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It Takes More Than Academic Preparation: A Nuanced Look at Black Male Success in STEM

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National reports show surprisingly low percentages of Black students represented in STEM fields. These startlingly low numbers of Black STEM graduates results in fewer African American scientists and leaders in STEM. Drawing upon a qualitative database spanning nearly 20 years this study examines the experiences of high achieving Black males studying primarily in STEM fields. This article focuses on three non-academic themes that have consistently emerged across the work that demonstrate the nuanced ways that self-confidence, developing meaningful relationship and the ability to recognize and navigate stereotypes, bias and racism impact success for Black males in STEM.

Keywords: Black males; STEM success; navigating stereotypes, high achievers

Introduction

Twenty years ago it would have been difficult to find a robust literature examining the experiences of high-achieving Black male collegians. The past two decades have resulted in an upsurge in research on this distinct population (Bonner 2000; Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998, 2002, 2004, Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt, Villarreal, McAllister, & Blacknall, 2012; Fries-Britt, Burt & Franklin, 2012; Flowers, 2012; Gasman & Spencer, 2012; Goings, 2016a, 2017a; Griffin, 2006; Griffin & Perez, 2013; Harper, 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008; 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Hrabowski, Maton & Greif, 1998; Maton, Hrabowski & Schmitt, 2000). Prior to this scholarship research on Black males was largely from a deficit approach (Fries-Britt, 1998; Harper, 2010).

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Successive lines of research continue to examine the experiences of Black males across important influences such as Black male sexuality (Strayhorn & Scott, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013), nontraditional age (Goings, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b) and native born versus non-native born Blacks (Mwangi, Fries-Britt, Peralta & Daoud, 2016). These lines of inquiry expand understanding of how multiple social identities shape the experiences of Black males in academia. Ultimately they inform our understanding of ways to improve pathways of persistence and success for Black males in the academy across all fields of study.

One academic pathway gaining significant attention is the recruitment and retention of underrepresented students studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). National reports show surprisingly low percentages of Black students represented in STEM fields (Mulvey & Nicholson, 2008; National Science Foundation, 2015). Many of the reported gains of minorities in science occur in fields such as psychology, social sciences, computer sciences and biological sciences with flat performance in degree completion in physical sciences and engineering since 2000. In mathematics and statistics there have been reported drops in the enrollment of Blacks since 2000 (National Science Foundation, 2015). In 2004 African Americans earned 8.78 percent of all science and engineering degrees (National Science Foundation, 2006). These startlingly low numbers of Black STEM graduates results in fewer African American scientists and leaders in STEM. Those who enroll in STEM majors often experience negative classroom and collegiate environments (Green & Glasson, 2009; Seymour & Hewitt, 1997) that seriously threaten degree completion in the field.

Context, Data and Methodology

This article draws upon an existing database that our research team has been building since 1998 on the experiences of high achieving Blacks and other underrepresented collegians majoring in primarily STEM fields. The overwhelming majority of the students in the database approximately 87% (n=261) identify, as Black or African American and approximately 67% (n=201) are males. Nearly half of the students attended both historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and traditionally White institutions (TWIs). Over 100 students attended both types of institutions as a result of transfer and attending TWIs for graduate school. The database includes approximately 115 graduate students who were persisting in STEM at the time we interviewed them.

An important feature of the database is that it is comprised of several independent studies consisting primarily of individual and small focus group interview data. Several studies in the database are recent and findings have yet to be published from these data. Interviews and small focus groups provided the most effective way to learn about students' experiences and to understand how they interpreted and perceived their experiences (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2001). Study sample sizes varied from less than 10 participants to 159 with each study representing a separate research project with distinct research questions and purposes. Every study was also uniquely connected by a set of core areas that were examined across each study. The core areas included academic and social experiences, peer and faculty relationships, classroom interactions and racial experiences. We know from the broader higher education literature that these factors matter. However, we wanted to understand how, and in what ways, these factors shape the lived experiences of Black collegians studying in STEM fields. In this current manuscript I rely on the findings from 4 studies in the database that are most relevant to Black men in STEM. A brief summary of each study and published works cited in this article are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Summary of Studies

Myerhoff Scholars Program	This project was based on 12 Meyerhoff Scholars at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. The study focused on the academic and social experiences of the participants in the program. At the time of this study the Meyerhoff Program enrolled only Black males. Black males continue to be a primary focus however participants in the program today are more diverse (see Fries-Britt, 1997; Fries-Britt, 1998; *Fries-Britt, 2002; *Fries-Britt 2004).
HBCU & TWI Multi campus study	This project included a total of 34 students with 15 participants enrolled at a TWI and 19 enrolled at an HBCU. Both institutions were part of a state system in the mid-Atlantic region. The study focused on the academic and social experiences of students and how their experiences shaped interactions with faculty and peers in and outside of the classroom (see Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Fries-Britt and Turner, 2002).
Black Honors Student Project	This project focused on 9 Black students enrolled in the honors program at a large public university in the mid-Atlantic region. The study examined classroom and campus experiences of the participants (see Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; *Fries-Britt, 2002; *Fries-Britt, 2004)
The National Society of Black Physicists (NSBP) Project	This project consisted of 5 years of data collection from 2005-2009 of minority students' experiences in physics and related STEM fields. The project included 159 students in total with approximately 32 students interviewed each year (See Fries-Britt, Younger & Hall, 2010a; Fries-Britt, Younger & Hall, 2010b; Fries-Britt, Burt & Franklin, 2012; Fries-Britt & Holmes, 2012; Fries-Britt, Johnson & Burt, 2013; Fries-Britt, Mwangi & Peralta, 2014; George Mwangi, Fries-Britt, Peralta, & Daoud, 2016).

* These manuscripts are repeated under two different projects as the data were used to address themes in both articles.

We define many of the students in our research as high achieving based on several criteria. First, in several studies, students were enrolled in honors programs and the requirements for participating in these programs typically entail students maintain excellent academic standing of at least a 3.0 GPA. Secondly, some of the participants received academic scholarships/fellowships in their major requiring them to maintain excellent academic standing to maintain the scholarship. Although GPA requirements varied across fellowship programs, by definition students awarded a fellowship were considered high achieving. For the NSPB project we employed the NSBP program requirements at the time of our study that students attending the conference be in good academic standing identified as a 3.0 and above GPA. The conference registration form required faculty signatures and verification that students were in compliance with this rule. We relied on the selection process of NSBP program staff's verification of these data. Based on these various definitions we defined the participants in our database as high achieving and persisting and succeeding at the time of our data collection towards degree completion.

Many factors have shaped the experiences of the students in our database. We have published detailed accountings of their experiences in other manuscripts (see Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Holmes, 2012; Fries-Britt, Younger, & Hall, 2010; Fries-Britt, Villarreal, McAllister, & Blacknall, 2012; Fries-Britt, Johnson, & Burt, 2013). In this article I focus on three fundamental themes that have demonstrated a high degree of consistency and saturation across our findings on Black males. Taken together these three themes are at the center of what contributes to the success of Black males in our studies: 1) a sense of confidence, 2) meaningful relationships and 3) ability to recognize and navigate stereotypes, bias and racism. These themes represent important aspects of Black male success over an extended period.

Our investment in this work over time has allowed us to gain a unique perspective of the nuanced ways that Black males navigate their success in physics and related STEM fields across a wide range of institutional types (see Table 2). The database that we have developed is unique and distinct and represents an important source of information about the factors that contribute to the experiences of Blacks and other underrepresented students majoring in physics and related STEM fields. Each theme is summarized and discussed herein with references to other projects from the database that provide greater details to support each theme. I conclude this paper with a discussion of implications for practice and research.

Table 2.
Examples of Institutions Attended

HBCUs	Non HBCUs
Dillard University	Chicago City University
Fisk University	Clemson University
Florida A&M University	Colorado State University
Grambling University	Duke University
Hampton University	Georgia Tech
Howard University	Harvard University
Jackson State University	Louisiana State University
Morehouse College	North Carolina State University
Morgan State University	UCLA
Norfolk State University	University of Pennsylvania
Spelman College	University of Maryland, Baltimore County
Tennessee State University	University of Maryland, College Park
	University of Michigan
	Randolph-Macon College
	Rice University
	South Carolina State University
	Stanford University
	Stockton University
	Vassar College

Discussion of Findings

Sense of Confidence

Many of the Black males in our studies entered higher education with a "healthy sense of confidence" in their academic ability and overall sense of self. They identified family (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt, Younger, & Hall, 2010) and supportive K-12 teachers (Fries-Britt, Younger, & Hall, 2010; Fries-Britt, Villarreal, McAllister & Blacknall, 2012) as providing confirmation of their academic ability. Teachers who were validating of students led to higher degrees of motivation (Fries-Britt et al., 2012).

> Ever since I've been in . . . high school, maybe even before high school, all the teachers I've had have always encouraged me to pursue science since I always did good in my science classes. My teacher, Mr. Iron, in high school, told me I'd make a good physicist. My teacher, Dr. Abdula, in college, told me I'd [be] a good physicist. And my grades were good, too, so they said, 'why don't you pursue it?' . . . Thus they played a very strong role in my pursuit of physics (p. 367).

Even when K-12 teachers were not supportive these students could rely on parents and other role models for assistance. Notwithstanding a solid understanding of their academic ability there is a caveat. Their "healthy sense of confidence" risks erosion as they find themselves defending their

work, ideas and presence in the academy (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). This is expressed in a fairly representative way by a Black male (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001) who was lamenting the ongoing process of proving that he belonged and could compete with his White peers.

> I mean at first, being a Black student, I don't think I was given a lot of credit. I think they thought I came from a lower level of understanding, or they didn't think [I had] enough knowledge or know how. But once they saw that I could compete at their level and higher, then they started valuing my opinion. Now certain students will come to you [*sic*] and say, "Well what do you think?" (p. 426)

Across our data we found that several factors fortify and restore Black males confidence when they encountered barriers. First, they turn to forms of capital in their family. Many of the Black males in our database are second and third generation college educated with one or both parents who completed college and in some cases graduate school. This factor alone is significant given that second and third generation college students are more academically prepared and successful than their first generation peers (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Secondly, their confidence in science, technology, engineering and mathematics is undergirded by their early exposure to STEM activities prior to college. Often through direct involvement in camps, internships, working with mentors, and related professional activities. Many of the participants' parents were STEM majors and/or professionals. Early exposure adds to their sense of connection to STEM and understanding of the academic requirements. Perhaps the most important factor that restores their confidence is past success in rigorous courses. They understand what it means to work hard and to persist at their work. They have earned high grades and proven that they can handle difficult course material. As evidence by the above example once peers begin to see what they are capable of producing in the classroom they turn to them to ask their opinion. Their early academic successes are an important part of their foundation and overall confidence to face new academic challenges.

Developing Meaningful Relationships

Students reported a wide range of experiences developing relationships with peers and faculty. The majority described excellent relationships with peers in their program. They relied on these peers for support academically and socially. Science environments require students to spend a lot of time with peers in lab settings and collaborating on homework problems. Physics majors observed that non-science students did not really understand them thus it was easier to socially hang out with other physics majors (Fries-Britt, Younger, & Hall, 2010). They credit these relationships for making all the difference in their success On the other hand there were students who really sought relationships outside of the science environment precisely because too much time was spent with these peers. Although support existed in college we found that some high achieving Black males experienced isolation from their less academically talented Black peers (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). This early finding increased our interest in understanding more about the role of peers across race and academic ability. We wanted to understand how racially diverse their classrooms were? How racially diverse were the peers they studied and socialized with? What perceptions did thy have about these interactions and their academic success?

Two patterns emerged in early schooling that shaped the access that many of the Black males had to same race peers at the K-12 level. Firstly, students enrolled in high schools with few Blacks found even fewer in honors and advance placement classes. For many of these participants enrolled in honors and advanced placement classes finding a community of other Black male peers who shared their racial identity and strong commitment to academics was nearly non-existent. They desired these connections in the classroom with other Blacks often lamenting the difficulties of being one of a few in the honors track. Those living in communities with large numbers of Blacks were able to benefit from strong social relationships outside of school in their neighborhoods but these relationships were less influential in their academic success.

The second pattern occurred with males who hailed from high schools with larger percentages of Black and other underrepresented minorities. In these schools many of the honors and advanced placement classes were comprised of the few White and Asian students who attended the school. The Black males in our study were often one of a few Blacks enrolled in honors and advanced placement classes. This resulted in participants often feeling like they were attending a school within a school where their less academically talented Black peers took classes together while they took classes with a majority of non-Black peers in the same school. Some males talked about being teased because they were in the honors and advanced placement classes while others described feeling uneasy about the access they were getting to rigorous courses and preparation for college. Both patterns reveal that high achieving Black males at the K-12 level may have limited opportunity to learn in environments with a critical mass of high-achieving Black males. At the collegiate level engagement with peers improved. Nearly all of the males in our study were able to find a supportive group of peers in college.

The most meaningful relationships and supportive collegiate environment occurred on HBCU campuses. A common observation was the strong foundation provided by the HBCU environment:

> There's nothing like a strong foundation. I come from a community where you don't have a lot of Black cohesiveness; it's not together. So you come to a foundation where everybody is working together. Here everybody is working and trying to do something and you have this foundation. You know who you are and you know where you come from. You can do more. (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002, p. 320)

Given the mission and purpose of HBCUs and their longstanding ability to support the psychological well-being of Black students (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Kim & Conrad, 2006; White & Cones, 1999) this finding is not unexpected yet significant given the role of HBCUs in preparing Black students in STEM (Gasman, M. & Nguyen, 2014; Upton & Tanenbaum, 2014). Upton and Tanenbaum submit that, " Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) may hold a unique advantage in the nation's efforts to bolster the participation of Black individuals in the STEM academic and workforce communities and might play an especially critical role in increasing the number of Black STEM PhD holders" (p. 1). Our data certainly support this finding as HBCUs have played an important role in preparing many of the students who earned their first degree at HBCUs and then transferred to a TWI campus for graduate school.

On TWI campuses Black males were able to establish connections however these relationships often took longer to form. Black males wondered about the motivations of faculty and if they were sincerely interested in working with them. This is illustrated by a student in a

forthcoming manuscript (Fries-Britt & Lewis in preparation) who understood the importance of having a meaningful relationship with a faculty member but he also thought of the process of establishing a relationship as a "necessary evil". He perceived faculty as having different sources of motivation for wanting to build a connection and often they behaved differently in the classroom than outside. While he found it necessary to build relationships with several professors including his advisor, ultimately he felt like he had to pull through his academic experience by himself.

In this forthcoming work (Fries-Britt & Lewis, in preparation) my colleague and I discuss a "sensing process" that Black males engage in as they seek more meaningful ways to connect with faculty. We argue that a process unfolds as Black males engage in an assessment of the dynamics that are occurring in their interactions with faculty. Essentially they are trying to determine the degree to which a faculty member is committed to their success. This process is nuanced, often subtle and significant to how Black males determine if there is a possibility of a meaningful relationship. In this work we discuss the importance of time and how quick judgments from students and faculty prevent important connections. Ultimately both parties must be committed to establishing a meaningful relationship to create the significant engagements in learning and mentorship. While Black males have different experiences to share in the development of relationships with faculty what is certainly true is that they desire these relationships. They understand the importance of making connections and faculty mentors that support their success. This need was expressed by a Black male who simply commented that he would rather have a relationship with a teacher who wanted to teach because he perceived this as a commitment that the teacher cared about his well-being.

Ability to Recognize and Navigate Stereotypes, Biases and Racism

In 20 years of interviewing high achieving Black students, especially those born in the United States, I have never had a participant report no encounters with stereotypes, biases and/or racism. Put differently, every Black male born in the United States that I have interviewed has encountered one of these social ills prior to, and/or during college. The examples that have been shared over the years are compelling and would be recognizable to many readers (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001, 2002; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt, Younger, & Hall, 2010b). Their academic ability is often called into question and they experience blatant comments about race being the central factor for their acceptance in academic programs (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt, Younger, & Hall, 2010b). Students reported differences that they observed in how faculty interacted with them in the classroom versus their white peers. For example faculty would not explain answers to questions in the classroom at the same level of detail they answered white peers. In meetings with faculty they were often encouraged to leave the major and or take lower level classes even though they were doing well in the program. They also describe fewer opportunities to participate on research teams whereas their White peers often receive invitations to join a team. These themes and issues are certainly not new other studies confirm that high achieving Blacks encounter stereotypes, bias and racism (Flowers, 2012; Griffin & Perez II, 2013; Harper 2006c); in fact there are far too many to list.

Unfortunately, these incidents have not subsided over the years. Black males who are successful have been able to recognize, navigate and confront these issues to ensure their success in the academy. For many native-born Black males their race is salient to their sense of self. While they have a strong academic identity, their racial sense of self is significant to how they

see themselves thus they have made a commitment to deal with issues of race. They display an ease and comfort talking about racial issues unlike their non-native born Black peers in our database (Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, & Peralta, 2014; George Mwangi, Fries-Britt, Peralta, & Daoud, 2016).

We have a much smaller sample of non-native born Blacks (under 40) in our database. In several publications (Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, & Peralta, 2014; George Mwangi, Fries-Britt, Peralta, & Daoud, 2016) we have identified some of the differences in racial perceptions and experiences of these students to their native born peers. These findings are certainly not generalizable to all non-native Black populations and the topic of racial experiences requires further examination. Nevertheless our data reveal that race is less salient for Blacks born outside of the United States. Several students admitted to not even understanding what was meant by racism. This is apparent in the comments of a Senegalese male who commented, "Oh, It's just funny when people speak of race. I don't know how you guys felt, but when I first came here I knew nothing about race, I knew how to spell racism but that's as far . . . I didn't even know what it really meant. I never looked it up in the dictionary." (Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, & Peralta, 2014, p. 5). Over time non-native students familiarity with, and understanding of, racism changed as they experienced their own encounters in and outside of the classroom. In subtle and very overt ways they had encounters that made them begin to wonder if race was playing a role. Even as they had these experiences they were resisting racism. We discuss in this work the reality that racism eventually will catch up with non-native Black students in the US context. We have continued to explore these themes in our work and have launched a new study specifically designed to examine in greater detail how non-native Black students learn about race in their home country context as well as the US context.

Implications for Practice and Research

The themes we found in our work may not hold true across all samples of high achieving Black males. Many participants in our studies describe highly educated families and communities with access to fiscal resources for tutoring, summer enrichment programs and other forms of capital. These opportunities helped students gain access to top schools and programs that prepared them for STEM majors. They were able to turn to parents and other family members as a first line of support and utilize their expertise and extended networks to help them think through problems they encounter in the academy. In different regions and parts of the country community and schooling experiences may differ considerably.

We know from research that parents are very influential and important in the college process and experiences of students especially for minority students and first generation (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). According to Cabrera and La Nasa when parents are involved especially in helping students think through the planning process it increases the likelihood that they will meet the academic qualification for college. Certainly college educated parents have a familiarity and understanding of the college process however the process of going to college has become more challenging and complicated as minority students incur more debt (American Institute for Research [AIR], 2013). The American Institutes for Research found that debt levels of underrepresented minorities compared to non-underrepresented minorities was higher across all types of institutions. They argued that,

> The quest to increase the number of STEM degrees and hold down what students pay for their education requires understanding not only what types of financial aid students receive to reduce the price but also how much debt accrues. This is particularly important in efforts to broaden participation in STEM fields (AIR, 2013, p. 5)."

It would be important for future research to understand the needs of parents in helping to support their student. How much do they really understand about the college process today? Do middle class parents feel like they can afford to pay for college? Do they feel like they can pay for the precollege experiences that many of the students in our studies had access to? What strategies are families employing to prepare their students for critical college benchmarks like entrance exams and advanced placement classes? The financial burdens and competitiveness of colleges today can be daunting for all families understanding the tradeoffs that parents make to prepare their student for higher levels of education is essential to continued success.

Second-and-third generation college educated Black students certainly benefit from social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) however they continue to be underrepresented in American higher education. We simply do not understand enough about the experiences of middle class Black students and their families' experiences in higher education. To be sure not all high-achieving Blacks are raised in middle class families talent is not restricted to, or defined by, one's family economic status. It is important for scholars to continue to examine the needs of working class and low-income families to support efforts to provide access to college with ample financial support.

While family support was available to the students in our database it did not shield them from challenges and barriers in the classroom and other parts of the campus. We found that their high levels of confidence played an important role. The confidence we observed in our participants is similar to findings in other studies (Flowers, 2012; Harper 2008; 2012). It may be a common characteristic for high achieving students to display a high degree of confidence and sense-of-self given their academic preparation and success. In academic environments where students are affirmed and supported by faculty and peers they are able to do well and feel emotionally supported. Conversely high achieving students may disguise their ability and demonstrate a disconnect from academics (Bonner, 2000). Peers are also key to student success supporting students in their academic transition and understanding of the academy especially in science where working and learning in a community of peers is so critical (Green & Glasson, 2009). Black males are looking for all of these key factors in their academic environment. They seek meaningful relationships with faculty where they are mentored and supported in their intellectual growth. Additionally Black males studying in STEM on TWI campuses see so few peers who look like them thus enhancing opportunities to connect with a community of peers is essential through campus programs and academic initiatives. These relationships help to build confidence and sustain students as they progress in their majors. STEM programs should continue to build opportunities for students to work on teams and to learn together in diverse learning communities.

Black males on TWI campuses are "academically battle tested" with questions and assumptions about their capability. Often the stereotypes, bias and racism they encounter occur in their everyday interactions on campus and in the classroom settings. These experiences only reinforce the need for them to know who they are and to find ways to build and undergird their confidence. They have fought through the process of proving that they are capable. Making it through these experiences builds determination and tenacity. When I have presented the findings

of students' perceptions of stereotypes, bias and racism to faculty in STEM programs the comments of some faculty illustrate why it is often challenging for Black males. Typically in an audience there are a few faculty who will argue that race does not matter in science. They submit that the only factor that matters in science is academic ability. No matter how many examples I provide of students experience they categorize these examples as anecdotal and thus less impressive. Some professors have argued that high achieving students who are committed to doing science and who are "really academically talented" are too busy to deal with racial incidents. I have had minority professors in science offer similar observations agreeing that racism has always existed, but students must learn to stay focused on the science and push through. Pushing through is exactly what the students in our studies have done. However, there are several things that I find problematic about these observations. Embedded in these statements is an underlying assumption that becoming a scientist is an identity that should have priority over other aspects of a student's sense of self. Many of the Black males we have interviewed are very committed to science however their identities as Black males are very salient in these science environments where assumptions are made about them precisely because they are Black males. Putting racial incidents aside is not always an effective strategy. Secondly, these observations imply that academic ability will shield students from racism. Students understand the importance of picking their battles carefully however, routine experiences that are hostile have consequences for overall psychological wellbeing and this is too much to ask students to ignore. Much like the race relations work needed in the United States to build understanding across communities in academia we must confront these issues at every level and support and affirm the realities that exist for all of our faculty, staff and students.

Clearly the pressure to eradicate the systemic nature of these ills should not be the responsibility of students. Ultimately the onus to solve and address these systemic problems should rest with the larger society and at all levels in the academy. Attracting and retaining underrepresented minority (URM) populations to STEM fields and ultimately professional positions in STEM require that we understand the culture of these environment. It would be important to know if other high achievers across different racial groups encounter similar stereotypes, bias and racism as Black males? If so how frequently do they occur? What do other high achievers identify as important influences that fortify them and help them persist and maintain their confidence? Ultimately we cannot be afraid to ask these important questions about the climate of our departments and campuses. I am reminded of an exchange that I had during data collection where I asked key campus leaders about their perceptions of the campus racial climate. I was surprised by the resistance that I encountered "why are you asking us about race?" protested a senior leader. He went on to admonish me for asking a question about this "outdated term" and informed me that "diversity and inclusion" were much more compelling and important to the campus climate and not race. I felt no need to defend my position during the data collection. I simply acknowledged the feedback and later as I juxtaposed the administrator's comments with what I heard from the Black students on his campus it became clear that they had unambiguously different views of the racial climate on campus. The Black students talked about the racial climate with fluidity and provided compelling examples in and outside of the classroom of their encounters.

We must continue to understand the experiences of high achieving Black males in the academy. The within group diversity in the Black male community remains an untapped source of knowledge. The cultural assumptions we make about the experiences that shape students lives based on different social identities is restrictive. The expansion of research on Black males

(Flowers, 2012; Gasman & Spencer, 2012; Goings, 2016a, 2017b; Griffin, 2006; Griffin & Perez, 2013; Harper, 2004, 2005, 2006b, 2006c, 2008; 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Strayhorn & Scott, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013) extends our knowledge of their collegiate experiences yet the demarcation of social identities can limit understanding of the complexity and saliency of multiple identities within academic contexts. In *Living at the Intersections Social Identities and Black Collegians* Strayhorn (2013) challenges us to examine the multiple realities that shape students' social identities and inequalities. Nowhere is this more important than in the study of Black males where images are typically one dimensional and negative.

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