Journal of African American Males in Education
Summer 2017 - Vol. 8 Issue 1

Untold Stories: The Gendered Experiences of High Achieving African American Male Alumni of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

*Jennifer M. Johnson
Temple University

Brian L. McGowan
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

High achieving African American male students face a number of challenges navigating the educational pipeline. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been lauded for providing nurturing and culturally affirming environments for its students, yet little is known about the role they play in promoting the college access and degree attainment of high achieving African American male students. Findings from interviews with 19 African American male alumni from nine institutions indicate that early experiences grappling with negative stereotypes associated with Black male achievement strongly influenced their decisions to attend an HBCU. The HBCU, through its campus environment, fostered opportunities for positive interactions that were shown to be important in the academic, personal, and professional development of African American male students. Findings from this study provide insights into the ways HBCUs can recruit and retain the high achieving Black males enrolled at their institutions.

Keywords: *High achieving Black males, historically Black college and university, campus environment*

Introduction

The scholarly literature focusing on African American male students in higher education has grown substantially over the past two decades. This includes a greater focus on the experiences of African American male students attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), a federally defined classification of postsecondary institutions whose principal mission was, and is, to promote the education of Black Americans (Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Palmer & Wood, 2010). Research has consistently demonstrated the academic and social benefits of attending HBCUs compared to attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer M. Johnson, Temple University, Email: jennifer.m.johnson@temple.edu

Scholars have found that HBCUs enhance students' academic skills (Flowers, Scott, Riley, & Palmer, 2015; Gasman, Nguyen, & Commodore, 2015), support students' racial identity development (Squire & Mobley, 2015; Van Camp, Barden, & Sloan, 2010), and promote the expansion of students' educational and professional aspirations (Goings, 2016; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002).

As the scholarship focused on HBCUs continues to evolve, there is a clear gap in the literature when it comes to "high achieving" Black students (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Goings, 2016). "High achieving" students, including those official identified as "gifted and talented," have a strong academic foundation stemming from precollege exposure to academic rigor, opportunities to complete advanced math and science courses, their overall scholastic performance (e.g., high school G.P.A., high school class rank), and/or performance on standardized tests (e.g. SAT and ACT) (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Perna, 2005). These students are highly sought after by college recruiters. Over the past thirty years, PWIs attract African American high achievers to their campuses by featuring their renown academic programs and enhanced campus facilities, or appealing to student's interests in extracurricular activities (e.g. athletics), financial needs (e.g. merit and need-based scholarships and grants), or desires to be close to home (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; Perna, 2000).

With increasing competition for high achieving African American male students, HBCUs must be intentional in engaging strategies to better understand this distinct population. Why do high achieving students choose to attend HBCUs? What are the experiences of high achieving students within these educational spaces? This study highlights the stories of those distinctly suited to answer these questions, recent HBCU alumni. Through an investigation of the ways race and gender intersect to shape students' educational experiences and outcomes, this study offers insights into the unique role that HBCUs play in promoting the college access and degree attainment of the high achieving African American males on their campuses.

HBCU College Choice

Over the past three decades, studies centered on the college choice process have been a focal point in the higher education literature. This complex process is influenced by a myriad of interrelated economic (e.g. expected lifetime monetary benefits) and sociological (e.g. achievement orientation, professional aspirations) factors (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2000). In a monograph titled, *Special Issue: College Choice and Access to College: Moving Policy, Research, and Practice to the 21st Century,* Amy Bergerson (2009) examines the barriers and challenges associated with higher education enrollment for "populations of color." Bergerson concludes that this literature has moved away from comprehensive college choice models, as proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and others, toward addressing issues of access and equity in the choice process. Through this review, Bergerson acknowledges segregation in primary and secondary schools based on race, ethnicity, and social class as barriers to student learning. She critiqued the systemic structures of inequality embedded within

educational systems that undermine the likelihood of college access even among students with high aspirations for college enrollment.

Although Bergerson's review offers significant insights into the college choice process of African American students in general, it fails to illustrate why African American students choose HBCUs over other postsecondary options. Few empirical studies have sought to understand the factors that contribute to African American students' decision to attend an HBCU (e.g. Blacknall & Johnson, 2011; Freeman, 1999a; Johnson, in press; Squire & Mobley, 2015; Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005; Van Camp, Barden & Sloan, 2010). Consistent with Bergerson's review, research suggests that precollege experiences of racial discrimination, isolation, and alienation influence decisions to attend HBCUs (Freeman, 1999a; Johnson, in press; Squire & Mobley, 2005; Van Camp et al., 2010). Freeman (1999a), for instance, found that African American students who attended predominantly White private high schools were more likely to consider HBCUs compared to high school students from predominantly Black schools. These students expressed experiencing pressures relating racially to their peers (both Black and White), and were disappointment by the few opportunities available to them to learn about Black history and Black culture in their schools.

High achieving Black students are not immune from experiences of isolation and discrimination, and as the literature suggest, may feel these pressures more intensely within majority White spaces (Carter Andrews, 2012; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). The literature is replete with narratives of African American adolescents who grapple with reconciling their academic identity within environments where there are low expectations for Black student achievement (e.g. Bonner, 2000; Ford, 1998; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fries-Britt, 1998; Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2009). Notwithstanding these negative experiences, among high achieving Black students, scholars have found that many Black adolescents excel academically despite experiencing racial discrimination in the K12 system (e.g. Carter Andrews, 2012; Sanders, 1997; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). For instance, Sanders' (1997) analysis of interview data collected from 28 African American urban eighth-graders suggests that keen awareness of racism and discrimination actually leads to the promotion of greater academic effort. For participants in his study, family practices of positive racial socialization ensured that students were aware of the biases and obstacles they may experience navigating the educational system so that they were better prepared to handle these potential stressors. This sense of empowerment to succeed in the face of racism and discrimination within school settings has also been described as academic resiliency (Carter Andrews, 2012).

With this context in mind, there is very little literature available to understand the college choice process of high achieving Black students who choose HBCUs. Focusing on "academically competitive" students who were offered merit-based scholarships to attend PWIs and HBCUs, Blacknall and Johnson (2011) explore the factors that influence the college choice decision among this student population. They found that these participants selected HBCUs for similar reasons as cited by Freeman (1999a), but also had family connections to HBCUs that influenced their choice process. Acknowledging the differences across HBCUs in their academic

offerings, facilities, and institutional environments, Blacknall and Johnson further suggest that some students are predisposed to attend HBCUs, and selectively search within this institution type. Taken together, these studies suggest that the environment of HBCUs may be particularly attractive to high achieving students interested in developing stronger relationships with other high achieving African American peers, who felt isolated or alienated socially in their home environments, and could benefit from the guidance of knowledgeable faculty and staff members within the campus environment.

African American Men at Black Colleges

Jacqueline Fleming's (1984) *Blacks in College,* one of the most referenced and earliest examinations of the college experiences of African American students, attempts to assess whether HBCUs or PWIs are better suited for this population. In the text, Fleming seeks to address a question that remains relevant today, are Black colleges– once the only institution of higher education open to Blacks– relevant in a "post-racial" society? The findings from her study reveal that Black colleges may be more supportive of Black students' personal, social, and cognitive development, compared to PWIs, despite having less developed campus resources and facilities. The analysis of gendered outcomes, however are limited to a few conclusions: Black colleges have the capacity to turn achievement conflicts into academic success; achievement oriented men exhibit better academic adjustment, better academic performance, and higher educational and occupational aspirations. Other comparative studies of HBCUs and PWIs focus on examining the college choice processes (e.g. Freeman, 1999a; Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005), experiences (e.g. Davis, 1994; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002), achievement (e.g. Berger & Millem, 2000), and outcomes (e.g. Allen, 1992) of African American students. These studies generally seek to understand the extent to which institutional contexts explain differences in college enrollment and degree attainment across comparison groups. As Lundy-Wagner and Gasman's (2011) review reveals, most studies use aggregate racial/ethnic group or institutional data, with little specific focus on the gendered experiences of students across different campus contexts.

Among African American males, researchers have consistently shown that Black colleges foster a family-like environment for members of the campus community (Allen, 1992; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Positive faculty-student interactions support this family-type environment. Flowers et al. (2015) characterize the student-faculty interactions experienced by men at HBCUs as "othermothering" – faculty engagement strategies that go beyond the classroom and traditional notions of mentoring to establish meaningful connections with students to support their academic and social development. These interactions promote opportunities for faculty members to better understand the personal and professional aspirations of students. Drawing from a nationally representative sample, Palmer, Wood, and McGowan (2014) found that men at HBCUs are significantly more likely than women to benefit from student-faculty interactions, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments. Additionally, compared to previous research looking at the engagement of Black men at HBCUs (e.g. Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004) results suggest that Black males are more engaged on campus than in previous generations (Palmer, Wood, & McGowan, 2014). Shorette and Palmer's (2015) interviews with six male HBCU alumni revealed how the institutional setting affirmed their overall potential where they

were able to foster higher aspirations. Many participants cited that their "precollege academic training left them underprepared compared to their peers" (p. 24). Thus, it was essential for the HBCU to provide strong support systems to succeed and persist on campus. Peers were also recognized as important sources of support for high achieving Black males at HBCUs; interactions with achievement focused classmates helped foster a collective sense of achievement and motivation for continued academic success on the collegiate level (Goings, 2016). It is the campus community, through faculty, staff, and peers that create the environment that constitute the human environment at HBCUs (Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002).

Masculinity and Gendered Expressions of Achievement

Current trends in research have evolved to reflect an intentional shift in attention toward the gendered expression of academic achievement and conceptions of masculinity among African American college men (Dancy, 2011; Ford, 2011; Harper, 2004; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Martin & Harris, 2006). The role of media in the teaching, maintanance, and reinforcement of Black masculinity cannot be underestimated. These messages are reinforced through families, peers, and educators. There are some that feel that these mass media images socialize African American males to devalue education and academic achievement (hooks, 2004). If these messages are internalized, young African American males can engage in a pattern of underachievement that limits opportunities along the educational pipeline (Bonner, 2000). HBCU participants in Dancy's (2011) study cited being primarily reared by patriarchal and hypersexual media images of African American men. Dancy's inquiry exploring 24 African American men's constructions of manhood is noteworthy as it involved participants at PWIs and HBCUs. The participants at HBCUs in his study cited how they were expected to conform to contradicting constructions of manhood by both their own peer African American communities and the broader African American campus community. As a result, there was added pressure to be "hard" while achieving academic success in college.

Studies with a particular emphasis on understanding the gendered expressions of academic achievement among high performing Black collegians, however, find these students embrace behaviors and attitudes that support achievement in college. Most notably, in the article titled, *Cool posing on campus: A qualitative study of masculinities and gender expression among Black men at a private research institution,* Harris, Palmer, and Struve (2011) noted that most participants in their study learned to value and prioritize academic success and were not concerned that other men would view this as being a feminine trait. These students entered college with strong academic records and maintaining academic success was viewed as both a priority and a necessity for gaining access to high paying careers in the future. Their emphasis on academic success in college was also a strategy for combating negative stereotypes for Black men. Participants described the importance of being well rounded in college through leadership and community involvement. Yet, the men in this study remarked that their focus on academics at times put them at odds with African American men from their home communities, many of whom did not value education in the same ways they did. These findings are supported by the work of others. For example, while investigating definitions of masculinities among 27 academically driven Black male student athletes across four institutions, Martin and Harris (2006) cited how these men embraced productive masculine conceptions and gender-related behaviors that differ from their other male peer student athletes who are unfortunately depicted in the literature as being "violent, aggressive, uneducated, and disengaged" (p. 360). Participants

in Harper's (2004) phenomenological study of 32 high achieving Black males across six predominantly White institutions in the Midwest conveyed their masculinity through their academic achievement, which in many cases differed from their other African American male peers on campus who adhered to more traditional definitions of masculinity.

Findings from these abovementioned studies highlight the need for additional inquiries into African American men's gendered expressions of masculinity and their experiences navigating the educational pipeline. Although our understandings of African American men's gendered experiences in college have increased in recent years, the experiences of HBCU alumni men are often omitted from these discussions. Thus, this qualitative study explores the ways that race and gender intersect to shape the educational experiences and outcomes of 19 high achieving African American male alumni of HBCUs. The research questions are: (a) What are the precollege experiences of high achieving African American males that contribute to their decision to attend an HBCU? and (b) Which types of interactions with the campus community facilitate successful degree attainment at HBCUs?

Method

This data is drawn from a larger qualitative investigation of the college choice motivations, collegiate experiences, and postsecondary outcomes of HBCU alumni, the National HBCU Alumni Study (Johnson, in press). To participate in the larger study, individuals must have earned a bachelor's degree from an accredited HBCU between the years of 2000 and 2013, agree to complete a demographic questionnaire, and engage in a semi-structured individual interview exploring their early educational experiences, college choice process, and experiences as an undergraduate student. The snowball sampling approach was followed to select participants (Merriam, 2009). The lead researcher contacted individuals who graduated from HBCUs and were connected to their local alumni networks. Participants were asked to share and repost the recruitment information via the social media outlets Facebook and Twitter. Each prospective interviewee was asked to complete a basic questionnaire to determine whether they met the full criteria for inclusion in the study. Fifty individuals (25 African American women, 23 African American men, and 2 Caucasian men) met the criteria and were interviewed for the larger study. Because we were interested in the educational experiences of African American male high achievers in this particular inquiry, we limit this investigation to the nineteen African American males who met these criteria. In this study, "high achiever" status is defined by a student's academic experiences prior to enrolling in college. This is inclusive of students who were selected for formal "Gifted and Talented" programs, were enrolled in selective "Advanced Placement" or "Honors" programs and courses, and/or earned a cumulative 3.0 GPA or higher as a high school graduate.

Participants

Interviews with nineteen high achieving African American males were analyzed for this study. Participants were raised in diverse environments including rural, urban, and suburban neighborhoods spanning 16 states including the District of Columbia. Within this sample, 47% came from families with at least one parent who graduated from a four-year college. Reflecting on the economic status of their household at the time of college entry, five participants self-identified as "lower class/poor", five participants self-identified as "working class", 4 self-

identified as “middle class”, 1 self-identified as “upper class/affluent”, and 4 participants chose not to disclose this information. All participants earned a bachelor’s degree from an accredited HBCU between the year 2001 and 2010. Participants were asked to create their own pseudonyms and those who did not select a pseudonym had one created on their behalf. A summary of the participants’ profiles can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	**Home State**	**HBCU**	**Degree**
Gregory	Pennsylvania	Cheyney University of Pennsylvania	Business Administration
Michael	Missouri	FAMU	Business Administration
Samuel	South Carolina	FAMU	Health Sciences
Silk	North Carolina	FAMU	Public Relations
Na’im	Michigan	FAMU	Elementary Education
James	Washington, DC	Hampton University	Biology
Lamont	Florida	Hampton University	Accounting & Finance
Sebastian	Washington, DC	Howard University	Communications & Culture
Payton	Nevada	Howard University	Finance
Cole	Arizona	Howard University	History
Malcolm	Georgia	Howard University	Engineering
Justice	Arizona	Morehouse College	Business Administration, Accounting, and Economics
Kenneth	New York	Morehouse College	Computer Science
Davon	Georgia	Morehouse College	Political Science/Leadership Studies
Bryson	North Carolina	NCA&T	Marketing
Charles	New Jersey	Oakwood University	Interdisciplinary Studies
Alfonso	Tennessee	UAPB	History
Dave	Arkansas	UAPB	Chemistry
Aubrey	California	Wilberforce University	Mass Media Communication

FAMU = Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University; NCA&T = North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University; UAPB = University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff

Data Collection

Prior to the study, participants were informed of the nature of the project and were provided an opportunity to ask questions. Once informed consent was obtained, each participant completed a demographic questionnaire electronically using *Survey Monkey,* an online open-response survey-designing tool, and subsequently engaged in an individual telephone interview. The demographic questionnaire captured information about participant's race, parental educational attainment, family class background, and participation in college preparatory activities. The semi-structured interview focused on understanding their family background, early educational experiences, factors that contributed to their decision to attend an HBCU, and their academic and social experiences as undergraduate students. Each audio-recorded interview lasted between 60-90 minutes and was transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Consistent with open-coding techniques, no *a priori* categories were imposed on the interview data (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Themes were identified in the narratives through a step-by-step process of qualitative data analysis as suggested by Merriam (2009). We began with open coding to identify initial concepts that emerged from the data. The lead researcher read the transcripts and created analytic memos to document perceptions of the emergent patterns, categories, and concepts embedded within the data (Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2009). Words and phrases were used as the units of analysis. These words and phrases were organized into broad themes. Using these themes, we began grouping the data into categories. These categories captured the recurring patterns that emerged from the participants' narratives.

We engaged in several strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness and reliability of this study. Participants were provided a summary report of the emergent findings and asked to provide feedback as to whether the themes accurately captured their experiences. Specifically, they were encouraged to report technical inaccuracies, expand on previously mentioned ideas, and report any perceived misrepresentation that was not a true representation of their experiences (Patton, 2002). This information was then reviewed and incorporated into the data analysis. To assess reliability of the coding scheme, a list of the codes and definitions was shared with an outside researcher who is an expert in qualitative methodology. Moreover, a research journal served as an ongoing log of procedures followed, rationale for adjustments to interview questions, captured reflections, and other notes about the project to document the process followed to arrive at the findings presented. Finally, we worked closely with a peer debriefing team throughout the research process to help make certain that the findings and interpretations are consistent with the stories shared by participants (Patton, 2002). The peer debriefing team helped explore possible areas of bias and was knowledgeable of the literature related to the educational experiences of students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Findings

In this section, we summarize the two major themes that emerged from the data. The first theme, "The Secret Life of the High Achiever" focuses on participants' experiences through high school. This theme highlights the ways these men made sense of their educational experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and achievement within academic and social spaces. Although

most participants embraced the label "high achiever" and excelled in the classroom, others shared how they actively resisted this label by behaving in ways that undermined their academic performance. The second theme, "Black Achiever Actualized" is specific to the HBCU environment. Early interactions with various members of the campus community encouraged participants to (re)engage in the academic behaviors linked to success. Moreover, participants described their HBCU as an environment that shielded them from a barrage of negative stereotypes associated with Black men and created opportunities for participants to embrace more positive self-concepts. Experiences within HBCUs motivated participants to complete their bachelor's degree and also raised their educational and professional aspirations.

The Secret Life of the High Achiever

Participants described their daily experiences grappling with the conflicting expectations placed upon them as high achieving African American males. Participants were well aware of negative stereotypes associated with African American students in general, and Black males in particular, which characterize these students as low performing and uninterested in education. However, as young boys, parents worked to ensure that participants had opportunities to defy these stereotypes by structuring opportunities for them to get the best education possible. For example, Michael was bussed to suburban district schools through high school. His mother was instrumental in having him identified as "Gifted and Talented" and encouraged him to engage in the various academic programs and activities offered through his schools. Reflecting on the role of his parents, he shared:

> I think early on they were trying to identify that I was smart or gifted because from second grade on I was on track with all the gifted programs for school . . . then it was all my mom in trying to nurture it. Any opportunity to participate in summer programs or any other kind of academic activities were definitely encouraged. I didn't see a lot of my friends who were pushed more into sports or the like; I was definitely pushed along the academic track.

Often through parental advocacy, 8 participants were identified as "Gifted and Talented" (GT) and subsequently engaged in gifted education curriculum. In these environments, they were expected to excel academically. Experiences through elementary school were generally positive. Cole shared, "I always had very strong teachers, almost like sergeant mothers who really took me under their wing. I never really felt alienated in elementary school." Moreover, these spaces sheltered students from some of the challenges they were experiencing. Gregory shared:

> School was an outlet from the low income/poverty type stuff that was going on at home. I've always been pretty strong academically; I was in gifted programs. That was my outlet in terms of kind of my alter ego . . . I could be someone else. It didn't matter that we didn't live in the best neighborhood, or have the best furniture, or have the best clothes. Teachers [just] cared that I was smart. I kind of latched onto that.

These spaces were often not racially diverse. By high school, all participants described being the "only Black kid" or the "token" African American male student enrolled in GT programs or taking honors/advanced courses. This academic isolation limited opportunities for students to

develop friendships with other African American students. Those involved in various student activities seemed better able to find their niche within these settings. For instance, Justice described himself as a "chameleon". Within his predominantly White high school, he was both a scholar and a jock. Not overly concerned about cultivating friendships within a specific racial group, he was the "kind of guy who could be in all those circles" and maintained diverse friendships. Michael also has a positive experience within his predominantly White high school. Reflecting on his interactions with peers, he shared:

> My Black peers saw me as the "smart Black kid" and I think generally respected me in that sense. It was never a situation where [I] got picked on or anything…I was on the track team…I was class president all four years...I was on the drum corp. I was pretty socially balanced.

For other participants, however, these spaces were not places of acceptance. Na'im had difficulties reconciling his identity as a high achieving African American male within predominantly White spaces, confessing that at times he disengaged academically as not to appear too smart by his Black peers. Reflecting on his experiences, he shared:

> Once I moved to Florida, I was one of the only Black kids in my class. All of the other Black kids were like, "You think you're better than us. You're acting White." I wasn't used to that. I was used to being in Gifted courses, but everybody looked like me and I was never accused of acting White. I remember being in my Algebra class, and I asked the teacher, "What do I need to do to get out of Algebra?" and she said, "If you get a C or below you can't go to Gifted next year." I made sure I had a C . . . so I wouldn't be in Gifted any more; so that my other Black classmates would accept me. Once I got out of the Gifted program and I was just in "regular" classes, they still didn't like me.

Several participants echoed similar experiences when trying to be accepted by their peers. Some of these men got into physical altercations with schoolmates during this period. As an example, Silk often fought against the "high achiever" label placed upon him. He shared, "I got into a lot of fights. I was angry. I was smart, but not wanting to be smart. But I did really well on standardized tests so the principal would contact my parents." Raised in a household with college-educated parents, there were clear messages that he and his siblings were expected to attend college. Nevertheless, Silk confessed experiencing identity issues – not wanting to appear too smart among his male peers, even joining the chess club "on the low" while publically thriving on the neighborhood football team.

Fortunately, interactions with teachers and mentors helped transform early experiences of achievement into college aspirations among those who began to disengage in education. Alfonso felt there were considerable pressures within his community to forgo college for other alternatives such as full-time employment or the military. He shared:

> I found myself in an inner city urban high school, which, as I look back on it now, did not prepare me for college in any way. But there were coaches; there were teachers who pushed me and told me that college was an option.

Most notably, it was African American male mentors who supported and encouraged these men. For James, it was his science teacher, an African American male, who told him, "I see the potential in you before you see it." This teacher drove him and two male friends to Hampton University (his alma mater) for their first visit. The opportunity to visit not just a college campus but also an HBCU for the first time was an eye-opening experience. Suddenly "college" became more than just some vague place to James; he could envision himself in the environment as a high achieving Black male. As James described, it was "the vibe, the culture, seeing so many young beautiful Black people who were studying on a Friday night" that helped confirm his decision to attend an HBCU.

Taken together, each participant described different precollege successes and challenges as high achieving African American male students. Whether through personal perseverance or interactions with mentors, decisions to attend HBCUs were influenced by precollege experiences of racial and social isolation within academic spaces. These experiences developed into a desire to be in educational environments that valued their academic potential while also satisfying their needs as African American men. These high achieving males had to make sense of their conflicting interests - could they excel academically and fit in socially? For these participants, the decision to attend an HBCU was a deliberate attempt to reconcile these two aspects of their identity.

Black Achiever Actualized

Once enrolled at their respective HBCUs, these spaces were viewed as new environments where these African American men could have a "second chance" to reclaim their high achieving status. Each alumnus described attempts to (re)engage in the academic behaviors linked with college persistence and degree attainment. This included going to class, creating a regimented study routine, and finding peers to study with on campus. These strategies were effective, particularly during the freshman year. Michael shared, "I think my first semester in college I got like a 4.0, which I hadn't had in high school in a while. I was impressed with myself." Similarly, Alfonso shared: "I had like a 3.9 GPA. I did great my freshman year. I listened to advice from everybody. Didn't do too much partying . . . It was difficult, but I was able to stay focused."

Compared to high school, peers became more important sources of support for these high achieving African American males. As students matriculated through college, they began selective involvement in formal campus organizations and activities to further engage with peers. The majority became leaders within student organizations, participated in selective professional development experiences, joined historically Black fraternities, and/or engaged in community service activities. For participants, being involved socially was just as important as academic achievement. James, following a "study hard, play hard" mantra, took pride in regularly meeting with his study group of fellow biology majors, while staying involved in different leadership and social clubs on campus. Silk rebounded well from his high school 2.75 GPA, maintaining a 3.5 collegiate GPA while involved in student government, the school newspaper, intermural athletics, and other campus activities.

Although on the surface students were thriving within these HBCU environments as evidenced by their academic achievement or student engagement, there were clear pressures felt by participants related to their desires to do well in college. Some did not think they could handle their newfound freedom while maintaining their academic responsibilities. Gregory shared:

> I was the first person in my family to attend college and I was on full academic scholarship. I had to keep a 3.0. That was a huge pressure for me and it stressed me out . . . it was straight up books for the whole first semester. To class, to the room to study; to the caf; back to the room to study.

For students like Gregory, it was faculty and staff members who intervened to ensure that they were maximizing the opportunities afforded to them while on campus.

Across all participants, faculty and staff were described as going "above and beyond" in the ways they were attentive to the behaviors and needs of these high achieving African American males. Participants talked about an array of opportunities they had to personally connect with HBCU staff, faculty, and administrators both formally and informally. If and when participants experienced potential barriers to their collegiate success (whether it be self-doubt, academic failures, financial challenges, or personal issues), they were able to turn to these individuals for advisement and support. In fact, it was oftentimes faculty and staff who reached out to these high achievers; they knew what was going on in their lives and were concerned with the holistic well being of these students. Alfonso shared:

> My advisors were like mothers. They were very in tune to everything I was doing…I think they went above and beyond building relationships with the students. [As a result] I knew there were adults [on campus] who weren't going to allow me to slide through the cracks. They weren't going to allow me to not give them my best, and they would call me out on that. It was good because I felt accountable and I felt that they truly were looking out for me.

Several participants talked about members of the campus community who would "call them out" for missing class or underperforming on assignments. These individuals also helped stymie any self-doubt that crept up within some achievers even when they were doing well. For example, Gregory shared the role of his marketing professor in helping him manage the stresses of college life. Recalling a conversation, he shared,

> One of my professors asked, "Why are you so anxious? Nobody's going to let you leave here…You enjoy this experience; it's the best time of your life . . . You are definitely smart enough to make it through here without putting yourself through all this stress!" After we had that conversation, I started to lighten up a little bit and started to socialize and get engaged in the student life aspect of campus.

When it came to other academic matters, HBCU alumni named specific faculty members, typically those in their major, who were instrumental in facilitating their academic persistence both in the major and at the university. Moreover, faculty took interest in helping them develop professional skills by informing them of opportunities to attend conferences, engage in internships, undergraduate research programs, or leadership development programs. Moreover, faculty members helped secure postsecondary opportunities by writing letters of recommendation. These experiences were particularly transformative for those who never before considered graduate education. Most alumni remained in touch with these faculty members well beyond graduation, updating them on their personal and professional successes.

Aside from the people, the campus environment itself was viewed as a space conducive to the achievement of African American males. The physical environment of the HBCUs attended varied considerably – some in metropolitan areas, others in more rural and isolated regions. Regardless of the setting, there was a clear sense of community within these spaces. Living on campus and engaging with residence life staff helped them feel like their campus community was a home away from home. This sense of "home" was particularly salient for those far removed from their families. For instance, Aubrey shared:

> As cool as we tried to play it, we were nervous. We were two boys from California who, outside of the Black college tour, had never really left the state of California. They really comforted us and many of those men are still my close friends to this day.

These feelings lingered with participants as they reflected on their time in these spaces. Na'im shared:

> Whenever I go back there, I just feel a sense of, I guess, love. I see people who don't know me who speak to me, say, "What's up?" to me. Everybody greets you and say, "Hey, how are you doing?" I just feel like this is just love. This is Black love. This is Black unity. We're all in this together. When I succeed, you succeed, we succeed…it makes you want to do better.

Within these HBCU environments, participants reflected on the ways they began to feel more comfortable embracing various aspects of their identity. Within a "loving" environment, HBCUs were described as spaces where one could begin to explore what it meant to be a Black male within the context of American society. For some, their HBCU was a space where they began to cultivate a physical image of "manhood" through dress, speech, and demeanor. For others, it was an opportunity to simply explore African American history and create their own definitions of "manhood". From their stories, it was clear that by the end of their undergraduate career, each person gained something more than just a bachelor's by attending an HBCU. These life lessons are exemplified by Payton's testimony. He shared:

> Academically, I was well prepared, socially it was different - an eye-opening experience in terms of my self-esteem and self-awareness. I learned that being smart and being cool are not mutually exclusive. Being on campus socially let me be my own person. [Moreover,] nobody can define my Blackness. My Blackness didn't define my success or failure; I can succeed anywhere.

Discussion

In this investigation, we endeavored to learn more about high achieving African American males, including their precollege experiences with academic achievement and motivations for attending an HBCU. Moreover, we explored the ways the HBCU context, consisting of the physical campus environment, the faculty, staff, and student population, fosters the conditions necessary to promote college retention and degree attainment for this group. Findings from the present study suggest that high achieving African American male students face a number of challenges navigating the educational pipeline. Despite being identified as

"gifted" or viewed as "high achievers" by school staff (or perhaps because of it) some of the Black males in this study had difficulty asserting their academic identities, particularly as middle and high school students (Whiting, 2009). Most commonly, this "honor" resulted in being one of the only Black male students in any given classroom. For some, these experiences contributed to an acute sense of isolation and a desire to leave the advanced level classes in order to take classes with a greater number of their African American peers. Their narratives illustrate a common critique concerning the underrepresentation of Black male students in both gifted education and honors level courses (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). Scholars argue that these students are often overlooked for consideration in these programs, attributing this trend to a host of barriers including unclear nominating procedures (Bonner, 2000; Ford, 1998) and family and peer influences (Bonner, 2000; Whiting, 2008). With a greater representation of African American students within these spaces, high achieving Black students can not simply employ strategies linked to school success, they can more effectively make sense of and respond to experiences of racism in schools (Carter Andrews, 2012; Sanders, 1997; Tatum, 1997).

Ironically, it is experiences with academic and social isolation through high school that actually motivated these high achieving Black males to consider HBCUs. Prior to college, the African American males in this study acknowledged the ways that their high achieving status singled them out from their peers. For some, this resulted in conscious decisions to underperform in the classroom or downplay their academic prowess in social settings. The idea that school achievement within African American peer groups is seen as "acting White" has been debated by numerous scholars (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2004). Findings from Harper's (2004) study on the "acting White hypothesis" reveal the ways support for achievement and leadership were negotiated within peer groups. Contrary to Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) claim, participants attributed much of their college success to the support offered by their same race peers. Of note, Harper's participants were high achieving African American male undergraduates at six predominantly White universities. Interestingly, the participants in the present study reported not having to negotiate these identities within the historically black college and university setting. Additionally, Strayhorn (2009) found that approximately 88% of high achieving black collegians report feeling pressure to prove their intellectual ability, despite prior achievements and participation in a university scholarship program. This pressure to prove their intellectual ability did not emerge for the high achieving students in this study, suggesting they could devote more time and energy to engage in the social and pre-professional experiences at HBCUs.

Beverly Tatum (1997) posed the infamous question, "Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" (p. 52). Previous studies suggest African American college men who have supportive peer relationships on campus have increased academic success (Bonner, 2010; Shorette & Palmer, 2015). With regard to high achieving student experiences, research has shown that same race peer support significantly enhanced the quality of their experiences in predominantly White learning environments (Harper, 2006, McGowan, in press). Participants in McGowan's (in press) work discussed gendered norms that were prevalent within their male peer groups that included having a sense of obligation to one another and viewing competition as being healthy and important for bonding and persistence. Furthermore, Strayhorn (2009) suggests that one strategy to reduce the psychological burdens of proving oneself capable is to increase opportunities for high achieving Black students to interact with one another through established programs that are academic and social in nature. The high achieving Black men we interviewed similarly acknowledged the significant role peers played in their collegiate successes as they intentionally sought involvement in formal campus organizations and activities to further

engage with peers. For participants in this study, being involved socially was just as important as academic achievement. Those interested in the experiences of Black males suggest that a key factor in students' success is structural diversity – or simply having a critical mass of Black males with diverse interests with whom students can interact. In these spaces, there are greater opportunities to engage socially with achievement oriented peer groups.

Implications

This study provides several implications for both high schools and postsecondary institutions invested in high achieving African American male students. Scholars have found that having a strong academic foundation can often combat factors that may contribute to the attrition of students, effectively equipping students with the boost they need to persist in college (Allen, 1992; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Perna, 2005). The findings from this study reveal that college success begins in elementary school. Within schools, teachers have the potential to drastically influence the attitudes that students have about education. Students who are interested in pursuing higher education must be put on the path towards academic success early (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). Our findings reveals that we may need to expand the traditional definition of "high achieving" when attempting to identify students with academic promise for postsecondary education. Although half of the participants in this study were formally identified as "Gifted and Talented" in elementary school, not all of these individuals were engaged in academically rigorous programs by the time they transitioned to college. Bonner (2000) talks about a phenomenon referred to as "gifted underachievers" a pattern of behavior that often emerges during middle school. While scholars have identified that most students begin to formulate college-going aspirations by the 7th grade, this may be too late for students who have begun to "underachieve" and those who are tracked into academic programs that steer them away from college preparatory education (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). It is important that educational decisions about the opportunities for Black male students take into consideration the larger pressures that may shape students' academic performance while involving family members who can better advocate for their children.

HBCUs must counter the assumption that high achieving students do not need additional types of support. As demonstrated by this study, upon college entry, these individuals still needed support as they reengaged in the academic behaviors necessary for college retention. So much of the academic underperformance of African American college students can be traced to the negative perceptions and stereotypes surrounding their academic ability (Bonner, 2000; Freeman, 1999b; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995). It is crucially important for HBCUs to address the actual and not the perceived academic needs of African American college students. The reluctance of the high achieving students to seek out campus academic support is consistent across colleges and universities (Charles, Fischer, Mooney, & Massey, 2009). When interventions are based on race or gender and the perception is that these individuals *need* special support systems, interventions negatively impact the performance of otherwise high achieving scholars (Allen, 1992; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Therefore it is recommended that such interventions at HBCUs should target the "at-risk" courses not students labeled as "at risk," and should be delivered in ways that are not perceived to be "remedial" but as integral to students' continued academic success.

The implications of our study also relate to HBCU admissions officers, faculty, and staff members. Understanding the motivations for attending an HBCU can be useful in designing

strategic recruitment practices. Freeman (1999a) concluded, "When individuals are disconnected from their culture, whether through boundaries or curriculum, they often have a desire to be connected or reconnected to their roots. For this reason private/independent predominantly White schools could prove to be profitable locales for HBCU recruiting of African American students" (p. 97). By developing partnerships with these schools and communities, HBCUs may be better able to recruit high achieving African American students looking to engage in a different type of educational environment for their postsecondary education. Additionally, having a personal connection to the HBCU context can be helpful in the recruitment of students with little familiarity with these schools. Freeman and Thomas (2002) examined African American high school students' decisions to attend HBCUs and advocate that HBCU admissions officers make better use of alumni in their recruitment efforts. In practice, HBCU admissions officers must continue to incorporate alumni in the recruitment process as their stories could shed key insights into how to successful navigate the college campus.

Directions for Future Research

The scholarly literature focusing on African American male students in higher education has grown substantially over the past two decades. Many studies perpetuate a deficit narrative, focusing on personal qualities or tangible resources African American males lack that contribute to a failure to persist in college. Few studies seek to understand the experiences of African American men who successfully navigate higher education, particularly "high achieving African American male" who may enter postsecondary education with greater odds of success (Harper, 2007). This study critically investigates the experiences of high achieving African American males within the context of historically Black colleges and universities. Through an investigation of the ways race and gender intersect to shape perceptions of "academic success", this study offers insights into the unique role that HBCUs can play in supporting high achieving African American males on their campuses.

This study also illustrates the importance of expanding our understanding of how race, academic ability, and institutional setting influence the academic and social experiences of African American males. Too few studies attempt to describe and explain how within-group differences impact students' interactions, relationships and experiences in college (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn, 2013). Previous scholars have demonstrated that within the Black college student population, there is great variation in the ways students identify in terms of their race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, and religion. Consequently, they suggest that research concerning Black college students should explicitly explore the ways that students connect with their identity (Stewart, 2008), and the ways various aspects of students' identity influence their educational aspirations, perceptions of the campus environment, and experiences within institutions of higher education (Strayhorn, 2013). Using an intersectional perspective, future studies can explore students' experiences by race, gender, and other salient aspects of identity with HBCUs. An intersectional perspective allows for the examination of power dynamics that exist within the campus environment, as well as the ways the various social identities of Black students are expressed differentially depending on the contextual factors that exist within individual HBCUs.

Conclusion

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015), the percentage of 25- to 29-year old Black males who attained a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 16.4% to 21.1% between 2000 and 2015. Unfortunately, we know very little about the policies and practices that contributed to this increase in educational attainment (Harper, 2014). Improving graduation rates among African American males remains a critical concern for administrators at HBCUs. Surprisingly few empirical studies have sought to understand the educational experiences of HBCU graduates and the experiences that contribute to institutional retention and degree attainment. A deeper knowledge of the campus-specific experiences of HBCU alumni can provide insights into how to foster institutional policies and practices to successfully recruit and retain the 21st century student. Because HBCUs are not a monolithic group, this task can only be accomplished through cross-sectional research studies that solicit the voice of a diverse array of HBCU graduates. This study illustrates how HBCUs can serve as supportive environments for high achieving Black males. This analysis suggests that intentional programmatic interventions aside, the HBCU environment, consisting of the physical campus environment, the faculty, staff, and student population, serve as spaces where the identity of African American males is affirmed and they are able to actualize their potential. Families and students should consider these findings when making college choices. While there may be different resources available to students who attend PWIs, high achievers would do well to understand the potential benefits of attending HBCUs where issues around race, racism, and stereotypes are minimized.

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