A Conceptual Model of Black Male Success in the Community College

THE FIVE DOMAINS

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these students' experiences and addressing factors affecting the success of students in mathematics and science to successful undergraduate students in community colleges and high schools. The model views mathematics and science success in the community college context as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. It builds on prior research by incorporating existing models of block and non-block successes and cultural and institutional factors that influence student success. The model addresses the unique challenges faced by students in community college courses, including differences in block and non-block courses and the impact of institutional factors. It also incorporates feedback from students and educators to refine and improve the model. The model is intended to support the success of students by providing a framework for understanding and addressing the factors that influence student success.
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To develop a conceptual model for Black male success, we reviewed published peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and reports on Black men in community colleges. This literature has focused primarily on several areas: analyses and evaluations of programs serving Black males (e.g., Bush, Bush, & Wilcoxson, 2009; Leach, 2001; Ray, Carly, & Brown, 2009), correlates and determinants of Black male persisten in community college (Flowers, 2006; Glenn, 2003–2004; Freeman & Huggans, 2009; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001–2002; Mason, 1998), and factors associated with academic achievement and success (e.g., Bush & Bush, 2010; Perrakis, 2008; Wood & Essien-Wood, 2012; Wood & Hilton, 2012b, 2012c; Wood, Hilton & Lewis, 2011; Wood & Turner, 2010). The latter two areas provided insight into the factors affecting the success, broadly defined, of these men. While limited to literature on persistence and achievement, the research that informed the development of this model may also have applicability for other student outcomes (e.g., transfer, attainment), since persistence research is often used as a starting point for investigating other academic outcomes (e.g., Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Nora & Rendón, 1990; Wood, Nevarez, & Hilton, 2011).

The literature on Black males in community colleges describes correlates and determinants of their success in five variable domains: social, noncognitive, academic, environmental, and institutional. Collectively, these domains are hereafter referred to as the five domains. These variable constructs are influenced by three sets of precollege considerations, including goals, background, and societal norms. Interactions between precollege considerations and the five variable constructs affect the success (e.g., persistence, achievement, attainment, transfer) of Black males in the community college. To provide a fuller understanding of these relationships, the primary components and variables of the model are discussed in the following section.

Precollege Considerations

The three primary precollege considerations are goals, background, and societal norms. While these constructs affect student success in college, their primary importance (in light of the model) is to provide a context for understanding the experiences of Black men prior to entering the community college. These constructs are generally interrelated. Societal norms refer to normative messages about Black men in society specific to their racial or ethnic and gender identity and are usually stereotypical in nature. Often, they depict Black boys or men as indolent, brutish, immoral, and unintelligent. These messages are rooted in historical racism (direct and indirect), perpetuated through social interactions, and reified through media and other societal institutions (e.g., schools, families, sports, churches; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011). As a result, school teachers (who are often White and female) have marred perceptions of Black boys, thereby treating them negatively and communicating with them in ways that suggest schooling is not for them. Thus, as a result of these negative messages about school, many young men redirect their efforts toward success in other arenas, particularly those that society has validated as realistic and “acceptable” pathways for Black males, such as entertainment and sports (Majors & Billson, 1992).

As students progress through the educational pipeline, they establish, clarify, and reassess their goals in three primary areas: career, personal, and educational. Career goals include students’ professional aspirations. Prior research has shown that having strong career aspirations, as opposed to mixed or unclear aspirations, is a strong propellant for academic success (Wood, 2010). Personal goals refer to students’ aspiration for their own lives (e.g., having a family, civic involvement, living in the local community). While stereotypical perceptions of Black men would suggest otherwise, research by Wood, Hilton, and Hicks (in press) illustrate several primary personal goals for Black men in community colleges, which include creating a better future for themselves and their families, a responsibility to others (with a focus on being a role model to family and friends), and debunking stereotypical perceptions of Black men. Their research indicates that these personal goals serve as motivational factors for Black men to succeed in college. Educational goals refer to the highest degree a student plans to earn (e.g., associate’s, bachelor’s, doctorate). Educational goals have been shown to be strong predictors of persistence for Black men, with greater aspirations being predictors of enhanced outcomes (Freeman & Huggans, 2009; Hagedorn et al., 2001–2002; Mason, 1998; Wood & Williams, 2013).

Several studies have identified background variables that are predictive of Black male success in the community college. Generally, younger Black male students are more likely to persist than older students (Hagedorn et al., 2001–2002; Perrakis, 2008). Moreover, Strayhorn (2012) has also linked age to greater levels of satisfaction with students’ academic experience. We postulate that findings regarding age are significant predictors of success because younger students have more recent experiences in educational settings and fewer life commitments (e.g., familial obligations). Prior academic performance in high school is another piece in the student success puzzle. Greater achievement in high school (e.g., grade point average, higher-level math course work) is predictive of Black males’ success in community colleges.
Numerous factors contribute to the success of Black men in the community college setting. In this vein, scholars have observed that barriers and support structures in community colleges can play a significant role. Black male students often experience disparities in career paths, academic achievement, and financial support. To address these issues, institutions must develop strategies that support student success. This includes enhancing support structures for Black male students and promoting a culture that values diversity and inclusion. By doing so, community colleges can help to level the playing field and ensure that Black men have equal opportunities to succeed. 

Implications for Research

Researchers have observed the importance of identifying and addressing the unique challenges faced by Black male students in community college settings. This includes understanding the role of institutional and individual factors in shaping student outcomes. By examining these factors, researchers can develop targeted interventions to support student success. This work has implications for policy makers, administrators, and educators, as well as for the communities in which they work. Overall, the goal is to create a more equitable and supportive environment for all students, particularly Black male students, to thrive.
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