

“You Are Going to School”: Exploring the Precollege Experiences of First-Year Black Males in Higher Education

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Abstract

Black males are often underrepresented in postsecondary education settings and frequently encounter many barriers in getting to college. Our aim in this qualitative investigation was to understand the precollege and college experiences of Black males who successfully enrolled in a postsecondary institution. Through a focus group interview, seven Black males in a living and learning community shared their experiences prior to and during enrollment at a highly selective, predominantly White institution. We used the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze the focus group data and pinpoint thematic explanations of precollegiate and collegiate experiences of Black males. Based on the thematic findings, we offer specific recommendations on how school counselors can help Black males prepare and eventually matriculate in higher education.

Keywords

Black males, collegiate, precollegiate, school counseling

Higher salaries, career advancement, and access to benefits are frequently correlated with higher levels of educational attainment (Heckman, 2000). Carnevale et al. (2015) noted salary differences of \$1 million over a lifetime between those with a high school diploma and those without. However, many racial/ethnic populations commonly encounter barriers to obtaining these benefits, specifically Black males. One of the barriers is access to postsecondary education. For example, in the 2012–2013 school year, “estimates indicate a national [high school] graduation rate of 59% for Black males, 65% for Latino males, and 80% for White males” (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015, p. 7).

Generally speaking, Black students comprise 14% of the undergraduate student population, of whom 36% are male and 64% are female (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2006; Kena et al., 2015). Further, bachelor’s degree attainment for males by race are Black, 34%; Latino, 45%; Asian, 64%; and White, 57% (Gose, 2014; Harper, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). Clearly, preparing Black males as early as middle school for postsecondary opportunities is important given the economic and quality-of-life advantages. Therefore, more research is needed on how to improve college enrollment outcomes for Black males and, in particular, how school counselors can facilitate this process.

Literature Review

K–12 Schooling Experiences

A recent report noted that 46% percent of Black students in public education attend high-poverty schools (Hussar et al., 2020) that tend to have fewer school support specialists (e.g., school counselors), lower paid and less experienced teachers, less modern and technologically advanced resources, and bigger class sizes than wealthier districts (Semuels, 2016). Such schools typically have fewer means to create robust scholastic experiences for students (Duncombe, 2017). As students navigate these realities, other educational vulnerabilities—such as high rates of minority enrollment, high rates of student absenteeism, high enrollments in special education, and low

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enrollments in Advanced Placement or honors courses—further compound their educational experiences (Duncombe, 2017). Education has had a long-standing pattern of the percentage of Black males placed in special education programs exceeding their percentage makeup of the total enrollment, a trend that has been evident for more than 40 years (Albrecht et al., 2012; Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Zhang et al., 2014). Many researchers, over the years, have linked this overrepresentation in special education to the historical effects of slavery (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Powers et al., 2004) and conclusions of past landmark legal cases (Cloonan, 2016; Lynch, 2016; Moore et al., 2008; Niedenfuer, 2015). Black students, in general, need special education services more than their White counterparts, and Black males, in particular, are more likely to be exposed to anti-Black school systems that yield poverty and underresourced communities, thereby requiring more intense services (Skiba et al., 2006).

Nationally, Black students are also underrepresented in gifted programs (Wright et al., 2017). This is especially troubling when looking at Black males. Regarding the underrepresentation of Black males in gifted and advanced academic programs, Black parents often face barriers to advocacy due to disenfranchisement and mistrusting school personnel, and this can be interpreted as a lack of desire to be involved in their son's education (Ford & Moore, 2013). Another educational issue is the misunderstanding of teachers on giftedness and appropriate referrals (Sullivan & Proctor, 2016).

Teacher bias frequently manifests itself in low expectations of their Black male students, leading to overrepresentation in special education programs and underrepresentation in gifted and college preparatory programs (Allen, 2013; Vincent et al., 2012). Educator bias is often defined as any thought, belief, or behavior that adversely influences how an educator perceives and ultimately interacts with a student (Bolden, 2009). If educators have negative perceptions toward equity and inclusion, they are more open to referring a child with problem behavior for special education evaluation than the alternative (Alexander, 2010). Educators' perceptions of Black males often manifest as low expectations and stereotypical biases which can negatively affect their educational outcomes. Teacher referrals and recommendations are also a major part of the selection process in gifted education. With this in mind, educator bias has been implicated as a major contributor to the problem of Black males being overly referred for special education and for their underrepresentation in gifted and advanced academic programs (Conger et al., 2019; Vega & Moore, 2018; Zhang et al., 2014). To this end, educator perceptions and stereotypical biases of Black males often contribute to the discipline gap (Ford & Moore, 2013). Black male students are frequently disciplined at higher rates than their non-Black peers, and suspended from schools at a higher rate (Ford & Moore, 2013; Hines, Harris, et al., 2020; Hines, Hines, et al., 2020). More specifically, they are suspended from schools at more

than twice the rate of their White counterparts (48.3% vs. 21.4%, respectively; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016).

School Counselors and College and Career Readiness

The ASCA National Model from the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019) offers a framework for the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs in K–12 schools. As such, the model supports the development of comprehensive programs that are data informed, systematic, developmentally appropriate, and accountable, with the aim to support the holistic development students need for postsecondary readiness and success (ASCA, 2019). A major job function of school counselors is to focus specifically on helping all students develop academic and social/emotional skills and advancing their college and career readiness. Toward this end, ASCA (2014) has presented a set of student standards, *ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success*, for supporting the development of students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes to enhance their academic success, college and career readiness, and social/emotional development. These research-based standards include two broad categories, mindset standards and behavior standards, with specific subcategories of learning strategies, self-management skills, and social skills.

The College Board National Office for School Counselor Advocacy also offers a detailed school counseling framework for fostering college and career readiness among students, the Eight Components of College and Career Readiness, which focus on comprehensive, multitiered, culturally responsive counseling practices for postsecondary readiness (College Board, 2010). The eight components are: (a) college aspirations, (b) academic planning for college and career readiness, (c) enrichment and extracurricular engagement, (d) college and career exploration and selection processes, (e) college and career assessments, (f) college affordability planning, (g) college and career admission processes, and (h) transition from high school graduation to college enrollment (College Board, 2010). Each component includes data-driven activities and multilevel interventions that build on each other throughout students' K–12 schooling.

To restate, Black males have the lowest 6-year graduation rate compared to all other racial demographic groups (NCES, 2019). With this in mind, it is imperative for school counselors to provide college counseling and career advisement to Black male students prior to graduation. This includes identifying resources to assist with college retention of Black males. To prepare students for college and beyond, school counselors utilize high-impact practices, defined as "resources that increase rates of student retention and student engagement" (Kuh, 2008, as cited in Gipson & Mitchell, 2017, p.128).

According to Gipson and Mitchell (2017), Black students who participate in high-impact practices while enrolled in college are likely to attain greater academic achievement. School

counselor engagement is critical in developing meaningful relationships with students and fostering parental or guardian support through individualized college and career counseling and strong enrichment and college immersion programs. Educator–student relationships have been found to influence students’ educational aspirations for college (Moore, 2006). More specifically, many researchers have found that positive relationships with caring adults support Black males’ ability to consider and pursue postsecondary educational opportunities (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Guifrida & Douthit, 2010). Further, positive relationships extend to Black males and school counselors who, after developing mutual trust and respect, can work together to develop and reach postsecondary goals (Reid & Moore, 2008). However, many school counselors, especially those who are non-Black, have trouble initiating and sustaining such relationships. For example, Bethell (2013) found that Black male students often indicated that they did not know their school counselor well or did not trust their school counselor. The Black male students also viewed the school counselor as someone who “only worked with the ‘problem’ kids” (Bethell, 2013, p. 95). Only one Black male student participant in the Bethell study spoke highly of his school counselor, and he spoke mostly of trust and the school counselor appreciating his hard work while in high school. Bethell asserted, “Schools commonly focus their student appreciation on academic accomplishments. Showing Black males that they matter has the potential to increase their connectedness to school and increase their academic outcome” (p. 106). We further argue that relationship building is likely to increase a Black male’s probability of going to college.

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According to the school counseling scientific and theoretical literature, school counselors play an important role in increasing students’ educational and career aspirations (Moore, 2006) and connecting school and nonschool resources to increase students’ social capital and preparation for college after high school (Bryan et al., 2011). However, “the ability of counselors to be agents of college preparation and access for their students is often undermined by the organizational capacity of schools, which is weaker in schools serving more Black students” (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006, p. 103). A study of a Chicago school illustrates just how impactful the use of school-based social capital can be in the college admissions process. This school took concrete actions to maximize students’ social capital and access to school counseling by lowering student-to-

school counselor ratios. The school counselors also created structural supports to aid in career and college counseling by creating a college prep course for all 11th graders, providing individualized assistance in the college search process, facilitating college field trips, increasing access to summer college immersion programs, and a creating a culture of staff sharing their college experiences (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). In the program’s first year, 61% of their graduating students, the majority of whom were Black, attended 2- and 4-year institutions (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). This outcome was quite likely viewed as impossible, considering that only 16% of the students were reading at or above the national norms when they entered high school, and only 33% of 18-year-olds graduated from high school in their neighborhood (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). Thus, the school counseling supports were able to offset the educational barriers that were stacked against the students.

In the extant theoretical and scientific literature, parental support is an important social dynamic in Black men choosing to pursue a college education (Bethell, 2013; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Guifrida & Douthit, 2010). School counselors need to consider the family structure and cultural norms to determine best how to support students, and can play a major role in bridging any gaps between family expectations and students’ needs and desires. Guifrida and Douthit (2010) asserted that school counselors can help parents encourage and motivate their students through the college-going process while also reassuring families that such a pursuit is not an act of abandonment of the family. The researchers further emphasized that school counselors are wonderful resources for helping families to see this point and aiding them with supporting their children (Guifrida & Douthit, 2010). This kind of support is another way that school counselors can foster positive relationships.

Individualized college and career planning is vital to successful postsecondary preparation and transition (Hines, Hines, et al., 2020; Reid & Moore, 2008). In a study of Black male college students majoring in engineering, the men reported the importance of academic planning and course selection in their decision to pursue higher education (Moore, 2006). Specifically, the Black male participants underscored the importance of encouragement from their school counselor(s) to take rigorous and college preparatory classes, allowing for greater connections with teachers of these courses who reinforced the students’ ability to achieve at a high level. Because many school counselors interact with students around career and post-high school preparation, a positive school counselor–student relationship can be helpful in student course selection for postsecondary readiness.

In the aforementioned study, Moore (2006) also noted the importance of meaningful, academic and career enrichment programs, opportunities, and experiences. Access to these programs provided participants with the exposure they needed to understand their academic and career options and the necessary experiences and connections to see themselves attending

college institutions, especially in engineering. Too often, school counselors are the gatekeepers to these programs; therefore, encouraging Black males' involvement in these programs is important, as is assisting them through the cumbersome process of applying and finding funding, if necessary.

Purpose of Study

The overall purpose of this study was to closely examine the precollegiate experiences of Black male undergraduate students who decided to enroll and participate in a college living and learning community. Specifically, the authors sought to identify the factors contributing to the students' decision to attend college. The current school counseling literature has a dearth of research on this topic as it relates to Black male college and career readiness. To this end, this study focused primarily on the research question, "What precollege experiences and events contributed to Black males' decision to attend college?"

Theoretical Framework

Cultural capital theory asserts that the absence or presence of social capital can impact social mobility (Bourdieu, 1986; Hines et al., 2015). Social capital has three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutional (Bourdieu, 1986). Embodied capital is the set of attitudes and cultural values that resides within the individual. Objectified cultural capital pertains to the material resources one owns to display social status. Institutional cultural capital encompasses an individual possessing titles, awards, and credentials. Habitus refers to individuals having an acquired flavor for a cultural item, such as upper-class individuals having a particular taste in art or high-end watches. Field is the type of capital needed to advance or lobby for a position that requires understanding the "rules of the game," practices, and norms. In this study, we use cultural capital theory to understand the types of assets these participants possessed that influenced their decision to go to college.

Method

Procedures

The first author received institutional review board approval to conduct this research study, then proceeded to recruit participants for a focus group interview. Participants were recruited from a Black male residential learning community at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the northeastern part of the United States, referred to as NU in the excerpts below. Out of 25 Black male students targeted for participation in the study, seven met the study's participation requirements and consented to participate in the study. The focus group interview protocol was developed and grounded in cultural capital theory, college and career readiness literature, and research on Black male students. We also used follow-up prompts in the group format (i.e., a focus group) to solicit participant responses (Breakwell,

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information.

Participant	Age	Major
Chris P. Bacon	18	English/Africana studies
Tyrone Smith	17	Allied health sciences
Garrett Morgan	18	Electrical engineering
Brian Badsco	19	Nutritional sciences
Jaquania Dwight	18	Civil engineering
Jimmy Neutron	18	Mechanical engineering
Michael Jackson	18	Communication

1995). All participants were given pseudonyms, and the group interview was recorded and transcribed.

Participants

All participants in this study were Black, male, first-year students, and each completed a demographic questionnaire through Qualtrics (e.g., major, age, city of origin, financial aid status). The questionnaire was a way to ascertain information on the participants' academic and personal experiences. The average age of the participants was 18 years old, and the age range was 17–19 years. Of the participants, 20% identified as first-generation college students, 86% were paying for college with either loans or scholarships, 86% resided in a two-parent household, and 86% described their city of origin as suburban (versus 14% from an urban location). See Table 1 for additional participant information.

Data Analysis

To analyze the focus group interview data, the research team conducted rigorous content analysis (Biddle et al., 2001; Scanlan et al., 1989) and used modified grounded theory analytical coding process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Our data analysis process used deductive and inductive approaches, and we created the conceptualization of themes using cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and salient strands from the literature. We employed the technique of *in vivo* coding as a method of code identification to cite participants' exact words and their responses presenting emergent concepts because of inductive analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

A five-step process (i.e., raw data codes, first-order clusters, second-order clusters, general dimensions, and emergent themes/comparative clusters) was the result of using a blended content analysis and grounded theory analytical procedure. Identified codes were quantized to identify the level of salience of identified clusters across multiple participants at each phase of the coding process (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). To ensure trustworthiness and quality of the data, we used an auditor; participant member checks; detailed memos; the documentation of an audit trail; and methodological, data, and multiple investigators/analysts (various forms of triangulation; Patton, 2002).

Positionality

Positionality entails the authors who were involved with the data analysis portion of this research study. The first author is a Black, male associate professor in school counseling, with a research agenda focused on understanding Black male academic and career outcomes. He has experience working with Black males in P-12 and in higher education settings. He identifies as a Black male who is committed to helping Black men and boys based on his own experiences within both private and public schools.

The second author is a Black woman who is an associate professor in school counseling, with extensive research and expertise with African American students and twice exceptionality. She served as the external auditor for this research study. The fourth author has a background in teacher education and experience working with students in P-12, specifically students of color.

Three other authors assisted in analyzing the data. The fifth author is a Black woman who works for a research firm and has experience working with students in higher education. Her research interests include Black women in higher education and support systems for students of color. She also has experience working with Black males in a residential learning community as a tutor and instructor. The sixth author is a Black, male Ph.D. candidate whose research interests are Black males' college and career readiness and mental health counseling for Black males. He has served as graduate assistant for the Black male residential learning community, and a background in school counseling and P-12 education. The seventh author is a White male with Puerto Rican heritage who served as the research assistant for the Black male learning community. He is a postdoctoral researcher whose research interests include public health in underserved communities and program evaluation and quantitative methods.

Findings

In this research study, seven young men candidly discussed the precollege experiences that influenced their decisions to attend and enroll in college. Three salient themes emerged: (a) external influences of college expectations, (b) precollege primers, and (c) educational and social integration. In the following section, we underscore the themes with direct excerpts from the interviews with the Black male participants.

External Influences of College Expectations

Participants discussed how external influences of college expectations played a role in attending college. We use the term *external* to indicate expectation outside of their internal motivation to pursue higher education. The participants emphasized the expectations of postsecondary attendance from their families. Their families provided embodied capital as they conveyed cultural norms and attitudes regarding the importance of pursuing an education beyond high school. For

example, Jaquania Dwight mentioned his parents' expectations and stated,

It [college attendance] has always been expected. College has always been in the picture. It was never not in the picture. So, when I started focusing on it, [it] was probably my freshman year in high school.

He also mentioned how his parents held him accountable for the process of completing his college application process. For example:

My parents—like everyone else has mentioned, it was always enforced. It wasn't: "Are you going to school?" It's: "What school are you going to?" So, my parents always made sure I was applying to colleges, filling out scholarships, and so forth. But, like I said, it's deciding what school do you wanna go to, not if you wanna go to school.

Garrett Morgan talked about his mother and grandmother having expectations of him attending college:

It's kind of a family thing. Going to college wasn't exactly a choice. It was more of—I mean, I wanted to go to college, but it was like "You're going to college" kinda deal.

Michael Jackson described how his siblings created expectations of him getting a postsecondary education,

Well, all of my brothers, they went to college. And my parents—it was also just expected. So, they told me I was going to all of the lower levels of school to get to college. And since all my brothers had gone, they kind of set that example.

Conversely, many of the young men in this study explained how educators and other significant individuals' expectations of them (embodied capital) included enrolling in college. For example, Chris P. Bacon had teachers, peers, and other individuals in the community who held him to higher standards and had expectations that he would attend college. He noted:

Ever since I started going to school, teachers always told me that I had potential to succeed at the higher education level, given I guess my work effort and stuff in class, as well as how I was to my peers. I guess peers also played a part as well. Like a lot of people kinda was looking forward for me to go to college in the first place, 'cause I'm kinda like an example for a lot of people. And, also, I guess just people that I know outside of schools and things like that just kinda always expected me to go to some type of institution and get a degree in something because they felt like if I didn't, I'd be wasting my potential.

Also, Michael Jackson's Spanish teacher played a role in his decision to attend college. He noted,

In 11th grade I had this Spanish teacher and she was always on my case about everything. Like she motivated me, and she pushed me

to make sure I got everything done. She would make sure I stayed after school with her to get my essay done, and she would revise it and things like that. She [would] look up scholarships and stuff for me. So, she kind of pushed me and made sure I got everything I needed to get done for college.

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Participant Michael Jackson

On another note, Jaquania Dwight had friends (embodied capital) who had expectations of him getting to college, and they help each other achieve that goal. Jimmy Neutron had expectations from his friends and coaches. This excerpt captures this point:

Having a bunch of friends that applied to college kind of made me stay on top of things. And coaches. They didn't really have a decision in where I went, but they would try and influence me to go somewhere where I could do my sport. But yeah.

Brian Badsco also addressed the role his coaches played in him attending college:

I had coaches send colleges to me to talk about schools... They tried to get me to play football in college. But I had another coach that was like, "Brian, I don't think you could play football in college." So, he helped me look for other schools that were [strong academically versus in athletics].

Precollege Primers

Many of the Black male participants were introduced to college through what we labeled precollege primers, such as summer enrichment initiatives, resources (e.g., financial aid), advertisement of programs, proximity to home, and networks and campus-based relationships; these gave them information on college activities and resources that contributed to their decision to attend college. The precollege primers are a form of institutional capital as they serve as a gateway to credentials, degrees, and certifications. In other words, the precollege primers provide the education, knowledge, and pathways to degree attainment. Tyrone Smith talked about how he chose his institution because of a bridge program and a Black male residential learning community that he joined in his freshman year:

I think it was the NU and knowing that I would be in things already going into NU. 'Cause I knew I was gonna be in SSS [Student

Support Services bridge program] and I knew I was gonna be in BMLC [Black male learning community], so those kind of things pulled me in.

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Garrett Morgan wanted to attend college closer to home because the tuition (institutional capital) would be more cost attainable. He underscored the benefits of attending college in state with the following excerpt:

Because it was in-state, the tuition [is] lower. But, also my family would be able to visit me. So, it's far but not too far. It's like two hours away from where I live. Well, yeah. Money is definitely a large factor because it definitely decides if you [would] be in debt for as long as you—you know what I mean? You [would not] be in debt forever.

Chris P. Bacon echoed similar beliefs:

For one, like they said, it was money. I think that is a big reason. Secondly, it was also just because, given the opportunity and the environment and the proximity from how far it is from where I live. It was ideal . . . at least for the first couple years or so to go there to get my feet wet in what exactly the higher education experience was like, without necessarily being too far stranded from what I used to know.

On the other hand, Jaquania Dwight discussed how the summer early start or bridge program (institutional capital) prepared him for college:

I attended something called Bridge the summer before coming into NU. It was a program for minorities in engineering where we basically took all the core classes, I'm taking now to get ready and to kind of get a feel for what the semester's gonna look like. It was a 5-week program, where we stayed here at NU. It did cost money, but if you worked hard, you got the reward for that at the end. So that is something that I was able to experience that definitely is helping me now and making college way easier.

Garret Morgan spoke of how the engineering bridge program (institutional capital) served as a resource for jobs and connections entering his freshmen year:

And it [Bridge program] gave me the connections to get my job through EDOC [Engineering Diversity and Outreach Center] and things of that nature. It just sets you up for success before college. And you don't get credit for the classes that you take, but you do

get a lot of work done. You stay up till like 4:00 a.m. sometimes. It's intense. But it really does help you when you come in. You start off really strong your first semester.

Tyrone Smith discussed how his bridge program, SSS, prepared him for his freshman year and assisted him in developing friendships:

I was in SSS before the semester, and SSS is basically program in the summer where it helps the transition to college. And you take two classes, so you get six credits by the end of the summer. And I think it overall helped me get used to the campus, how a college class would be, and make new friends.

Educational and Social Empowerment

This theme emerged as the Black male participants discussed how precollege opportunities they had mentioned empowered them to obtain resources, embodied capital, and institutional capital through relationship building, student activities, leadership opportunities, and building brotherhood. Michael Jackson found out about a supplemental instruction resource on campus to assist him with courses where he was struggling:

I go to this thing called SI. It's almost every day of the week. It's for chemistry class, and it's ideally students who passed the class and understand it. They re-teach the class to other students. So, it's not really—they're teaching it a different way than their professor would teach it so it's more understandable for students.

Chris P. Bacon utilized a program that helped him develop soft skills as a freshman:

So the AAC—that's a place where you can go for time management, basically helping you plan out how you're going to study, when, and what you're gonna study on a particular time. And just kind of getting yourself into the groove of learning how to plan to study. And that is helpful because a lot of times, coming from high school, depending on where you come from, you may not have been asked much to get a good grade in class. So going there, I guess you relearn—like you kind of forget everything you knew and kinda relearn how to study and kinda perform better and learn how to time-manage better.

Many of the men also talked about how they created their friendship networks (embodied capital) through their precollege primers (e.g., Bridge; institutional capital) and through their residential learning community (BLMC), which contributed to the motivation to persist in college. Jimmy Neutron expressed that the others in BLMC are his friends. Tyrone Smith has a "mixture of people from my high school, BLMC, SSS, and then people from the AACC [affinity group]." Brian Badsco described having to make friends (embodied capital) quickly because he was an out-of-state student:

I'm from New Jersey, so I had to make friends fast. I made some friends that were also from New Jersey. And people in my classes, people that go to SI. And of course my BLMC brothers.

Garrett Morgan identified friends (embodied capital) from a variety of networks across campus:

I have friends from pretty much all around. I have two friends that I have almost every class with. So, we study a lot together. Obviously, I have my BLMC brothers. And then I have this squad of five people with an additional two because two of them have girlfriends. So, we all hang out together a lot in Towers [residence hall].

The young men were also involved in many social programs (institutional capital) at the university. For example, Michael Jackson shared:

I'm interested in getting involved in this one called BOSS, but this semester I had class during when they met, so never really had that opportunity. But next semester I think I might join. And I am kind of involved in this fashion club but it's kind of corny. So I don't go as often as I would like to.

Discussion

The study's findings underscored how Black men successfully traverse the college-going process in ways that embrace community-oriented experiences. Despite the potential barriers that each of the seven Black male participants endured, they noted the different ways they found strength and support through their respective communities (embodied capital), including their home of origin (embodied capital) and the communities (embodied and institutional capital) they began creating as a part of the process. These sentiments were reflective of the different ways in which social and cultural capital can manifest to offer needed support but also to build on the cultural wealth that participants already possess (Brooms, 2018).

Each participant noted the importance of relationships to their college-going process, from building aspirations to eventually enrolling (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Gufridda & Douthit, 2010; Hines, Harris, et al., 2020; Moore, 2006). First, they spoke of the ways in which their parents and caregivers were influential in setting those early expectations of attending college. For many of the participants, going to college was never a choice, but they put greater focus on their academic pursuits because of the expectations of their parents and caregivers, including extended family members (Bethell, 2013; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Gufridda & Douthit, 2010). The Black male participants also noted that their teachers, friends, and coaches pushed them toward college. These close relationships built the foundation and set the focus toward college going; they are often the most critical force in the pursuit and completion of postsecondary educational opportunities (Gufridda & Douthit, 2010). As noted in embodied capital, the expectations and support these young men received played a critical role in their pursuit of college. School counselors can

use school–family–community partnerships (Bryan & Henry, 2008) as a modality of supporting the college and career readiness of Black males.

Precollegiate programs served as a pivotal resource in demystifying the college experience, allowing participants to get a better sense of what college would entail. Researchers have pointed to precollegiate enrichment and summer bridge programs as ways to provide career exploration while also increasing social networks and cultural capital that is needed to navigate and succeed in higher education (Almeida et al., 2019; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Moore, 2006). Similarly, the learning communities and campus resources extended the impact of the summer bridge program by creating that real-time community not only with social engagement but with academic skill development and success (Cintrón et al., 2020; Hines, Harris, et al., 2020). In fact, summer bridge programs and campus resources may help to round out Black male students' social networks, which often may be inefficient in providing a holistic, deeper understanding of the college-going process and skills needed to be successful (Elliott et al., 2018).

In naming all the factors that were important in the college-going process, the Black male participants did not mention the role of school counselors. Although these interactions may have taken place, they may have been minimal or perhaps not meaningful or helpful in the participants' college-going endeavors. This is perhaps not surprising because school counselors may be underutilized or narrowly focused on responsive services within schools (Bethell, 2013). This finding is particularly important because Bryan et al. (2011) found that school counselors are often the gatekeepers and holders of information for the college-going process—in fact, they are critical to this process. The Black male participants in this study did not mention if or how school counselors worked with them toward that end. This absence may be oversight, but it also might reflect limited or insignificant interactions or school counseling programming (Bethell, 2013; Owens et al., 2011). Further, although school counselors can provide a wealth of support and services, especially geared toward college and career readiness, the Black male participants may have not actually benefited from them.

Implications

Research

More research needs to be conducted on improving the enrollment of Black males into college. For example, interviews with Black males who participated in summer bridge programs could uncover how those initiatives helped them prepare for college and increased their level of engagement at the institution. Researchers also should investigate further how school counselors prepare Black males for college or other postsecondary opportunities. Interviews with counselor educators can address how they prepare preservice school counselors to work with Black males in P–12 school settings. Moreover, scholars

can use data from the 2009 High School Longitudinal Study (<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/hsls09/>) to look at variables that best predict college enrollment for Black males. Last, researchers should interview Black male high school seniors who intend to enroll in college to understand their process of postsecondary preparation.

Practice

School counselors can be gate openers (rather than gatekeepers) to college access. School counselors help decide what courses are offered, who has access to those courses, academic interventions such as SAT/ACT preparation, and access to college campuses and admissions representatives. Constantly examining their practices and adapting them, if necessary, to best serve Black males is important for school counselors. They should also identify programming at the college level (e.g., summer bridge programs and living and learning communities) that will support Black males in persisting through college.

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ASCA recently released a standard in practice document on eliminating racism and bias within school counseling departments and schools (ASCA, n.d.). The guidance underscored the importance of school counselors and how they should play a major role in providing equitable services. It also chronicled the ways in which comprehensive school counseling programs should be working to narrow the opportunity and college attainment gaps among students of color (ASCA, 2019).

In this section, we illustrate how school counselors can best adapt their practices to better serve Black males through college and career exploration. Generally speaking, they are charged to use data to determine what type of interventions their students need to be successful. Data may come in the form of test scores, discipline data, absentee data, and student and parent surveyed needs assessments (ASCA, 2019). School counselors should use such data to develop specific interventions or programming to assist students who are falling behind and to develop other supports in collaboration with teachers. Further, school counselors should aim to build strong relationships with students' parents or legal guardians, who are critical stakeholders when working with Black males (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013; Hines et al., 2019). For example, schools can send a copy of PSAT student score reports to parents/guardians with a letter to explain how to read the results (College Board, 2010). However, school counselors need to go

a step farther when working with Black males. School counselors can host workshops for parents/guardians to learn more about the PSAT and how it is used before the test is given in October, and then a follow-up workshop after PSAT scores are released to offer guidance to students and their parents/guardians on how to read the PSAT score report.

Partnering with local colleges to bring students on campus tours is highly recommended. School counselors also need to identify programs and affinity groups that will support their Black male students at college. For example, many participants noted the importance having a living and learning community as they transitioned from high school to college. These programs can assist Black males who are pursuing majors in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) because they also serve as preparatory programs. Getting students to college is not enough; but school counselors must ensure that Black male students get through and graduate college.

Policy

Given the emphasis that each of the participants placed on their involvement in precollege primers (e.g., bridge program initiatives, financial aid resources, advertisement of programs, proximity to home, networks, and campus-based relationships), incorporating policies that allow for these to happen is important. For example, schools often institute attendance or GPA policies that allow and restrict student participation in specific activities related to college going, including college visits, fairs, etc. Revisiting said policies is important for schools to ensure that interested students are not prevented from taking part, particularly because, as this study indicates, these early exposures allow students to begin developing social and cultural capital that are critical for successful transitions.

Because course enrollment patterns, particularly around rigorous courses and STEM-related courses, show strong relationships with college preparedness, it is important that policies related to eligibility are equitable. In particular, policies around college going and rigorous courses like Advanced Placement must treat these as opportunities for any student interested in college. As such, enrollment in said courses should be reflective of the student body as a whole.

Limitations

Several limitations exist to this research study. First, this study is qualitative and has a limited number of participants so findings are not generalizable. Second, the participants were part of a living and learning community for Black males and the researchers did not interview Black males outside of this program. Black males who chose not to live in the living and learning community may have had differing precollegiate experiences and might list other factors that encouraged them to pursue and persist in college. Also, NU is considered a highly selective public institution; therefore, Black males at

other institutions (e.g., HBCUs, 2-year colleges, private schools) may have different experiences. Finally, this study was limited to freshman students and not Black males from different classifications (e.g., sophomore, junior, senior), who might have given a deeper reflection of how their precollegiate and college experiences impacted their persistence.

Conclusion

School counselors must make it an American imperative to successfully assist Black males with college preparation. The seven young men in this research study shared their experiences on why they decided to attend college and the resources that assisted them in their transition to higher education. School counselors can play a major role in the college awareness and preparation process for Black males. It is critical that they go beyond college readiness and not set limits in providing critical information, experiences, connections, and outreach to Black male students.

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