



THE ACHIEVEMENT
GAP AMONG
AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN

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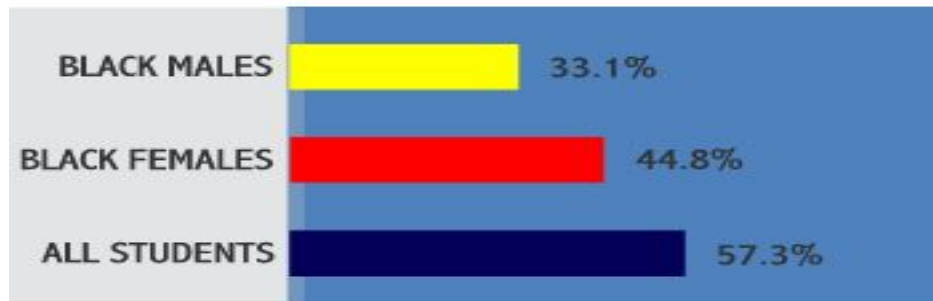
The Achievement GAP among African American Men

Education has always been a priority in America. Institutions have always boasted about high enrollment. However, in recent years, most of the emphasis with education is on completion. The State of Tennessee, for instance, initiated Drive to 55 in order to increase the percentage of Tennesseans with degrees. This initiative changes schools' philosophies relating to enrollment, and shifts the focus to retention and completion. Completion coaches, advisors, and other student support services are collaborating to ensure that students have the support needed to finish. The efforts for retention and graduation are noteworthy; however, the question still remains will these efforts close the achievement gap with the group that lags the most - African American men. (Garrison, 2014)

African American men still have the lowest graduation rate among any group or ethnicity. The Schott Foundation reported that 40% of African American men drop out of high school. “Only about 60 percent of them will earn high school diplomas, and roughly four in 10 drop out before graduation day. That’s compared with a 65-percent graduation rate for Latino males and 80 percent for young white men.” (Williams, 2015)



NATIONAL COLLEGE GRADUATION RATES



SOURCE : US DEPT OF EDUCATION

July 2011

African American men have a 33% completion rate for college. This data includes both four year and community colleges. According to the Department of Education, Black men have the highest graduation percentage when completing at least six years of course work. For Black men, it takes on average of 150-200% of the course length to finish college. The longer it takes them to graduate the higher the risk of dropping out. In most African American male homes, education is not a right or even the norm. It is the exception. While there has been an increase of

African American graduates over the years, there is still a low percentage of them that actually graduating as compared to other ethnicities. (Statistics, 2012)

The Power of Education for African American Men

I. A sense of purpose

Education aims one toward a target of success. It creates an environment where ideas and professions can be explored and conquered. Having a sense of purpose provides direction and enhances achievement. Whether it's an attorney, doctor, policeman, firefighter, etc., these are all professions that offer a sense of belonging. In black communities, these professions are many times lost to drugs and other forms of illegal activity. Education helps restore the value of purpose and focus. It creates a paradigm within the student that he is a part of something greater than himself. Having an education helps affirm dignity. It provides an opportunity for development and growth. Having a degree is a bridge that connects individual life to the world.

II. Leverage/Bargaining Power

The lack of education affects the earning potential and employment opportunities of Black men. A company in Chattanooga, TN, called *US Pipe/Wheland Foundry*, hired minorities and paid them exceptional wages. Many of the Black men working in this plant did not possess college degrees, but still made earnings of \$50,000 per year to support their families. These positions empowered them with buying power for homes, necessary purchases, living expenses, and the ability to send their children to college. Unfortunately, the plants closed and many of these same men currently seek similar employment only to be told the position required some type of engineering degree. Job availability for black men is controlled by educational

achievement. The unemployment rate for Black men is at an all-time high. The work force is more competitive than it has ever been, which makes it even more difficult to enter without a degree. Education is a must to compete for the best jobs, and is becoming the decisive issue when considered for a standard job. In addition, degrees or certificates are required for long term employment.

The Causes of the Gap

I. Education vs. Environment

One of the causes for the gap in achievement is the struggle between one's education and one's living environment. Young black men are coming from environments where they have to defend their decision to go to school. Some of them are fathers, care givers, or have commitments that makes staying in school a daily choice. Some even have home environments where living is a daily struggle. Some of them are coping with past traumatic events. These elements can affect them where they withdraw and mentally shut down. I have worked first hand with students who would tell me that their home was a war zone. When I presented them with alternatives, they would say their family (in this case this meant gangs) would look out for them.

Home is where decisions are made to stay in school or to withdraw. Life doesn't stop to allow one to attend school. It's the response to life's crises that makes the difference. While attending school my parents' home was foreclosed. I confided in family friend that I was moving back home. He told me I would have more opportunities for employment if I stayed in school. Those words had to be repeated over and over again during undergrad to prevent me from quitting. I knew my family wanted me to finish but it was hard focusing knowing they had lost their housing. Fortunately it worked out for them and for me. This example shows there may be times

where school could be placed on hold to tend to other life issues; however it's important to have a plan to get back on the path.

Regardless of ethnicity, financial pressure is an issue with which almost everyone can identify. It can make for tense moments, even making dreams and efforts questionable. However, financial pressure cannot be an excuse to drop out. While federal and state funds assist students in attending college, there are few and limited resources available for students throughout the year. This requires students to take jobs that involve a full time commitment during the week or directly conflicts with their school schedule. Students feel the constant pressure of having to seek out resources while still trying to commit time to school. These behaviors eventually affect a student in his or hers academics and some students just drop out of school.

II. The lack of belonging (No one looks like or will understand me)

Another issue that African American men fight is the perception that “no one looks like or understands me”. In many cases, black men are the minority in the typical classroom which can cause an immediate disconnect. It is not always expressed in words or with someone making them feel inferior. Many times it comes with comparing their life experiences to others — whether that is from home or academics to someone else from another cultural background. It could be as simple as watching a student of another ethnicity drive to school while waiting on a ride from a parent or the bus. This sometime creates an inferior complex that self-worth is determined by possession of assets or the abundance of things. They began telling themselves, “I don't belong here.” which creates a perception that education is restricted by culturally connected teachers. Some young men feel misunderstood because of various stereo-types and media perceptions which causes a false ideology; if no-one looks like me they will not

understand me. The lack of disengagement with black men is not necessarily the lack of concern, but a lack of feeling connected. It forces him to live outside his comfort zone and to live a life that is connected to humanity.

III. Valuing individual purpose

Lack of purpose is a major factor on why African American men may give up on school. College, for many, is a road to fulfill a certain mission. Somewhere there has been genocide of dreams for young African Americans. Something has killed their dreams for being an attorney, doctor, clergy, or service men. The oppression that many of them live with day to day creates a mindset that nothing else can be accomplished.

There is a Biblical saying that “without a vision the people perish”. (Proverbs 29:18) Students are coming to class without a vision for their life. When there is no vision for education, there is no purpose for achieving it. The community needs its vision back. This starts at a young age. Children need to know their life matters because their purpose is needed in the world.

IV. Lack of social and cultural capital

Many African American men lack the social capital to be successful in college. Social capital refers to the networks and relationships used as resources for mentorship and sponsorship. College can be difficult to adjust to initially. Having proper and healthy relationships helps students become accountable and offers opportunity for them in future endeavors.

Mentorship is an important asset with any endeavor, however for black men it is a must. It helps offset the struggles within the class room. It also diffuses any cultural gaps that may be

missing from predominately white institutions. What helped my experience in school was meeting a faculty member who knew my family and nurtured me until I finished community college. Having a friendly confidant goes a long way during life struggles..

V. Inside and outside classroom disengagement

Engagement is a must for any classroom experience. It is vital that African American men are not left to ask, “*Why am I here?*” Class engagement is what helps students connect with the content of the class. Class engagement makes them feel valued in the class. One of the issues for African American men is the lack of courage to initiate the engagement. No one wants to be embarrassed, and as a result many decide rather to be the entertainer of the class instead of striving to be the head of the class. Classroom engagement creates a sense of belonging and attachment. Classroom engagement is not just asking questions to the instructor, but when the instructor engages and questions them about assignments and task.

Recommendations for Outreach for African American Men

- I. Schools within the Tennessee Board of Regents are providing services to assist with the needs of African American men. Southwest Community College has the M.O.S.T. program. M.O.S.T. is a grant-funded program through the U.S. Department of Education's Predominantly Black Institutions (PBI). It is designed to give preference and assistance to first-year African-American male students. Chattanooga State has a similar program called BOSS(BOSS (Building Outstanding Service Scholars). It is a co-curricular high impact educational program designed to assist students in the transition from high school to college

in a supportive and familiar environment. Programs like these are needed to help connect and offer a source of engagement for the student.

- II. It is also imperative that there is connection between them and others who come from a similar path. African American alumni could play a vital role in keeping these young men committed to school. Having quarterly luncheons where they can hear success stories would provide necessary encouragement.
- III. Another recommendation is that similar programs be offered to students while in middle school/elementary school. Efforts to rehabilitate dreams and aspirations when a student enters college may be too late. There needs to be a college connection while African American males are still in the developmental stages of their life. It is important that we are not just concerned with having resources available to them once they start college; but by how well they are connected to college before their classes start.

Conclusion

In conclusion the best plan for African American Men is self-effort. There will never be a legislation or programs that will substitute for the power of self will and determination; however I do believe that self-effort is developed by relationships, mentorship, discipline, and love. There is a passage in the Bible where Cain, while his brother was dying, was asked, "...where is your brother?" Cain questioned the statement by saying that he was not his brother's keeper. His response signaled selfishness, lack of connection, disengagement, and lack of concern. The same question is still being asked when a student sits in class looking confused and disengaged. The question is being asked when a student is missing and no one has heard from him. The question is being asked when his grades are constantly failing. The question is being asked when he chooses detrimental paths. The question is being asked when he is no longer in school. The

response to this question should be “Yes!” I am my brother’s keeper. Yes, I will check on my visibly disgruntled and confused brother. Yes, I will reach out to him when his grades are failing. Yes, I will approach him when he has taken paths I know that are harmful for him. My brother’s keeper is not an initiative, program or public speech. It must be a way of life.

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