High-Achieving Black Males in Higher Education: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Introduction

The scholarly literature on Black males in higher education perpetuates a deficit narrative that assumes Black men lack the skills or drive to succeed in college. However, there are Black men who experience success in higher education, but their stories are missing from contemporary research. In response to this lack of literature, many dedicated scholars have explored the experiences of high-achieving Black male collegians (e.g., Bonner, 2010, Ellington & Frederick, 2010; Fries-Britt, 1998, Goings, 2016; Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2012; Hrabowski, 1991; Jett, 2011; McGee & Martin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2014). Given the infancy of this body of scholarship, we sought to enhance and deepen the conversation on high-achievers through this special issue. We believe this special issue is unique as we have articles that explore the community college, four-year, HBCU, and graduate student experience. It is our hope that scholars and practitioners use these studies along with the larger body of work to create programming and policies to support high-achieving Black male students.

In the first article, Fries-Britt draws on a database of her work that expands 20 years to explore the experiences of high-achieving Black males particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Findings from this study show that over the course of 20 years the following three themes have remained consistent across all of her studies: self-confidence, developing meaningful relationships, and the ability to recognize and navigate stereotypes, bias and racism.

The second article, "Untold Stories: The Gendered Experiences of High Achieving African American Male Alumni of Historically Black Colleges and Universities" Johnson and McGowan present findings from interviews with 19 Black male historically Black college and university (HBCU) alumni. A poignant finding from this study is that during the participants

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high school experiences, experiencing negative stereotypes about being an academically gifted Black male push them to enroll at a HBCU.

The third article by Alston, Guy, and Campbell titled "Ready for the Professoriate? The Influence of Mentoring on Career Development for Black Male Graduate Students in STEM" investigated the role that mentoring has in the science identity and career development of Black male Ph.D. students. Findings from this study suggested that participants future career aspirations (e.g., entring the professoriate) and science identity were directly influenced by the relationship they developed with their mentors in their doctoral prorgam.

The last article titled, "Networking 101: Exploring Within Group Differences Between High-Achieving Black African and Black American Engineering Community College Student Peer Groups" by Berhane explored how Black African and Black American engginnering students developed raltionships with each other and how the community college put support structures in place to support the Black students on campus. Results indicated that Black American students had a variety of peer groups they associated with on campus, however, Black African students often worked in groups with other Black African students.

The Future of Research of High-Achieving Black Males in Higher Education

The future for research and scholarship on academically gifted and high-achieving Black males in higher education presents myriad challenges and opportunities to divine innovative approaches that are impactful and sustainable across the Black male diaspora. All too often, initiatives and programs that are conceived and operationalized in urban settings fall short of providing viable models and frameworks for those who are ensconced within more bucolic environs. And, what is an authentic display of high-achievement for the Black male who is kinesthetically gifted is different for the Black male who manifests his abilities through his leadership acumen (Bonner, 2015). Essentially, the future for Black male scholarship must invoke the lessons Steven Covey (1989) shared in his book The *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*; we must 'begin with the end in mind.' Bonner (2015) posits that we must ask ourselves, "What is the end we seek for Black males in schooling contexts?" (p.1).

A potential point of departure when attempting to answer this question is to problematize and deconstruct what Black male high-achievement means in different *contexts*. Defining context as *people, place, and situation,* it is important to focus on what it means to be a gifted, Black, male (people) in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Minority Serving Institutions (HBCU, HSI)(place), in academic and student affairs engagements (situation). According to Davis, Brunn-Bevel, Olive, and Jones (2016), "…privilege and subordination transcend context to a certain degree and that subordinated identities are more salient across situations" (p. 52). Also, the future of research and scholarship on this high-achieving population must foreground new conceptual and theoretical approaches like intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Nelson, Stahl, & Wallace, 2015) and the Multiple Dimensions of Identity model (Abes, Jones, McEwen, 2007) that allow these men to bring all aspects of their being to the table. Hence, it is necessary to look at who these individuals are at the intersection of their multiple and competing identities. To be Black, high-achieving, and male is to be each one of these identities concomitantly.

In addition, future research must tackle the stubbornly persistent problem of how masculinity is defined and framed, particularly as it pertains to high-achieving Black men. The range of motion that is accorded to men of color within the parameters of this gender construct is at best limiting. If the creatively gifted and high-achieving Black male artist is relegated to a

subaltern status in the masculinity hierarchy, it is no hope for a definition that seeks to be expansive and inclusive of all masculinity expressions across the diaspora.

And finally, it is imperative that Black male high-achievement does not divorce itself from the contemporary strivings among populations of color who are foregrounding activism—areas in which high-achievement is flourishing—especially as we extol the importance of leadership potential (Bonner, Jennings, Marbley, & Brown, 2008; Ross, 1994; Sternberg, 2005) as an expression of giftedness.

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