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# Path to Success: Shared Wisdom of How HBCU Institutional Agents Support African American Men Matriculate

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*In this single case study 10 HBCU institutional agents shared strategies and practices that they used to promote academic success for their African American undergraduate male students. Using social capital theory as a theoretical framework, interviews and observations were used to elicit data about the agents' experiences and to answer how they were being successful at helping African American men matriculate at their university. Four major themes grew from the narratives shared by the participants: challenges, support, engagement, and investment. Following discussions of the findings, recommendations for school counselors, college counselors, and college administrators will be presented along with the limitations and recommendations for future research.*

*Keywords: African American men, matriculation, social capital*

By the time many African American males reach college campuses, they are already at an academic and psychological disadvantage (Cuyjet, 1997; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Negative stereotypes portrayed in the media about African American men affect their self-image and academic confidence (Jenkins, 2006) and influence how other students and faculty on campus view them (Bush & Bush, 2010; Hall, 2009). There is also a misrepresentation of census data, which indicates that there are more African American men in prison than there are attending colleges. Though discredited by Toldson and Morton (2012) in their critique of current data and statistics from the multiple organizations regarding the state of Blacks in America, this distortion persists in the academic world and in society.

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As a result of stereotypes and misinformation, African American men have been labeled, both in society and in academia, as dysfunctional and uneducated (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009), disinterested and disengaged, unfriendly, threatening, less intelligent (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Gasman, Nguyen, & Commodore, 2015), and as violent and dangerous (Jenkins, 2006). Stereotypes and challenges about African American men belonging in college are perpetuated on countless college campuses and have devastating effects on how African American men are considered in society and academia (Goings, 2016; Harper, 2009). Many African American men, as a result, do not persist to undergraduate degree attainment in higher education. And for those who do, only one-third of African American men who attend college complete their undergraduate degree within six years of entering college (Harper, 2012; Harper & Gasman, 2008).

Despite the negative connotations surrounding African American males in higher education, there are African American men who persist to undergraduate degree attainment. The majority of these undergraduate degrees conferred upon African American male students come from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) (Brown & Davis, 2001; Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram, & Platt, 2011; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

Established in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, HBCUs remain an integral part of higher education in the United States promoting opportunities for personal growth and development and academic excellence to African American students (Gasman et al., 2010; Palmer et al., 2016). HBCUs constitute 3% of higher education institutions but are responsible for 16% of African Americans with a bachelor's degree (Goings, 2016); and as Palmer, Maramba, and Dancy (2013) pointed out, there is “[a] plethora of research has documented the relevance and positive impact of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) on Black students” (p. 65). Even with this breadth of information available about HBCUs and their role in facilitating African American men's education and having positive impact on their students, HBCUs are reportedly experiencing difficulty with retention, success, and graduation of their Black male undergraduate students (Gasman et al., 2015; Palmer et al., 2013). Therefore, it is essential for scholars to consider exploring HBCUs, specifically their institutional agents, and how they support African American men toward degree completion.

### Overview of Relevant Literature

#### Factors for Success

Much of the research on African American students at HBCUs has focused on exploring, explaining, or finding the cause (or causes) that impact African American males' ability to matriculate to undergraduate degree attainment. These studies can be summed into three intersecting perspectives: (1) studies that focus on the students and their motivations and behaviors in and out of the classroom (Cuyjet, 1997; Hamilton, 2005), (2) studies that focus on the experiences of African American men on PWI versus HBCU campuses (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2009), and (3) more recently, on studies that focus on the role social capital plays in promoting academic success and matriculation to degree attainment for African American men (Dancy & Brown, 2001; Harper, 2008; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). Studies relating to the persistence of African American men and their matriculation at HBCUs revealed that peer influences, campus environment, and faculty interaction were all key

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components to their success in higher education (Palmer, Arroyo, & Maramba, 2016; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010; Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

Peer group influences are the most powerful source of influence on the undergraduate student's academic and personal development (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Hall, 2009; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Palmer & Maramba, 2011), and positive peer group influence is key to persistence and matriculation for African American men in higher education (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2006). An example of this influence was provided in a qualitative study conducted by Harper (2006) wherein interviews with 32 high achieving African American males from six predominately White institutions (PWI) revealed that the participants were able to bypass challenges of race and stereotypes by participating in positive peer groups, including those they formed with peer groups outside of their own race and gender.

Campus environment also plays a significant role in supporting undergraduate African American male students to graduation (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 1997; Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy & Brown, 2008; Green, 2000; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011). However, there are significant differences in how HBCUs and PWIs are perceived by their African American male students. African American males reported feelings of invisibility and hostility on PWI campuses (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2006; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2009); whereas, at HBCUs, they tend to report more positive interactions with peers, faculty, and others on campus (Harper, 2006; Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, & Commodore, 2012), prompting some scholars (i.e., Brown & Davis, 2001; Dancy & Brown, 2008; Palmer & Gasman, 2008) to believe that the HBCU campus is a better fit for African American men.

On the other hand, Noguera (2003) stated that African American men play a major part in their own destruction as they adopt behaviors that are not conducive to positive integration and acclimation into the institutional culture and to academic success. In other words, African American men participate in behaviors, such as acting out in class and not challenging themselves academically, which contributes to their "disidentification" (Noguera, 2003; Osborne, 1999) and being disconnected from the college culture. Noguera challenged institutions to develop strategies to help African American men and their families become fully engaged in the process of taking responsibility for their own actions and in the process of changing their circumstances.

The last factor for promoting success of minority students at institutions of higher learning is student-faculty interactions (Dika, 2012; Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, & Commodore, 2012; Palmer, Arroyo, & Maramba, 2016). As an illustration, Grier-Reed, Madyun, and Buckley (2008) conducted a qualitative study about the experiences of African American students whose faculty created a student network group on campus to help African American students discuss problems they were having and to discover strategies to help the students persevere to degree attainment. The group met weekly with the two African American faculty members who facilitated open-ended discussions with the students. The focus was on developing trustworthy relationships in an educational setting. Although there were six females and three males in the study, the experience for the African American men were positive and helped them to maintain their pursuit of an undergraduate degree. Dancy and Brown (2008) proposed that faculty and other institutional agents in the higher education "ground their pedagogies and practices in frameworks sensitive to African American men's unique raced and gendered experiences" (p. 999). While others have proposed faculty and institutional agents move beyond their pedagogies and prescribed roles to establish meaningful relationships with their students in order to support

the success of the students (Goings, 2016; Palmer et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2016; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Through their interactions with students directing them to campus resources and connections, faculty members perform as instruments of social capital (Dika, 2012).

### **Social Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu defined theory of social capital as, “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition,” and is credited with bringing the into the mainstream of research (Claridge, 2004, p. 2). Other researchers (e.g., Anheier, Gerhards, & Romo, 1995; Coleman, 1998; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2004) have constructed their own conceptualization of social capital and how it is to be applied in research. As a result, the definitions of social capital differ based on the discipline in which a study is conducted (Claridge, 2004). Despite the differing perspectives, social capital theory has been successfully used and is applicable for studies involving African American men, higher education, and undergraduate degree attainment (Brown & Davis, 2001; Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

Using social capital derived from commonalities of the various theories of social capital including Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2000) as the theoretical framework, Dika (2012) conceptualized social capital as “the resources that accrue to an individual through social networks” (p. 599) in her quantitative study exploring faculty as social capital for college students at a college in Puerto Rico. In the context of education, faculty, counselors, administrators, and other institutional agents who provide access to institutional based knowledge and resources were themselves social capital and implied that, in the absence of these agents, students did not have access to resources. Dika posited, “In the context of higher education, students’ relationship with family and peers constitute bonding social capital, whereas relationship with institutional agents on campus represents bridging social capital that is useful for attaining educational goals” (p. 600).

There has been important research devoted to African American men in higher education (Cuyjet, 1997; Dancy & Brown, 2008; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Goings, 2016; Griffin, 2006; Hamilton, 2005; Harper, 2015; Museus & Quayle, 2009; Palmer et al., 2013; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010). With this, much of the research has been directed on the African American male student himself, his struggles, his successes, and his behaviors. Though there is growing interest in exploring the resources, strategies, and practices that are being employed to help facilitate this group’s matriculation to undergraduate degree attainment (Shorette & Palmer, 2015), there still appears to be a lack of research focusing on the institution’s role and contributions in helping African American men to successfully complete their undergraduate degrees. Employing Dika’s (2012) conceptualization of social capital as a theoretical framework, the aim of this present study was to identify strategies and practices being employed by administrators, faculty, counselors, student affairs leaders and specialized program leaders (groups formulated by the institution that targets African American men) from an HBCU that has a history of achievement in supporting successful matriculation of African American men in higher education (Diverse: Issue, 2016).

To address this purpose, the overarching research question that guided this study was: “How do participants describe the social and systemic strategies and practices they employ to help African American men matriculate to undergraduate degree attainment?” In addition, the

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following sub-research questions were used to gain a deeper insight of the participants' experiences:

1. What are your experiences and challenges working with African American men in higher education?
2. How does this institution support African American men in their pursuit of undergraduate degree attainment?
3. What are some of the practices and strategies that are implemented to target African American men that contribute to their matriculation?

### **Method**

To address the research questions, a qualitative case study was used to examine the experiences of 10 institutional agents at a single historically Black college (HBCU) supporting African American men's undergraduate matriculation. A single case design was applicable because the study sought to explore how and why the participants were successful in helping African American men matriculate.

### **Setting and Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of 10 institutional agents at a single HBCU, including one administrator, two counselors, three faculty members, two leaders from the student affairs department, and two group leaders who provide services for African American men on and off the campus. The HBCU site was chosen because of (a) being ranked in the top 5% among all colleges and universities, in undergraduate degree completion for African Americans (Diverse: Issue, 2016), and (b) because of its convenient location to this researchers. The selected historically Black college (HBCU) has a long tradition of supporting and helping African Americans achieve academic excellence. The university is located in the southeastern region of the United States and has received numerous awards for its academic achievements from the *U.S. News & World Report* and from the *Princeton Review* of colleges.

Approval from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) from the University the research originated and the HBCU was granted before implementing the study. A purposeful sampling and snowballing techniques were used to recruit participants for the study. A gatekeeper appointed by the HBCU IRB granted access to the university. A total of 96 emails were sent to the potential participants, from which three participants agreed to participate in the study. The three participants and gatekeeper disseminated recruitment flyers to other institutional agents on the HBCU campus. As a result, nine additional institutional agents consented to participate in the study but two withdrew before the interviews due to scheduling conflict. From further snowballing techniques, a total of 10 participants were recruited. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the demographics for the ten institutional agents.

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Table 1

## *Demographic Information for Participants of Study*

Pseudonyms	Position	Degree Level	Years of Experience with Population
Alfred	Counselor	Masters	Over 10 years
Bill	Administrator	Ed.D.	Over 10 years
Cindy	Administrator	Ph.D.	Over 10 years
Deborah	Counselor	Masters/Ed.D.	Less than 2 years
Elvira	Faculty Member	Ph.D.	Over 10 years
Frank	Faculty Member	Ph.D.	Over 10 years
George	Program Leader	Ph.D.	7 to 10 years
Ingrid	Student Affairs	Ph.D.	Over 10 years
Harry	Student Affairs	Ph.D.	Over 10 years
Janice	Student Affairs	Masters	6 to 10 years

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected from several sources, including face-to-face interviews, physical artifacts, and observations around campus and in each participant's work space. The first author of this study immersed himself on the college campus and collected field notes about his observations while on campus and during participants' interviews. These reflective and descriptive notes were used to record the researcher's experiences, thoughts, and feelings about his observations (Creswell, 2012). Prior to engaging in face-to-face interviews, participants were required to read and sign an informed consent form and were asked to complete a demographic survey. In addition to researcher observations, face-to-face interviews consisted of participants being asked six open-ended semi-structured interview questions about their experiences supporting undergraduate African American male students in higher education. The interviews were conducted in the participants' offices on the university's culturally rich and prestigious

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campus. Participants were given as much time as they needed to answer questions in their own words without feeling rushed. Interviews with each participant ranged from 60 to 75 minutes in length.

### **Data Analysis**

Data for this case study were analyzed by developing a detailed description of the case and its setting (Creswell, 2012). The transcribed interviews were read and memos about the data were written in the margins of the participants' transcripts. Thoughts about the campus environment, people on campus, the terrain, the weather, and the participants were noted and also written on the transcripts. Through the process of open coding, interview transcript data were analyzed line by line to identify initial patterns. The interview transcripts were then entered into the computerized qualitative software program, *Atlas.ti* (7.0). Codes produced from the *Atlas.ti* (7.0) analysis were compared with the codes found during the open coding process. The researchers, then, made a data table to combine similar codes from both processes. To determine relationships among the combined codes, the researchers then performed axial coding to determine clusters of meaning. The clusters of meaning were then reduced through selective coding and placed into central themes. Yin (2009) suggested that developing a theoretical proposition is an analytical strategy to assist researchers with analyzing and interpreting case study data. Participants' transcripts and memos were reread to ensure the proposed themes captured the participants' voices and meanings and addressed the intention of the study. Using social capital theory as a frame, four central themes were identified to address the study's intention, that institutional agents at this one particular HBCU use effective strategies and practices that help African American men to successfully complete their undergraduate degrees.

### **Trustworthiness**

Efforts to ensure trustworthiness were accomplished through several strategies. First, trustworthiness was established through constant engagement with the participants to ensure that their meanings and voices were accurately captured (Creswell, 2012). Participants were given the opportunity to review and correct any discrepancies during the data collection, analysis, and reporting process. Only one participant responded to the member checking inquiry. The participant's interview transcript was corrected and then verified by the participant to ensure the correction did indeed reflect the participant's actual meaning. Because multiple sources of data are encouraged for qualitative studies, the second strategy to establish trustworthiness was triangulation (Creswell, 2012). This case study involved a triangulation of data, which included collecting multiple sources of data such as collecting physical artifacts while on campus (e.g., flyers and group announcements), interviews, and field notes from researcher observations over a several day period. Finally, rich thick descriptions were used to analyze and report findings of this study, which proves the reader with an opportunity to determine transferability (Creswell, 2012).

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this present study center around the inability to generalize the results to PWIs, private HBCUs, and other public HBCUs located in other regions of the country. This

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qualitative inquiry took place at one public historically Black college in the southeastern region of the United States. Another possible limitation of the study was that neither author has ever attended an HBCU. Lastly, the majority of participants selected for the study were recruited through snowballing. Despite the limitations of this qualitative study, data gleaned from this present study provide relevant strategies and practices for institutional agents to help foster their African American male students' academic success.

### Findings

HBCUs' institutional agents provide social capital that is integral for effectively supporting African American men with their educational goals (Dika, 2012). Four themes emerged from this study to provide insight into how institutional agents see themselves as providers of resources and networks for assisting African American men on the HBCU campus (Table 2). The first theme, challenges, explains the participants' response to the numerous challenges that impede academic success for African American men in higher education. The other three themes, support, engagement, and investment, represent the strategies and practices used by these institutional agents to assist African American men in their efforts to overcome challenges and persist to undergraduate degree attainment at their university.

Table 2.

*Major themes and sub-themes from findings.*

Major Themes	Sub-themes
Challenges	Problems from home Balancing employment and academics Negative media and societal stereotypes
Support	Mandatory programs Creating programs and groups Providing positive role models
Engagement	Listening and caring Intrusive advisement Open door/Open dialogue
Investment	Teaching social, academic, and character skills. Sharing similar stories Connecting to resources and networks



## Challenges

A significant finding in this study was that all of participants felt that most of the challenges that African American men encounter, as they pursue a higher education degree, begin before the student reaches the college campus. Although the participants differed in their perceptions of what those challenges are, they all agreed that these challenges, if not effectively addressed, could be a significant hindrance to degree completion for the African American male student. Most of the participants cited academic unpreparedness and home environment problems as major contributors to the African American male students' challenges to matriculation. The other challenges included not seeking help, social media influences, lack of role models, and finances.

**Academic Unpreparedness.** African American male students lack basic study and time management skills to be successful at the college level of academia according to the participants' descriptions. Some of the participants' feelings were that the students might have not been challenged in high school while others made no comment as to what may have caused the deficit in basic academic skills for African American men coming to the university. Alfred shared his experiences:

...a lot of the challenges...kind of go back to their preparation, and getting here. So, a lot of times, they didn't have a lot of those basic steps that they needed prior to coming to [university]. So sometimes some of the education wasn't the best...So when they get here, they're not totally focused on what it takes to succeed at this level.

Frank added:

And one of the things that I find out is a lot of our students, a lot of our males, they came from high schools that didn't push them to study. Or the materials were to an extent to where they knew it and they didn't have to study. And then when they came to college they're like, "Oh, my goodness – I've gotta study and I don't know how!"

Harry, through his experiences, saw the unpreparedness of these students as a significant challenge to African American male student graduating on time:

...So having African American males who are prepared for the rigors of college has been a significant challenge, and that's why you see a lower graduation rate, not only at the high school level but at the college level and a lower retention rate as well as progression rate. It takes longer for them to graduate.

**Home environment problems.** Participants Alfred and Frank concluded that the problems for some students stem from either the student leaving a disadvantaged home or from the student leaving a home where his family is dealing with numerous crises. Frank stated:

... there could be lack of relationship with a caregiver, or an unhealthy relationship with a caregiver at home. You know, a lot of violence, or just a lot of issues and problems going on. In a lot of ways, it is getting away. And sometimes, that becomes the focus, and so when they get here, they're not thinking so much about succeeding...they're just trying to, you know, escape what's going on at home.

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Another challenge for those students who managed to make it to the college environment is that the problems of home are still etched in their minds. Alfred shared:

And a lot of our young students have, too, difficulties with family back home. So that's one of the major issues that we have, and so, again, there's a lot of emotions and pain that have come out of those experiences, that, when they get to school, all of that stuff tends to just [whoosh] rise to the surface.

Bill added, "... many African American males are helping to support their entire family. So any extra income that they get goes back to support the family..." Janice concurred, "...some of the males, they may be fathers where they have children that they're taking care of."

**Not seeking help.** Participants Alfred, Cindy, Deborah, Ingrid, and Janice reported that they experienced difficulties or challenges getting African American male students to seek help, especially when the students were experiencing significant problems (i.e., stress from problems at home, academic problems, difficulty coping and adjusting to college life). Accordingly, Alfred reported that seeking help was seen as not being normal or cool:

As far as the therapy is concerned, as I said earlier, you know, there's not a lot of precedent for young African American males coming into therapy. And again, it's not something that's considered to be normal or cool, or just a part of what we do, you know, to be as healthy as possible. So, that's challenging.

Some of the participants believed that the negative influence of social media and societal stereotypes of African American male student not seeking help and it contributes to their negative self-identity on the college campus.

**Social media influences.** Participants Cindy, Deborah, Frank, and Janice postulated that the negative media portrayal and societal stereotypes of African American males had a negative impact on the students' ability to seek help and to complete their undergraduate degrees. Deborah discussed the difficulties helping African American male students when they hold on to others perceptions of them:

...I think they feed into the stereotypes themselves. So it's hard to kind of, I guess, offer support when they are themselves perpetuating the stereotypes that people place upon them. So, one, you have to kind of find a way to help them break that stereotype before you can then offer treatment to them or any kind of counseling.

Cindy, speaking about the students' perception of themselves, added, "I think the main issue dealing with African American males is how other people perceive them and the stereotypes they have about what they look like." Several of the participants believed that, by having positive role models to interact with African American males, they could overcome the challenges projected unto them by negative media influences and societal stereotypes.

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**Role models.** Some of the participants spoke about African American men not having enough role models to help model appropriate behaviors for them. George stated that this was important for African American males to see people like them. Cindy added:

I guess some of the challenges are having enough role models for them or wanting to create a situation where there are enough accessible role models. Because there are lots of role models here at an HBCU but wanting them to be accessible enough to the students so that they can talk to them and develop a mentoring relationship. And hopefully that relationship will be such that they can talk about those issues that are germane to their well-being and success.

Alfred stated that specialized groups were created to fill the need for role models:

There's a lot of information that we know that a lot of young African Americans don't have strong male figures, healthy male figures. And so, having a group that is based upon having older male -- successful males -- work with a group of young African Americans, you're filling a gap. So you're providing something they don't have.

**Finances.** A number of the participants saw the students' difficulties balancing work and school as a significant challenges to the students' ability to matriculate. For example, Alfred, speaking to the problem of juggling school and work, stated:

A lot of them just don't have the money, so they struggle with having to work jobs, and then not being able to focus as much on school. And so they just get overwhelmed a lot of times, with having to try to do it all...they kind of struggle with that.

In order to combat the numerous challenges that follow African American male students to the college campus, the participants devised strategies and practices to help the African American male students' overcome those challenges and persist towards undergraduate degree attainment. Cindy summed up the participants' attitude:

...what I do to help them depends on the kind of situation that they're in. So I guess my philosophy is how can I help them to move forward? So that's what I'm always thinking about because they're going to have challenges regardless of where they are and what institution they're in. They're going to have challenges just like everybody else. But the question is how do I help them to deal with those challenges?

### Support

In response to the numerous challenges identified by participants of African American male students on the college campus, the participants shared strategies they used to support the students' academic success. According to Bill, "One of the challenges I found is that they haven't really connected to the university." To overcome this disconnection, Bill stated that one strategy used at the university is the implementation of a special version of the college orientation program. This mandatory orientation program is used by some of the specialty

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programs on campus and its purpose is to help African American males connect to the university. Bill further explained:

...it is not so much for academics. It's for connection to the university and the course. It engages them to look at the university and look at themselves and how they fit into the world and their future. So that course gives them an opportunity to explore their career path and then look at the different hurdles that's coming up.

Consistently, Henry shared, "Prior to starting classes, we discuss everything from, as I said, etiquette on a college campus...their expectations. And it's all male; we separate them from the females...we cover all the issues that we think are important to those students." According to one of the participants, the opportunity for matriculation increases when the African American male student are able to complete their sophomore year. Harvey stated, "... typically if they make it through the second year, their sophomore year, they're gonna graduate. So the key is to get them through that sophomore year to transition on into a major that fits their capabilities."

Another strategy was to use groups and forums as a platform to bring in role models, company representatives, and other successful African American males who could mentor and model success for the students. According to Janice:

we have...different companies coming on campus that actually speak with the students to potentially entice them to work towards their degree...So providing examples and also heavily communicating different strategies and resources is what we feel has helped with some of the challenges that we see for students just in general, which encompasses our African American men receiving their degrees.

Participants Alfred, Bill, George, and Harvey expressed that creating programs and groups for African American male students featuring companies and successful role models for the student helped the students become more successful in acclimating to the college environment and increased the likelihood of them matriculating. An added bonus of the groups was that they provide opportunities for mentoring and for African American male students to talk openly and seek help.

### **Engagement**

Some of the participants expressed that, by creating a college environment of community and family, they were creating an environment for African American men to matriculate. Harvey captured their voices in this statement:

A lot of students will call you their godfather or their uncle because they want to associate with you and have that family feel...But specifically on an HBCU campus, you're gonna find those type of figures, those mother and father figures, that these students can look up to and they can communicate with and feel comfortable communicating with. The worst feeling an African American male can have is that feeling of being by themselves and not having anyone to go to discuss any issues that they have. And so having that network and that assistance is paramount in their success.

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To accomplish the task of creating the community and family type of atmosphere, an overwhelming majority of participants discussed two overlapping strategies they used to help African American men matriculate on their campus. Those two themes are constant engagement and investment.

Constant engagement involved maintaining close relationships with the students through dialogue, checking up on the students and having an open door policy. Participants felt that the three main components needed to successfully support African American men matriculation were: understanding, caring, and listening to the students. Frank, speaking about engaging and understanding the students, stated, “And so once...the students understand that...you’re being “real” with them...and you understand where they coming from, I think you start to really get more receptive and positive feedback.” Many of the participants agreed that the students were reluctant to engage until they felt that the institutional agents really cared about them and their future. As a response, a few of the participants shared their thoughts about the importance of caring. As an example, Bill stated:

First care and then you can help students. If you don’t care, there is something about a young person, they pick up on that very quick and I think that the value of the HBCU for us is that we pride ourselves on excellence with caring...Be honest with them but you care about them...you’ve got to really understand who they are so you can take the time to learn their story, listen to their story and give them your best advice you can.

George added, “A lot of these young men tell us that no one listens to them...So I think that that is one of the key factors...let them start talking and expressing their challenges because they know them better than I do.” Lastly, Ingrid shared, “They need somebody to be really listening, not kind of listening. Not just hearing the words but hearing what they’re not saying, too.” An overwhelming majority of the participants felt that, if the institution wanted to be successful in helping African American men to matriculate, there must first be an understanding of the students’ challenges and needs. As Deborah recounted:

...its kind of understanding...issues that are specific to them, what they deal with on a daily basis...being more understanding and kind of open to what their experiences are so that we can proceed accordingly in offering counseling services or advising on an academic level.

Once the students believe that the participants understood their challenges, cared for them, and listened to their concerns, the participants were able to fully engage the students and became “intrusive” in their approach to help the students overcome challenges and persist to matriculation. Some of the participants reported being so engaged with their African American male students that they are able to take a proactive stance when it comes to helping the student matriculate. Ingrid recounted:

I call them in because I know they are in trouble – even though they haven’t asked for help yet – and confront them, a lot of times there’s some denial and some hesitancy and whatever. But I think most of my kids really trust me...

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Participants Bill and Janice referred to this proactive type of engagement as “intrusive advisement.” Janice stated that intrusive advisement involves checking up more on students who they perceive are having trouble(s), whether socially, academically, or systemically. In like manner, an overwhelming majority of the participants shared that, when they encountered students on campus, they took the time to check on them inquiring about their well-being and their academic progress. Harry stated that many institutions are not successful in engaging African American males and helping them matriculate because it requires “investment.”

### **Investment**

A majority of the participants shared their experiences connecting the students to resources or providing the resources themselves. What was significant about the participants connecting the African American students to resources were that in most cases, the participants recounted that they had to also invest time teaching the students how to appropriately interact with the particular entities. As Ingrid commented:

...So (helping them) to give them counsel to deal with systems: how to get help, how to navigate your environment. So if you have an issue with an instructor, this is how you go talk to that instructor. If you need help with financial aid, this is how you go get that help from financial aid. Don't go with an attitude don't go in with your entitled self. Go in the right way and people will help you...So I think if we teach them better how to navigate systems and how to conduct themselves within systems, the more successful they'll be.

The investment of teaching social skills was essential to the success of the African American male student because, as many of the participants stated, the students had social skills but not in the area of engaging and navigating the academic, professional, and business environment. To further illustrate the point, Bill conjectured:

Believe it or not, one of the issues facing African American students in college – they are not shy. They are very outgoing but that does not mean that they are prepared to engage socially. So they have social skill deficits and so we need to engage them and to be more comfortable in more social settings and having conversations that relate to academics and the business community rather than purely social conversations.

Participants Alfred, Bill, Cindy, Frank, George, Ingrid, Harry, and Janice stated that by sharing their personal stories with students, the students were able to understand that although there are challenges, they can overcome and persist to completing their degrees. The participants stated that they shared, with the students, experiences of struggling with finance, wanting to drop out, failing despite being academically capable, and then shared with them strategies of how they were able to surmount those challenges and complete their educational goals. Harry explained:

And so we try to tell them our stories because they see titles and they think that you just magically received a title of a Ph.D. They don't know the struggle...so you share your experience...And you let them know, 'Yes, you can because we're gonna help guide you so that you don't make the same pitfalls that we made.'

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In addition to the investment of time, the participants all discussed the investment of resources. For example, one participant reported helping students prepare for interviews with potential employers by taking the students out to dinner to teach them table etiquette and social manners. Ingrid shared this experience:

But when they were preparing for their interviews, I knew they were gonna be taken out for a meal at a nice restaurant and I had this concern they wouldn't know quite how to act – or, you know, there's all that silverware and different glasses, and you know...companies like that want to be sure that you know how to act in a social situation. So I take 'em out to dinner.

The participants felt that, by investing in these students, they were building up the students' confidence and creating an atmosphere for the student to succeed both academically and professionally. Some of the participants (Cindy and Ingrid) discussed lending jackets and heavy coats to students who had to travel north to colder states for professional opportunities. Additionally, several of the participants stated that they helped African American male students attend professional conferences and presentations to enhance their professional knowledge and exposure. This statement by Bill best sums up the commitment of the participants, "...we have invested in them...they have invested in us...If they are willing to do the work, we are going to try to do everything in our power to help them be successful and reach their goal."

### Discussion

There is significant literature stating that HBCUs are nurturing and supporting environments for African American male students (e.g., Brown & Davis, 2001; Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, & Commodore, 2012; Gasman, Nguyen & Commodore, 2015; Palmer & Gasman, 2008), but there is little that specifically explains institutional agents' contributions to creating the campus environment. Brown and Davis (2001) stated that HBCUs were purveyors of social capital for African American men; yet, only the students' perceptions and experiences of social capital have been highlighted in literature (e.g., Palmer & Gasman, 2008). This study sought to fill that gap in literature by presenting the experiences of ten institutional agents (administrators, counselors, faculty members, student affairs and program leaders) providing social capital to support African American males matriculation at their university.

It is important to recognize challenges in order to reflect on ways to overcome them. As can be found in current research literature (e.g., Gasman et. al., 2015; Gasman, Nguyen, & Commodore, 2015; Goings, 2016; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011), this study found several primary challenges African American men face in college. Institutional agents at this one HBCU, through their interview accounts, shared that students' academic unpreparedness and home environment problems were major contributors to their African American male students' challenges. The other challenges their students experienced included not seeking help, social media influences, lack of role models, and finances.

Despite having to voice the challenges their students faced in college, the participants in this study were eager to highlight what they were doing well at their HBCU that contributed to the overall success of many of their African American male students. They especially focused on support and engagement. Consistent with recent literature regarding African American men in higher education (e.g., Goings, 2016; Palmer, 2015; Wood & Palmer, 2015), the results of this

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study revealed that engagement, interactions, and support from institutional agents on HBCU campuses are essential to the academic success of their students. Goings (2016), for example, found that positive interactions and engagement with professors and staff members, who reached out to students beyond the classroom, were key to academic success for non-traditional high achieving Black men. In fact, HBCU faculty should focus on creating a culture that promotes student engagement by developing supportive and meaningful relationships with their African American male students (Palmer, Wood, & Arroyo, 2015). Participants from this current study used the strategy of constant proactive engagement to assist their African American male students, which meant that they did not wait for students to come to them but were consistently engaging the students inside and outside the classroom. Using an open door policy was another strategy the institutional agents practiced, giving the student access to them during non-office hours.

Participants also discussed ways in which they worked beyond their assigned duties and responsibilities to support their students. They explained that their time and effort was an investment in their African American male student's social and academic experiences. The participants created mandatory programs and groups to address deficiencies in academic preparation, social skills, and in helping the students acclimate to the college environment. Groups were created to address specific needs of the students and to provide an open forum for discussions regarding challenges and issues that were impeding their African American male students' academic success. The institutional agents' investment in their African American male students were consistent with other research in which staff and faculty at HBCUs were encouraged to provide workshops and seminars to help the African American male students with issues such as finance and other challenges they may encounter (Scott, 2015). As a part of their investment strategy, the participants in this study reportedly took time to share stories of their own challenges in higher education. To further invest in their male student's success, HBCUs have been encouraged to partner with organizations and businesses to provide opportunities for mentorship and internship (Scott, 2015). Participants from this study demonstrated that this strategy was indeed integral to their students' success. Several participants stated they used group meetings to introduce African American male business professionals as role models for their students. In addition, the institutional agents also invested in helping students obtain internships. Some of the institutional agents in this study went as far as helping the students by purchasing (or loaning) business attire and teaching them social etiquette to help them with interviews for internships and employment.

Without a doubt, institutional agents at HBCUs are doing incredible work with their students. To highlight what is going well, we sought to explore and report current strategies and practices that were being used at a single highly ranked HBCU (Diverse: Issue, 2016) to help their African American male students matriculate. These strategies and practice have commonalities with Wood and Palmer's (2015) Context, Actions, and Outcome (CAO) model of institution responsibility. According to Wood and Palmer, their model focuses on the institution's responsibilities and the crucial part of the model is the "Action." Similar to emergent themes from this study, Palmer and Wood conceptualized that institutions must respond to students "where they are" and should have an ongoing commitment to work to create an environment where they can better serve the students. The institutional agents in this current study shared their wisdom and experiences to assist other HBCUs and institutions of higher learning support their African American male students.



## **Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study suggest that African American male students are more likely to acclimate to the college environment and become academically successful when college administrators and other institutional agents take an interactive, involved, and engaged approach to the social and academic well-being of the African American male student. To facilitate engagement institutional agents must be willing to overcome their fears and preconceived bias of African American men. Additionally, before institutional agents can effectively work with the African American male student, agents must take the time to understand the unusual struggles and challenges African American men face simply because they are both Black and male.

Interactive strategies such as empathy, listening, and caring are useful when trying to engage African American male students in their education process. Though crucial to being able to elicit open discussions with their students about the challenges they are experiencing socially, academically, and systemically, these strategies are often forgotten in day-to-day interactions on college campuses. Once rapport and trust are established, institutional agents can work collaboratively with their African American male student to construct strategies to address the student's specific needs.

Institutional agents can also support African American male students' matriculation by investing time to provide, connect, or create resources to help their students succeed. This support means going beyond the institutional agents' assigned role. Institutional agents' in this study demonstrated a commitment to invest time to teach their students skills to help them successfully navigate the campus systems and beyond. Institutional agents should create groups, to support the academic and social needs of their students, and develop opportunities in and outside of the classroom for successful African American male professionals and graduate students to interact, present, and mentor their undergraduate African American male students.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

The aim of this study was to examine strategies and practices that were being used at an HBCU to promote undergraduate degree attainment for African American male students on their campus. Ten institutional agents were interviewed about their experiences working with African American male students. A rich amount of data was gathered from the participant's lived stories. Yet, there appears to be much more insight and knowledge—wisdom—that could be gained from studies involving institutional agents from across the country and their learned strategies and practices they use to support African American men complete their degrees. Furthermore, there seems to be little research relating to the institutional agents' perspective of the type of support (social capital) they provide to help African American men to matriculate. Acquiring this type of information could offer institutions more practical and effective ways of supporting their faculty, administrators, and staff as they support their students. Clearly, more research is needed regarding academic institutions and their agents' contributions to support African American males in academia. To learn more comprehensive strategies and practices, a recommendation for future research is for a multiple case study of institutional agents at both HBCUs and PWIs that have demonstrated success in helping African American men matriculate.

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