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Bonding Beyond the University: Experiences of Black Males on a Sojourn to Atlanta

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This study explored the role of Thurgood Marshall Scholars (TMS), a Black Male Initiative program, on Black male students' college experiences and their bonding interactions. Museus and Quaye's (2009) intercultural perspective of persistence was employed as a conceptual frame to investigate how participants made meaning from their engagement. The findings suggest that TMS contributed significantly to students' relationships with their Black male peers. In particular, their Sojourn to Atlanta allowed the students to deepen their bonds and engage in a cultural and historical excursion. These relationships and experiences bolstered the men's commitment and collective consciousness.

Keywords: Black males, bonding, engagement, higher education, Black Male Initiatives

Unlimited networking and building a bond that goes beyond the university. We kinda keep up with each other. Kirk is thinking about going to school out [in California] and I can hit him up when I'm out there. It benefits us both. – David (age 24, mass communications major)

Black Men's College Experiences

The status, achievements, and efforts of Black males in education in general and within higher education in particular have garnered much attention over the past two decades (e.g., see Amechi, 2016; Brooms, 2017; Bush & Bush, 2010; Cuyjet, 2006ab; Dancy, 2012; Goings, 2016; Harper, 2009; Harper & Wood, 2015; Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014; Strayhorn, 2008, 2017; Wood, 2013, 2014; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Some of these studies highlight a range

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of challenges that follow Black males from elementary and secondary school contexts into higher education, such as lack of preparation (Brooms, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014), lower Black male student enrollment (Cuyjet, 2006b), and racism (Jenkins, 2006; Smith, Mustaffa, Jones, Curry, & Allen, 2016). Undoubtedly, there are myriad factors that contribute to issues of preparation, including family support and socialization, prior educational experiences, and students' own engagement and efforts. Lack of preparation lends itself to Black male students' ambivalence and lack of confidence in their academic skills and abilities upon transitioning to college and their help-seeking behaviors. Nationally, the six-year Black male graduation rate of 34% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016) raises cause for concern and ongoing research has sought to identify ways to highlight areas for enhancing their college experiences.

Beyond the challenges, a number of Black male students continue to persevere and pursue their educational goals, including college degree attainment. A part of these students' college experiences includes their identity development, which helps inform their academic efforts and social relationships (Bridges, 2011; Dancy, 2012). A number of researchers have worked to position Black males to self-author and rewrite their own narratives (Amechi, 2016; Brooms, 2018a; Clark & Brooms, 2018; Goings, 2016), thus highlighting how Black males negotiate and navigate college in ways that speak to their agency and autonomy. Additionally, researchers contend that Black male students' academic engagement increases their opportunities for success and helps counter various deficit perspectives held against them (Goings, 2016; Harper, 2009; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Wood, 2014). Additionally, a critical area of investigation for Black males' college experiences centers on their involvement in clubs and organizations. Most recently, Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs have been developed as a measure both to address some of the challenges which they face and provide them with a support network on campus (Brooms, 2017; Cuyjet, 2006a; Palmer et al, 2014; Wood & Palmer, 2015). While these studies have been informative regarding how students' on-campus involvement have helped them better navigate and negotiate campus, little work has examined how their beyond campus interactions contributed to their engagement experiences and social relationships.

To contribute to this gap in the literature, the current study uses qualitative interview data with five Black male students to explore how participating in the Thurgood Marshall Scholars program (pseudonym) mattered in their college experiences. As the quote by David in the opening epigraph of this article signifies, networking and developing bonding relationships with male peers, especially beyond the university, provides Black males with a critical source of support that can be used during their college years and in future endeavors. In particular, we explored how the students' engagement and experience participating in a group trip (Sojourn to Atlanta) impacted their bonding and sense of self. Findings from this study can contribute elements to enhance programming efforts geared toward supporting Black male success in higher education.

Black Males' Engagement Experiences

Scholars contend that Black students' involvement in campus clubs and organizations contribute to their transition to, adjustment, and social integration in college (Brown, 2006; Museus, 2008; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999; Patton, 2010; Patton, Flowers, & Bridges, 2011). Nagasawa and Wong (1999) theorized that ethnic social networks helped bolster minority students' survival in college. Importantly, they acknowledged campus climate as a major force

that lends to the origin of racial/ethnic peer cultures on college campuses and that these supportive cultures “help minority students deal with the problems of cultural and racial isolation, anonymity, and survival in college” (p. 80). These researchers argued that the emergence of an ethnic peer culture is related to the solution of the problem, primarily because it serves as an extended unit (or enclave) to reduce the social and physical size of the campus. Nagasawa and Wong theorized that racial/ethnic social networks enhance students’ survival in three specific ways. First, the content of ethnic social networks matter to students’ experiences in college. These supplementary cultures which reinforce academic effort and excellence are more likely to facilitate integration into the college social and academic systems and, thereby, enhance survival in college than those that do not. Second, peer cultures can help provide social support and information for students in navigating the college maze. Garnering access to social support helps students stave off feeling alone and anonymous, which may impede their ability to adjust (and persist) in college. Third, given opportunities for members to focus on themselves, peer cultures can increase solidarity and pride in members.

More specifically to Black male students, and their involvement in male-centered programming in particular, engagement on campus has been linked to student leadership, persistence, and success as well (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms, 2018b; Brooms, Goodman, & Clark, 2015; Brown, 2006; Clark & Brooms, 2018; Druery & Brooms, 2018; Palmer, Maramba, & Dancy, 2014; Zell, 2011). Using qualitative interview data with 40 Black males at two different predominantly white institutions (PWIs), Brooms (2018a) found that Black males’ engagement in a BMI program supported students through increased access to social and cultural capital, especially in the form of offering a counterspace on campus and allowing the men to connect with other Black males (both peers and institutional personnel) and enhanced the participants’ academic experiences. Additionally, students noted that they “felt connected to BMI through a heightened sense of self and collective identity awareness” (p. 150). Thus, the students felt empowered as they had opportunities for self-discovery and social cohesion.

Relatedly, Zell (2011) examined the perceived impact that membership in Brother2Brother (B2B) peer groups had on Black male college students. Using focus groups with students at both junior colleges and four-year institutions, Zell found that students’ engagement yielded six primary benefits: academic motivation, personal presentation, validation of emerging skills, personal growth, ethic of collaboration, and rewarded through accountability. These findings revealed that the B2B program was “essential in mediating challenges to success, including the acquisition of the social and intellectual capital needed to achieve their college goals” (p. 224). In particular, the students’ engagement helped them overcome stereotypes and isolation while simultaneously raising their profile by playing a part in campus life and drawing positive attention to their efforts. Collectively, these studies certify that BMI-type programs provide Black male students with important pathways to success given their increased access to resources on campus, opportunities to build the capital at their disposal, and their personal development and social bonding.

Black Male Bonding in College

A number of studies highlight the importance of Black males’ peer relationships and the benefits that they accrue through their relationships with peers and institutional personnel (Dancy, 2012; Jackson & Hui, 2017; McGowan, 2016; McGuire, McTier, Ikegwonu, Sweet, & Bryant-Scott, 2018; Strayhorn, 2008). Across these studies, researchers note that Black males’

bonding impacts their manhood and masculine identities (Dancy, 2012), the ways that they identify and develop relationships (Jackson & Hui, 2017; McGowan, 2016), and the types of support that are available to them (Strayhorn, 2008). For instance, in a qualitative study of 17 Black males at a predominantly white institution (PWI), McGowan (2016) found that race played a critical role in students' relationship formations. In particular, some students' racial identity salience helped inform their decisions on developing relationships, while for other students, common social interests and communication styles proved more prevalent.

Similarly, in a quantitative study of 231 Black male students, Strayhorn (2008) found empirical evidence of the "various supports that can powerfully impact the success of Black male collegians" (p. 36). Strayhorn found that having a strong support group (or person) was related positively with satisfaction in college, can contribute to students' social integration and sense of belonging, and increase their retention. Finally, McGuire and colleagues' (2018) study of Black males' homosocial bonding is important as well. These researchers used a qualitative study of 18 Black male students, all of whom were members of a Black Christian fraternity, to investigate the ways that they defined and embodied brotherhood as well as the emotional benefits they gained from brotherhood. They found that the men defined brotherhood as an active process that centered on support for and accountability to others. These relationships helped the men meet specific behavior goals and had a positive impact on their academic performance. As these studies reveal, Black males' bonding relationships matter a great deal in how they relate to one another, their identity development and expression, and their educational experiences.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework employed in the current analysis was comprised of Museus and Quaye's (2009) intercultural perspective of persistence. Museus and Quaye (2009) used a qualitative study to test Kuh and Love's (2000) cultural perspective to explain Students of Color's persistence at predominantly white institutions. In particular, Museus and Quaye found consistency across three intercultural propositions in their model while the other five propositions were modifications of Kuh and Love's corresponding cultural propositions. Three of Museus and Quaye's propositions have been adapted to help frame the current study: (1) Black men's college experiences are shaped by their cultural meaning-making systems; (2) knowledge of Black men's cultural backgrounds (or cultures of origin) and immersion are required to understand these students' abilities to negotiate their respective campus cultural milieus; and (3) influence of, connection to, and support from cultural agents correlate to likelihood of Black men's persistence. Importantly, the researchers used the intercultural perspective to posit that collective cultural agents, such as BMI programs in the current study, "can also work to decrease cultural dissonance and facilitate the adjustment and persistence" of Black college men (p. 83).

Especially at historically white institutions (HWIs),¹ this approach is critical because it honors students' backgrounds and communities while simultaneously resisting assimilation, which some have considered as "cultural suicide" (see Tierney, 1999). In focusing on the emergent intercultural perspectives, Museus and Quaye (2009) suggested that an increased understanding of culture could provide researchers with valuable insights into the process of Students of Color's persistence. Additionally, the perspective can be a useful framework for analyzing how campus spaces, such as BMIs and other student-centered programs, can serve as a

cultural community that enhances students' bonding and values their unique cultural backgrounds and identities.

An intercultural perspective, which pays particular attention to students' bonding, was used to examine Black male students' college experiences. In particular, we examine the BMI program as a cultural community that uniquely positions students with access to each other and various forms of capital (e.g., sociocultural capital, academic capital, and resistant capital). In this study, we examine students' BMI experiences, from the meanings that they craft to the ways in which they narrate their Sojourn experiences.

Methods

Thurgood Marshall Scholars and the Sojourn to Atlanta Context

This study is part of a larger project that examines Black males' engagement experiences in college. The larger study incorporated both survey and interview data collection methods to explore how Black male students narrate their BMI engagement across multiple campuses (Brooms, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). The current paper is based on data collected through a focus group interview with five Black male students who all were members of the Thurgood Marshall Scholars (TMS) program, a male-centered initiative, who all participated in an excursion trip to Atlanta as part of TMS programming. The Black males were students at Jackson Johnson University (JJU; pseudonym), a historically white institution with about 25,000 students located in the southern region of the U.S. Black students at the institution account for about 11% of the student population. The Thurgood Marshall Scholars Program was created nearly a decade ago to increase Black male students' awareness and understanding of the challenges they face and their agency in navigating the institution and attaining their bachelor's degree. The TMS focus areas are centered primarily on academic success, mentoring, peer connections, and personal development (e.g., leadership, professional development). Finally, Paul, a middle-aged Black male, served as the coordinator of TMS since its inception and was responsible for all programming—including the Sojourn to Atlanta trip. A one-on-one interview was conducted with Paul as well and is used as data in this study.

According to Paul, the purpose of the Sojourn to Atlanta was to provide the students with a trip that was centered on cultural and historical immersion. Atlanta, Georgia was chosen because it is “a city where there was a large concentration of African Americans” and, even further, “which would expose them to a cultural and historical immersion experience. It was also designed to enhance their image of self while broadening their perspective of what can be achieved in academics and life.” The three-day trip included lodging at a hotel in the Buckhead area. A total of 19 students participated in the Sojourn; 17 undergraduate students and two graduate students. Initially, invitations were based on student participation; students with the highest levels of participation at TMS activities and events were invited to participate in the Sojourn. One graduate student was a Senegalese male who was a doctoral student at the university; the other graduate student was a U.S.-born Black woman who was a doctoral student at the university and whose dissertation research focused on Black male students' experiences at historically white institutions. Also, Shaun, a university staff member and TMS Affiliate, served as a chaperone for the trip.

The trip comprised of group meals, occurring at historical locations, and visits to several cultural and historic attractions. These venues included the Georgia Aquarium, the Martin Luther

King, Jr. Center, the Center for Civil and Human Rights, as well as three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)—Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and Spelman College. During the visits to the HBCUs, students participated in campus tours and interacted with current students. According to Paul, these conversations were set up as a way for the TMS members to “compare and contrast their experiences with the students they spoke to at these HBCUs. Some of the questions they asked [were] to gain an understanding of institutional support systems at their institution (the HBCUs) and their own (PWI).” In addition to general conversations throughout the trip, the chaperones engaged students in debriefing discussions each day and students completed and submitted a survey response after the trip.

Study Participants

As mentioned, data were collected through a one-on-one individual interview with the program coordinator as well as a focus group interview with five Black male students. Four of the students were recent graduates (the interview was conducted several weeks after the end of the spring semester) and all of the students were aged between 22 and 24 at the time of the interview. With regards to TMS participation, one student participated for two years after transferring to the institution while the others participated between three and four years. Thus, these students can be considered as highly engaged in TMS across their college careers.

Given that the focus group interview for this project took place a few weeks after the end of the spring semester, our recruitment was limited to students who were available to the researchers during the summer time. Through our use of qualitative methods, the goal of this study is not to make general claims about all TMS students' experiences, or even all who participated in the Sojourn, but rather to discern how these particular students made meaning from their experiences. The following questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: How do Black male students make meaning from their engagement in a male-centered program?

Research Question 2: What experiences do Black male students identify as salient in reflecting on their Sojourn to Atlanta trip?

We use pseudonyms throughout this study in reference to the institution, organization, and students to protect students' confidentiality.

Data Collection and Analysis

Both researchers collaborated in developing the focus group interview guide and we used a number of discussions to vet questions to ensure that the inquiry could elicit valuable meaning making from students. The focus group interview was conducted on campus at an office location convenient for all of the student participants and lasted an hour and a half. The interview was facilitated by the first author and followed a semi-structured design to allow participants to engage in a conversational flow (Creswell, 2013). The second author took notes of the discussion during the interview; these notes were used to help contextualize the interview. We chose a focus group interview for two specific reasons: (1) as a way to allow the students to construct meanings actively through discourse and (2) as a way to provide space for a potentially richer

and more robust dialogue (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). The first author transcribed the interview immediately and shared it with the second author to ensure accuracy.

For the analytic process, we read and reread the focus group interview transcript to refamiliarize ourselves with the conversation and the participants' narratives. First, we read the transcript separately and wrote notes from our reading. Second, we wrote out codes for the participants' narratives; here, we relied on an inductive and deductive reading of the interview text (Creswell, 2013). That is, we conducted a line-by-line reading of the transcript paying specific attention to students' discussion of the Sojourn trip (inductive) and, second, we used extant literature to help us identify potential themes regarding Black male students' campus involvement and out-of-classroom learning (deductive). Third, we discussed each of our themes and came to a consensus on how to develop and present a coherent narrative of the students' experiences. To ensure reliability of our analysis, we discussed our findings with the students in one-on-one and small group meetings.

Findings

The following section discusses the major themes from the responses from the students. We organized our findings in consideration of (a) context and (b) meaning making. Data from this study contributes to the literature by examining the import of Black males' out-of-classroom engagement in general (the TMS) and their off-campus experiences more specifically (Sojourn trip). We use the first theme to examine the men's decisions to get involved with TMS to provide a context to better understand and appreciate their Sojourn experiences (the final three themes).

“Get me around some positive Black males”: TMS Involvement

In helping to provide a context for the men's experiences beyond the university, we first begin by examining the decisions they made to engage in a male-centered program on campus. In particular, we assert that the men's reasons for engaging in the Thurgood Marshall Scholars program helped undergird the bonding that they experienced throughout their BMI careers in general and, as we later argue, during the Sojourn Trip more specifically. Each of the men provided different reasons for their initial engagement, revealing the importance of various forms of cultural capital in their experiences. For instance, David (age 23, political science major) relayed how responding to a family member's demand initiated his participation; he shared:

David: My cousin, actually, she was a graduate of JJU. She forced me to be in TMS because I was still living in the hood and so forth. She was trying to get me around some positive Black males, because wasn't nothing positive about my life when I started college.

Researcher: How did you feel about being forced to participate?

David: At that point, I was acceptable for doing anything to get me out of the hood. So, I did [follow up and participate]. I was embraced with open arms. I remember meeting Paul [the program coordinator] for the first time and I didn't have a computer at home. He told me that I had to check my school account and I hadn't checked it because I didn't know how to use a computer. So I worked with Paul and checked my account and found out it was some stuff I had to take care of—but I probably woulda missed it if I hadn't talked with Paul.

Although David recounted being “forced” to participate in the TMS program by an older cousin, he benefited from his family member’s knowledge of the program as well as her encouragement and support (familial capital—the cultural knowledge nurtured through kinship or extended family; Yosso, 2005). Being “forced” to participate did not mar David’s experiences or early perceptions of the program; instead, he placed his participation within a perspective of his lived experiences and his expressed desire to engage with “positive Black males” who could enhance his college experiences and personal development. Being embraced “with open arms” and making an early connection with Paul both made an indelible impact on David’s early experiences and met some of his personal and developmental needs.

In addition to family members’ efforts, some of the men received encouragement to participate directly from Paul. These personal points of contact were important enough to these students that they decided to follow up on the initial invitation to attend an early programming event. Frank (age 23, sports administration major) shared:

I got a call from some random man [collective laughter], Paul, said it was a new program and I fit the profile that they wanted to serve. [They] said early move in, come to campus and get to learn how JJU is. Even though I live in [the city], I had never been on campus. So, it was something cool to go to.

In addition to Frank’s lack of familiarity with the university, the opportunity to move to campus early and learn more about the university was appealing to him. Frank’s comment about receiving a call from “some random man” met with heartfelt laughter among the group because, throughout the interview and their college experiences, each of the students recounted a number of ways that their positive relationships with Paul made enduring contributions to their college years. Because of his person-first practices and healthy relationships philosophy, Paul quickly went from “some random man” to serving as a mentor and father figure to a number of students. The strength of Paul’s tutelage and leadership is revealed in Wesley’s statement about his decision to participate in the Thurgood Marshall Scholars program. Similarly, in speaking about his decision to participate, Wesley (age 24, Spanish major) noted, “David introduced me to Paul and it was almost like I wanted my cake that I could eat too. I met Paul and felt like I had everything that I needed.”

“I got to experience something different”: Sojourn to Atlanta

In addition to discussing how they got involved in the program, the students were asked explicit questions about their experiences during and meaning making from the Sojourn to Atlanta trip. Some students like James (age 22, psychology major) suggested that the trip served as a “vacation” while others were excited to attend because of the destination and low cost to them personally; Kirk (age 23, Black Studies) stated, “I never been to Atlanta and I was able to go, pretty much scot-free.” In addition to these points, the men also recognized that the trip offered them an opportunity to create and have experiences that went well beyond what they would be exposed to on campus.

In speaking about his Sojourn experience, which connected with his own previous experiences in Atlanta, Wesley offered:

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It was a chance for me, it was just getting back to my stomping ground. I stepped as a freshman in Atlanta and met a lot of my friends. It was a chance to show these guys a good trip. It brought us closer, I was able to step outside of my comfort.

First, Wesley offered positive recollections of his time attending college in Atlanta, he considered the city and college campuses as his “stomping ground” and a place where he built important friendships. In addition to him stepping outside of his own comfort zone, he credited the trip with bringing the men even closer together to each other. Similarly, Frank acknowledged:

It was a way to do something that I wouldn't be able to do with no other group on campus. I had a sister who went to Spelman and I knew nothing about it. I got to experience something different, so I was looking forward to it.

In speaking about the qualities of their experiences, the men noted that having time to build their relationships with each other was a critical component of the trip. Kirk stated, “It was relaxing going without having any obligations. Really getting to know the guys, outside of a school setting, which was cool.”

In speaking about the goals he held for the Sojourn to Atlanta, Paul, who designed and coordinated the trip, stated:

Obviously there were several things. One in particular was to build a stronger sense of connection with one another, which would assist in enhancing their overall experiences at Jackson Johnson University—from the standpoint of supporting one another academically and socially. The other aspect or element was to give them exposure to a city that most of them had never traveled to or experienced, so to provide that exposure.

As can be garnered from Paul's narrative, the goal and focus of the Sojourn was multifaceted. A central component of the Sojourn was for students to enhance their connections with one another through an off-campus immersion experience. Additionally, he noted the opportunity to expose the students to the HBCU environment; he added:

Another element was to expose them to college students attending a different type of institution, HBCU versus PWI, and allow them to dialogue with those students to find out what experiences they had in common and also to find out what experiences were unique to an HBCU institution.

In reflecting on his own experiences, Paul contended:

It was transformative and cathartic. In terms of myself, I have not experienced Atlanta in those particular contexts, as far as going on a trip in a group, as far as going on a trip with African American males. And being exposed to the various aspects of what Atlanta had to offer educationally, socially. It was transformative to observe the impact the trip had on the students; and observing how intrigued, enthused, and engaged they were based on what they experienced.

A common consensus among the participants was that the Sojourn trip provided them with a very different experience than what they had on their own campus—or very different than what they would have experienced individually. Paul described the trip as transformative for both himself and the students; in particular, he noted both the collective engagement and collective experiences as a critical element of the Sojourn.

“It was a historic feel”: Being Present and in the Moment

Some of our discussion about the Sojourn to Atlanta also focused on what the men believed they learned and would take away from their experiences. In addition to feeling inspired by their exposure, as David mentioned, “The world is much bigger than my city,” the men’s social interactions provided them with valuable learning experiences about bonding. Frank noted:

I would say, kinda going off what he just said, stuff I never seen that’s different than what I thought it would be. Just like it was more friendly. Not with us, but with each other. They had a barbershop on campus. That felt like a school and a home—more than like here, this is a commuter campus. There [at the HBCUs], it’s like a family.

According to Frank, the sojourn provided the men with an opportunity to engage in community in ways that was much different than what they experienced at their historically white campus. He highlighted the friendliness of people they met, as opposed to competition or dissonance; even more, he noted that the Historically Black Colleges and Universities they visited—Spelman, Morehouse, and Clark Atlanta—felt like both “a school and a home” that allowed for family-like bonds to develop. This environment and sense of community and family were much different than the climate on their college campus.

Frank also added to this point about the stark differences between their campus and these HBCUs; he shared:

I can say getting to go to the campus and seeing the Spelman, looking like it was just buildings and seeing all the people mingling together. Seeing Clark Atlanta and Morehouse, everybody is just outside. In the [Student Center on our campus], you can see divides between Blacks and whites; there (at the HBCUs), everybody is cool.

Similarly, Kirk observed, “I think the social life was a whole lot different.” He went on to explain, “The environment was better! When we went, everybody was outside talking to each other. People weren’t just walking past each other and giving you the head nod; they were taking time to talk to you.” The men were impressed by the ways in which students at the HBCUs engaged with each other in their social interactions, approaches that were much different than the dissonant and denigrating experiences, as well as the barrage of stereotypes which affronted them on their own campus. At many HWIs, Black students, as well as Students of Color, develop bonds and create social spaces on campus as a way to counter some of the racism, hostilities, and microaggressions they face (Brooms, 2017; Robertson & Chaney, 2015; Smith et al., 2016). The men were impressed and moved by people taking time to talk as opposed to “just walking past each other.”

Beyond these differences in campus environments, the men also acknowledged some of the salient moments and opportunities their Sojourn afforded. Frank declared that the trip was

historical because of the legacies of institutions such as Morehouse College and the individuals who traversed these spaces. He stated:

I would say it was a historic feel 'cuz they showed us the [Morehouse] Chapel that some famous people come and speak in. They showed us some dorms; they showed us where MLK (Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) walked through. Just so many people, like the Benjamin Mays statue, all the history of Spelman, and I think they said W.E.B. Du Bois taught at Clark Atlanta.

In addition to the history, and even as a connection to it, a final comment from Wesley helps summarize the crux of the men's experiences; he shared, "To add, just enjoy the moment; enjoy it and be present in the moment. Enjoy it and be present in the moment because opportunities like that don't come too often."

"We're all here together": Bonding Beyond Campus

In this final section, we discuss how the men reflected on their Sojourn trip with their engagement. As we pointed out earlier, students like Wesley credited the trip with bringing the men closer together; more specifically, the men discussed their relationships through ideas of brotherhood and fictive kinship. These close-knit relationships were able to develop precisely because they felt connected to each other through their college experiences, engagement on campus, and the Sojourn trip. As they reflected on their bonding, several of the men tried to articulate their understanding of brotherhood but struggled to define it; instead, they discussed close and meaningful connections with their male peers as a visceral experience. Wesley expressed:

Brotherhood to me just means just having this mutual agreement that you don't even understand until you experience it. It's like on a personal level when I think about my twin brother, love him still; haven't seen some of these guys in a while, still love them to death. Something I can't explain.

Frank added by responding:

Like he just said, people in this group want to make sure that we still doing good. I do have white classmates and they might be in my life for one semester. I try to use those to my advantage. These people, it's not just for class, we're here and we're all here together; we want to see each other. I probably wouldn't do that with other groups in the school.

Similarly, David stated:

Dependable, somebody that you can depend on. Brother also is like somebody that goes through the same thing that you go through. So, like Wesley being my brother, we have connections; he goes through the same thing as I do.

The depth of the men's relationships are clear in the statements by Wesley, Frank, and David. The importance of the men's bonding was critical to their college experiences and was deepened

through their off-campus engagements as well. Knowing that they were “all here together” helped strengthen the men’s bonds with and toward one another. Importantly, Wesley’s profession of love toward his TMS brothers is likened to his love for his own sibling.

The men referred to each other as “brothers” and even used kinship terms in reference to Paul. For instance, James contended, “I would say it’s like a brotherhood because we have Paul, who’s like the father, and we’re like the adopted kids.” According to James, the TMS program helped him establish family-like bonds with his male peers and the program coordinator that helped support him throughout his college years. In taking account of the men’s brotherhood, a number of men offered short but potent statements about the ways they felt empowered through their bonds. Kirk offered, “‘Cuz it last a lifetime. No matter where we go, we know we have somebody that we can call and talk to.” Similarly, Wesley added, “And if we all thriving in different places, that’s power in itself. I know I’m here for a different reason.”

As he recounted his overall experiences, Wesley connected the Sojourn trip with a previous event the group attended, the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) conference:

I know going to the SAAB conferences, we were all together, at the table it was us; in the [hotel and meeting] rooms it was us. Even though we were in this different pool of individuals, we were there together. We were there to represent JJU and the SAAB chapter. It’s amazing to see people achieving their goals. Everything to me, it’s bigger than the response I’ve been giving. Paul introduced me to Wesley, Wesley told me about a guy he knew and “boom” here comes [graduate school].

A final comment from James helps synthesize the importance of the men’s bonding:

I would actually say expectation. Expectation drives motivation. Being around my brothers, they expect me to do good, we all expect to graduate. That motivates me to do better. We use each other as resources. With that brotherhood, it’s almost like... you’re not alone.

As their narratives attest, the men’s bonding experiences beyond campus helped reaffirm and deepen their academic goals and aspirations as well as their commitments to each other. Additionally, their bonding relationships helped strengthen their collective consciousness so that they centered achieving together as a significant desire, goal, and focus of their efforts.

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to explore how Black male students made meaning from their TMS engagement experiences with a specific lens on their excursion trip to Atlanta. While much research lauds student involvement as an important vestige to drive academic and social integration (e.g., see Museus, 2008; Palmer, Maramba & Dancy, 2014), we find that involvement for these five Black males helped enhance their social connections and bonds. In particular, the students’ bonding during and through off-campus events helped to strengthen their commitments to each other and their collective achievements. We discuss these points in further detail below.

As it relates to the students’ TMS engagement, getting around “positive Black males”

was particularly appealing to the participants because these individuals reflected themselves, as Black males, and could represent their possibilities. Students believed that being engaged with such a group provided them with a critical community that supported their academic efforts, sense of self, and personal development. Sensibly, recruitment efforts honed in on the students' race and gender identities; however, it was the environment established by the program coordinator and TMS members that made the program especially attractive for these students. The students felt welcomed and valued and received vital information about and support for transitioning through college. These early experiences help reveal some of the ways that the students understood their TMS engagement from the onset and provide a context for their Sojourn experiences. This finding relates to previous research that shows the benefit of engaging in a culturally rich program (Brooms, 2018a, 2018b; Druery & Brooms, 2018; Zell, 2011) and the importance of Black male bonding and peer support in college (McGowan, 2016; Strayhorn, 2017). The students gave credence to their TMS peers for increasing their motivation, being held accountable, and persevering toward individual and collective goals. Given the quality of their experiences, students staved off feelings of isolation ("It's almost like... you're not alone") and developed deep bonds that functioned and were experienced much like a family (e.g., fictive kin language in terms such as "father," "brother" and "brotherhood").

All of the students contended that the Sojourn trip was both "different" from their traditional college or engagement experiences and some even considered it "historic." The opportunity to travel with their Black male peers provided a unique phenomenon to deepen the men's bonding and fortify some of their relationships with each other. Collectively, the trip was "different" because students traveled beyond the local area for a destination that most had not yet experienced. Also, the trip was "different" because students were in a completely dissimilar type of environment, especially during their visits to and tours of HBCUs. These campuses offered the participants a glimpse into student life at institutions that comprehensively catered to Black students, which was much different than their own campus. Even further, the notion that this trip was "historic" speaks to some of the activities they engaged in, including the cultural and historic site visits and palpable learning opportunities. Additionally, traveling together meant that these were collective experiences; the students were engaged in conversations throughout the trip, which allowed them to discern and make sense of their experiences both individually and collectively.

As the findings in this study attest, the Sojourn trip played a vital role in informing and strengthening the students' relationships and how they thought about themselves. David's attestation summarizes the sentiments of the group, as he acknowledged that the Sojourn provided him with "Lifetime memories and good connections and friends; and, brotherhood." In addition, the trip and shared experiences they garnered and participated in helped to enhance their social and cultural capital. As it relates to their social capital, meeting students at other college campuses provided them with opportunities to expand their social network; however, it was the multiple opportunities to engage and learn with and from each other that truly strengthened their Black male peer network. With regards to cultural capital, the Sojourn helped deepen the men's knowledge about a range of experiences, people, and places related to Black history and Black life. The exposure to various campuses helped the students appreciate their bonds with each other and helped them (re)conceptualize how community matters during college. Also, visiting cultural and historical sites added to their cultural knowledge and cultivation towards their sense of self.

Implications

The findings from this study provide a number of practical implications for university personnel who work with Black male students. Like other research regarding Black male students' engagement on campus (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms, 2018a, 2018b; Palmer, Maramba, & Dancy, 2014), the TMS program provided students with multiple activities and opportunities that they benefited from during their college years. To enhance Black males' college experiences and personal development identified in the narratives and consistent within the educational literature (e.g., Zell, 2011), student affairs practitioners can structure activities beyond campus to help deepen students' connections with each other, broaden their cultural knowledge, and heighten their sense of self. The uniqueness of "bonding beyond campus" can make a number of contributions to students' development as it may help students refine and reinforce their peer community in ways that speak to their holistic needs. Students in this study grew strength and resolve through their bonds with their Black male peers, which helped to reaffirm their resilience, persistence, and collective consciousness. Exploring Black male students' shared ideologies as well as their resilience and achievement from a collective standpoint that are congruent with their cultural perspectives (Museus & Quaye, 2009) and sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012) are recommended approaches.

By attending to the students' cultural meaning-making systems and their connections to cultural agents, support for Black male students' development can be enhanced. Given the range of challenges and cultural dissonance that Black males face and experience on some college campuses (e.g., racism and alienation), strengthening their connections to a supportive social and cultural network (Brooms, 2018a) and one that supports their persistence (Strayhorn, 2017) is recommended. Importantly, Black males' engagement in student-centered programs should be valued beyond their integration to the campus milieu and be centered on how these programs connect with, build on, and extend their own individual and collective assets, skills, and cultural backgrounds. Understanding how Black males think about themselves through their intersecting identities is warranted as well, as this can provide critical insights on better supporting their racialized and gendered identity development and their bonding experiences (Bridges, 2011; McGowan, 2016). Ultimately, speaking to Black males' strengths and possibilities offers us manifold opportunities to redefine narratives about them from multiple perspectives (Amechi, 2016; Brooms, 2018a, 2018b; Clark & Brooms, 2018; Goings, 2016). That the men relished being together ("we were all together") during their exploration says a great deal about how they see themselves and their acknowledgement of how they benefit from collaborative out-of-class experiences, activities, and opportunities with each other.

Conclusion

As this study shows, examining Black male students' engagement experiences is a ripe area to learn how to broaden the opportunities and support afforded to them. Better understanding, developing, and coordinating factors that support their persistence and resilience in college is much needed. At the same time, more work is needed at the institutional level to reduce the barriers they face—institutional, academic, and interpersonal. If our goal is to help students achieve success in college, then we must give more attention to the campus culture and climate and the various ways that different student groups connect with (or not), respond to, and cope with the institution. As one study participant, James, articulated, one's ability to succeed

may be based on expectation as “expectation drives motivation”; still, these expectations are situated within the institutional support systems and resources available to students.

Note:

¹ We use the term “historically white institutions” to distinguish those institutions whose histories include policies and practices of excluding Black students and other Students of Color from gaining admission and matriculating (see Brooms, 2017).

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