Perceived Influence of African American Male Mentorship on the Academic Success of African American Males in a Predominantly White Institution of Higher Education: An Institutional Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring relationships may have an effect on student attrition. Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993) identified several factors that contributed to student attrition, including academic and social integration. According to Tinto, academic and social integration influence students' decisions to persist in school or to drop out. Tinto found that various built-in characteristics such as family background, K-12 educational achievements, academic abilities, and other personal attributes significantly influenced rates of student persistence. Moreover, integrating students who enter college socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged into the social fabric of the institution may increase their chances of enhancing persistence and matriculation. Given the problems facing the African American community, "African American boys require communities of men who can ensure their safe passage and celebrate—through ritual and ceremony, fellowship and membership their ascension to manhood" (p. 2).

In general, the aim of a mentoring relationship is to develop and refine a young person's skills, abilities, and understanding (LaVant et al., 1987). Mentoring relationships can be arranged formally or informally. Often, "formal mentoring programs are designed to increase enrollment and retention of minority and other students, as well as increase student satisfaction with the academic experience" (p. 33).

Introduction

The roles of mentors are difficult to define. Mentoring can take many forms and involve multiple activities. According to some practitioners, *mentors* can be defined as "teachers of relationships, rights, and responsibilities". In addition, mentoring is a "proactive strategy that exposes students to positive role models who can help with specific life skills, goal setting, and opportunities" (p. 1). Mentors are important in various stages of development in the lives of students, particularly African American males. Given the problems facing the African American community, "African American boys require communities of men who can ensure their safe passage and celebrate— through ritual and ceremony, fellowship and membership their ascension to manhood" (p. 2).

In general, the aim of a mentoring relationship is to develop and refine a young person's skills, abilities, and understanding (LaVant et al., 1987). Mentoring relationships can be arranged formally or informally. Often, "formal mentoring programs are designed to increase enrollment and retention of minority and other students, as well as increase student satisfaction with the academic experience" (p. 33). Informal mentoring is spontaneous and established by two or more persons for the benefit of those involved. According to Jacobi (as cited in LaVant et al.), evidence supports the notion that informal mentoring positively influences the establishment of more formal mentoring programs. Given the successful outcomes of many informal mentoring arrangements, more extensive and formally structured models have followed (LaVant et al.).

Thomas (1989) found that racial difference was often an obstacle for European American mentors in identifying positively with their African American mentees. By contrast, race served as a positive source of identification in same-race developmental relationships for both African Americans and European Americans. These results suggest that understanding the role of mentoring in education for African American males requires a look into the convoluted variables that are associated with these relationships. Thomas also found that same-race relationships provided more psychosocial support than did cross-race relationships for both African Americans and European Americans. Based on Thomas's findings, one might conclude that the phenomenon is attributable to the inherent link of racial identity. Not only is the ethnic link void in cross-race relationships; it often becomes a hindrance to the progression of the relationship for some of the reasons discussed.

Mentoring relationships may have an effect on student attrition. Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993) identified several factors that contributed to student attrition, including academic and social integration. According to Tinto, academic and social integration influence students' decisions to persist in school or to drop out. Tinto found that various built-in characteristics significantly influenced rates of student persistence: family background, K-12 educational achievements, academic abilities, and other personal attributes. Moreover, integrating students who enter college socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged into the social fabric of the institution may increase their chances of enhancing persistence and matriculation.

Student participation in mainstream campus life influences student attrition (Astin, 1984). Based on his research, Astin submitted that active involvement in campus

life (through involvement with sports, fraternal organizations, and leadership opportunities) encourages student bonding with the institution. Through his research Astin found that highly involved students were more likely to spend more time on campus, interact more frequently with campus staff and students, and devote more time to studies. Some studies (e.g., Edelman et al., 2006; Hughes, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Venegas, 2001) have shown that students who were connected to their university were more likely to graduate and matriculate. As suggested by current literature, the process of mainstreaming and connecting students to college campuses is more difficult for African American men. Thus, it is important to actively involve them in formal mentoring programs.

Although research regarding mentoring in higher education is sparse, mentoring programs for African American males at both the undergraduate and graduate level exist at several colleges and universities. These programs differ greatly in their structure and arrangements; however, all have shown promise in terms of increasing retention and promoting inclusion of African American males on campus. In "Retaining African American Men Through Mentoring Initiatives" LaVant et al. (1987) highlighted several of these programs:

> The Black Man's Think Tank: In 1993, Eric Abercrombie created this program at the University of Cincinnati. The Think Tank provides a forum for Black male academics to discuss issues and concerns that confront Black male students in higher education.

> The Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB): Tyrone Bledsoe founded SAAB in 1990 on the campus of Georgia Southwestern University. It was designed as a Black male development model, and was established to provide student intervention and support to African American males enrolled in college. One of the key goals of this program is to help African American males develop an understanding of the responsibilities of being a citizen.

> The Black Male Initiative: In 1990, Texas Southern University established this program in an effort to encourage Black youth in inner cities to enter colleges and universities, thus continuing their education. This program focuses on highlighting and interacting with successful role models to promote the value of education.

> The Meyerhoff Program: The Meyerhoff Program was created in 1998 at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). Freeman Hrabowski III, president of UMBC, established the program in aims to increase the number of African American men who earn doctorates.

> The Bridge: Georgia State University initiated a program called The Bridge in the mid-1980s with the express purpose of providing a jump start at the freshman level and enrichment of experience for African American students. Mentoring is a major aspect of the program, which provides an opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to engage in one-on-one relationships.

Project BEAM: Project BEAM (Being Excited About Me) assists students of color in gaining admission to West Virginia University and also provides academic support and other services. BEAM is predicated on the fact that establishing a one-to-one relationship with prospective students and really getting to know them establishes trust and gains student commitment, which leads to successful retention. BEAM is a strategic program at WVU, designed to improve African American students' coping abilities at predominantly White colleges and universities.

The Faculty Mentor Program-University of Louisville: The University of Louisville is one of the universities that experienced a significant increase in freshman African American enrollment in the early 1980s. However, the number of Black students enrolled fell off dramatically after the first year of enrollment. (p. 1)

According to the Dellums Commission (2004), in 2004 African American males made up only 2.4% of undergraduate college enrollment in the 50 flagship colleges and universities participating in the study. It is imperative that educational institutions continue to devise strategies and implement programs that positively affect retention of students once they arrive on campus. Initiatives should also be created that target, encourage and attract African American males who might be a potential student, but who need extra support or encouragement to enroll in higher education. Mentoring programs can serve as a solution for tackling this issue.

Many researchers have documented the benefits of mentoring. According to researchers (Edelman et al., 2006; Fleming, 1984; Harris, 1996; Hughes, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Venegas, 2001; Woolbright, 1989), students who interact and become involved in a mentoring relationship found greater satisfaction in their collegiate experiences than those students who did not have these same experiences. Minority students consistently reported this type of satisfaction, especially African American men and professionals who benefited from having a mentor to guide them at critical points in their educational, professional, and personal development. According to LaVant et al. (1987), mentoring is vital to the survival and empowering of African American men and enhances their ability to make plausible gains in higher education milieu.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to determine the perceived influence of African American male mentorship on the African American male's academic success?, This study specifically focused on the academic success of seven academically successful African American male undergraduate students t a predominantly White institution of higher education. This was done by examining students' self-efficacy, support structure, and academic background, guided by the four research questions, one of which focused specifically on African American male mentorship.

Through the experiences of the participants, the study provides insight into issues of societal perception, persistence, support, and access through the perspective of African

American males. This study was developed to provide a contextual understanding of African American males in higher education and provide those who work with the African American male populations in higher education, as well as in K-12 settings, insight to Black males from their perspective. The findings may be used to assist institutions of higher education in the recruitment and retention of African American males by providing strategies and recommendations.

Research Question 3

Research question 3 (as cited in Brown, 2008) asked, *What is the perceived influence of African American male mentorship on the African American male's academic success?* After much deliberation and conversation with the participants in the study, it came as a surprise to this researcher that African American male mentorship did not have a significant impact on the success of these seven young men. A common theme from the interviews with these young men was that African American males could be successful without adult Black males playing a major role in their tutelage. By no means is this researcher implying that African American male fathers, mentors, teachers, and/or role models are not important in a young Black male's life. However, the interviews conducted in this study indicated that, with a solid overall support system, Black males can achieve great success both personally and academically. Upon the realization that Black male mentorship does not play a significant role in achievement for some African American men, the focus of the question shifts from the perceived influence and impact of African American male mentorship on academic success and matriculation to the general lack of African American male mentors, particularly on the campuses of institutions of higher education.

The lack of African American male mentors for African American boys and young men has continued to be a pertinent issue for today's Black males. This deficiency starts in the home environment, since Black male roles models and mentors are scarce in many neighborhoods. Kunjufu (2006) asserted that the deficiency of role models continues into the educational pipeline, where over 83% of educators who come into contact with Black males are Caucasian females. When examining the lack of male mentorship from this perspective, the issue is evident and problematic. However, as reflected in the interviews in this study, it appears that these successful African American males, seemingly without the presence of Black males in their life to mentor or guide their path, have found substitutes to fill that void. Excerpts from the interviews provide some sense of the source of those substitutes and their roles as mentors.

Andrew did not complain about the lack of an adult Black male to serve as a mentor. Instead, he eagerly named his sister as the chief mentor in his personal and academic life.

> I look to my sister a lot and she motivates me on a daily basis. When I am kind of down and I need help, I try to figure out what to do in certain situations, and most of the time she has been there and done that, so she can help me out. Outside of

> the academic room, as far as our relationship with females—relationships with other individuals, period—she has a lot of insight and I look up to her a lot.

Colin did not look to faculty or staff at the university to provide mentoring services for him. Instead, he looked to his peers.

> One thing that I take pride in is the African American brothers on campus. We kind of keep each other motivated. Like, if we get kind of discouraged or caught up in something, we keep each other motivated and we keep each other going. One thing I have noticed about being in college is that you can't get through it alone.

Damian shared that, if he had had an African American male in his life, that presence would have been perceived as a positive aspect.

> I think it would definitely help. I grew up without a father or a male figure in my life, so I can only imagine that something like that would help a Black male in life and school. I think it would have made it easier to go to someone when I had questions about life, someone that could understand where I am coming from. My mother and sister were great, but it just helps if it's someone that can relate a little better.

As he saw it, Jesse's guidance did not come from higher education faculty, or even from teachers in public school. Instead, he identified his parents as his mentors.

> My biggest motivator was probably my mother, since she raised me since I was about 4 years old because of the separation between my mother and my father, who wasn't really the best influence in my life. He wasn't the man he was supposed to be and, as a result, that has been another motivator: trying to be the man that he wasn't going to be, and just trying to be the biggest influence in my mother's life. My mom was really a pusher—I can credit her for a lot of things.

While giving strong credit to his mother (as a positive model and mentor) and his father (as a negative model and thus motivator), Jesse poignantly noted the lack of an adult Black male to serve as a mentor in his life:

> I wish I would have met some brother like yourself who really, really taught me or told me, "Jesse, take your time, just take 12 hours in your freshman year and then extend it up to 15 hours in your sophomore year and 15 hours as your junior then." Although personally it [lack of adult Black male] had no influence on me, I think it has the potential of being very influential on a young Black male. Like I said earlier, my father wasn't there for me and I still made it because of my mother. But if my father was the man he was suppose to be, I may have become a lawyer like he is or something like that. I think I was always suppose to go to

college, so I don't think that would have mattered, but maybe it would have influenced the path I took in life.

Saviour had no comment about the mentoring role of faculty or staff (Black or otherwise) at an institution of higher learning. Again, he identified a parent as his mentor.

My dad just kept reinforcing everything in me saying, "f you want anything in life, you have to go get it, because people aren't really going to give it to you, especially in this world and in this country."

Saviour added a general commentary about the significance of a racial match between mentor and mentee, whether on a campus of higher education or in life in general. His comments imply that, while it is helpful to have a mentor of the same race in any area of life, a "specialist" (such as a faculty member in an institution of higher education) could be especially helpful.

When it comes to mentors, it does not have to be a Black person. But because the person is of the same race, I think he understands where the person is coming from. It's rare that you find someone who truly understands. . . . Can you really understand what it is to come from a household where you don't have to speak correct English, where you speak whatever works within your family, where you don't learn all these numbers and stuff like that? Coming from an area like that, the only person that will understand is the person from that area.
[Mentoring] definitely helped me. While I got along a little better with my mother, my father was great, he was so knowledgeable, I could ask him anything and he would always have an answer. I can't say it was just my father that helped me get into college, or who made me study, because my mother played a major role as well. So again, while I think it helps, it wasn't the sole reason.

Analysis for Research Question 3

Prior to data collection it was assumed that the role of the African American male mentor would exert significant influence on academic achievement; analysis of the results of the interviews did not support that assumption. Of those four, only Saviour and Colin reported that their fathers had played a pivotal role in their lives in general and their academic success in particular by challenging them academically. The other two participants with male figures in their lives considered that they had been successful without the influence of a male role model.

As alluded to earlier, a common theme from the interviews with these young men was that African American males can be academically successful without adult Black males playing a major role in their tutelage. The interviews indicated that, with a solid overall support system, a Black male can achieve high levels of success, both personally and academically. Only three of the seven participants in the study (Andrew, Saviour, and Wayne) were raised in two-parent households. Although it might be assumed that the

other four participants, raised in single-parent households, might have been influenced negatively by the lack of an African American male role model, the responses from these participants did not support that assumption. The participants who were raised in single-parent households seemed to have other individuals who served as mentors in support systems that did not include a male role model. In fact, Andrew was quick to name his sister as his mentor, and Colin and Jesse identified their mothers as their mentors and motivators.

Although the analysis leads to the conclusion that African American male mentors are not a necessity for successful matriculation by a young African American male, Saviour noted that, although it is not necessary that mentors on campus or in life be of the same race as the mentee, it is helpful for the mentor to understand "where the mentee is coming from." This would indicate that a match of race between mentor and mentee could be an advantage. Overall, whether these African American males were utilizing a formal or informal support system, the perceived support seemed to have a significant influence on their ability to enter and continue in college. In fact, all but one of the participants stated that they were satisfied with their support systems, which they described as having a significant influence on their academic performance. Even though the overall support system was important to these students, the assumption that the mentor be an African American male was not supported. Thus, the findings related to this research question were not consistent with research reviewed in Chapter II. While Foster and Peele (1999) discussed factors that were effective in the success of Black males in education, one of those factors being the presence of African American male teachers, this study has failed to support that notion but has validated the notion of the positive influence of support systems in general.

Critical Race Theory and Research Question 3

Although the singular African American male mentor relationship reported in this study did not have much of an influence on academic success nor on matriculation by Black males as had been anticipated, it was revealed that a male mentorship relationship would seem to have more impact if the mentor were of the same race as the student. The isolation that Black males experience at predominantly White institutions is reinforced by the absence of African American male faculty/mentors. Based on the responses from these study participants, it can be assumed that the participants experienced difficulty in forming relationships with White faculty. The participants' reported reservations about admitting difficulties to White faculty because of the fear of being perceived as academically underprepared for college may also be an indication that they may feel that they do not belong. Participants stated that they found it easier to approach African American faculty because of their shared life experiences. Hiring more African American faculty was viewed by all participants as critical. Because of the low African American enrollment on the University of Texas at Austin campus and the low number of African American faculty members, Black males often find themselves lacking formal and informal support groups. The participants seemed to counter this absence of support by creating peer support groups on their own. The participants described how they depended on their peers for support both socially and academically. One could postulate that the difficulty in forming relationships with White peers may have been one of the reasons for

creating a peer-to-peer support system; the other may have been that such a system was considered essential to their survival.

Research Question 3: Findings

Research question 3 asked, *What is the perceived influence of African American male mentorship on the African American male's academic success?*

1. African American male mentorship did not have a high impact on the success of these seven young men.

2. A common theme from the interviews with these young men was that African American males could be successful without adult Black males playing a major role in their tutelage.

3. The interviews conducted in this study indicated that, with a solid overall support system, Black males can achieve success both personally and academically.

4. Upon the realization that Black male mentorship does not play a significant role in achievement for some African American men, the focus of the question shifts from the perceived influence and impact of African American male mentorship on academic success and matriculation to the general lack of African American male mentors, particularly on the campuses of institutions of higher education.

5. Of the seven young men interviewed, only four had been raised with a male figure in their lives. Of those four, only two reported that their fathers had played a pivotal role in their life in general and in their academic success by challenging them academically. The other two participants with male figures in their lives considered that they had been successful without the influence of a male role model.

6. Although it might be assumed that the other four participants, raised in single-parent households, could have been influenced negatively by the lack of an African American male role model, the responses from the participants without an African American male role model did not support that assumption.

7. The participants who were raised in single-parent households seemed to have others who served as mentors in support systems that did not include a male role model.

8. It was agreed by the participants that, although it is not necessary that mentors on campus or in life be of the same race as the mentee, it is helpful for the mentor to understand "where the mentee is coming from." This would indicate that a match of race between mentor and mentee could be an advantage.

9. Overall, whether these African American males were utilizing a formal or informal support system, the perceived support seemed to have a significant influence on their ability to enter and continue in college.

10. All but one of the participants stated that they were satisfied with their support systems, which they described as having a significant influence on their academic performance.

11. The findings in this study were not consistent with research reviewed in Chapter II. While Foster and Peele (1999) discussed factors that proved effective in the success of Black males in education, one being the presence of African American male teachers, this study did not support but validated the notion of the positive influence of support systems in general.

Several participants mentioned programs on campus that had been particularly helpful upon their arrival to campus. One remarked, "I would love to see [organizations such as SAAB] grow more and influence more people." The participants stated that the programs that discussed stereotypes and racial issues openly and candidly were the most effective. However, some participants were less than enthusiastic about the institution's motivations for offering specialized services for the African American male student. A common theme from the interviews with these young men was that African American males can be academically successful without adult Black males playing a major role in their tutelage. The interviews conducted in this study indicated that, with a solid overall support system, Black males can achieve high levels of success at high levels, both personally and academically.

Concluding Remarks

Faculty mentorship is important for young Black males. Administrative support of mentorship programs within an institution of higher education is necessary for the success of such programs. Many of the participants gave credit to the University for providing a range of programs aimed at their acceptance on campus. However, it is interesting that none of the participants mentioned a faculty-student mentorship program as a part of those services. In fact, Jesse stated that he wished he would have met a person like the researcher, who could have assisted him in his freshman and sophomore years on campus. "If someone could have just said, 'Jesse, take your time, just take 12 hours in your freshman year and then extend it up to 15 hours in your sophomore year and 15 hours as your junior year.'" Although many institutions of higher education have guidance counselors to assist with course scheduling and other academic issues, students often feel more comfortable in discussing more personal or individual academic problems with people with whom they can build rapport.

The participants cited a couple of effective characteristics of mentors or aspects of support systems that were consistent with those reported in the literature as effective in a mentoring program: (a) formal and informal support groups, and (b) matching by racing in mentoring programs. Faison (1995) cited several criteria for mentoring programs:

(a) the functions of mentors that meet the needs of African American undergraduate students, depending on the students' stage of collegiate career; (b) the most critical commodities that mentees identify needing from their mentors; (c) how the personal mentoring relationship of mentors and mentees impacts the degree and manner in which African American undergraduate students succeed in school; (d) whether African American mentees choose university mentors by attending to their personal characteristics more than activity setting and positional characteristics; (c) whether cultural and interactional differences previously thought to be inhibitors to the formation of successful mentoring relationships between African American students and their university professors on predominantly White campuses are evident among the participants. Several study participants expressed a need for more African American male mentorship, not only on campus but in outside life as well. One participant stated that, if some of his boyhood friends had had a male role model in their lives, they might not be in prison today.

LaVant et al. (1987) offered another perspective on effective mentoring criteria. Based on the observations of the faculty mentoring programs offered at several postsecondary institutions, they asserted that, in order to have an effective mentoring program that promotes and enhances retention, academic achievement, and leadership development in African American men, several factors must be considered. First, the executive leadership within the institution must be genuinely committed to the concept of a formal mentoring program. Second, resources (human and financial) must be allocated for support of the program. Third, a university committee should be established to identify African American male students, upon admission, who might be potential program participants or mentees. Fourth, energetic, compassionate, and dedicated individuals from all fields of expertise and all levels within the university must be selected as mentors. This perspective is consistent with the responses given by participants in the present study.

Mentors can have significant influence all students. One study participant stated that he had chosen his major based on a conversation with a high school teacher. He stated that the teacher had shown interest in him and had complimented him on a paper. The teacher stated that the student should consider engineering because it seemed he had "a head for numbers." Four years later this young man was a senior engineer major holding a 3.11 GPA. The power of mentoring is truly something special, should be regarded as such, and should be utilized more in the culture of higher education concerning African American males.

LaVant et al. (1987) contended that in effective mentoring programs the program coordinator or director should work closely with the university's admissions office and registrar to obtain information related to potential and current program participants. A couple of the participants stated that they were serving as peer mentors and commented that identifying potential students at registration could be an effective method of "scouting" peer mentors. This was based on the observation that students tend to relate to students of the same age and experiences. They asserted that a training program must be developed for faculty and staff who are selected to serve in the program. For initial and continued success of the program, external (local) community support for the program must be established by marketing the program to community leaders, business affiliates,

and educators. Based on reports by several participants that they attributed their academic success to a variety of people in their lives who had provided a support system, it is reasonable to involve community and business people to serve as mentors and role models. Finally, an effective mentoring program should contain an evaluation component to assist with modifications and improvements. The researchers stressed that an unbiased assessment and evaluation of all phases of the program must be an ongoing process, since redesign can be expected and a program may be ignored or eliminated for lack of objective documentation regarding its effectiveness.

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