

# **Support Structures: Challenges and Potential Solutions Toward Persistence in Earning a Baccalaureate Degree for Black Male Students Attending Predominantly White Institutions**

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*Recent studies show 34.1% of Black males in the United States completed their undergraduate degree compared to nearly double that of their White counterparts. A growing body of research exists indicating the need to further investigate the scope and level of support structures currently present for first-year, Black male undergraduate students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). PWIs are failing to implement programs and supports necessary to confront these issues among the Black males attending their schools. This study will investigate impact of the current level of support Black males receive relative to the challenges they face attending PWIs.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past two decades the rate of Black males who graduate from college has steadily declined. Research suggests that Black males, in particular, are failing to meet the rigors (academic, individual and social) of college life at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Harper (2013) reported that only 34.1% of Black males in the United States completed their Bachelor's degree compared to more than double that for White males. A PWI is defined as an institution of higher learning where White students make up at least 50% of the total student population (Harper, 2013). Recent studies have shown that many PWIs are not prepared to support these students' needs due to lack of understanding of their specific needs and effective resources for their personal and academic growth and success (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Support structures could include academic assistance, such as peer-to-peer tutoring, providing faculty and staff professional development on cultural sensitivity, recruitment and retention of a culturally diverse faculty and staff, more remedial student support in math and literacy, minority student campus and community networking resources, and purposeful student-to-student social opportunities (Harper, 2013). A review of the literature was conducted to gain a better understanding of how present support structures influence Black male student persistence to graduation.

Currently, the percentage of Black male students who graduate from PWIs with a 4-year degree are at record lows across the United States (Palmer, Moore, Davis, & Hilton, 2010). The current body of literature focuses primarily on the disconnect between Black males and their lack of preparation for the rigors of college life. However, less focus has been placed on identifying the specific needs of Black male students and ways to adequately address those needs. Also, the literature does not offer much insight into what PWIs are doing to be more proactive in their engagement and retention of the vast majority of Black males who attend their universities (Strayhorn, 2015). As a result, this paper will investigate the major challenges Black male students face when attending PWIs, particularly in their first year of study, through

the perspectives of educational leadership, economics, and sociology. More specifically, an educational leadership perspective will examine how the policies, decisions, and awareness of leaders at the institutional level impact the experience of Black males on PWI campuses. Then, an economic perspective will provide information on how the lack of educated and skilled Black males in the national and global markets directly and indirectly affects loan debt, income levels, and revenue. Furthermore, the sociological perspective documents the many mental disparities that exist as impediments for Black males toward their overall success. In addition, the many negative social representations present in the media and other venues about Black males serve as barriers to potential inclusion measures.

The ethical considerations for this topic include the notions of the Ethics of Justice and the Ethics of Care. Justice, in this context, gives a structure to the responsibility of educators to make decisions that provide all students with the quality of leadership and education they deserve as human beings. Leadership decisions should be rooted in fairness and equality among students on campus. Care, in this context should be the cornerstone of education and used as a basis for addressing ethical dilemmas. In addition, the notion of civic responsibility is worth mentioning as it relates to educators addressing social issues as democratic leaders. Therefore, the complex question is, "What are the specific challenges of Black male students attending PWIs, and are PWIs meeting those needs to increase their persistence and graduation rates?"

### **Educational Leadership Perspective**

Student persistence and degree attainment in college have been topics of increasing importance over the past few years (Wood, 2012). In 2009, President Obama pledged plans to increase the number of community college graduates by five million students by the year 2020 (Wood, 2012). This has served to raise national attention to not only the community college's role, but the role of colleges and universities in general, in educating graduates needed for the U.S. to compete in a global market economy (Wood, 2012, p. 1). "In particular, much criticism has centered on the dismal success rates of minority male students, particularly Black male students, who view college as a mechanism for upward social and economic mobility despite outcomes which suggest the opposite" (Wood, 2012, p. 2). Furthermore, some have even criticized many of these institutions for providing Black males with an access point, but failing to offer adequate support for their success (Wood, 2012). Findings suggest that a student's interpretation of, and reaction to, the stressors associated with institutional setting determined level of success (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

The research highlights the claim that Black males who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) academically and socially outgain their same-race peers attending PWIs whom often experience microaggressions, which are added obstacles usually not present at HBCUs (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). By emphasizing these issues PWI higher education administrators, and faculty can have a point of reference with regard to the quality and impact of the education they provide to Black males. Perhaps a look at the resources used to support Black males at HBCUs can offer insight into a successful model for PWIs.

According to Museus (2011) of those who enroll in a 4-year college or university roughly 59% of White students earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years, while less than 40% of Black students achieve their undergraduate degree in the same time. From a leadership standpoint, some key reasons exist that contribute to the challenges Black males face when they enter college at a PWI, particularly in their first year, as well as the challenges many of these institutions face with providing the support these students need to progress in higher education. A large body of evidence supports the notion that many students of color (in particular, Black males) face challenges connecting to the culture of PWIs, which often results in them feeling alienated, marginalized, and unwelcome (Allen, 1992; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Park, 2009, as cited in Museus, 2011).

Museus & Quaye (as cited in Museus, 2011) analyzed the research from 30 students of color at a PWI and found those students who grew up in cultures that were different from those on their campuses, experienced cultural dissonance, which can be summed up as tension or stress developed as a result of the difference between the student's home and campus culture. In and of itself, cultural dissonance, sets in

motion specific challenges for Black males that often impedes their progress from the outset. These challenges are especially difficult for any freshman college student to contend with while also trying to navigate the ebb and flow of college life, only to add another layer of cultural norms and expectations to overcome.

Moreover, other scholars have conducted studies over the past decade into the issue of Black male student success in higher education. According to one study, a large percentage of Black males have faced challenges across different fields of study such as the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) domains. Strayhorn, Long, Kitchen, Williams & Stentz (2013) assert that historically underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities (i.e., African Americans) have experienced barriers to their success in STEM related fields. African Americans, in particular, have lower degree attainment rates, switch to non-STEM majors more frequently, and experience unique social challenges when compared to their White and Asian Pacific Islander counterparts.

Likewise, Strayhorn (2015) provides persuasive evidence that hostility toward Black males on many college campuses continues to be an important issue that affects perceptions of a chilly climate and unwelcoming campus environments. In fact, Strayhorn et al. (2013) maintains the lack of Black male student success has been attributed to academic and cultural isolation, lack of peer support, and poor student-faculty relationships. Brooks, Jones & Burt (2012) note that the research on African Americans who attend PWIs concluded that university administrators, faculty and staff fail to identify problems affecting African Americans on campus. The research goes on to strongly suggest that studying and evaluating factors affecting African American's (Black males in particular) success at PWIs would help college and university retention staffs better understand the unique obstacles facing many of these students and consequently improve their overall experience. Support structures such as mentoring programs for Black male students, ongoing faculty and staff professional development, curriculum development, creating and fostering a sense of cultural awareness and community on campus can go a long way in helping Black males adjust and succeed at college life (Strayhorn et al., 2013). Mentorship, which is viewed as paramount to overall success, was also supported in the literature as being essential to supporting Black males. In one study, more than half of the Black male students who participated identified a mentor as somebody who helped them at a critical point in their journey toward obtaining their degree (Warde, 2008).

On another level Brooks et al. (2012) indicate that many Black male students who enroll at PWIs experienced lower academic achievement because they had lower academic aspirations and, therefore, were doubtful about their choice to complete a degree program (Brooks et al., 2012). Another factor pertains to the often poor relationships between faculty and Black male students who attend PWIs. Wood (2012) identified that frequent and meaningful interactions between Black males and their professors had a significant impact on their rate of persistence. However, the research indicated that Black males are far less likely to initially engage faculty about academic matters when compared to their White counterparts. For those Black male students who experienced positive in-class interactions, there was more likelihood of greater academic commitment (Wood, 2012). Brooks et al. (2012) concluded their research with the notion that university administrators, faculty, and staff continually fail to identify the problems that affect Black males on campus, which serves as an indicator to many of these students that there is little to no focus on addressing their particular needs.

Moreover, stereotypes and media images often depict Black males in a negative outlook (e.g., aggressive, poorly educated, and prone to violence), and the adverse impact from many of these images are often detrimental to the overall experience of Black males attending many PWIs (Woldoff, Wiggins, & Washington, 2011). Researchers note that terms such as endangered, uneducable, dysfunctional, and dangerous are often used to describe Black males (Palmer et al., 2010). Many of these issues, if identified and mitigated through effective (i.e., ongoing faculty and staff training and student engagement) leadership, could be addressed and appropriately managed to the benefit of this student population.

At the same time, Davies & Zarifa (2011) discuss the institutional inequalities that exist which impede many disadvantaged groups (e.g., Black males) from persisting to graduation in higher education. Their study found that disadvantaged groups, in general, are entering college in greater numbers than in

past decades, however, due to inequalities in resources made available based on socioeconomic status (SES), the degree to which students have been applying and graduating college has not reduced the inequalities in attaining an undergraduate degree. At a basic level, the study found that the “dual process” of expansion and inequality happens at the individual and structural level, whereby a system for historically advantaged groups is in place characterized by better access to resources that support their learning and achievement (Davies Zarifa, 2011, p. 142). As a result, two terms emerged from the research that provide a context for how many PWIs fail to adequately support students of color (e.g., Black males). “Maximally maintained” inequality and “effectively maintained” inequality describe the process of creating the tiers of access to educational resources which are provided accordingly based on socioeconomic status, and exist primarily in institutions of higher learning across the United States and Canada (Davies & Zarifa, 2011). Scholars explain maximally maintained inequality as the ability of advantaged groups to move up to more advanced levels of education at the expense of those in the lower tier (i.e., marginalized groups), who (resulting from educational disparities at the school level) receive subpar support at these institutions (Davies & Zarifa, 2011). Consequently, this process of effectively maintained inequality has far-reaching effects on the outcomes of educational achievement, as well as the economic prospects (i.e., jobs, income level, and livelihood) of marginalized students.

### **Economic Perspective**

There are several factors to consider when identifying the economic impact of the current state of Black males in higher education. According to Harper (2013), much of the previous research has framed this population of young men in a perpetually negative light, often focusing on their lack of achievement in lieu of the academic and social gains many Black males have made despite the hurdles they have had to overcome at PWIs. The majority of studies often depict Black male students as underprepared to meet the rigors of college life (Harper, 2013). From an economic standpoint, this deficit model of depiction has served to create a view of Black males as all having the same issues relative to their skill level, available resources, and background when they arrive on PWI campuses. For example, the research shows that although a large number of Black males may share similar financial challenges, the scope and degree of those challenges are not always the same (Jackson & Reynolds, 2013).

Through the accessibility of federal grants and student loans, many Black males are able to overcome the financial burden of college at least from the outset. The problem surfaces when these students do not finish college due to the myriad of social and academic (e.g., isolation, lack of mentorship, poor peer and faculty/staff relations) challenges (Strayhorn, 2015). Although, better access to loans serve to level racial and economic inequality, the results have not produced intended outcomes. Jackson & Reynolds (2013) assert that student loans were (in part) designed to meet the needs of disadvantaged racial groups with fewer resources than their White counterparts. However, results have shown that despite these efforts, Black students’ (particularly Black males) persistence rates have not increased as significantly as hoped over the past two decades.

Consequently, after many of these students drop out, they often find themselves in debt for exorbitant amounts of money, without a college degree, and their job and career prospects extremely limited. In addition to taking out student loans, many Black males need to work to supplement their college related living expenses, which researchers indicate has a negative effect on their persistence rates (Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014). The ability to pay for college is a major factor influencing the success of Black men. The increasing cost of college is forcing students of color to rely more heavily on loans, and while the loans help, they do not cover the total costs associated. Working in and of itself is not the problem, rather it is the substantial number of hours these students need to work, in addition to full time studies that hinders their success (Palmer et al., 2014).

As a result, a growing number of scholars have called for the government to enact systemic interventions that would help students who cannot afford college by reauthorizing the Higher Education Act. For instance, policies that stabilize tuition and address the lack of adjustments to need-based aid will go a long way in helping Black males tackle the financial cost of higher education (Palmer et al., 2010). Furthermore, if the United States is to maintain and build upon its position in the global economy,

devising ways to promote access and success for Black males must be a top priority (Palmer et al., 2010). Ultimately, student debt is an issue that affects a vast majority of students, but Black students are particularly vulnerable often due to the lack of support they receive in college. Statistics show that over 80% of Black students (nearly double that of Black males versus Black females) graduate with debt compared to just over 60% of White students (Shapiro, Meschede & Osoro, 2013).

Equally important, in their study on increasing participation and persistence of African American males in higher education, Palmer et al. (2010) illustrate the impact that dismal rates of college completion of this population has on the U.S. and global economy. Their research focused on the lack of representation of Black males in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematic (STEM) fields, citing the failure of the U.S. education system to meet the needs of Black males academic and social needs particularly in high school and in their first year of college. "Research has shown that the U.S. has historically been less responsive and supportive to the needs of African Americans in many social institutions, particularly education" (Harvey & Harvey, 2005; Harvey, 2008; Levin et al., 2007; Moore & Owens, as cited in Palmer et al., 2010). On a positive note, studies have shown that improving educational experiences and the quality of education that Black males receive will boost our economy from a domestic outlook, as well as increase our economic position on a global scale (Palmer, et al., 2010). Furthermore, improving the educational outcomes of Black males and improving their access to an educational experience that meets their specific needs is a matter of equity. In like manner, scholars have determined that educational attainment is one of the greatest indicators of economic success. McElroy & Andrews (2000) surmise that with higher levels of education, one has greater access to jobs with increased pay, benefits, and security. Not to mention, the economic impact of degree completion for Black males, noting that there is a higher percentage of Black males who complete high school than those who finish college, so the push seems even greater for PWIs to create ways to support these students to their full potential.

In their analysis of the economic benefits of closing the educational achievement gap, Lynch & Oakford (2014) posit that the gains would not only increase the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but also tax revenues. For example, closing the racial educational achievement gap would shift Social Security tax contributions by more than \$800 billion by the year 2050. In addition, it could provide much needed support for national healthcare (Lynch & Oakford, 2014).

Turner (2016) argues for the move to more racial equity in education, where one's race is no longer a factor in the distribution of opportunity and support, would remove many of the economic barriers that exist. Therefore, allowing marginalized groups (e.g., Black males) to achieve at their full potential and productivity. This increase in opportunity and support would not only benefit these students, but communities and the economy as a whole. Educational attainment has been shown to be linked with better job prospects for minorities in general. Currently, people of color are earning approximately 30% less than non-Hispanic Whites (Turner, 2016). From another perspective, if the average incomes of minorities were raised to the average incomes of Whites, total U.S. earnings would increase by 12%, which is nearly \$1 trillion (Turner, 2016, p. 12). The research makes a strong case for improvement of support structures at the institutional level for PWIs, in particular for Black males, who are at the bottom tier with regard to persistence rates at the college level.

Lynch & Oakford (2014) proclaim that over the past decade, the rising income and wealth inequality has had a detrimental impact on communities of color, particularly low-income Blacks with a decrease of nearly 50% in household wealth, which has made longstanding inequalities in education even worse. Having knowledge is power and being aware of the economic condition of many Black male students puts PWIs in a position to be proactive about how to help these young men succeed in their schools. Providing a more viable financial system (e.g., scholarships, better access to subsidized tuition) for these students in particular helps create solid pathways to their achievement. Turner (2016) states that the social and economic forces that influence opportunities for achievement are interconnected and reinforcing. Not surprisingly, people who are better educated tend to live healthier lives, earn more income, and have an overall better quality of life. There are multiple benefits to a baccalaureate education, which include enhanced career mobility and security,

social networks, marketable skills, and personal and professional aptitudes (Nevarez and Wood, 2010, as cited in Palmer et al., 2014).

A college education is not a guarantee to a great life, but studies show that those who have a college education are often in a better position to obtain the type of life that broadens their economic prospects. For that reason, it is essential for PWIs to help the Black males on their campuses in every way possible, so that they have the encouragement to persist to completion. Indeed, many Black males deal with the brunt of these factors, and at the college level, they can often develop a mindset which is counterproductive to their success in academia. Socially, feelings of isolation and financial stress can cause a myriad of issues for these young men. Providing a network of support can help these students feel less isolated and more in control of their outcomes. Anecdotal data from Black male students indicate their desire for better relations from peers, faculty and staff at PWIs, and their willingness to persist when they feel valued and heard (Palmer et al., 2014).

### **Sociological Perspective**

In order to put this topic in perspective from a sociological context, the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is appropriate as a means to provide a framework for discussion. Critical Race Theory combines progressive struggles for racial justice with critiques of the conventional legal and scholarly norms which are themselves viewed as part of the illegitimate hierarchies that need to be changed (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT scholars, most of whom are themselves persons of color, challenge the ways that race and racial power are constructed by law and culture. One key focus of critical race theorists is a regime of White supremacy and privilege maintained despite the rule of law and the constitutional guarantee of equal protection of the laws. Agreeing with critical theorists, the law itself is not a neutral tool but instead part of the problem, critical race scholars identify inadequacies of conventional civil rights and education. (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT can be specifically applied to the issue of Black male student achievement in higher education at PWIs, in the sense that historically the amount of resources and facilities present in many communities of color, with regard to access to quality education, have been subpar (Harper, 2013). These factors have in large part, created a cycle of poorly educated students with minimal opportunities for success. Many of these young men often see college as being out of their league, and the Black men who do apply to college often drop out or have negative experiences due to the lack of knowledge of many institutions to support them in relevant ways (Strayhorn et al., 2013).

Expanding CRT beyond law to advocate for a paradigm shift in education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) in their path-breaking research, posit that the absence of quality educational supports for students of color (Black males, in particular) in America's schools has created a cycle of disparity and inequality among this population of students for decades. Even before Black males enter college many come from grade school systems that punish their attempts at social identity. Instead of support, many Black males are suspended or expelled from school for what is termed "non-contact violations"—wearing banned items of clothing such as hats and jackets, or wearing these items in an "unauthorized" manner, such as backwards or inside out" (Ladson-Billing & Tate, p. 52). By the time many of these students enter college at a PWI, they are, in many cases, entering at a disadvantage on a social, economic, and academic scale. The tenets of CRT call for programs and interventions that focus on supporting Black male students based on their specific needs, rather than from a one-size-fits-all (aka multiculturalism) perspective (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Critical Race Theory is an appropriate framework for this topic, due to its focus on many of the issues that concern people of color in the fields of social science, and equity in education. Critical Race Theory addresses the inequity of public education in this country with respect to people of color. For instance, in academic tracking, poor and minority students are likely to be placed at the lowest levels of the school's scoring system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), putting these students at a disadvantage from the outset, and ultimately reinforcing a deficit mindset or belief, contributing to their low persistence rates (Palmer et al, 2010). Studies conducted about CRT maintain that it is the very structure of the education system in America that impedes progress toward supports that encourage and enhance the success of Black male students specifically as a group in higher education. As a result, Critical Race Theory scholars

unabashedly reject a paradigm that attempts to be everything to everyone and consequently becomes nothing to anyone, allowing the status quo to prevail” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

However, another important point of inquiry stemming from the research is the notion that some Black males, despite their challenges, are able to forge ahead successfully as a result of effective support from others and by adopting the concept of Grit and Growth Mindset. Duckworth (2014) summarizes this theory as a person possessing character traits (e.g., self-motivation, determination, resourcefulness, and sustained discipline toward a long-term goal) that, if nurtured and encouraged can be applied to overcoming obstacles (i.e., new environments and challenges). Embedded within this concept is the notion of resilience. Several scholars including Yeager & Dweck (2012) discuss how challenges are “ubiquitous,” and the need for educators to promote resilience as essential for student success in school.

Students who believe (or are taught) that intellectual abilities are qualities that can be developed (as opposed to qualities that are fixed) tend to show higher achievement across challenging school transitions” and greater course completion rates in challenging courses in general. Duckworth (2014) posits that the “gritty” individual approaches achievement as a marathon, having the advantage of stamina. As a result, studies show that when minority students (Black males, in particular) are able to be supported individually based on their needs persistence rates to degree completion increase. (Warde, 2008). For many Black male students, a sense of self-motivation often stems from the foundational support they receive from their family and other networks. According to Warde (2008), family support is likely the most critical contributor to helping African American male students successfully overcome some of the obstacles to academic and social success.

Although, some recent studies indicate that persistence and completion rates at 4-year colleges and universities have been increasing over the past decade, there continues to be disparities based on race and ethnicity. In particular, the degree completion rates of many African American students (Black males, in particular) continue to fall significantly behind White students (DuBois-Barber, 2012). For many Black males, establishing relationships and maintaining engagement on PWI campuses continues to be challenging, and compared to their White peers, are more likely to develop perceptions of a racially hostile environment on campus (DuBois-Barber, 2012). These perceptions can present a great deal of difficulty for Black males as they attempt to navigate their undergraduate years in school.

Alternatively, Tuitt (2012) found that when other Black faculty and staff were present at PWIs, Black males were more likely to initiate an interaction, as well as build and maintain positive relations. Meanwhile, the absence of racially diverse faculty and staff was a major concern for Black males, especially in their first year of college. As a result of being a historically marginalized group, Black males at the collegiate level can often develop coping mechanisms (e.g., assimilation) to attempt success in school. For some coping helps, but it also perpetuates a state of being that sociologist and scholar, W.E.B. DuBois, coined as “double consciousness,” referring to the two-ness of African Americans—being both an American and an African American. DuBois describes this phenomenon as one attributed specifically to African Americans, primarily stemming from the effects of slavery and segregation (Brannon, Taylor, & Markus, 2015).

Double consciousness, for many African Americans, continues to be fueled by contemporary racial disparities, as well as a continuing legacy of prejudice, discrimination, and inequality (Brannon et al., p. 586). Furthermore, this two-ness influences the lived experiences of African Americans in complex and varied ways. For example, many African American students at PWIs try to assimilate into the culture of their surroundings, often disassociating with the culture and norms in which they grew up. In essence, there are two cultures that exist—mainstream American and African American. These two cultures, for African Americans, shape their daily lives, and define their interactions within their same-race group as well as outside of that group, too.

From the perspective of many Black male students, interactions on PWI campuses support DuBois’ theory of double consciousness. Some of these interactions take the form of microaggressions which occur between these students and their White peers and/or college and university faculty and staff (Huber & Zolorzano, 2014). The concept of microaggressions can be used as a tool to help identify the often subtle (conscious and unconscious) acts of racism, discrimination that emerge in schools, on college

campuses, classrooms, and everyday conversations. By identifying microaggressions and their sources, institutions can begin to educate themselves as well as students on more effective ways to address these situations and create a more inclusive environment for Black males and other marginalized student populations.

These and other forms of institutional racism, as Huber & Zolorzano (2014) contend, must be understood as formal or informal structural mechanisms, which should be identified and systematically eradicated from university policies and procedures. Ultimately, “without a structural understanding of the racism that manifests in the everyday lives of people of color, it remains an elusive concept that becomes difficult to ‘see’ in any tangible way” (Huber & Zolorzano, 2014, p. 7).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The discussion around the complex question, “What are the specific challenges of Black male students attending PWIs, and are PWIs meeting those needs to increase their persistence and graduation rates?” is indeed multilayered. The research shows that not only do challenges exist for Black males, but it also identifies some of the unique challenges that exist for PWIs as they attempt to meet the needs of these students in particular. Black males have been shown to face difficulties with peer-to-peer relationships with their White classmates, feelings of isolation, poor faculty interactions, as well as academic and other social disparities. In conjunction, PWIs are tasked with creating a welcoming environment, providing a well-trained and competent faculty and staff, and giving students an experience which prepares them for a meaningful life after college. In this sense, both Black male students and the PWIs they attend have a duty to each other as student and educator.

As educational establishments, PWIs have an ethical responsibility not only to Black males, but to every student on their campuses. Shapiro & Gross (2008) discuss how the Ethics of Justice and the Ethics of Care are two crucial perspectives that should be used by educational leaders when they are attempting to build a community within their institutions. Ethics of Justice pertains to the laws, rights, and policies that are part of our history as a democracy. The characteristics of these entities are defined by their commitment to freedom for humanity, and should guide educational leaders as they make decisions that respect the equality and individuality of all people (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). Furthermore, the Ethics of Justice allows for incrementalism (i.e., stages) in its approach, which is a factor that could help PWIs to build on the solutions that are working to help Black males (e.g., faculty/staff mentorship, curriculum inclusivity, and dispelling stereotypes) and create a thriving, encouraging environment for them.

There is a great concern to make schools just, to provide equality and educational opportunity, but also to educate so that students emerge as competent citizens of the world (Kohlberg, 1981, as cited in Shapiro & Gross, 2008). The Ethics of Justice calls on educators to view being just as a moral principal, and as such, being just should be reflected in the policies, procedures, and mission of the institution governing all students (Shapiro & Gross, 2008, p. 22). Likewise, the Ethics of Care, according to Shapiro & Gross (2008) claim that caring is based on a society that highly values and nurtures personal relationships. Institutions of higher learning have a civic responsibility to the personal well-being of every student attending their school.

Considering this from an ethical standpoint, PWIs must continue to seek out solutions to better support Black males, and enact policies which speak to elevating the experience of these students through academic and social supports beginning with their foundational year as freshmen. Furthermore, care, especially caring in education, is paramount to fostering growth and learning in students. The Ethics of Care is essential to education (Noddings & Gilligan, 1992, as cited in Shapiro & Gross, 2008). “Caring is the bedrock of all successful education and contemporary schools can be revitalized in its light” (Shapiro & Gross, 2008, p. 27).

### *Integrated Summary*

Until now, much of the research has focused on Black male students and PWIs in terms of the challenges these students face when they enter college, such as disengagement with college courses, feelings of isolation, and a sense of not belonging within the campus community. Apart from this and



information about declining Black male student achievement, little research has been done about the impact of present support structures at PWIs, and what PWIs are doing to be more proactive in supporting Black male students during their freshman year (Strayhorn, 2015). Also, current research fails to adequately establish how Black male students feel about the support they receive while attending PWIs, particularly in their first year of study, as this is the most crucial year to engage many of these students. Additionally, there is a lack of data regarding the impact of current support systems on Black male persistence to graduation from PWIs (Brooks et al., 2012).

A review of the literature provides valuable insight not only into the challenges Black male students face when they attend PWIs, but also some of the challenges PWIs face in effectively meeting the needs of this student population specifically. It also offers a few potential solutions that if implemented, could help these young men better navigate college life and ultimately achieve 4-year degree completion. For example, PWIs could adapt their curriculum so that it is inclusive of content material which speaks to the lived experiences and achievements (historical and contemporary) of people of color. In addition, Black males, in particular have been shown to respond favorably academically and socially when a network consisting of mentors, same-race peers, and faculty relationships are present and made part of their overall experience. Also, interventions should include comprehensive integration of faculty and staff professional development centered on presenting knowledge of the specific needs of Black males, as well as methods of inclusion that work to support these students is paramount for PWIs.

Taking into account the economic impact of increasing support structures for Black males, the research shows that supporting these students in meaningful ways helps their persistence and graduation prospects, in addition to the national and international market economy. Both educational leadership and economic perspectives are informed by the sociological perspectives of Black males themselves, as well as PWI administration, faculty, and staff. For instance, a large percentage of Black males who develop feelings of isolation and cultural dissonance in their first few weeks of arriving on many PWI campuses can often trigger some of the sociological behaviors (e.g., double-consciousness). In turn, the lack of support from school leadership exacerbates the problem, which has a direct (e.g., low graduation rates) and indirect impact (e.g., lack of future job prospects) on the economy due to the lack of significant skill-ready Black male presence in the global market.

Highlighting this issue will benefit not only Black males who attend PWIs, but other marginalized groups on campus, university communities (e.g., faculty and staff) and their inclusion efforts, as well as higher education prospects (i.e., recruitment, curriculum enrichment, and campus-wide inclusivity) in general. All in all, from the literature, there seems to be a lack of proactive effort on the part of PWIs to provide holistic support structures that meet the specific needs of Black males from a cultural as well as academic standpoint. As a result, the current body of literature focuses primarily on the gaps that exist between Black males and their preparedness for the rigors of university life, rather than implementing potential systemic solutions that may help remedy this epidemic. Moreover, the body of research on this issue is lacking and to date, contains gaps that have not been addressed with regard to the root causes of the dismal number of Black males who persist to bachelor degree completion at PWIs across the country (Strayhorn, et al., 2013).

Although, the literature contained insightful research about this topic, some of the limitations consisted of identifying the specific deficits of Black male students when they arrive to college, and many studies did not establish the specific reasons why PWIs have not better addressed the needs of this student population in meaningful ways. This indicates a major need for PWIs to rethink their approach to supporting Black males and instead of operating from a deficit model, begin to capitalize on the skills and potential these students already have and finding specific ways of identifying their needs and creating programming and interventions around those needs.

While conducting research on this topic, this writer was made aware of the individual and same-race group challenges Black male students face attending PWIs. Some of the issues seemed evident at the beginning, and a few of the root causes were highlighted in the literature, which put the disconnect between Black males and their experience at PWIs in better context. Future research should continue to investigate how this population is being supported and ways that educators can begin to break through

decades of failed policies and assumptions, meet these students where they are academically and socially, and offer support that elevates and enriches the experience of Black male students as they enter the doors of PWIs across the country.

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