



Understanding the Black Male Student Experience and Promoting their Success

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Introduction

Concerned with the academic struggles of Black male students at the national level and in our local context, California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) embarked on an effort to explore firsthand how our Black male students experience and navigate the academic environment, campus life, and the university in general. Relying primarily on focus groups, this inductive, qualitative study revealed valuable information on Black male students' impressions of the campus climate, obstacles faced, persistence strategies, existing resources, and needs to be addressed. Our effort took a multi-divisional collaborative approach, engaging Academic Affairs and Student Affairs in interpreting the findings, identifying strategies to make these students' voices heard on campus, and seeking strategies to promote their academic and personal success. Ultimately, it is our hope to develop interventions that are guided by theory, informed by campus specific data, and situated in unique institutional culture.

Research Questions

- How do students' subjective experience with race and gender shape their perceptions and experiences within the campus environment?
- What do men of color identify as primary challenges to persistence as well sources of support in their academic persistence?
- What are the individual level persistence strategies that men of color utilize in their academic persistence?

Methodology

Participants: The CSUF Student Success Dashboard was used to identify students reporting as male, and Black or African American that enrolled as either a direct entry or transfer in fall 2013, 2014, or 2015. Those 144 students were invited through email to participate in the study. Utilizing a snowball recruitment strategy, initial study participants were asked to recruit additional study participants. A total of 32 Black male students participated.

Data Collection: Multiple focus group sessions were conducted by Dr. Elvira Abrica once in the fall 2015 semester and twice in the spring 2016 semester (early and late), following a longitudinal design to capture changes in perceptions. A total of 16 focus groups were held on campus in private, centrally located meeting spaces. Each focus group met for 60-90 minutes. All focus group meetings were recorded and transcribed.

Analysis: Transcripts of all focus groups were reviewed and thematic categories were established by a lead analyst within Academic Affairs. Transcripts were then coded into thematic categories and independently reviewed by a second analyst in Student Affairs. No discrepancies in coding were found. Findings were shared with entire research team for final comments and thematic categories were placed into three broad categories.

Discussion

The research team has been strategically disseminating the findings through targeted presentations to key personnel throughout the University. Dr. Vincent Harris, director of the Male Success Initiative at CSUF, is the action agent for disseminating the findings to our campus community. These groups include leadership teams and committees in both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. During several reflection breaks throughout the presentation, attendees are prompted to take an action-oriented mindset by writing down their ideas for supporting our Black male students. The goal is for these stories to inspire campus leadership, faculty, and staff to take initiative within their purview to create change.

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- Focus Group Participants for placing their trust in CSUF to share their stories.

Findings



Where I Come From
First Impression of CSUF

“...the majority of people I know are Black...”

“I’ve grown up in a lot of different places...”


“I’ve always lived in White communities or Latino communities.”

“I think it does something to you. Now here you’re trying to learn but sometimes in the back of your head there’s other noise going on about you’re the only Black dude in the class...”

“Where are all the Black people at? Ah, oh. I’m the only one.”

“They advertise a lot that they’re the most diverse Cal State and things, but when you get here it’s like ‘Uh, I don't really feel that way.’”

“It felt overwhelming... not because of the size of campus, but just because of that overall feeling of just going to college...”



What I Face

“...you’re either White washed or you’re a hood Black guy... There’s no medium, there’s no perception of people seeing you as just who you are...”

“You shouldn't even say nothing. You shouldn't even be here. That's how I'm feeling...”

“Are you about to be the ghetto Black guy or are you going to come off as a smart, intelligent one?”

“We definitely get that stereotype of you’re an angry Black person.”

“I felt like I was being discredited, not because of what I was saying, but probably because of what I look like and who I was.”



How I Persist
Support I Need

“It would be cool if I had somebody to look up to that kind of looked like me.”

“...she goes around each table and she interacts with us. That right there is what I need, interaction.”

“How is my grade going to be affected? I have to look at the do's and don'ts.”

“You’re a culture on campus, you deserve your own voice.”

“I was just looking for a community...”

“... you need to let go of those kinds of things and just focus on what is going to keep you here...”

“Failing doesn't mean that you’re going to fail forever. It just means you have to keep trying at it.”

“...mentorship and advisors and counselors are a great way to help men of color stay in colleges...”

- Presenter/Action Agent: Vincent Harris, Director of Male Success Initiative
- Research Team listed alphabetically: Elvira Abrica, Jyenny Babcock, Yessica De La Torre, Robert Koch, Sunny Moon, Peter Nwosu, Vijay Pendakur, Su Swarat