Creating conditions of mattering to enhance persistence for Black males at an historically Black University.

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Creating Conditions of Mattering to Enhance Persistence for Black Men at an Historically Black University

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ABSTRACT: A strong body of research has documented the supportive environments of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and discussed their impact on facilitating student success. Notwithstanding the consistency of these findings, recent evidence indicates low graduation rates at HBCUs, especially among Black men. Using the voices of four student affairs practitioners and Schlossberg’s theory of marginality and mattering, data from this article suggest that HBCUs could be more proactive in creating conditions of mattering to enhance persistence for Black men. Implications for institutional practice and future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the institutional environments of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and their impact on engendering academic success for Black students (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters, & Strayhorn, 2008; Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006; Kim, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). For example, research has consistently shown that students at HBCUs are immersed in a family-like environment and
have exposure to a wide array of support from faculty, staff, peers, and administrators (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Furthermore, the literature has shown that despite being chronically underfunded in comparison to predominantly White institutional (PWIs) counterparts, HBCUs are equally, if not more effective in contributing to student learning and their academic success (Kim, 2002).

Notwithstanding the consistency of this literature, recent research has emerged about the precarious status of Black men at HBCUs. Specifically, Roach (2001) noted a gender disparity on the campuses of HBCUs in college attendance for Black men and women. While this gender imbalance is not unique among Black students, it is reported to be more severe compared to other racial and ethnic groups. For example, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed while there was an increase in college enrollment for Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians/Pacific Islanders between 1976 and 2008, more females than males enrolled in college. This gender gap is the largest for Black students, with females comprising 64% of Black students enrolled in college (NCES, 2010).

Other researchers have echoed the gender disparity that Roach (2001) reported and indicated that Black men account for a large proportion of those leaving HBCUs before graduation (Harper & Gasman, 2008; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). In fact, Kimbrough and Harper (2006) explained that Black women are graduating from HBCUs at rates two to three times higher than Black men. Interestingly, compared to their PWI counterparts, HBCUs were once considered to be relatively immune from high attrition for Black students (Harper & Gasman, 2008). Nevertheless, similar to PWIs, HBCUs are intently focused on investigating ways to increase the completion rates for Black males. Some have even implemented special programmatic initiatives aimed at increasing Black male persistence (Palmer & Wood, 2012). Using Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of marginality and mattering, the purpose of this article is to provide insight into ways to help increase the Black male completion rate at HBCUs. To situate this study in the extant literature, the subsequent section of this article will review research on HBCUs, focusing particularly on contemporary studies about Black men.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Numerous studies on HBCUs have focused on comparing the experiences and outcomes of Black students attending HBCUs compared to PWIs (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1999; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Kim, 2002; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Kimbrough, Molock, & Walton, 1996; Nelson-Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007; Outcalt & Skewes-Colt, 2002). Indeed, despite the lack of parity in resources between HBCUs and PWIs,
research has overwhelmingly shown that Black students at HBCUs are educated in a family-like environment that promotes racial uplift, empowerment, cultural nourishment, and academic success. Nevertheless, recent research on Black students at HBCUs suggests that Black males and females experience the HBCU environment differently (Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom, & Bowman, 2010). Specifically, Gasman et al. (2010) has argued “... the reality of poor achievement, enrollment, and undergraduate degree completion by [Black] males at HBCUs suggests a gendered effect” (p. 32). Said differently, Black females on the campuses of HBCUs appear to be getting more out of their college experience than Black males (Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011).

Given this issue, there is an urgent need to critically focus on the Black male college experience at HBCUs. Notwithstanding contemporary research on the experiences of Black men at HBCUs is lacking (Davis, 1999; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006). In fact, to date there have been few contemporary studies that have provided insight into the academic and social experiences of Black men at HBCUs.

Some of the contemporary research on Black students has examined gender differences in student engagement and satisfaction. For example, whereas previous research has shown that Black men were more involved on campus and satisfied with their experience than Black women (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Gasman et al., 2010), a quantitative study, involving 1,167 Black undergraduate students at 12 four-year HBCUs, who completed the National Survey of Student Engagement, revealed that gender gaps in engagement and satisfaction have narrowed in recent years (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004). Coincidentally, Harper et al. (2004) indicated “HBCU women no longer lag behind men in their academic and social engagement experiences” (p. 277); thus suggesting that Black male dominance at HBCUs has “subsided considerably” (p. 280).

In a qualitative study, which employed in-depth focus groups with Black male leaders from multiple HBCUs, Kimbrough and Harper (2006) continued to explore the campus experiences of Black males at HBCUs. One critical finding from this study revealed that Black males encountered barriers to interpersonal relationship building. Participants highlighted the difficulties they had forming relationships not only between Black males and females, but also with family and on campus support (e.g., counselors, faculty, and staff). These experiences caused the participants to question whether HBCUs offered a familial environment. According to Kimbrough and Harper (2006), participants observed that they “receive horrible treatment most of the time” (p. 200) at the HBCUs they attended.

Furthermore, a study that Palmer and Young (2009) conducted with Black men at HBCUs revealed the importance between campus involvement and
student success; nevertheless, consistent with research (e.g., Kimbrough & Harper, 2006), participants reported that most of their male peers were disengaged on campus. Interestingly, participants in Palmer and Young’s (2009) study offered that many of the programmatic initiatives that HBCUs used to promote student engagement had little to no interest to this current generation of students. Therefore, they suggested that campus administrators survey students to better understand their interest in order to promote Black male campus involvement.

Other research on the experiences of Black men at HBCUs has shown that the conservative institutional climate of HBCUs has a negative impact on Black male persistence. For example, in a qualitative study involving 76 Black men at 12 HBCUs, Harper and Gasman (2008) discovered that the participants perceived the institutional climates of these institutions to be too conservative, which resulted in an unwelcoming environment. In addition, research on Black men at HBCUs has investigated salient factors promoting their academic success. Ross (1998) explored critical factors important to the retention and persistence of 37 Black men at a private HBCU. Her study revealed that the participants’ relationship with parents, particularly, the mother, support from family, access to positive role models, and religious beliefs were important to their academic success. Palmer, Davis, and Maramba’s (2011) study confirms and extends Ross’s (1998) findings about the critical impact of family support on the success of Black males at HBCUs.

In addition, a qualitative study by Palmer et al. (2009) revealed challenges that threatened to impede the success of the Black male collegians at an HBCU. Poor help-seeking behavior, lack of financial aid, and problems at home were each identified as salient challenges in the lives and undergraduate experiences of the participants. Despite these challenges, with an internal locus of control (Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008) and support from campus agents (Palmer & Gasman, 2008), these participants persisted to graduation.

While the research cited has provided important insight into how Black males experience HBCUs, there is still a scarcity of research on Black men at HBCUs (Palmer & Wood, 2012). To this end, using the voices of four student affairs professionals, who worked closely with faculty on fostering student success, and Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of marginality and mattering, this article provides knowledge about practices important to increasing success for Black men at HBCUs. Indeed, this article enriches HBCU administrators, faculty, and student affairs practitioners’ understanding of salient factors that matter to the success of Black men at HBCUs because unlike many studies (e.g., Harper & Gasman, 2008; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2011), it relies on the voices and experiences of student
affairs practitioners—professionals who work closely and intentionally with students at HBCUs to support their personal development and academic success in- and out-of-the classroom (Hirt et al., 2006, 2008). According to Hirt et al. (2008), student affairs practitioners at HBCUs form institutional guardianships with students. Relationships of this caliber are formed to “retain students so that an educational institution with an explicit mission to advance the [Black] community is sustained” (p. 220). In the following section of our article, we provide an overview of Schlossberg’s concept of marginality and mattering.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Schlossberg’s (1989) concept of marginality and mattering is premised on the precarious nature of life’s transitions. She theorized that as adults transition in life (e.g., entering first grade, college, getting married, or retiring), they are concerned with whether they are able to manage the transition as well as fit into new roles (Schlossberg, 1989). Schlossberg speculated that when an individual transitions into a new role, there is an increased likelihood of feeling marginal, which she defined as lacking a sense of belonging. This sense of marginalization engendered feelings of self-consciousness, which may compromise task performance (Schlossberg, 1989).

Schlossberg (1989) explained that the more dissimilar the new role is from the former role, the more marginal the person may feel, especially if there are no models for the new role. To contextualize her viewpoint, she provided an example of a nontraditional student attending a campus that is largely focused on traditional-aged college students (Schlossberg, 1989). She noted that this student may feel more marginal, especially if there is no guidance or norms to help the student ease into his/her role. Schlossberg (1989) explained that everyone may feel marginal at times given the social context. For example, she delineated that a college freshman, who was once marginal, finds a community on campus, but may feel marginal again upon graduation from college and entering the job market (Schlossberg, 1989).

Schlossberg suggested that mattering is starkly different from marginalization (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering is based on the work of Morris Rosenberg, a sociologist, and involves the feeling of belonging and mattering to others. The sense of mattering includes several postulates: (a) Attention—creating positive relationships with others that promotes feelings of personal worth; (b) Importance—feeling valued and cared about; (c) Ego Extension—feeling that our success or failures matter to someone; (d) Dependence—knowing that there is a reciprocal process between the positive contribution that one makes to the community and what they
receive in return from the community; and (e) Appreciation—feeling appreciated and valued by others (Schlossberg, 1989).

Some researchers have used the concept of mattering to assess the campus climate for students of color in higher education. For example, Gossett, Cuyjet, and Cockriel (1998) used a mattering/marginality survey instrument to measure Black students’ perception of campus climate compared with their non-Black counterparts at four PWIs in the Midwest. They found that Blacks felt marginalized on these campuses and their non-Black counterparts had little awareness of how Black students felt. Furthermore, using Schlossberg’s mattering and marginality, Berger’s concept of membership, and Nora’s concept of “fitting in,” Johnson et al. (2007) measured racial and ethnic students’ sense of belonging at a PWI from a national sample of 2,967 first-year students who participated in the 2004 National Study of Living-Learning Programs. The results of their study revealed that Black, Latino, and Asian Pacific American students felt less of a sense of belonging than their White peers. While researchers have applied Schlossberg’s work on mattering to assess campus climates for students of color at PWIs, in this study, we use Schlossberg’s (1989) work to examine conditions important to fostering retention and persistence among Black men at an HBCU.

METHODOLOGY

Geographic Location

The geographical location of this study was situated in an urban, metropolitan city. More specifically, we conducted this study at a public, doctoral research HBCU in a mid-Atlantic state. At the time of data collection, the university had just been recognized as research-intensive by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. According to the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at this university, approximately 6,000 undergraduates and 857 graduate students were enrolled when data were collected. Approximately 89.6% of the students were Black, and their White, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American counterparts comprised 2.7%, 1.0%, 0.7%, and 0.10%, respectively, of the student population.

Consistent with recent research on HBCUs, which reported that Black women outnumber men in enrollment and completion rates (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer et al., 2009; Roach, 2001), the number of Black male undergraduates enrolling and graduating has consistently lagged behind female undergraduates at this university. For example, data from the OIR indicated that of the 483 Black men admitted to the institution in 2003, 31, or 6%, graduated in their fourth year and 128, or 27%, graduated in six years. On the
other hand, of the 657 Black women admitted in 2003, 120, or 18%, graduated in their fourth year and 265, or 40%, graduated in six years.

Participants

Data for this study was collected through interviews with four student affairs practitioners who worked in a capacity that fell outside of the typical student affairs arena (e.g., residence life, student activities). Specifically, these practitioners were assigned to a specific academic school to work directly with faculty to support and encourage student success. In particular, they worked in tandem with faculty to identify and develop interventions for students performing below academic standards. Additionally, two practitioners served as adjunct faculty members at the university for approximately five years. Given the critical role they played in supporting student success, interviewing the student affairs practitioners was critical to helping HBCUs better understand what mattered to Black male success.

While the university employed six practitioners who worked with faculty in various academic schools to help facilitate student success, using snowball sampling and help from administrators, we recruited four to participate in this study. The practitioners were Black and three of four were women and one was a man. Three practitioners earned degrees from the university in the study. Specifically, two participants earned their bachelor’s degree, and one participant earned both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the institution. Two of the women held PhDs in higher education, one woman held a master’s degree in education, and the man held a bachelor’s degree in social work. Collectively, they had more than 46 years of experience working in student affairs, with a special interest on student retention and persistence.

Data Collection

Each practitioner (referred to here forth as “participants”) was engaged in one face-to-face interview, which ranged from 50 to 60 minutes. Prior to the interviews, participants signed a consent form and completed a brief demographic form. The consent form allowed the participants to engage in the study, and the demographic form allowed the researchers to collect information about the participants’ educational background, age, and number of years they worked in higher education, specifically in their capacity at the institution.

During the interviews, participants were asked about academic and social factors promoting the success of Black men at the institution. Although a standard interview protocol was used to conduct the interviews, discussions often became conversational, which allowed the researcher and participants to
mutually share experiences relevant to the topic of discussion, encouraging deeper reflection among participants. Observations regarding the ways in which participants responded to questions and their willingness to engage in the interview were recorded throughout the process of data collection. More specifically, notes were made about observations of participants’ body language, ease at answering the questions, and willingness to provide depth to their responses. In addition to the individual interviews, one follow up phone interview lasting approximately 10 minutes was necessary to clarify statements the participants made during their initial interviews.

Researchers’ Positionality

For any qualitative study it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). One researcher identifies as a Black man while the second researcher identifies as a Filipina American. While the lead researcher conducted all the interviews, both researchers were involved in data analysis and ensuring the data’s credibility. The researchers are faculty members at a research-intensive PWI and their scholarly interests are similar in that they assess campus climate across institutional types, investigate factors promoting the success for students of color, and examine racial/ethnic disparities in college student outcomes.

The lead researcher was affiliated with the HBCU when data were collected. He became interested in conducting a study on Black men at HBCUs because of the lack of contemporary research on the subject. To this end, he hoped to fill a void in the literature by discussing salient educational and social experiences that mattered to their success.

When the lead researcher conducted the interviews with the participants, he came to the study with a set of biases. First, although he worked as a research assistant and completed his graduate training at this university when data were collected, he was fairly detached from the university’s undergraduate experience. Nevertheless, by serving as a mentor to Black men at the institution, he gained insight into some of the academic problems and challenges facing undergraduate Black men at this institution. Furthermore, due to being immersed in the research literature on HBCUs, he assumed that HBCUs were supportive, family-oriented, and nurturing environments. His experience of interacting with faculty and staff at this HBCU confirmed the literature’s findings. Furthermore, because of his experience of being self-driven, the lead researcher believed that an internal locus of control played a salient role in the success of college students. Notwithstanding, when he conducted the interviews with the participants, he did not broach this perspective.
The second researcher’s interests lie primarily in examining how postsecondary institutions and campus environments (e.g., minority serving institutions) facilitate success of students of color. Her research and involvement in these topics have led her to assume that HBCUs provide a positive environment for Black men, which is conducive to their learning and success. Her experience as a former student affairs professional, who worked closely with racial and ethnic minority undergraduate students, functioned as her impetus for this study. Employing both her prior experience in student affairs and her current role as a faculty member in higher education, she had a keen interest in writing about and analyzing data that specifically involved the perspectives of student affairs practitioners and their engagement in improving the educational outcomes of Black men at HBCUs.

Despite the bias that both researchers brought to this study, they allowed the findings to emerge independently by focusing on the participants’ voices. Member checking and peer debriefers also helped to make certain that the findings were accurately reflective of the participants’ voices.

Data Analyses

We engaged in the constant comparison of data, including reviewing the lead researcher’s memos, observations, and reviewing interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Jones et al. (2006), constant comparative analysis engages the researcher in a process of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously at “all stages of the data collection and interpretation process, and results in the identification of codes” (p. 44). We read through the research notes and made reflective remarks in the margins to help form initial concepts. As the data became increasingly voluminous, we used ATLAS. Ti (5.0), a qualitative data management software program, to organize, manage, and code the data. We used open coding, which involved analyzing the transcriptions line-by-line, to identify themes. The line-by-line coding allowed for emerging thematic categories to surface from the data and become aggregated into response patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Memo writing allowed us to not only refine the categories, but also to understand the relationships among them. Throughout this process we sought data saturation, which is achieved when no new and relevant insights emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although we employed tenets of grounded theory strategies to analyze the data, our goal in this study was not to develop a grounded theory.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

We employed several techniques presented by Merriam (1998) to ensure credibility of the study. For example, we provided thick description so readers
can draw their own conclusions about the transferability of the findings to similar settings and contexts. In addition, providing thick description enables the reader to vicariously experience the participants’ social reality at the institution. Furthermore, we engaged in member checking by returning the transcribed interviews to all participants so they could review transcriptions for accuracy and clarity following the interviews (Jones et al., 2006). In addition, we asked participants to review our interpretations of the data. We used their feedback to enhance the integrity and preserve the authenticity of the participants’ voices (Jones et al., 2006). Lastly, we used feedback from three peer debriefers, who were active researchers on Black men and HBCUs, to ensure credibility.

**FINDINGS**

In this section, we present two themes that capture the study’s key findings, each of which relates specifically to Black men’s sense of mattering at the institution. “Authentic Caring,” the first theme, signifies the emphasis the participants placed on faculty and administrators demonstrating authentic concern for students by forming mentor relationships with them, listening, and displaying concern for their in-class and out-of-class experiences. This theme also highlights the importance that participants placed on faculty being flexible, understanding, and displaying a willingness to work with students when they encountered academic difficulty or fell short of expectations.

In the second theme, “Engagement Matters,” we present two sub-themes. The initial sub-theme—“Out-of-Class Engagement”—delineates the significance participants placed on student involvement and student-faculty interaction outside of class. The “Beyond Lecturing” sub-theme explains the importance of faculty using the classroom as a critical space for facilitating student learning, retention, and persistence.

**Authentic Caring**

Each participant noted the importance of faculty and administrators going beyond their defined professional roles to display authentic caring for students. Authentic caring is best understood as consistently displaying interest and concern for Black men’s well-being and success in college. Authentic caring can be observed when faculty and administrators “check in” with students periodically, advocate on behalf of students during times of extreme need and crisis, and are intrusive in their advising of students. Paul, who earned a bachelor’s degree in social work and worked as a student affairs practitioner at the university for approximately twenty years, explained that it is particularly important that male faculty at the university serve as role models and mentors to the Black men on
campus. Embedded in the relationship that faculty have with students is demonstrating concern not only for students’ academic success, but also for their experiences and success outside of the classroom. He emphasized that displaying a caring mentality is more important than implementing a variety of programmatic initiatives to promote student success. Paul explained:

I think that male faculty need to mentor some of these kids. I think the mentorship comes from everyone. If faculty sees a [student] using inappropriate language, they need to tell them, “Young man, don’t use that type of language.” I don’t think enough faculty do that at this university. It takes a community to raise a child, and I believe that. I think that we all have an inherent responsibility to students. I think you can have a thousand programs, but the bottom line, and I said this in the beginning, is caring. I think we need to embrace the caring element more.

Furthermore, Paul expressed that a component of caring about Black men is listening to them, being proactive in reaching out to them, and inquiring about their interests. He delineated that without this sense of authentic caring, students are more likely to leave the university before earning their degrees. He communicated:

I’ve had students who come to me and say, “Mr. Paul if it wasn’t for you, I would have left [the institution].” I don’t know, I’m not saying I’m special, but I tend to go along and listen. When walking to campus, I will get into a conversation with these men; I don’t just walk past them. I will engage them, find out their interests. We have students who want to be business owners, but don’t know about the entrepreneurial program down in the school of business with Bro. Riddick, so I tend to let them know, perk their interest, and hopefully plant a seed of knowledge.

From Paul’s perspective, it is important for faculty and administrators at the institution to not view their work and influence on students’ success as narrowly defined by their formal roles and responsibilities at the institution, but also it is important for them to take the time to get to know and interact informally with students. Paul also believed that programmatic interventions were important in fostering student success, but a necessary pre-condition to the effectiveness of programs was demonstrating to students that they are known and cared about as individuals at the institution.

Lindsay, another student affairs practitioner and adjunct faculty member who earned a PhD in higher education and worked at the university for 12 years, shared Paul’s perspective about the importance of caring and its impact on the academic success of Black male students. She particularly noted that it is
important for faculty to display a sense of caring. For example, she explained that rather than outright failing a student for not meeting the deadline for an assignment, faculty should take the time to determine if there are unforeseen circumstances going on in the student’s life that may have impacted his ability to get the assignment submitted on time and, if warranted, give the student some additional time to complete the work. In this sense, Lindsay underscored that being flexible is important for communicating care and concern to students. She explained:

> It is important that faculty support students. If, for example, they fail to submit an assignment on time, talk to them and try to understand what is going on… “say okay, that happened to you. Take a little time, and give me my work. You’ve got two more days to get that together or something like that…”

Lindsay explained that she displayed this mentality frequently for students as an adjunct faculty member in sociology. The practice that Lindsay described may be especially important for Black men who often have difficulty seeking help and reaching out to faculty when they need support. Kelly, a student affairs practitioner who earned a master’s degree in education and worked at the university for seven years, echoed the importance of faculty as well as the university community to display a sense of authentic caring for students’ well-being and success. Specifically, she emphasized that it is important to create a supportive campus climate where students feel they truly matter. She stated: “A caring faculty, staff, and a university is important to student success. I think that if you have people who truly care, you are able to attract students, make them feel significant, and help them solve their problems.”

Similar to Lindsay and Kelly, Karen, another student affairs practitioner and adjunct faculty member who earned a PhD in higher education and worked at the university for eight years, echoed the importance of faculty displaying a sense of authentic caring. Nonetheless, she cautioned that since the university is transitioning to being research intensive and growing in size, some faculty may be more concerned with teaching and research and less concerned about the ultimate success of their students. Karen explained:

> Because the students are in their class, [faculty] know who’s doing well, and who’s not doing well. I’ve developed an early alert form for those students at midterm who are looking like they just aren’t going to make it. They probably will, but after midterm it’s 6 or 7 weeks into the semester, halfway through, so we can find out what happened…. You know, it’s a lot of work for faculty, and unfortunately because the campus has gotten so big
... the emphasis is now publish or perish, so if you’re on a tenure track, you come to class and teach, and it kind of ends there.

For Karen, the growing size of the institution served as a barrier for faculty to get to know students and provide the kinds of outreach efforts indicative of authentic caring. Furthermore, the importance that the institution placed on conducting empirical research and publishing to earn tenure threatened the extent that faculty could reach out to students and engender a sense of mattering. Having structures in place like the “early alert system” is necessary to ensure that students do not fall through the cracks. Additionally it conveys that someone at the institution is paying attention to them. Karen also explained that in order to encourage faculty to care as much about students’ success as they do their research, the university should incorporate some kind of measure in the tenure process for faculty. Doing so, Karen explained, may allow, and perhaps encourage, faculty to display a level of concern and support for student success. She said, “[The university] should have some mechanism in place in the tenure process that will encourage more faculty support and concern for student success.”

The participants expressed that it is important for faculty and administrators to go beyond their defined professional roles and provide mentorship and guidance not only in the context of students’ academics, but also in relation to their out-of-the-classroom experiences and daily lives. With respect to the latter, the participants noted that it is important for faculty and administrators to actively engage students in dialogue, listen to them and get to know their goals and interests. In sum, the participants believed that institutional efforts to retain Black men would likely be enhanced if faculty and administrators worked harder to create an institutional climate in which students felt truly cared about, valued, and supported.

Engagement Matters

Harper and Quaye (2009) characterized student engagement as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, leading to a range of measurable outcomes” (pp. 2–3). In a similar fashion, Harper (2009) offered several beneficial gains and outcomes of engagement for Black men, including the acquisition of social capital and access to resources, development of less-conflicted racial/ethnic and gender identities, and the increased likelihood of persistence toward graduation. Our analysis of data collected from the participants revealed that engagement was a critical factor in fostering a sense of mattering, and ultimately success, for Black men at
the HBCU. The participants spoke about students’ purposeful engagement in out-of-class activities and of faculty engaging students intellectually in the classroom. They maintained that when students are not engaged in both domains (in- and out-of-the classroom), their likelihood for success at the institution is compromised. In this section we present these two domains of engagement as sub-themes of the “engagement matters” theme.

Out-of-Class Engagement

The participants believed that the HBCU where the study was conducted needed to place more emphasis on implementing activities that facilitated student-faculty engagement. They felt these activities created a sense of mattering for students, which ultimately led to greater academic success. Paul, in particular, noted how he created a space on campus that allowed Black men to have meaningful engagement with their fellow peers and faculty. Specifically, Paul shared: “I’ve created an atmosphere called, Positive Influence Territory [the PIT], where students can go, sit, study, and engage with faculty and friends... as we know, engagement leads to positive outcomes.” The words “study” and “engage” are particularly noteworthy in Paul’s response as they suggest that the PIT is not just a place where students socialize but rather a context where students can have educationally purposeful interactions with peers and faculty, which may foster a sense of belonging and lead to a host of productive student outcomes related to increased retention and success.

When describing the PIT, Paul acknowledged that the tenuous financial conditions of some HBCUs, including the one in this study, may prevent them from having the financial resources to create spaces where students have an opportunity to interact with faculty and peers. As such, he advised that it is important for educators to be creative and resourceful by seeking grants to provide the opportunities necessary for reaching out to Black men and engaging them outside of class. Paul recounted:

I believe directors and administrators must go out and write grants for the things that we need.... The PIT was created with no money. I borrowed furniture from the physical plant. I got books... we have to find money and resources.

Like Paul, Karen also emphasized the relationship between student engagement with faculty outside the classroom and how it creates an environment where Black men feel like they matter and are valued. During her interview she shared a story about a time when the university invited a speaker to impress upon the faculty the importance of engaging students outside the
classroom. While she noted that some faculty members lacked excitement about the concept, she underscored the positive outcome of student engagement with faculty outside of the classroom. Karen noted:

Two summers ago, we had Dr. Jones from Brownstone University [pseudonym], he’s dean of the college at Brownstone, and he talked to us about how they changed around their student retention, using faculty to engage them [students] outside of the classroom. Dr. Jones spoke... about faculty having round tables and rotations in the meal hall, and they had faculty conducting out-of-classroom workshops in the [residence halls]. You know, that didn’t go over very well [with faculty here].

By Karen’s account, Dr. Jones emphasized the importance of not only engaging Black men with faculty outside of the classroom but going a step further by meeting students where they are and bringing student-faculty interaction opportunities to spaces where they reside, dine, and spend most of their time outside of the classroom. The lack of enthusiasm described by Karen on the part of the faculty suggests that this strategy contrasts with what has been typically observed in terms of student-faculty interaction at the HBCU where the study took place. Consequently, some systematic efforts to improve student-faculty interaction among Black men at the institution are important given its recent patterns of declining student outcomes among these students.

While Paul and Karen broached the importance of student engagement with faculty, Lindsay explained the value of student engagement in general. She explained that a part of caring about student success is encouraging them to become engaged on campus. She noted that campus engagement is important, particularly for Black men, because it fosters discipline and structure, which will help them succeed academically in college. To bolster her perspective, she told a story about a young man who was struggling academically. She suggested that if he became involved on campus, it would provide an additional basis of support.

Caring about students’ academic success is caring about their level of involvement. In fact I have a student now that... he’s doing so poorly... last year was his freshmen year, I don’t think he’s earned 12 credits. He’s just falling, and his mom just happens to mention to me that he plays the trumpet and the saxophone. I’m like, “Hello, why isn’t he in the band?”... so I’m trying to get him into the band because I think it will instantly provide structure, and discipline... and that’s what this young man needs.

As Lindsay suggested, purposeful engagement in out-of-class activities will not only create a sense of belonging for Black men at the HBCU, but also provide
much-needed structure and discipline, which are necessary to manage the multiple responsibilities and time demands that college students must often balance. Kelly shared Lindsay’s perspective about the nexus between student engagement and discipline for Black men at the HBCU. In addition, she acknowledged the importance of out-of-class engagement in providing Black men a larger network for social support at the institution. She explained:

Those students who are engaged interact more with different entities on the campus, so they get to know the ins and outs a little better, they get to meet the people who actually work in the registrar’s office, they get to meet directors, they get to interact with directors, they get exposed to events, whereas students who are not involved lack such exposure.

The insight Kelly offered is significant and directly related to the “importance” stage of Schlossberg’s framework—that is feeling valued and cared about. When Black men are engaged outside of class, they are able to establish relationships with key campus administrators upon whom they are able to rely on for access to campus resources and other forms of support.

To summarize this theme, the participants asserted that a key component of creating conditions of mattering for Black men is demonstrating concern for their engagement outside of the classroom. They explained that campus involvement provides structure, discipline, and helps students establish key relationships at the institution. In the next engagement sub-theme we share findings of what faculty can do in the classroom context to create conditions of mattering for Black men at HBCUs.

Beyond Lecturing: Engaging Black Men in the Classroom

The participants explained the importance of faculty moving beyond simply lecturing to engaging Black men in the classroom. They suggested that the classroom can be used as critical spaces for facilitating student learning, engagement, persistence, and retention. The participants also explained that faculty and students can learn from each other and should be changed or “transformed” through their interactions with each other. Karen, who occasionally taught as an adjunct professor in the university’s school of education, explained:

Like I said, it doesn’t matter how much tutoring, mentoring, and everything we have, if the faculty are not engaging the student in the classroom... some faculty don’t like this, they just want to give the content and move on. But really, “how is the student’s life going to be changed because they took my class?” That’s the question I ask [when I teach a class] and a
matter of fact, I make them write a paper in my class about how their life is changed. I mean, great you learned something, now what are you going to do differently? ... tell me how our encounter is going to change your life?

While Paul agreed with Karen’s sentiment about faculty engaging Black men in meaningful classroom activities, he noted that engagement leads to enhanced critical thinking skills and academic success. In particular, he reflected:

I think when you engage, you develop, because you gain insight, you know, if you’re a teacher that just gives lectures and notes, you are limiting students’ critical thinking... and that is important to their success in and outside of classroom.

Lindsay echoed perspectives shared by the other participants regarding the importance of faculty engaging Black men in the classroom. She stated: “I think faculty need to stop lecturing to students and start engaging them because it [engagement] creates student interest and shows that faculty care about their success in the classroom.”

Participants indicated that the classroom can be used as critical spaces for facilitating student learning, persistence, and retention. Participants noted that engagement engenders Black men’s interest and illustrates concern for student learning and success. While we acknowledge that actively engaging students in class is good pedagogy and is necessary to facilitate learning and success for all students, it is especially important for Black men who are reportedly among the least likely to be engaged at most campuses, including the HBCU where this study took place. Students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and mattering if they perceive faculty as genuinely interested in connecting with them during class and valuing the perspectives they bring to the setting.

DISCUSSION

This study considered creating conditions of mattering to facilitate the persistence for Black men at an HBCU. The participants of this present study described several factors important to creating conditions of mattering among Black men: faculty and administrators displaying authentic caring to promote a sense of belonging, facilitating student involvement on campus, student-faculty engagement outside the classroom, and using the classroom as a venue for engaging and facilitating student learning. Interestingly, a plethora of research has shown that HBCUs consistently create conditions of mattering, which has been positively linked to student persistence (Berger & Milem, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). For example, Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) found that
Black students at HBCUs experienced a supportive environment that involved faculty and peers, which increased their likelihood of persistence. Furthermore, Berger and Milem (2000) concluded that Blacks at HBCUs self-reported higher levels of self-concepts in psychological wellness, academic, and achievement orientation than their peers at PWIs.

Notwithstanding the consistency of this research, findings from the current study suggest that this HBCU could be more proactive in implementing conditions of mattering and support in certain areas. For example, while some participants described what the university could be doing to better support students, they also described the lack of enthusiasm from faculty and administrators toward some of these strategies. In particular, participants explained that because this HBCU had transitioned from a teaching institution to one where research is heavily emphasized in promotion and tenure decisions, some faculty were less inclined to go beyond their prescribed duties (i.e., teaching), to follow procedures to promote student success. In fact, research has shown that this is normally the case at research universities because research productivity, and not student interaction, is a major consideration in tenure decisions (Guffrida, 2005).

Research on HBCUs has suggested that a significant part of the supportive environment of HBCUs is the nurturing and supportive relationships that students have with faculty and administrators (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Wagener & Nettles, 1998). For example, Wagener and Nettles (1998) explained that faculty at HBCUs are supportive and reluctant to give up on students because they are convinced that students can succeed. Furthermore, Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) noted that Black students at HBCUs are more likely to encounter faculty and administrators who are supportive and nurturing than their peers at PWIs. Findings from the present study do not directly contradict findings from previous research on Black students at HBCUs. However, as Kimbrough and Harper (2006) suggested, faculty and administrators at HBCUs could be more purposeful and proactive in engendering conditions of mattering for Black men.

In addition, participants in this current study emphasized the importance of student involvement on campus. Campus involvement has been linked to a wide range of educational and social outcomes, including cognitive development (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005), moral and ethical development (Kuh et al., 2005), and retention and persistence (Berger & Milem, 1999). Despite such, research from Kimbrough and Harper (2006), Palmer and Young (2009), and Roach (2001) have shown that campus involvement among Black men at HBCUs is woefully low. In fact, Kimbrough and Harper (2006) explained that HBCUs lacked a "strategic institutional effort to invite and encourage involvement among [Black] men” (p. 194). Indeed, while the participants
underscored the link between student involvement and academic success and personal development, they did not divulge the extent that Black males were involved on their campus.

Finally, participants discussed a range of benefits associated with faculty moving beyond lectures to actively engage students in the class. According to the participants, some faculty members were not fond of actively engaging students in the classroom at this HBCU. Interestingly, in a study that Harper and Gasman (2008) conducted with Black men across 12 HBCUs, they found that participants did not view the classroom as a safe space for voicing their opinions with faculty because they feared that their grades would be lowered if they disagreed with professors. While our findings are similar to Harper and Gasman’s (2008) in that participants in both studies did not view the classroom as a space conducive to faculty-student engagement, it differs in many respects. To this end, more research is needed about the value faculty place on engaging students in the classroom at HBCUs.

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. This study was conducted at one HBCU with four student affairs practitioners. However, our thick description of the institutional context will allow readers to assess the transferability of findings to similar contexts. In addition, while we interviewed student affairs practitioners who specialized in student success to understand factors they perceived as important to the persistence of Black men, they largely focused on what faculty should do to create conditions of mattering for Black men. Finally, the practitioners represented only one perspective of what could be done to enhance student persistence at the HBCU in this current study. Interviews with other campus administrators would likely have provided other insights into factors critical to Black male students’ sense of mattering.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on our findings, we propose several recommendations for institutional practice and future research. Findings from this current study revealed that faculty could be more intentional about establishing rapport and building critical relationships with Black male collegians. One way to encourage relationship building between faculty and students is to provide opportunities for faculty and student interaction outside the classroom. Perhaps if faculty interacted more with students outside the classroom, they would get to know their students better, listen intently to their concerns, and foster mentoring
relationships with them. According to Kuh et al. (2005), an effective way to maximize student-faculty interaction is to provide socially catalytic spaces—that is, locating spaces typically used by students close to faculty or department offices. Because providing such spaces seem to require little to no money, this may be a good strategy for HBCUs to employ to facilitate faculty-student interaction. Furthermore, HBCUs may consider including these types of interactions with students as a component of the service requirement for faculty members’ tenure and promotion. As more HBCUs transition from teaching to research institutions (Minor, 2008), rewards and incentives may be necessary to encourage faculty to engage students outside the classroom.

Another recommendation that HBCUs may find useful to facilitate faculty-student interaction is to implement initiatives where faculty work actively with the institutional community to support academic success among Black men. An example of such a program that an HBCU implemented is the Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence (MILE), which is premised on Kuh et al.'s (2005) student engagement in educational purposeful activities. To this end, MILE participants engage in a variety of out-of-the classroom activities, team building exercises, and service learning projects. According to an evaluation of this program conducted by Chickering et al. (2006), the MILE has been effective in fostering persistence among Black men, partly because students formed critical relationships with faculty, administrators, and peers involved in the initiative, thus providing a stronger support network.

While participants explained a connection between campus involvement and success, according to Kimbrough and Harper (2006), Palmer and Young (2009), and Roach (2001), Black women are more engaged at HBCUs than their male counterparts. In order to foster campus involvement among Black men, HBCUs should consider surveying their students to better understand what kinds of activities strongly appeal to them. Promulgating initiatives that appeal to Black men may propel more of them to get involved, leading to increased interaction with the campus community, thus expanding their social networks at critical junctures during college. Furthermore, faculty, in particular, who teach first year experience courses, should emphasize the benefits of campus involvement and its impact on student learning and academic success. Moreover, if HBCUs do not use the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), they may consider using NSSE to better understand how students spend their time on campus to engender activities conducive to campus involvement for Black men. In addition, given that many students at HBCUs work full-time jobs off campus while carrying a full course load (Palmer et al., 2009), HBCUs should consider using social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)
to provide better opportunities for student involvement. While a site such as Facebook would easily allow HBCUs to advertise events occurring on campus, which may be helpful to students who are not on campus often, it may be more practical to encourage students, faculty, and administrators to use the site as a space to facilitate engagement between students and faculty.

It is interesting to note that while the participants’ discussion of what HBCUs could do to create conditions of mattering for Black men to a large extent focused on faculty, but not much on administrators, such as the student affairs practitioners. We believe that HBCUs’ efforts to engender conditions of mattering could have a more profound impact on persistence for Black men if there was a stronger partnership between academic and student affairs. One approach may begin with the orientation of newly hired student affairs professionals and academic employees. During the orientation of new staff and faculty, activities that incorporate the interaction of student affairs professionals and faculty may begin to build a strong relationship between them. Thus, the more familiar they are with each other, the more likely they are to work collaboratively on student issues. However, these interactions must extend beyond orientation sessions.

One way that collaboration between student and academic affairs may take place is through joint professional development activities. Professional development topics may include pressing student issues that impact policy and practice in both areas. The information presented at these sessions may include current research studies and findings about Black college men. These sessions can also serve as a starting point for collaboration between faculty and student affairs practitioners and to find ways to critically address how to successfully retain Black men in college.

Additionally, as student affairs and faculty/academic affairs forge better relationships, ideas and opportunities for collaboration will hopefully increase. These collaborative projects may take form in a number of ways. For example, in cases where a student might approach a faculty member or a student affairs practitioner regarding an academic concern, either party may be kept apprised of the situation and carefully monitor a student’s progress. This will not only address the student’s concerns in a timely manner but also it would create a stronger social network for students. Another example might include the establishment of learning communities, which would require student affairs practitioners and faculty to collaborate on how to structure and promulgate such communities. Learning communities would be vital because they would assist in developing additional peer support amongst students and provide both academic and social support. Through having stronger relationships between faculty and student affairs practitioners, both groups are able to share with each
other successful practices, which can be implemented collaboratively in the classroom, counseling/advising sessions, or other student services to positively enhance persistence for Black men.

Future research should explore administrators’ perceptions of what HBCUs can do differently to improve persistence among Black men. Furthermore, future research examining factors promoting the persistence of Black men should include the voices of student affairs practitioners and faculty. Doing so would allow for the examination of similarities and differences between these two groups as it relates to what matters to the success of Black men at HBCUs. Third, research should investigate differences in how students perceive the institutional environment of HBCUs compared with administrators’ perceptions. Such research might produce nuances in how these groups perceive the institutional environments, resulting in a stronger environment to support the success of students in general, and Black men specifically. In addition, future research should explore the extent to which faculty engage students in their classroom and whether they believe that such engagement is linked to academic success. Finally, research should also investigate whether faculty support for students declines at HBCUs as more transition from teaching institutions to being research-focused. As discussed, faculty at research institutions are generally not concerned with forming meaningful relationships with students because they are heavily evaluated on their scholarly productivity; therefore, they tend to invest more time and effort engaging in scholarly activity (Guiffrida, 2005).

REFERENCES


