Falling Through the Cracks: An early warning system can help keep Black males on the community college campus

J. Luke Wood, PhD, San Diego State University
The number of African-American male students in community colleges is significantly lower than their female and majority counterparts. In fact, more than a quarter of Black males leave community colleges within their first year. After three years, 55 percent will drop out without attaining a degree. This represents the highest dropout rate among every racial, ethnic and gender sub-group. While Black male retention rates are dismal, dropout rates of more than 45 percent are experienced by White and Hispanic males. These statistics signify a need to implement policies that may curb the loss of African-American males as well as other male students.

The educational system has not served Black males well. Many Black families reside in elementary and secondary districts where there are fewer academic offerings, less-qualified teachers, out-of-date materials, and lower quality curricula. This can lead to underpreparation to compete in collegiate-level coursework, thereby placing some Black males at a disadvantage before they step onto a college campus. Realizing that student success is impacted by a multiplicity of factors (e.g., social, academic, precollege), which are even more complex for Black males, these considerations are only one piece of the success puzzle.

I believe that the most predominant factors affecting the success of Black males are psychological in nature, resulting directly from barriers, negative messages, and stressors in and out of the college environment. These environmental challenges impact students’ motivation, focus on academic endeavors, and academic confidence. For example, negative messages from television, radio, newspapers, the Internet and music suggest that Black males are academically inferior and incapable of excelling in school. These messages can be reinforced, knowingly and unknowingly, by staff, faculty, and peers and are exacerbated in campuses environments that are unwelcoming. When Black males excel academically, their peers who have internalized stereotypes about school may criticize and reject them for being successful in school. Such environmental factors can lead students to become apprehensive about interacting in the classroom and perceive that they cannot achieve academically.

Furthermore, many Black males may experience a utility-conflict meaning that their perceptions of the benefits of school conflict with their experiences, perceptions, and immediate needs (e.g., food, housing). For instance, with some of these students, the reality of “making it” may seem more likely through a steady job or through illicit activities when compared to the collegiate environment.

One environmental challenge that has become increasingly evident in recent years is the work-college balance, the balancing act that takes place between being a student and an employee. My research on Black males has illustrated that current economic conditions may have made balancing college and work more difficult as fewer available jobs can lead to unemployment, underemployment or fewer employment options.

Black males and other students fall through the cracks when community colleges do not have processes in place to enhance their success. While most community colleges provide student services such as career counseling, tutoring and mentoring, too many institutions wait until after there has been a semester of low performance — wherein a student exhibits high absenteeism and low grades — before intervening. More colleges need a centralized system for evaluating student performance throughout a semester. Schools also need to take actions to prevent, or at least limit, low performance. This can be accomplished through an alert system.

This system tracks students, and when a problem is detected, faculty and staff are notified. Even though many community colleges have integrated early warning protocols, many others have yet to do so. Several studies on Black males have recommended the implementation of early warning systems as a strategy for improving success rates, thus the focus here on such systems. Early warning systems need not center efforts on Black males alone; rather, it is an intervention that can be employed campuswide to impact all students (while keeping key elements in mind that are specific to Black males). This will be key in gaining support from multiple campus affiliates who will be more likely to implement policies and procedures that are geared toward the interests of marginalized groups when these interests benefit the dominant majority (in this case, all students).

These alerts should occur early in a semester. This warning system will require counselor, faculty and administrators to file a report when a student’s performance — primarily measured by grades, attendance, completion of homework, and/or classroom engagement — becomes a concern. Once a student has been identified for one or more of these issues, counselors, faculty, and administrators can meet with the student and enact immediate interventions to prevent attrition and/or poor academic performance.

The purpose of the warning system is to prevent attrition by identifying students who are most at risk. Early warning policies are vital to facilitating student success in the community college, especially given that extreme differences can exist in a student’s precollege academic preparation. Thus, a warning system creates a standard for identifying areas of concern while also allowing institutions to serve large numbers of students with diverse backgrounds.

— Dr. J. Luke Wood is an assistant professor in the Department of Administration, Rehabilitation, and Postsecondary Education at San Diego State University. Wood is co-editor of the Journal of African American Males in Education.