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Reconceptualizing Reactive Policy Responses to Black Male College Achievement: Implications from a National Study

By Shaun R. Harper

Tariq Dixon and Bryan Barnhill II, both juniors at Harvard University, share a variety of common characteristics, including race and gender. The two black male undergraduates maintain 3.6 cumulative grade point averages, are extremely active on campus and hold leadership positions in multiple student organizations, and aspire to attend law schools upon completion of their bachelor's degrees. Perhaps more interesting are the circumstances from which they emerged. Some may erroneously assume that all Harvard students come from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and high-resource preparatory schools, which is far from true. Both Tariq and Bryan attended predominantly black public schools, one in Baltimore and the other in Detroit. Although one was raised by two parents and the other in a single-parent home, poverty was a shared reality of their upbringing. Despite these odds, both students were afforded access to one of the most highly regarded universities in the world and are currently demonstrating excellence, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Much can be learned from Tariq and Bryan—insights into their triumphant educational journeys could be instructive to policymakers who endeavor to improve black male participation and achievement in higher education. In 2004, black men comprised only 4.3 percent of all students enrolled at American institutions of higher education, the exact same percentage as in 1976. Literally, no progress has been made in increasing participation rates among this population in over a quarter of a century. Moreover, 67.6 percent of black male undergraduates who start college never finish, which is the worst college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in higher education. Political responses to these trends have been few and marginally effective. Clearly, college administrators, faculty, and policymakers need new insights into interventions that increase access and facilitate successful transitions among those who not only enroll, but also excel, persist through baccalaureate degree attainment, and graduate with a host of productive outcomes.

Right or wrong, the reality is that most policy efforts, especially those aimed at socially disadvantaged groups, are reactive in nature. More problematic is that political stakeholders concerned with black male student achievement at all educational levels typically react to deficiencies and, in some instances, to evidence of educational malpractice among those responsible for the schools in which these students are enrolled. Consequently, policy and resource allocation decisions are made to fix what researchers, parents, educational lobbyists, and sometimes the students themselves identify as contributing factors to racialized and gendered achievement gaps.

A paradigmatic shift in policy formation is advocated in this article. Concerning black male achievement, the question here is: To what should policymakers react? While it is necessary to continually illuminate factors contributing to black male underachievement and the unequal assurance of social justice via education, it is equally important and arguably more instructive to look for insights into "what works"—the programs, people, and enriching educational experiences that helped prepare Tariq and Bryan, for example, for admission to and success at a premier university. In this regard, policy initiatives are still reactive, but typical responses to the dearth of effective educational interventions are balanced with efforts guided by lessons learned from those who transcend socioeconomic disadvantage, overcome previous educational odds, and successfully navigate their way to and through postsecondary education.

An Anti-Deficit Investigation of Black Male Student Success

Emphasis here is placed on balanced political decision making based on black male students' self-reports of success. In 2006, I constructed an anti-deficit framework for use in a national research study to explore the undercurrents of black male educational achievement, to furnish evidence of good practices in black male access and educational engagement initiatives, and to enable black male college achievers to reflect on critical moments and key experiences that facilitated their success. Interviews were conducted with more than 200 high-achieving black male undergraduates at 42 different colleges and universities across the country. Administrators at each institution, including provosts, deans of students, multicultural affairs professionals, and directors of various student services and academic affairs units, identified black men who met the following criteria: those who had earned cumulative GPAs above 3.0, established lengthy records of leadership and engagement in multiple student organizations, developed meaningful relationships with campus

The National Black Male College Achievement Study Participating Institutions

Historically Black Colleges and Universities
Albany State University, Cheyney University, Clark Atlanta University, Fisk University, Florida A&M University, Hampton University, Howard University, Morehouse College, Norfolk State University, North Carolina Central University, Tennessee State University, and Tuskegee University.

Highly Selective Private Research Universities
Brown University, Columbia University, Harvard University, Princeton University, Stanford University, and University of Pennsylvania.

Public Research Universities
Indiana University, Michigan State University, The Ohio State University, Purdue University, University of Illinois, and University of Michigan.

Private Liberal Arts Colleges
Amherst College, Claremont McKenna College, DePauw University, Haverford College, Lafayette College, Occidental College, Pomona College, Saint John's University (MN), Swarthmore College, Vassar College, Wabash College, and Williams College.

Comprehensive State Universities
California State University Long Beach, California State Polytechnic University, City University of New York, Lock Haven University, Towson University, and Valdosta State University.

administrators and faculty outside of the classroom, participated in enriching educational experiences (e.g., study abroad programs, internships, and summer research programs), and earned numerous merit-based scholarships and honors in recognition of their undergraduate achievements. Each student participated in a two- to three-hour individual interview on his campus and follow-up interviews via telephone.

The national study magnifies lessons learned from those who maximized their college experiences and moves beyond the deficit perspective by highlighting institutional agents, policies, programs, and resources that help black men achieve desired educational outcomes across a range of institutional contexts. From this study emerged a powerful set of policy implications, some of which are presented below.

Improving Access and Outcomes for Black Males in Higher Education

High-achievers on each campus cited numerous programs and initiatives that led to their achievement, which are too numerous to list in this article. The point here is not to present an exhaustive list of implications, but to offer only a few examples of how policy and resource allocation decisions can be informed by the perspectives of successful students. If asked, Bryan might recommend that public resources be allocated to initiatives like the Detroit Area Pre-College Engineering Program, or that participation in the Summer Engineering Academy sponsored by the Minority Engineering Program Office at the University of Michigan be extended to more black male high school students. Bryan attributed his college readiness to engagement in these programs. Others in the study named several other publicly and privately funded programs in their states that were designed to offer racial/ethnic minority students early exposure to college. Reportedly, these types of programs are extremely effective, especially in rural areas and urban centers. Without them, some high-achievers insisted that they would not have been prepared to compete for admission to college or excel once enrolled.

Like Tariq, many participants were from single-parent homes, while others were raised by two parents. Regardless of his familial structure, each high-achiever noted that his parent(s) held non-negotiable expectations for college attendance. The question was never "if," but "where." This was true of participants whose parents were college graduates, as well as those who were first in their families to experience higher education. The salience of this finding makes clear that the expenditure of public resources on programs for parents of black boys and teens that focus on college knowledge and the consistent articulation of college-going expectations would be extremely valuable.

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Support for pre-freshmen transition programs for admitted students (often referred to as summer bridge programs) is also essential, as participation proved beneficial for many high-achievers in the study. On many campuses, these programs take place six to eight weeks prior to the start of a student's first semester; some are part of federally funded TRIO Programs. Several participants indicated that they would not have gained access to their respective institutions were it not for the existence of these programs. Furthermore, participation also enhanced their transitions to college by exposing these students to campus resources, enabling them to foster early relationships with faculty and staff, and providing space for the cultivation of same-race peer support, all of which they relied on once the academic school year officially began. For those who participated, these programs left a memorable imprint on their success. Tariq was not involved in a bridge program, but did arrive at Harvard having participated in a pre-freshmen initiative that afforded him opportunities for meaningful interaction with other racial/ethnic minority students. As a result, he had a group of peers upon whom he could rely for support during his first semester. Institutions should invest resources into programs of similar design.

The high-achievers remained enrolled at their institutions in part because financing their college education was not a burden. Few held off-campus jobs, not because they came from affluent families, but because their institutional aid packages were such that employment beyond the borders of their campuses was unnecessary. Efforts to dismantle public support for scholarship programs geared toward racial/ethnic minority students contradict findings from this national study. If black male student enrollments are to increase, public resources must be targeted to need- and merit-based financial aid awards for this population. Scholarship programs should be grown instead of eliminated, and more funds must be earmarked at the federal, state, and institutional levels specifically for black male undergraduates.

Conclusion: A Paradigmatic Shift in Policymaking

Although the range of policy implications from more than 200 student interviews could not be presented more fully in this article, the case has been made for a conceptual shift in policymaking related to black male achievement. Examples cited above only provide a glimpse into the instructive insights that can be garnered from those who manage to do well. The important role of black faculty in black student success and the allocation of funds for black male student engagement efforts are just two other examples of findings for which there are policy implications. The paradigm emphasized throughout this article does not seek to dismiss the sociopolitical wrongdoings that continually yield educational disparities for black men. Instead, the rightful juxtaposition of these issues with instructive lessons learned from transcenders like Tariq, Bryan, and other high-achievers would likely move states and institutions beyond stagnation and ill-structured political responses to the troubling status of black male students in higher education. ❑

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