(Re)defining the Narrative: High-Achieving Nontraditional Black Male Undergraduates at a Historically Black College and University

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Abstract

Using Harper's anti-deficit achievement framework as a theoretical guide, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the academic and social experiences of four nontraditional, high-achieving, Black male undergraduates attending one historically Black university. Findings show that the participants were intrinsically motivated to succeed in college to make a better future for themselves and their families. Support from their peers, family, and children also played a role in their success. Last, the university cultivated a campus environment that affirmed the participants' identities as Black males and nontraditional students. These findings present a counternarrative to deficit-oriented research about Black males generally and nontraditional Black male collegians specifically.

Keywords

nontraditional high-achieving Black males, historically Black college and university

Why are Black men not succeeding in education? This simple question often frames scholarly conversations about the academic trajectory of Black males. Moreover, this type of question captures what Valencia (1997) described as a deficit thinking approach that "holds that poor schooling performance is rooted in students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling

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arrangements that exclude students from learning are held exculpatory" (p. 9). Consequently, deficit thinking has had a devastating impact on the ways in which Black males are treated in society and portrayed in scholarly literature (Harper, 2009). For instance, Harper (2009) argued that even when provided examples of successful Black men, their lived realities are "overshadowed by the master narrative that amplifies Black male underachievement, disengagement, and attrition" (p. 708). Deficit thinking has not only framed the media's portrayal of Black men, but it has also affected the ways in which Black men are treated at colleges and universities.

Scholars have continuously reported that Black men, especially at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), are subjected to racism, stereotyping, and an unwelcoming campus environment (Harper, 2015b; McGee & Martin, 2011). Consequently, it is not surprising that Black males comprise only 5.4% of college attendees nationwide (Wood & Palmer, 2014), and only 33% of them graduate within 6 years (Harper, 2012). Given these educational outcomes, there is need for investigations that focus on the challenges Black males face. However, I argue that scholarly investigations have focused on Black male deficits for far too long. Taking a deficit-oriented approach only provides a piece of the story (Goings, 2015c) and excludes the narratives of Black males who excel in education.

When investigating the educational trajectory of Black males, there are questions to consider whose scope is far beyond deficit thinking, such as, "How did the 33% of Black males who graduate do it? And what can higher education scholars, practitioners, and policymakers learn from the success narratives of these men?" Given the prevalence of deficit-oriented discourse around Black males, this phenomenological study, framed through Harper's (2010, 2012, 2015a) anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF), seeks to disrupt that narrative. Specifically, this study investigates the academic and social experiences of four high-achieving nontraditional Black male (HNBM) undergraduates attending one historically Black university.

Significance of the Study for Adult Education

Scholars over the past 25 years have called for research in adult education to be more inclusive of various racial and ethnic groups (Drayton, Rosser-Mims, Schwartz, & Guy, 2014; Johnson-Bailey, 2001a; Ross-Gordon, 1991). This call is in response to the dearth of adult education literature on non-White racial groups. Johnson-Bailey (2001a), for instance, explained that discussions of race and ethnicity in the adult education literature peaked from the 1930s to the 1940s and from 1980 to 2000. Thus, there is a need for studies such as this one to rekindle scholarly conversation about the diverse racialized experiences of adults in various educational contexts.

There is very little literature that investigates the experiences of nontraditional, Black males students (Goings, 2015c). One particular volume, titled *Swimming Upstream: Black Males in Adult Education* (Rosser-Mims, Schwartz, Drayton, & Guy, 2014), has provided insight into the educational experiences of adult Black males. In the concluding chapter, Drayton et al. (2014) argued the need for future studies on the experiences of high-achieving Black male students. Thus, this study seeks to answer their call and provide through exploring the experiences of four HNBM undergraduates.

Literature Review

Due to a plethora of reasons, including family, work responsibilities, and the afford-ability of college, higher education has witnessed an increase in students seeking enrollment after the age of 25. Students in this category are typically identified as "nontraditional," but this population is the fastest growing on college campuses (Bonner, Marbley, Evans, & Robinson, 2015). Given President Obama's goal of mak-ing the United States the number one nation with regard to citizens with college degrees by 2020, the U.S. Department of Education (2011) contends there will be a need for eight million more adults to earn their college degrees. Nontraditional Black students have a unique opportunity to fill this void, as a recent National Urban League 2014 report found that approximately 65% of Black college students are nontraditional based on their status as financially independent.

It is important to note that Black nontraditional students often experience barriers to degree attainment (Rosser-Mims, Palmer, & Harroff, 2014). Rosser-Mims, Palmer, et al. (2014) explain that Black nontraditional students may enter college underpre-pared for the work, all the while having difficulties balancing their family, academic, and work responsibilities. Despite these barriers, Black nontraditional students con-tinue to seek to (re)enter college as options for upward mobility become more and more limited without a college degree.

Challenges Facing Nontraditional Students

One common thread in the literature on nontraditional students is that they experience a plethora of challenges on college campuses that hinders their persistence and gradu-ation rates (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Markle, 2015). For instance, in Goncalves and Trunk's (2014) exploratory study investigating the challenges of 10 nontraditional col-lege students, they found that the university's inability to address the needs of nontra-ditional students presented considerable obstacles, namely, being isolated on campus and a lack of available, relevant campus organizations. These findings signal the need for colleges and universities to develop programming and supports to create a sense of belonging for nontraditional students.

Watt (2011) found that participants in her study saw interacting with faculty and staff as challenging. Consequently, this caused the students to become "detached . . . which resulted in further disengagement with the institution and dissatisfaction with the college" (p. 16). Given that researchers (Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000; Scott & Lewis, 2012) have found that faculty interactions influence nontraditional students' success, it is critical that further research examines faculty perceptions of nontraditional students to uncover how interactions can be improved.

Although numerous studies have explored the experiences of nontraditional stu-dents, there are two apparent gaps that must be discussed. One current gap is that there are very few studies that discuss the experiences of nontraditional students from marginalized racial populations (Drayton et al., 2014; Ross-Gordon, 2011). This omission is critical given that Black students, males specifically, tend to have

vastly different experiences in college than other racial groups. Goings (2015b) asserts that there is a one-sided perspective about Black males in the literature, which "promote[s] a singular and myopic portrayal, besieging such males as criminal, unskilled, and problematic" (p. 92). Thus, it is important for researchers to counter the deficit-oriented discourse by investigating Black males who are academically successful.

High-Achieving Black Males

As a result of the deficit-oriented discourse on Black males in scholarly literature, several researchers have challenged this narrative by focusing on the academic and social experiences of high-achieving Black males in higher education (Bonner, 2003; Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2012). These researchers have found that high-achieving Black males succeed, in part, to disrupt society's negative perspective of them (Harper, 2009). For instance, Harper and Davis (2012) found through their textual analysis of 304 essays written by high-achieving Black males interested in pursuing a doctorate degree that the men believed that education was a way to prove themselves as scholars who value education. Moreover, research has shown that same-race peer support (Harper, 2006) and faculty and staff support (Bonner, 2003; Jett, 2011) help high-achieving Black males attain success in higher education.

In addition, McGee and Martin (2011) found that in response to being stereotyped in their classes (specifically mathematics and engineering), high-achieving Black students exhibit stereotype management strategies. Essentially, they understand that their Blackness is seen "by others as a marker of inferiority in mathematics and engineering contexts" (p. 1354), so they develop coping mechanisms to prove their doubters wrong. However, this particular study and others on high-achieving Black collegians found that racial stereotypes and others' persistent deficit thinking could not be changed. Scholars contend that these negative experiences often take place within the PWI context. As a result, researchers have focused on high-achieving Black males at PWIs. Other researchers have also begun to focus their attention on the experiences of high-achieving Black males within the historically Black college and university (HBCU) context.

High-Achieving Black Males at HBCUs

HBCUs are institutions that were established prior to 1964 and have a targeted mission to serve Black students. In a climate where few options were available for Black students, HBCUs provided opportunities for Black students to earn college degrees (Goings & Gasman, 2014). Until the 1950s, HBCUs educated approximately 90% of Black students in higher education (Kim & Conrad, 2006). While these institutions have come under recent scrutiny for low enrollments and graduation rates (Gasman, 2007), they continue to provide educational opportunities for a significant number of students who are Pell-grant eligible (Gasman, 2013). For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2011), despite comprising approximately 3% of colleges and universities, HBCUs are responsible for producing 16% of

Black students with a bachelor's degree. Though it is quite evident that HBCUs help educate Black males, there are few studies to date that explore the experiences of HNBM students at HBCUs.

Over the past 15 years, there has been a growing body of research examining the academic and social experiences of Black male collegians. In the literature on high-achieving Black males within the HBCU context, researchers have found that they are more likely to experience HBCUs as warm and supportive environments, where their lived experiences and identities are affirmed by their peers, faculty, and staff (Fries-Britt, Hurt, & Franklin, 2012). In Jett's (2011) case study, Roger, a high-achieving doctoral student attending a PWI, believed his undergraduate experiences with a Black HBCU mathematics professor developed his foundation to handle advanced mathematics and his desire to further his education. Moreover, in Bonner's (2003) case study of two high-achieving Black males (one attending a PWI and the other an HBCU), it was found that the participant who attended an HBCU described the campus as having a family environment, where he felt welcomed. While researchers have examined the experiences of high-achieving Black males at HBCUs, there is a need for studies focused on nontraditional students (Goings, 2015c). Therefore, this study seeks to fill the current gap in not only the high-achieving HBCU literature but in the nontraditional literature as well.

Theoretical Framework

Harper's (2010, 2012) ADAF was used as the theoretical and processing framework for this study. Wood and Palmer (2014) define a processing framework as one that "provides direction on how to engage in a given activity" (p. 35). As a result, the ADAF provided a lens for me to explore the experiences of Black males from an asset-based approach. Harper (2012) explains that the ADAF "inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition" (p. 5). For instance, instead of asking a deficit-oriented question such as "Why are [Black males] so underprepared for college-level mathematics and sciences?" an ADAF question would ask, "How do STEM achievers from low-resourced high schools transcend academic underpreparedness and previous educational disadvantage?" (Harper, 2010, p. 69). In essence, the ADAF provides researchers with a framework to develop research questions and accounts of Black males that emphasize their successes rather than their failures.

Harper (2012) identified that the ADAF can be used in the development of studies in the following three areas: precollege socialization and readiness, college achievement, and postcollege success. For the purposes of this study, I looked specifically at the college achievement experiences of four HNBMs. ADAF was paramount to the development of this article as I wanted to explore how HNBMs overcome the barriers of being a Black male and nontraditional student in college while experiencing academic success and persistence toward their college degree. Moreover, I sought to understand the ways in which these men experienced being high achievers in the

HBCU context, as Fountaine and Carter (2012) argued that it is critical for HBCUs to be explored through a strengths-based approach. Last, this particular framework is aligned with my worldview of redefining the Black male narrative by reframing it through an asset-based perspective. In line with the ADAF, this study was guided by the following two research questions:

> **Research Question 1:** What factors enable high-achieving nontraditional Black male undergraduates to succeed academically while simultaneously juggling employment and family responsibilities?
> **Research Question 2:** In what ways do HBCU faculty and staff compel and support high-achieving nontraditional Black male students to succeed academically and socially during their undergraduate tenure?

Research Design and Methods

This study is based on a larger qualitative research project that examined the academic and social experiences of high-achieving Black males attending an HBCU (Goings, 2015a).

The aim of this present study was to focus on the experiences of the nontraditional subsample ($n = 4$). While researchers have debated the definition of the nontraditional student (Bonner et al., 2015; Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996), for the purposes of this study, the NCES (2013) definition combined with Horn and Carroll's (1996) moderately nontraditional student definition was used. The NCES (2013) identifies a nontraditional student as one who is 25 years of age or older. Horn and Carroll (1996) define a moderately nontraditional student as having two or three of the following characteristics: (1) delayed enrollment in college, (2) attending college part-time, (3) having financial independence, (4) working full-time while taking classes, (5) responsible for dependents (other than spouse), (6) a single parent, and (7) obtaining a high school diploma through an alternative route (e.g., GED). It must be noted that this criterion was not used to select participants in the larger research project but just applies specifically for this article.

Phenomenological methods were employed to uncover Black male HBCU students' campus experiences and the supporters who played pivotal roles in their success. Phenomenological inquiry "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). A phenomenological approach was useful as it allowed me to uncover, through the participants' experiences, what it is like to be a high-achieving Black male attending an HBCU and the types of supports that aided in campus success.

Research Site

This study was conducted at Success University (SU), an urban mid-Atlantic public HBCU. At the time of data collection, SU reported an undergraduate population of approximately 6,300 students. Furthermore, 81.4% of the student population identified as African American/Black and 44% of the undergraduate population identified as male.

A criterion-based sampling approach was used to investigate the experiences of high-achieving Black males in this study. The following criteria were used to determine eligibility: (1) self-identify as African American or Black and male, (2) have a 3.0 cumulative grade point average (GPA), and (3) be in good academic standing at SU. A 3.0 GPA was used as a marker of high-achievement, similar to other studies on high-achieving Black males.

Participants

With a mean GPA of 3.3, the four participants in this study had impressive academic records. Of the four participants, three were seniors, all of whom graduated at the conclusion of data collection. Rahim, age 62, married, and a parent of 15, earned his degree in construction management and is currently pursuing a master's degree at SU in the same field. Brandon, age 35, married, and a parent of two, earned his degree in hospitality management and will begin a master's program in the same field at an Ivy League institution. Stanley, age 28, earned his degree in nursing and is now working as a registered nurse to gain more nursing experience before entering medical school to become an anesthesiologist. Vince, age 37, a single parent of three, is a junior social work major who plans to enroll in a master's program in social work after graduating from SU. He then plans to pursue his PhD in social work.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using a semistructured interview approach. Moustakas (1994) explains that "the long interview is the method through which data is collected on the topic or questions" in a phenomenological investigation (p. 114). Each student participated in two interviews lasting between 50 and 120 minutes. Additionally, each interview was recorded using an electronic recording device and was later professionally transcribed. The semistructured interview was beneficial because it allowed the men to lead the discussions, which often took a very casual format. Aligned with Harper's (2012) ADAF, some interview questions included the following: "What (if anything) sets you apart as a nontraditional student at SU?" "Who has played a significant role in your growth as a student and man?" and "What challenges have you overcome during your undergraduate years and who has helped you succeed?"

Data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) method for analyzing data in a phenomenological study. As I read each line of the transcripts, I bracketed my observations and reflections in the margins. This practice is important in phenomenological studies as it forces researchers to suspend their thoughts to better understand experiences from the participants' perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Using NVivo, a qualitative data management program, I took each significant statement from the participants and developed clusters of meaning, which served as subthemes. Guided by the ADAF, I looked for significant statements that explored how these men succeeded and countered the pervasive deficit narratives about Black men. These clusters of meaning were then grouped to form central themes. During the development of the central themes,

I constructed a textual description (*what* he experienced attending SU) and structural description (*how* he experienced being a nontraditional Black male at SU) for each participant. For the purposes of this article, four themes are discussed. They explore how these men were motivated to succeed and the roles played by those who supported the men academically and socially.

Researcher Positionality

This study and my approach to researching Black males is a direct result of my lived experience as a Black male. As an undergraduate, I was a high achiever (by criteria used in this study) at a small PWI. There, I experienced racial stereotyping from peers and professors as I was a member of the men's basketball team and on the dean's list, an accomplishment I prided myself on because it disrupted the deficit narrative about Black males. My racialized experiences as an undergraduate propelled me to apply to a doctoral program at an HBCU. What I noticed immediately at the HBCU was that my professors looked like me affirmed by identity as a Black male. As I conceptualized this study, I wanted to better understand what it would be like to attend an HBCU as an undergraduate. Thus, through the perspectives of these four men and the other participants of the larger study, I sought to understand the Black male high-achiever HBCU experience.

Trustworthiness of Data

To ensure trustworthiness of data, several suggestions by Creswell (2007) and Creswell and Miller (2000) were employed. First, member checks were conducted to ensure that my analysis captured my participants' lived experiences. I provided participants with copies of interview transcripts to allow them to elaborate on their responses. Second, I searched for disconfirming evidence during data collection and analysis, a practice Creswell and Miller (2000) recommend because "the search for disconfirming evidence provides further support of the account's creditability" (p. 127). Last, I used rich and thick descriptions in detailing the experiences of participants, which, Creswell (2007) contends, "allows the reader to make decisions regarding transferability" (p. 209).

Findings

Harper (2015b) explains that using the ADAF allows researchers to "identify policies, practices, and structures, as well as individual, familial, cultural, and communal resources that help Black men succeed educationally" (p. 142). As a result, the four themes provide insights into these areas. Specifically, the first theme, titled "Setting the Standard for Excellence: Me, Myself, and I," highlights how the participants believed that their sheer determination served as an explanation for their academic success. The second theme, titled "Two-Way Learning and Peer Support," examines how their peers both young and old provided encouragement, which compelled them

to succeed. The third theme, titled "Family Support and Sacrifices," explores how the participants were motivated to succeed because of the sacrifices their families made for them. The last theme, titled "SU Campus Supports Black Male and Nontraditional Success," captures how the university created an inclusive environment, where the participants felt that their identities as both Black males and nontraditional students were affirmed.

Setting the Standard for Excellence: Me, Myself, and I

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that the men were all very self-motivated. Each participant credited his own self-will as an impetus for success at SU. Initially, I thought this was because the participants had a long history of academic success, but, in fact, many had experienced failures throughout their academic careers. For instance, Rahim dropped out of school in the eighth grade to enter the workforce; Vince dropped out of college during his traditional college-age years due to academic issues; and Brandon was previously on academic probation in a community college. Despite these failures, each participant was self-motivated and thankful for the opportunity to continue their education. Brandon, for instance, explained, "I'm a person that nothing truly breaks me. It's almost like I can't be broken." Brandon believed his inner strength could get him through any situation. Stanley, however, explained that his intrinsic motivation stemmed from his thirst for knowledge. He stated,

> I'm the type of learner who has to ask, "Why?" I can't just have you tell me something and I not say, "Why?" or, "Tell me more." You can't just say, "The sky is blue." I'm going to be like . . . "What caused the sky to be blue?"

During Rahim's interview, he gave an analogy that explained his thought process about going back to school at the age of 62:

> I have a philosophy that with whatever it is that you do, you always ask yourself four questions. Those four questions are: Why am I doing it? What is the reward of success? What is the method of achieving it? What are the consequences of failure? With those four questions, you can appropriately proceed in anything you want to do.

Rahim's philosophy not only captured the essence of the men's intrinsic motivation, but it also provided a framework from which to understand Rahim's experience specifically. Throughout his life, Rahim was always self-motivated, but his behavior was guided by his definition of success. For instance, as an adolescent, success revolved around his passion to earn a living and a "fair wage." Consequently, this thinking caused Rahim to lose interest in school because, by the eighth grade, he felt he already had all the prerequisite skills to be successful in the work world; thus, school no longer held value. However, now at the age of 62, Rahim's definition of success has changed; he wanted to become a high school and/or college instructor. Therefore, he was extremely self-motivated to become "credentialized" (Rahim's created word for earning his degree and a word we joked about during our interviews).

"Two-Way Learning" and Peer Support

While the participants were often older than their classmates, they all stated that SU created an environment where nontraditional students learned as much from their younger classmates as their classmates learned from their wisdom. Some participants used phrases like "They have my back," "They've helped me," and "We all help each other" to describe how their peers supported them. Additionally, participants described the peer support they received as a "two-way learning" system. While the participants received support from their young peers, in return they provided support and mentoring. For example, Stanley explained that in the nursing program, "If I don't know something, it's definitely somebody in that class who knows what I don't know. We can help each other because my strength might be [their] weakness and vice versa." As nontraditional students, this symbiosis helped them feel engaged and supported on campus.

The participants who had children in this study (Rahim, Vince, and Brandon) discussed how their younger classmates provided insights on how to understand their own children. For example, Brandon described how his peers offered a helpful perspective on engaging his teenage child:

> Despite their age, no matter their age because I do have peers that are 18 and 60. Everyone's been [helpful]. The younger students have been able to assist me with my 17-year-old daughter. I've seen students who have assisted me on stuff that even I didn't know about. There's more two-way learning in a sense.

For Brandon, attending SU and being a parent provided him the opportunity to learn from his classmates academically and socially. Likewise, Vince discussed the ways in which his classmates helped him understand his own children better:

> [The students] are like my little brothers [and] sisters. The relationship that I have with them is very valuable to me. It's beneficial for the most part because I'm introduced to a lot of new things. It keeps me on my toes because I have two daughters myself. I really appreciate the younger students and the conversations we have because it gives me insight on my children.

Vince's relationship with his classmates provides an example of the "two-way learning" Brandon described previously. Through his interactions with classmates, Vince felt supported as a student and parent.

Rahim also embraced the two-way learning opportunity. In response to a question about his interactions with the other students in his classes, Rahim explained, "They've helped me. I interact without respect to age or culture. Anybody who has something I think can help me out, I'll talk to them about it."

Family Support and Sacrifice

The men credited their families for their success at SU. Throughout the interviews, they discussed the sacrifices their parents had made in their lives. For example, Stanley

asserted, "My mother and father have been most influential in me getting my education, and my siblings." The participants with families of their own credited their spouses and/or children. They even expressed how their children were in competition with them for grades. For instance, Vince jokingly explained,

> My motivation, far from none, are my children. For me, for me to do well is to know that my kids will do better. I'm in competition with my children, believe it or not. What I mean is, I can't sit up here and advocate to them, "You have to get good grades in order to succeed in life," when they know their dad is in school and gets bad grades. We actually push each other.

During our conversations, Vince repeatedly discussed how his children motivated him to succeed. He believed that he had to reenroll and succeed to show the importance of good grades and furthering their education. Brandon also explained, "My daughter is graduating from high school, so I knew I had to finish my degree for her to understand why [education] is important." To understand Brandon's motivation, I asked him to elaborate on how his perspective had changed since he first entered college as a teen. Brandon stated, "Kids are older, that's number one. It's critical to make sure they understand that I'm not just talking the talk, [but] I'm walking the walk."

Participants also acknowledged the sacrifices their families had made for them. For example, many participants discussed how their families allowed them the flexibility to focus on their schoolwork, even when it meant less time for family events and gatherings. Vince explained how he sometimes had to sacrifice time with his children to complete class projects. His mother would take care of them while he worked. Vince recounted, "There has been times where I had to do 15-page papers and literally had to live in the library. I had to call my mom [and ask her] to get the kids because I'm in the library." The men truly appreciated the sacrifices their families made to help them succeed. Their families' flexibility and unwavering support further encouraged the participants to prove that the sacrifices had not been made in vain.

SU Campus Supports Black Male and Nontraditional Success

All the participants consistently spoke about how SU provided an environment that embraced their identities as Black men and nontraditional students. During an interview with Stanley, he explained why he enjoyed attending SU:

> It's so many Black people in one place trying to do right and trying to get to the next level of success so for me it can be inspirational because I want everybody to do well so that Black people [can rise] in society.

Brandon offered similar remarks regarding his experiences as a HNBM:

> [It is] beautiful in the sense that you are in a setting that you can be yourself. You see people just like you, talk like you, walk like you, dressed like you, for the most part are trying to achieve the same goals.

In addition to wanting success for himself and his family, Rahim explained that he wanted to uplift Black people as a group:

> I don't think that we as a people at SU associate our education with true social advancement as a people. We think of it from an individualistic point of view. The nature of me coming to school is from that point of view. In other words, what you are doing affects more than you. . . . Therefore, as an HBCU, we represent the upper echelon of Black people although we all may think we come in just to get a degree. Therefore, we have to advance the cause on both fronts.

Rahim believed that whenever he stepped off campus, he represented the university. Thus, it was important for him to be a leader and show his community how SU was developing the next generation of Black leaders.

Participants acknowledged how their professors at SU provided support for nontraditional students. Vince, for example, described that his social work professors counseled him when he was going through a custody battle for his children. Though the battle could have been a distraction, his professors encouraged him to continue his academics and gave him advice on available resources to help during his custody hearings. Vince elaborated,

> The professors [really] stayed on me, kept me positive, and encouraged me to come to class. They even gave me their personal numbers [to call them] and they actually called me at home the other day. I couldn't believe it! I really appreciate when they call to check on me because they know my situation and know how I care about my kids. This lets you know that someone has your back and genuinely cares about you.

It was this genuine care Vince described that made SU so welcoming and supportive for these HNBMs. Though nontraditional students can often feel isolated from their peers, SU embraced the participants in this study and made them feel at home.

Discussion and Implications

To open this article I posed the question, "Why are Black men not succeeding in education?" Given that Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework theoretically guided this investigation, based on the lived experiences of the four HNBMs in this study, I frame my discussion to answer the following question: Why are nontraditional Black males succeeding? As several scholars on Black men have argued (e.g., Goings, 2015b; Harper, 2009), there are opportunities to learn from how Black men are successful that can inform the programs and policies educational institutions develop to support these men.

Similar to the results of Palmer and Strayhorn (2008) who found that Black men in their study "felt personally responsible for their education" (p. 132), the men in this study believed that their academic success was heavily influenced by their own action. Moreover, while these men were intrinsically motivated, their motivation was not only to ensure their academic success, as they believed their duty was to show positive images of Black men not only excelling in school, but also to being committed

husbands, fathers, and family men. Similar to previous research (Harper, 2015a), these men took pride in (re)defining the narrative about Black men, as they were well aware of the deficit perspectives about Black men and sought to always directly challenge that narrative by being successful.

Along with being intrinsically motivated, the men in this study acknowledged their family as an impetus for their success. In terms of the family unit, the three men who had children credited them as their motivation for reenrolling in college and succeeding academically. In Johnson-Bailey's (2001b) book *Sistahs in College: Making A Way Out of No Way* that investigated the lived experiences of eight reentry Black female students, she found that her participants often negotiated and bargained with their family to attend school due to their responsibilities as a parent and spouse. For the men in this study, they did not necessarily need to negotiate with their spouses and family. However, their spouses, children, and other family members understood the value of their education and that their sacrifices for these men were worthwhile because the men succeeded academically. Although this study did not explore the perspectives of the spouses of these men, future work exploring the gendered and racialized experiences of both Black male and female nontraditional students may provide a more nuanced account of how both men and women negotiate their responsibilities as student, parent, and spouse.

Along with family support, this study's findings echo previous research as participants discussed how they benefited from peer support. Unique to this study was the way in which the high-achieving men in this study benefited from peer support. Brandon described that as a nontraditional student, there was an opportunity for a "two-way learning" environment among peers. Specifically Brandon, Vince, and Rahim used their interactions with classmates to understand their own children better. At the same time, they shared their life and career wisdom with their younger classmates. These interactions fostered a sense of collective achievement among the participants and their classmates (Hucks, 2011). Moreover, Hucks argued in his study exploring the generational schooling experiences of Black boys and men that "as teachers and students, our fates are linked. It raises shared responsibility, shared accountability, and shared achievement" (p. 352). This sense of collective achievement and responsibility to each other as students compelled these men not only to achieve for self-gain but also to progress the image of students at HBCUs.

In this study, the men continued to acknowledge the role SU played in their success. They believed that the institution recognized their identities as both Black men and nontraditional students. This distinction was key to their achievements because they encountered professors and staff members who took an interest in understanding their lived experiences and then provided encouraging words and reached out to these men outside of class to ensure that these men were able to juggle their various life, work, and academic responsibilities. In essence, not only was the notion of collective achievement embraced by students, but it also was central to the mission of the institution and the governed faculty and staff's interactions with these men. These findings contradict Watt's (2011) results that nontraditional students experienced difficulty interacting with faculty and staff on campus. Moreover, this signals the need for future research to explore the interactions between faculty/staff and nontraditional Black

male students to uncover how faculty/staff affirm (or not) their identities as Black men and nontraditional students.

Moreover, the participants explained that because the campus was an HBCU whose mission was to educate African Americans, SU provided a positive campus ethos that promoted academic excellence of Black students generally and Black males specifically. In studies on the experiences of high-achieving Black males at PWIs, despite being high achievers these men still experienced instances of racism and stereotyping from peers and faculty (Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2015b). Furthermore, in Markle's (2015) mixed-methods study on nontraditional students, she found that approximately one third of the sample dropped out because they believed that university policies favored traditional students. This consequently led many of the participants to express feelings of isolation. While Markel's qualitative findings did not describe the race of the participants who felt this way, her findings speak of the difficulty many nontraditional students may have adjusting to a campus environment that is more tailored to traditional-aged students. However, the men in this study never discussed the campus being isolating to nontraditional students. From their perspectives, the men achieved *because of* rather than *despite* their institution.

Without a doubt, educational institutions generally and higher education institutions specifically continue to grapple with how to best support Black male students. Moreover, given that nontraditional students are the fastest growing population on campuses, institutions have to be cognizant of how to create a supportive environment for these students. Unfortunately, HBCUs are not often made a central part of this conversation. In essence, not only has deficit thinking guided the discussions about Black male success but HBCUs too are discussed from a deficit paradigm (Goings & Gasman, 2014). However, when noting that while HBCUs are only 3% of higher education institutions but are responsible for 16% of African Americans with a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2011), we must explore how these institutions nurture their students. The findings from this study provide some insight as to how HBCUs support their nontraditional Black male students and ensure these students develop a sense of belonging to campus. Moreover, this study provides the foundation of future work to apply Harper's ADAF to other adult education spaces. Last, future investigations are needed on the nontraditional Black male experience at various HBCU types (public, private, and religious) along with other institutions including but not limited to GED programs, community colleges, for-profit institutions, and other adult education spaces.

It is my hope that adult education scholars will continue to investigate Black males from an anti-deficit perspective. This is not only needed in the literature but also in academia as Black male students will benefit from scholars and practitioners who believe in their potential. If we as the educators who shape tomorrow's future do not fight for the reframing of deficit narratives about Black males, who will?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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