



## Challenges and Triumphs of Black Men in Higher Education

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### Article Details

Article Type: Review Article

Received date: 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2025

Accepted date: 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2025

Published date: 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2025

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**Citation:** Williams-Tillery, P., (2025). Challenges and Triumphs of Black Men in Higher Education. *J Soci Work Welf Policy*, 3(1): 141. doi: <https://doi.org/10.33790/jswwp1100141>.

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### Abstract

This practice brief addresses the declining number of Black men on college campuses in the United States. Many of these students attend White institutions (PWIs), where they may face discrimination and limited resources compared to historically Black colleges (HBCUs) or Black institutions (PBIs). A degree is often necessary for success in today's job market, which could incentivize Black male students to pursue higher education despite the challenges. The number of young women attending college remains high compared to young men, specifically young Black males. The educational experiences of Black boys often impact their transitions to and perceptions of going to college. Young Black males face unique challenges when deciding whether to attend college, which impacts the retention and attrition rates of this population. Addressing and overcoming systemic barriers and creating a more inclusive and diverse environment for Black male students on college campuses is essential. This brief report presents obstacles and solutions to support and empower this population for a more equitable and successful educational experience.

**Keywords:** College, PWIs, HBCUs, Black Male Education, System Barriers, Retention and Attrition, College Diversity, Inequalities, Ecological Validation Models

### Introduction

Black males' college and university enrollment is declining. Female college students outnumber males, enrolling at higher rates since 1996. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics [1], among high school graduates between 16 and 24, women outnumber men attending higher education institutions (HEIs), 65.3% to 57.6%. Male students' race and ethnicity were 85% Asian, 59.9% White, and 59.6% Black. Further examination and action are needed to address the declining enrollment of young Black men at HEIs.

Individuals may associate the privilege of attending college with educational background or race. Removing the stigma associated with who can and will be more successful with a college degree is essential. The U.S. educational system has long been one that regulates Black students—specifically, young Black males—and

impacts their academic goals [2]. College classrooms commonly have more female than male students. Black male undergraduate students comprise about 15% of the student population, with 70% attending a 2- or 4-year college and 14% enrolling in private, nonprofit universities [3]. The question is whether Black men have given up on college or colleges have given up on the Black male student population based on a history of oppression and racism.

### Equity in Education for Black Male Students

Black students in the United States, specifically Black males, have been disproportionately impacted by racial and educational inequalities [4-6]. Compared to other ethnic populations, Black students face greater challenges accessing quality education [5]. Despite efforts to establish equity, there remains a historical mindset that Black people do not succeed in education. The U.S. higher education system has a history of racial injustices and prejudices, leading to perceptions of Black students as intellectually inferior [6-10]. Beliefs that dehumanize a population lead to disparities in outcomes and opportunities that have a lasting impact on society. This population lives with the idea that they are not good enough amid misconceptions that have impacted generations of Black males. Black male students are often misjudged, perceived as unmotivated and indifferent, and subject to school expulsion and the juvenile system, perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline [4, 11]. Lasting change requires awareness to confront the historical and ongoing systemic barriers stagnating Black male youth and the fight for antiracist policies, which are necessary for expanding opportunities for their success in HEIs.

Racism persists in the U.S. educational system even though the educational system is becoming more diversified [12]. During the 2017-18 academic year, the United States classroom teacher population was dominated by people classified as non-Hispanic White. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 79% of teachers in the United States public school system during the 2017-2018 academic year were classified as non-White Hispanic. In comparison less than 7% were black, some 9% were Hispanic teachers, and 2% were Asian American. Despite beliefs that

Black students have the same opportunities as their peers, inequalities exist. White supremacy has been manifested in educational settings through curricula that are not culturally relevant and have disciplinary practices that affect students of color and assumptions about the capabilities and behaviors of these students. When most of the teachers are white, there is a risk that the educational experiences of minority students may be shaped by biases and a lack of understanding of their cultural context.

When teachers lack training on cultural sensitivity and how to address and teach minorities in the classroom, they tend to rely on self-taught beliefs and pedagogical techniques that reflect their biases and expect less from Black children [13, 14]. All teachers should be trained in cultural sensitivity but more specifically those who work in predominantly white schools that also provide services to children of color. The insufficient training of cultural sensitivity for teachers in mainly white educational environments negatively affects the academic success of Black children. This lack of training undermines the development of humanizing relationships of student-teaching, which are essential for emotional and academic support [15, 16]. Culturally relevant pedagogy faces these disparities, promoting commitment and performance [17]. In addition, the experiences of teachers who undergo training indicate improvements in the management of different classrooms [18]. Teachers' training to understand the stress and resilience of Black students is essential to dismantle systemic barriers [19, 20]. Ultimately, improving cultural sensitivity could mitigate the academic challenges faced by these students.

Black students lack role models when they do not have chances to encounter people who look like them at school, which can lead to lower self-esteem or other negative outcomes. Gebresilase & Zhao [21] highlight the importance of teacher-student interactions for the development of self-esteem and the enhancement of academic performance. Additionally, Acosta-Gonzaga [22] provided a link between self-esteem and performance. For example, Sun [23] and Jiang [24] highlight the mediating role of self-esteem in broader education contexts. Thus, without having role models to identify with and strive to be like, the academic and personal growth of Black students in school is limited, these findings suggest. The lack of Black role models within schools has a significant impact on students' self-esteem, academic performance, and prospects, especially considering powerful negative stereotypes of inferiority in society at large. As noted earlier, academic self-esteem acts as an important buffer in African American adolescents, highlighting the positive role self-perception can play in lessening the impact of negative experiences associated with a lack of representation [25].

Accepting the stereotype of inferiority could have a significant impact on Black students' academic achievement, socio-emotional well-being, and future opportunities. Inherited prejudices are associated with mental health issues [26], and the endorsement of the racial stereotype has negative effects on commitment and academic performance [27]. Also, internalized racism is associated with depressive symptoms [28] and leads to short-term perspectives [29]. Moreover, biases among school mental health professionals can compound these challenges [30].

Additionally, Graves and Wang [31] illustrate that Black boys face a heightened risk of school suspension, which exacerbates feelings of exclusion and negatively impacts self-esteem. Education shows a pattern of cultural misunderstanding and challenges of a school system that comprises 85% White and 75% female educators. An absence of representation perpetuates a lack of understanding of Black students' behaviors and harsh disciplinary actions impacting their development, academic achievement, and the overall future of the Black male student population [13, 32]. Without educators' consideration and attention, Black students with exceptional academic talent may face uncertainty.

## Gift or Curse for Young Black Boys?

Often overlooked for their unique academic skills, exceptional Black children may be referred to special education instead of gifted and talented programs [32, 33]. Misunderstanding leads to focusing on what is wrong with children of color rather than embracing their creativity and unique cultural characteristics, resulting in missed educational opportunities given to their non-Black counterparts. Including culturally responsive pedagogy in teaching diverse populations is an antidote for the growing number of Black boys prematurely referred to special education [34]. Black males receive more diagnoses of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and behavioral problems, creating bias in determining gifted and talented eligibility [35] as a result, they comprise 11.8% of the special education population.

The federal government does not require educational systems to offer gifted and talented education [36]. Children and youth should have the same opportunities to succeed as their peers, regardless of their cultural background, financial status, and area of interest [37]. Representation of Black educators makes a difference in academic outcomes for Black students; they are a core partner with GATE and are dedicated to supporting the success of Black students. This facilitates the support that has become a necessity in addressing the inequitable engagement of Black students [35]. These educators' culturally relevant practices serve to amplify and solidify student academic identities, offering a polycentric alternative to the conflicting results of sub-representation for Black males [38, 39]. Moreover, these practices counteract the anti-Black bias embedded within the educational system [40]. These dynamics are important to understand to promote equitable access and foster the potential of Black students in Gate designs [41].

Nicholson-Crotty et al. [33] found that the lack of Black teachers in schools decreases the likelihood that Black students will be referred to GATE programs. These students are typically referred to as "at risk" and often find both capacity and identity eroded. Whiting [42] calls for a paradigm shift in our perception of Black students; that is, we must focus on their strengths and abilities as opposed to their deficits. He believes acculturation is a key attribute to building a positive scholarly identity with Black male students. Whiting [42] explains that we need to be able to create our programs and practices to support these students grow and develop their abilities so that they will be able to live a rich academic life and a rich inside/outside life while taking advantage of their talents.

The lived experiences of Black men in the home, community, and spirituality contribute to their strengths in higher education institutions. These strengths can be recognized and utilized for better support and programs for the success of, in this case, Black men in the college education spectrum. Dr. Shaun Harper's concept of "anti-deficit" frames the institutional response necessary to address the systemic obstacles faced by Black men in higher education, situating this oration within a discourse of resilience rather than deficit and dismissing individualism as antithetical to true community [43]. Within the Black community, peer networks, spirituality, and the bonds therein are essential for students' academic persistence [44, 45]. Scott [46] emphasizes the need for these support systems to both combat the negative effects of racism and build a sense of belonging. The studies also shine a light on the experiences of Black male students, demonstrating how the initiatives in historically Black universities facilitate their educational travel [47, 48]. Grasping how these strengths shape academic outcomes can help institutional policies maximize support for Black male students [49].

Despite the need for cultural competence when working with diverse students, teachers report insufficient training in culturally responsive teaching practices [50, 51]. In addition to building a stronger rapport with Black students, culturally competent teachers can motivate and prepare them for higher education learning environments. Young

Black males subject to consistent questioning about their intellect and given few opportunities to achieve success cannot always envision going to college, and these stigmas usually follow them into their future.

### Challenges Faced by Black Men on College Campuses

In addition to the apparent barriers Black male students face on college campuses, such as financial challenges, limited resources, and a lack of male representation, they continue to struggle with systemic racism. Lopes Cardozo et al. [52] and Srimulyani et al. [53] showed that education can potentially empower minoritized and marginalized groups. However, education systems may promote discrimination, creating an environment of conflict and disagreements related to educational disparities and cultural and social issues. Higher education systems are microcosms of society, maintaining Black men's discomfort [54].

Often viewed as a societal problem, Black men have unique experiences in HEIs based on two inherent characteristics: the color of their skin and their gender. In a study of the prevalence of negativity associated with Black men in U.S. higher education, Brooms [55] provided constructive insights into their social identities and experiences. When college and university leaders take into consideration the exclusive experiences of Black male students, they can advocate for dismantling racism and creating fair and just systems within the academic arena as well as outside.

Black men on college campuses face a range of challenges and achievements that necessitate a nuanced understanding. Despite these roadblocks, the push of tutoring as well as the help from the community helped to boost their experiences and results [56]. According to Harper [43], tailored support strategies are important to enhance their learning performance. For some Black men, growing up in underprivileged neighborhoods makes them more susceptible to messages that highlight limitations instead of possibilities. This narrative can have a major impact on how they see themselves and how they view the value of higher education. Amechi et al. [57] reveal different opportunities and needs across subgroups, and Kumah-Abiwu [58] shows how living in the city can work positively in favor of some backgrounds, and negatively for others.

Hale [59] discusses the dynamic contribution of historically Black faculty in challenging stereotypes. Author, Mcelderry [60] highlights the power of persistence strategies for Black men in mostly white institutions, which support social ties and help reduce feelings of alienation. Addressing mental health problems is also key to encouraging resilience among these students [61]. It is critical to understand the resilience and resolve that so many Black men show despite these hurdles. However, there are also stories of success, mentorship, and community, stories that capture the potential for success and the power of education to transform lives. Increasing the representation of Black men in education empowers their community while encouraging them to strive towards further achievements, like college degrees or professional pursuits.

Young Black men are resilient and have the same college aspirations as other cultures. They want to become leaders in their communities and earn more than their parents and grandparents, and they see college as their path to a new life. Young Black boys need encouragement from their parents and other positive role models to attend college. Rethon et al. [62] contended that minorities have a stronger desire to attend college than their White peers, even in the face of apparent barriers and exclusionary strongholds.

Historically, Black people were not allowed to learn how to read and write, it was viewed as a threat to the slavery-based economy [63]. Despite a history of enslavement, Black people have always had a desire to learn and recognized that education was the key to success and wanted to ensure that the next generation's path to a quality of education was better than what they experienced. Historically Black Colleges and Universities frequently offer opportunities for

socioeconomic mobility for Black students [64-66]. Many Black entertainers, politicians, and professional athletes have attended HBCUs, which provided the best opportunities for highlighting and preserving their work until the 1970s [67]. HBCUs were established from a profound commitment to education for Black individuals, founded by Black educators, churches, and Quakers dedicated to abolishing slavery [68].

HBCUs have a rich history in the Black community, and some of these institutions have been conveniently located in the community, making them more accessible for Black students to attend. It is not uncommon for Black parents to encourage their children to attend HBCUs or PBIs to continue family traditions. These environments are often family-oriented, and students can see other scholars who look like them. Despite HBCUs' mission to serve and create welcoming environments for diverse student populations, Black male student enrollment declined from 1996 to 2007 amid the development of other HEIs providing similar academic services [5]. Black men seek institutions that meet their immediate requirements, are convenient, and address nontraditional and traditional students' needs. To create an inclusive environment, it will be important for HBCUs to create programs to better serve diverse populations.

### Practical Applications and the Interplay of Identities

The intersectionality of race, sexuality, religion, and socioeconomic status has a profound influence on the experiences of Black queer men in universities and historically Black universities. Recent research has been critical of how Black male initiatives (BMIs) for Black queer men are efficient and inclusive. According to Hutchings and Thomas [69], these kinds of initiatives often reinforce a narrow definition of leadership in which queer identities are marginalized. Similarly, Hutchings [70] also identifies the specific obstacles faced by gay, bisexual, and trans black males in these forms of mentoring schemes, stressing the necessity of more inclusive practices. Black queer men experience complexities based on their identity at the intersection of their feeling of belonging [71] and benefit from programs that will accommodate their specific needs. When developing culturally relevant programming to support black queer men, Author Huerta, [72] highlighted the importance of emotional vulnerability in these programs which can inform strategies aimed at creating educational supportive environments. To address the universal encounters faced by Black educators, it would be helpful to consider theoretical frameworks and lived experiences. Authors LEMUS JR et al. [73] outlined the solutions required to solve these issues, whereas Erwin (2021) introduced public accounts that highlight how black teachers navigate and experience institutions with a white majority, underlying the urgency that Black male initiatives should be in alignment with the inherent barriers. The challenges facing black male initiatives for black queer men in their inclusiveness and efficiency have been voiced by recent scholarship. For instance, Hutchings and Thomas [69] contend that these initiatives often reinforce a narrow understanding of leadership that marginalizes queer identities. Similarly, Hutchings [69] discusses the unique obstacles confronting gay, bisexual, and trans black males in these mentoring schemes, stressing the necessity of putting more inclusive methods in place.

Black queer men often navigate complex intersections of identity that affect their sense of belonging [71], but LEMUS JR et al. [73] proposed viable solutions to these problems. This echoes the work of Erwin (2021) on personal narratives that foreground the barriers that Black educators experience in White contexts and underscores the pressing need for tailored support that reflects the unique experiences of this population. This unique struggle is also the space Black queer persons are positioned at the crossroads of intragroup marginalization and identity politics [74] and their needs for intersectional activism are often overlooked. This double marginalization often leads to feelings of the masses, as explored



in the analyses of queer men's perceptions of sexual aggression [75]. Additionally, it highlights the experiences of marginalized identities within the academy about rendering the invisible struggles apparent [76, 77]. The belonging of LGBTQ+ students of color interrupts the hegemonic narratives that can obscure their unique challenges [78]. These complexities also reflect the struggles of Latin men in higher education, indicating larger tendencies of marginalization [79].

### Critical Race Theory and Higher Education

Critical race theory (CRT) reflects racism's infiltration of the U.S. educational system in curriculum design, lessons, standardized tests, and behavioral management for students of color [80]. CRT addresses education standards related to Black students, particularly males. Understanding CRT could lead to dismantling inequality and unfair systems created by the education system and creating more equitable systems. PWI administrators may categorize Black male students as Affirmative Action admissions or sports scholarship recipients. Some researchers view racism in higher education as normal, a cultural rather than a rare experience for diverse populations [80]. CRT has not received wide acceptance and use in HEIs. Other theories, such as the African American male theory and the community cultural wealth theory, focus on Black men, their college choices, and their campus experiences [5]. Theoretical approaches that support the development of policies and procedures focused on creating equity and systematic changes for Black male students could assist administrators and educators in creating safe educational environments, addressing barriers to success and social and emotional well-being.

### Mental Health for Black Males Attending College

Regardless of a student's race, socioeconomic status, or gender, HEI leaders should focus on mental health and awareness. Students impacted by mental health issues are less likely to graduate on time are more likely to earn lower grades and do not always ask for help [81- 88]. Addressing and offering mental health services on campus is necessary for some students' success. Colleges and Universities will need to ensure that mental health services for Black men are supported through collective frameworks that will work towards systemic change in higher education. According to Authors Johnson and Florestal-Kevelier [89], collective impact approaches are key to this issue, as are the factors of social determinants discussed by Stewart, Maiden, and Stewart [90]. In addition, Kirkbride et al. [91] establish evidence connecting social determinants to mental health outcomes, further justifying the institutional workforce to focus on recruitment, retention, and graduation practices.

The ecological validation model serves as a framework for establishing institutional working groups aimed at promoting systemic change. Many educational institutions are implementing strategic programs to enhance equity and inclusion within their communities. Morgan State University and UNC Greensboro initiatives are examples of this approach, focused on advancing the success of students, particularly on behalf of historically excluded demographic groups [92, 93]. Evidence indicates that providing validating environments can help foster self-efficacy across different student groups [94]. Interventions for adaptation to this model, as highlighted by Shum et al. [95], also emphasize the necessity of context for the support of these structures. Ultimately, the incorporation of ecological views can profoundly transform cultural characteristics on university campuses [96].

Faculty and staff may struggle to identify and understand the impact of trauma that shows up in the classroom [97], leaving them challenged to help their students. PWI leaders need to create Black male initiative programs (BMI) to improve their overall academic performance and make them feel like they belong on campus [98, 99]. In addition to academic rigor, Black males present with past and current traumatic experiences. Some students experience challenges before they go to college [100] and might struggle to ask for assistance from mental health professionals or access mental health services [101].

Students of color face increased mental health challenges when attending PWI campuses [102]. There are differences between the college experiences of White students and students. White students feel a greater sense of belonging [103] than their non-White peers. In contrast, students of color reported higher rates of harassment and more experiences of racism than their White counterparts [104].

Many of the challenges faced by Black males are related to past historical trauma and negative relationships with people in authority. Some Black men choose college to escape their impoverished communities, but once there, they may face some of the same problems they tried to leave behind. Black males attending PWIs may be subject to microaggressions from their peers and faculty and present with anxieties and hypervigilance related to past negative experiences with police officers [105]. These conditions could create an environment where Black males feel unsafe, with their physical and psychological well-being threatened. Acknowledging and addressing the traumatic experiences of Black men in the academic environment and advocating for equal educational opportunities is crucial to redirect young Black men to higher education.

### Conclusion

This brief is of relevance to higher education administrators, faculty, and the student affairs professionals at PWIs, PBIs, and HBCUs. The recommendations are intended to respond to the specific challenges and opportunities of each institution type in supporting the appropriation of Black boys and men in schools. But intentionally and effectively serving marginalized students, especially Black male students, on college and university campuses must be done holistically and intentionally. Once institution leaders understand what challenges Black males are currently and historically facing, they can develop retention strategies that address the unique barriers that this student population encounters. Word of mouth is one of the most effective recruitment tools that college and university administrators have. When administrators design and implement mentoring programs and supportive academic spaces grounded in cultural competencies, Black men will start to feel like they fit on campus and share those experiences with other Black males contemplating college.

Addressing the barriers faced by Black male students when attending higher education institutions requires more than just a one-stop shop approach; supportive strategies must recognize the complex dynamics experienced by this student population to promote effective institutional changes [106, 107]. For Black students to feel as though they belong in any given school climate, racial injustices must be addressed, while also aiding students to check any traumatic experiences related to his or her previous academic journey. From this research, college administrators can assist Black students in cultivating a new normalcy, inspiring them toward the advancement of their academic objectives. College and university leaders can eliminate these legacy systemic racist policies and develop inclusive practices that lead to creating a more equitable academic setting. These efforts could enhance the educational experiences of Black male students, contributing to a more diverse campus community, changing their perception of HEIs, and generating a sense of pride within their families and communities that will impact future generations. Investing in the success of Black male students is essential because they contribute to the future workforce and are critical to building a more equitable society.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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