



Surviving to Thriving: An Exploration of the Impacts of Internalized Racism on Retention and Completion of College Among African American Male Undergraduates: Connecting Students, Campus, and Community Through a Social Belonging Intervention

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigates the impact of internalized racism on dropout rates among African American male undergraduates in United States higher education and examines a pilot social belonging intervention designed to address these challenges [1-3]. Despite ongoing initiatives to expand postsecondary access, African American men consistently experience disproportionately high attrition rates, driven not only by systemic inequities but also by complex psychosocial challenges such as internalized negative racial beliefs, stereotype threat, and social isolation [4, 5]. Guided by the conceptual framework of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, the study explores how diminished self-worth, cultural isolation, and reluctance to seek institutional or community support undermine students' sense of belonging, academic participation, and persistence [6]. The pilot intervention was implemented during the spring semester and included approximately five hours of engagement across three 90-minute group sessions, along with pre- and post-surveys and reflective group discussions with African American male undergraduates from rural and urban backgrounds attending a rural, predominantly white institution [7]. Results indicate that manifestations of internalized racism, including detachment from campus life and hesitancy to connect with available resources [2, 8, 9], increase dropout risk, while the intervention promoted greater resource awareness, perceived validation, and willingness to seek support [2, 10, 11]. These findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and belonging-centered strategies in higher education to confront the enduring and contemporary effects of racism and to foster equity, resilience, and academic success among African American male students [12-14].

Keywords: Internalized Racism, African American Male Undergraduates, Dropout Rates, Higher Education, Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, Stereotype Threat, Cultural Isolation, Sense of Belonging, Resilience, Retention

Background

African American male undergraduates in the United States continue to experience significantly higher dropout rates compared to their peers, despite increased access to higher education. This disparity is shaped by structural inequities such as systemic racism and institutional barriers, as well as psychosocial factors including internalized racism and diminished social belonging [2, 3, 4, 15]. Guided by these realities, this study examines the effects of internalized racism and social isolation while also piloting a culturally responsive social belonging intervention for African American men at a rural, predominantly white institution (PWI).

The research draws on the theoretical framework of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), which emphasizes the enduring effects of historical trauma and negative racial beliefs across generations [16]. Dropout rates among African American men remain persistently high, reflecting institutional, cultural, and psychosocial barriers. Beyond commonly cited factors such as academic preparation and financial strain, students often face invisibility, microaggressions, and limited support, particularly in rural or predominantly white institutional settings. These challenges are exacerbated when support programs are fragmented or fail to account for racialized and ruralized experiences.

Internalized racism involves the acceptance of negative stereotypes about one's racial group, which can diminish self-esteem, academic

motivation, and engagement [16]. Transgenerational trauma further contributes to psychological distress rooted in historical and ongoing racial oppression, influencing academic outcomes and self-concept [16]. Stereotype threat, cultural isolation, and discrimination within campus environments also undermine belonging, self-worth, and academic engagement [4, 5]. Together, these dynamics may contribute to reluctance to seek support, detachment from campus life, and increased risk of attrition [2, 10, 17].

The literature points to the need for culturally responsive interventions that address these realities directly. Social belonging programs that include group dialogue, peer support, storytelling, and faculty or staff mentorship can improve engagement, validation, and campus and community connections for African American men [10, 14, 18]. Culturally affirming strategies that integrate resource awareness, intentional mentorship, and student voice have been associated with stronger effects on retention and resilience [2]. Participatory and trauma-informed designs are especially useful because they acknowledge lived realities, foster trust, and align support with students' cultural strengths and experiences [16, 19].

This study is significant because it addresses a persistent gap in graduation and retention rates for African American male undergraduates, especially in rural PWI contexts where race, place, and belonging intersect in distinctive ways. By piloting a culturally responsive social belonging intervention, the study offers evidence to inform institutional reforms, campus policy, and social work practice aimed at improving outcomes for this historically marginalized population [4, 20].

The study aimed to develop, implement, and evaluate a social belonging intervention to improve academic engagement, psychosocial well-being, and retention among African American male college students. Specifically, it sought to:

- Examine how race, place, and campus climate influence student belonging and persistence.
- Identify the effects of internalized racism and social isolation on academic outcomes.
- Pilot a culturally responsive intervention and analyze its impact on belonging, engagement, and campus connections.
- Generate recommendations for social work practice, higher education policy, and future intervention research to advance equity and inclusion [10, 14].

This research adheres to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, which mandates a commitment to social and racial justice, respect for diversity, and empowerment of marginalized individuals and groups. The study design prioritized participant confidentiality, voluntary informed consent, and the responsible use of data to improve student well-being and institutional practice. The intervention also incorporated principles of cultural humility, trauma-informed care, and anti-oppressive practice, in keeping with professional social work research and education standards.

The study directly responds to the social work grand challenge to eliminate social isolation. African American male college students frequently experience social isolation due to intersecting barriers of race, place, and class, compromising their academic persistence and mental health. By centering belonging, connection, and empowerment through culturally attuned intervention strategies, this project sought to strengthen social networks and contribute to more resilient and engaged campus communities [11].

Literature Review

Research consistently demonstrates that African American male undergraduates in the United States encounter substantial barriers to college persistence and completion, with internalized racism and diminished social belonging emerging as critical yet often underexamined psychosocial risk factors [2, 3, 20]. Contemporary

scholarship often frames these challenges through Critical Race Theory (CRT), Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), and social identity development, all of which help explain how historical legacies of racism, stereotype threat, and exclusionary campus climates constrain opportunity and erode student well-being [5, 6].

Internalized Racism and Academic Success

Internalized racism may be understood as the conscious or unconscious acceptance of negative societal beliefs and stereotypes about one's own racial group, contributing to diminished self-esteem, self-efficacy, and academic motivation [16, 21]. College students who internalize such beliefs may be more likely to disengage from academic life and to report poorer psychological health outcomes. This internalization stems from prolonged exposure to systemic racism, unequal educational opportunity, and persistent negative societal messaging. Stereotype threat further intensifies this process by increasing anxiety about confirming racialized assumptions, which can negatively affect academic performance and persistence.

A strong body of scholarship identifies social belonging, defined as the sense of being accepted, respected, and valued within the academic community, as a foundational predictor of persistence for African American male students [4, 11, 14]. Culturally supportive environments, intentional mentorship, and affirming peer networks can mitigate the effects of internalized racism, bolster resilience, and strengthen retention. These findings suggest that belonging is not merely emotional support but a structural and relational condition linked to academic survival [10, 14].

Intersectionality, Rurality, and Institutional Barriers

Recent scholarship suggests that African American men at rural PWIs experience a form of double marginalization, as underrepresentation by both race and rural context compounds feelings of isolation and invisibility [13, 22]. Rural-origin [7, 23] Black students may face limited access to culturally responsive supports, while traditional interventions often fail to address their social, geographic, and cultural realities. These findings [24] support the need for multidimensional approaches that integrate psychosocial, institutional, and cultural mechanisms of support.

Culturally Responsive Interventions

Evidence also underscores the effectiveness of interventions that center cultural affirmation, kinship networks, mentorship, and student voice, especially when designed through participatory and trauma-informed frameworks [19]. Belonging interventions have been shown to improve academic confidence, connection, and persistence among marginalized students. However, several gaps remain. Traditional retention initiatives often focus on academic or financial support without adequately addressing internalized racism, cultural trauma, and belonging [16, 25]. In addition, relatively few studies employ participatory designs that elevate student agency and lived experience, especially in rural PWI settings [5, 14, 16, 22].

The present study responds to these gaps by using a mixed-methods, participatory pilot intervention to examine how race, place, internalized racism, and social belonging shape the experiences of African American male undergraduates in a rural PWI context.

Method

Overview

This study employed a mixed-methods, participatory design to explore internalized racism and social belonging among African American male undergraduates and to pilot a culturally responsive intervention. Quantitative pre- and post-surveys were combined with qualitative reflective group discussions to examine changes in campus engagement, empowerment, and resilience.

Participants and Setting

Participants were African American male undergraduate students enrolled at a rural, predominantly white institution in the United States. Convenience sampling was used to identify students who

self-identified as experiencing challenges with campus integration or academic persistence. Eligibility criteria included current enrollment, identification as an African American male, and voluntary participation. Recruitment was coordinated through the Student Success Center. A total of five students enrolled in the pilot, and all five completed the pre-survey, post-survey, and structured group sessions [2].

Intervention Structure

The social belonging intervention was implemented as a pilot during the spring semester, with approximately five total hours of engagement. The intervention included three 90-minute group sessions facilitated by the researcher. Sessions were grounded in cultural affirmation, trauma-informed practice, and participatory engagement.

Activities included storytelling and the sharing of lived experiences related to race, rurality, belonging, and campus life; community asset mapping and a campus scavenger hunt focused on identifying supportive people, spaces, and institutional resources; and a scenario-based activity in which participants worked through common academic and social challenges. Across sessions, participants engaged in collective reflection, peer support, and discussion about strategies for help-seeking, relationship building, and campus connection.

Data Collection

Data collection combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Participants completed pre- and post-intervention surveys that included the Social Belonging and Academic Fit Scale, five-point Likert-type items, and open-ended questions designed to assess belonging, engagement, and awareness of campus resources at baseline and following the intervention. The five-point Likert scale ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Demographic questions captured participant characteristics, including first-generation status, rural or urban origin, and other background information relevant to the study context. In addition to surveys, reflective group discussions occurred during and at the conclusion of the intervention sessions. These discussions invited participants to describe their experiences of campus climate, social belonging, internalized racism, and the perceived relevance and impact of the intervention. Field notes were also maintained to document group dynamics, emerging issues, and suggestions for improving the program.

To increase transparency, the survey instrument and selected open-ended prompts may be included in an appendix or supplemental materials. Item-level pre- and post-intervention findings may also be presented in tabular form to support readers' assessment of the intervention's effects.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means and simple comparisons of pre- and post-intervention item scores, to track shifts in belonging, engagement, and related behaviors. Particular attention was given to items assessing knowledge of campus resources, perceived validation, feelings of being welcomed on campus, and confidence in forming new connections.

Qualitative data from open-ended survey responses and reflective group discussions were analyzed using an inductive coding approach. Open coding was used to identify patterns and meanings emerging from participants' own words rather than from a predetermined codebook. Codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes that reflected students' experiences of internalized racism, belonging, and campus engagement.

Although coding was primarily inductive, interpretation of the findings was informed by the study's conceptual frameworks of PTSS, CRT, and social belonging. These frameworks helped illuminate

how historical trauma, systemic racism, and campus climate shaped the meaning participants assigned to their experiences and informed how themes were interpreted in relation to retention and well-being.

Ethical Considerations, Rigor, and Positionality

The study adhered to the NASW Code of Ethics and the university's Institutional Review Board protocols. Procedures included informed consent, participant briefing on confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Data were handled securely, and identifying information was removed or masked to protect participant privacy.

To enhance rigor and trustworthiness, the study used triangulation and peer debriefing. Triangulation was achieved by drawing on multiple data sources, including pre- and post-surveys, group discussions, and field notes, to corroborate patterns across the dataset. Peer debriefing with a colleague familiar with African American male student success and qualitative inquiry provided critical feedback on coding decisions, theme development, and emerging interpretations. These strategies strengthened the credibility of the findings and supported more thoughtful attention to potential bias.

The researcher's positionality also informed the study. As a social work scholar-practitioner committed to racial and educational equity, the researcher approached the study with awareness of the historical and contemporary marginalization of African American men in higher education. Reflexive attention was given to power dynamics, interpretation, and the responsibility to honor participants' voices while situating their experiences within broader structural realities.

Research Questions

1. How does participation in a social belonging intervention influence African American male students' sense of belonging within a university setting?
2. What measurable changes occur in engagement, resource awareness, and academic confidence following the intervention?
3. How do students describe the role of social belonging in shaping their persistence and connection to campus?
4. What implications do the intervention outcomes have for social work practice and policy in higher education?

Results

Quantitative findings indicated increases in participants' awareness of campus resources and opportunities for involvement, as well as stronger recognition of the importance of social belonging. Survey items measuring knowledge of involvement opportunities (mean = 4.8) and importance of social belonging (mean = 4.6) reflected the highest levels of agreement, with all participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that the intervention increased these dimensions. Participants also reported stronger perceptions of being taken seriously by peers and staff (mean = 4.2) and feeling welcomed on campus (mean = 3.8). Confidence in making new campus connections also improved following participation (mean = 3.6).

At the same time, lower scores persisted in areas such as feeling included in groups (mean = 1.8) and comfort with authentic self-expression (mean = 2.4), indicating ongoing challenges in these areas. Moderately positive perceptions of acceptance, respect, and pride in belonging (means ranging from 2.6 to 3.2) suggested some improvement, but also reflected continued neutrality and disagreement for some items. Item-level pre- and post-intervention results may be included in an appendix to provide additional transparency regarding the pattern of change across survey items.

Qualitative findings revealed themes of empowerment, support, and service needs. Participants emphasized the importance of financial aid, mentoring relationships, culturally relevant group engagement, and visible campus resources. Students described greater self-discovery, increased willingness to seek help, and stronger recognition of the role of peer relationships and culturally diverse activities in fostering

a sense of belonging and helping them move beyond their comfort zones. Approximately 76.9% of participants reported greater empathy and understanding for classmates from different backgrounds.

Participants also identified recommendations for improving the intervention. They expressed a need for more student-led, culturally responsive activities, intentional group mixing, and increased sensitivity to personal backgrounds, including dietary preferences and religious diversity. Empowerment-oriented sessions, such as scenario-based activities and storytelling, were identified as particularly meaningful. Participants also recommended ongoing needs assessments, expanded peer leadership, and resource-rich environments to strengthen future programming.

Discussion

This pilot study contributes to ongoing scholarship on the impacts of internalized racism and social isolation on African American male undergraduates, particularly in rural PWI settings. Quantitative findings suggest that the intervention enhanced participants' awareness of campus resources, understanding of the importance of social belonging, and perceptions of validation from peers and staff. These changes are meaningful because they point to the potential of even brief interventions to improve relational and institutional connections [2, 6, 14].

At the same time, persistent difficulties related to group inclusion and authentic self-expression indicate that short-term interventions alone cannot fully resolve the deeper structural and cultural barriers students face. These findings suggest that while belonging interventions can open pathways to connection and help-seeking, broader institutional transformation is still necessary to address exclusion, invisibility, and the long-term consequences of racialized campus climates.

The qualitative findings deepen this interpretation. Themes of empowerment, self-discovery, and greater willingness to seek support reflect the value of creating spaces where African American male students can process lived experiences collectively and identify strengths within themselves and their communities. Participants' emphasis on mentoring, peer networks, and culturally responsive activities aligns with literature suggesting that belonging is strengthened when students encounter affirming relationships and environments that acknowledge their identities rather than asking them to suppress them.

Viewed through the lenses of PTSS and CRT, the findings underscore how internalized racism, historical trauma, and structural inequities shape students' self-perceptions and experiences with campus systems. Reluctance to seek help, uncertainty about belonging, and reduced comfort with authentic self-expression may be understood not as individual deficits but as responses to broader systems of exclusion and accumulated racial harm. In this context, the intervention's emphasis on storytelling, collective dialogue, and asset-based engagement offered participants an alternative space for validation and connection.

The intersection of race and rurality is especially important in this study. Participants' experiences support the idea that African American men in rural PWI environments may navigate a distinct form of double marginalization tied to both racial underrepresentation and geographic context. By centering these lived experiences, the study begins to address a gap in literature that has often focused more on urban or majority-Black institutional environments.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The findings reinforce the importance of trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and relationship-centered approaches in higher education social work practice. Social work practitioners can play a key role in designing interventions that move beyond deficit-based models and instead emphasize empowerment, belonging, and

connection. Interpersonal support, community building, and ongoing needs assessment should be central features of campus-based programming for African American male students.

Implications for Higher Education Practice

Institutions should embed social belonging interventions within broader campus support structures rather than treating them as isolated programs. Resource visibility, culturally relevant activities, and inclusive practices that respond to diverse student needs are essential. Faculty and staff training should address group inclusion, authenticity, and empowerment to make campus environments more welcoming and less alienating for marginalized students. Student-led and peer-mentoring models may also increase impact by leveraging trusted relationships and lived experience.

Implications for Research and Policy

Future research should examine the long-term effects of social belonging interventions on persistence, academic outcomes, and psychosocial well-being across broader and more diverse samples. Longitudinal, multi-institutional, and mixed-methods studies would be especially valuable in identifying which intervention components generate the strongest and most sustainable outcomes. Additional research should also examine how intentional grouping, culturally tailored activities, and strategies to support authentic self-expression operate across different institutional contexts.

Policy implications include the need for sustained institutional funding for culturally affirming, student-centered programs; campus-wide training on inclusion and trauma-informed support; and routine, data-informed needs assessments in student services planning. Policies that promote student voice, culturally responsive programming, and equitable access to support are likely to strengthen retention and belonging among marginalized student populations.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The small sample size and convenience-based recruitment limit generalizability. The intervention was brief and conducted at a single institution, which constrains conclusions about long-term effects on retention and belonging. In addition, reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias. Future studies would be strengthened by larger samples, longer follow-up periods, and triangulation with additional institutional data such as academic records or retention outcomes.

Conclusion

This study highlights the profound influence of internalized racism, stereotype threat, and cultural isolation on the educational experiences of African American male undergraduates. The findings suggest that diminished self-worth, reluctance to seek support, and uncertainty about belonging may heighten the risk of dropout, even as institutions continue to pursue access and retention goals. At the same time, the pilot intervention demonstrated that culturally responsive, belonging-centered programming can increase awareness of resources, perceived validation, and willingness to seek support.

The study also illustrates that belonging is not merely an individual feeling, but a structural and relational condition shaped by campus climate, representation, and access to affirming support. For African American men in rural PWI contexts, interventions that center storytelling, peer connection, mentorship, and asset-based engagement may offer important pathways toward resilience and persistence. Continued institutional commitment, culturally grounded practice, and future research are necessary to build on these findings and advance equity in higher education.

AI Use Declaration

During the preparation of this manuscript, the researcher used ChatGPT to assist with grammar review and idea development. After using this tool, the author thoroughly reviewed, revised, and verified

the content and assumes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final work.

Ethical Approval

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of a public university in the United States and conducted in accordance with established ethical standards.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no personal or financial conflicts of interest related to this study.

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