

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

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.

Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigates the impact of internalized racism on dropout rates among African American male undergraduates in the United States higher education. 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 and stereotype threat. Guided by the conceptual framework of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, the research explores how diminished self-worth, cultural isolation, and reluctance to seek institutional or community support undermine students' sense of belonging, academic participation, and persistence. Data collection included pre- and post-surveys and reflective group discussions with African American male undergraduates from rural and urban backgrounds attending a rural, predominantly white institution. Results reveal that manifestations of internalized racism—including detachment from campus life and hesitancy to connect with available resources—increase dropout risk. Conversely, culturally responsive environments, strong mentorship, and targeted interventions promote resilience, engagement, and retention. These findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, culturally informed strategies and policies in higher education to confront the legacy and real-time impact of internalized racism, ultimately fostering equity and academic success for African American male students.

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 greater access to higher education. This ongoing disparity is shaped by structural inequities such as systemic racism and institutional barriers, as well as impacted by psychosocial factors like internalized racism and reduced social belonging ([Farmer & Hope, 2015; O'Neal, 2020](#); Allen et al., 2018; Cintron et al., 2020; [Farmer & Hope, 2015; O'Neal, 2020](#)). The research draws on the theoretical framework of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, which emphasizes the enduring effects of historical trauma and negative racial beliefs across generations (DeGruy, 2005). Dropout rates among African American men persist nationwide, with roughly two-thirds failing to graduate within six years of enrollment at public colleges, reflecting both institutional and cultural barriers. Beyond commonly cited factors such as academic preparation and financial strain, students face feelings of invisibility, microaggressions, and a lack of support, particularly in rural or predominantly white institutional settings. These challenges increased when support programs are fragmented, divided, or fail to account for racial and rural identity (Harper et al., 2012; Robinson, 2022). The causes of high dropout rates are multifaceted. Some of the causes are identified in the following discussion.

Internalized Racism: Internalized racism is the acceptance of negative stereotypes about one's racial group diminishes self-esteem, academic motivation, and engagement, directly linked to lowered academic achievement and retention (DeGruy, 2005; Gale et al., 2020). Secondly, transgenerational trauma is the psychological distress from historical and ongoing racial oppression that persists across generations, affecting academic outcomes (DeGruy, 2005; Nadal et al., 2021). Lastly, stereotype threats and exclusion- the acute experiences of stereotype threat,

cultural isolation, and discrimination within campus environments further undermine belonging, self-worth, and engagement (~~Cross, 1991~~; Allen et al., 2018; [Cross, 1991](#)). The impact includes diminished self-worth, reluctance to seek campus support, detachment from campus life, and ultimately, increased risk of college dropout (Cintron et al., 2020; WGU Labs, 2024). The literature points to the urgent need for multi-layered, culturally responsive interventions: Social Belonging Programs are evidence-based belonging interventions that include group dialogue, peer support, storytelling, and faculty/staff mentorship—improve engagement, validation, and campus and community connections for African American men (Brooms, 2017; [Harper, 2015](#); Strayhorn, 2012; ~~Harper, 2015~~).

Culturally Affirming Strategies should include programs that embed cultural affirmation, resource awareness, and intentional mentorship, demonstrating stronger effects on retention and resilience (Cintron et al., 2020; WGU Labs, 2024).

Participatory and trauma-informed designs are effective interventions that draw on participatory models and trauma-informed practices, co-created with student input to address lived realities and experiences, and build trust through culturally consistent support structures (Bligh & Flood, 2013; [DeGruy, 2005](#); Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2018; ~~DeGruy, 2005~~).

Systemic and practice recommendations should include faculty/staff training, student-led activities, targeted dissemination of resources, and a campus-wide commitment to inclusion are essential. Holistic approaches must address structural, psychosocial, and educational domains in unison, ensuring frequent needs assessment and cross-campus and community collaboration. This study is significant because it addresses the persistent gap in graduation and retention rates for African American male undergraduates—one of the most urgent equity challenges in U.S. higher education. Traditional interventions often overlook the complex roles of internalized

racism, cultural affirmation, and belonging, especially in rural and predominantly white institutional (PWI) settings. By piloting a culturally responsive social belonging intervention, the study provides timely evidence and insights to inform institutional reforms, campus policies, and social work practice aimed at improving outcomes for this historically marginalized population (Allen et al., 2018; Farmer & Hope, 2015).

The study aims 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 seeks 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 ([Brooms, 2017](#); Strayhorn, 2018; [Brooms, 2017](#)).

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's design prioritizes participant confidentiality, voluntary informed consent, and the responsible use of data to improve student well-being and institutional practice (NASW, 2021). The intervention incorporates principles of cultural humility, trauma-informed care, and anti-oppressive practice, in line with standards for professional social work research and education.

The study directly responds to the social work grand challenge to “Eliminate Social Isolation,” issued by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare. African American male college students regularly experience social isolation due to intersectional barriers of race, place, and class, compromising their academic persistence and mental health. By centering belonging, connection, and empowerment through culturally attuned interventions, this project aims to strengthen social networks and build resilient, engaged campus communities (AASWSW, 2020; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Literature Review

Research consistently demonstrates that African American male undergraduates in the United States encounter pronounced barriers to college persistence and completion, with internalized racism and a diminished sense of social belonging emerging as critical, yet historically understudied, psychosocial risk factors ([O’Neal, 2020](#); Cintron et al., 2020; Farmer & Hope, 2015; [O’Neal, 2020](#)). Much of the contemporary scholarship frames these challenges within the concepts of Critical Race Theory, Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), and social identity development, illuminating how historical legacies of racism, stereotype threat, and exclusionary campus climates restrict opportunities and erode student well-being ([Cross, 1991](#); DeGruy, 2005; [Cross, 1991](#); Nadal et al., 2021).

Internalized Racism and Academic Success

Internalized racism is defined as the conscious or unconscious acceptance by African Americans of negative societal beliefs and stereotypes, leading to diminished self-esteem, self-efficacy, and academic motivation ([DeGruy, 2005](#); Brown et al., 2017; [DeGruy, 2005](#); Gale et al., 2020). Alicino (2017) and Padilla (2001) found that college students who internalize such beliefs are more likely to disengage from academic life and report poorer psychological health

outcomes. This internalization results from sustained exposure to systemic racism, unequal educational opportunities, and persistent negative societal messaging (Gale et al., 2020; Nadal et al., 2021). Empirical studies on stereotype threat—where students fear confirming negative stereotypes about their racial group—further demonstrate the direct effects of internalized racism on academic underperformance and college withdrawal ([Cross, 1991](#); Nadal et al., 2021; ~~Cross, 1991~~).

A robust body of literature identifies social belonging—the sense of being accepted, respected, and valued within the academic community—as a foundational predictor of persistence for African American male students (Allen et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Research by Cintron et al. (2020) demonstrated that culturally supportive environments, mentorship, and supportive peer networks can mitigate the effects of internalized racism, bolster resilience, and significantly increase retention and graduation rates at both predominantly white and minority-serving institutions. These findings are echoed in studies by Brooms (2017) and Strayhorn (2018), who emphasize the importance of affirming campus climates, intentional outreach, and community-belonging interventions.

Intersectionality, Rurality, and Institutional Barriers

Recent scholarship contends that African American males at rural and predominantly white institutions (PWIs) experience “double marginalization,” as underrepresentation by both race and rural background compounds feelings of isolation and invisibility (Foster, 2021; Harper & Simmons, 2019). Research by Means and Pyne (2016) and Reid et al. (2021) documents how rural-origin Black students face unique challenges in accessing culturally responsive supports, with traditional interventions often failing to address their needs. Smith and Hill (2019) and

Naylor et al. (2015) call for a multidimensional approach that integrates psychosocial, cultural, and institutional mechanisms of support.

Impact of Culturally Responsive Interventions

Evidence underscores the effectiveness of interventions that center cultural affirmation, kinship networks, mentorship, and student voice, particularly when developed with participatory and trauma-informed frameworks (Bligh & Flood, 2013; Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2018; Rothman & Thomas, 1994). For example, Cintron et al. (2020) evaluated a living and learning community for Black males at a PWI and found substantial improvements in GPA, retention, and emotional well-being. Similarly, Walton and Cohen (2011) documented the positive effects of a brief social belonging intervention on minority student performance, showing lasting benefits for both engagement and graduation rates. Despite the growing recognition of these dynamics, several gaps persist. Traditional retention initiatives generally focus on academic or financial support, without integrating culturally affirming practices to address internalized racism and attendant trauma (DeGruy, 2005; Walton & Brady, 2019). Few studies employ participatory approaches that elevate student agency and lived experience in the design of interventions (Bligh & Flood, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The literature calls for ongoing research that leverages mixed-method and phenomenological designs to illuminate both structural and psychosocial drivers of persistence, especially at the intersections of race, place, and institutional context (Foster, 2021; Harper et al., 2012). Current research on African American male undergraduates blends Critical Race Theory (CRT), Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), intersectionality, and social belonging frameworks to examine dropout and retention ([Cross, 1991](#); DeGruy, 2005; Strayhorn, 2018; ~~[Cross, 1991](#)~~). CRT foregrounds the role of systemic racism and institutional inequities, while PTSS introduces the impact of historical trauma transmitted across generations,

which shapes internalized racism and educational outcomes. Social learning theory and identity development models address how stereotype threat, marginalization, and negative self-perception reduce academic self-efficacy, engagement, and persistence (Gale et al., 2020; Nadal et al., 2021). However, research gaps persist. Few studies take a multidimensional approach that integrates rurality, campus climate, and cultural affirmation with traditional predictors of success (Means et al., 2016; Harper & Simmons, 2019). Scholarship most often assesses retention in urban or majority-Black institutional contexts, leaving the intersection of rural origin and PWI (predominantly white institution) settings underexplored (Foster, 2021). Culturally responsive interventions tailored to the specific challenges and lived experiences of rural and minoritized Black male students are rarely tested, and qualitative, participatory, or phenomenological designs are infrequently prioritized (Bligh & Flood, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Method

Sampling and Sample

Participants were African American male undergraduate students enrolled at a rural, predominantly white institution (PWI). Convenience sampling was used to target students who self-identified as having experienced challenges with campus integration or academic persistence. Selection criteria included current enrollment, identification as an African American male, and voluntary participation. Recruitment was coordinated through the Student Success Center, and ethical consent procedures were followed (Cintron et al., 2020). Data collection combined quantitative and qualitative methods, utilizing Pre- and Post-Surveys: such as the Social Belonging and Academic Fit Scale, Likert-scale items, and open-ended questions to assess belonging, engagement, and campus resource awareness at baseline and after the intervention. Demographic Surveys were used to capture participant backgrounds, including first-generation

status and rural or urban origin. Protocols: Included informed consent, pre-assessment, structured group sessions, post-assessment, and open reflection questions ([Brooms, 2017](#); Creswell & Poth, 2018; [Brooms, 2017](#)).

Quantitative survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means and averages) to track shifts in belonging, engagement, and related behaviors. Qualitative data were subjected to thematic and narrative analysis to identify core experiences, perceived barriers, and the intervention's strengths. Open coding grouped participant narratives by recurring themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Giorgi, 2006). Data from multiple phases (pre, during, and post-intervention) provided triangulation and increased reliability (Cintron et al., 2020). Reflective Group Discussions provided opportunities for participants to facilitate open sharing of individual and group perspectives, using formative and summative feedback for program adaptation. Ethical protocols considered were incorporated as follows: the study adhered to the NASW Code of Ethics and the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols. Procedures included: informed consent and participant briefing on confidentiality, voluntary participation, and withdrawal rights.

Secure handling and anonymization of data to protect participant privacy. Reflexivity and cultural humility on the part of the researcher to ensure respectful interpretation and minimize harm. Practices to ensure beneficence, justice, and respect for persons, especially when working with stigmatized and minoritized students (NASW, 2021).

Research Questions

How does participation in a social belonging intervention influence African American male students' sense of belonging within a university setting?

What measurable changes occur in retention, engagement, and academic confidence following the intervention?

How do students describe the role of social belonging in shaping their persistence and connection to campus?

What implications do the intervention outcomes have for social work practice and policy in higher education?

Results

Quantitative results indicated increases in resource awareness and campus involvement. Post-intervention survey data indicated improvements in participants' awareness of campus resources and opportunities for involvement, and in their understanding of the importance of social belonging. Survey items measuring “knowledge of involvement opportunities” (mean: 4.8) and “importance of social belonging” (mean: 4.6) achieved the highest consensus, with all participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that the intervention increased these dimensions. The intervention led to higher scores on items related to being taken seriously by peers and staff (mean: 4.2), as well as feeling welcomed on campus (mean: 3.8). More students felt confident in making new campus connections following participation (mean: 3.6). Ongoing challenges were identified in areas such as “feeling included in groups” (mean: 1.8) and “comfort in authentic self-expression” (mean: 2.4) remained lower, with more neutral or disagree responses, indicating persistent challenges regarding group inclusion and authenticity. Moderately positive perceptions were noted for acceptance, respect, and pride in belonging (means: 2.6–3.2), but these also reflected some ongoing neutrality and disagreement.

Qualitative findings revealed themes related to identified themes of empowerment, support, and service needs. Thematic analysis of participant reflections revealed recurring

emphasis on financial aid, mentoring relationships, the cultural relevance of group engagement, and visible campus resources. Students described the importance of empowerment, self-discovery, and increased willingness to seek support after the intervention. Study participants further emphasized that peer relationships, mentoring, and culturally diverse activities enhanced their sense of belonging and helped them overcome challenges in their comfort zones. Approximately 76.9% of participants reported greater empathy and understanding for classmates from different backgrounds.

Participants identified the following barriers and recommendations for improving the intervention: Students identified a need for more student-led, culturally responsive activities, intentional group mixing, and sensitivity to personal backgrounds (including dietary preferences and religious diversity). Empowerment sessions (such as scenario-based exercises and storytelling) were cited as impactful, and students recommended ongoing needs assessments, expanded peer leadership, and resource-rich environments for future refinement.

This study set out to examine the impacts of internalized racism and social belonging interventions on the retention and academic success of African American male undergraduates at a rural, predominantly white institution. Employing a mixed-method, participatory approach, the research engaged students in a pilot social belonging intervention. It utilized both quantitative surveys and qualitative reflective responses to gauge changes in campus engagement, empowerment, and resilience.

As previously stated, the primary purpose was to identify the psychosocial and institutional mechanisms underlying high attrition rates among African American men in higher education and to pilot a culturally responsive group intervention to address these issues. Methodologically, the study combined pre-/post-quantitative survey assessments with open-

ended qualitative feedback, analyzed using thematic and descriptive statistics. Key findings included significant improvements in campus resource awareness, feelings of validation, and willingness to seek support, alongside persistent needs for authentic group inclusion and culturally relevant activities.

Implications for Social Work, Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy

The findings highlight the necessity for social work practitioners in higher education to adopt holistic, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive approaches when supporting African American male students. Interpersonal empowerment, community building, and routine needs assessments should be central to campus interventions (Strayhorn, 2018).

Implications for Higher Education Practice

Interventions focused on social belonging should be embedded in campus programs, with an emphasis on making resources visible, culturally relevant activities, and inclusive practices that cater to diverse student needs. Faculty and staff training should address group inclusion strategies, authenticity, and empowerment to foster a more welcoming and supportive environment for all students. Ongoing needs assessments, including proactive checks for dietary, cultural, and social preferences, can enhance student comfort, reduce barriers, and improve retention of marginalized groups. Student-led and peer-mentoring models can amplify the impact of belonging interventions by leveraging existing campus peer networks and role models.

Implications for Future Research

Further studies should examine the long-term impact of social belonging interventions on academic outcomes, persistence, and overall well-being across a broader, more diverse sample of students.

Furthermore, future research should investigate the effectiveness of intentional grouping, culturally tailored activities, and specific strategies for enhancing authentic self-expression and group inclusion.

Mixed-methods and longitudinal designs are recommended to capture both qualitative and quantitative changes, and to identify which elements of intervention programming yield the most significant benefits. Lastly, research should also examine scalable models for resource dissemination and peer support that can be adapted to different institutional contexts and populations.

The results reinforced the relevance of three major theories applied throughout this study: Critical Race Theory, Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, and social belonging. These models and theories assisted in understanding the interplay among individual identity, campus climate, and educational outcomes. Internalized racism is validated as a critical barrier influencing not just academic decisions, but also mental health and personal development (DeGruy, 2005).

Research

This study demonstrates the value of mixed methods and student-driven intervention design. There is a need for larger-scale, longitudinal, and multi-institutional analyses, as well as further exploration of rurality, intersectionality, and the unique resilience strategies employed by marginalized students (Means & Pyne, 2016).

Policy

Policy recommendations include expanding institutional funding for student-led, culturally affirming programs; mandating campus-wide training on inclusion and trauma-informed support; and integrating continuous, data-informed needs assessments into student services planning (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Limitations

The small, convenience-based sample size and single-institution setting may limit generalizability.

The short duration of the intervention might not capture long-term shifts in retention or belonging.

Reliance on self-report measures is subject to bias, and findings would be strengthened by triangulation with academic records or faculty observations.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies should. Employ randomized controlled or longitudinal designs across multiple campuses and demographic groups. Next, it should incorporate intersectional analyses involving gender, race, rurality, and first-generation status. Lastly, future studies should test the scalability and adaptability of culturally responsive, student-led belonging strategies and mentorship networks.

Conclusion

In summary, this study highlights the profound impact that internalized racism, stereotype threat, and cultural isolation have on the educational experiences and persistence of African American male undergraduates. The findings demonstrate that manifestations of internalized racism, such as diminished self-worth and reluctance to seek support, significantly increase dropout risks, even as ongoing institutional efforts strive to improve access and retention. However, the results also make clear that culturally responsive interventions, mentorship, and affirming campus communities can foster resilience, elevate belonging, and ultimately strengthen academic outcomes among this vulnerable population. Addressing the enduring legacy and lived realities of internalized racism requires higher education leaders and

practitioners to move beyond surface-level reforms and implement systemic, holistic approaches that center cultural affirmation and belonging. Future research should continue to explore actionable strategies and policy innovations that empower African American male students to thrive, ensuring equity and success within postsecondary institutions. Lastly, this research contributes to a clearer understanding of the role of internalized racism and belonging in shaping the educational directions of African American male undergraduates. The intervention's positive effects on empowerment, resource awareness, and community validation support the continued development of holistic, culturally grounded support systems within higher education. The pilot intervention used in this study was associated with measurable increases in resource knowledge, campus validation, and peer-staff rapport. Positive shifts in self-reported belonging, but gaps identified were in group inclusion and authentic self-expression. Qualitative themes identified included greater student empowerment, the value of peer/mentor networks, and the need for further personalization and inclusivity in interventions.

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