

This article demonstrates several notable strengths, beginning with its focus on a highly relevant and timely issue: persistent disparities in retention and graduation rates among African American male undergraduates. By examining the influence of internalized racism, stereotype threat, and social belonging, the study addresses underexplored psychosocial factors that shape academic persistence. The theoretical framework is a particular strength, drawing on Critical Race Theory, Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, and social belonging theory to provide a multidimensional lens for understanding students' lived experiences. Attention to intersectional considerations—including rurality, institutional context, and sociocultural dynamics—further enhances the study's depth and relevance.

Methodologically, the mixed-methods design allows for the integration of quantitative pre- and post-survey data with qualitative reflective group discussions, supporting triangulation and a more nuanced understanding of student experiences. The pilot social belonging intervention is culturally responsive and grounded in trauma-informed care, mentorship, and culturally relevant programming, reflecting alignment with social work values and ethical practice. The literature review is generally comprehensive, situating internalized racism, stereotype threat, and belonging within historical and contemporary scholarship. Ethical considerations are clearly articulated, with appropriate attention to confidentiality, voluntary participation, and cultural humility. The study also offers practical implications for higher education practice, social work, and policy, including recommendations for mentorship networks, student-led initiatives, and institutional training to foster inclusion. Findings suggest improvements in participants' awareness of campus resources, engagement, and perceived validation, while qualitative data highlight empowerment, mentorship, and the value of culturally responsive interventions. These outcomes tie closely to the NASW mission by promoting social justice, equity, and culturally competent strategies that support vulnerable populations in achieving educational success.

Despite these strengths, several conceptual and methodological limitations warrant attention. Most notably, the manuscript does not clearly articulate the specific gaps in existing research that the study seeks to address. While the topic is important and timely, the authors should more explicitly distinguish how this study advances the literature beyond what is already known, particularly in relation to internalized racism, African American male persistence, and social belonging in higher

education. Relatedly, the significance of the work would benefit from clearer articulation, including a more explicit discussion of its theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions to higher education, social work scholarship, and NASW-aligned goals of promoting equity and empowerment.

Additional limitations relate to sample and analytic constraints. The small, convenience-based sample drawn from a single rural, predominantly white institution limits generalizability, and self-selection bias may affect representativeness. The short duration of the intervention precludes assessment of long-term effects on retention or graduation, and the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential response bias. Quantitative analyses are largely descriptive, with minimal use of inferential statistics or comparison groups, limiting causal interpretation. Although the study identifies persistent challenges—such as lower levels of group inclusion and authentic self-expression—these findings are not explored in sufficient depth. Intersectional factors such as first-generation status and rural background are acknowledged but not fully integrated into the analysis. Policy recommendations, while present, could be made more concrete and actionable. Specific policy suggestions could include:

1. **Institutional Mentorship Programs:** Require universities to implement structured mentorship networks pairing African American male students with faculty, staff, and peer mentors trained in cultural responsiveness.
2. **Culturally Responsive Curricula and Training:** Mandate faculty and staff professional development focused on understanding the impact of internalized racism, stereotype threat, and cultural isolation, and integrating inclusive teaching practices.
3. **Student Resource Access Policies:** Standardize proactive outreach to ensure African American male students are aware of academic and psychosocial support services, including culturally specific student organizations and counseling resources.
4. **Data Collection and Reporting:** Implement institutional policies requiring regular disaggregated reporting of retention, engagement, and graduation rates by race, gender, and other relevant demographics to inform targeted interventions.

5. **Longitudinal Support Interventions:** Develop funding and policy support for multi-year social belonging and mentorship programs to evaluate long-term effects on persistence and graduation outcomes.

The manuscript also contains redundancy, particularly in repeated discussions of theoretical frameworks and literature review themes, which could be streamlined to improve clarity and concision. In addition, the authors may benefit from the assistance of a professional copy editor to address grammatical, stylistic, and technical issues, avoid short, choppy sentences, expand short paragraphs with additional context or analysis, and improve overall readability and coherence.

Although the study is described as mixed-methods, the methodological description lacks sufficient detail to fully evaluate rigor, validity, and replicability. The manuscript does not specify the number of African American male participants, nor does it provide essential demographic information such as age, academic classification, major, length of time enrolled, or enrollment status. The absence of these details limits readers' ability to contextualize the findings and assess sample representativeness. Key aspects of the sampling strategy are also unclear, including recruitment procedures, eligibility criteria, and whether participation was voluntary or incentivized—considerations that are particularly important given the sensitive nature of the topic and the single-institution context.

The study references pre- and post-surveys but does not identify the instruments used, their theoretical alignment with constructs such as internalized racism or Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, or evidence of reliability and validity. Similarly, the reflective group discussions are insufficiently described, with limited information regarding their structure, duration, facilitation, and analytic approach (e.g., coding procedures, thematic or narrative analysis, and strategies to ensure trustworthiness such as interrater reliability or member checking). Integration of quantitative and qualitative data is underdeveloped, leaving it unclear how the two methodological strands informed one another or contributed to the study's conclusions.

Importantly, the manuscript would have benefited from the inclusion of appendices. Providing survey instruments, discussion protocols, analytic frameworks, participant demographic summaries, or intervention materials as

appendices would enhance transparency and methodological credibility, while allowing readers to more fully assess alignment among the research questions, data collection methods, and analytic procedures. Additionally, key methodological considerations—including researcher positionality, potential sources of bias, and detailed ethical safeguards—are not explicitly addressed. Collectively, these omissions limit confidence in the findings and underscore the need for a more transparent and systematically articulated methodology.

Overall, the article makes a meaningful contribution to understanding how internalized racism and social belonging shape the academic experiences of African American male undergraduates. Its strengths lie in strong theoretical grounding, cultural responsiveness, and actionable implications for practice. However, the manuscript would be strengthened by clearer articulation of the research gaps it addresses, a more explicit statement of significance, improved methodological transparency, and editorial refinement to address grammatical, stylistic, and structural issues, including short, choppy sentences and underdeveloped paragraphs. Specific, concrete policy recommendations, such as structured mentorship programs, culturally responsive faculty training, standardized resource access, and longitudinal support interventions, would further enhance the manuscript's practical impact. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights and provides a foundation for future longitudinal and multi-institutional research aimed at advancing equity, retention, and student success in higher education, consistent with the mission of NASW to promote social justice, empowerment, and culturally competent practice.

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My Comments on Revision 1:

The revised manuscript demonstrates substantial improvements in clarity, theoretical grounding, and articulation of the social belonging intervention. The linkage to Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, Critical Race Theory, and social belonging theory is strong, and the mixed-methods approach is clearly described.

Quantitative and qualitative findings are well presented, and the discussion connects results to practice, policy, and future research.

However, several formatting and structural issues remain. APA formatting on the reference page requires significant revision, as many citations are improperly formatted. All paragraphs should be indented, and major headings should be centered and bold. There should not be both an "Implications for Future Research" and a "Directions for Future Research" section; only "Directions for Future Research" should remain. The "Policy" and "Limitations" sections are currently too short and read as choppy; they need expansion and clearer integration into the manuscript. Additionally, the purpose of the "Research" section within the Discussion is unclear and should be clarified or removed.

Addressing these formatting, structural, and clarity issues will strengthen the manuscript and improve its alignment with APA and journal standards.