

## **Factors affecting bachelor's degree completion among Black males with prior attrition**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Black males lag behind their female counterparts in bachelor's degree completion. This study examined why Black males leave higher education, eventually return, and complete their degrees. Researchers are aware of some of the challenges that Black males encounter in higher education, but there is little information factors affecting successful completion of bachelor's degrees by nontraditional, Black males, who are overlooked by the literature because they do not meet the current criteria for 6-year graduation rates. This study examined three questions: 1) What causes Black males to discontinue their postsecondary degrees and leave college? 2) What factors influence their decisions to return to postsecondary education? and 3) What factors help or hinder them in completing their degrees? This study used a phenomenological approach. A panel of 5 Black males with bachelor's degrees reviewed interview questions and suggested revisions. Questions were broken into two parts: one related to participants' first enrollment in college and the second related to participants' experiences during later college attempts. Participants were Black males at least 25 years of age with previous college experience who had dropped out for at least one year before reenrolling and eventually completing a bachelor's degree. Participants were identified using professional colleagues and a recruitment script. Ten participants agreed to 30-minute interviews at which the researcher took extensive notes which were later coded to identify themes. Results showed that the majority of participants had spent 10 or more years engaged in higher education. The time to degree ranged from a low of 5 years to a high of 27 years. An interesting finding emerged related to the participants' choice of institutions. Participants who stayed at 4-year institutions experienced shorter time to degree completion than those who enrolled at 2-year institutions.

Keywords: Black males, retention, drop out, higher education, degree completion

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## INTRODUCTION

Although American higher education has seen an increase in the proportion of bachelor's degrees awarded to African Americans, this growth is attributable largely to the success of Black women who, for more than 70 years, have steadily surpassed Black men in college completion (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011). In 1940, less than 1% of Black males and 2% of Black females had earned college degrees. By 2000, almost 10% of Black men and 15% of Black women had completed their degrees (McDaniel et al., 2011). Women outnumber their male counterparts in degree completion in all racial groups; however, the gender gap is greatest within the Black community where Black women outnumber Black men two to one in pursuit of degrees (Harper & Harris, 2012).

The present study focused on a select group of Black men who had attended college and, for one reason or another, dropped out earlier but ultimately returned to higher education to complete their bachelor's degrees. Researchers sought to understand the reasons for their premature departure from college and their eventual return with a view to understanding what support or resources helped them persist to graduation.

## BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Black males confront many challenges along their educational path, and the problems start as early as elementary school. For example, during the 2010-2011 school year in Texas, Black and Hispanic students were twice as likely to be held back as Asian or White students in selected grades (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2013a). In middle and high schools, Black students' dropout rates exceed those of students from other ethnicities, except for Hispanic males. Finally, to be eligible for college, students must complete high school; Holzman (2010) reported that Black males were "least likely to graduate from high school in 33 states" (p. 37). Many Black males are locked out or pushed out of school by higher suspension rates or less access to academic support than their peers (Schott Foundation for Public Education [SFPE], 2012). Large urban school districts show low Black male graduation rates: New York City (28%), Buffalo (25%), Duval County, FL (23%), and Palm Beach County, FL (22%).

Some states have introduced programs to address the low Black male high school graduation rates. The most successful seems to be New Jersey with its Abbott Plan, which stemmed from the *Abbott v. Burke* decision (2003). It provides equitable resources to all students. New Jersey is the "only state with significant Black male enrollment and greater than 65% Black male graduation rate" (Holzman, 2010, p. 13).

When Black males drop out of high school, they may be more likely to become involved in criminal activity and be incarcerated. For example, only 8% of Black males who graduated from high school were institutionalized in 2000, compared to 18% of Black males who had dropped out of high school (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Tobar, 2007). If Black male high school graduates are less likely to be incarcerated than dropouts, they are still vulnerable as their rate of incarceration was "still 2.7 times the national average for all young male high school graduates" (Sum et al., 2007, p. 20).

In 2002, Schiraldi & Ziedenberg estimated that 791,600 Black males were in the penal system compared to 603,032 who were enrolled in higher education, but these findings do not mean that those Black males would have gone to college even if not incarcerated. The Associated Press (2007) critiqued a government report indicating that more Black people were in

prison or jail than in college, noting that the study failed to include commuter students or to “provide racial breakdowns by gender or age” (p. 1). Other scholars have challenged Schiraldi and Ziedenberg’s findings, but the fact remains that Black males continue to face challenges in entering and succeeding in college. If systems are not put in place to support this distinctive group, the education deficit for Black males will continue and may lead to fewer Black men going to college and graduating.

Enrollment of Black males in higher education is low compared to other groups such as White males and Black women (Harper, 2012; Taylor, Schelske, Hatfield, & Lundell, 2002). According to Sum et al. (2003), college enrollment of Black students increased 11.6% from the early 1990s through 1997. Despite this increase, fewer Black males stay in college to graduation compared to their female and White counterparts. Taylor et al. (2002) found that 63% of White males and only 45% of Black males were still enrolled after 3 years in college.

As with enrollment rates, Black males have lower graduation rates than do their White or female counterparts. In 2003-2004, “for every 100 degrees awarded to Black men, Black women were awarded 216 associate degrees, 200 bachelor degrees, and 250 master’s degrees” (Sum et al., 2007, pp. 21-22).

## CONTEXT AND METHOD

In 1976, almost 8,000 more degrees were granted to Black women than to Black men; in 1994, that difference had increased to 22,000 (Garibaldi, 1997). The disparity between Black males and their female counterparts raises questions about why the men leave higher education, eventually return, and complete their degrees. Researchers are aware of some challenges that Black males face in higher education; however, there is limited information about how their experiences affect their retention, re-enrollment, and degree completion. To explore these issues, the present study examined three questions:

1. What causes Black males to discontinue their postsecondary degrees and leave college?
2. What factors influence Black males’ decisions to return to postsecondary education?
3. What factors help or hinder returning Black males in completing their degrees?

Although prior studies have explored Black males’ presence in higher education (Glenn, 2001; Wilkins, 2005), this study sought to address gaps in the literature and to focus on factors prompting Black males to leave college originally, to return subsequently, and to succeed ultimately. Using a phenomenological approach, researchers focused on “describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58); in this case, returning to college after dropping out. A panel of experts composed of five Black men holding baccalaureate degrees analyzed the interview questions and suggested revisions. Interview questions were divided into two groups and were aligned with the research questions cited above. The first group of questions explored participants’ first enrollment in college, and the second group addressed participants’ experiences during their later attempts in college.

The primary researcher set participant criteria: Black males at least 25 years of age with prior college experience but who had dropped out and stayed out for at least one year before reenrolling and eventually completing a bachelor's degree. Using professional colleagues and a recruitment script, researchers selected 10 participants for interviews. The primary researcher

gave the participants a demographic questionnaire which she asked them to complete prior to the interview. The questionnaire provided important information about participants' age, marital status, employment, and academic history.

The researchers conducted a formal, 30-minute interview with each participant using standard, open-ended questions that allowed the opportunity for follow-up questions as needed. Follow-up interviews were scheduled to obtain additional clarification and member checking. Interviews were tape recorded (Olympus VN-7200) and later transcribed by the primary researcher using a Microsoft Office Word document.

## RESULTS

This study sought to understand factors affecting the successful completion of bachelor's degrees by nontraditional, Black men, those who are overlooked by the literature because they did not meet the current criteria for 6-year graduation rates. Based on the interviews of 10 Black men over the age of 25, researchers recorded the interviews and took extensive notes which were later coded to identify common themes. Table 1 identifies participants by their demographic characteristics and time to degree.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

	Age	Married	Kids/#	Current Job	Time to degree
Participant #1	50	Yes	Yes/4	Teacher	27
Participant #2	45	No	No	Business Consultant	5
Participant #3	34	Yes	Yes/5	Teacher	10
Participant #4	45	Yes	Yes/3	Fire Chief	12
Participant #5	44	No	Yes/2	Teacher	16
Participant #6	43	No	Yes/1	Teacher	9
Participant #7	44	Yes	Yes/5	Community College Adjunct Faculty	18
Participant #8	40	Yes	Yes/1	Private Investigator	21
Participant #9	40	Yes	No	Sales Executive	7
Participant #10	32	Yes	Yes/1	Probation Officer	13

Among the participants, the majority had spent 10 years or more intermittently engaged with higher education. Time to degree ranged from a low of 5 years to a high of 27 years. One interesting finding emerged related to participants' choice of institutions: most of those who stayed in 4-year institutions experienced a shorter time to degree than those who enrolled in 2-year institutions. All of those who alternated between 2-year and 4-year institutions took 10

years or more to complete their degrees. Participant #5, who enrolled exclusively in 4-year institutions, stayed away from higher education for 11 years before returning to complete his degree in just one year.

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