

*Research Article*

**#Black Boy Joy:  
The College Aspirations of Rural Black Male Students**

**Loni Crumb  
Crystal R. Chambers  
Jessica Chittum**

*Too often research studies on Black boys emanate from deficit orientations and take a problem-centered approach that overemphasizes stereotypes or pathologizes Black male students, overlooking their aspirations and successes. Utilizing the High School Longitudinal Survey of 2009 (HSL: 09), we examined the postsecondary goals of rural Black male ninth graders as well as the relationships among their educational aspirations, college knowledge, and support from school counselors using social and aspirational capital situated within the community cultural wealth conceptual framework. We found that the educational aspirations of rural Black male ninth graders are high; however, their knowledge of college falls short of their educational aspirations and their support from teachers and school counselors. We discuss the strengths, attributes, and systems of support that are useful to rural Black male students as they transition through secondary education to post-secondary settings and, based on our findings, call for a paradigmatic shift using family-school-community partnerships.*

Joy can be defined as “the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires” (Merriam Webster, n.d., para. 1). High aspirations to attend college and the prospect of attaining college goals can be a source of joy for rural Black boys. Nevertheless, Black male scholars (Harper, 2015; Henfield, 2012; Strayhorn, 2013) purport that researchers often misrepresent or exclude the positive academic experiences of Black male students that foster collegiate aspirations.

Educational research on Black male youth has often taken a problem-focused orientation or used deficit-orientated ideology (Harper, 2015; Strayhorn, 2013). It is frequently the case that normative youthful exuberance that Black male students display is continually labeled as disruptive, violent, or unmotivated in school settings (Wright, 2015). In addition, despite the fact that many Black male high school students are academically gifted (Bonner et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2014), they have lower college enrollment rates than similarly situated peers (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017).

Despite the propensity to face adverse circumstances such as disproportional school suspensions (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019), negative teacher perceptions (Wright, 2015), more messaging related to not belonging in academic settings (Gray et al., 2018), increased potential to live in poverty

(Minor & Benner, 2018; Newton & Sandoval, 2015), and to be raised in a single parent home (Newton & Sandoval, 2015; Varner et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2007), many Black boys successfully transition through secondary education and subsequently enroll in various colleges and universities. In fact, certain high schools across the US are able to help Black males achieve 100% college acceptance rates year after year (Warren & Bonilla, 2018) while other schools fail in comparison.

Black male students who face additional challenges such as living in rural communities with under-resourced school districts that offer fewer course and extracurricular activity options (Byun et al., 2012) also find ways to successfully navigate the educational pipeline to college. As a result of these positive outcomes in the face of sometimes dire circumstances, researchers have called for investigations of ways to support the academic self-efficacy of rural Black males as they transition through secondary schools in pursuit of a college education (Isik et al., 2018). Our understanding of rurality is culturally-based and references proud, tightly connected communities with a shared history (Stephens, 2019; Theobald & Wood, 2010; Thomas et al., 2011), whereas federal definitions focus on population counts and geographic distance from urban area agencies (McShane & Smarick, 2018). The NCES (2015) locale framework employs

definitions of rurality developed by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the post-secondary aspirations of rural Black male ninth-graders in the US using the High School Longitudinal Survey of 2009 (HLS: 09), which is sponsored by the NCES. We found that educational aspirations of rural Black male ninth graders are high; however, their knowledge of college falls short of their educational aspirations and their support from teachers and school counselors. Accordingly, we discuss factors that may influence rural Black males' academic self-efficacy and aspirations to attend colleges and universities upon high school completion.

### Literature Review

College education attainment for Black male students living in rural areas is predicated on precollege factors such as socioeconomic status, parental education level, school and community capital, and college readiness activities (Castro, 2020; Chambers & Crumb, 2020). Given the aim of this study to highlight "Black Boy Joy" by producing counter-hegemonic research examining the collegiate aspirations of Black male students, the following literature review addresses (a) rural community social and cultural capital, (b) rural schools and the influence that school counselors have in cultivating the educational aspirations of Black males, and (c) rural Black males' college knowledge and academic self-efficacy. While we hold the perspective that all school personnel are responsible for cultivating college aspirations (Chambers & Crumb, 2020; Chambers et al., 2019; McKillip et al., 2012), school counselors are particularly poised by way of assignments to college counseling as well as the ability to have individualized discussions with students regarding their future goals.

### Rural Community Social and Cultural Capital

Rural living is often stereotyped as outmoded and regressive in the US while urbanicity is considered modern and progressive (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Black students living in rural communities have historically faced context-specific situations such as having increased propensity to live in impoverished communities, particularly in counties located in the southeastern US (Beaulieu, 2019). Although rurality is often viewed as disenfranchisement due to lack of access to

educational and healthcare resources, rural communities are rich in community-based social and cultural capital (Sørensen, 2016; Yosso, 2005).

**Families.** *Rural familism* is characterized by a feeling of belonging among family members and the integration of individual activities and achievements towards a collective goal; consideration of land, money, and other assets as shared property for the mutual aid of any and all family members (Chambers et al., 2021). In this regard, individuals within rural communities have a collective sense of community uplift, which can be both motivation for college attainment and a barrier, if college enrollment is suspected to contribute to rural out-migration (Agger et al., 2018; Petrin et al., 2014; Tabit & Winters, 2019; Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). Black male rural students may place their college aspirations secondary when it conflicts with the needs of their families (Agger et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005).

College attendance can also present a hardship for Black rural families due to the challenges of geography, with concomitant housing and transportation costs (Chingos, 2018; Hillman, 2016; Meyers, 2018). Many rural communities are education deserts where the commute to college is over an hour drive, creating a strain on housing and transportation budgets (Meyers, 2018). This is quite the investment for families unsure of the returns of higher education (Freeman, 2005). While not all Black rural families are economically disadvantaged, Black males from such backgrounds may defer college enrollment or leave college once enrolled (temporarily or permanently) to attain jobs to provide financial support for their families (Perna & Jones, 2013).

Nonetheless, Black students and their families value the possibility that attaining a college education could improve the educational trajectory (via intergenerational literacy) of their entire families (Crumb et al., 2020; Chaney, 2014). Economically disadvantaged Black families hold a high achievement orientation toward family members enrolled in secondary and post-secondary education (Chaney, 2014; Freeman, 2005). Moreover, Means (2019) found that families are a significant source of social, cultural, and financial capital for rural Black males as they help cultivate college aspirations (Means, 2019).

Viewing rural communities as part of extended kinship networks, community-based organizations also provide opportunities for rural Black males to

interact with peers and adults who can assist with providing college information and financial resources (Farmer et al., 2006; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Irvin et al., 2010). This is especially important because many rural Black males are the first in their families to attend college and, thus, often have limited access to college knowledge within their nuclear familial networks (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Petrin et al., 2014).

### **Rural Schools and the Influence of School Counselors**

Rural schools educate one-fifth of students in the US, but school funding and other policies are urban driven and often overlook the needs of rural schools (Chingos & Blagg, 2017; Leyden, 2005; Showalter et al., 2019). Most operational and human resource costs associated with schooling are fixed and rural schools must stretch them over wide geographic expanses. In *Why Rural Schools Matter*, Tieken (2014) advances that beyond assisting students in meeting state promulgated educational goals, rural school personnel cultivate students' college and career goals.

Nonetheless, in making allocation decisions with limited budgets, rural schools may be unable to invest in the number of school counselors needed to help facilitate students in their college decision-making process. Only 29% of public schools have a counselor dedicated to college counseling, and with school counselor caseloads averaging 309:1, the opportunities for students to receive individualized college guidance is limited (Clinedinst, 2019). Although school counselors play an integral role in helping Black males transition to college (Henfield, 2013), rural school counselors are less able to provide comprehensive college readiness support due to large caseloads, limited funding, and being assigned various non-counseling duties because of staff shortages (Crumb & Larkin, 2018). Furthermore, rural school counselors may have less training in culturally-responsive services for students of color (Crumb & Larkin, 2018), which may result in counselors holding lower academic expectations for Black male students.

In particular, the educational aspirations of rural Black males tend to be lower than their metropolitan counterparts due to lower socioeconomic statuses and access to habitus, which support college going (Strayhorn, 2009). School counselors are uniquely positioned to assist students with developing college

aspirations individually and collectively, especially when college counseling is part of their expressed duties (McDonough, 1991). Gafford Muhammad (2008) found that, for Black male students, having a school counselor who believed in their academic potential was a powerful predictor of college enrollment. However, with the gross majority of rural students underserved by school counselors, Black male students are particularly poised for counselor oversight in the area of precollegiate preparation (Henfield & Byrd, 2014).

Finally, it is important to note that Black male students are often less likely to reach out to school counselors for assistance, as their perceptions of counselor helpfulness may be limited by general mistrust of school personnel (McClain & Cokley, 2017). Moreover, stigma and cultural taboos within Black communities often inhibit students from seeking counseling and other behavioral health services (Avent Harris & Wong, 2018; Cartwright & Hammonds, 2021).

### **Rural Black Males' College Knowledge and Academic Self-Efficacy**

Rural students frequently enroll in colleges that are less selective than they are academically eligible to attend (Hillman, 2016). Hence, educational researchers have questioned if rural students of color make fully-informed decisions related to college aspirations and choosing program majors (Chambers et al., 2019). For example, rural students often choose majors that reflect careers in their local communities rather than program majors that match their interest and academic capability (Hillman, 2016; Klasik, Blagg, & Pekor, 2018). The underrepresentation of Black males in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors may be a result of this having less college knowledge (Strayhorn, 2015). *College knowledge* is considered privileged information that is necessary to understand how college operates as a system and culture including contextual skills and awareness to prepare (Conley, 2010; Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). Strayhorn (2015) proposed that Black males may lack adequate preparation for college-level math and science courses, which typically serve as gatekeepers to STEM majors. More concerning, many Black males are not urged to attend college based on their academic capacities; rather, they are often urged to pursue college due to their perceived and stereotypical athletic abilities (Washington, 2016).

Black students' self-perceptions of academic self-efficacy can influence their college aspirations as well. Academic self-efficacy is one's beliefs regarding their confidence in performing various academic tasks successfully and is a key predictor of academic achievement (Edman & Brazil, 2009). Black students have been found to have significantly less confidence in successfully graduating from college than White students (Rhea & Otto, 2001). Moreover, rural school personnel may have internalized negative perspectives of rurality, akin to internalized racism and sexism (Roché, 2013), which may dampen students' academic self-efficacy, self-concept, and aspirations (Chambers & Crumb, 2020; Chambers et al., 2019; Castro, 2020; Srivastava & Joshi, 2014). For rural Black students, academic self-efficacy is among the strongest predictors of orientation towards and expectations for pursuing education in the future (Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2008; Kerpelman & Mosher, 2004). Thus, it is essential that rural Black male students build their academic self-efficacy and thereby educational aspirations via multiple avenues such as social capital accrued within school and community networks.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework grounding this study is community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) with specific focus on social and aspirational capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1988). Community cultural wealth is a framework that provides information and concepts to produce tactics for managing systemic oppression (Yosso, 2005). Community cultural wealth is derivative of critical race theory and (a) counters deficit-ideology pertaining to communities of color; (b) highlights the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities possessed by marginalized groups that are often unrecognized and under-appreciated; and (c) centers the concept of intersectionality, which refers to the interlocking forms of oppression experienced by people with various social identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005). The community cultural wealth framework has been used in educational research to explore college and career aspirations of rural Black students to demonstrate how various forms of social capital cultivate and sustain college aspirations (Means, 2019).

Community cultural wealth is comprised of six aspects: (a) social capital, (b) aspirational capital, (c) familial capital, (d) navigational capital, (e) linguistic

capital, and (f) resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). For the purposes of this study, social and aspirational capital are deemed most pertinent. *Social capital* refers to networks of people who are instrumental in providing an array of support (e.g., emotional support, financial resources) to help one navigate society's institutions (Yosso, 2005). *Aspirational capital* refers to maintaining hope in future plans, even in the face of real or perceived hardship (Yosso, 2005). We focus on the two aspects of social capital and aspirational capital because in using a national dataset, we are restricted in our ability to explore the full breadth of the community cultural wealth framework. Furthermore, we sought to focus on the aspirations of rural Black male students in relation to their interactions with school counselors. Overall, the community cultural wealth framework is ideal in understanding the relationship between rural Black male high school students, the relationships with their support systems (e.g., family, friends, teachers, counselors), and the relationship with their environment (e.g., location, exposure) to determine what influences decisions to pursue postsecondary education (Burt & Johnson, 2018; Means, 2019).

### **Researcher Positionality**

Researcher positionality involves a reflection of how the researchers, participants, and topic of interest interact with and influence one another (Finlay, 2014). My (Crumb) lived experiences as a Black woman raising two Black sons in a rural area prompted my interest in the current research study. I (Chambers) am the mother of a young adult Black male who has experienced the marginalization of my son's brilliance and intellectual capacity. My (Chittum) interest in the current study was prompted by my background as a motivation researcher with interest in rural education.

### **Method**

We used the NCES High School Longitudinal Survey of 2009 to examine the educational aspirations of Black male ninth graders from rural areas. The HSL:09 is a nationally-representative longitudinal survey consisting of 23,000 students across 944 secondary schools in the US. The NCES HSL:09 sample includes students, parents/guardians, math and science instructors, and school counselors. In the 2009 base survey year, student participants were in the ninth grade. Subsequent follow-ups in 2012 and

2016 tracked student advancement from high school to postsecondary and job/career outcomes. Our sample includes data from the 2009 base year and is the most recent for national data at this level.

The research questions guiding the present study are as follows:

1. What are the educational aspirations of rural Black males in ninth grade?
2. Do rural Black males have college knowledge and confidence in support of their aspirations?
3. Do school counselors discuss college and career aspirations with rural Black males in the ninth grade?

To answer the first research question, we analyzed student educational aspirations as measured by the base year survey questions, “As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will get” and “How sure are you that you will go on to pursue a Bachelor’s degree after you leave high school.” To answer the second question, we measured college knowledge by self-reports of whether or not students had taken or planned to take the Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test (PSAT) and/or an Advance Placement (AP) test. Note, this approach is limited in that some districts require students to take PSAT/pre-ACTs (PACT) and AP courses are less prevalent in rural districts (Showalter et al., 2019). These factors were selected because most students take the PSAT or PACT in grade 10. In addition, many are able to take AP courses by grade 10 (Judson & Hobson, 2015). Thus, these are the college preparation activities with which a ninth grader would more likely be familiar due to temporal proximity. As results bear out, their taking or plans to take the PSAT or PACT were not universal in our sample, and there were students who took or planned to take AP exams. We posit that between these proxies, there is a grain of truth regarding ninth grade college knowledge.

To answer the third question, we analyzed students’ responses to a series of questions related to things the student talked to their school counselor about including courses, personal problems, career choices, and college. Answers to these questions were used to measure whether interactions with a school counselor occurred with a specific focus on the college counseling dimension. Note, this measure is limited in that it does not ascertain the quantity or quality of interactions. It is important to note that, from the dataset, one cannot appreciate what rural Black males got out of these conversations. We do

know from the literature, however, that these conversations are positively associated with college enrollment (Gafford Muhammad, 2008; McKillip et al., 2012).

The sample for this study is confined to rural Black male students ( $N = 376$  out of a total of 1,149 Black males). It was critical for us to concentrate solely on rural Black males to garner an understanding of their educational aspirations without the influence of results from other student populations by race, sex/gender, and rurality/urbanicity. We wanted to understand rural Black males on their own terms (Dixon-Roman, 2017). We used descriptive statistical techniques—frequencies, correlation, and chi-square analyses—to analyze results. Descriptive approaches to data analysis, while simplistic, are powerful towards generating actionable results—findings that bear on real education practices (Pogrow, 2019).

## Results

### Post-Secondary Educational Aspirations

Our analysis indicates that rural Black male ninth graders have high educational aspirations (see Table 1). Specifically, 62.2% desired educational opportunities beyond the diploma. Educational aspirations were measured by the survey question, “As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will get?” This aspiration largely matches the postsecondary enrollment rate of 18-multi-year-olds in the US (NCES, 2017). Only three (0.8%) of the students in this sample thought they would not finish or would drop out of secondary school. Forty-nine (13%) rural Black male students indicated the high school diploma, GED, or equivalent was their highest aspiration.

Examining rural Black male students with postsecondary education goals, 5.6% ( $n = 21$ ) aspired to seek an associate’s degree. Results showed 18.6% ( $n = 70$ ) desired to begin and complete a bachelor’s degree and another 18.6% ( $n = 70$ ) aspired to attain a master’s degree. Finally, 20.8% ( $n = 78$ ) aspired to attain doctoral/terminal professional degrees. Twenty-one percent ( $n = 79$ ) of the students responded that they did not know how far they would be educated. For ninth graders, “don’t know” is a sound response, as most ninth graders are new to secondary school and have yet to discover the scholastic and professional pathways before them. Students who were uncertain of their educational trajectories are referenced as “whiches” by Hossler

Table 1  
*Educational Aspirations of Black Boys*

Level of education	<i>n</i>	%
Less than high school	3	0.8
High school diploma or GED	49	13.0
Start an associate's degree	5	1.3
Complete an associate's degree	16	4.3
Start a bachelor's degree	3	0.8
Complete a bachelor's degree	67	17.8
Start a master's degree	6	1.6
Complete a master's degree	64	17.0
Start a PhD/MD/law/other professional degrees	4	1.1
Complete a PhD/MD/law/other professional degrees	74	19.7
Don't know	79	21.0
No response	6	1.6
Total	376	100

*Note.* Provides responses given by ninth graders on how far the student thinks he will get (i.e., level of education) when it comes to educational aspirations.

and Gallagher (1987) and "seekers" by Freeman (2005), comprise just over one-fifth of the sample, and are a prime audience for college readiness and transition programs.

### Post High School Graduation Plans

For further validation of student educational aspiration results, we analyzed responses to questions regarding their plans immediately after high school (see Table 2). Note that these results are not cumulative and therefore total over 100%. This stands to reason, as students were presented a wide variety of options, and several may be appealing. It is notable that some plans are not mutually exclusive of others. For example, a student can enlist with the

National Guard and still attend college, making checking the box for college and military simultaneously appropriate responses.

The largest share of students ( $n = 193, 51.3\%$ ) indicated that, in the year following high school graduation, they would enroll in a bachelor's degree program. Forty-seven (12.5%) indicated that they would enroll in an associate's degree and/or certificate/licensure trade program. Of significance, 43.6% ( $n = 164$ ) expressed an intention to join the military. Fewer than 10% of participants indicated that they would attend an apprenticeship, start a family, travel and/or do volunteer/missionary work in the first year post high school graduation. Only 36 students (9.6%) did not know what they wanted to do

Table 2  
*Immediate Plans in the First Year After High School*

	<i>n</i>	%
Enroll in an associate's program	47	12.5
Enroll in a bachelor's program	193	51.3
Plans to obtain a license or certificate	47	12.5
Plans to attend an apprenticeship program	8	2.1
Join the armed services	25	6.6
Get a job	164	43.6
Start a family	32	8.5
Plans to travel	39	10.4
Plans to volunteer or do missionary work	17	4.5
Does not know	36	9.6

*Note.* Provides responses given by ninth graders on their immediate plans within the first year after graduating high school. Percentages do not total 100% due to students providing multiple responses.

Table 3

*Correlation Matrix: Certainty of Educational Aspirations by Plans to Enroll in A Degree Program During First Year After High School*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. How far in school he thinks he'll get	–													
2. Ability to complete a BA/BS	.493**	–												
3. Disappointed if he didn't by age 30	.365**	.608**	–											
4. Will pursue a BA/BS	.259**	.350**	.224**	–										
5. Enroll in an AA/AS program	.364**	.639**	.653**	.180**	–									
6. Enroll in a BA/BS program	.393**	.663**	.645**	.291**	.928**	–								
7. Obtain a license or certificate	.374**	.649**	.656**	.181**	.961**	.931**	–							
8. Apprenticeship	.381**	.659**	.663**	.193**	.976**	.954**	.978**	–						
9. Armed services	.368**	.651**	.655**	.183**	.964**	.944**	.966**	.982**	–					
10. Get a job	.342**	.606**	.640**	.128*	.938**	.891**	.948**	.953**	.945**	–				
11. Start a family	.368**	.639**	.651**	.168**	.965**	.939**	.967**	.980**	.976**	.956**	–			
12. Plans to travel	.379**	.652**	.639**	.178**	.963**	.938**	.968**	.979**	.972**	.951**	.976**	–		
13. Volunteer	.379**	.658**	.662**	.187**	.970**	.947**	.976**	.989**	.979**	.956**	.978**	.979**	–	
14. Does not know	.372**	.646**	.653**	.149**	.955**	.920**	.955**	.977**	.967**	.922**	.963**	.959**	.971**	–

*Note.* BA/BS = bachelor's degree. AA/AS = associate's degree.

\*  $p \leq 0.05$  (two-tailed).

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$  (two-tailed).

Table 4

*How Sure They are About Going to College to Pursue a Baccalaureate Degree*

	<i>n</i>	%
Very sure about going	150	39.9
Will probably go	59	15.7
Will probably not go	5	1.3
No response provided	162	45.8
Total	376	100

*Note.* Provides responses given by ninth graders on how sure they are about going to college to pursue a BS or BA degree.

in that year. Thus, more than 60% of rural Black males indicated that they were planning some form of postsecondary education, corroborating the aforementioned findings.

Correlations between how far a student thinks he will get and plans to enroll in an associate's ( $r = 0.36, p \leq .01$ ), licensure/certificate ( $r = 0.37, p \leq .01$ ), or baccalaureate ( $r = 0.39, p \leq .01$ ) degree program were moderate, positive, and statistically significant (see Table 3). This includes the possibility of an apprenticeship ( $r = 0.38, p \leq .01$ ), joining the armed services ( $r = 0.37, p \leq .01$ ), getting a job ( $r = 0.34, p \leq .01$ ), starting a family ( $r = 0.37, p \leq .01$ ), travelling ( $r = 0.38, p \leq .01$ ), and doing missionary work ( $r = 0.38, p \leq .01$ ). Student responses across the spectrum of postsecondary options were consistently moderate, positive, and statistically significant. In addition, the statistically significant correlations among the varied post-high school graduation choices suggests that students perceived a variety of options as appealing. This may signal perceived joy or interest in considering their future. Correlations between how far a student thinks he will get and "doesn't know" regarding plans also registered in this range ( $r = 0.37, p \leq .01$ ). Overall, correlation results suggest a positive disposition towards a wide range of opportunities without fixation on any particular option. These results further signal the potential of student openness to guidance regarding post-secondary options.

In addition, to examine student aspirations at the baccalaureate level and beyond, we analyzed the item addressing how sure students were that they were going to college (see Table 4). We found that 39.9% ( $n = 150$ ) were very sure about going to college, and another 15.7% ( $n = 59$ ) indicated they would probably go to college. Just five students (1.3%) indicated that they probably would not go to college while 162 did not respond. The majority of this latter group ( $n=152, 40.4\%$  of total) were not included in

this part of the data collection by NCES. Thus, the overwhelming majority of rural Black males who were provided the opportunity to respond to this question desired some form of postsecondary education. More particularly, their aspirations were to pursue a bachelor's degree or higher.

### College Knowledge and Confidence

Beyond postsecondary educational aspirations, we wanted to know if rural Black males had the knowledge needed to plan towards those objectives (Conley, 2005; Waziri, 2017; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). We posit that plans to take PSAT/PACT and AP exams are appropriate proxies for learning whether or not ninth graders have sufficient information to begin planning for postsecondary education (i.e., college knowledge). However as noted, the limitation of this proxy is that the requirement for students to take PSAT/PACT and AP courses is less prevalent in rural districts (Showalter et al., 2019).

Over two-fifths of the students ( $n = 157, 41.8\%$ ) indicated that they took or intended to take the PSAT (see Table 5). Another 16.8% ( $n = 63$ ) of students had not yet decided whether or not they would take the test, while 14.9% affirmed they would not take the test. One-fifth of rural Black males ( $n = 77, 20.5\%$ ) indicated that they did not know what the PSAT was. Thus, between the undecided and those not knowledgeable, nearly 47% of rural Black males did not have adequate information or guidance to prepare for the PSAT.

As for AP exams, 25.5% ( $n = 96$ ) indicated that they took or wanted to take an AP test. There were more students undecided about AP exams in contrast to responses about taking the PSAT (29%,  $n = 109$ ). This stands to reason given that some districts require all students to take the PSAT and AP coursework tends to be limited in rural locales (Showalter et al., 2019). The number of students not wanting to take AP tests was likewise higher when contrasted with the PSAT (22.6%,  $n = 85$ ), with another 15.4% ( $n =$

Table 5  
Does the 9<sup>th</sup> Grader Have College Knowledge?

	PSAT		AP test	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	157	41.8	96	25.5
No	56	14.9	85	22.6
Haven't Decided	63	16.8	109	29.0
Doesn't know what this is	77	20.5	58	15.4
No response provided	23	6.1	28	7.4
Total	376	100	376	100

Note. Provides the response given by ninth graders on whether the student had taken or was to take the PSAT or AP test.

Table 6  
Comparison of Rural Black Boys' Plans for the PSAT and AP Tests

		AP test plans				Total
		No	Yes	Haven't decided	Don't know what that is	
PSAT plans	No	46 (76.7%)	8 (13.3%)	5 (8.3%)	1 (1.7%)	60 (100%)
	Yes	26 (15.6%)	91 (54.5%)	42 (25.1%)	8 (4.8%)	167 (100%)
	Haven't decided	2 (2.6%)	5 (6.6%)	62 (81.6%)	7 (9.2%)	76 (100%)
	Don't know what that is	4 (5.6%)	10 (14.1%)	12 (16.9%)	45 (63.4%)	71 (100%)
	Total	78 (20.9%)	114 (30.5%)	121 (32.4%)	61 (16.3%)	374 (100%)

Note. Provides the number of ninth graders with a specific response (no, yes, haven't decided, or don't know what that is) to two questions: one about the PSAT and one about an AP test. Columns represent responses regarding whether students had taken, planned to take, or had not decided to take an AP test. Rows represent responses regarding whether students had taken, planned to take, or had not decided to take the PSAT.

58) of students indicating that they did not know what an AP test was. Thus, nearly 45% of rural Black males did not have adequate information or guidance to prepare for an AP exam.

Correlations between whether one has taken or plans to take PSAT and AP were strong, positive, and statistically significant ( $r = .66, p \leq .001$ ). Chi-square analyses confirm with 77.4% likeness among rural Black males that have taken or plan to take AP and PSAT exams ( $\chi^2 = 365.53, df = 9, p \leq .001$ ; see Table 6). In addition, 63.4% of students who did not comprehend what AP was also did not realize what the PSAT was. Results were mixed among students unsure of or choosing not to take one of the tests. In addition to college knowledge, given reports of repressed academic self-confidence of rural students (McDonough et al., 2010) and Black students (Rhea & Otto, 2001), we wanted to investigate rural Black male students' confidence to successfully enroll in

and complete a bachelor's degree. We assessed if rural Black males believed they had the ability to complete a bachelor's degree program. More than half of rural Black males in this sample (53.5%,  $n = 201$ ) indicated that they definitely had the ability to complete a bachelor's program. An additional 37.5% ( $n = 141$ ) indicated that they probably could complete a program. Only 6.4% ( $n = 24$ ) indicated that they probably could not or definitely could not complete a baccalaureate program. Three quarters of students indicated disappointment if they did not earn a baccalaureate degree by age 30 (77.4%,  $n = 291$ ; not shown). Hence, not only did rural Black male ninth graders have high, college-aimed postsecondary aspirations, they also held the self-confidence to finish a baccalaureate degree. Furthermore, rural Black males internalized accountability to complete a four-year degree in that they felt dissatisfaction with

Table 7

*Student's Confidence to Attain Educational Aspiration(s)*

Response	Graduate high school		Complete a bachelor's degree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Very sure	311	82.7	201	53.5
Will probably	49	13.0	141	37.5
Will probably not	3	0.8	16	4.3
Definitely not	4	1.1	8	2.1
No response provided	9	2.4	10	2.7
Total	376	100	376	100

*Note.* Provides responses given by ninth graders on their level of confidence regarding graduating from high school and/or completing a bachelor's degree.

Table 8

*School Counselor Involvement with Students' Education/Career Aspirations*

Student talked to school counselor about:	"Yes" responses	
	<i>n</i>	%
Math courses	64	17.0
Science courses	49	13.0
Other courses	60	16.0
Going to college	69	18.4
Adult jobs/careers	59	15.7
Personal problems	33	8.8
Help putting together education/career plan with student	44	11.7

*Note.* Provides the results of school counselor involvement in each student's education or career advancement. Included are numbers and percentages of ninth grade male students who responded "yes" to working with a school counsellor regarding each of the listed topics.

the idea of not meeting that goal by age 30. These high aspirations notwithstanding, there was a disconnect between their educational aspirations and college knowledge. To measure their perceptions of the importance of achieving that goal, we examined if they would be disappointed if they did not earn a bachelor's degree by age 30 (see Table 7).

### School Counselor Interaction

Our results indicated that 11.7% ( $n = 44$ ) of students responded that their school counselor helped them put together an education/career plan (see Table 8). When considering assistance in deciding coursework for the 2009-2010 school year, just 17% ( $n = 64$ ) reported conversing with a school counselor about math courses, 13% ( $n = 49$ ) conversed about science courses, and 16% ( $n = 60$ ) conversed with a counselor about other courses. Regarding conversations about attending college, just 17% ( $n = 48$ ) of rural Black males conversed with a school counselor and 15.7% ( $n = 59$ ) spoke with counselors about jobs or careers. Only 8.8% ( $n = 3$ ) indicated that they spoke with a school counselor about

personal problems. While it seems only a few students had conversations with their counselors about courses, jobs/careers, and personal problems, those who did have conversations with their counselors about college were more likely to also have spoken about science courses ( $r = .16, p \leq .001$ ), other courses ( $r = .27, p \leq .001$ ), jobs/careers ( $r = .44, p \leq .001$ ), and personal problems ( $r = .24, p \leq .001$ ). See Table 9.

### Discussion

The overall aim of this study was to explore the educational aspirations of rural Black male students and identify factors that influenced their aspirations to attend college and universities upon high school completion. Additionally, we inquired into whether rural Black male students had sufficient knowledge of postsecondary admissions processes, self-confidence, and connections with their school counselor in order to meet their aspirations. The results provide several important points of discussion.

Table 9

*Correlation Matrix: School Counselor Involvement by Student Educational Aspirations*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. How sure he will graduate from high school	–											
2. How far he thinks he will get	.241**	–										
3. How sure he will go to college	.102*	.259**	–									
4. Thinks he can complete a BA/BS degree	.346**	.493**	.350**	–								
5. Disappointed if he doesn't obtain a BA/BS degree by age 30	.334**	.365**	.224**	.608**	–							
6. Talked to school counselor about education/career plan	.136**	.128*	.211**	.304**	.145**	–						
7. Talked to school counselor about math courses	.221**	-.024	.005	.046	-.054	.002	–					
8. Talked to school counselor about science courses	.063	.057	.082	-.020	-.037	-.004	.249**	–				
9. Talked to school counselor about other courses	-.022	.040	.085	.068	.037	.052	.052	.234**	–			
10. Talked to school counselor about going to college	-.005	.165**	.057	.231**	.091	.039	.051	.163**	.271**	–		
11. Talked to school counselor about adult jobs/careers	-.063	.117*	.122*	.096	.064	-.023	.138**	.148**	.233**	.440**	–	
12. Talked to school counselor about personal problems	-.050	-.042	.003	-.026	-.007	-.030	.003	.018	.001	.096	.238**	–

Note. BA/BS = bachelor's degree.

\*  $p \leq 0.05$  (two-tailed).

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$  (two-tailed).

Largely, rural Black male students in this study presented with a high academic achievement orientation, as most of the students believed that they would successfully earn a high school diploma or equivalent, and the majority of students reported aspirations to immediately transition to a four-year college. This finding supports research from Goings and Shi (2018) and Means et al. (2016), which illustrated that rural Black males are successfully matriculating toward high school completion and are often confident in their academic capabilities. Specifically, our findings indicated that rural Black males perceive themselves as capable of achieving academic success at the bachelors, masters, and even terminal degree level. Situating this finding in the community cultural wealth framework, the high academic aspirations of the Black rural males in this study juxtaposes deficit ideology often ascribed to this population in regard to academics. Although a smaller percentage of rural Black male students (20.8%) aspired to attain doctoral or terminal degrees diverse career options that could motivate them to pursue terminal and professional programs (Means, 2019; Strayhorn, 2015).

It is questionable whether or not rural Black male students have exposure to adequate resources that can foster college enrollment. Our results showed that approximately 39% of rural Black male students reported they were sure of their future aspirations to, if they attend college at the bachelor's level, they are likely to garner aspirational and social capital via exposure to mentors and be introduced to attend college. While this is admirable, it leaves 61% of students with some level of uncertainty about their college attendance. Although ninth graders still have time to determine their post-graduation endeavors, exposure to necessary pre-college preparatory activities (e.g., PSAT) and pathways (e.g., AP courses) have a significant influence on college knowledge and aspirations (Chambers et al., 2019). Unfortunately, the results show that rural Black males may not have adequate information or guidance to prepare for the PSAT, nor do they have adequate information related to taking AP courses and exams. This finding is similar to results from other studies (e.g., Strayhorn, 2015) that suggest Black males from underserved backgrounds may not be exposed to rigorous math and science courses taught by well-qualified teachers, nor are they urged to enroll in AP courses at the same level as students from other racial/ethnic groups.

A noteworthy finding in this study is the high percentage (43%) of rural Black male students who reported intentions to join the military immediately after high school. This finding is particularly important for individuals and entities invested in the overall success and economic advancement of Black males. Bradford Wilcox et al. (2018) reported that serving in the military was associated with a 72% increase in the odds that Black males would rise to the middle-class socioeconomic level or higher as compared to males in other racial/ethnic groups. Furthermore, joining the armed forces can provide rural Black males with stable employment, health care, housing, and opportunities for college enrollment, burgeoning multiple forms of capital (e.g., social, aspirational, navigational). Joining the military can help cover the cost of college tuition for service members and their families. Moreover, the military champions virtues such as duty, responsibility, loyalty, and perseverance (Bradford Wilcox et al., 2018), which are all values possessed by Black male youth.

Finally, results from this study shed light on how rural Black male students engage with their school counselors. For those who sought services from school counselors, matters discussed were related to math, science, other courses, college aspirations, job/career plans, and personal concerns. Contrary to reports that Black male youth are apprehensive to seek help (Lindsey et al., 2018), results from this study show that some rural Black males did reach out to school counselors for guidance in both educational and personal matters. For Black male students, conversations with school counselors who affirm their academic capacities can buttress aspirational capital and present a gateway for further conversations that can impact overall personal development (Burt & Johnson, 2018).

### **Implications**

The results of this study have several important implications for increasing rural Black male college enrollment and educational aspirations. First, it is important to cultivate rural Black males' academic joy, their reason to aspire to higher levels of education. This includes recruiting rural Black male students for academically or intellectually gifted courses (Lawson Davis et al., 2020). Educators should work to counter the tendency to overlook Black male students' academic abilities in lieu of stereotypical athletic potential (Harris et al., 2014). Rather, school personnel should intentionally foster rural Black male students' academic identity, which will help to build their academic self-efficacy. Based

on the findings from this research and other studies (e.g., Chambers et al., 2019; Chambers et al., 2016), it is especially important to facilitate academic self-efficacy in the areas of math and science for rural students who aspire to attend college.

Second, college readiness activities for rural students should occur as early as the elementary level. This is important because, for individuals who pursue careers in STEM fields, interest and aspirations for STEM begins prior to the middle grades (Maltese & Tai, 2010). Teachers and school counselors can start discussions about college and program majors in the classroom and reach out to various colleges to visit their schools and engage with students. These activities increase visibility of four-year colleges, which rural students may not easily access due to transportation barriers. Such activities may also help foster rural Black male students' social and aspirational capital in relation to secondary and post-secondary education.

Furthermore, considering rural familism, it is essential that school personnel include students' families in college readiness activities, as some rural Black males may be the first in their families to attend college and may benefit from collective motivation (Agger et al., 2018; Isik et al., 2018).

Professionals at the middle grade levels can begin conversations and activities related to the PSAT and AP courses to increase Black male students' familiarity before reaching the high school level. High school counselors can actively collaborate with college recruitment and admissions offices and welcome these professionals for school visits to provide up-to-date, firsthand information related to the admission process, the financial aid process, and exploring college majors. Specifically, because representation is important, high school counselors should intentionally seek out representatives from minority-serving institutions such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities to visit rural school districts to recruit students.

Finally, family-school-community partnerships are vital to the success of rural Black male students. Many rural communities have high achieving, influential Black males in members of organizations (e.g., Masonic Service Association) or Greek fraternities who are interested in youth outreach initiatives. These males have social capital and can serve as role models for rural Black male students who aspire to attend college. Members from these organizations can potentially partner with Black male teachers to hold affinity groups for Black male

students. Likewise, religious leaders in rural Black communities are mostly male and have pre-existing connections with Black families and cultural capital in rural communities. Thus, they can also serve as positive role models and partner with other Black male leaders and schools to foster college aspirations.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

There are several limitations to consider in the present research study. The sample for this study consisted of Black male students from rural areas in the ninth grade. Because these students are in their first year of high school, many of them may not have been privy to conversations related to college. Toward that end, we emphasize the importance of creating a college-going culture for rural students prior to high school level. In addition, we drew from a discrete sample from within the HSLs 09, and while the overall dataset is designed to be nationally representative, it is unclear whether or not this subset is representative of rural Black males nationally. Finally, as a matter of delimitation, we focused exclusively on ninth graders. Although using the 2012 and 2106 follow ups could have assisted in providing a more conclusive analysis of the choices rural Black males ultimately make, we were interested in those preliminary contacts—whether they were interacting with counselors at this early phase and whether they were coming to high school with college aspirations. In future work, we will explore aspirations in late high school and college enrollment. Here, inferential analyses were more appropriate as there is a tighter connection between college aspirations and postsecondary enrollment.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we explored the post-secondary aspirations of rural Black male ninth graders as well as the relationships among their educational aspirations, college knowledge, and support from school counselors. Contrary to some deficit-perspectives of education within this context, we found that Black male ninth grade students often have high educational aspirations with many planning to attend post-secondary education. Moreover, rural Black male students expressed efficacy in their ability to finish high school and complete a college degree. At the same time, there is an opportunity to continue addressing gaps related to school and community-based resources and guidance leveraged to support rural Black males in achieving

their college aspirations. Our hope is that the findings of this study encourage rural schools, educators, and communities to continue collaborating to support positive educational experiences aimed at projecting Black male youth towards college and beyond.

Drawing on rural community-based social and cultural capital, rural Black males can traverse college knowledge gaps with the assistance of their families, community-based organizations, and school personnel, which will burgeon Black boy joy.

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**Authors:**

**Loni Crumb** is an Assistant Professor in the Counselor Education program at East Carolina University. Contact: crumbL15@ecu.edu

**Crystal R. Chambers** is a Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at East Carolina University. Contact: chambersc@ecu.edu

**Jessica Chittum** is the Director of Assessment and Pedagogical Innovation in the Office of Curricular and Pedagogical Innovation at the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Contact: chittum.jr@gmail.com

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