



# BLACK MEN AND THE COLLEGE ADMISSION ESSAY

Creating a Counter-Narrative

**A**s a practitioner who has scored many admission essays, I've noticed that numerous colleges and universities include questions that seek to expose and evaluate students' interactions with diversity, equity, and inclusion. Frequently, applicants are encouraged to disclose a difficult moment in their life and share how they overcame it.

By Michael R. Williams

Such questions were originally developed to give voice to the diverse experiences students encounter in their homes, neighborhoods, and schools. But as a Black male liberator who has spent his career providing training and anti-deficit literature to support the holistic existence of Black men, I've seen firsthand the problematic nature of such questions, as well as the negative effects the prevailing narrative has on the population I serve—Black men.

Perhaps unwittingly, the types of questions described above encourage Black men to champion their trauma. This practice harms individuals and it prevents all of us from confronting the adverse effects of failed policies, procedures, and practices aimed at addressing racial and educational inequalities in the US.

## FRAMING THE ISSUE

The approach to college admission described above undoubtedly affects a wide array of students, but this piece is focused solely on how those practices impact Black men.

The way I approach this issue is framed by my positionality; the support I provide to Black men; and the ways I work to push back against the deficit model used most frequently to examine the recruitment, retention, and matriculation of Black males in higher education.

With that in mind, let's take a step back and consider the ways these questions work to uphold and support existing structures of inequity while also erasing the unique identities of applicants, particularly Black males.

Black men deserve to exist. Our existence is not dependent on the ways we perform and exclude others from engaging in masculinity. Nor is it dependent

on our hyper-visual bodies in a capitalistic society. Yes, there are rigid structures Black men must navigate in any attempt to achieve both educational and social aspirations. But we should neither highly score and praise Black men's ability to navigate poverty and disfigurement, nor should we employ that practice as deserving of scholastic funds.

The move away from glamorizing grit and trauma must first come at the acceptance of the many failed attempts to explicitly combat oppression.

Uncovering and removing the barriers faced by Black men requires a multifaceted approach to examining housing discrimination, access to adequate health care, food insecurities, culturally relevant psychological health practices, and wage inequality, just to name a few. Yet instead of taking on these tasks, we reward students for their perseverance. We praise their ability to be resilient in situations wherein Black men have learned to cope without having their most basic of needs met. The ritualistic coping and subservient mannerisms developed remain unique to Black men, having been labeled as *cool pose*. This posturing serves a dual purpose—intracommunal messaging among Black men and a mask against societal pressures due to racial and gender inequalities. More recently select scholars have praised the coded resilience as *grit*.

### EMBRACING A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

My vision for education is to develop student supports, engage in student success, and dismantle

social systems that hinder student learning. The fascination with grit in college admission, and its manifestation in essay questions, run counter to those goals.

Researchers define grit as the capacity to sustain effort and interest in projects that take months or even longer to complete. While the ability to remain focused on short-, mid-, and long-term goals

is commendable, issues arise when we overlook the barriers in traversing the mountain. Embracing the notion of grit and rewarding trauma narrows our field of vision to focus on the narrative that Black males can persist and attain long sought-after goals. But the influences of oppression are completely ignored when you focus on the end goal and adopt the grotesque association of trauma and grit as acquirable skills. The cool pose coping mechanism employed by Black men serves as just one example of the effects that narrative can have on Black men, both as individuals and collectively.

A counter-narrative exists in the ability to name the real-life experiences that hinder progression and to develop plans to deconstruct the barriers. Such a shift proved powerful for me in my own personal and professional development and is long overdue within the realm of college admission where we frequently reward Black men for their athleticism in jumping breaches when, as educators and

practitioners, we should have built a bridge.

The move away from glamorizing grit and trauma must first come at the acceptance of the many failed attempts to explicitly combat oppression. Both colleges and society are comprised of free-thinking individuals. As individuals, we must consistently challenge the ways in which we internalize oppression through unlearning and (re)learning. Interrogate your own ideology toward Black men, African Americans, and marginalized communities as a whole. And to my fellow Black men, I ask you to examine whether you suppress your own interactions with oppression. As a concept within masculine performance, there is an underlying reward for remaining silent when confronted with pain.

We also must contest the institutional oppression that exists within society, as well as the college and university context. The impact of college application essays remains seated in this area, as it rewards retaining grit in the face of oppression.

Reflecting back on the scenario of climbing the mountain, it's time to remove that boulder and not praise those who passed it. The higher education community must reimagine the connection between grit, trauma, and the identification of academic promise. Changing college essay questions to embrace a counter-narrative is a critical first step. [↗](#)

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