INTEGRATING WELLNESS INTO BLACK MALE INITIATIVE PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Even though Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs have found ways to positively influence the academic and psychosocial outcomes of Black men attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), Black college men remain at high risk for psychological distress. Current research addressing the need for BMI programs to incorporate wellness and mental health considerations in their work with Black male students is lacking. With attention to student well-being growing on college campuses, BMIs are challenged to develop more holistic programming to raise awareness of the importance of wellness in the Black male college experience. Attention is given to Hettler's six-dimension wellness model, and recommendations are made for integrating it into BMI programs.
Keywords: Black college men; wellness; Black Male Initiative Programs; mental health; college student development

Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs have been created on college campuses to promote the retention and persistence of Black male undergraduate students throughout their college matriculation (St. Léger, 2012). With an ever-increasing number of Black men enrolling at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), the need for BMI programs and additional forms of focused support has become more evident. Research findings indicate that BMIs have successfully enhanced the academic achievement and sense of belonging and community of Black college men on campus, as well as their knowledge of career opportunities, advancement, and development of professional identity while enrolled in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Brooms, 2016, 2018a).

These findings indicate that there has been considerable research on interventions designed to enhance community building, academic success, and career readiness for Black men attending PWIs. Although data about these outcomes are indeed important, the influence of BMI programs on specifically enhancing the mental health and well-being of Black college men appears to have been overlooked.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the need for the integration of mental health and wellness considerations in Black Male Initiative programs at predominantly White institutions. By incorporating consideration of the relationship between mental health and the collegiate experiences of Black men, BMIs can further enhance academic achievement and career readiness and, in addition, also enhance the holistic identity development of the attending Black male students. This article will also provide recommendations for Black Male Initiative programs to integrate considerations of wellness into their scope of practice with Black college men at predominantly White institutions.

Background

BMI and Black Male Student Development

Over the years, Black men have encountered many challenges in obtaining higher education. Challenges that impede Black student achievement at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) include issues pertaining to campus climate (Brooms, 2018a, 2018b; Strayhorn & Devita, 2010), social isolation (Harper, 2013), and a lack of access to Black student services professionals (Palmer et al., 2014). In response to these challenges and others such as underrepresentation, social isolation, and racial and cultural stereotyping (Harper, 2013; Morton IV, 2020), many institutions have developed policy initiatives and created programs to better support the needs of Black students in hopes of positively influencing their collegiate success, identity development, and sense of belonging.

BMIs are recognized as successful social cohesion programs to provide Black male students with support and resources to increase their college retention and graduation rates (Brooms, 2016). Previous research has indicated that student involvement in BMI programs has led to positive outcomes regarding academic performance, leadership engagement, and overall satisfaction with their collegiate experiences (Brooms, 2016, 2018b; Brown, 2006; Harper, 2013; Strayhorn & Devita, 2010). Research on BMI programs reveals that this initiative can enhance awareness and exploration of identity development for Black male students (Brooms, 2017, 2018b; Dancy, 2012; Davis, 2012). However, research focusing on the ability of BMIs to enhance spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual identities appears to be lacking. Brooms (2018a) stated that more research addressing the influence of BMIs on socio-emotional and psychosocial development, as well as the investigation of self-efficacy and other identities, such as spirituality, is needed.

Black Male Wellbeing at PWIs

Research findings suggest that students of color face a higher prevalence of challenges to their mental health on predominantly White campuses (Lipson et al., 2018). To better understand how BMIs can support Black male students holistically, attention must also be given to challenges to their mental health and well-being while attending PWIs. There are numerous obstacles impeding the well-being of Black students attending PWIs. Many align with historical challenges related to perceived and personal stigma surrounding mental health in Black communities, beliefs regarding masculinity, and access to and knowledge of culturally sensitive services and spaces on campus (Anderson, 2018; Clement et al., 2015; Lipson et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2020).

In a study of BMI programs, Broom (2018a) found that students "having spaces to express themselves as Black males was critical for their socio-emotional needs, especially regarding their healing, motivation, and self-efficacy" (p. 69). In a related study, researchers found that one of the primary ways Black college men coped with stress was by discussing their issues with members of their support networks (Goodwill et al., 2018). Although Brooms' (2018a) findings highlight the positive influence of BMIs on Black male students academic performance and educational experiences at PWIs, research on Black college student mental health shows that Black men attending PWIs report having significantly more mental health concerns than their peers (Barry et al., 2017). Some of the concerns reported by Black college men include but are not limited to anxiety, depression, racialized stressors, and substance use disorders, all of which have been prevalent among college students of color (Hankerson et al., 2015; Lipson et al., 2018; Mushonga, 2019).

Given these findings, it is critical that BMI programs incorporate opportunities for increased awareness, vulnerability, exploration, and growth pertaining to other aspects of student identity development and collegiate experiences for Black male students. Specifically, incorporating awareness of the challenges to well-being encountered by Black men attending PWIs and engaged in BMI programming can challenge barriers and stigmas, in turn positively influencing holistic wellness and identity development.

Theoretical Foundation

Incorporation of Hettler's Model of Wellness

With scholars recommending future work and research pertaining to the impact of BMIs on identity development, Hettler's (1980) six-dimension Model of Wellness could be a beneficial framework for helping students navigate the process of developing their holistic identities. Hettler's (1980) Model of Wellness can be utilized by BMIs as a framework to create intentional programming that integrates wellness concepts to support holistic development across multiple dimensions. The dimensions of Hettler's (1980) model are: physical, social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and occupational.

Because this model provides a holistic view of human functioning based on a student's lifestyle and environment, it is considered applicable to a diverse range of college students. Through programming that utilizes Hettler's (1980) Model of Wellness as a framework, BMI programs will help Black male students successfully develop across a broader range of dimensions of their collegiate experience, enhancing their potential for achieving optimal health and well-being along the way.

While Hettler's (1980) model has been utilized to help craft experiences for college students that cover a broad range of components of well-being, more work is needed to better understand how this wellness model can be used to positively influence the overall college experience of specific populations of students. With traditional BMI programs primarily focusing on student academic and social success, Hettler's (1980) model can be integrated into BMI programming to assist in rais-

ing awareness of other aspects of identity and psychosocial development. BMIs that incorporate the six dimensions of wellness proposed in Hettler's model into their programmatic offerings could help Black male students achieve optimal student development and health outcomes. However, more research on the idea should be explored.

Theoretical Integration

There are numerous ways that BMIs can integrate Hettler's (1980) wellness model into their approach to supporting and developing Black male college students. However, three methods appear to have the potential for an immediate impact on student well-being as well as a long-term impact on the reach of BMI as a whole. Those three methods are wellness-focused programming, wellness-focused pillars, and collaboration with wellness-focused departments.

Wellness-Focused Programming

The first step BMI programs can take is creating programming within the initiative that focuses on mental health and well-being for Black male college students. Research findings indicate that wellness programming can enhance individuals' well-being (McGrady et al., 2021). Programming centered around or developed with considerations of the six dimensions of wellness could immediately impact Black male college students' perceptions of topics pertaining to their mental health and well-being. Example topics for BMIs looking to incorporate wellness-focused activities could include the relationship between physical health and Black men (physical dimension), healthy relationships and navigating emotions (emotional dimension), and defining spirituality and self-care (spiritual dimension).

In a study conducted on the promotion of wellness for Thai college students, researchers (Ratanasiripong & Rodriguez, 2011) suggested the formation of wellness groups, or dialogue groups, where students could engage in dialogues related to mental health and well-being. In BMIs, these groups could also be an effective way to help students build stronger connections, communication skills, and pathways to explore topics that are typically stigmatized in the Black community. Additionally, through collaboration with mental health professionals, dialogue groups could be utilized to broach, or explore issues of race, culture, and diversity (Day-Vines et al., 2007), as they pertain to the mental health of Black men. Research on broaching supports the utilization of this skill because of its potential to enhance relationships, rapport building, vulnerability, and client satisfaction with services with clients of color in counseling settings (King & Borders, 2019). However, more research related to incorporating wellness into BMIs is needed to understand better what broaching topics related to wellness could look like and what topics are deemed necessary by Black college men involved in BMI.

An example of a hypothetical wellness-focused strategy that a BMI program could deliver on their campus could be offering a group-based dialogue on self-care strategies resulting from COVID. The larger group discussion could begin the program with a presentation of general facts regarding the importance of self-care while in college. After presenting the information on general self-care, the larger group could then divide into smaller groups, where group members could discuss self-care strategies utilized by each individual. The desired outcome would be that students will gain a better understanding of an aspect of mental wellness while in college through intentionally focused programming and conversation on wellness along their collegiate journeys.

Wellness-Focused Pillar

Additional research findings indicate that promoting mental health is a salient way to encourage academic achievement and life-long well-being (Gibbs & Larcus, 2015). With this idea in mind, the second step that BMIs can take beyond student-centered programming is adding a

wellness-focused pillar to the initiative's foundational areas of focus on college campuses. The six pillars, or key strategic areas, that many BMIs aim to address on college campuses are institutional commitment, diversity recruitment, academic enhancement, social/emotional programming, and culturally competent mentorship (Fullard, 2019). With wellness-focused programming helping BMIs bring awareness to mental health and well-being at the student level, the addition of a wellness-focused pillar to their key strategic areas can help them solidify the acknowledgment of wellness as an integral aspect of the Black male student experience at the programmatic level. The visible establishment of wellness as a key strategic area for a program developed to support students from minoritized identities may also encourage other minority-serving initiatives to consider the influence of mental health and well-being with their students' collegiate experiences.

An example of a hypothetical wellness-focused pillar, or wellness-focused strategic area, that a BMI could add to its key programmatic focus areas could be wellness-based initiatives. Within the focus area of wellness-based initiatives, BMIs could create objectives and programming specific toward addressing the intersection of wellness and the Black male college student experience on their college campus. The conceptual wellness program example above that discusses self-care and Black college men is an example of programming delivered through the existence of this specific pillar. Sample wellness-based objectives and goals are: (a) Offer at least one monthly wellness program that highlights one dimension of Hettler's Model of Wellness, (b) Wellness experts will be invited to collaborate on BMI programming, and (c) Wellness-based resources will be offered at every BMI program.

Wellness-Focused Collaborations

Through the utilization of Hettler's (1980) model, BMIs can develop student-focused programming as well as new larger-scale program-matic objectives. However, Fullerton (2011) recommended that wellness-focused collaborations on college campuses can provide a range of appropriate, integrated support services to students in a way that is inviting and promotes accessibility and authenticity. With that in mind, the third step that BMIs can take to enhance their efforts of promoting awareness of mental health and well-being is through the establishment of wellness-focused collaborations across their institutions and communities.

This article defines wellness-focused collaborations as partnerships with on- and off-campus departments and professionals whose occupational missions align with at least one of Hettler's (1980) six dimensions of wellness. For example, BMIs' wellness-focused collaborations may include on-campus partnerships with departments such as the college's student health center, campus recreation department, and counseling center. Off-campus partnerships with professionals may include collaborations with local political leaders, counselors, physical therapists, church leaders, career coaches, and more.

Collaborations with departments and professionals outside of BMIs can provide opportunities to provide students with diverse perspectives from leaders and experts in their respective fields pertaining to dimensions of wellness. More crucially, cross-campus partnerships can also offer opportunities to enhance students' sense of belonging and systems of support at their institution and increase the visibility of wellness-based staff members. While partnering with clinical and non-clinical wellness-based staff members can allow BMIs to partner with wellness experts, Mekhail (2019) states that wellness staff members on college campuses "must maintain high levels of visibility and accessibility in multicultural spaces—or any identified spaces that minoritized students feel a sense of belonging" (p.47). Increased visibility of wellness staff members in student spaces could lead to stronger levels of connection and trust between staff and students of color, particularly students

participating in BMIs. Through stronger relationships across campuses, BMIs and their campus partners can work together to challenge stigmas and break barriers associated with the relationship between Black college men and mental health and well-being.

An example of a hypothetical wellness-focused collaboration could be executed by partnering with clinicians from the college counseling center to help facilitate the suggested programming on self-care. While the Black Male Initiative may host the program on campus, the presentation and facilitation of the break-out groups can be led by representatives from the counseling center. Through facilitating the larger and smaller groups, counseling center staff members may also offer best practices and recommendations for effective self-care strategies based on their work with specific student groups.

Tying It Together

Through the development and integration of wellness-focused programming, pillars, and collaborations, BMIs can purposefully promote the importance of mental health and well-being in the Black male college student experience. In addition to promoting this awareness, BMIs can more intentionally deliver timely, culturally sensitive programming and objectives pertaining to the wellness of Black college men through increased understanding of wellness from cross-campus and community partnerships. Increased partnerships between students and faculty, staff, and community members can aid in raising awareness of wellness in BMI programs and, more importantly, possibly advocate for a culture of optimal student well-being across campus.

Limitations of the Proposal and Implications for Future Work

Although Hettler's (1980) Model of Wellness is applicable across diverse populations, research findings in the field of college mental health recommend additional culturally relevant services

and considerations as colleges work to meet the multifaceted psychological needs of Black college students (Jones et al., 2016). Programs for Black male students such as Brother2Brorther and Student African American Brotherhood highlight the impact of mentoring and retention initiatives directly on Black male students, considering the historical challenges on Black college students. Since this proposal only discusses the utilization of Hettler's (1980) model as a framework for considering student well-being, future studies seeking to better understand the integration of wellness models in programming focused on Black male students must also recognize cultural considerations in the Black male college experience.

Future work may also aim to integrate more culturally sensitive theories instead of or in addition to Hettler's (1980) six dimensions. In their study of college student wellness, Oliver et al. (2017) found that "race is an influential factor of wellness...and should be considered in terms of assessing factors that contribute to holistic health" (p. 1643). With this idea in mind, future work investigating considerations of mental health in work with this population should also consider the role of race, specifically in the well-being of students attending predominantly White institutions. In the paradigm proposed herein, it was assumed that culturally relevant considerations could occur through collaboration with wellness-based staff members such as clinicians from the college counseling center on campus.

While the paradigm has potential, it is made based on the assumption that BMI programs will have access to culturally competent services and diverse representation among the professionals who partner with the initiative. Current research findings indicate that counseling services on college campuses often go under-utilized because of its staff's lack of racial diversity (Morton IV, 2020). Therefore, those engaged in future investigations of collaborations of BMIs with wellness-based professionals may seek to understand better perceptions that BMI personnel have of support ser-

vices on campus, as well as the impact on students' perceptions of wellness through partnerships with wellness-based professionals of color. Additionally, more work is needed to better understand how Black men enrolled at PWIs define wellness, as this conceptual model defines wellness through a preexisting framework, rather than student perspectives.

Another limitation of the proposed model is that it aims to bring awareness to all six dimensions of a single wellness framework. Hettler's (1980) model was proposed due to its utilization with college students (Gieck & Olsen, 2010; Horton & Synder, 2009), but future work should encourage partnerships with students, allowing them to advocate for what areas of wellness they believe should be given more attention regarding their development and college experiences. The model suggested in this manuscript offers an opportunity for BMI programs to potentially address multiple aspects of wellness that could impact students' lives. However, not all dimensions of wellness may apply to specific students' college experiences. Lastly, differences in BMI programs should be considered, such as size, student demographic make-up, and variances based on their respective institution. Not all BMI programs operate the same. Therefore, their differences should be considered as wellness or mental health frameworks are explored.

Conclusion

By integrating considerations of student well-being into their structure, BMI programs can promote increased self- and institutional awareness and attention to the mental health and well-being of Black college men. This increased attention can further enhance their academic performance and educational experiences throughout their matriculation through college. Dunn (1961) believed that wellness is a comprehensive concept of health that focuses on a person's level of functioning across a variety of dimensions in order to maximize their complete potential. This integration process holds promise for enhancing already accomplished BMI programs while further maximizing the academic potential of Black male college students and, more importantly, their potential to achieve optimal mental health and well-being while in college.

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