




Empathy and Academic Achievement Among Black/African American Students at an HBCU

Hyung Nam Kim, PhD

North Carolina A&T State University, Greensboro, North Carolina, United States

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1443-2122>

Contact: hncim@ncat.edu

Abstract

Empathy is the ability to understand the thoughts, behaviors, and feelings of others. In addition to fostering strong relationships and overall personal growth, empathy plays a crucial role in college students achieving positive academic outcomes. However, a knowledge gap exists concerning the role and impact of empathy among college students, particularly Black/African American students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). This research aims to address this gap by examining those students' **empathy levels** and their association with academic achievement. The study found relatively low levels of empathy and a negative association between empathy and academic performance. Further research is needed for a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between empathy and academic achievement among HBCU students.

Keywords: *empathy, Black/African American college students, academic achievement, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, HBCU*

Date Submitted: April 12, 2024 | Date Published: December 5, 2024

Recommended Citation

Kim, H. N. (2024). Empathy and academic achievement among Black/African American students at an HBCU. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 14, 296–308. <https://doi.org/10.5590/JERAP.2024.14.1.20>

Introduction

Empathy

Individuals with empathy are adept at understanding others' perspectives in various situations (Cuff et al., 2016). This ability, which allows people to recognize that others have beliefs, desires, and emotions that differ from their own, is studied in the theory of mind (Blair, 2005; Carlson et al., 2013). Accurately interpreting **others' mental states, based on their behaviors and contextual cues, is** crucial for empathic interactions. More specifically, empathy enables individuals to manage their own emotions effectively and enhances their interactions with others, which can lead to reductions in stress, conflict, and aggression (Klimecki, 2019). Empathy contributes to building enduring and robust relationships (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). It fosters deep connections with others, creating a shared sense of understanding and support. Furthermore, empathy drives people to act with kindness and compassion, encouraging prosocial activities such as volunteering, making

Note: This material is based upon work supported in part by the National Science Foundation under Grant Nos. 2315735 and 1831969.

charitable donations, and helping those in need (Davis, 2015; Williams et al., 2014). Overall, empathy facilitates the development of harmonious relationships in personal, professional, and community settings.

Complexity of Empathy

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) is a measure of empathy (Davis, 1983). It includes four constructs: perspective-taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress. Perspective-taking (PT) assesses an **individual's capability to view situations from another person's** standpoint and understand their mental state. Fantasy (FS) measures the tendency to use the imagination to immerse oneself in fictional scenarios. **Empathic concern (EC) assesses the ability to feel compassion and concern for others' misfortunes.** Personal distress (PD) measures self-oriented feelings of anxiety and discomfort in emotionally charged interpersonal situations.

In general, individuals tend to display different levels of competence across these dimensions of empathy. For example, someone with high perspective-taking and high empathic concern is likely adept at understanding and feeling for others. On the other hand, a person with high perspective-taking but low personal distress may **be emotionally attuned to others' emotions while maintaining their own emotional stability.** Hence, this person tends to retain emotional composure even in tense situations and is less prone to feeling overwhelmed **by others' emotions (e.g., anxiety, stress, or anger).**

Empathy in Higher Education Contexts

Empathy greatly **influences college students' academic success and personal development.** For instance, medical students with higher empathy levels were found to be rated more competent in clinical clerkships (Hojat et al., 2002). Empathy has been shown to improve the quality of learning and strengthen the relationships between students and instructors (Wynn et al., 2023). Empathic learning helped students to grasp subjects more conceptually and meaningfully, aiding in contextual understanding (Franzese, 2016). Empathic learners could better engage with the perspectives of characters in literary and historical narratives, contributing to their comprehension of the materials (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). Empathy, along with self-awareness, emotional management, self-motivation, and interpersonal skills, positively affected the academic achievement of secondary school students (Yahaya et al., 2012). A positive relationship was found between empathy and the grade point average (GPA) of secondary school students who completed the National Consortium For Humanizing Education Communication Index (Bonner & Aspy, 1984). Students with higher empathy levels were more likely to engage actively in class discussions, ask questions, and help their classmates (Stürmer et al., 2006). These prior studies collectively suggest that empathy is vital for college students to enhance academic performance, build stronger relationships, maintain mental well-being, and support overall personal growth. By embracing empathy, college students are expected to increase their chances of achieving academic success and personal fulfillment.

Empathy of College Students

Many studies (Aldrup et al., 2022; Goroshit & Hen, 2016; Warren, 2015) **tend to focus on instructors' empathy toward students, often neglecting the students' own empathy and its impact on their academic performance.** While the existing body of research on this topic is limited, Wilson (2011) examined how service-learning **influenced students' personal development, focusing** especially on the expression of empathy. It was found that students who participated in service-learning were more likely to demonstrate empathy in their reflective writings, compared to those who did not. This implies that service-learning activities can effectively foster **empathy, potentially boosting students' academic success.** Peifer and Taasobshirazi (2022) found compelling evidence of a connection between the **COVID-19 pandemic and a decline in college students' mental health** and empathy. Their longitudinal study, which used the Patient Health Questionnaire to measure mental health symptoms, revealed a significant rise in anxiety and depression, with scores increasing from 9.35 ±

3.79 before the pandemic to 10.14 ± 3.75 post-pandemic. **This indicates a notable shift in students' mental health during the pandemic.** Additionally, they observed a significant decrease in cognitive empathy, with scores dropping from 45.78 ± 4.87 pre-pandemic to 42.35 ± 4.25 post-pandemic. This suggests a substantial **decline in students' ability to understand others' perspectives and show emotional concern, highlighting the pandemic's negative impact on both emotional well-being and empathy.**

Empathy in the Context of Black/African American Students

Limited research exists on empathy within the context of underrepresented college students, particularly Black/African American students. Despite this scarcity, Warren (2013) investigated how empathy could enhance interactions between White female high school teachers and Black/African American students. Warren used a qualitative approach, utilizing classroom observations, student focus groups (with Black male students), and semi-structured interviews with White female high school teachers. Warren (2013) discovered that empathy facilitated instructional flexibility, risk-taking, and strong bonds, leading to proactive student engagement and improved quality of **education for Black/African American students. Although Warren's** study focused on a high school environment, it underscores the potential benefits of empathy in fostering positive interactions between educators and Black/African American students. Similarly, Ford Jr. (2016) posited that empathetic educators can make Black/African American male students feel more visible, thus enhancing their academic and psychosocial outcomes. These prior studies suggest that empathy is a powerful contributor to Black/African American students reaching their full potential.

Challenges Faced by Black/African American Students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Despite the long history of empowering Black students and creating supportive environments at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU), Black students still encounter unique challenges, including microaggressions and financial hardships. These issues can adversely affect their emotional well-being, leading to stress or anxiety, which may, in turn, impede the development of empathy, a key component for fostering a truly supportive campus environment for all students. For instance, a survey of 342 students and 419 faculty and staff from 47 HBCUs found that approximately 40% of HBCU students reported a recent decline in their mental health, with stress, anxiety, and depression being prominent concerns (Smith & Thompson, 2024). Another survey by Williams and Washington (2018) found that 90.2% of 92 HBCU students experienced stress caused by school work; 76.1% felt stress related to finding a job; 62% found stress in balancing school and work; and 53.3% experienced stress caused by relationships. Additionally, a survey by Carrion et al. (2023) involving 109 pharmacy students at an HBCU found that over 55% reported various mental health issues, including stress.

The significant stress and emotional strain experienced by Black students due to financial burdens, academic pressures, and racial microaggressions (Smith et al., 2011; Sun, 2022) can adversely impact their ability to empathize with others (Keels et al., 2017). Research suggests that acute stress may impair cognitive empathy **and can block the contagion of others' emotions** (Nitschke & Bartz, 2023). This lack of emotional bandwidth can hinder interrelationships and create a sense of isolation, ultimately obstructing the development of a truly supportive and empathetic campus environment.

A survey by Smith and Thompson (2024) underscores the need for better mental health support at HBCUs, with over 65% of HBCU student respondents ($n = 342$) emphasizing the importance of promoting supportive interventions from the school to aid students with mental health challenges. This need for support is further echoed by the finding that approximately 70% of students and faculty/staff had actively tried to seek information on mental health resources from their HBCUs.

The chronic underfunding of HBCUs may also contribute to this issue. Compared to predominantly White institutions (PWIs), HBCUs often receive significantly fewer resources and less financial support (Mutakabbir & Parker, 2021). This disparity results in, for example, a shortage of mental health professionals, limited access to emotional wellness services, and a lack of programs specifically designed to address the unique challenges faced by Black students. A survey of 159 students at an HBCU (Ayyad et al., 2023) revealed that 25% were unaware of available mental health resources, while 39% faced time constraints that prevented them from seeking help. Additionally, some students simply considered these resources as intended for only severe mental issues, while others faced language barriers or financial limitations, all of which impeded their full utilization of the resources. Furthermore, the American Psychological Association (2024) reports that only 5% of the psychology workforce is Black, compared to 80% White. This disparity makes it more difficult for HBCUs to identify culturally competent professionals to address the specific needs of their Black student body effectively.

Although empathy is crucial for academic success, there is a lack of clear understanding of its role and impact among college students, especially Black/African American college students at HBCUs. This study aims to advance the knowledge **in this area by examining students' empathy levels and their association with their academic achievement at an HBCU.**

Methods

Participants

The study included a convenience sample of 63 full-time undergraduate engineering students from a large, research-intensive HBCU in the Mid-Atlantic region. Of these, 39 were enrolled in the spring semester, and 24 were enrolled in the fall semester in 2023. All participants came from a statistics course and received course credit for their voluntary participation. The mean age was 22.29 years ($SD = 4.96$), and all participants identified as Black/African American. The gender distribution was 40 males and 23 females. As participation **was strictly voluntary, students did not face any penalties for not participating. Participants' responses were** kept confidential until the semester ended, not being shared with anyone, including the research team members and instructors. Anonymity was further ensured through a unique study ID.

Convenience sampling was employed in this study to facilitate efficient data collection among college students at an HBCU. Given the challenges of accessing diverse participant pools within a constrained timeframe, convenience sampling allowed for the selection of willing participants who were readily available on campus. **Furthermore, accessing students' academic outcomes (e.g., grades)** from institutions other than our own would have posed significant challenges, due to privacy regulations and institutional policies. This method enabled the study to gather timely insights into empathy and academic achievement among HBCU students, ensuring practicality and feasibility in research implementation.

Material

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), developed by Davis (1983), is a 28-item self-report questionnaire that helped to measure individual differences in empathy among participants. Participants were asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Does not describe me well" to "Describes me very well." The IRI demonstrated strong internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.70 to 0.78 (Davis, 1980). The IRI assessed four distinct dimensions of empathy: perspective-taking, empathic concern, personal distress, and fantasy.

Procedure

All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential. Participants were asked to complete the IRI questionnaire via Qualtrics. The IRI was administered individually; participants completed it in approximately 10–15 minutes.

Data Analysis

The study calculated the mean score for each subscale of the IRI to assess the average level of empathy. This can be helpful in understanding the overall empathy profile of a sample population. Statistical analyses were performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics for Macintosh, version 24. A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (Mishra et al., 2019) indicated that the data followed a normal distribution, $D(63) = .08$, $p = .20$ for perspective-taking, $D(63) = .09$, $p = .20$ for fantasy, $D(63) = .10$, $p = .17$ for empathic concern, and $D(63) = .08$, $p = .20$ for personal distress. Pearson correlation coefficient measured the relationships between the IRI subscales and **the participants' academic performance**. Participants' academic performance was assessed using their final exam scores for the semester.

Results

Mean Differences

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation values of the self-reported empathy levels. In addition, paired-samples t -tests revealed statistically significant differences between all possible combinations of the four constructs, except for the following combination: perspective-taking and empathic concern.

Table 1. *Self-Reported Empathy Levels and Mean Differences Between the Four Constructs of Empathy*

	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> -tests for comparing mean values			
			EC	PT	FS	PD
Empathic concern (EC)	2.73	0.53	–	$t(62) = -.45$, $p = .66$	$t(62) = -4.03$, $p < .001$	$t(62) = 13.77$, $p < .001$
Perspective-taking (PT)	2.69	0.59		–	$t(62) = 2.75$, $p = .008$	$t(62) = 9.64$, $p < .001$
Fantasy (FS)	2.41	0.65			–	$t(62) = 8.26$, $p < .001$
Personal distress (PD)	1.67	0.50				–

Correlation

As indicated in Table 2, the Pearson correlation coefficient showed a negative correlation between empathic concern and academic performance. Pearson correlation coefficient also showed a negative correlation between personal distress and academic performance.

Table 2. *Pearson Correlation Coefficient Between Empathy and Academic Performance*

	Empathic concern (EC)	Perspective-taking (PT)	Fantasy (FS)	Personal distress (PD)
Academic performance	$r(61) = -0.27$, $p = .035$	$r(61) = -0.22$, $p = .086$	$r(61) = -0.24$, $p = .061$	$r(61) = -0.41$, $p < .001$

Discussions

Empathy Levels

This study identified differences in empathy levels among Black/African American HBCU students and compared findings to previous research. For instance, Javaeed et al. (2022) found that the mean empathy scores for all four constructs (examined above) of undergraduate medical students were higher than those in the present study. Konrath et al. (2011) conducted a cross-temporal meta-analysis to assess empathy levels of college students between 1979 and 2009. They found that there was a significant decline in empathic concern and perspective-taking, while fantasy and personal distress remained relatively stable. Nevertheless, the declined levels of empathic concern (mean = 3.5) and perspective-taking (mean = 3.3) are still greater than those observed among the college students in this study. In contrast, other prior studies have reported lower levels of empathy compared to those observed among the college students in this study. For example, Davis (1980) measured empathy among undergraduate students enrolled in psychology classes and reported separate scores for males and females. To facilitate comparison, this study combined those scores and calculated the averages, resulting in 17.24 for fantasy, 17.37 for perspective-taking, 20.36 for empathic concern, and 10.87 for personal distress. Compared to these averages, the college students in this study indicated higher levels of fantasy and personal distress but lower levels of perspective-taking and empathic concern.

Challenges in Supporting Emotional Well-being at HBCUs

Despite a history of empowering Black students, HBCUs face challenges in supporting these students' emotional well-being. A growing body of research indicates high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among HBCU students (Carrion et al., 2023; Smith & Thompson, 2024; Williams & Washington, 2018). These mental challenges are attributed to financial burdens, academic pressures, and microaggressions (Smith et al., 2011; Sun, 2022). **These cumulative stressors can strain students' ability to manage their emotional well-being** (Keels et al., 2017; Nitschke & Bartz, 2023). Compared to the situation at resource-rich non-HBCUs, limited access to culturally competent mental health services on HBCU campuses (Jones et al., 2020; Walker, 2018) further hinders student well-being. This lack of support may contribute to the observed difference in empathy and emotional burden among these students. Chronic underfunding (Mutakabbir & Parker, 2021) creates a shortage of qualified professionals and programs, despite student and staff efforts (Smith & Thompson, 2024). Further challenges include students being unaware of resources (Ayyad et al., 2023), time constraints, and the lack of culturally competent professionals (American Psychological Association, 2024). Overall, this gap between student needs and available support indicates the need for improvement in mental health resources at HBCUs.

Mixed Findings in Empathy Across Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds

Studies on empathy among students with different racial or ethnic backgrounds have yielded mixed results, with some indicating higher levels of empathy in Black students and others indicating levels lower or similar to those of other ethnic groups. For example, Lange and Couch (2011) administered the IRI questionnaire with undergraduate students, the majority (94%) of whom were White. The summed scores for each empathy construct were 20.09 for personal distress, 26.16 for empathic concern, 22.00 for perspective-taking, and 23.48 for fantasy. Scores for all empathy constructs in the White students were greater than those of the Black/African American students in the present study. Rasool et al. (2012) measured empathy of 121 engineering students in Sweden, using the IRI. As compared to the mean score for each empathy construct of Black/African American students in the current study, Swedish **students' empathy levels were higher: 2.93 for personal distress, 3.83 for empathic concern, 3.57 for perspective-taking, and 3.47 for fantasy.** Berg et al. (2015) found a statistically significant difference in empathy levels between White and Black/African American students from four medical schools. The self-reported empathy levels in Black/African students

were higher than those of White students. Webster (2010) administered the IRI with students in a baccalaureate nursing program, testing 68 White students, 1 Asian student, and 4 Black/African American students. Before the nursing students received empathy training, their empathy levels for perspective-taking (19.40 ± 3.76) and personal distress (10.16 ± 4.19) were greater than those of the students in the present study, while fantasy (13.67 ± 5.76) and empathic concern (21.88 ± 2.82) were lower. As most students in **Webster's study** were White, it could be argued that fantasy and empathic concern skills are likely greater in Black/African American students than in White students.

Inconsistencies and Influencing Factors in Empathy Research

It is important to acknowledge that this research and prior research on empathy among college students with different race and ethnic backgrounds have yielded inconsistent findings, possibly due to a range of factors that influence empathy. For example, Mooradian et al. (2011) found that empathic concern is closely related to **an individual's agreeableness, while personal distress is closely related to neuroticism. These relationships** are positive in that people who are high in agreeableness are more likely to be concerned about the welfare of others, and people who are high in neuroticism are more likely to experience personal distress when others are distressed. Guilera et al. (2019) reported that there is a positive correlation between empathy and personality in medical students, e.g., between fantasy and openness to experience and between personal distress and neuroticism. They argued that students with an open and more flexible attitude are more likely to show a higher level of fantasy, imagination, and creativity. In addition, students with higher levels of neuroticism are more likely to experience heightened emotional reactivity and sensitivity to negative emotions. An individual with a high level of personal distress, likely feeling personally distressed by another **individual's suffering, may be more likely to offer help or support** (Carrera et al., 2013). On the other hand, personal distress can also be harmful, leading to burnout or compassion fatigue (Thomas, 2013). It is thus critical for people to be aware also of their own personal distress levels and to take steps to manage them adequately.

Correlation Between Empathy and Academic Performance

This study found significant negative correlations between particular empathy constructs (empathic concern and personal distress) and **students' academic performance. These results contrast with those of earlier studies.** Onwubiko (2020) conducted the IRI with 200 college students working in the libraries of 10 **universities in Nigeria and found a positive correlation between students' empathic behavior and their academic performance.** Javaeed et al. (2022) found no relationship between empathy and academic performance among medical college students in Pakistan. Tikkanen et al. (2022) reported that cognitive empathy had a **negative impact on students' academic well-being,** leading to increased cynicism, feelings of inadequacy, and decreased engagement in their learning activities. Based solely on the findings in the present study, it is unclear why a negative correlation was **found between Black/African American HBCU students' academic outcomes and empathy levels.** It is crucial to note that this finding is based on a single study, and more research is needed to confirm these results and to explore the potential reasons for this correlation. Nevertheless, I will propose hypothetical explanations for why empathy may be negatively correlated with academic outcomes in certain circumstances.

Hypothetical Explanations for Negative Correlations

While students with high empathy may focus more on others, fostering supportive learning environments, they might also experience emotional overload from absorbing the emotions of those around them. This overload might lead them to prioritize the needs of others over their own, increasing the risk of stress, difficulty concentrating on studies, and ultimately a decline in academic performance. These hypothetical explanations are informed by previous research indicating a negative association between specific aspects of empathy and academic self-efficacy. Aparicio-Flores et al. (2020) demonstrate that personal discomfort, a component of

dispositional empathy characterized by fear, anxiety, and a sense of lack of control when witnessing others' distress, is linked to lower perceived academic self-efficacy. This study aligns with prior work highlighting the idea **that such negative emotions associated with empathy can contribute to diminished beliefs in one's ability to succeed academically**. Paro et al. (2014) also identified a potential downside of empathy, particularly the **empathy dimension "personal distress" (i.e., the degree to which an individual feels overwhelmed by others' emotions)**. For both male and female medical students, higher scores on personal distress were linked to lower scores on personal accomplishment (achievement). In addition, personal distress scores positively correlated with emotional exhaustion, a sign of burnout. These findings suggest that feeling distressed by the emotions of others could contribute to burnout, potentially hindering academic performance.

Students with a higher level of empathy may invest more time and energy in supporting others, potentially resulting in less time and energy for their own studies. Tran et al. (2023) argued that empathy is positively correlated with self-esteem, and undergraduate students with high self-esteem are more likely to be empathetic towards peers who work on similar tasks. Tran et al. also pointed out that students with high levels of self-esteem were less preoccupied with themselves but more likely to lose themselves in other people. Hypothetically, this might lead to a decline in their academic performance if students cannot effectively manage their time and priorities. **Future research will investigate Black/African American students' time management skills and association with empathy.**

Impact of Emotional Reactivity on Academic Performance

A higher level of empathy could make students more susceptible to the emotional struggles of others, potentially leading to increased stress and emotional reactivity in themselves. This, in turn, could impede their ability to focus and achieve academic excellence. Thompson et al. (2022) found that heightened affective empathy was associated with increased difficulties in emotion regulation. This implies that individuals highly **attuned to others' emotions (e.g., distress, anger, and anxiety)** may struggle to regulate their own emotions, potentially resulting in challenges related to academic performance. This is likely due to their heightened susceptibility to being triggered by the emotions of others and their difficulty disentangling their own emotions from those of their peers. Drago (2004) revealed a positive correlation between academic **achievement and students' ability to recognize, use, and manage their emotions, i.e., emotional intelligence**. Future research will examine the degree to which emotional intelligence influences academic performance among Black/African American students.

Influence of Learning Styles on Academic Performance

Different learning styles might also contribute to individual differences in academic performance among students with varying levels of empathy. May (2000) found a connection between empathy and diverse learning style profiles (activist, reflector, theorist, and pragmatist). Students with high empathy may prefer learning that involves more interaction and collaboration with others, while those with low empathy might prefer more independent and solitary learning. If the teaching methods or learning environment do not align with **students' preferred style**, their academic performance could be affected. This relationship between empathy and learning styles further extends to classroom dynamics. Xiang and Jing (2020) studied how empathy affected academic performance among groups of students who were teamed up according to their empathy levels. The group of students with high empathy demonstrated better communication skills and active participation in class activities, resulting in higher academic performance, compared to the group of students whose empathy levels did not factor into team formation. These findings highlight the potential importance of considering empathy alongside learning style when exploring academic achievement, particularly among Black/African American students. Future research will focus on examining the relationship between learning style, empathy, and academic achievement among Black/African American students.

Limitations

The IRI is a self-report measure, vulnerable to social desirability bias, wherein individuals might overestimate (or underestimate) their empathy. To address this limitation, future research can utilize multi-measurement approaches, such as combining the IRI with observations of empathic behaviors in simulated scenarios or with physiological assessments (e.g., heart rate changes) during emotional stimuli. This study relied on quantitative data obtained through surveys. While this approach provided valuable insights into the prevalence of empathy among HBCU students, it might not capture **the full spectrum of students' experiences**. **Future research could** employ qualitative methods, such as focus groups and in-depth interviews, to explore the specific challenges faced by Black/African American students at HBCUs. This study focused on engineering students, so the findings might not be generalizable to other student populations. Future research could examine empathy and academic performance across a broader range of disciplines. Additionally, Ryan et al. (2020) identified restorative tendencies, a strong desire to learn, and high achievement orientation as common traits among engineering students. These potential confounding factors, which were not considered in the study, may interact with empathy to influence academic performance. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how these traits shape the relationship between empathy and academic outcomes in this population.

Implications

In essence, while students with high empathy are naturally focused on others, fostering a supportive learning environment, they may be vulnerable to emotional overload. This overload, along with potential influences from individual differences in personality and learning style, can lead them to prioritize the needs of others over their own, increasing the risk of stress, difficulty concentrating on studies, and ultimately a decline in academic performance. As individual differences associated with agreeableness, neuroticism, openness to experience, time management, emotional intelligence, and learning style would likely affect empathy, future research will examine how such differences are associated with empathy among Black/African American HBCU students. Since intricate relationships exist between empathy, individual differences, and academic outcomes among Black/African American HBCU students, unraveling such complex relationships is crucial for creating supportive learning environments that empower Black/African American HBCU students to reach their full potential. Research that furthers understanding of these relationships will inform targeted interventions to promote student success and well-being.

Conclusion

This study investigated the empathy levels of Black/African American college students enrolled in a large HBCU and examined the association between empathy and their academic performance. The findings revealed relatively lower levels of empathy compared to some prior studies with different student populations. This study observed a negative correlation between specific empathy constructs (empathic concern and personal distress) and academic performance, contrary to prior research suggesting a positive relationship. These findings highlight the complexities of empathy and its association with academic achievement among Black/African American HBCU students. Future research should investigate how personality traits, time management, self-regulation, and learning style influence the relationship between empathy and academic achievement. Understanding these factors will contribute to developing targeted interventions to support **students' academic success and emotional well-being**. By addressing the unique challenges faced by Black/African American students, HBCUs can create more supportive and inclusive learning environments that nurture empathy and academic achievement.

References

- Aldrup, K., Carstensen, B., & Klusmann, U. (2022). Is empathy the key to effective teaching? A systematic review of its association with teacher-student interactions and student outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review*, 34(3), 1177–1216. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09649-y>
- American Psychological Association. (2024). *Data tool: Demographics of U.S. psychology workforce*. <https://www.apa.org/workforce/data-tools/demographics>
- Aparicio-Flores, M. P., Esteve-Faubel, J. M., Esteve-Faubel, R. P., & Álvarez-Teruel, J. D. (2020). High academic self-efficacy and dispositional empathy in future teachers. *Sustainability*, 12(17), Article 6728. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12176728>
- Ayyad, A. A., Maestri, T. J., Harris, S., Casanova, N., & Ibrahim, H. (2023). *Assessing underutilization of mental health resources at a historically black college and university (HBCU)*. Research Square. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-3760662/v1>
- Berg, K., Blatt, B., Lopreiato, J., Jung, J., Schaeffer, A., Heil, D., Owens, T., Carter-Nolan, P. L., Berg, D., Veloski, J., Darby, E., & Hojat, M. (2015). Standardized patient assessment of medical student empathy: Ethnicity and gender effects in a multi-institutional study. *Academic Medicine*, 90(1), 105–111. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000529>
- Blair, R. J. R. (2005). Responding to the emotions of others: Dissociating forms of empathy through the study of typical and psychiatric populations. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 14(4), 698–718. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2005.06.004>
- Bonner, T. D., & Aspy, D. N. (1984). A study of the relationship between student empathy and GPA. *Journal of Humanistic Education and Development*, 22(4), 149–154. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2164-4683.1984.tb00252.x>
- Carlson, S. M., Koenig, M. A., & Harms, M. B. (2013). Theory of mind. *WIREs: Cognitive Science*, 4(4), 391–402. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1232>
- Carrera, P., Ocejja, L., Caballero, A., Muñoz, D., López-Pérez, B., & Ambrona, T. (2013). I feel so sorry! Tapping the joint influence of empathy and personal distress on helping behavior. *Motivation and Emotion*, 37, 335–345. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1007/s11031-012-9302-9>
- Carrion, A. J., Ridley, A., Rasaki, A. A., Journee, B., & McCants, T. A. (2023). Impact of COVID-19 on the academic performance and mental health of HBCU pharmacy students. *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 15(2), 123–129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2023.02.017>
- Cuff, B. M., Brown, S. J., Taylor, L., & Howat, D. J. (2016). Empathy: A review of the concept. *Emotion Review*, 8(2), 144–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073914558466>
- Davis, M. H. (1980). A multidimensional approach to individual differences in empathy. *JSAS Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology*, 10, 85. https://www.uv.es/~friasnav/Davis_1980.pdf
- Davis, M. H. (1983). Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44(1), 113–126. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.44.1.113>
- Davis, M. H. (2015). Empathy and prosocial behavior. In D. A. Schroeder & W. G. Graziano (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of prosocial behavior* (pp. 282–306). Oxford Academic.
- Drago, J. M. (2004). *The relationship between emotional intelligence and academic achievement in nontraditional college students* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Walden University].

- Feshbach, N. D., & Feshbach, S. (2009). Empathy and education. In J. Decety & W. Ickes (Eds.), *The social neuroscience of empathy* (pp. 85–98). MIT Press.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.7551/mitpress/9780262012973.003.0008>
- Ford, D. J., Jr. (2016). Utilizing the empathy wheel to counsel African American male students. In W. Ross (Ed.), *Counseling African American males: Effective therapeutic interventions and approaches* (pp. 97–106). Information Age Publishing.
- Franzese, P. A. (2016). The power of empathy in the classroom. *Seton Hall Law Review*, 47(3), 693–716.
<https://ssrn.com/abstract=2956433>
- Goroshit, M., & Hen, M. (2016). **Teachers' empathy:** Can it be predicted by self-efficacy? *Teachers and Teaching*, 22(7), 805–818. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/13540602.2016.1185818>
- Guilera, T., Batalla, I., Forné, C., & Soler-González, J. (2019). Empathy and big five personality model in medical students and its relationship to gender and specialty preference: A cross-sectional study. *BMC Medical Education*, 19, Article 57. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-019-1485-2>
- Hojat, M., Gonnella, J. S., Mangione, S., Nasca, T. J., Veloski, J. J., Erdmann, J. B., Callahan, C. A., & Magee, M. (2002). Empathy in medical students as related to academic performance, clinical competence and gender. *Medical Education*, 36(6), 522–527. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2923.2002.01234.x>
- Javaeed, A., Rasheed, A. A., Manzoor, A., Ain, Q.-T., Costa, P. R. D., & Ghauri, S. K. (2022). Empathy scores amongst undergraduate medical students and its correlation to their academic performance. *Journal of Advances in Medical Education & Professionalism*, 10(2), 99–104.
<https://doi.org/10.30476/jamp.2022.93026.1512>
- Jones, L. V., Ahn, S., Quezada, N. M., & Chakravarty, S. (2020). Enhancing counseling services for Black college women attending HBCUs. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 29(4), 325–340. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/15313204.2018.1449689>
- Keels, M., Durkee, M., & Hope, E. (2017). The psychological and academic costs of school-based racial and ethnic microaggressions. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(6), 1316–1344.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217722120>
- Klimecki, O. M. (2019). The role of empathy and compassion in conflict resolution. *Emotion Review*, 11(4), 310–325. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/1754073919838609>
- Konrath, S. H., O'Brien, E. H., & Hsing, C. (2011). Changes in dispositional empathy in American college students over time: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15(2), 180–198.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868310377395>
- Lange, T. M., & Couch, L. L. (2011). An assessment of links between components of empathy and interpersonal problems. *The New School Psychology Bulletin*, 8(2), 83–90.
<https://nspb.net/index.php/nspb/article/view/165>
- May, B. A. (2000). Relationships among basic empathy, self-awareness, and learning styles of baccalaureate pre-nursing students within King's personal system [Doctoral dissertation, University of Tennessee]. TRACE. https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/8346
- Mishra, P., Pandey, C. M., Singh, U., Gupta, A., Sahu, C., & Keshri, A. (2019). Descriptive statistics and normality tests for statistical data. *Annals of Cardiac Anaesthesia*, 22(1), 67–72.
https://doi.org/10.4103/aca.ACA_157_18
- Mooradian, T. A., Davis, M., & Matzler, K. (2011). Dispositional empathy and the hierarchical structure of personality. *American Journal of Psychology*, 124(1), 99–109.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.5406/amerjpsyc.124.1.0099>

- Mutakabbir, Y. T., & Parker, C. (2021). Financial issues for HBCUs in 2020 and beyond. In G. B. Crosby, K. A. White, M. A. Chanay, & A. A. Hilton (Eds.), *Reimagining historically black colleges and universities: Survival beyond 2021* (pp. 79–87). Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80043-664-020211008>
- Nitschke, J. P., & Bartz, J. A. (2023). The association between acute stress & empathy: A systematic literature review. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 144, Article 105003. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2022.105003>
- Onwubiko, E. C. (2020). A survey on the correlation between student librarians' empathic behaviour and academic achievement. *Library Philosophy & Practice (e-journal)*. Article 4652. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/4652/>
- Paro, H. B. M. S., Silveira, P. S., Perotta, B., Gannam, S., Enns, S. C., Giaxa, R. R. B., Bonito, R. F., Martins, M. A., & Tempski, P. Z. (2014). Empathy among medical students: Is there a relation with quality of life and burnout? *PLOS ONE*, 9(4), Article e94133. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0094133>
- Peifer, J. S., & Taasobshirazi, G. (2022). College students' reduced cognitive empathy and increased anxiety and depression before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(18), Article 11330. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191811330>**
- Rasool, C., Danielsson, H., & Jungert, T. (2012). Empathy among students in engineering programmes. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 37(5), 427–435. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2012.708720>
- Ryan, S. J., Mosher, G. A., & Freeman, S. A. (2020). Analysis of engineering and engineering technology student strength patterns using StrengthsFinder. *Journal of Technology, Management, and Applied Engineering*, 36(2). <https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/jtmae/article/id/14105/>
- Smith, V., & Thompson, J. (2024). *From awareness to action: The imperative for enhanced mental health support at HBCUs*. UNCF Institute for Capacity Building. https://uncficb.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/uncf_mentalhealth_24_interactive.pdf
- Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2011). Racial battle fatigue and the miseducation of Black men: Racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stress. *Journal of Negro Education*, 80(1), 63–82. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/806860>
- Stephan, W. G., & Finlay, K. (1999). The role of empathy in improving intergroup relations. *Journal of Social Issues*, 55(4), 729–743. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00144>
- Stürmer, S., Snyder, M., Kropp, A., & Siem, B. (2006). Empathy-motivated helping: The moderating role of group membership. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(7), 943–956. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167206287363>
- Sun, W. (2022). HBCU undergraduate students' perceived stress management and coping skills. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 23(1), 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2020.1871402>**
- Thomas, J. (2013). Association of personal distress with burnout, compassion fatigue, and compassion satisfaction among clinical social workers. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 39(3), 365–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2013.771596>
- Thompson, N. M., van Reekum, C. M., & Chakrabarti, B. (2022). Cognitive and affective empathy relate differentially to emotion regulation. *Affective Science*, 3, 118–134. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-021-00062-w>
- Tikkanen, L., Anttila, H., Pyhältö, K., Soini, T., & Pietarinen, J. (2022). The role of empathy between peers in upper secondary students' **study engagement and burnout**. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 978546. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.978546>

- Tran, M. A. Q., Hà, T. A., Chau, N. N. T., Dang, T. A. N., & Ngo, V. T. (2023). Mediating effects of self-esteem on the relationship between self-compassion and empathy among Vietnamese university students. *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, 41, 746–760. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10942-022-00484-w>
- Walker, L. J. (2018). Examining the Every Student Succeeds Act's impact on African American students' mental health access. *Teachers College Record*, 120(13), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811812001304>
- Warren, C. A. (2013). The utility of empathy for White female teachers' culturally responsive interactions with Black male students. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 3(3), 175–200. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1063074>
- Warren, C. A. (2015). Conflicts and contradictions: Conceptions of empathy and the work of good-intentioned early career white female teachers. *Urban Education*, 50(5), 572–600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914525790>
- Webster, D. (2010). Promoting empathy through a creative reflective teaching strategy: A mixed-method study. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 49(2), 87–94. <https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20090918-09>
- Williams, A., O'Driscoll, K., & Moore, C. (2014). The influence of empathic concern on prosocial behavior in children. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, Article 425. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00425>**
- Williams, L., & Washington, G. (2018). Soul Glow: An application for helping to understand and improve mental health care of HBCU students. In *2018 IEEE international conference on healthcare informatics (ICHI)*, 358–360. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICHI.2018.00055>
- Wilson, J. C. (2011). Service-learning and the development of empathy in US college students. *Education+ Training*, 53(2/3), 207–217. <https://doi.org/10.1108/0040091111115735>
- Wynn, C. E., Ziff, E., & Snyder, A. H. (2023). Understanding, experiencing, connecting: The benefits of empathy in the classroom. In J. Chin & M. L. Kozimor (Eds.), *Emerging stronger: Pedagogical lessons from the pandemic*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003316336-6>
- Xiang, W., & Jing, X. (2020). Research on grouping strategies of online collaborative learning based on empathy. In *ICTEM 2020: Proceedings of the 2020 3rd International Conference on Education Technology Management* (pp. 1–6). Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3446590.3446591>
- Yahaya, A., Ee, N. S., Bachok, J. D. J., Yahaya, N., Boon, Y., Hashim, S., & Goh, M. L. (2012). The impact of emotional intelligence element on academic achievement. *Archives Des Sciences*, 65(4), 2–17. <https://core.ac.uk/download/11798725.pdf>



The *Journal of Educational Research and Practice* is a peer-reviewed journal that provides a forum for studies and dialogue about developments and change in the field of education and learning. The journal includes research and related content that

examine current relevant educational issues and processes. The aim is to provide readers with knowledge and with strategies to use that knowledge in educational or learning environments. *JERAP* focuses on education at all levels and in any setting, and includes peer-reviewed research reports, commentaries, book reviews, interviews of prominent individuals, and reports about educational practice. The journal is sponsored by The Richard W. Riley College of Education and Human Sciences at Walden University, and publication in *JERAP* is always free to authors and readers.