# ENGAGING AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES FOR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

## BY ROBIN L. HUGHES

**A**lthough there is some research addressing gifted African American children who attend K–12 schools (Ford, 2006; Moore et al., 2006), few studies address high-achieving and gifted African American male college students. Moreover, the vast majority of research highlighting the schooling of African American students focuses on their negative educational outcomes instead of their educational successes (Bonner, 2001, 2003, 2005, Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998, 2004; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper, 2004, 2008). With this focus, educational stakeholders, and the students themselves, often begin thinking about within-student deficits, which, in turn, leads to expectations of failure (Hughes & Bonner, 2006; Steele, 1997). Researchers and educational institutions should highlight the suc-

cessful educational characteristics of high-achieving African American male students and promote success for all students. These types of research and programs might not only encourage others to think more intentionally about pushing African American students toward educational success, but more importantly, it also would encourage stakeholders to think differently about African American students and their families. This article, therefore, describes my observations of the components of a program for African American males that focuses on improving their educational success at the university level.

## Background

The program is housed in a university that is located in a racially diverse and urban city; however, the campus' students, faculty, and staff population do not reflect the racial demographics of the city. Although the city's population is well more than 40% African American, the university's population is 85% White with less than 6% African American. In addition, African American males comprise less than half of the population of African American students who attend the campus.

## Observations of the Program

A summer-long Bridge Program, which is modeled after the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB), was specifically designed for the academic success of the African American male students. SAAB is part of a national effort originally intended to assure the academic success of African American males (SAAB National Headquarters, 2009). The national program consists of six domains for assuring success: (a) personal development,

(b) service, (c) financial, (d) academic, (e) spiritual/social, and (f) public relations. Although all of the chapters are based upon these domains described in the larger model, the actual implementation of programming on each campus is dependent upon decisions made at the site. This controlled flexibility is the beauty of the SAAB program. It is prescriptive in foundation, but in practice no two campus structures are alike.

The director of the undergraduate chapter at this university intentionally designed a summer and a yearlong retention program using high-achieving and gifted literature (Bonner, 2001, 2003, 2005; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998, 2004; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper, 2004, 2008). The program assumes that academic success is the outcome if all students are given equal chances to participate in programs that cultivate achievement. Three design elements of the summer program—heterogeneous and homogeneous balance, African American male mentoring, and anticipatory advising—described below, include a Bridge Program specifically developed to introduce African American male students to the campus climate and campus structure.

### Heterogeneous and Homogeneous Balance

African American male students attend academic classes with the entire summer Bridge Program student body. Students also take academic classes in environments that are gender and racially mixed. However, some time is spent each day working with the African American male students as a distinct group. Each student is assigned a peer mentor and introduced to faculty and senior-level administrators on campus. During the small-group meeting with African Americans, stu-

dents are expected to engage in fairly in-depth discussion groups about campus life, climate, and culture. In addition, students participate in scholarly exchanges in a book club where the readings are focused on the success of African American males.

### African American Male Mentoring

Making connections to successful African American male faculty and staff is a critical element of the summer program. A feature of the programming requires that each student be matched with an African American professional mentor. Each student makes connections with several faculty and staff members located throughout the university and the city during the first week of the summer program. One professor explained:

> Students of color are often out of touch with faculty of color. Since they don't see us, it is easy for them to believe that we do not exist. It is up to us to be more visible and available to students of color even before they enter college. This lets them know that there are other careers out there. And in fact, becoming a professor is a viable career for everyone. This is a good message to send to White students as well.

During the first few days on the campus, students learn from the mentors that overcoming crisis is a part of their history, so in essence they are expected to persist despite crises encountered.

During my observations, five mentors participated in a panel discussion about their educational life stories. During that session, the students talked about their underpreparation for college work. The mentors all reiterated similar stories, with a caveat—they articulated

how they overcame struggles despite underpreparation. This discourse seemed to not only convey similar educational and contextual stories to the students, but the mentors also established an instant kinship with students.

One of the mentors suggested, and others agreed, that just as crisis is a part of African American history, so is resilience. However, he claimed to the students, "The difference in your cases is that we are here as mentors to serve as your academic guide along a somewhat bumpy and curvy road." He maintained that the road had been bumpy during his academic career, too, and that he and other African American males had no mentors. Because they traveled this road already they knew where the twist and turns and bumps in the road were located. As a mentor and guide, he and others were there to assist the students in negotiating their journey through higher education.

One professor also emphasized to the students the importance of mentoring relationships:

I wish that I had somebody who could have mentored me, because I probably could have avoided gangs, etc. I was stuck in a position for while until I realized I needed a master's degree in order to move up. My academic background came back to bite me. . . . I applied to a master's program at Miami University and he [admissions counselor] looked at my transcripts and histories of "D's" and "F" minuses and a couple "B's" and one or two "A's". I explained that my transcript described who I was 10 years ago, not who I am today. The faculty member told me, prove to us that you do this level of work. So that presented another challenge. I would have to return to another school, and get "A's" and

"B's." I knew that I could do it. I took a couple of graduate-level course at Cincinnati and I got an A in everything. They [Miami University] let me in.

Another African American male professor described how he made it on sheer resiliency, self-determination, and will, something that everyone has; however, according to the professor:

Black folks, due to structural racism, have consistently lived in that space in order to be successful. We tend not to have a plethora of mentors, or other resources, so we have historically had to rely on our bootstraps. Some folks call it resilience. Not everyone is mentally equipped to have so many doors slammed in their faces, and to bounce back with a smile, determination, agency, and willpower. Other folks don't do it. Why should students of color be the only ones? They should not have to be, and we need to quit preparing students for this mental pathology. We can cut this symptom off at the root if we begin to mentor early. It is important to establish mentoring relationships early. Then students do not have to deal with so much mental crap that other students do not have to.

The mentors established a relationship that communicated that "we are in this together" and "you are talented." This same theme of overcoming hardships from those who were in authority or teaching-leading positions was not uncommon. The mentors told students that underpreparedness cannot be an obstacle; it will have to be a motivator. But, they indicated that these students are not in this alone—they have mentors. They often referred to themselves as "kinfolks," some "folks" whom you

call on for help. Still other mentors reminded students that until there are enough faculty of color, and faculty who care about their future, then they must be more resilient. As one administrator put it, "you will have to do more than jump through hoops, you have to learn to jump over the hoop." She explained that the bar appears to be at one level for most students; however, "Black students, and other students of color, must be prepared and willing to do more. It is just the world in which we live and, until that changes, we [meaning Black people] have to be ready to do 10 times more."

## Anticipatory Advising

In the past decade, the buzzword in advising has become that of "intrusive." Intrusive advising is meant to convey a form of advising that is proactive. However, the word conjures images and communicates an element of unwanted prying. According to Glennen's (1975) seminal piece, one would believe that the results of intrusive advising should lead to more successful students, higher graduation rates, and increased retention rates. However, the graduation and retention rates for African American males across the nation remains at a very slow, and even declining rate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Although the advising in this program resembles intrusive advising, it might be more adequately described as "anticipatory advising" in this context. Students who participate in the SAAB program are advised in anticipation that issues may arise and that students will need help throughout their academic careers in order to make smooth transitions and, in some instances, to persist. In addition, the advising assumes that all students will be successful, so all students are held to high expectations. In addition, a strong sense of familial care, love, and

reciprocity is exhibited throughout the program. The "advisors" (Black faculty, staff, and community members) anticipate problems, but expect nothing less than success and high achievement.

According to the director of the program, because all of the students are first-generation college goers, the advisory program is designed with their unique needs in mind. Anticipatory advising takes on the following characteristics:

1. There exists a fictive kinship or a history of care for the student. When students arrive on campus, they know that they are to become a part of a bigger family—often referred to as the "village" by many of the staff members. The mantra of the brothers, together we will rise, also is parlayed throughout the campus. Both faculty and staff play a significant role in advising students whether they are enrolled in the faculty member's discipline or not. As one faculty member put it, "We do not have the luxury of a set advising schedule and a set number with whom we advise. We advise, we serve all of the students. We need them to graduate—for us—for our community—for the village."

2. Advising is unique, with strong elements of care and intentionality. Each student meets with an advisor/mentor. Words like "love" and "care" are used during advising sessions (many of which are impromptu), and a common language is used that conveys determination and advice about what one needs to do in order to be successful. This anticipatory advising is different from traditional advising. There is no office, no office hours, and no advisors in the traditional sense (paid to advise or listed under the Human Resource page). Advisors who participate in this reciprocally respectful relationship meet students with a hug in the hallways, in their own offices, at student meetings, and at students' normal hang out spots. I asked a faculty member to describe this unique style of advising. She said, "We love and we fuss. We care for these children as if they are our own the minute they arrive on this campus. They *are* [emphasis added] our own." What I observed stood in stark contrast to what I know (as an expert in the discipline) about student affairs in higher education.

3. Advising is reciprocally respectful and extensive. The students respect the faculty members as advisor and mentor, and instantly form a fictive kinship. The students stop by to chat with many of the mentors/advisors throughout the week, sometimes at the expense of the mentor's/advisor's already busy day. During a meeting with faculty and staff members, researchers asked how they were able to publish with the additional load. They replied:

> We have no choice. Do we just allow them to fail while we are busy trying to acquire tenure? We are not in a space yet where we have lots of folks to rely on—to help the students. We have to do double-duty until we all make it, not just a select few.

Researchers asked about the African American faculty who do not participate in this work. Certainly it would make the work less cumbersome if everyone pitched in, given the demographics of the institution—only 30 African American professors. One explained that:

> Yes, we have double duty. We don't have time to think about the folks who are unwilling to help—who place getting tenure or whatever over the students. We gotta do what we gotta do and that is get these folks through the educational pipeline—successfully. Plus, we came from a people who picked cotton for nothing. This time we are harvesting a crop for a significant return.

The relationship is more than that of administrator and student. It is a relationship built upon caring and respect for each other. Advising is cooperative and extensive. It included not only a partnership with the student, but also a partnership with other faculty, staff, and students on the campus, as well as the parents of students.

## Observations of the Effects of the Program on Students

Prior to the program, I asked the students, "What are your plans after you receive the baccalaureate degree?" They were puzzled and responded with various facial expressions and contortions: crumpled eyebrow, puzzled looks, and blank stares, in addition to low whispers. If those facial contortions would be given titles, they might say, "Well, this is it, right?" or "Work of course." They all assumed that earning a baccalaureate degree was the end of the academic trail. It also meant immediately acquiring a job.

The students were most surprised when they were introduced to successful African American males and females who held upper level adminis-

trative positions and terminal degrees, and were employed as faculty and or staff in the academia. Most students claimed that they were unfamiliar with any African Americans who held Ph.D.'s or master's degrees. At least one student noted that it was difficult to believe that those credentials were "available" to African Americans. He said:

> I never met a Black person with a Ph.D. Now we are in a room full of them. We never met any of you before. It would be helpful if younger kids knew that you were around. Then they would know that they could be one too.

I observed that during the daylong discussions with mentors, the students listened with intensity. The classroom climate seemed to change from warm to electric. I noticed that students who were fidgety, clock watchers during the first few days of the summer program were now sitting not only at the edges of their seats, but also upright and at attention. The intensity seemed to indicate more than just an interest in the speaker, but an emotional or deeply felt connection to his lived experiences.

As the mentors focused on how students could be academically successful, the students seemed to take on a new worldview. One student noted, "We did not know we could do all of this stuff until you told us." That "stuff" to which the student referred was an introduction to graduate school, careers in the professorship, access to mentors, and a discourse steeped in success—all this along with a mantra—"you can do anything."

Students who initially had some doubts about how they might perform academically as a freshman began to talk about graduate school and what they needed to do in order to be suc-

cessful in their undergraduate careers. According to one student, the thought of graduate school had never entered his mind until he participated in the summer program. He explained: "I never thought about a college education, and certainly not a Ph.D. Now, I am enrolled in college and I want to go to graduate school within a matter of days. This is crazy. Mad cool."

## Conclusions and Implications

I observed a program focused on academic success and achievement. The program's director used the work of Bonner, Fries-Britt, and Harper, whose work focused on academically gifted and high-achieving African American students, to develop the program. Their work suggests that high-achieving African American males establish close networking connections to upper level administrators, such as deans, presidents, and faculty members. Students also need to be involved in campus activities and play numerous leadership roles throughout their tenure in college. Additionally, Bonner (2005) suggested that other retention measures and early warnings should be employed to assure success for all students. In addition to the mentoring program, this summer retention program and the academic year program have instituted an early warning system using the assistance of Black faculty and staff who are engaged in work with the students. A computer system of grade reporting also notifies the director of all grades when students fall below a certain GPA.

According to the program's director, a critical piece to the students' academic success in this program is that both advisors and mentors assume that students will be successful (Ford, 2003). This approach to mentoring

and advising moves away from the cultural deficit thinking model and in turn works to cultivates highly successful outcomes for African American male students (Ford, 2003, 2004).

The retention program also uses a framework for advising that anticipates and expects educational success. Whereas the intrusive model of advising suggests an action-orientated stance toward advising, anticipatory advising moves beyond this model and assumes that all students will need assistance. It is framed around elements of genuine care, fictive kinship, and reciprocity. Supporting students in college requires that not only the Human-Resources-designated advisors assist in the academic preparation of the student, but faculty members, administrators, and advisors take an aggressive approach in supporting students. Supporting means that faculty and administrators do not wait for students to contact them, but they approach all of the students the minute they arrive on campus. Supporting means that they neither wait for students to get into difficulty nor do they watch while they are going through some crisis; instead, they jump right in as a support team—again, the day they arrive on campus. Given that Millennial students are those whose parents are designated helicopter parents, institutional support must become stealth-like in the way in which students are supported. Advisors and mentors must take an anticipatory approach to advising.

The mentoring relationships were critical and developed early for the students. In fact, students were exposed to a wide variety of upper level administrators, faculty, and high-achieving African American males the day they arrived on campus and throughout the semester. The first meeting played a particularly crucial role in establishing relationships and rethinking their roles

as students on campus, and their future as successful African American men.

Given the demographics of the region, the dropout rates, and the institutional makeup of the institution, it is critical that African American males feel connected to the institutional lay of the land, be attuned to the campus climate, and begin to establish mentoring relationships the day they arrive on campus. An orientation prior to the summer program centered around success for African American males appears to be critical. An orientation allows the students to establish relationships with mentors, faculty, staff, and students before the traditional summer program begins.

In addition, both summer programs work in conjunction with one another, which exposes *all* students, faculty, and staff to multiple cultural backgrounds and perspectives. We know that all students, faculty, and staff benefit from engaging with people from diverse backgrounds (Hurtado, 1996; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999) and that the demography of the community is critical to the academic success of students (Ford, 2003, 2004). Because the summer Bridge Program acts as the point of entry, certainly another good starting point would incorporate activities, diverse guest speakers, diverse faculty and staff, and a diverse curriculum. Given the current racial demographics of the institution, exposing all students to faculty, staff, and students from underrepresented groups makes a difference in whether racial minority members are academically successful and whether they persist (Chang, 1999, 2005; Hurtado, 1996). GCT

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