

I think of college as setting a good foundation for my future

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Black males navigating the college decision making process

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Abstract

Purpose – Little attention is given to black male experiences and decision-making process around college-going. A qualitative study (interpretive phenomenological analysis [IPA]) was conducted using a strengths-based perspective to understand the experiences of three first-generation black men college students attending a predominately white institution. Superordinate themes include perceived benefits to attending college, barriers to college admission and attendance and influential programs and supports. Recommendations for school counselors helping black males are included.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors used a narrative approach to illustrate the stories and experiences captured by the three young men who participated in the study. Hays and Singh (2012) suggested using a narrative approach for telling the stories of marginalized groups. IPA (Smith, 1996) was the approach used to identify superordinate themes, because the authors wanted to better understand the participants' K-16 experiences. As a qualitative approach, IPA provides detailed examinations of personal lived experiences on its own terms rather than pre-existing theoretical preconceptions.

Findings – The participants' accounts clustered around three superordinate themes: perceived benefits to college, barriers to college admission and attendance and influential programs and supports.

Originality/value – Although there are studies that provide insight on the factors that impact first-generation, black men's success in attending college, there are few studies that have used a strengths-based perspective to investigate key experiences that lead to college enrollment. Those experiences that lead first-generation black male to attend college are pivotal and provide insight into important points of intervention and support. School counselors and other educators can use these insights to inform practices and the creation of supports for black men in their respective schools.

Keywords First generation college students, Black males, College preparation, School counselors

Paper type Research paper



In the current age of accountability, educational reform and the struggling economy, there is an increased need for all students to graduate from high school and pursue higher education. The USA has seen an increasingly globalized economy and a reduction in domestic

manufacturing jobs, which had once sustained the nation's working class. In the next decade, however, occupations that require postsecondary education are expected to grow at significantly higher rates than jobs requiring less educational attainment (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). Moreover, attainment of higher education is a fundamental indicator of adult well-being (Ou and Reynolds, 2008). Sample benefits include better physical health, positive mental health and greater use of preventive health care (College Board, 2013; Heckman, 2000).

With economic changes as well as educational reform, there is an increased demand for P-12 schools to produce high school graduates who are college and career ready. As such, literature on this topic has increased to include the development of college and career readiness for youth as a whole as well as unique populations (i.e. first-generation students, black men, etc.). Current literature often documents challenges that unique populations face in being college and career ready. For example, first-generation students as well as black boys and men are likely to be academically underprepared and may lack critical knowledge on college-going processes, all of which make it difficult to persist in higher education (Ahram *et al.*, 2011; Hooker and Brand, 2010, Vega *et al.*, 2012). Although this information is helpful, current literature is limited as it relates to decision-making processes related to enrolling postsecondary opportunities. As such, the current study investigates the experiences and decision-making process that led to first-generation black men enrolling in college.

College-going and first-generation students

First-generation college students experience unique challenges in accessing and completing higher education. By definition, first-generation college students have parents that did not attend a higher education institution. What comes along with that experience can be an overwhelming sense of pressure, apprehension and a great deal of ignorance regarding what the process entails. Such barriers can perpetuate the lagging in achievement and matriculation to college as compared with their peers (Hines *et al.*, 2015).

Specifically, pre-entry characteristics such as family support, high school support, educational goals and financial considerations vary amongst first-generation and non-first-generation college students. For example, first-generation students do not receive as much support as non-first-generation students in their decisions to attend college (Saenz and Barrera, 2007). Similarly, first-generation college students do not have the same sources of support as non-first-generation students such as parents who understand the process of adjusting to college (Woodsley and Shepler, 2011). Research has found that all students need to understand the complex college admission and selection process, the academic requirements for college work, the options available to them, how to pay for postsecondary education and the cultural differences that exist between high school and postsecondary education (Hooker and Brand, 2010).

Although many students aspire to attend a four-year college and understand the opportunities an advanced degree will allow, some, particularly first-generation college students, have little understanding of the academic and social preparation necessary to actually enter a four-year college and to be successful in such a setting. Also, the majority of these students do not receive college and career counseling on the range of postsecondary options or are given limited guidance on how their individual academic plan matches their postsecondary aspirations (Hooker and Brand, 2010). This important information, or "college knowledge," includes a thorough understanding of college admissions, testing and curricular requirements, application processes, college options and choices, tuition costs and financial aid, college culture and course rigor and

expectations and necessity of increased higher education (Conley, 2007). Without this knowledge, students can experience lower levels of educational aspirations, achievement and attainment.

Further, the academic concerns of first-generation college students are vastly different than their non-first-generation peers. For example, the academic preparation of first-generation college students tends to be less rigorous than their peers (Woodsley and Shepler, 2011). Additionally, first-generation college students, especially African American boys and men, often struggle with the cultural mismatch between their background and the college culture and climate, making it even more challenging to create networks of support (Owens *et al.*, 2010). Beyond social support, first-generation college students may require academic support but may be unfamiliar with the campus offices available to meet their needs.

College-going and black males

Numerous studies have highlighted the challenges that have hindered black men from being successful in high school and ultimately entering college. Research suggests that black men are disproportionately represented in special education and take part in learning experiences in more restrictive educational environments (Artiles *et al.*, 2010; Skiba *et al.*, 2006; Waitoller *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, black men are likely to attend schools with lower graduation rates, fewer rigorous courses and limited exposure to student-centered learning environments (Hines *et al.*, 2019; Hughes *et al.*, 2007; Schott Foundation, 2012). Thus, many black boys and men are less prepared than white students and even lacking the minimum requirements needed for postsecondary education (Ahram *et al.*, 2011; Vega *et al.*, 2012).

College and career readiness and black males

College and career readiness have been a national conversation for years, and particularly in recent years. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) referenced it several times as being a very important priority of the department of education to ensure everyone's access to postsecondary education. And in 2010, The US Department of Education noted that postsecondary education is increasingly becoming a necessity for political, social and economic mobility. High school graduates need to be appropriately equipped to succeed in their postsecondary endeavors. College and career readiness involve the attainment of various skills that allow students to successfully pursue and complete postsecondary education and begin a career. (Roderick *et al.*, 2009). For example, students need to know how to interact socially, manage time and work independently and efficiently. Strong interpersonal skills and social skills, for example, enable students to interact with a diverse group of professors and peers, thus enhancing success in college (Martinez and Klopott, 2005).

According to Conley (2010), college-ready students understand the structure of knowledge and big ideas of core academic subjects, can develop a set of cognitive strategies as they increase their understandings of key content, possess the academic behaviors necessary to successfully manage and engage with a college workload and possess a contextual understanding of the navigational and cultural elements of gaining admission to and being successful in college.

Based on research findings by American College Test (ACT), black students, in general, are less likely to be college and career ready. Black students, for example, pursue an advanced course of study in high school at a lower rate than do white students, thus decreasing the chances that they will be as prepared for college as white students (Moller *et al.*, 2010). Compared to all students tested, black students were

found to less likely to meet the benchmarks of college and career ready (ACT, 2012). Black students are less likely to meet the college readiness benchmarks in English, Reading, Mathematics or Science (ACT, 2012). In addition, more than half of black students who took the ACT did not meet the benchmark of college-ready (ACT, 2012). Lee and Ransom (2011) suggested that to combat the low postsecondary success rates of black males several factors need to increase: teacher, faculty and boss support; positive role models and mentors for these students; and positive peer influences and relationships.

There are troublesome trends for black males, in particular, within the American education system. For example, whereas ninth grade black males are enrolled in college prep math and science courses with rates of 79.6 and 73 per cent, respectively (Lamb *et al.*, 2013), they are far less likely to continue enrolling in academically challenging courses later on in high school (Tyson *et al.*, 2005).

Theoretical framework

The College Board's National Office of School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) Eight Components of College and Career Readiness will serve as the framework for this research study. This framework is designed to assist school counselors in preparing vulnerable and underrepresented population such as black males for college and other postsecondary opportunities. The eight components (College Board, 2013, p. 3; Perusse *et al.*, 2015) are:

- (1) College aspirations:
 - Goal: build a college-going culture based on early college awareness by nurturing in students the confidence to aspire to college and the resilience to overcome challenges along the way. Maintain high expectations by providing adequate supports, building social capital and conveying the conviction that all students can succeed in college.
- (2) Academic planning for college and career readiness:
 - Goal: advance students' planning, preparation, participation and performance in a rigorous academic program that connects to their college and career aspirations and goals.
- (3) Enrichment and extracurricular engagement:
 - Goal: ensure equitable exposure to a wide range of extracurricular and enrichment opportunities that build leadership, nurture talents and interests and increase engagement with school.
- (4) College and career exploration and selection processes:
 - Goal: provide early and ongoing exposure to experiences and information necessary to make informed decisions when selecting a college or career that connects to academic preparation and future aspirations.
- (5) College and career assessments:
 - Goal: promote preparation, participation and performance in college and career assessments by all students.
- (6) College affordability planning:
 - Goal: provide students and families with comprehensive information about college costs, options for paying for college and the financial aid and scholarship processes and eligibility requirements, so they are able to plan for and afford a college education.

(7) College and career admission processes:

- Goal: ensure that students and families have an early and ongoing understanding of the college and career application and admission processes so they can find the postsecondary options that are the best fit for their aspirations and interests.

(8) Transition from high school graduation to college enrollment:

- Goal: connect students to school and community resources to help the students overcome barriers and ensure the successful transition from high school to college.
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Purpose of the study

Although there are studies that provide insight on the factors that impact first-generation, black men's success in attending college, there are few studies that have used a strengths-based perspective to investigate key experiences that lead to college enrollment (Harper, 2012; Harper and Associates, 2014; Hines *et al.*, 2015). Those experiences that lead first-generation black male to attend college are pivotal and provide insight into important points of intervention and support. School counselors and other educators can use these insights to inform practices and the creation of supports for black men in their respective schools. Toward this end, the purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of first-generation black men students who have successfully transitioned into college. This study highlights the ecological factors that impact the decision-making process and motivation for going to college for first-generation black men. Therefore, our primary research question is, "What experiences and events influenced first-generation black men college students' motivation and decision to attend and persist in college?"

Methodology

Participants

Participants for this study include three first-generation black male college students from a mid-sized predominantly white institution located in the southern region of the USA. At the time of the interviews, two of the participants were 18 years old, whereas the other was 19 years. All three participants were raised in the same state as the institution they attended with two of them attending public high schools and the other a private. James grew up in an urban area, Ahmad is from a rural area and David is from a suburban area within the same state. All participants attended public school for the exception of David who attended private school during his high school years. All of the participants are first-generation college students and reported interest in attending college. To note, pseudonyms are used to ensure participants' identity remain confidential.

All three participants were recruited through a Rites of Passage Program. This program was designed to recruit and retain men of color at the university. The participants engage in a range of professional and personal development activities, including but not limited to, service learning and educational workshops. Examples of service-learning include mentoring of local black youth and volunteering at a transitional house for disabled veterans and homeless men.

Procedure

Flyers and recruiting emails were given to the assistant director of the Rites of Passage Program at the university. The first author solicited volunteers by visiting two classes

where members of this program were students. Before the participant process began, participants were given a preliminary questionnaire and demographic form to determine if they met the eligibility requirements for this study (e.g. first-generation college student and considered a freshman right out of high school). All three participants met the requirements and agreed to participate in a 90-min interview. All interviews were confidential as they were conducted in a private setting where the first author used a semi-structured interview protocol. The literature on college access, college preparation and social capital was used to create the interview questions. The participants were asked questions pertaining to their decision-making process to attend college, the persons who influenced their decision to go to college and the high school experiences around college decision-making. The interviews were taped and transcribed. Participants were compensated with a \$100 gift card.

Data analysis

The authors used a narrative approach to tell the stories and experiences captured by the three young men who participated in the study. Hays and Singh (2012) suggested using this method for telling the stories of marginalized groups. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) was the approach used to identify superordinate themes, as the authors wanted to understand the participants' K-16 experiences. As a qualitative approach, IPA provides detailed examinations of personal lived experiences on its own terms rather than pre-existing theoretical preconceptions. Participants were treated as the experts and insiders on the phenomenon, and our research team sought to understand their experiences (phenomenology) and interpret them to shed light on the research questions. IPA is intended for research involving just a few participants (Larkin *et al.*, 2009). As is common with this approach, semi-structured interviews were used for gathering data.

As suggested by Smith and Osborn (2008), the authors (i.e. first and second) read each transcript numerous times to become familiar with participant experiences while using the left-hand margin to annotate interesting and significant parts of the transcripts (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Each transcript including annotated notes was reviewed individually, and emergent themes for each were then written in the right margin. For each transcript, the first and second authors created a table detailing the emergent themes for each transcript. Once each transcript was analyzed by the aforementioned interpretative process, a final table of superordinate themes was created to capture the emergent themes across all transcripts (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

Positionality

The first author is a black male and has experience working with black males throughout the educational pipeline. He has worked extensively with schools as an educator and consultant to increase academic achievement and college and career readiness of African American males and other underrepresented students. His research also focuses on how parental involvement impacts the academic success of African American males. The second author is a black female whose personal experience as a first-generation college student further heightens her awareness of the unique experience of underrepresented populations. Her graduate degrees coming from institutions that focused on promoting equity in schools, she is keenly aware of the school supports necessary to ensure success for black students. The third author is a black male and previously served for several years as a high school counselor. His research agenda now includes the college and career readiness of black male student athletes, and strengths-based approaches that facilitate their empowerment. Last, the fourth author is a black male whose personal experience includes working with first-

generation students, including black males. He is an administrator of a department that is focused on inclusive excellence. Also, the author was a first-generation college student.

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Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of data, the authors engaged in several strategies. First, semi-structured interview questions were created based on previous literature regarding college access, preparation and social capital (Dixon-Román, 2013; Scott *et al.*, 2013; Strayhorn, 2015). Interview questions were then shared with a qualitative researcher with expertise in college and career readiness and black males for feedback. Feedback was used to revise and edit semi-structured interview questions. Second, the research team acknowledged the ways through which personal experiences could influence the analysis of the data. To that end, the research team was particularly careful to bracket their personal and professional experiences, particularly as black men and women, and allow the data to speak. Bracketing involves acknowledging and holding at bay the presuppositions a researcher might have about a phenomenon given their experiences (Tufford and Newman, 2012). Doing so allows a team to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research, while also facilitating a deeper level of reflection throughout the qualitative inquiry process (Tufford and Newman, 2012).

Finally, the first and second authors included an auditor as a part of the data analysis process. Once themes were determined by the first and second authors, transcripts were shared with an auditor (third author), who reviewed transcripts and themes independently. The auditor then discussed transcripts and themes with the first and second authors until there was a consensus. Also, the authors performed member checks and had a documented audit trail (Patton, 2002).

Results

Participants were asked to talk as widely as they felt comfortable about the influences and experiences around decision-making and enrollment in college. The participants' accounts clustered around three superordinate themes: perceived benefits to college, barriers to college admission and attendance and influential programs and supports.

Perceived benefits to college

All three participants saw college as a way to improve their lives. They thought college had both advantages and benefits, thus a reason to pursue postsecondary education. Ahmad stated “[. . .] I feel I can do in life with a college degree. And I mean there are more reasons why I came here, but its to better myself, really.” James said, “I think of college as setting a good foundation for my future, so its something I really want to do(?)” while David attended college “basically for security reasons.” Also, David noted, “And, like, with education, it opens up more possibilities to, you know – for, I mean, I guess I would say, like, a better life.”

Ahmad, James and David saw college as an opportunity to be financially established and provide for their families. James shared:

[. . .] that's like my top reason for going [to college] is to be financially stable. To me, being financial stable is not really having to worry about paying bills, living paycheck to paycheck, being able to provide for my family.

James echoed the same, “I mean I've got to make a living somehow, so I believe that college is a good starting point for me.” James went on to add:

What I would say, I guess well, I wanted to go to college for me so I can support my family, because my family's really not – like we're middle class. We're not high class. For my family, we really have to work for what we get, so that's a big motivator for me, which is my family in general, period.

David knew having an education would lead to financial gain. He stated, "Well, so from an economic standpoint really. Like without education, basically, I mean, it would be hard to have a substantial or supportive income, something like that."

A college education or degree was another benefit for Ahmad, James and David because it provided a "better life" with greater economic opportunities including job stability and earning potential. James said:

[...] you have to get a degree to be a certain career. I mean a career aspect is a big thing with college, so you can get your education, get your degree and then, do what you want to do with your life.

David saw college education as a way to move to a higher social class. He stated:

I mean, being, like, low – I mean, I wouldn't say low class, but like lower middle class, something like that, and not wanting to be like that for the rest of my life.

Barriers to college admission and attendance

All three men experienced barriers to college attendance. Each of the men faced different struggles in getting to college. Ahmad had to complete his application for college and financial aid by himself because his parents did not go to college. He did not know if he would attend college at first. He said:

it crossed my mind a few times. I don't know why because it seemed like it'd take a lot to get into college. I basically did everything on my own, like, financial aid.

Ahmad went on to say his school counselor and mother did not provide a lot of help:

My guidance counselor was there, but he didn't really tell me what to do. I had to fill it out on my own. I had my mom beside me, but she'd never been to college before, so she couldn't help me fill it out either. And so I had to do it all by myself, so I was little scared. I was scared that I would put in wrong information.

James had trouble adjusting to his academic work load his first semester because the structure of attending class was different than high school. He shared:

I guess you can say the workload, and the environment. Because in high school you're really, basically enclosed in this building. But in college, it's like more open space. You have more freedom basically than, you get out of high school. You're not told what to do. You have to do it for yourself. Your professor's not going to make you do your work like your high school teacher would.

In addition, James wanted to take a course load above the minimum requirement but could not because he failed a course the summer before his freshman year. James said:

I actually planned for like 15, but then I got put on academic probation because of the summer classes that I took. Since I didn't succeed in one of those classes, they dropped me down.

David struggled with being the only black person in his class, which translated into deficit thinking. David shared:

well, maybe it would be like I was the only Black kid in my class in high school. So, it was like hard. Sometimes, basically seeing how a bunch of other students were that much better than me academically.

David voiced his annoyance with his thinking and his grades, “and sometimes, I mean, it was a little frustrating or discouraging that I couldn’t do as well.”

Influential programs and supports

Ahmad, James and David shared similar factors that motivated them to attend college as well as persist at their current institution. One common experience was involved in extracurricular activities. Ahmad discussed how his marching band was influential in exposing him to college:

But when I got to high school – well, no, in the eighth grade in middle school, I joined the high school marching band. Because the middle school and high school were together, and we would go to like a bunch of different colleges for competitions, so I started looking into, like, a band scholarship or whatever. I didn’t really know anything about that, but it was helpful in deciding which college I wanted to go to because I got the chance to go there.

James was on the track and step teams in high school:

particularly, I was involved in – well, I ran track. I was also part of the Step Team. They give out scholarships to go to college, so that was really [important] to me.

Particularly, James focused more of his energy on the step team as he thought he would attain more financial aid for college. He said, “Step Team. So that even pushed me more to go to college. I applied to various scholarships, but I really didn’t get any because it was so competitive.” Additionally, James believed the step team provided an impetus for him to think about his future:

the Step Team really just taught me a lot about just life in general, as like an all-male student, where we really wanted to go in life after high school, after your senior year. It was a good experience for me.

David attended before and after-school activities to keep him focused on academics,

“basically, so, like keep us in to, like, keep us occupied so we wouldn’t, you know, do anything outside of school.” David included examples, “like study hall, going to the YMCA, and stuff like that, and just having, like, after-school recreation and stuff like that. Some activities, field trips, and stuff.” Also, David explained the time frame of their activities:

what they did was just like we come in from 8:00 in the morning, and we stay, like, till, like, 6:00, and then like 7:00 on Thursdays, and stuff like that.

All three participants were involved in a minority male program designed to recruit and retain students; however, only two of the participants spoke extensively about the contribution it made to their college preparation. Ahmad talked about his transition to college:

No, it wasn’t a tough transition because, no, the Stark (pseudonym) program, that really showed me how it would be. I only took two classes, and those were *Personal and Academic Success* and *Communications*. And both of them, I learned a lot. Because in one my classes, in my personal academic success class, we would almost always have to stand in front the class, and I never had to do that in high school.

JME

Ahmad told the interviewer, the Stark Program was proactive in getting him to the university,

I don't know how they got my e-mail at all, I just know I applied to Cloverly (pseudonym) before the Stark program got to me [...] I really don't know how they got to me or my e-mail. I'm glad they did though.

Ahmad added:

I had people to take me on tours around the campus, like my peer mentors, and they would just tell me everything I needed to know about being here. . .they were Afro-American, so I could instantly relate to them.

James touted how the Stark program prepared him for college,

I got more involved in the summer program with the Stark and that really helped me out. After I went through that program, I was like, 'yes, this is a good school for me' since I have a good foundation set up all ready.

Further, both Ahmad and James wanted to attend and stay at this institution because of the diversity of students in attendance. Ahmad, stated, "Well, when I first starting looking into XYZ (pseudonym), I first started looking at the diversity here [...] because I know we live in a world full of everything." James said, "I know XYZ (pseudonym) is known for their diversity and stuff. But I just wanted a new experience all together."

Finally, all three participants talked about significant individuals who assisted them in getting to and staying in college. Ahmad's role model was his band director and he told the interviewer:

he graduated with a bachelor's or a master's in music; I don't know which one, but he seemed like really happy, like he has a lot together. In addition, Ahmad said, "I was just seeing if I could put myself in his shoes one day because he was as good leader.

Ahmad also discussed how the Stark Program director was a reason he attended and stayed in college:

John Smith (pseudonym); he's one of my mentors [...] because I have to see him like every week at 1:30 – it's different days, [...] [he] asks me a bunch of questions, *[laughter]*, and then I have to do what he says.

James's mother was one of the main reasons he attended college:

in elementary school, again, my parents were really there for me. My mother was a teacher at the same elementary school I went to. So that really focused me to excel in my academics.

James also believed that his relationship with teachers and regular meetings with his school counselor played a role in his going to college. To note, James's mother was attending a four-year college at the same time as James and is considered a paraprofessional in her local school district.

Discussion

The participants of this study provided insight into their motivations for attending and persisting in college. Clearly, young men at this institution had intrinsic motivations to want to succeed and improve their quality of living through attaining a college education. Moreover, the young men faced obstacles and barriers that may have thwarted their plans to attend college. Further, all three participants had individuals, activities and programs which mitigated the potential for not attending or dropping out of college. The themes in this

research study are a starting point for school counselors to prepare first-generation, black males in middle and high school.

As reflected in the research literature, education is seen as a vehicle to upward mobility, improved quality of life and an opportunity to achieve higher pay (Owens *et al.*, 2010). Ahmad, James and David believed a college education will help them bring more financial resources for their families and an opportunity for career advancement. Discussions about linking the importance of education, financial stability and career trajectories with black males is important to develop an academic plan toward college.

However, despite the high aspirations for postsecondary education, participants detailed ways in which they were underprepared for such. Participants shared having limited support from school staff and their families in completing college applications and applying for financial aid (Saenz and Barrera, 2007; Woosley and Shepler, 2011). This is particularly troubling as each participant is coming from a dually historically underserved background (first-generation and cultural minority) who had difficulty navigating the college-going process but gained admission to and enrolled in college. Although academic and career planning, which typically occurs with school counselors, can increase opportunities for college attendance (Reid and Moore, 2008), the participants did not benefit from such. In fact, only one participant, David, mentioned interactions with the school counselor around academic and career planning, which was limited at best.

Although there was limited academic and career planning, the participants detailed factors that were influential in their decision-making process to attend college. For example, each participant noted that extracurricular activities exposed them to different postsecondary opportunities while also building their skills and aspirations to pursue college. For historically underserved students, extracurricular activities often provide exposure to a range of career possibilities while helping students to develop skills (Hines *et al.*, 2019). These programs are important but have limited reach particularly in urban and rural settings (Hines *et al.*, 2019; Hines *et al.*, 2015). As such, these programs may be an additive component of comprehensive academic and career planning where school counselors work with local agencies and postsecondary institutions to create pathways for greater skill development and successful transitions to college (Reid and Moore, 2008). Further, each highlighted significant relationship with family members and mentors as influential in their decision to attend college. These relationships play a pivotal role for first-generation students, especially those from historically underserved backgrounds as these relationships help to build aspirations and a consistent network of support for students regarding college-going (Hines and Holcomb-McCoy, 2013).

Implications for practice

The results of this study provide direction for school counselors and the work that needs to be done with first-generation black males. If school counselors are to facilitate the increased motivation and firm decision-making of black males to attend college, there must be a consideration of all who significantly influence that student's teachers. School counselors, then, need to engage the student's world, literally and figuratively. Specifically, the results of this study suggest that school counselors get to know the parents and other significant others in the lives of black males. Further, it would be prudent for school counselors to include all of those stakeholders in building a support network for the student to eventually thrive as a college student.

Recommendations

Findings from this study illustrate both the strengths and critical needs of first-generation, black boys and men pursuing college. These stories also provide entry points for

intervention and support from educators, especially school counselors. As such, the authors are offering the following recommendations for school counselors in P-12 schools.

Elementary school

School counselors are critical to facilitating the development of self-efficacy in elementary students. Self-efficacy, especially as it relates to academic achievement and learning, is paramount to eventual success in a rigorous curricular and extracurricular activity that lead to college and career readiness. For years, research widely documented the influence that self-efficacy beliefs have on various domains of functioning and behavior (Bandura, 1994, p. 1; Lent and Hackett, 1987; Schwarzer, 2014). According to social cognitive theorists (e.g. Bandura, 1977), self-efficacy beliefs are at the core of human behavior and influence the choices people make and the course of action they pursue. As such, people with high self-efficacy in a specific domain select more challenging and ambitious goals in that domain. Some researchers (Noguera, 2003) suggest that black boys have already disengaged by the fourth grade. Whether this has to do with black males having a low sense of self-efficacy or being labeled disruptive and tracked to a path toward future suspension (Yang et al., 2018), school counselors are well-positioned to disrupt this trend and proactively shift the narrative for black boys. Elementary school counselors have the requisite training and capacity to proactively engage the educational experiences of black boys. Using a strengths-based lens, school counselors can implement comprehensive programs that ensure that all students, including black boys, have differentiated instruction that considers their environmental influences, societal pressures and structural inequities that perpetuate the marginalization of black males in education.

Critical for elementary children, and especially first-generation black boys, is exposure to the college and career possibilities. The visibility of varied professional options will first broaden the horizon of these young men. Then, vicarious learning opportunities and instrumental learning scenarios will cultivate the kind of academic, emotional and career development that translates into college and career readiness.

Middle school

School counselors can promote a strength-based, college-going culture by developing vision and mission statements that infuse the belief that *ALL* students will be college and career ready and how as both provide the direction and future plans for the operation of their comprehensive school counseling program (American School Counselor Association, 2012). Moreover, school counselors should use the American School Counselor Association national model (American School Counselor Association, 2012) as it incorporates the tenants of advocacy and social justice to produce systemic change within the school counseling program given the historic injustices (i.e. higher suspension rates, disproportionately placed in special education, lower educational expectations from teachers) first-generation black boys have encountered and continue to encounter, particularly at the middle school level. School counselors at the middle school level can position themselves to assist black boys to prepare academically for high school and later postsecondary preparation.

Middle school counselors should work cooperatively with both elementary and high school counselors, which would allow families to develop and chart their strategies to help black males enter high school and college more prepared. School counselors should also work directly with black students to understand interests and link students with extracurricular activities and opportunities to cultivate said interests (Hines and Holcomb-McCoy, 2013). These extracurricular activities and opportunities allow for black males to further explore interests, connect with others with similar interests and also provide

opportunities for college and career development. In building with extracurricular activities, it is important that school counselors link black males with role models through mentorship and tutoring activities. These connections will allow black males to relate to someone who could speak to navigating and thriving in college and career. School counselors should conduct frequent individual planning meetings with black boys to discuss how to monitor the status of their academic coursework related to college preparation ([American School Counselor Association, 2012](#)).

School counselors should use school data to identify and implement interventions to address gaps in student achievement and attendance ([Hines et al., 2020](#); [College Board, 2010](#)). School counselors can use the Eight Components of College and Career Readiness as a framework to develop a college-going culture for black boys as it provides a systemic framework for working with underserved populations. Finally, school counselors can address the social/emotional aspect of college readiness by bolstering the confidence of black boys in their academics. Providing group counseling with an Afrocentric format for black males can empower them to excel academically and bolster self-efficacy ([Wyatt, 2009](#)). Using a group counseling format can serve a great method for discussions around college and career readiness ([White and Rayle, 2007](#)).

High school

School counselors at the high school should participate in vertical teaming with elementary and middle school counselors, ensuring that ninth-grader black boys have access to rigorous course work (i.e. advanced placement and honors courses), academic support and a college-going culture that embraces black boys and men ([Hines and Holcomb-McCoy, 2013](#); [Hines et al., 2014](#); [Toldson and Lewis, 2012](#)). School counselors are expected to provide the opportunity for students to develop an awareness of careers, foster students' ability to find career information and help students search for and attain achievable goals ([American School Counselor Association, 2012](#)).

The challenges between and within groups are unique, and awareness of such along with targeted efforts is critical. At the high school level, in particular, school counselors have the opportunity to facilitate the exposure to and understanding of the college process. To this end, high school counselors are critical in either hosting college representatives at the school and coordinating college tours for students to obtain more knowledge about the overall process and to begin envisioning themselves succeeding on a college campus. Although tours are important, they must be a part of a larger comprehensive college preparation strategy ([Toldson and Lewis, 2012](#); [Toldson and Esters, 2012](#)). Additionally, school counselors should assist black males in getting internship experiences foster career development and choosing a college major, especially for first-generation college students ([Toldson and Lewis, 2012](#); [Toldson and Esters, 2012](#)). It is critical for high school counselors to incorporate significant others, particularly parents, in academic success and college-going process ([Hines and Holcomb-McCoy, 2013](#)). Other important stakeholders, including men from the community, clergy and other community leaders, should be included in their educational process. Specifically, school counselors should solicit black males from colleges or those who have graduated from college to be mentors.

The high school counselor's approach can be multilayered. First, it would be prudent for the high school counselor to ensure that parents, teachers and other stakeholders in the student's educational process understand their unique educational experience. This can facilitate the overall climate at the school being such that black boys and mens' cultural and racial identity are affirmed and celebrated. Such informational moments can take place via presentations at Parent Teacher Association meetings, faculty meetings, college nights, and

through other creative means of communication (e.g. website, brochures, bulletin boards, etc.). Such awareness and knowledge are critical for stakeholders to then adjust their services to meet the specific needs of black boys and men.

Second, school counselors can spearhead efforts to address the unique needs of black boys and men. This can, and arguably should be, a collaborative effort. [Hines et al. \(2019\)](#) suggests that a team approach – one that involves all stakeholders executing one vision for the success of all students – should be used with black boys and men. Again, this would include faculty and staff in the school, parents and significant family members, and others in the community with which the student regularly interacts and has respect for. Whether through formal college access programs such as AVID or GEAR-UP, or other nontraditional means, the high school counselor's role in facilitating their empowerment is critical.

A final focus for the school counselor's efforts can be black males' level of self-efficacy. The measure of their ability to accomplish certain tasks can be instrumental in ensuring that black males, especially first-generation college students, are ready for their college and career experiences. To further facilitate the successful transition of black boys and men to college, high school counselors can administer various personality and career assessments. These can help students better understand themselves and then discern what college environment would be most congruent with who they are and their interests.

Future research

Given the nature and results of this study, more research is needed around preparing black males for college. Researchers should study the career motivations of black males and the impact on their decision to enroll in college. Research studies on the type of schools black males attend are needed to determine what type of courses help to prepare them for college. More research should be conducted on the preparation of school counselors in helping black boys and men and their parents successfully navigate the college-going process. Also, additional research is needed on how deficit thinking impacts decision-making around college-going. Further research is needed to understand how black males overcome obstacles and barriers to attend college. Finally, research studies are needed on strengths-based approaches to helping black boys and men get to college.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, we conducted the study using three participants for in-depth analysis; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all black males in college. Second, the participants attend a college in the south and experiences of black males may differ in other regions of the USA. Third, the participants attend a predominantly white institution and do not consider the experiences of black males who decide to attend and enroll in historically black colleges and universities.

Conclusion

Given the push for school counselors to promote equity and postsecondary attainment, college and career readiness is crucial to the upward mobility of black boys and men. School counselors have the training, knowledge and skills to facilitate the college preparation of black males; however, they must be willing to challenge the inequities and understand the context of this population to be effective. School counselors are in a very position use strengths-based approaches to assist black males to be college and career ready.

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College as
setting good
foundation

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