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### Ebony in the Ivory Tower: Examining Trends in the Socioeconomic Status, Achievement, and Self-Concept of Black, Male Freshmen

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# Ebony in the Ivory Tower: Examining Trends in the Socioeconomic Status, Achievement, and Self-Concept of Black, Male Freshmen

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Despite the educational challenges African American males face, there is a sizeable population successfully finishing high school and entering college. This study provides an overview of how a national sample of black male freshmen embodied the cognitive, social, and institutional factors related to college access between 1971 and 2004. Data reveal that black, male freshmen today have more affluent family backgrounds, better academic records, and greater confidence in their skills and abilities than their peers who entered college in earlier decades. Trends indicate that men with lower incomes, less confidence, and less ideal academic records are increasingly unlikely to be present on college campuses.

According to the American Council on Education's *Minorities in Higher Education* report (Harvey, 2003), black students are becoming an increasingly visible presence on college and university campuses. Indeed, the number of African American students in college grew 45% between 1980 and 2000, and by the end of the twentieth century, 1.5 million black undergraduates were enrolled in higher education institutions (Harvey, 2003). Unfortunately, much of this growth has been attributed to the achievements of African American women, rather than to the community as a whole. The proportion of African American women earning undergraduate degrees roughly equals their representation in society at large (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008). Conversely, African American males continue to be underrepresented in their rates of college attainment. Despite black males' expressed value of and desire to attend college, they continue to be less likely to complete

high school and attend college than both white males and black females (Harper, 2006a; Holzman, 2006). Jackson (2003) notes, "In almost every category of academic failure, African American males are disproportionately represented" (p. 45). There is widespread evidence that black males are more likely than their female counterparts to fail high school courses, to fail out of high school in general, and to be underprepared for college-level coursework (Cohen & Nee, 2000; Holzman, 2006; Roderick, 2003). While gender gaps exist between the academic achievement and college enrollment rates of white students as well, it is important to note that the black gender gap is wider than disparities observed within other groups (see Corbett et al., 2008; Harvey, 2003).

Public figures, scholars, and researchers have begun to focus efforts on identifying the sources of these disparities and are offering better support for African American males as they strive to gain access to and succeed in college. Although we are gaining greater understanding of the factors that prevent black men from attending college, the population that successfully finishes high school and matriculates into college receives less attention. Focusing solely on those men who have been excluded from higher education lends credibility to the myth that success in higher education is not a viable option for African American males. We know far too little about the characteristics and experiences of black men who persist through high school and are college bound.

To address these knowledge gaps, this study provides a demographic overview of a national sample of African American males who have successfully gained access to college over the past 30 years. In addition to addressing trends in the characteristics, aspirations, and values of African American male freshmen, we analyze the changes in their socioeconomic backgrounds, academic achievement, and self-confidence. While understanding the characteristics of black males who are not gaining access to higher education is critically important in promoting access to higher education, examining the characteristics of those who are entering college offers us important information as well. This study allows us to gain a sense of "what works" in promoting access by presenting the characteristics of the black men who have gained access to college over time, and can guide potential programs and interventions that are designed to facilitate success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature documents achievement disparities between African American males and white males as well as those between African American males and their female counterparts (Harper, 2006a). For example, according to a recent report, 58% of black males fail to graduate from high school with their peers (Holzman, 2006). Further, a study of students in Chicago public schools revealed that African American males tend to experience a larger drop in academic performance and higher course failure rates over their high school careers than their peers (Roderick, 2003). By the end of ninth grade, 80% of black males in Chicago were failing at least one of their courses, compared to 41% of black females.

While troubling in isolation, these trends are even more problematic because they extend from high school completion to college entry. In 1976, there was a small differential in the college enrollment rates of black men and women. These gaps have widened over time and women now constitute a sizeable majority among all African American freshman undergraduates (Harper, 2006a; Harvey, 2003). The college enrollment of black females increased 126% between 1976 and 2002, compared to a 51% increase for black men (Harper, 2006a). From 1995 to 2002, the percentage of African American females entering college rose from 28.4% to 36.1%. The

percentage of African American males, on the other hand, was relatively stagnant during the same time frame, with 25.9% entering college in 1995 and 25.8% in 2002 (Harvey, 2003).

While some (e.g., Ogbu, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2004) suggest that these trends reflect a lack of motivation or inherent ability within the black community generally (and among black males, in particular), we vehemently oppose this viewpoint. These perspectives represent a deficit-thinking paradigm, positing that all students who fail in school do so because of internal deficiencies (e.g., cognitive and/or motivational limitations) or shortcomings socially linked to the student (e.g., familial deficits and dysfunctions) (Valencia, 1997). This viewpoint may be appealing to policymakers and educational leaders at the secondary and postsecondary levels; it provides a simple explanation that absolves those in privileged positions of any guilt for the disparities we observe and for not making efforts to promote greater educational opportunities. Adopting a deficit perspective of black male achievement allows leaders and policymakers to ignore the need for systematic changes that might shake up the status quo.

We assert that black males have as much inherent ability and intelligence as any other student population. We concur with others (Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2006b, 2008) who suggest the factors associated with African American male underachievement are multidimensional and complex<sup>1</sup>. For example, Cohen and Nee (2000) suggest that educational disparities are rooted in that: "Black men . . . have been victims of an intersectional contextual failure, [with a] combination of ineffective schools, neighborhood and individual poverty, [and] diminishing low-skilled living-wage employment opportunities" (p. 1196). Thus, we suggest looking to forces within and outside the student that shape opportunities, academic achievement, and college access for black males.

Researchers have identified several factors that place black men at a greater disadvantage for access to, and success in, postsecondary education (e.g., Cohen & Nee, 2000; Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2006a; Jackson, 2003; Wilson-Sadberry, Winfield, & Royster, 1991). First, while individual drive and motivation are key, family resources profoundly influence educational opportunities. Specifically, economic resources, parental education levels, and parental involvement are interrelated constructs with great potential to influence student participation in higher education (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Perna, 2006). Numerous researchers show that wealth and family income are positively related to academic achievement and college attendance (Dynarski, 2002; Marable, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Perna & Titus, 2004).

The educational advantages that accrue to those from more affluent backgrounds create additional and grave disadvantages in access along racial lines given African Americans' overrepresentation in the lowest socioeconomic levels. Despite the growth of the African American middle class, an undeniable overrepresentation of African Americans among the nation's poorest citizens remains (Brown et al., 2003). African American males and females are more likely to be unemployed than equally educated Whites. In addition, black men and women earn less than their counterparts, and the median income for black families in 2001 was only 62% of that of white families. Economic disparities such as these persist over time, maintaining, and sometimes widening, the gap between African American families' standards of living and those of white families (Brown et al., 2003; Oliver & Shapiro, 1997; Shapiro, 2004).

These economic disparities translate into diminished rates of college attendance. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 65% of all students whose families earn more than \$75,000 a year attend college, compared to 24% of students whose families earn less than \$25,000 (Marable, 2003). Since only 22% of academically qualified students who come from low-income families attend college (Marable, 2003), it is unlikely that these trends can be dismissed as

merely a function of student ability, rather than of income (Perna, 2006; St. John, Asker, & Hu, 2001). Thus, it should come as no surprise that “the college-going rate of the highest socioeconomic-status students with the lowest achievement levels is the same level as the poorest students with the highest achievement levels” (Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002, p. 17). Considering the overrepresentation of Blacks among America’s poorest families, it is likely that many able and talented black males do not attend college simply because their families lack the necessary financial resources.

Closely related to trends in family income, college preparation and attendance patterns of African American students reflect that Blacks are less likely than Whites and Asians to have college-educated parents (Cota-Robles & Gordan, 1999). Better-educated parents can enhance academic outcomes and college going by providing more information and assistance to their children. For instance, highly educated parents are more likely to recognize student needs for tutoring, to push for college preparatory classes, and to arrange college visits (Cota-Robles & Gordan, 1999). Perhaps most importantly, these parents are more likely to have the supplemental income to finance activities that improve their child’s educational opportunities.

In addition to the strong association of parental resources and experiences with higher education, countless scholars have documented the role of parental involvement and support in student achievement. Parent involvement, particularly while children are in primary and secondary school, has been widely correlated with increased academic achievement, aspirations, and college attendance (i.e., Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Ford & Amaral, 2006; Gordon, Gordon, & Nembhard, 1994; Hossler et al., 1989; Jeynes, 2003). Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif (1998) specifically highlight the importance of parenting in their qualitative study of African American, male, high achievers. They identify several factors that contributed to the success of the students in the study: emphasis on reading, parental encouragement for academic success, close interaction between parents and teachers, parental interest in homework, and consistent verbal praise.

In addition to the effect of family and socioeconomic background on black student achievement, research highlights the influence of high school environments and educational contexts where black males are immersed. African American males often face inadequate, discriminatory structures in high school that fail to prepare them for graduation from high school, let alone for college attendance. One way this discrimination manifests is in the paltry resources allocated to schools with high African American enrollments. In the United States, geographic residence and educational opportunities are inextricably linked. School district budgets are based largely on property taxes, thus schools located in communities with expensive homes and thriving businesses are better funded (Kozol, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2005).

Given economic inequities by race and housing segregation in the United States, African American parents are less able to afford living in the expensive neighborhoods served by wealthy school districts (Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield & Lee, 2005). This re-segregation of American neighborhoods has also led to a re-segregation of public education, concentrating black students at urban schools with significantly fewer resources than the suburban schools their white counterparts attend (Cohen & Nee, 2000; Gandara & Maxwell-Jolly, 1999; Kozol, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2005). Urban schools generally have lower per-student expenditures, fewer resources, and are more likely to have classes taught by less experienced and out-of-major instructors when compared to suburban schools with predominantly white enrollments (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002; Kozol, 2005). These pronounced differences in resources translate to extreme differences in opportunities to learn or the quality and quantity of education to which students are exposed (Oakes,

2005). While one can certainly find driven, focused, college-bound students and committed teachers and counselors at low-resourced urban schools, these students' pathways to postsecondary education are certainly more difficult to navigate than for their peers with more extensive college preparatory resources (Allen, Kimura-Walsh, & Griffin, 2009).

In addition to the larger political and school structures that create resource disparities, school policies, practices, and individual agents (e.g., teachers and counselors) also influence the experience of African American males. Teachers' low expectations and academic tracking, based on perceived ability, are two key practices that negatively shape black males' educational experiences (Gordon et al., 1994; Oakes, 2005). Black males describe how being subjected to low teacher and counselor expectations, and being stigmatized as violent and jail-bound shape their educational opportunities and treatment (O'Connor, 1999). Researchers have found that disciplinary policies have a disproportionately negative effect on African American boys, leading them to be less likely to receive academic help and more likely to receive detentions and expulsions for their misbehavior than white males (Gordon et al., 1994; O'Connor, 1999).

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study considers how multiple barriers and opportunities for support come together to shape black male trajectories. We chose the Integrated Model of Student Success (Figure 1) to identify key characteristics of college-going, black males and theorize about how trends and changes in these characteristics are related (Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005). Based on Swail, Redd, and Perna's (2003) earlier Geometric Model of Student Assistance and Achievement, the Integrated Model proposes a framework for understanding dynamic connections between factors related to college access and retention.

This student-centered model suggests that student outcomes are the result of complex interactions among cognitive, social, and institutional forces (Swail et al., 2005). Cognitive factors are internal and relate to the skills, abilities, and knowledge students have that prepare them for higher education and enable them to succeed academically on a college campus (Swail et al., 2003). While they can certainly be shaped by external forces, such as parents, teachers, and friends, characteristics such as academic preparation, postsecondary planning, and college knowledge

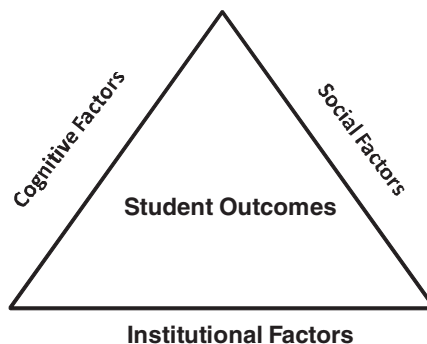


FIGURE 1 The Integrated Model of Student Success (Swail et al., 2005)

are all considered cognitive factors. The second dimension of the model, social factors, captures experiences largely external to students that have fundamental influence on their experiences. Cultural history, family influence, financial issues, socioeconomic status, abilities to interact with peers, and the development of student aspirations are all addressed by the social dimension (Swail et al., 2005; Swail et al., 2003). The final dimension of the model, institutional/systemic factors, captures the ability of institutions to support (or block) student efforts as they aim to gain access to and succeed in college. These factors represent institutional interventions and include efforts toward K-16 coordination, outreach programs, financial aid, climate, diversity, facilities, and services (Swail et al., 2005; Swail et al., 2003).

Gaining a better understanding of the influence of these three dimensions helps us recognize how institutional efforts can facilitate student achievement (Swail et al., 2005; Swail et al., 2003). Balance among the three factors is necessary to foster a student's capacity for development, growth, and persistence. However, balance does not necessarily mean equal support from all three forces. Rather, Swail et al. (2003) use the term equilibrium to describe when cognitive, social, and institutional forces come together to maximize potential for persistence and achievement in a given student based on his or her own unique needs. For example, a student whose social and cognitive factors are strong will not require as much institutional support to achieve success, and a student with strong cognitive factors in a supportive institution will often be successful, even in the absence of strong social factors.

The Integrated Model of Student Success is useful in directing our attention to understanding multiple forces with potential to shape college aspirations and access for black, male students. It highlights the importance of personal skills and motivation along with support and family context; however, it recognizes that institutional practice can enhance (or inhibit) access to college. Thus, in our analyses we attend to variables that capture cognitive, social, and institutional factors related to college access for students broadly, and for African American males in particular. We focus primarily on cognitive and social factors contributing to student success to gain more insight on how to improve institutional practice. These analyses also inform our understanding of the characteristics of black males who are increasingly absent from college campuses and stimulate our thinking regarding services institutions can (and should) offer to address students' needs and promote college access.

## THE STUDY

This study is part of an emerging literature that examines black males who gain access to college (e.g., Fries-Britt, 1997; Grantham, 2004; Harper 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Wilson-Sandberry, Winfield, & Royster, 1991). This literature highlights the importance of personal motivation, teacher encouragement, family socioeconomic status, father's influence, counselor support, and a specific plan to enroll in higher education for African American men. Despite their significant contributions, these studies do not consider whether and how the characteristics of college-bound, black men have changed over time. Previous studies that have examined trends in the characteristics of African American college students also have not fully addressed the issues at hand in this study. These works have either examined the experiences of African American students in college as a group (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2005) or the characteristics and experiences of black students at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007). In other words, there has not been an attempt to specifically examine how the

characteristics of African American men entering college have changed over an extended period of time.

This study aims to fill this gap, examining both the consistencies and changes in the population of African American males entering college between 1971 and 2004. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

- 1) What are the key trends in the characteristics, skills, abilities, and experiences of black males who are gaining access to college?
- 2) How do changes in the cognitive, social, and institutional forces shaping black male achievement compare to trends observed among their peers, particularly black women?

## METHODS

### Data Source

All participants in this study completed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Student Information Form (SIF). This survey is administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles and is part of a nationwide longitudinal study of American higher education (Astin, Oseguera, Sax, & Korn, 2002). The SIF has been issued annually for over 40 years, and reaches almost 400,000 students early in their first year of college at 700 institutions across the nation. The survey is designed to assess students' high school and family experiences, as well as the background characteristics, beliefs, and expectations they bring to their campus—all of which have the potential to influence students' experiences and outcomes in college (Astin et al., 2002).

The reliability of items appearing on the SIF has been addressed by the Higher Education Research Institute (n.d.). Responses to the majority of questions have remained stable over time, with fluctuations being linked to larger societal trends and issues rather than to random occurrences. Nearly 90% of the institutions whose students are included in the SIF data are repeat participants, which also limits sampling error. While in-depth analyses have not been completed on every survey item, several published texts (e.g., Astin, 1991, 1993) have determined that factors constructed based on the survey data have high internal reliability.

The data used in these analyses were the SIF survey responses of 214,951 entering, full-time, African American, male freshmen between 1971 and 2004.<sup>2</sup> These data were drawn from a larger sample of 541,824 black male and female freshmen attending 1,112 baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities who participated in the CIRP over the past three decades. The responses were statistically weighted to estimate the national population of first-time, full-time, black freshmen during that period. The weighting procedure is designed to compensate for over- and under-sampling of institutional participants based on institutional control, type, and selectivity<sup>3</sup>. Thus, these analyses can be understood as being representative of the approximately 3.6 million black students who entered college between 1971 and 2004.

### Data Analysis

Much like reports, such as *The American Freshman: Thirty-Five Year Trends* (Astin et al., 2002) and *Black Undergraduates from Bakke to Grutter: Freshman Status, Trends and Prospects*,



1971–2004 (Allen et al., 2005), this study was conducted as a trends analysis (Loether & McTavish, 1980). Trends analysis involves plotting and observing changes in data over time and is particularly useful in exploring changes in survey responses over a series of days, months, or, as in this case, years.

This method allowed the researchers to provide a broad descriptive overview of how black male freshmen have embodied the cognitive, social, and institutional forces shaping college access over a 30-year period. The responses of students completing the survey in the same year were aggregated, and yearly data were then examined across the full 30-year time period. Changes in aggregate data were calculated to represent evidence of upward and downward trends in specific data points<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, aggregated data were charted graphically to visually indicate upward and downward trends. HERI trends data are aggregated before being distributed for analysis, preventing more precise statistical tests in determining changes or differences between trends or data points. The dataset lacked sufficient information to calculate the pooled standard error necessary for t-tests. Reports based on similar datasets (e.g., *The American Freshman* [Astin et al., 2002] and *Black Undergraduates from Bakke to Grutter* [Allen et al., 2005]) similarly do not report tests of significance and focus on detailing numerical changes over time. However, for consistency and clarity, we placed parameters on our terminology around changes over time. Demographic changes and differences between groups that were between 0 and 5 percentage points were labeled as small, changes between 5 and 15 percentage points were labeled as moderate, and differences in excess of 15 percentage points were labeled as substantial.

In addition to being an effective means of examining change over time, trends analysis facilitates comparisons across groups and locations or institutions. Therefore, data were also disaggregated and examined by institutional type, differentiating between black males attending historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and those attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Additionally, the data collected from African American males were compared to data collected from college-bound, African American females and trends observed among the national sample of students completing the SIF in the same year to highlight specific trends and disparities. Key divergences in the observed trends or students' characteristics and experiences are noted and highlighted where appropriate throughout this analysis.

## FINDINGS

We analyzed responses to SIF survey questions that fell into at least one of the three categories displayed in the Integrated Model of Student Success (Swail et al., 2005): cognitive forces, social forces, and institutional forces. Survey items representing cognitive forces focus primarily on students' academic and social preparation for college, while social forces are represented by survey items addressing family background, support, and participation in the college-going process. While few SIF questions address institutional forces that shape college-going, items related to students' use of teachers and counselors for support and college information were also included in these analyses. While trends reveal significant increases in the academic qualifications, skills, confidence, and family affluence of black, male freshmen, there is also troubling evidence regarding a poorer and less prepared population of black males who are increasingly unlikely to be present on college campuses.

## Cognitive Forces

### *Academic Preparation*

Comparisons of the 1971 and 2004 cohorts of first-year, African American, male students reveal substantial upward trends in overall preparation for college. In 1971, just over 5% of African American males achieved A averages in high school. By 2004, almost one-fifth (19.8%) of black males entered college with high school GPAs equivalent to A or A+. On average, black males enrolling at PWIs reported higher levels of academic achievement than males at HBCUs, and this trend was consistent at each time point (yearly). In 1971, 8.2% of black males at PWIs and 2.4% of males at HBCUs had A averages in high school. This gap had widened somewhat by 2004, with 22.8% of black male PWI students, and 14.7% of black male HBCU students reporting a high school GPA of A- or above.

While there has been significant improvement overall in the academic achievement of college-bound, black males, it is important to note that these data also highlight the persistent academic disparities between African American men and their female counterparts. The proportion of black men reporting A- or better grade point averages in high school has been lower than that of black women since the 1970s. In 1971, 9.7% of black women (as compared to 5.4% of black men) reported a high school GPA of A- or higher, a difference of approximately 4 percentage points. In 1990, 13.4% of black women and 7.1% of black men reported A averages in high school, a gap of roughly 6 percentage points. By 2004, the gap had grown to 13 percentage points, with 19.8% of black men and 33.2% of black women reporting high school grade point averages of A- or above.

### *Self-Concept and Confidence*

Consistent with improvements or gains in levels of academic achievement and preparation, black men's ability self-ratings have also increased over the past 30 years. Black men were increasingly likely to rate themselves in the top 10% of students their age in academic ability, math ability, writing ability, drive to achieve, and leadership ability. Between 1971 and 2004, the percentage of black males who considered themselves in the top 10% compared with peers in academic ability increased from 34.5% to 64.2%; perceptions of leadership ability increased from 43.5% to 68.5%; and intellectual self-confidence increased from 44.2% to 75.5%.

While self-ratings were similar across institutional types, black males who chose to attend PWIs expressed greater confidence in their academic abilities than counterparts entering HBCUs. For example, in 2004, 66.4% of PWI freshmen and 60.5% of HBCU freshmen rated themselves above average or in the top 10% in academic ability. Interestingly, black males attending PWIs rated themselves more favorably than their peers at HBCUs on their leadership ability and intellectual self-confidence from the 1970s through the end of the century. There was a shift in 2000; black males entering HBCUs looked much like their peers at PWIs in perceptions of their leadership ability and intellectual self-confidence. In 2004, 68.9% of black men entering HBCUs and 68.2% of black men entering PWIs rated themselves in the top 10% in leadership ability. Black males choosing to attend HBCUs held a small advantage in intellectual self-confidence. Seventy-eight percent of black men attending HBCUs rated themselves in the top 10%, as compared to 73.9% of men attending PWIs.

Gaps in academic achievement between black men and women documented both through this study and through previous research (e.g., Cohen & Nee, 2000; Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008; Harper, 2006a) do not appear directly related to the ways in which black males perceive themselves and their level of confidence in their academic abilities. Despite superior academic performance and comparable completion of college requirements, black women overall felt less confident about academic abilities than their male counterparts. For example, in 2004, men rated themselves somewhat more highly than women in academic ability (64% vs. 61%) and leadership ability (69% vs. 65%). Wider gaps were observed between men and women in terms of their intellectual self-confidence. Seventy-six percent of black men rated themselves in the top 10% of students in terms of their confidence in their academic abilities, as compared to 65% of black women. Again, similar disparities were observed between the total student population of men and women participating in the SIF in 2004. Black men were more likely to rate themselves as being above average as compared to their peers in their leadership ability (69.0% black men; 63.0% SIF men; 57.1% SIF women) and intellectual self-confidence (76.0% black men; 66.4% SIF men; 50.4% SIF women).

### *Degree Aspirations*

In 1975, 32.5% of black males aspired to Master's degrees, 15.7% to PhDs, and 14.5% to professional degrees (i.e., MD, DDS, or JD). By 2004, there were moderate changes in black males' degree aspirations; they expressed greater interest in master's degrees and PhDs (38.9% and 20.8%, respectively), and demonstrated a small decrease in interest in professional degrees (12.2%).

## Social Forces

### *Socioeconomic Background*

The importance of socioeconomic factors in college access also emerged in our analyses. Despite some increases during the mid-1980s, the percentage of black, male freshmen from low-income families<sup>5</sup> declined (38.6% in 1971 to 33.2% in 2004). There were also shifts in the proportion of black males who had family incomes in the highest categories: In 1971, less than 1% of black males reported family incomes in the highest income category, salaries in excess of \$40,000 a year. By comparison, the highest income category in 2004 was \$200,000 or above, and 3.1% of entering black males indicated this family income. There were also differences in the affluence of black male students by institutional type. Compared to PWIs, HBCUs enrolled larger proportions of black males from poorer families over time. In 2004, 14% of black men attending HBCUs came from families with incomes above \$100,000; at PWIs 17% of black men reported family incomes in excess of \$100,000.

### *Parental Education*

In addition to increases in income, college-bound, black males come from families with higher levels of educational attainment. In 1971, 14.1% of black male freshmen had fathers and 15.6%

had mothers who were college educated. After three decades of steady increases, over one-third of students reported having either a mother (43.1%) or a father (37.1%) who had graduated from college. Further, by 2004, 14.7% of black, male freshmen had mothers and 14.2% had fathers with graduate degrees, up from 4.6% and 5.1% respectively in 1971.

### *Parent Involvement and Support*

Black parents had an increasingly important role in shaping their sons' college choice processes over time. In 1971, 37.1% of black males reported that parents' desire for them to attend college was very important in their decision to pursue postsecondary education. This percentage increased to 43.8% in 1980 and to 50% by 1990. While decreasing slightly throughout the 1990s and early 2000, 50.4% of black males noted parents were instrumental in shaping their college aspirations in 2004. Black men were also more likely to report that their parents were very important in their decisions to attend college than students completing the SIF generally, where 38.9% of all men entering college in 2004 indicated parental desires were key in their decision to attend college.

There were small increases in the percentage of black males reporting that relatives helped select the college they chose to attend. Close to 10% of black males felt relatives played a large part in their choice of institution in 1971. In 1990, 13.2% said relatives' opinions were very important, a figure that increased to 14.6% in 2004. Again, black, male freshmen were somewhat more strongly influenced by their families in their college choice process than other students. Thirteen percent of black women, 9.9% of women completing the SIF overall, and 8.8% of men participating in the SIF reported that their parents' desires played a large part in their choice to attend their current institution in 2004.

In addition to having increased influence on college choice, black parents were offering their sons more financial support over time. In 1980, 56.1% of black males received some financial support from their parents for college; 14.5% received at least \$1500. These numbers spiked in the early 1990s, and at the beginning of the decade, 72.1% of black males got some form of financial support from their parents, and 36.9% received more than \$1500 from parents. By 2000, 70.1% of black males received some parental support, and 42.4% received at least \$1500.

### **Institutional Forces**

While our analyses largely focused on the cognitive and social forces related to college access and success, we also explored variables related to institutional forces black, male freshman experienced on their pathway to college. There were several shifts observed related to the influence of teachers and counselors on the college choice processes of black males. College-bound, black males spend less time getting advice from teachers than in past. In 1971, 34.3% of respondents reported asking teachers for advice. This percentage increased somewhat over the 1970s and 1980s; however, there were moderate declines throughout the 1990s. By 2004, 28.1% of college-bound, black males were seeking the advice of their teachers outside of class.

Although there have been increases since 2000, the percentage of black males who described their teachers' advice as important in their choice of a specific college has declined somewhat over time. Reliance on guidance counselors for institution-specific information also appeared to

decline, but black, male freshmen were somewhat more likely to have their institutional choice process influenced by school counselors than teachers. In 1973, 15.1% of black males starting college said guidance counselors were influential in their institutional choice process, and 10.7% noted that teachers played a role. By 2004, however, 11.4% received influential college choice advice from guidance counselors, and 7.9% of incoming black male freshmen were guided in their choice process by their teachers.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A look at black men who have successfully persisted to and enrolled in college provides useful insight as education leaders, institutional agents, and policymakers aim to promote college access for future generations of black men. This study gives an overview of several characteristics of black college freshmen and how these characteristics have changed over 30 years. Our analyses illustrate several improvements over time but, within the larger context of educational inequalities, it is clear that several gaps and disparities have remained. In this section, we discuss the mostly upward trends in light of previous research in order to highlight persistent problems facing Blacks in education, challenge commonly cited deficit-oriented thinking about the achievement gap, and identify dispositions or experiences that promote college-going among black males.

Consistent with previous research (Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002), our findings indicate that Blacks who are gaining access to and enrolling in college are from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds. Black male students were increasingly likely to come from homes where parents earned higher incomes and were college educated. Although rising wages, inflation, and increased rates of college attendance among African Americans have played a role in observed trends in the socioeconomic backgrounds of black males, changes in representation in the lowest and highest annual income categories and parental educational attainment over the past three decades are noteworthy. The demonstrated increased level of affluence among black, male freshmen in our trends analyses may reflect economic progress within the black community. Alternatively, it may also indicate that K-12 inequalities pose greater barriers to college access today than ever before. The latter explanation is supported by research indicating that Blacks are both disproportionately represented in lower-income categories and in low-resourced high schools—schools with inequitable educational resources (where they lack access to counselors, qualified teachers, honors and advance placement classes, books, computers, and other learning tools) (Kozol, 2005; Oakes, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2005). This study's findings suggest that students most likely to be found at these low-resourced schools—Blacks from low-income families—are less likely to get into college today than 20 or 30 years ago.

In observing the data on college freshmen over the past three decades, several characteristics and trends stand out as possible indicators of success among black males. The data suggest that black men who are successful at negotiating the college-going process have key characteristics in common. Black men who persisted to college were likely to have high self-confidence in their academic abilities and leadership skills. These students were also increasingly likely to have high educational aspirations, financial support for college, and parents who were knowledgeable about the college-going process. These findings are consistent with the larger scholarship on the characteristics of high achieving students who are gaining access to college (Allen et al., 2005; Astin et al., 2002; Cota-Robles & Gordon, 1999). While not necessarily surprising, it is important

to acknowledge trends shaping access to college, broadly, have a similar influence on patterns of access within the African American male community.

Although further research is necessary to produce a more comprehensive picture, the commonalities among college-bound, black males identified in this study are a starting point for reflecting on strategies for improving the educational experiences of black students early in the educational pipeline. Facilitating the development of the identified positive characteristics associated with black, male freshmen among young students will require a multi-pronged approach to address several long-standing barriers in opposition to advancing college-going opportunities. The particular barriers identified in the literature that pose the greatest challenges with regard to promoting college access among black male students include: (1) the noted role of teachers and counselors as gatekeepers to valuable information about college-going; (2) the low expectations held by teachers that may prevent them from sharing valuable information and may affect student perceptions of their abilities and potential; (3) the distrust in school agents among black parents and students; (4) the lack of access to counselors in under-resourced schools; (5) the national trend of decreased financial aid and grant offerings; and (6) the concentration of black, poor students in low-resourced schools that fail to provide adequate opportunities to learn. It could certainly be argued that individual items on this list of challenges negatively influence the outcomes of several underserved student groups (e.g., black women, Latina/os, Native Americans, low-income students); however, these forces appear to have a particularly negative influence on African American men for reasons that have been difficult to determine (Cohen & Nee, 2000). Thus, researchers must continue to work toward identifying the specific reasons why black males appear to be particularly challenged in their efforts to overcome social, economic, and educational barriers when trying to gain access to college. Further, institutional agents in primary, secondary, and higher education must actively take steps to break down these barriers, requiring increased resources and financial investments, a long term-commitment, diligence, persistence, and dedication.

Based on the findings of our study, we recommend several immediate steps be taken to increase the number of black males entering college. Given the important role that parents play in influencing black males' college choices, it is important for both high schools and colleges to provide information and clear knowledge about the college admissions process to parents who have not attended college. Thus, to increase the presence of black males in higher education and to see greater diversity in the socioeconomic backgrounds of black males who do gain access to college, higher education administrators and policymakers must actively and vigilantly engage in outreach efforts, informing parents about the college application process and funding opportunities in new, creative ways. The formation of partnerships between institutions at the K-12 and collegiate levels could be particularly beneficial in promoting the dissemination of college preparatory information. Visits from admissions officers and other college administrators can provide parents with direct information, as well as provide K-12 counselors, teachers, and administrators with professional development and additional insight into the college preparatory process to share with students and their families.

Another small-scale step is to offer academic support to black high school students. Trends reveal that college-bound black males are increasingly well-prepared academically for college, but are still less well-prepared than their peers. Interestingly, black men still report greater confidence in their abilities, despite the fact that other students (e.g., black women, white men) report superior levels of academic achievement. This trend may add to our understanding of

a study by Cuyjet (1997) who reported that black men tend to start college with poorer study skills and habits than do black women, yet they were less likely to seek help when experiencing academic difficulty. Our findings suggest that there is a possibility African American males are less likely to seek necessary help because of their high level of academic self-confidence. These findings collectively suggest that it may be necessary to consider new ways to offer resources to African American males.

While this issue certainly warrants future study, we suggest that programs targeted toward African American males offering academic support in high school or in college should enlist trusted role models (e.g., older student mentors) to socialize black male students to utilize support services and to develop new, more efficient study skills. At the college level, undergraduate advising centers, multicultural student services offices, or African American cultural centers can initiate programs matching successful, black, male upperclassmen with incoming students for guidance and mentorship. Encouraging mentoring pairs to form friendships could allow mentors to share their experiences and strategies for success and academic achievement in college. College students also could be involved with mentoring high school students. We suggest high schools, particularly those close to institutions of higher education, make connections with college student services offices to locate African American males in college to mentor younger students. College mentors could offer their high school mentees advice and support through personal meetings and visits, if proximity allows, or by correspondence via phone, e-mail, and text-messages, if the college campus is further away.

We believe that the problems of African American poor academic performance and lower rates of college attendance, persistence, and graduation are not insoluble. Recent history demonstrates the opposite. From 1960 to 1975, the society committed resources and formulated policies to increase black participation in the American Dream through increased college participation. The results and returns on this investment are seen clearly in a generation of high achieving African Americans occupying some of the most prestigious positions in America. After initial, dramatic gains facilitated by race-conscious policies, the wheels of progress that produced these truly remarkable advances ground to a halt and, actually, have reversed direction. The result is a crisis in black male college participation, which ironically parallels patterns from the 1960s. In contrast to this discouraging snapshot of the current state of racial progress in higher education, the country recently elected in its first black president. While this marks a profound celebratory moment in our nation's history, we must ask: What were, and are, the odds of this happening, given the representation of Blacks in the pipeline to the presidency? Are our educational institutions providing opportunities for black students to acquire the necessary skills to qualify for the highest leadership position (and other prestigious roles) in the society? In the spirit of citizens of all backgrounds and identity groups who voted into office the 44th U.S. president into office, running on a platform of hope and social progress, we offer this: our country can and must do better.

## NOTES

1. These complex causal patterns involve not only individual, family, and community factors but also socio-historical, political, economic, and racial factors.
2. For the purposes of this analysis, a student is considered African American or black if he or she marked "African American/Black" in response to the ethnicity question on the CIRP survey.

3. See Appendix A of *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall, 2004* (Sax, Hurtado, Lindholm, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2004) for a full description of weighting procedures.
4. Trend data for the general population of students responding to the SIF over the time frame addressed by this study is available in *The American Freshman: Thirty-Five Year Trends* (Astin et al., 2002). The African American student trends, disaggregated by gender and institutional type, are available in *Black Undergraduates from Bakke to Grutter: Freshman Status, Trends, and Prospects, 1971–2004* (Allen et al., 2005). Both reports can be purchased from the Higher Education Research Institute (<http://www.heri.ucla.edu>).
5. For the purposes of this report, low-income families do not have incomes in excess of 150% of the federally defined poverty level for a family of four for that given year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

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