African American Male Students' Perceptions of Self-Efficacy, Student Engagement, and Mentoring and Student Retention

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Abstract

There is limited quantitative research on self-efficacy, student engagement, mentoring, and student retention of African American male (AAM) students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). The purpose of this study is to fill the gap by sharing findings from a web-based survey on perceptions of self-efficacy, engagement, mentoring, and retention in a PWI. According to the results, a positive correlation exists between GPA and student groups, classification and engagement affect academic performance, and classification and interest in faculty mentor. Mentoring minority students is vital to consider, given the impact on student retention and success. The study provides recommendations for mentoring and future research to higher education leadership.

Keywords: African American, mentoring, retention, self-efficacy, student engagement

Higher education administrators continue to face increased pressure to account for higher rates of student retention (Britt, 2013). One group of at-risk students to whom much research has focused on is African American males (AAM). Research suggests that graduation rates for AAM continue to drop yearly (Harper, 2013). Success for AAM is a heavily contested and researched topic as there are factors such as engagement, academic achievement, and lack of motivation that impact their ability to persist (Booker & Brevard, 2017). As African American (AA) student enrollment at Predominantly White Institution (PWI) increases, universities struggle with attrition, retention, student engagement, self-efficacy, and mentoring (Brooms, 2018). Therefore, more attention must be given to provide the proper resources to improve the negative experiences within the social and academic lives of AAM who attend PWI (Harper, 2013). Academic achievement, student engagement, mentoring, and self-efficacy have a positive effect on retention and graduation for AAM (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Yet to date, much of the attention related to academic achievement and student engagement has been directed towards the student body at large, rather than AAM at PWI. As such, these institutions lack effective programs designed to increase the probability of retention, student engagement, self-efficacy, and mentoring of AAM (Hall, 2017). The role of student engagement, self-efficacy, and mentoring are directly related to issues of attrition and retention of students, especially at PWI (Regis, 2019). This study aims to fill a gap by adding research to the current body of literature on the relationship between self-efficacy, student engagement, mentoring, and retention of undergraduate AAM at a PWI.

The purpose of this study had three main objectives. The first objective was to understand better how students perceive the measures that are used to determine the likelihood of student retention among more at-risk student populations. Second, another aim was to establish the relationship between students who perceived student engagement, self-efficacy, and mentoring as important and their performance at college as a measure of retention. The third and final objective was to offer recommendations for minority students, faculty, and institutions of higher education to enhance the student experience, engagement, and retention for all students and AAM specifically.

Literature Review

Predominantly White Institutions have a history of exclusion rather than the inclusion of AAM (Harris, 2018). Colleges in the south openly opposed integration and fought against AAM attending their respective institutions (Harper, 2013). Harris (2018), indicated that this history created a sense of hesitancy among AAM and prevented them from feeling truly wanted or accepted even decades later after the initial integration movement. Retention for AAM students attending a PWI can be detrimental due to a lack of inclusion (McClain & Perry, 2017). AAM represent 13 % of undergraduate enrollment in 2017 (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2020) and 91 % of these students attend a PWI (Carter, 2018).

Mentoring within higher education is a critical tool for student engagement, retention, and success. Successful mentoring is a way of teaching and guiding a person who is less experienced with how to become a positive role model (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2013). Higher education research continues to explore student success for AAM (Tinto, 2017). Yet, data suggests that more and more AAM are beginning to leave postsecondary institutions before graduating (Brown, 2019). Approximately 39% of AAM graduate as compared to a 60% graduation rate among their white male counterparts at the same institutions of higher education (Britt, 2013). The disparity in the graduation rates among AAM is alarming, since attaining a college education is critical to the

success of AAM, and PWI are not sufficiently and systematically addressing the problem (Sinanan, 2016). According to Brooms (2016) AAM fair better at Historically Black Colleges and Universities due to environments that foster self-efficacy.

Relationship between Mentoring and Retention

Mentoring is key to AAM students in higher education settings (Booker & Brevard, 2017). AAM represent the highest attrition rate among any population and require a stable and supportive environment to establish a cultural identity (Sinanan, 2016). Mentoring by involvement outside of the classroom with a faculty member, there is an enormous endeavor for academic success (Britt, 2013). An institutional effort to enhance student retention is predicated on student engagement, mainly student and faculty engagement within the classroom, which can foster a significant relationship to create a mentoring opportunity (Tinto, 2017).

A mentoring relationship with faculty members can aid in retention for AAM (McClain & Perry, 2017). Booker and Brevard (2017) found that mentoring opportunities for AAM students assisted with their integration into an educational and social system within higher education settings. Students' participation in mentoring programs promotes academic success, persistence, and improves retention rates for college students (Sinanan, 2016).

Higher education researchers have shown a vast correlation between retention, student engagement, and academic achievement (Wood, Newman & Harris, 2015). The problem of keeping students enrolled has caused some administrators of universities to focus keenly on student retention (Brit, 2013). Research suggests 46% of AAM depart from public institutions and 57% from private institutions before graduation, which is much higher than their white counterparts (Brown, 2019). The retention of college students, namely AAM is an issue at most colleges and universities (Brooms, 2016). Furthermore, this problem is intensified when considering freshman AAM. Brooms (2016), propose that increasing the student retention rate is a challenging but important goal in many institutions of higher education.

Tolliver and Miller (2018) refer to the impact of critical strategies for American men to complete college. Connolly, Flynn, Jemmott, and Oestreicher (2017), explored the implementation of a First-Year Experience program aimed towards the first-semester at-risk college students who would help to increase retention from semester to semester. The results of the study yielded promoted improved academic achievement and enhanced GPAs. Mentoring opportunities for AAM students enhance a students' ability to interact with faculty members and staff members, which results in having academic and social supports (Tinto, 2017). According to Tinto (2017), providing an opportunity to establish meaningful faculty relationships are crucial in assisting students in matriculating into the educational systems of the university. Increased emphasis on mentoring was a significant component for creating a supportive environment (Brooks, Jones & Burt, 2013).

Importance of African American Faculty and Staff Mentors

African American male students tend to experience greater satisfaction and persistence when connections with the faculty and other students are perceived as needed (Britt, 2013). According to Sinanan (2016), mentoring for AAM in a college setting promotes a sense of satisfaction, well-being and increases the state of belonging. The involvement of faculty and staff members with their AAM students in the classroom and outside the class creates a positive relationship for AAM

in college (Hall, 2017). With a productive mentoring project, AA staff and faculty members can share educational experiences that can prove to be beneficial for AAM (McClain & Perry, 2017). Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2013) suggest that increased visibility of AA faculty and staff members, as well as the implementation of productive retention programs, can positively impact the retention rate for AAM. For a college degree to be a reality for AAM, they must be adequately prepared and supported by mentors that have already been through the same processes and similar experiences (Sinanan, 2016).
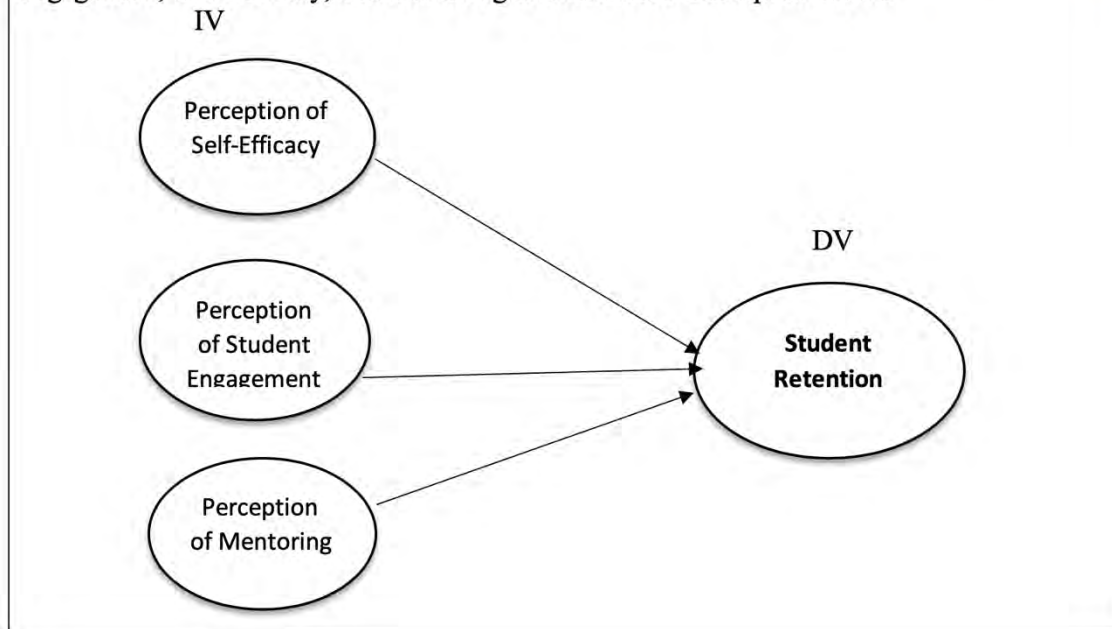
African American male students are more likely to choose mentors of the same race when seeking advice or counsel (Goings, 2015). Often an AA faculty or staff may be more likely to mentor AAM students because they can see themselves in the students (Sinanan, 2016). Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2013) contended that having a relationship with a role model on campus impacted AAM desire to graduate. Eakins and Eakins (2017) elaborated that a mentorship program in particular for AAM fosters a positive relationship that impacts student engagement on campus.

While mentoring programs have been proven effective by numerous studies, many institutions still do not have programs implemented in a formal setting (Sinanan 2016). Predominantly White Institutions can foster supportive environments by addressing the needs of their students, particularly AAM by way of mentoring opportunities (Sinanan, 2016). Kelly, Gayles and Williams (2017) recommended that PWI recruit and retain AA faculty and staff members. AAM students require adult mentors that they can easily relate to
improving academic achievement, self-efficacy, and student engagement (Booker & Brevard, 2017).

Methods

To begin analyzing the perceptions of factors essential to increasing AAM retention at PWI, a web-based survey was designed to gather data through Qualtrics. Survey methodology was an appropriate choice for this study since quantitative analysis allows the researcher to retrieve data numerically to measure perceptions of a specific population (Neuman, 2019). Survey participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with various programs that were available to them in and outside of the classroom experience with peers, faculty, and staff members. This study sought to determine if a relationship existed between three independent variables: self-efficacy, student engagement, and mentoring. The DV was retention.

Figure 1. The Relationship between Perceptions of African American Male Students on Student Engagement, Self-Efficacy, and Mentoring and Retention Conceptual Model

Measures

The following questions (Q) and hypotheses (H) guided the research:

Q.1. How do African American male students' perceive self-efficacy, student engagement, and mentoring factors?

Q.2. What is the relationship between African American male students' perceptions of self-efficacy, student engagement, and mentoring and retention?

H_1: There is a positive relationship between African American males' who agree with the measures of self-efficacy and retention.

H_0:1 There is no relationship between African American males' who agree with the measures of self-efficacy and their retention.

H_2: There is a positive and significant relationship between the engagement of African American students and their retention.

H_0:2. The relationship between engagement by African American students and their retention is neither positive nor significant.

H_3: African American males' perceptions of mentoring will be positively and significantly related to their classification and GPA levels.

H_0:3 There is no relationship between African American males' perceptions of mentoring and their classification and GPA scores.

The survey instrument consisted of 31 questions arranged across five criteria: demographics, self-efficacy, student engagement, mentoring, and general attitudes about college. Responses unique to mentoring is the focus of this paper. The survey consisted of open and close-ended questions that included multi-item measures based on a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to

strongly agree. The survey consisted of a question focused on participants' perceptions, which required the participant to either answer yes or no. Lastly, students were asked an open-ended question that required them to give their definition of a mentor.

The DV, retention, was operationally defined as a second semester AAM freshman from Spring 2018 who had enrolled for the fall 2019 semester, and all AAM sophomores, juniors, and seniors who were enrolled for at least one course for the fall 2019 semester. The DV was measured by two questions, *what is your classification* and *what is your GPA*. Demographic variables, age, major, living arrangement, student-athlete, honor society, first-generation college student, and highest education level for parents were assessed in the study using categorical and yes or no responses.

Population and Sample

Seven hundred and seventy (n=770) AAM undergraduate students enrolled at an urban southeastern United States public PWI between the age of 18 and 22 were identified to participate in the study. The survey participants were selected from a combination of sampling techniques to include stratified sampling and simple random sampling. Ten percent of undergraduate students at the university were represented in the survey. minimum sample size of 270 comprised of 71 freshmen, 65 sophomores, 67 juniors, and 67 seniors. Since participation was voluntary, only those willing to participate were included in the final sample, in which the ultimate selection of 99 survey participants was utilized, representing 13% of the total number of AAM enrolled at the institution. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of the students who participated in the study. Overall, sophomores were the largest classification group in the sample (36.2%); students age 18-21 comprised 80.9% of participants, primarily living off-campus (70.2%). Within the sample, 46% of participants' GPA ranged from 2.5-2.99. The majority of participants were not athletes (84%), not a member of an honor society (79.8%) and were not first-generation students (80%).
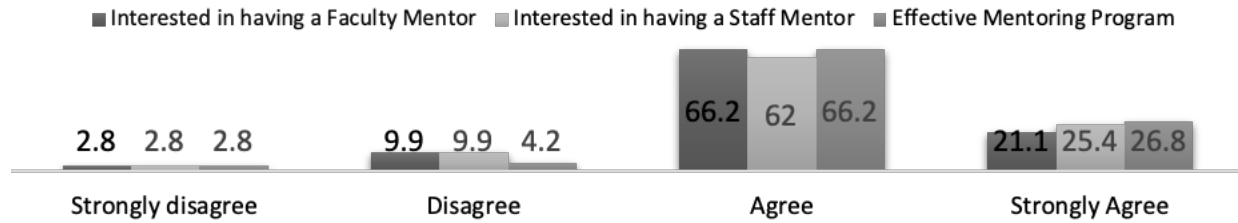
Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic	Percentage	Demographic	Percentage
Classification		**Athlete**	
Freshman	3.2	No	84.0
Sophomore	36.2		
Junior	28.7	**Honor Student**	
Senior	31.9	No	79.8
Age		**First Generation Student**	
18-21	80.9	No	80.0
22-25	18.1		
26-29	1.1	**GPA**	
30 and older	–	Below 2.0	10.6
		2.0 – 2.49	10.6
Living Arrangements		2.5 – 2.99	46.8
Off Campus	70.2	> 3.50	11.7

Analysis

Responses to each of the sets of questions are conveyed using descriptive statistical analysis. According to Figure 2, the majority of participants (66.2%, 62%) respectively agreed that they were interested in having an on-campus faculty mentor and a staff mentor. Sixty-six percent of participants believe the academic success of AAM could be addressed with an effective mentoring program.
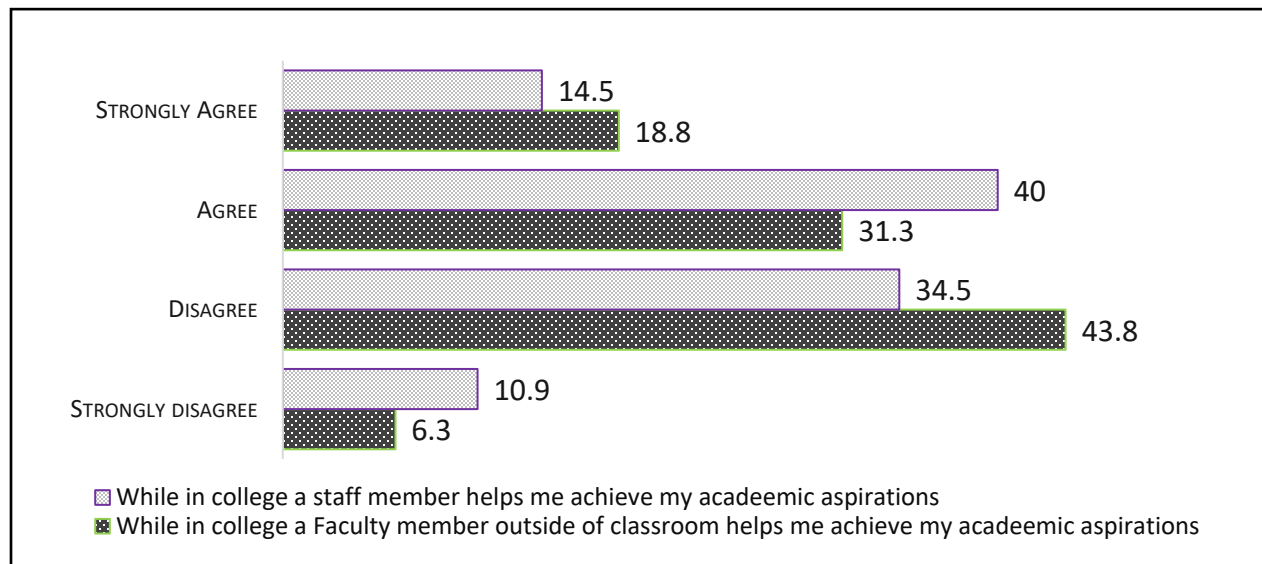
Figure 2. Descriptive Statistics. Perspectives of Mentoring

■ Interested in having a Faculty Mentor ■ Interested in having a Staff Mentor ■ Effective Mentoring Program

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Faculty Mentor	2.8	9.9	66.2	21.1
Staff Mentor	2.8	9.9	62	25.4
Effective Mentoring Program	2.8	4.2	66.2	26.8

Interestingly, when asked about whether while in college, a faculty member outside of the classroom helped them receive their academic aspirations, only 31.3% agreed that they had a faculty member help outside of the classroom. Consequently, 40% of participants perceived staff members as helping more than faculty. Overall, less than 20% of the participants strongly perceived faculty and staff supported them to achieve their academic aspirations.

Concerning faculty and staff mentoring, when strongly agree and agree were combined, 87.3% and 87.4% of the participants respectively reported that faculty and staff mentors were important. When asked about their perceptions of a mentoring program, the data reveal that when strongly agreed and agreed were combined, 93% of the participants perceived a mentoring program to be something they needed. Despite this perceived need by the participants, they also indicated their needs were not being catered to.

Figure 3. Descriptive Statistics: Perspectives of Mentoring

STRONGLY AGREE	14.5	18.8
AGREE	40	31.3
DISAGREE	34.5	43.8
STRONGLY DISAGREE	10.9	6.3

▨ While in college a staff member helps me achieve my acadeemic aspirations
▧ While in college a Faculty member outside of classroom helps me achieve my acadeemic aspirations

The DV for this study was retention. The DV was measured by two variables, classification, and GPA. Table 1 shows that just over one third (36.2%) of the sample were sophomores. Seniors (31.9%) were the next largest group to complete the study. Freshmen were the least number of participants in the study. When the distribution for GPA was examined, slightly more than half of the participants (57.4%) had at least a GPA between 2.0 and 2.99. For those who had at a B average to A the data showed that these comprised 39.4% of the sample. Overall, most of the Participants could be described as "retained" as they were all passing.

To address the second research question, three hypotheses were tested. Hypothesis 3 was unique to mentoring and posited, *African American males' perceptions of mentoring will be positively and significantly related to their classification and GPA levels.* A Spearman's correlation was run to determine the directional relationship between interest in having a faculty mentor, interest in having a staff mentor, an effective mentoring program for AAM outside classroom help from faculty, outside classroom help from staff, a campus mentor, and GPA (Table 2). Of the six factors tested, there was no significant correlation found between interest in having faculty mentor, interest in having a staff mentor, an effective mentoring program for AAM, outside classroom help from faculty, outside classroom help from staff, campus mentor, and GPA.

Table 2

Correlations Between GPA, Faculty Mentor, Staff Mentor, Mentoring Program, Faculty Help, Staff Help, and Campus Mentor

Variables	Coefficient
Faculty Mentor	.079
Staff Mentor	.059
Mentoring Program	-.070
Outside Help (Faculty)	-.128
Outside Help (Staff)	-.110
Campus Mentor	.082

Note. **Correlation is significant at the .01 level. *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

Data analysis was conducted to detect if student engagement, self-efficacy, and mentoring impacted retention for AAM attending a PWI. The data showed student engagement, mentoring, and self-efficacy positively impacts student retention. For AAM students in this study, the respondents on average are highly engaged within student involvement through attending events and belonging to student groups. Interestingly, many of the participants indicated that they were highly engaged during class, and their level of confidence was very high as compared to their peers. The support received from professors was reported extremely high by those surveyed. Over 54% of student participants agreed that student engagement affects academic performance. Mentoring results explained the importance of mentoring and demonstrated a need and desire of AAM participants. The impact of student engagement, mentoring, and self- efficacy is very prevalent in college retention literature as well as within this study. The data also showed that GPA and classification are positive indicators of retention. There exists a positive correlation between GPA and student groups, classification and engagement affect academic performance, and classification and interest in faculty mentor. Results of descriptive statistics indicated that student engagement, self-efficacy, and mentoring are significant engagement factors for AAM. Consequently, AAM who are engaged on campus, who have a high degree of self-efficacy and who are mentored on campus are more likely to be retained than those who do not. As retention is one of the most critical aspects of college, a high positive correlation between self-efficacy, student engagement, and mentoring may not be surprising.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities rely on the financial benefit of student enrollment. Equally important is garnering the input of these students as their college experience shapes their narratives. As such, college administrators have to engage with students and understand how their experiences validate the proper strategies needed to assist with retention and academic achievement (Tinto, 2017). African American male students are at risk for attrition; therefore, mentoring opportunities are necessary to increase the retention of AAM. To make this a reality, a systematic approach is warranted to encourage staff and faculty members to make a conscious effort to establish relationships with these young men inside and outside of the classroom. Having a deliberate understanding of the AAM experience, particularly as it relates to self-efficacy, student engagement, and mentoring can assist campus leaders in educating and aiding in the development of success for university students, campus leaders, and career aspiration beyond college.

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