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He Needs to be in a Learning Community – Learning Community, a Place of Respite and Brotherhood while Persisting in College



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ABSTRACT

Black males encounter significant microaggressions and race related challenges as students in Predominantly White Institutions. These encounters negatively impact their college learning and social experiences. In the face of these challenges, college retention rate of Black males falls behind those of other racial and gender groups (Toldson, 2012). Notwithstanding, statistics point to the success and persistence of Black male students in such oppressive environments and the role of learning communities in fostering successful outcomes for students. Using the Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) framework, this qualitative study explores the experiences of eight Black males living in a same race same gender learning community while attending a predominantly white institution. Findings from this study highlight brotherhood and respite as contributing to the success, persistence and retention of Black male college students.

Keywords: Black males, brotherhood, community cultural wealth, living and learning community

Of the nearly 2.3 million students who entered higher education in 2013, approximately one million will leave their first institution within six years, without receiving a college degree (Shapiro et al., 2019). That is, almost 50% of students drop out of college. While the college enrollment of Black men is proportional to their representation in the U.S. population, the college retention rates of Black men fall far behind those of other racial and gender groups (Toldson, 2012).

Additionally, only a third of Black males graduate from college (Cose, 2014; Harper 2012; NCES, 2019).

The low college retention rate of Black males is no accident. Instead, it is an outcome linked to a wide range of factors, from students' pre-college experiences, to their experiences in college – both those that enhance college persistence and those that constrain it. Exploring and illuminating experiences and structures that have led to inequitable levels of college retention of Black males is extremely important (Harper, 2015), as it sheds light on structural, personal, and environmental challenges that influence educational outcomes. In the same regard, identifying practices, academic, and social support structures that contribute to the college retention of the one-third who persist is equally as important, for it can highlight and document practices that higher education might scale up to reach more students at risk. Brooms and Davis (2017) highlight that even when Black males get to college, the challenges continue. Black male students face and endure challenges during their college education in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Some of the challenges include social isolation, and micro-



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aggressions, all of which can negatively affect students' learning, social experiences, and ultimate persistence (Brooms et al., 2017). Microaggressions are defined as intended or unintended slights, snubs, or hostile messages that demean a marginalized group and create physiological stresses (Steele, 2010). For example, thinly veiled slights like, "You are so articulate," imply it is unusual for someone of that race to be intelligent; or "You must be here on affirmative action," imply the student did not earn their admittance to college. According to Kim et al. (2013), students' perceptions of, interpretations of, and reactions to microaggressions contribute to their level of success, thus these microaggressions can hamper students' ability to excel academically and earn degrees. To combat these microaggressions and persist through to graduation, Harper (2013) asserts successful Black male students develop meaningful peer and mentor relationships on campus, engage in leadership opportunities, including culturally relevant experiences, and receive support from family members and others. Clearly, though, this is a systemic problem, and one that needs to be addressed on multiple fronts, through the duration of student learning. There exists no one solution, no panacea to redress the abysmally low college retention rates of Black males. Instead, institutions of higher education employ a range of strategies to address low retention rates in their colleges. Some strategies combat stressors and microaggressions while others aim to attract and retain a diverse group of students. One example of these strategies is "themed" housing or learning

communities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Black males who participated in a living and learning community and how engagement with the learning community contributed to their college persistence.

Literature Review

A growing body of research explores a variety of structures that foster successful college experiences for Black males. This study focuses on such themes that emerge from this scholarship: living and learning communities and their influences on student satisfaction.

Learning Communities

According to Tinto (1993), the current day practice of learning communities has three things in common. The first practice is shared knowledge. Students engaged in learning communities are encouraged to take similar courses, usually around a central theme. In so doing, they foster a higher level of "cognitive complexity" (p. 2) working and learning together. He argues this high level of cognitive complexity would not easily occur if the courses were dissimilar. The second is shared knowing: learning communities enroll students in similar classes and often times the students reside in designated residence halls, so "they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately, in a way that is part of the academic experience" (p. 2). By asking students to live and learn together, students engage socially and intellectually in ways that promote their learning and discovery of self when engaged with other experiences and

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thoughts beyond their personal experience. The third is shared responsibility. Learning communities ask their students to be responsible for each other. Collaborative groups are encouraged, and the emphasis is on the success of the collective group. Students typically participate in learning communities during their freshman and sophomore years in college and the communities are typically set up around a theme, e.g., social justice, ecology, women in STEM, engineering, foreign languages, or culture (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). An innovative interpretation of this learning community movement is “affinity housing,” which has enabled students who share common identities, or cultural identities, to live together. For example, some universities promote living and learning communities for students interested in Latino and Latin American cultures, as well as students who are interested in studies related to Black/African American males’ experiences. These learning communities are designed to build peer networks and act as a conduit for engaging in scholarly discussions relevant to the communities. In some cases, these communities attract and cater to same-race students and provide an avenue for same-race students to find respite from micro-aggressions they face while engaged with the larger campus community (Grier-Reed, 2013). These affinity communities or culturally relevant spaces, combined with mentoring programs and other student engagement groups, create peer support systems for students, thereby offsetting challenging

environments students face and increasing their persistence and retention.

Learning Communities for African American Male Students

One of the strategies colleges and universities use in addressing Black male college retention, is the creation of learning communities dedicated to promoting successful college outcomes for Black males. One such example is the creation of the African American Male Initiative (AAMI) in 2002. This initiative was formed by the University System of Georgia (USG) to address issues of Black male achievement in their university (Thomas Hill & Boes, 2013). According to Thomas Hill and Boes (2013), the purpose of the AAMI learning community is to “increase the likelihood that African American males are retained during their first year of college” (p. 39). USG accomplished this by designing a learning community with formal support structures such as mentoring, educational and social programming, academic advising, tutoring, and networking opportunities with business. Thomas Hill, and Boes (2013) conducted a study on the AAMI learning community to determine to what extent degree earning students participating in the learning community were satisfied with the services provided, the effectiveness of the learning community and to learn of any improvements that needed to be made. Findings of the Thomas Hill and Boes (2013) study indicate students were satisfied with the resources and services provided by the learning community. The students also

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reported positive relationships with other learning community participants, faculty and staff. Finally, the study participants credited the AAMI learning community with “keeping them motivated and focused on their academics” (Thomas Hill & Boes, 2013, p. 54). These findings reported by Thomas Hill and Boes (2013) are consistent with prior research by others including Strayhorn, (2010) and Zhao and Kuh, (2004), which report that supportive campus environments and structures such as learning communities enable successful outcomes for students.

Theoretical Framework

I use Community Cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2005) to inform this study and to highlight various embodied capital or assets Black male students possess that contribute to their persistence and college retention while facing challenging environments.

Community Cultural Wealth Theory

Yosso (2005) asserts community cultural capital encapsulate values, skills, assets and other forms of capital possessed by minority groups or People of Color (POC). Yosso (2005), using a Critical Race Theory (CRT), conceptualizes these various forms of community cultural wealth. These forms of community cultural wealth include: 1) aspirational capital which refers to the ability to allow oneself or children to develop resiliency and maintain hopes or dreams of a better future even in the face of opposition; 2) linguistic capital, the intellectual and social skills attained through the ability or lived

experiences of communicating in more than one language or style; 3) familial capital, a commitment to family – nuclear and extended, to a community that builds on shared history, a shared commitment to the communities’ resources including caring and providing coping mechanisms for members of the community; 4) social capital, including community resources, peer groups, churches, youth groups, mentoring groups that provide emotional support, financial support or academic support as the student pursues higher education; 5) navigational capital, skills of maneuvering through social or academic institutions – in particular, institutional structures that are hostile to People of Color (POC); and 6) resistant capital, the motivation to challenge inequity and fight for social justice. These six forms of community cultural wealth challenge the deficit thinking of cultural capital as it relates to Black men in college and brings to light the various forms of cultural wealth/capital Black male students possess and capitalize on to persist through college.

Methods

In this qualitative study, a phenomenological design is used to inform the experiences of Black male students living in a learning community while attending a PWI. According to Neubauer et al. (2019), phenomenology is “an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (p. 91). Essentially, this method of inquiry focuses on the study of an

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individual or a set of individuals' lived experiences in the world and allows researchers to describe what certain experiences are like for participants (Neubauer, et al., 2019). The goal of this type of inquiry is to describe the meaning of the experience from the perspective of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Question

The objective of this study was to explore the experiences of Black male students living a culturally relevant and gender specific learning community, and to understand how peer, cultural, and gender specific institutional structures can influence the experiences of Black males in PWIs, the research question explores the interconnectedness between retention rates, and the living and learning community. The research question guiding this study was:

What are the learning and social experiences of Black male students living in a Black male learning community while attending a PWI?

Setting

The setting for this study is a Black male learning community - "Webster House," in a large U.S. public research university located in the northeastern part of the United States. For the purpose of this study, I refer to this institution as "Winchester College," which is a predominantly white institution (PWI) enrolling approximately 18,000 undergraduate students. An estimated 15,000

students are enrolled in the main campus and about 3,000 at other locations within the state. The university includes several schools and colleges with various undergraduate degrees and over 100 majors, as well as graduate and professional degree programs.

The Webster House learning community, which was established four years ago, consists of freshmen and sophomores, a cohort of 40 to 50 students split somewhat evenly by graduating class. Members of Webster House reside on a single floor in Bryant Hall, an eight-story building dedicated to housing various learning communities on campus. This approximately 200,000 square foot residence hall provides students many opportunities to engage with each other and pursue interests based on their academic majors, interests, or background. A team made up of a faculty director, graduate assistants, peer mentors, student leaders, and staff from residential life (student affairs) led the learning community.

Students apply to join Webster House once they are admitted to Winchester College or after their freshman year. Once accepted, new students are welcomed during a pinning ceremony. Alumni, upperclassmen, and parents are encouraged to participate in the welcoming ceremony. The faculty director, Dr. Ogem, welcomes incoming students, using the opportunity to set the vision for the new class. The vision is focused on promoting a culture of excellence, accountability, and brotherhood. Upperclassmen pin new students, an experience a participant

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described as “passing of the torch” to the next class, “We are keeping the legacy going.”

Participants

As this study targeted a specific group, I used purposeful sampling to select study participants. Purposeful sampling is used to identify and select individuals or groups who are knowledgeable and have experienced the studied phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The participants were selected from the PWI’s population of males living in a learning community for Black males. During the 2018-19 academic year, Black undergraduate males comprised of about two percent of the total undergraduate enrollment in the main campus of this university. Of this number, 40-50 students lived in Webster House.

Prior to initiating the interviews for this study, I requested and received approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once I received approval from the IRB, first I contacted target recruitment participants who consisted of faculty, staff, and students in the target institution. Some of these individuals I met previously, and I identified others based on my familiarity with the Webster House. I purposefully targeted these individuals, because: 1) they worked directly with potential study participants, 2) knew students who would be interested in conducting the study, and 3) could provide me with information about peer group and mentoring sessions where I would conduct observations. Using information obtained from target recruitment participants, I used

snowball and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2007) to contact potential study participants via email. Pseudonyms are used in referring to the participants.

Eight students participated in the study: one sophomore, two juniors, one senior and four students currently in graduate school. The distribution of the graduating class in this study is significant because it speaks to the length of time the students have been in the PWI and potentially the breadth of their experiences. The inaugural freshman class of Webster House graduated with a four-year degree in May of 2020. Seniors and graduate school study participants who were members of the learning community from the onset of the program spoke of their experiences prior to, during, and after participating in the learning community.

Three of the eight participants self-identified as African American, one as African, one as Caribbean, and one as “other.” I collected ethnicity data with the understanding Black Americans are a polyethnic group. The diversity among Black people and Black males in the study may account for potential differences in experiences. Participants self-reported their GPAs, which ranged from 1.9 to 4.0 with a mean of 3.17. The demographic data are self-reported.

Half of the study participants self-reported engaging in pre-college experience programs. In this study, pre-college experience is defined as academic programs participants engaged in on a college campus

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Table 1.1
Demographics – Household Income Level

Demographics - Household Income Level			
Low Income	Middle Class	Upper Middle	High Income \$150,000 -
\$20,000-\$44,999	\$45,000-139,999	\$140,000-\$149,999	\$199,999 +
3	5	0	0

Total number of Participants = 8

(Table HINC-01, 2018 Household Income Survey, U.S. Census.)

Table 1.2
Demographics – First Generation College Student

Demographics - First Generation College Student	
Yes	No
5	3

Total number of Participants = 8

Table 1.3
Demographics – Mother’s Education Level

Demographics - Mothers Education Level - Highest Completed			
No formal education	High School	Assoc./Undergraduate degree	Graduate degree
1	5	2	0

Table 1.4
Demographics – Father’s Education Level

Demographics - Father's Education Level - Highest Completed			
No formal education	High School	Assoc./Undergraduate degree	Graduate degree
1	3	2	2

Total number of Participants = 8

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as a high school student prior to enrollment at the university. Five of the study participants reported living in a dual parent household, while the remaining three reported belonging to a single parent household. Six grew up in urban settings, two in a suburban setting. All participants reported coming from low or middle income households. Family education level of participants ranged from no formal education to graduate degrees. Participants pointed to mentors, counselors, faculty members, success coaches, and parents as sources for inspiration and but relied on student support services and mentors from the learning community to navigate the nuances of academic structures.

Data Collection and Analysis

This phenomenological method of inquiry involved interviews and observations. Using Seidman's (2006) interview techniques, I conducted separate interviews in private offices or spaces with each participant. In the interviews, I asked open-ended questions, which enabled the participants to engage in the interview process freely, articulating their experiences in voice and on their terms (Creswell, 2009). In the initial interview, I discussed the context of the study with participants. This allowed me to build rapport and allowed the participant to feel at ease prior to delving into the interview questions. Following the first set of interviews, I reviewed collected data and interview protocols, for the benefit of modifying subsequent interview protocols if needed

(Creswell, 2009). After each interview was completed, I transcribed the audio recordings, reviewed the transcription for accuracy, and using file locker, I then made available the transcribed interviews to participants for the purpose of member checking. About half of the participants accepted this offer, while the other half did not.

The second interview allowed participants to follow up on the initial interview and expand on questions I had asked in the initial interview. The third interview was reserved for any follow up questions I had. However, I achieved data saturation after the second set of interviews. Each interview ranged from 45 to 180 minutes.

Using techniques by Miles and Huberman (1994), while reviewing and analyzing the transcribed data, I made notes of repetitive key words, phrases, sentences, highlighting or underlining them in the transcribed documents, and making remarks alongside the margins of the printed documents. I repeated this process for each interview and all transcribed data. Then, I created a table linking key words, phrases or sentences to common themes and then to broader categories. I also looked for possible connections, and linked key words and phrases such as satisfaction, mentoring, perception of self, academic and social experiences to the transcribed data. With this process, I noted the connections and documented common themes and categories. In addition to interviews, I conducted two informal observations. The first observation

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was at a Webster House team meeting. The team meeting was in preparation for an arranged trip to D.C. The meeting, which lasted for a little over an hour, was used to discuss details of the trip including the specific functions the group was to attend, networking opportunities. The meeting included instructions for preparations the students had to make in advance of the trip such as informing their professors of their whereabouts and staying on top of their academic work while traveling. The second observation was a three-hour community building retreat at the start of the academic year. This retreat consisted of a series of activities. Participants congregated in smaller groups and were asked to engage in a series of team building activities. For both observations, using memoing techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994), I drew parallels between themes or salient concepts in the data collected from my field notes, highlighting key takeaways from discussions, and capturing student-to-student interactions and interactions between students and their advisors. Outliers or unusual experiences were noted, documented and highlighted in the findings and I repeated the same process outlined above.

Trustworthiness

Credibility. As in all qualitative and quantitative research, the researcher's personal biases, lens, or perspectives may influence the research methodology, interpretations, results and, therefore, affect the credibility of the results. This takes several

forms in this study. First, the same race positionality of the study participants and researchers as Black persons, presents benefits and challenges. One such benefit is that participants may feel more comfortable to discuss racially sensitive experiences with a same race researcher. That said, sameness in race or ethnicity goes not guarantee similarity in lived experiences. In this study, participants names are withheld, as well as the names of the schools and colleges involved in the study. Steps such as these ensure the confidentiality of the students and institutions. Alternatively, the personal experiences of the researchers as members of this ethnic group may have influenced data interpretation. To address this, I used bracketing technique to limit the assumptions and preconceptions held prior to engaging in the study. Moreover, I performed participant member checks; wrote detailed memos; and kept documentation for an audit trail (Patton, 2002).

Findings

Study participants discussed their experiences in Webster House. They describe a sense of brotherhood felt within the group of students, their ability to make connections within and external to the community, and their use of Webster House as a place of respite – a place where they can re-charge and learn constructive ways of dealing with microaggressions. They credit mentors, advisors and the Webster House faculty director for providing guidance, academic support, and for driving them to seek out and

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stay focused on their academic and professional goals.

Two salient themes emerged across the participants' experiences. The themes are (1) brotherhood and (2) respite.

Brotherhood

A common theme among study participants is the role Webster House played in supporting their holistic development as students, including the support of their academic, intellectual, emotional, and social needs. In particular, by being a space where the students can return to after navigating uncomfortable or unwelcoming spaces on campus, Webster House is a place of refuge, a place where Black male students can meet with and develop friendships with students that are like them, students and advisors who understand the unique challenges they face, and a safe environment where they can recount their experiences, gain affirmation, and receive guidance. For the study participants, Webster House catered to these needs by providing formal and informal support structures, which filled a gap that was largely unmet by the larger campus community. Formal structures includes mentors, advisors and counselors, structured study sessions. While informal structures includes the formal interactions with same race same genders peers who are present and understand challenges you may be going through. By catering to this need, Webster House positively altered students' experiences in the institution.

While academic support was central to the Webster House mission and appreciated by staff and students alike, also important were the different kinds of social support that students received to get through their daily lives. "You are not invisible." "Someone cares." These messages – "we're family," "here's how you do this," "here are the resources you need," address needs of these young Black male students that may be ignored by the larger university. Essentially, Webster House strategically uses several mechanisms to build social cohesiveness.

Consider one meeting I attended, which was held to reconnect with students after the first week of classes and to prepare them for an upcoming networking trip to Washington, DC. Punctuality and personal accountability are highly emphasized. The meeting was mandatory. As students filed into the meeting room, they signed in using an iPad passed around from student to student. The graduate assistant, Stanley, facilitated the meeting. In preparation for the upcoming trip, no detail was spared. Stanley went through a detailed agenda for the entire multi-day trip, including arrival times, departures, and the itinerary of various events students were expected to attend. The students learned what items on the trip agenda were optional, and which were mandatory.

You will need several dress shirts, ties, dress pants, and a suit or dress jacket. Make sure your shirts are ironed well! Do not forget your tie! Who needs a tie? Do you all know how to tie a tie? I need a couple of volunteers to help tie ties.

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One student suggested, “You can look up on tying ties on YouTube! Once you have it tied, when you take it off, loosen it a bit and slip it off your neck, then hang it up so you do not have to tie it again the next time.”

Stanley continued, “You can certainly look up tying your tie on YouTube, but if you need help, I and these other folks (pointing to the volunteers) can help you tie your tie. I will also bring extra ties and shirts in case you guys forget to pack them. If you need any help on the trip, come see me.”

Drawing from Yosso’s Community Cultural wealth theory, students’ navigational capital are built by learning to prepare for and engage in a networking event. Students are expected to engage in discussions and are taught how to approach professionals in a networking event, how to engage in meaningful conversations during the event, how to dress, and what to wear. But there’s a back-up plan, as well. A staff member will be there with extra ties and the knowledge of how to tie them – there is a system of support whenever help is needed. The advisors and Stanley also counseled students on conduct at the networking event.

After the students and their advisors returned from the trip, Stanley sent an email to students, reminding them to follow up with the individuals they met during the series of networking events. In his email, he embedded a written template with prompts on how to initiate conversation with prospective mentors.

The “brotherhood” like social support structure in this community of Black male students includes providing students a safe space with mentors and advisors who share the same or similar experiences as members of the learning community. The sense of brotherhood, all for one and one for all, “I got you,” “I have got your back” was evident. The unspoken creed of Webster House was that of solidarity, trust, and unwavering support – I will provide all the necessary information to you but if you fall short, I am here for you, as evidenced in Stanley’s actions and words. “Do not forget to bring your dress shirts and your ties, but if you forget, I will have extras for you.” Participants saw the level of caring and mentoring provided by their advisors as further evidence of strong investment in the group’s success, helping to make it cohesive. The support structure fostered a feeling of belongingness, an expected standard of excellence, and a space where students can “let their mask down,” open up and share their personal and academic concerns with peers and advisors, knowing that “they will not let them fail.”

Respite

An important factor in shaping students’ educational outcomes is the social support present at the academic institution (Hallinan, 2006). Social support systems include friends, family, peers, and advisors who play an important role in supporting and encouraging students in times of stress, and also celebrating with students in times of triumph. The mere presence of a supportive peer group is a source of comfort to the student –

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knowing that the support structure is there when it is needed.

At the start of the academic year, Webster House organized a retreat, a team-building event aimed at fostering relationships between the incoming freshmen and returning sophomores. All participants highlighted the sense of belongingness and social support in Webster House as one of the factors that has contributed to their positive experiences in college. Randall, a junior, recalled his experiences:

I was so excited to start school here. However, when I went to freshman orientation, everyone in my orientation group was White. There literally was not a single Black person in my group. I felt alone and out of place... like I did not belong because I could not relate to anyone there. But when I finally went to Webster House, it was welcoming. It was filled with people that looked like me, that have the same culture as me, that understand where I come from. It was move in day and the older students helped us move in. It was a very welcoming experience. I got to meet everyone on my floor and learn about their majors. I also had help from the student support center on campus, so it made my transition from high school to college a lot easier. Being able to have a conversation with someone and to have that person relate to you on some level is very important. Being a first-generation college student, I did not have a lot of knowledge as to how things work on campus. The advisors and older students at Webster House would provide guidance on when to add or drop a

course, how to change majors, they would reinforce that I belong on this campus, but they also saw beyond the academics. They would ask how you are. "How is your family? How is this? How is that?" They have worked with students like me and they understand my struggle. If I did not have Webster House, or the support, I definitely would not live on campus.

Randall's engagement with Webster House enhanced his navigational capital. It helped him access student support services, learn from other young Black men about their majors and their experiences on campus, offered him emotional support and access to resources.

Study participants regularly referred to Webster House as a place of respite. Dwayne describes this as the sense of "I see you." I understand you. I am here to listen, I support you, not necessarily that we are going through the same thing, but I acknowledge that you are going through something. You are not invisible. Your pain is visible, it may not be visible to everyone, but I see you, and you know that I see you, you can talk to me. Dwayne describes it as the ability of "letting one's mask down" - the ability to be in a space where one is comfortable enough to share one's voiced accounts and narratives of racist incidents targeting Black males such as incidents dealing with microaggressions, false accusations, or stereotypes. Dwayne describes his experience:

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Sometimes, the day-to-day life on campus can be challenging. Even as a leader in various campus organizations, there have been times when I found myself falsely accused, I am the default suspect when things go awry. Each time I have to make a conscious decision to put these incidents behind me and not let it escalate or physically affect me. In sharing these experiences with my advisors, they suggest ways I can respond to or deal with those situations. I also share my story as a way to de-stress. It provides an avenue for other students like me to learn from my experiences and hopefully develop their own mechanisms of dealing with it. My job is to focus on my school work, and be the best I can be, in spite of what is happening around me. I go by a motto: "If there's no enemy within, the enemy on the outside can do me no harm."

The social support created by this learning community provides a haven for high achieving Black male students, a place where they can gain peer support, commiserate with others and develop mechanisms for responding to racism or racist stereotypes (Harper, 2015).

Discussion

Black male students in Webster House are actively engaged in their learning community. Referencing the research question, the experiences provided by the formal and informal structures such as study halls, formal networking sessions, create a feeling of connectedness among members of this group. In addition, the presence of same race, same

gender mentors who can relate to the students' experiences appeared to help offset and assist students in navigating microaggressions and other unpleasant experiences the students endure while attending the university.

Study findings highlight that students participating in the various programs offered by the learning community are supported academically and socially as they strive for excellence in their academic pursuits. Indeed, while engaging in the various programs offered by Webster House, the young men were building on and leveraging various forms of capital. For example, in learning to strive for excellence, they strengthened their aspirational capital by way of developing or surpassing the academic and professional goals they had prior to engaging in Webster House. The participants aspired to graduate college prior to Webster House, however after being part of Webster House, their aspirations included graduate level work and professional degrees. They compounded their social capital by networking, engaging and leading several organizations, and expanding their peer groups. In learning to effectively network and navigate the structures within their university, they strengthened their navigational capital, by way of developing the necessary skills to maneuver organizational structures that may be unwelcoming to them. For example, navigating through their PWI. Essentially, in being part of Webster House, and engaging in various programs, Black male students leveraged their experiences to strengthen the capital they had and accrued

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new forms of capital.

Yosso (2005) uses Community Cultural Wealth to describe social capital as the ability to leverage community resources such as mentoring groups, peer groups, and other resources within the community to form networks, gain emotional or academic support. The presence of formal and informal support structures offered by Webster House is consistent with this framework. While the participants brought considerable capital with them to Webster House, the formal and informal structures created, the experiences offered, and the norms and expectations established expanded the young men's cultural capital in significant ways. In addition to developing their social capital by reaching out to peers, faculty members and strengthening those relationships, they were able to develop a web of networks within Webster House and spanning outside the university through the various networking engagements they were involved in.

Themes drawn from the study demonstrate participation in Webster House enriched students' social and academic experiences. In creating a home away from home, strengthening their cultural capital and creating a sense of brotherhood among

students, Webster House created a path for Black male students to thrive and persist in their academic pursuits.

Recommendations

In addition to navigating social and environmental obstacles, Black male students strive to perform well academically, develop meaningful relationships with peers and instructors. According to Strayhorn (2016)

the best opportunities for academic development and growth occur when student social and academic experiences are in concert with an atmosphere of nurturing, inclusivity, and support.

Contrary to studies which attribute Black male college achievement to academic under

preparedness, this study highlights social factors, including cultural inclusiveness, belongingness, positive peer advisory relationships as contributing to the success, persistence, and retention of the Black male college students. It also points out that the needs of Black male college students are distinct from other populations, and so, efforts and practices targeted to the masses may not address the specific needs of this population of students. As such, the role of culturally relevant learning communities in fostering a holistic college experience for Black male students is noteworthy.



“While the participants brought considerable capital with them to Webster House, the formal and informal structures created, the experiences offered, and the norms and expectations established expanded the young men’s cultural capital in significant ways.”

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In addition, findings from this study point to the role of institutions in fostering the success of their students. In essence, to combat these unique challenges, it is useful for institutions of higher learning to implement intentional and empirically studied practices aimed at reducing challenges Black male students face in PWIs (Cintron, Hines, Singleton, II, & Golden, 2020). To that end, I offer recommendations for practice below, and call for additional studies that further explore these best practices and their long-term benefits.

Post-Secondary Learning as a Holistic Experience. Colleges should view Black male students' education from a holistic perspective, as a seamless progression from secondary learning to postsecondary schooling. This includes providing an environment, such as a learning community where students are fulfilled academically, socially, emotionally, and culturally. It becomes imperative for high school counselors, college counselors, advisors and mentors to direct students to engage with learning communities – in particular during the first two years of college and as an arsenal to foster their college persistence. Support systems solely targeting the intellectual development of Black male students are insufficient. Rather, support systems should include provisions for inquiring about the physical and emotional health of the student and any stresses students may have, including financial stress and stresses from family back home. One way to do this is by making accessible, relatable

mentors - as described in this study, who inquire about the health and well-being of the student and their family during advisory meetings (Brooms, 2018, Cintron et al., 2020). As Randall, a study participant highlighted in reference to the support he receives from his mentors and advisors, "They inquire how I am doing personally, how are you? How this, how is that? They have worked with students like me and they know my struggle." Some students, particularly low income and first generation students, carry the additional burdens of being caretakers of their family back home, a burden that must not be ignored and one that may compound challenges students face. Understanding the unique circumstances of Black male students may also offer insights on specific areas in which these students may need the most support.

Limitations

Transferability concerns a study's generalizability (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Several limitations may constrain the study's transferability. First, it was conducted using a small sample size involving eight Black male students living in a specific learning community. Additional institutions were not sampled for this study nor were other geographical locations studied. In addition, the study was conducted over a three-month period. In inquiries with small study samples and a condensed timeline, the objective is not to generalize; rather, by providing thick descriptions documented from observations and interviews, a certain degree of transferability can be drawn from the detailed

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account of study participants' experiences and readers can assess transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Future Research


Findings from this study highlight challenges student face as well as current practices that positively influence the experiences of Black males attending PWI's. In addition to highlighting challenges Black males face in PWIs, this study focuses on Webster House as a culturally relevant learning community, the strengths or capital students have embodied, and strategies that have yielded student success and positive outcomes. I recommend future studies continue the exploration of Black male college experience through the lens of Black males while concurrently exploring institutional structures and practices that shape these experiences. This future inquiry through the lens of Black male students has the potential to provide insights on successful practices and systems that aid in students' success. Similarly, such inquiry will also shed light on practices or structural impediments to their learning, social experiences, and sense of belonging.

Finally, I recommend additional studies on similar learning communities dedicated to Black male students and issues concerning Black males. Future study samples size should be increased, and a mixed methods research design used to better understand academic attainment during and after engagement with learning communities. Future studies could also benefit from

increasing the geographical locations of participants to include other regions of the United States. This will allow for a comparative analysis in the experiences of Black males and success of similar programs in varying geographical locations.

Conclusion

Colleges should create and invest in culturally relevant spaces and learning communities that provide opportunities for Black male students to build social networks, engage in culturally relevant experiences and, as students in this study describe, a place where they can lay their mask down - in other words, a home away from home. The benefits of mentors, advisors and counselors students can relate, engage with is equally as important.

Participants in this study describe Webster House as a place where their voices are heard, a place where they can easily seek help and have their academic needs met, and a place that offsets negative stereotypes by offering various images of successful Black males. These culturally relevant spaces also provide a place where they can self-affirm, learn from mentors, advisors and counselors, foster a sense of brotherhood, and develop peer and mentoring relationships lasting past their academic journey (Cintron et al., 2020; Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015). 

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