

# PERSISTENCE FACTORS IN BLACK MALE COLLEGE GRADUATES

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## Research Summary

*“My first year at college was extremely difficult. I perceived racism frequently. I became quite reactionary and sheltered. However, per the advice of my high school precalculus teacher, the following year I occupied my time with activities, which allowed me to meet the amazing people who would eventually become my dear friends.”* (P4, written expression)

*“We had a gathering of Black seniors right before graduation -- being part of that energy was amazing. We had beaten the odds.”* (P1, interview)

### **What factors do Black male college graduates describe as helping them persist at college?**

As a doctoral student in New England College’s Educational Leadership program, I chose to research Black male college persistence because of its relevance to my work as director of Young Man with a Plan, a mentoring program for Black and Latino teen males in Boston. I was also motivated by growing knowledge of disturbing gaps and their grave consequences:

- The college persistence of Black men is lowest of all demographic groups (Young, 2018)
- Higher education levels are tied to higher socioeconomic status, and there is growing income inequality in the U.S. (Muñoz, 2015)
- Value of a College degree: >\$1 million average lifetime earnings college degree versus high school diploma (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020)
- Higher levels of education are also associated with better health, happiness, civic engagement, and healthy relationships (Ma, Pender, & Welch, M. 2016)

### **PURPOSE AND METHOD**

The purpose of my qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Black men who successfully graduated from college within the past 10 years. This was achieved through 90-minute interviews, 75-minute focus groups, background information collection, and a writing assignment, all which asked participants to describe:

- Their experiences with self-efficacy, career goals, mentoring, financial resources and literacy, and a sense of belonging, factors previously correlated with college persistence
- The single most important factor in their persistence to graduation
- Racial experiences on their college campus

### **PARTICIPANTS**

- 13 Black male college graduates who attended college between 2010 and 2020
- 12 of 13 were first-generation college grads
- All attended Predominantly White Institutions (10 different: state schools, Liberal Arts Colleges, private universities, Ivy League schools)
- All received financial aid and 12 took out loans
- 5 varsity athletes; 5 were part of a formal mentoring program called POSSE, though none in the same POSSE group. POSSE sends groups of students from the same urban area to liberal arts colleges, providing them built-in peer support and advising at the college.

## RESULTS

In synthesizing the data, **TWO KEY THEMES** emerged.

### 1. The primacy of relationships in participants' college persistence. They described:

**Highly valued mentoring (12), affinity with Black faculty and students (12), family as the most important factor in their persistence (11), positive faculty experiences (9), and self-efficacy that derived from others' belief in them (7).**

"At one of the darkest periods of my life, I was really struggling, going through it emotionally and mentally. She [his faculty mentor] was THERE." (P4, interview)

"This Caucasian [Business Law professor] was a great great person." (P1, interview)

"When I got insecure and lost confidence, I could hit people up from my past--they would remind you of who you are, what you've done and that you can do it." (P6, interview)

"Black faculty members gave advice--academic, professional, spiritual and familial." (P2, interview)

"My older cousin "Big Bro" was my mentor." (P10, interview)

"An older alumna from my college was absolutely instrumental in my success." (P9, interview)

"My mother believed in me. Her belief in me helped me believe in myself." (P7, interview)

"I had great high school coaches who tried hard to coach the whole person." (P13, interview)

"I told myself college is something I can accomplish, especially with role models, mentors and my support system checking in on me and expecting me to succeed." (P5, interview)

### 2. Difficulty in navigating and being fully authentic in PWI Spaces. They described:

**Microaggressions, being uncomfortable in White spaces, and negative social situations (13), suppression of their Blackness (11), feeling afraid or threatened (9), struggling to belong (9), witnessing BLM protest and backlash (8), negative effects on their mental health (7).**

"In trying to be not too Black, I had an inner voice that dictated how I should interact. I tried to move with confidence. I was very intentional with my vocabulary to prove to them that I belonged here." (P11, Focus Group)

"Not threatened, but definitely a feeling when you encounter White people. They look at you a certain way, don't smile. I really don't know why." (P8, Focus Group)

"There is an anonymous app called Yik Yak where people posted crazy nasty things. Reading what students said anonymously about Blacks made us feel paranoid, like damn, who can I trust here?" (P5, interview)

"I was there 2014-2018 and 2015 was a big protest year after Ferguson and Black Lives Matter. The rural area around our school is a different political culture, and there were threats made on student activists by phone or on social media. I had a sense that my Blackness was more visible on campus. It definitely made me feel at times that my race would make me a target or would lead to difficulty." (P9, interview)

“While I was working in the mailroom dispensing packages, a White female reached across the counter to touch my beard. She said she ‘wanted to know how it felt.’” (P12, interview)

“Like losing your sense of self, because, when I’m when I’m in these spaces, I’m suppressing, like for folks who know me, I’m someone who likes to talk a lot. And literally when I was in college, I just wasn’t speaking. Like, I felt like whenever I was in majority white spaces, I couldn’t be myself. And that got like kind of code switching and it was just exhausting. (P6, Focus Group)

“I always thought of my Blackness through college. It affected my mental health and my academics.” (P3, written expression)

“If there was a party, an issue in my dorm or any wrongdoing on campus, they (campus police) would pull me in and ask questions. I felt like I was the guy used in a lineup.” (P7, Interview)

“I’m going to White dominated spaces or parties where people literally shrink away from you. I’m approachable, but people seem afraid to approach me. I know macro and microaggressions exist, but when they actually happen to you, it’s different.” (P4, focus group)

### **Other Persistence Factors**

Regarding factors previously associated with college persistence, participants described:

**Career Goals:** Only four participants had specific career goals they sustained throughout college. “Graduating college” was the “career goal” most frequently stated. Participants described positive feelings towards the Career Services office, while stating they had little knowledge of career paths. “Career planning caused me angst ‘cause no one had done this thing I was trying to do, trying to get from Point A to B without a blueprint.” (P2, interview)

**Financial literacy and resources:** All participants described themselves as members of low-income families with extremely limited financial resources and little financial literacy. Due to a lack of financial resources, participants worked (up to 40 hours per week) while in college. Study participants described a lot of “hustle.” “I had no financial resources. It was a stressor every semester. I had to figure out how to pay.” (P7, interview). One participant with full ride financial aid took loans to help pay his mother’s living expenses.

**Self-Efficacy:** Those who entered college with a belief in their ability to succeed said it was mainly fueled by others’ belief in their ability or others’ expectations. They also described gaining self-efficacy over time through small successes, observation, and role models. “Having mentors who looked like me and graduated college. It made me believe it’s possible.” (P9, interview)

**Sense of belonging:** Only 5 participants expressed feeling a sense of belonging on campus, and 4 of these 5 were varsity athletes. “I did not feel seen or heard in all these spaces that I’m trying to be a part of. It ate at me.” (P6, interview) Nine study participants described feeling afraid or threatened, at least some of the time. “Afraid of being falsely accused, afraid of failing in class, afraid of others’ fear of me, always on edge because of everything.” (P5, interview)

### **Some thoughts on belonging**

Dr. Terrell Strayhorn’s (Strayhorn, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012) research on belonging suggests that a sense of belonging is a basic human need, as fundamental as air, water, shelter, food. Having experiences of not belonging/alienation can raise doubts about one’s capabilities, hijack one’s

abilities, and erode confidence. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970), achieving a sense of belonging first requires a sense of safety. Only after feeling a sense of safety and belonging can a student achieve esteem and self-actualization. Belonging is especially important for young people in the midst of personal development, which includes forming identity and affiliations. It is also a time when students have heightened vulnerability to peer and adult influence and to messaging about their place and their worth. Not belonging can stunt growth and aspirations.

## **STUDY STRENGTHS & LIMITATIONS**

The study presents authentic views and voices of Black men who persisted against the odds to graduate college. With openness, balance, and vulnerability, they shared rich descriptions of their lived experiences at 10 different predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Participants' descriptions also informed advice to high schools and colleges (pages 7-8).

The study brought into sharp focus the climate of the 2010-20 decade with its heightened/overt political and racial tensions and rise in racial hate speech and crimes. The deep emotion with which participants described experiences in their campus spaces was impactful and moving—even small things like anxiety over not being invited to join study groups or chosen for group projects. This summary captures just a small subset of their powerful experiences and words.

The results produced in this study were based on the experiences of a relatively small group of 13 Black male college graduates who attended PWIs between the years of 2010 and 2020. As is the norm in phenomenological research, the researcher was also a participant. Twelve of the 13 participants were additionally first-generation students, and it is possible some of the experiences they described could be related to their first-generation status in addition to their race. Thirteen interviews, 13 written expressions, and two focus groups produced a large volume of data for analysis and interpretation; however, I feel confident that these findings capture the essence of the study participants' experiences and voices.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

My complete dissertation will be published and available soon. Please reach out if you have any questions about my research or about Young Man with a Plan (YMWAP), the mentoring organization I lead in Boston. YMWAP strives to close opportunity and wealth gaps through coaching young Black and Latino men to make academic and social emotional progress, create and fulfill Success Plans, gain financial literacy, and build tenacity. YMWAP also exposes young men to successful males of color representing a diverse range of career fields.

My comprehensive bio is on page 10.

Respectfully,  
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**If you can mentor someone—please do so—and know that it can change a life outcome.**

*"There were a lot of people rooting for me. I always had people who had my best interests at heart and acted accordingly. Without that, everything's different."* (P2, interview)

## Detail on Study Participants and Experiences Described

### *Study Participants*

Participant	Graduated	College Type and Major	First Gen?
P1	2018	State University, Business	Yes
P2	2018	Mid-sized Private University, Politics	Yes
P3	2014	Small LAC, Political Science	Yes
P4	2019	Small LAC, Creative Writing	Yes
P5	2019	Small LAC, Sociology	Yes
P6	2020	Ivy League (2, transfer), Africana Studies	No
P7	2014	State University, Psychology	Yes
P8	2020	Small LAC, Communications and Psych	Yes
P9	2018	Ivy League, Engineering Sciences	Yes
P10	2017	Small Private College, Business	Yes
P11	2018	Small LAC, Biochemistry and French	Yes
P12	2017	Small LAC, Economics and Philosophy	Yes
P13	2010	Small Private University, Sports Mgt	Yes

### *Experiences Described by Participants Relative to Black Male College Persistence*

Experience Described	# of Participants Stating (N = 13)
Experiencing racial microaggressions on campus	13
Being uncomfortable in White spaces on campus	13
Negative social experiences	13
Positive experience with Career Services on campus	13
Valued relationships with Black faculty & students	12
Having a mentor	12
Suppression of Blackness/code-switching	11
Having little or no financial literacy	11
Struggling financially in college	11

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Family as most important persistence factor	11
Negative experiences with Campus Security	10
Career goal as “graduating college”	10
Positive experiences with faculty	9
Feeling afraid or threatened on campus	9
Struggling to belong	9
Intentionally seeking or creating spaces for belonging	8
Experiencing or witnessing overtly racist acts	8
Heightened racial tension related to Black Lives Matter	8
Having fluid career goals	8
Having mental health issues	7
Feeling watched or surveilled	7
Self-efficacy as coming from others’ belief in them	7
Negative experiences with faculty	7
Feeling a sense of belonging on campus	5
Positive social experiences	5
Having specific career goals retained through college	4

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## Implications for High Schools Preparing Black Males for College Success

*Participants discussed pre-college factors that helped their persistence. Key themes were:*

**Recognize the value of your teachers and other staff who mentor students:** They are highly valued by students who in many cases maintain contact with them after graduation.

**Have guidance counselors who focus on helping students get *through* college:** Make sure guidance counselors are not just measured on getting students into college but on helping with right fit colleges and factors contributing to persistence, such as socially navigating PWIs, connecting with professors, forming study groups, and understanding college finances. Introduce the HBCU option. Consider adding counselor capacity to support your alumni in college.

**Encourage students to seek rather than fear challenge:** Teach students that challenge is a part of life and that getting outside of their comfort zone is the best way to grow. Encourage them to persist in academics, sports, and work, and discourage them from taking short-cuts.

**Teach financial literacy:** It is essential to teach students financial literacy, beginning with the value and return on investment of college and other post-secondary choices, and, critically, aspects related to financing college and the terms and repayment of loans.

**Encourage students to take advantage of academic enrichment and mentoring programs outside of the classroom during high school:** Study participants spoke highly of the impact of external academic programs starting as early as middle school, summer enrichment opportunities, mentoring programs with near-peer mentors, and community service. Such programs expose teens to new experiences that they described as fueling higher goals and teaching accountability.

**Don't just pick top performers for enrichment programs:** Not everyone is an early bloomer. Treat every student as if they can achieve "like the AP kids." Study participants who ended up at top colleges described a lack of academic interest and performance in 9th grade that shifted during high school to new levels of academic enthusiasm and commitment, inspired by new experiences or through teachers, counselors, or peers who encouraged them.

**Encourage eligible students to attend Summer Pre-College Bridge programs:** Participants described bridge programs as providing high value for both social and academic integration.

**Engage family in college planning:** With family named by participants as the most important factor in their college persistence, it makes sense to fully engage parents in college planning and to make accommodations necessary to provide outreach and accessibility to those families with challenges associated with language, transportation, or availability.

**Be honest and complete in telling students about college:** First generation and students of color may not be prepared for the culture shock of being Black at a PWI. Be thorough and holistic about sharing what to expect and how to prepare and navigate, academically, financially, and especially socially and emotionally to develop strategies for finding support and connection.

**Normalize discussion about mental health:** Mental illness is real and prevalent. Experiencing racism negatively impacts mental health. Depression and anxiety can be treated through therapy and medication. "You get depressed and anxious and blame yourself, but it's not your fault."

**Normalize asking for help:** Make sure your graduates heading off to college know that it is not weak or vulnerable to ask for help--be it academic, financial, employment or health related.

## Advice for Colleges

*Study participants were asked what advice they would offer college leadership. These themes were consistently articulated:*

**Diversity is more than a quota:** Once you accept students, genuinely care about them--your admissions, hiring, programming, and financial decisions impact their sense of safety, belonging, and their mental health. "Institutions should not merely focus on filling quotas and pointing to diversity numbers as progress. They really drop the ball in helping students navigate through unknown PWI spaces."

**Understand the needs and backgrounds of your students of color:** Visit their neighborhoods and schools; do not assume all students are equally prepared; and "don't be afraid of us".

**Clear and explicit communication and guidance on academic and career paths, opportunities and resources, respectfully delivered, is appreciated.** "Sometimes we are lost. We just look at other students for clues as to what to do when."

**Recognize the power of your faculty to profoundly impact the college experience and persistence of your most vulnerable students:** Along with scholarship, hire for and reward diversity, emotional intelligence, and mentoring in your faculty and staff.

**Leverage and build on the positive reputation of Career Services:** Career Services was viewed positively by all study participants who described using it for resume development, job search skills, internships, and job interviews. Participants describe knowing little about career fields beyond the most visible. Promote/offer information sessions on career fields and jobs within fields.

**Offer adequate culturally responsive mental health services and outreach:** There is a lot of need.

**Understand the financial difficulties of your students:** Having very few financial resources and no safety net creates great challenge and stress. Make more financial resources available--financial aid and scholarships--along with grants for small expenses or funds so low-income students can fully participate in campus life, study abroad, research, and internships.

**Offer bridging programs:** Participants reported that bridging programs increased their social and academic integration with the campus, and their sense of belonging.

**Invest equitably in extracurricular programs and spaces:** Multicultural events and spaces are highly valued. "Please do not make us beg for money for an affinity space or speaker."

**Evaluate all your systems with a racial equity lens:** Audit your admissions, financial aid, advising, counseling services, campus security, faculty, etc. Are they fair? Who works there? "Don't appoint a committee that will take five years to come up with recommendations."

**Think about who you accept into your student body and their impact on campus climate.**



## RESOURCES

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**Jaykyri Simpson, MBA, Ed.D:** Jaykyri leads Young Man with a Plan (YMWAP), a Boston program serving Black and Latino teens across 8 BPS and charter schools. YMWAP delivers a unique mix of in-school and after-school mentoring with a focus on both academic and social emotional growth through sustained coaching and individualized success planning. Originally from Cleburne, Texas, Jaykyri received his B.A. at the University of New England (UNE) where he captained their division-winning basketball team, and his MBA from St. Joseph's College in Maine. In 2021 Jaykyri received his doctorate in Educational Leadership from New England College. His dissertation research explores college persistence in Black males. Jaykyri incorporates everything learned through his research into Young Man with a Plan's curriculum. After successfully

defending his dissertation, Jaykyri has been engaged by New England College to share his research and to consult with their faculty on effective approaches for improving campus culture and climate for students of color. Jaykyri has also consulted with K-12 leaders and educators on design of boys' groups, effectively engaging males of color in the classroom, and racial equity issues. Prior to becoming YMWAP's director, Jaykyri led Project Ochendo at New Mission High School in Boston, where he taught and mentored students of color, helping them improve their study skills and grades, and to access and persist at college. He also served as basketball coach, admissions counselor, and retention coordinator for three years at Mt. Ida College and as basketball coach for two years at UNE. Jaykyri was in the 2020 cohort of the Lewis Family Foundation's Strong Leader Program and participates in the 2021 Boston Nonprofit Executive Directors of Color Program offered by Third Sector New England. Jaykyri is a founding member of Men on a Mission, a nonprofit in his Texas hometown.