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# HIGH-ACHIEVING *Black* COLLEGIANS

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*We know very little about high-achieving black students, even though these students have an important role to play in both our institutions and society at large. Who are these students? How is college different for them? What are their special struggles and needs?*

BY SHARON FRIES-BRITT

**I**F ASKED WHETHER we think blacks have different experiences than whites do, most of us would likely respond yes. However, just how different these experiences are, how pervasive and profound, would likely be lost on most of us who aren't black. This point was illustrated dramatically in an ABC *Prime-time* experiment. In 1991 *Primetime* aired a compelling story, "True Colors," which revealed the outcomes of an experiment they conducted to see how two men, John (white male) and Glenn (black male), experienced

their day-to-day interactions as they sought to purchase consumer products and applied for housing and jobs. At the outset of the experiment, the two men felt that they were equal in every way: they both worked at the same company, were from the Midwest, attended Big Ten schools, and were from middle-class families. Seemingly, the only difference between them was the one that you could see, their race. The central question posed by Diane Sawyer was, "How much difference does the color of your skin make in everyday life in America?"

In order to answer this question, the two men were asked to spend two and a half weeks going into segregated and mixed communities to see how they each would be treated. They were followed by *Primetime* staff and agreed to wear hidden microphones in order to record their experiences. At the end of two and a half weeks, Diane Sawyer reported that on some occasions Glenn and John were indeed treated the same, and sometimes it wasn't clear if there was a difference in how people treated the two men. Diane Sawyer commented that "what was compelling was how often they were treated very differently. . . . Every day, or night, Glenn experienced being treated as an outsider."

Although *Primetime* didn't reveal the exact number of times the two men were treated differently each day, it did provide vivid examples of how Glenn was treated with suspicion, offered higher prices for services, and given different information than John was about availability of housing and jobs. In one case, Sawyer reported, as both men approached the electronics counter in a department store, John received instant attention, whereas Glenn was ignored. They didn't think much of this incident until the same thing happened again and again. At a shoe store, John got instant attention again and a hearty welcome. Three minutes later Glenn entered the same shoe store, and the same salesman never greeted him—he simply ignored him. *Primetime* began to run a stopwatch to see how long it would take for Glenn to receive help. Nearly five minutes later Glenn was still waiting for service, and the salesman was just watching him. Later both men were sent into a record store at the same time to do some browsing. *Primetime* noticed that the salesman stopped over near Glenn as if he was going to assist him. The cameras revealed that the man was actually trailing Glenn. Every time Glenn moved, the man moved. John was able to witness this behavior and expressed surprise when he saw the salesman trailing Glenn.

There were too many examples in the *Primetime* story to recount for the purposes of this article. However, one final example is telling. One day *Primetime* decided to lock both men out of their cars within forty feet of each other. Glenn struggled with his car all day.

Sawyer reported that "John had a small crowd of passersby offering information and help." Glenn never received any help.

The experiences of Glenn offer insight into some of the encounters that high-achieving black collegians describe as they seek to navigate the academic and social environment at traditionally white institutions. Many high-achieving blacks feel that they are equal to their high-achieving white peers. Increasingly, blacks come to college with academic experiences similar to those of their white counterparts. They enter college with high SAT scores and excellent high school grades. They have taken advanced-placement classes, participated in gifted and talented programs, and attended private high schools or highly ranked public schools. One or both of their parents are college educated. Nonetheless, throughout their academic process, many high-achieving blacks report encounters in and outside the classroom, with white and black peers and faculty, that make them feel like outsiders on campus. Not all black students report these feelings. However, what is compelling is how often they do.

Consequently, black students on college campuses, especially those who attend traditionally white institutions, are likely to encounter, and even believe, many stereotypes about the inferior academic ability of blacks. For high achievers whose sense of identity is partly anchored in academics, this can be disconcerting as they seek to establish their connections academically and socially on campus. In this article, I introduce you to an understudied segment of the black student community, why it is important to study them, and some of the factors that shape their experiences.

High-achieving blacks represent a diverse and complex community of students. They are from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, including families who are at the poverty level and families with annual incomes well above \$200,000. These students are raised in both one- and two-parent families. Their parents' educational background ranges from having no college education to holding professional degrees.

In my own work I have interviewed students who represent the range of characteristics just described, although the majority of the students I have studied are

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middle-class blacks. These students have at least one, if not two, parents who are college educated, including parents with graduate degrees. Mothers tend to have more education than fathers and often serve as the primary source of academic motivation and encouragement. The students are likely to have experiences at both public and private schools. Some describe starting their education at a private school and later transferring to a public school. The majority of the students attended predominantly white public secondary schools, although some attended schools with a majority black population. The students tend to have SAT scores that rank in the top 5 percent nationally, and many are enrolled in honors programs or have maintained a 3.0 or better grade point average.

## WHY STUDY HIGH-ACHIEVING BLACKS?

**W**E KNOW VERY LITTLE about this segment of the black student population. Most of what we know about black students at traditionally white institutions is based on the experiences of underachievers who have pronounced academic needs. Because high achievers tend to do well on standardized tests and may be enrolled in honors programs, we assume that they have fewer problems and needs relative to other, lower-achieving blacks. As they report in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson found that black students who enter college with skills and levels of academic preparation similar to those of their white counterparts earn lower grade point averages, take longer to graduate, and are in greater danger of not graduating.

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Because few studies focus on populations of successful blacks, it is easy to assume that academic excellence in blacks is uncommon, resulting in a distorted image of African American students as academically ill equipped. This, coupled with the fact that in our larger society intelligence is generally associated with the white community, increases the likelihood that black students will encounter negative stereotypes about their academic abilities on campus. Achievement gaps do exist between blacks and other groups. Understanding what causes the differences in educational achievement is critical, and studying the experiences of high achievers adds to our overall understanding of student performance.

Clearly, the levels of educational attainment achieved by blacks will directly affect the quality of life for the black community, the nation, and the nation's ability to compete in world markets. The high attrition rates of black students, combined with lower enrollment of blacks in master's and doctoral programs, jeopardize degree attainment and career advancement rates over time. Understanding the experiences of students who have been successful can have a direct impact on campus policy and programs designed to enhance the retention of black students. Even more compelling, if we lose blacks at the graduate and professional levels, we severely hamper our ability as a nation to prepare highly skilled black professionals to assume high-level leadership positions.

## WHAT DO CAMPUSES NEED TO KNOW?

**R**ESearch POINTS TO several key concepts that institutions of higher education should keep in mind when addressing the needs of black students.

### **High Achievers May Experience Isolation.**

We have long understood that black students attending traditionally white institutions experience alienation and isolation. High-achieving blacks are no different; they report feeling isolated from their white peers. However,

they experience a different dimension of isolation as well. Early in their educational process, they report being isolated from black peers in the classroom, and often this continues well into college. This lack of interaction with other blacks in the academic setting is ever present for these students. One student's comments are representative of what many students express. She observed, "I am usually the only . . . black person in my class or the only minority in my class. And I think that I don't know how I really feel about it, but I always think that they notice too, you know." Not only is she aware that there are no other minorities; she wonders what "they" (whites) in the classroom feel about it. Similarly, another student reflecting on his experiences prior to college commented, "In high school I did not really associate with African Americans because I was always in the higher classes and they were always white. So, basically, when I came [to college] I was shocked that whites were kind of segregated from the African American students. But because of the program, I learned how to study with and get along with other African American students."

As a result of being in a scholarship program for high-achieving blacks at a traditionally white institution, this young man found himself, for the first time, interacting and socializing with blacks who were equally interested in academics. Prior to the program he interacted primarily with whites who were identified as academically talented, and this kept him segregated from other blacks. The shock was due to the fact that he had never experienced "intellectual segregation" in reverse, where blacks were the identified high achievers. As a result of his involvement in the program, he was learning how to get along with other African American students who were also high achievers.

When high-achieving blacks have limited contact with each other, they form an image that they belong to a small minority of black students who are academically talented. They see the universe of black talent as limited, and they become accustomed to not expecting other blacks to do well. High-achieving blacks need to

connect early to other blacks who are doing well academically. In these interactions they increase their self-esteem and gain a greater appreciation of the wealth of talent in their own and others' communities.

**High-Achieving Blacks May Camouflage Their Ability.** Talented black students are likely to encounter pressure from black peers when they demonstrate interest in academics. Most of the pressure occurs prior to college, although many college students continue to report that they are accused of "acting white" by their black peers. These students are faced with the challenge of balancing their racial and intellectual identities in ways that allow them to be successful in both environments. Because they seek to be included in the community of their black peers, they may decide to downplay or camouflage their abilities in order to gain acceptance.

Depending on their sense of self and self-esteem, they may be more or less likely to be involved in programs such as honors or similar programs. In fact, in some cases, high-achieving blacks have reported that formal programs such as honors programs are less attractive because of the emphasis and attention they bring to the students' ability. Some of the students I interviewed who were in honors programs revealed that they never really tell peers they are in those programs unless they are asked. They tend to be involved in other activities on campus that put them in contact with the black community, such as a black student union, a society of black engineers, or a black journalists' group. They express the importance of having a support group within honors programs, such as the Black Honors Caucus, where they can connect with other blacks who share their experiences.

In the *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, anthropologist John Ogbu relates his work on minority achievement, in which he found that some minorities develop a strategy of oppositional identity to the majority culture as a way of maintaining their own identity. Put differently, whatever behaviors the majority culture

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exhibits are behaviors that some minorities oppose. Demonstrating an interest in academics and participating in honors programs are things that are identified primarily with whites. Therefore if black students demonstrate these behaviors, they are more likely to encounter peer rejection. Hence a pattern of camouflaging or disassociating with academics serves as a coping mechanism for some high-achieving blacks.

Because of the distinct challenges they face, high-ability blacks need to find a “like-type” community of peers. It is important for these students to connect with a diverse circle of peers, including black peers, who have a range of academic ability. It is even more important that they connect with other black students who are equally interested in academics; these peers tend to provide the greatest level of support because they too are seeking ways to affirm both their racial and their intellectual identity.

**High-Achieving Blacks Feel They Have to Prove Themselves.** By far one of the most compelling themes for this population is that they feel they have to constantly prove their intellectual ability. Many students report that they are often told, “Oh, you are going to get in because you are black.” As one student shared, there seems to be an assumption that black students are admitted into college because of race and not ability. Many talented African Americans perceive that their white peers and faculty are constantly evaluating their ability in the classroom. Some students have described that white peers will confront them directly about their test scores and grades, especially if the white students find out that their black peers were accepted into the honors program and they, the white students, were denied admission. As reported in the *Journal of Higher Education*, Brian Smedley, Hector Myers, and Shelly Harrell also found that minority students con-

## *What Actions Can Campuses Take?*

I believe that it is important for the campus community to be mindful of the wide range of academic ability and needs that exists in the black student community. Future research on black students must continue to consider intragroup differences. We need to understand more about high-achieving students, their encounters with faculty and peers, and what they find encouraging and supportive in and outside the classroom. The following are a few suggestions on how campuses can begin to enhance the environment for high-achieving blacks.

***Offer a wide range of formats and opportunities for students to demonstrate their ability in the classroom.*** If all of the options for demonstrating ability are public and take place in front of peers in the classroom, some high achievers, especially males, may decide to behave in a disengaged way so that they can maintain status in their extended social community.

***Increase opportunities for black students to work together on the campus.*** Because few black students are enrolled at traditionally white institutions, they are often spread out across groups in order to provide a diverse perspective on leadership teams or in classroom discus-

sions. This practice is common and has some merit. However, over time it may benefit the learning and development of white students more than that of black students. Black students also need to benefit from working with each other. They don't all have the same opinion, and they need the support and comfort of more blacks in the discussion. It creates a better balance and challenge for white students, who need to learn from multiple experiences of black students, too.

***Review honors and similar programs on campus to see if the structure and activities of the programs support the needs of high-achieving blacks.*** Because fewer black students tend to be involved in these programs, it may be important to offer additional support services for black students, such as a black honors caucus, or to connect some of the activities of honors programs to cultural events that are diverse and that encourage the participation of a broader range of students on campus.

***Provide counseling support.*** High-achieving black students may experience a number of adjustments in college as they move through stages of identity development. Some may feel confused and frustrated by their attempts to connect on campus with black and white

stantly feel their academic ability is questioned and that over time this creates enormous stress and low satisfaction with their college experience.

During a set of interviews I recently completed with Kimberly Griffin, one student offered a vivid example of how the proving process plays out for her in the classroom:

Well, when I find that I'm the only black person in a class, I feel that I have to prove myself just as intelligent, just as smart, just as worthy, you know, of the same grade as somebody else who's not my race. I am not extremely competitive, but I feel competitive in that instance where I have to prove myself to be a strong student, you know, to compete with those in my classroom. It's been that way since high school because I am going up against mostly Asians and whites . . . so I've

always felt I had to prove myself when I've always been the one black person in the class.

In a recent article in the *Journal of College Student Development*, Bridget Turner and I write in detail about the impact of having to prove one's ability as one of several kinds of obstacles that black students encounter. We observe that "colleges and universities must develop strategies that acknowledge and respond to the general, intellectual and personal stereotypes that Black students encounter. Even though the stereotypes manifest in different ways they all send the same signal to the Black student: you are not welcome. Instead of forging ahead academically, Black students are spending energy trying to justify their existence on the campus" (p. 428).

Not all experiences in the classroom are negative. In fact, many students report that they have been able to develop strong connections and relationships with white and black faculty. Faculty who are successful in

peers. Students who seem withdrawn or isolated should be encouraged to seek help.

**Encourage black students to use their social support groups as academic support groups.** Black students should be encouraged to use their social peer connections as opportunities to support each other academically. It is important for black students to find social networks on campuses of traditionally white institutions, but they should maximize these opportunities to also support each other academically. Peers can help each other stay focused on academics and establish habits to support their academics. Encourage them to set expectations such as meeting to study first and then taking in a movie or engaging in other social activities.

**Make studying a "black thing" and not a sign of "acting white."** All students should be encouraged to study. However, because blacks who demonstrate an interest in studying are often accused of "acting white," real efforts should be made to change this stigma. Campus leaders and organizations, particularly those that work with black students, should work to dismantle this stereotype. Efforts should be made to have roundtable discussions on campus and to find opportunities for all students to discuss their myths and stereotypes about who is intelligent.

**Support and encourage contact with faculty.** High-achieving black students should be encouraged to interact and work with faculty. Faculty can serve as role models for these students and provide them with opportunities to develop their intellectual abilities.

**Encourage the participation of family members in the activities on campus.** The more that family members understand a student's environment, the better a position they are in to be supportive. Finding ways to encourage the participation of black parents on traditionally white campuses can offer reciprocal benefits: as the campus has more opportunities to interact with a diverse community of parents, it is able to learn more about the values and attitudes of all parents.

**Support and encourage student contact with family.** Much of what we understand about student experiences on campus suggests that we should encourage students to break ties with home soon after arriving on campus so that they can begin to make the transition to college. In some cases, this may be very appropriate; however, it is important to recognize that in many cultures significant and regular contact with family members is important, and critical to students' well-being.

fortifying relationships with high-achieving blacks tend to genuinely engage them in their studies and expect them to do well. They interact with the students in and outside the classroom and demonstrate an interest in them personally.

**Family and Community Play an Important Role in Black Students' Achievement.** Although many high achievers express a high degree of self-motivation, the influence of parents, siblings, and extended family is critical in helping these students remain motivated. Even at the collegiate level, many students identify family members as sources of motivation and support. Students have explained that their parents create a "mentality of positive achievement" and encourage them to do well. One student, commenting on the critical role of her older sibling, stated "Seeing my sister achieve things makes things easier. . . . I just see her accomplish so much and I know that if I just follow those footsteps, I could do well." This same student went on to explain that her sister was able to help her understand important paperwork for the admissions process and informed her about scholarships and grant opportunities.

Freeman Hrabowski, Kenneth Maton, and Geoffrey Greif, in their book *Beating the Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Males*, reveal compelling stories from parents about their strategies, values, and techniques for keeping black male students engaged and committed to academic excellence. The fathers in the study reported that they found it necessary to make sure their sons had positive racial identification and positive male identification. The study notes, "Although fathers spend considerable time preparing their sons for life as black males who must be on guard, they also emphasize both the need for taking pride in the history of African Americans and the son's abilities to compete in a variety of arenas. It is a significant challenge for some fathers to prepare their sons for negative treatment while teaching them simultaneously that their skills are equal to or better than the people who may treat them negatively" (p. 60).

The role of the family and the extended black community is important as a source of motivation and achievement because many high-achieving blacks recognize that their achievements reflect the extended black community. For example, one student commented, "I think the fact that I am not only black but a

black female going into the field of medicine, where we're definitely an underrepresented minority, it makes me actually want to do better. It . . . gives me that edge of determination to do well in my classes so that I can go to med school and become a doctor. And so it actually pushes me along, so it's a good thing."

Family and community involvement are critical for all students. High-achieving blacks are likely to demonstrate patterns of family connection very similar to those of other groups of students. To the extent that parents become familiar with, and engaged in the activities of, the campus, they are able to be more effective in their support at the collegiate level.

**SOME MIGHT ARGUE** that in comparison to those of other students on campus, such as students who have been disadvantaged by poor academic preparation, the needs and concerns of high-achieving blacks are less urgent. In a time of competing resources and demands on faculty and staff time, it would be easy to overlook this population in favor of addressing the needs of underachievers, whose needs, if unmet, impede their ability to be successful. I am certainly not arguing a case for ignoring the needs of underachievers; we must be vigilant in our efforts to increase resources and services for this population. Rather, I am suggesting that we understand the range of needs in the black student community and add to our understanding of the intragroup differences to enhance the development of campus policies and programs designed to meet the needs of this and other student populations.

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#### NOTES

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