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Rethinking Excellence: Black Male Success and Academic Values in Higher Education

Bryan K. Hotchkins and T. Elon Dancy, II

ABSTRACT: This research uses a qualitative case study approach to explore how African American male collegians embody and perform various forms of excellence within a predominantly White institution (PWI). Analyzing data on high-achieving Black males with excellence theory (Prakash & Waks, 1985), the study is anchored in three themes implicating current notions of excellence in higher education: 1) major focus as the “major focus,” 2) Black + male + nerd = academic anomaly, and 3) intergenerational fulfillment. The authors argue that participants’ experiences with anti-Black racism, which required resilience, fostered higher ordered critical thinking, advanced the path to self-actualization, and reinforced a commitment to social justice, comprise collegiate excellence outcomes. Hence, the authors’ focus additionally allows for an exposure of the biases revealed amid institutional disregard of these developments. The authors conclude with a critical discussion of higher education purpose and, subsequently, myopic institutional perspectives on college student excellence.

Several events over the past few decades have influenced the way excellence is conceived in American education. For instance, in April 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its seminal report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The report warned that education systems were required to raise standards of academic performance or risk losing global standing. In addition, the impact of academic rankings on collegiate

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notions of academic excellence is apparent. Postsecondary institutions change admissions policies and manipulate reporting of standardized test scores and other data in order to improve rankings in widely read publications like *U.S. News & World Report* (Hunter, 1995; McDonough, Lising, Walpole, & Perez, 1998). While federal education initiatives often refer to the notion of excellence (either directly or indirectly) (Smith & Tolbert, 2004), there remains little critical public discourse about the meaning of excellence as an educational goal. How do colleges and universities conceive excellence in relation to critical thinking, social responsibility, and self-actualization? How do the experiences of marginalized college student groups, particularly Black men, challenge and inform institutional definitions of excellence? What is the relationship between the institutional conception of excellence and supports for underrepresented students, particularly Black men?

The development of positive institutional supports toward the conferral of postsecondary degrees to African American males is one of the most pressing issues facing academic and student affairs personnel in American higher education (Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy, 2012; Harper, 2014). Quantitative data sources broadly frame the “problem” as one of gross academic underachievement when comparing Black males to females who are awarded undergraduate degrees at nearly twice the rate of their gendered counterparts (U. S. Department of Education, 2012). However, upon closer examination of contributing structural, cultural, and hostile campus racial climate factors (Carter, 2008; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012), the lack of postsecondary enrollment and degree attainment by Black males is found to be coupled with racial and gendered phenomena primarily found in predominantly White institution (PWI) environments where racism is overwhelmingly present (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Flowers, 2005). The adverse impact of racism on Black males is documented across varying disciplines (e.g., sociology, psychology, and education) in some of the following ways: marginalized presence in White institutions (Gusa, 2010), cumulative affects of racial battle fatigue (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015), enduring racial microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007), and confronting race-related color-blind racism (Coleman, Chapman, & Wang, 2013). These studies define racism as endemic phenomena that harm people in ways that adversely affect college outcomes (among many other impacts). While this may be the case for some Black males, others have found ways of avoiding succumbing to the numerous challenges presented by PWIs.

In particular, literature discussing the success of Black males in academe has nearly reached repletion while highlighting a variety of contributing factors

ranging from purposeful engagement and involvement to positive influential cultural supports. For instance, when Black male collegians locate mentors, access institutional resources, and take roles as leaders in co-curricular organizations (Hotchkins, 2014; Warde, 2008); internalize positive parental racial socialization, remain connected to nuclear families, and identify fictive kinships (Brown, 2008; Sledge, 2012); and employ protective factors linked to emotional intelligence (EQ) as facilitating techniques, the outcomes of their academic resilience are positive (Ford, Kokjie, & Lewis, 1996; Morales, 2010). These types of encouraging outcomes, which are directly connected to rewarding Black male achievements, are representative of overcoming academic, social, and systemic impediments at PWIs. Furthermore, scholars have found faculty interactions and building peer relationships with Black students act as relevant sources of agency for achieving success (Bonner, 2001; Fries-Britt, 1997; Noldon & Sedlacek, 1998). However, although the literature discusses the role of supportive factors that aid in the achievements of Black male collegians, there is less understanding of how these students' navigation of (and achievement within) these settings represent various kinds of excellence that their institution may disregard at best and disavow at worst.

This research uses a qualitative sociological case study to respond to the following overarching research question: how do high-achieving African American male collegians embody and perform excellence while attending a predominantly White Institution (PWI)? Sub-questions include: 1) what do high-achieving African American male student leaders perceive as crucial to college success? and 2) how do African American male student leaders perceive and respond to their predominantly White institutional environment? The theoretical framework for excellence draws from Prakash and Waks's (1985) four conceptions, or schools, of excellence: technical, rational, personal, and social. Respectively, each conception also holds its own standard of what constitutes excellence: mental proficiency, disciplinary initiation, self-actualization, and social responsibility. Drawing on data from seven participants' experiences, this study contributes to previous research about high-achieving Black male collegians by presenting their learned ability to embody excellence not only as an achievement of technical standards (e.g., grade point average, standardized test scores), but in three other conceptions, as evidenced by achievement in racial identity development, leadership development, and campus resistance efforts. The strategies participants employ in PWI environments respond to standards of excellence largely diminished in PWIs. Based on the findings presented in this study, participants employ various forms of educational excellence (albeit unrecognized in various contexts): capacity to use cognitive competencies and disciplined thinking as applied problem solving toward

securing personal autonomy in an effort to advocate for and achieve equity for Black people.¹ The researchers asked participants questions about involvement in organization study groups, expected gains from doing so, and how they perceived their institution as (dis)engaging them as Black intellectuals.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This particular study examined the intersection of the Black male identity as self-labeled “student,” “leader,” and “high-achieving” to determine how participants constructed and enacted excellence. The theoretical framework, four conceptions of excellence (Prakash & Waks, 1985), was used to identify a) institutional and systemic supports and impediments impacting how Black males navigated their college environment and b) strategies African American males enacted to utilize supports and overcome impediments. The four conceptions of excellence (Prakash & Waks, 1985) were applied to challenge deficit-informed notions of African American male academic underachievement that frame this demographic as likely to fail, deprived, inadequate, and even unintelligent (Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2009; Jenkins, 2006). Prakash and Waks (1985) framed the four conceptions of excellence to address public and institutional considerations of the kinds of excellence to seek and value both as student and organizational imperatives.

Standards of educational excellence are operationalized as 1) mental proficiency, 2) disciplinary initiation, 3) self-actualization, and 4) social responsibility, with the assumption that mental proficiency is the lowest level standard with each subsequent standard building on the one that precedes it. Mental proficiency is representative of an individual’s ability to problem solve where “knowledge is viewed as the possession in memory of information; understanding is viewed as the ability to subsume problems under standard problem types and to apply problem-solving routines” (Prakash & Waks, 1985, p. 81). Mental proficiency is measured by standardized achievement tests, college admission requirements, and seen as a direct result of a student’s cognitive competency. Disciplinary initiation occurs as a result of problem solving, but also requires creative, high-order imaginative abilities where “learners must invent the rules for the interesting and important problems” that enable them to easily move through increasingly intricate conceptual schema (Prakash & Waks, 1985, p. 83). Excellence as self-actualization requires an individual to “shape the development of his or her unique mind, and integrate mental and other powers in the pursuit of cognitive and other personal ends to actualize himself of herself” for the purpose of securing authenticity and freedom from the constrictive binds of social conditioning (Prakash & Waks, 1985, p. 85). Self-actualization is learner-centered, inasmuch as what is

relevant to the education process is determined by an individual who achieves autonomy by owning their personal development. Finally, social responsibility couples individual satisfaction with communal uplift as a function of achieving a just society where the common good is reached due to individuals actively working to solve significant problems.

For decades now universities have prioritized excellence in the technical conception that measures excellence quantitatively (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Financial profit is an intrinsic value of universities and hence requires university presidents to behave as corporation chief executive officers (CEOs), deans as managers, faculty as economic developers across teaching, research, and service, and students as consumers who use quantifiable metrics like rankings to determine confidence level in a college or university (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Without a serious critical discourse about what constitutes higher education excellence, institutions largely understand student excellence in terms of student success measures. Student success measures include rates of student admissions with high grade point averages and scores (and excluding those without these measures), retention rates, graduation rates, and earnings outcomes, among other quantifiable measures of academic proficiency (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). However, student excellence also takes place in the three additional domains with three additional standards. In this vein, high-achieving Black male student leader narratives are utilized to inform the current dominant institutional assumptions about educational excellence. As a result, this study advances previous literature by offering empirical evidence about the ways Black males are excellence personified, albeit the White, capitalist structures of higher education institutions fail to acknowledge and account for the whole of Black male student excellence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Leadership Outcomes

The literature review includes a discussion of leadership as a form of excellence in which Black males meet multiple aims with multiple standards, not just technical, or economic producer ones. The concept of leader, leadership development, and the practice of leading has been broadly discussed in the literature for nearly three decades. Although the contexts vary, leadership processes are primarily divided between intrapersonal and interpersonal definitions that allow for determining not only the factors influencing being a leader, but also the effectiveness of leading. When examining a leader's intrapersonal traits, considerable experience in previous positions is an outcome of learning capacity (Bettin &

Kennedy, 1990; Hirst, Mann, Bain, Pirola-Merlo, & Richter, 2004); and the value of skill sets as coupled with creative problem-solving are relevant along with being able to integrate wisdom, intelligence, and creativity (Marshall-Miles et al., 2000; Stenberg, 2008). Interpersonal areas of leadership focus on social mechanisms, which are influenced by the creation of positive learning environments, and the cultural communicational competence of leaders in an effort to create high-quality leader-member relationships (Scandura & Lankau, 1996) and the development of social capital (Galli & Müller-Stewens, 2012). Frequently cited leadership theories consider both intra- and interpersonal development transformations (Burns, 1978), as well as examining the role of servant-leaders (Greenleaf, 1977) and practicing leadership authentically (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Although the above-mentioned leadership examples were derived from organizational corporate environments, and originally unintended to be applied in the collegiate context, these theories serve as adequate departure points from working adults to student leaders. The typology of student leadership is coupled with Astin's (1993) early work that identifies students as "leaders" in college settings based on higher degrees of involvement, peer interactions, election to positional roles, self-confidence, and popularity.

Additional research examines the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and leadership (Dugan, 2006; Haber, 2011; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Strayhorn, 2010); the influence of race on leadership development of Black, Latino, Asian Pacific, and mixed-race students (Arminio et al., 2000; Balón, 2005; Hotchkins, 2014; Museus, 2008; Renn, 2003); and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) student perceptions of leadership development, as connected to the lack of supports offered by higher education for this demographic (Renn, 2007, 2010; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). Although the abovementioned research primarily examined student-centered leadership experiences, the quantitative socially responsible leadership model (Dugan, 2006; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Dugan, Komives, & Segar, 2008) is framed as "a purposeful, collaborative, values-based process that results in positive social change" (Campbell, Smith, Dugan, & Komives, 2012, p. 601).

Furthermore, those who practice socially responsible leadership are believed to be inherently committed to creating change for the common good (Barnes, 2014). A key outcome of Dugan, Komives, and Segar (2008) was that African American students held significantly higher mean scores concerning consciousness of self and controversy with civility, citizenship, and change. Dugan, Komives, and Segar speculated that each of these categories, pertaining to Black student leaders, was consistent with cultural collectivism and a motivation to participate in social change (Arminio et al., 2000; Harper & Quaye, 2007). However, this conclusion fails to confirm the exact rationale for Black students' involvement in organizations.

In reviewing the socially responsible leadership model (Dugan, Komives, & Segar, 2008), we understand that self-identifying African American student leaders, whether attending PWIs or historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), have historically shared the goal of achieving a greater good for Black people, one that is contingent upon eliminating racism, while achieving racial equality (Fleming, 1984; hooks, 1994). Additionally, we recognize that cultural charge to remove oppression has served as an impetus for Black student leaders to become involved in Black activist organizations, including Black student unions and Black Greek letter organizations (Flowers, 2004; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Patton, Flowers, & Bridges, 2011), and resonates across intergenerational family relationships, which includes first-generation Black collegians (Robinson, 2014).

College Success Outcomes

Discussion about Black male excellence in higher education is predicated on Allen's (1992) quantitative research about Black student outcomes while attending PWIs and HBCUs and the relationship between individual and institutional characteristics as coupled to social involvement, academic achievement, and the occupational aspirations of the participants. Findings indicated that participants' exposure to institutional stressors (e.g., racial microaggressions) determined their levels of success and confirmed campus racial compositions of HBCUs provided environments that were more conducive to achievement. Nearly 25 years later, Harper (2014), offering a 15-year examination of systemic adjustments made to foster Black male student success, extended Allen's (1992) premise that being successful in college is not only about navigating the racial composition of the campus, but also requires an institutional reframing of anti-deficit perspectives to inform future initiatives about Black men. Across the literature, being successful for Black males means ultimately having an ability to employ self-imposed protective practices that provide psychological distance from what is perceived to be discriminatory sources, whether individual or institutional (Bridges, 2010; Williamson, 2010). However, distancing oneself can be counterproductive because it further exposes Black males to experiencing "onlyness," and "niggering," especially in the absence of same-race faculty role models (Harper, 2013). We do know that high-achieving Black males exhibited self-efficacy and engagement (Flowers, 2012; Hébert, 2002; Museus, 2012), overcame academic challenges, relied on family encouragement (Griffin, 2006), utilized organization mentors and peers for leadership advice (Hotchkins, 2014; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007), possessed spiritual anchors and used prayer as a barrier to racism (Dancy, 2010b; Herndon, 2003), established meaningful relationships with faculty, administrators, and peers

(Fries-Britt, Burt, & Franklin, 2012), advanced self-actualized identities (Dancy, 2012), and viewed themselves as members of Black culture (Bridges, 2010; Davis, 1994; Williamson, 2010).

The majority of research associated with being successful labels Black males as “high-achieving” students who are typically situated in STEM majors. Specifically, Moore, Madison-Colomore, and Smith (2003) found participants coped with racially hostile environments at PWIs by employing a “prove-them-wrong” strategy, exhibiting hyper-assertive academic postures to refute false, White perceptions of Black intellectual inferiority. Harper (2009) found high-achieving Black male collegians, unlike those in the Williamson’s (2010) and Bridges’s (2010) studies, choose to purposefully invest in developing relationships with White peers instead of distancing themselves, which increased persistence. Flowers (2012) interviewed gifted, high-achieving Black male engineering students at HBCUs who exhibited strong self-efficacy, attributing family, God, and supportive institutional environments as central to their academic excellence. Finally, Griffin (2006) used qualitative methods to explain the comprehensive motivations of nine, Black, high-achieving students, three of whom were male. Findings indicated participants were self-motivated, career-oriented learners who were heavily influenced by parental encouragement, a desire to disprove stereotypes of intellectual inadequacy held by peers and professors, and viewed academic challenges as surmountable, all of which contributed to being successful academically.

Findings from these studies elucidate the importance of understanding persistence strategies employed by academically successful Black male collegians in PWI and HBCU learning environments, but fail to associate the process of high-achievement with excellence, academically or otherwise. We operationalize excellence as a holistic process that not only includes cognitive ability, and racial self-acknowledgment, but also considers how Black males choose to use institutional resources toward bettering the lives of African Americans, locally and globally.

METHODOLOGY

To be knowledgeably aware of how African American male collegians construct and enact excellence while attending a PWI, a qualitative sociological case study was used to amplify individual participant voices toward gaining a deeper perspective about their lived experiences. Conducting a multi-case study through a sociological lens allowed for acknowledging that, “as a sociological approach, the case study strives to highlight the features or attributes of social life” (Hamel, 1993, p. 2); in this case, the enacting of Black male excellence within a PWI collegiate context, which has historically served to exclude African Americans (Gusa,

2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). In pursuit of recognizing participants' meaning-making as valid, each participant served as an individual case (Creswell, 2007), which rendered vigorous findings through using multiple cases as opposed to single ones (Yin, 2009). Multiple participant vantage points not only allowed for "closing in" on real life experiential situations (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Merriam, 1998), but also granted the opportunity to compare Black male collegians to each other and overarching literature about African American college students. Rather than being descriptive or analytical, this study was interpretive to better understand what constituted participants' constructions of excellence and how excellence looks to those who embody it in relation to theories about student success that are achievement-centered (Evans-Winters, 2005; Wiggan, 2014). In this study, seven participants were used as individual units of analysis. Data was collected using three semi-structured interviews, a brief in-person follow-up interview, which helped clarify emergent themes, and three observations of participants contextualized the resulting interview data. During data gathering, analytic memos were noted to enhance and broaden the data corpus and for cross-referencing emerging categories, participants' narratives, and researcher perspectives.

Procedures and Participants

Southern Christian University (SCU) is situated within a southern state. SCU is the oldest private university in the state and is designated a high research activity institution. According to the Office of Institutional Data Analysis at SCU, in 2014, of the 11,650 undergraduates enrolled, 987 are African American (621 female, 357 male). Study participants consisted of seven African American male collegians who held leadership positions in both historically Black (e.g., Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.) and predominantly White (e.g., Fellowship of Christian Athletes) organizations. After securing research approval from the SCU IRB, informational flyers were strategically posted on campus informing possible participants about the study opportunity. An electronic version of the flyer was forwarded to nearly 232 Black male undergraduates by the Center for Ethnic Student Success (CESS). Additionally, eight of nine historically Black student organizations were included in the email. The ninth organization, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, was suspended when the study was conducted. Of the approximately 232 students, 47 responded with an interest in participating, but only 15 agreed to participate. Only seven students were interviewed and observed. The remaining eight declined for personal reasons. Of those who participated, five held peer-elected organizational positions, while the other two held appointments. Participants' demographic data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

<i>Name</i>	<i>Organization(*)</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>GPA</i>
Charles	Black Student Union	Vice President	20	3.45
Robert	LGBT Queer Students of Color	Social Media Lead	19	3.67
Eugene	Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.	Vice President	22	3.83
Vertner	Nat'l Assoc. of Black Journalists	Historian	20	3.50
Nathaniel	Nat'l Assoc. of Black Engineers	Chaplin	17	3.33
Henry	Black Males United	President	21	3.67
George	Nat'l Assoc. of Black Engineers	President	25	3.83

*Organization identification by participants reflects the level of greatest involvement

Purposeful criterion sampling (Patton, 1990) allowed for securing participants who met the study's predetermined criteria: 1) self-identified African American, 2) currently a leader in a student organization, and 3) enrolled in the university. I spoke with the students, prior to the interviews, about offering in-depth information about their experiences. The participants' confidentiality and identities were protected by providing self-selected pseudonyms. Each participant selected the interview locations and dates.

Data Collection

Three face-to-face, in-depth, 60–90 minute interviews were conducted with each participant and a 30–60 minute in-person, follow-up interview during a six-week timeframe. Three 75 minute organization, study group, and in-class observations of each participant contextualized the interview data. Participants were asked about leadership styles, organizational climates, and interactions with White peers, faculty, and administrators to investigate key moments that shaped their perspectives. Questions were semi-structured allowing for participants to discuss experiences in a transparent manner (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Yin, 2009). Interviews were transcribed within one week of being audiotaped. Memos and observation notes were included in the data corpus.

Data Analysis and Reporting

To develop this sociological case study, qualitative interview transcripts, observation notes, and demographic data were collected and analyzed. Each interview began with questions pertaining to family background and expectations of participants concerning degree attainment. Interview protocols were influenced

by literature review discussions about relevant issues impacting Black students like social supportive structures (Bonner, 2001; Hotchkins, 2014), motivations to be high-achieving and academically successful (Cokley, 2003; Griffin, 2006), and patterns of involvement (Astin, 1993, 1999). The aforementioned literature was examined to identify overlapping repeated patterns; coding schemes were constructed thereafter. Cross-case synthesis techniques analyzed individual cases, then comparatively (Yin, 2009) for categorical convergence (Eisenhardt, 1989) to compare behavioral similarities of high-achieving, Black male student leaders, which resulted in salient emergent themes (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). An open line-by-line, constant comparative coding method was utilized. Organization and study group interactive observations with White peers, faculty, and administrators were included in the data corpus and used as a form of interview supplement. In doing so, eight salient themes emerged, which were coded analytically into three main findings that took into account participants' constructions of excellence and the commonalities and differences therein.

RESULTS

Using Prakash and Waks's (1985) four conceptions of excellence aided in organizing language around participant notions of excellence in order to identify primary sources of institutional supports and impediments, which impacted how Black male students navigated their predominantly White college environments. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: 1) major focus as the "major focus," 2) Black + male + nerd = academic anomaly, and 3) intergenerational fulfillment. First, participants indicated a commitment to their academic major and viewed attending college as a privilege that could only end in personal degree attainment. Second, participants acknowledged the intersection and distinct differences between their Black, male, and self-labeled nerd identities, which were interchangeably used for the purpose of securing resources and deflecting race, gender, and intellectual stressors. Finally, desires to meet intergenerational expectations, while making life better for community elders, were central to participants' beliefs that education is to be used as a catalyst for achieving Black equality. Given themes that include participant consideration of standards across the four conceptions of excellence (Prakash & Waks, 1985), we argue that participant achievements are actually "more excellent" than the institution recognizes.

Major Focus as the "Major Focus"

I can only become a civil engineer if I do what is necessary to assure my place in civil engineering, which will better position me to get paid afterwards

[graduating]. I have to get all As in the math-related courses like Calculus II, which set me straight for particle dynamics, surveying and thermodynamics. I mean this is my major, my life, so I have to master it. Basically, keep the main thang, the main thang or major focus on my major focus. Plus, I graduated high school with 32 hours of concurrent enrollment hours so I'm ahead of the game and have to keep focused to stay that way. Make sense? In the words of Jay Z, "I'm focused man!" (Nathaniel)

Major focus as the "major focus" refers to perceptions of participants that excelling in their academic major areas could only be achieved if they dedicated strict, nearly singular focus to their studies and studying to be better prepared. The above quote from Nathaniel speaks to his interpretation of self-investment as not only the lynchpin to his college success, but also preparation to enter the field of civil engineering upon graduating. Participants viewed themselves as needing to be completely engaged in all things directly connected to their academic majors in order to stay "well informed about the ins and outs, interns, job fairs, and conferences where I can present my work to peers and colleagues for critique and acceptance," stated Henry. Within an organizational context, participants acknowledged perceiving themselves as being viewed as leaders by peers and advisors due to actively welcoming additional work, which allowed them to be seen as accomplished yet tested leaders. Although this theme related to co-curricular organizational leadership roles, it also included in-class professorial interactions where African American males perceived themselves as being viewed by professors as intellectuals, who were accepted as seriously invested in education.

Nathaniel's perspective is indicative of feeling like his actions were directly connected to academic outcomes, which would ultimately yield positive results that could only be reaped if he engaged in the appropriate activities. Charles confirmed Nathaniel's premise by adding the following concerning his experiences:

Sometimes studying alone is not enough to keep my grades up where they are supposed to be, you know, no Cs. In order to do that, I utilize Professor Ray's office hours to confirm my way of writing papers as correct, or at Dr. Wilburn's to make sure my formulaic processes are right and exact so I'll be prepared for my physics test! Relationships with my profs are essential because if they know you're committed, 98.9% of them will be committed to you being successful. Plus, I want to earn a Ph.D. in communications so I already know writing with the least amount of errors is fundamental!

Supportive professor behaviors, in the form of providing additional instruction outside of in-class interactions, reinforced what participants perceived as a non-confrontational, beneficial relationship, which provided a foundation for not only

out-of-class repetitious problem-solving exercises, but also created a positive in-class space for showing intellectual prowess. During in-class observations, professors frequently called on participants to answer questions and acknowledged their intellect. To illustrate, upon grading Vertner's test, his writing composition professor responded, "yet another A, your writing is setting the curve Mr. Tandy." George had similar in-class experiences: "Dr. Richards always calls on me to solve Trig problems on the board. He knows I can do it, plus, after each class we do lesson follow-ups to determine my level of mastery. He trusts me. I trust him." Interactions like these confirmed participants' intellectual ability and increased their scholarly self-efficacy regardless of academic major focus. Eugene primarily used peer-based study groups as a reliable source of academic error and success: "Studying with people in my courses is the best way for me to do well. We check each other's work. We critique presentation styles and give each other that academic real talk!" Robert had a similar narrative: "That's the benefit of living in the Honors Residence Hall, I get direct access to smart kids 24/7. They know I'm smart too so the reciprocity is real and keeps me on my toes; no imbeciles allowed!"

These occurrences contributed to participants feeling like they had multiple intellectual outlets, which created familiar thought vacuums where unfettered thinking could take place (e.g., in-class, professors' offices, or residence halls). Oddly, none of the participants utilized on-campus libraries for indulging in academic work and preferred more intimate public places like coffee shops where organic conversations could occur in the absence of campus confinements. Henry elaborated, "sometimes it's about testing your smarts in real world situations where no one knows you're a deep thinker. I'm a national merit scholar so on campus I'm expected to be brilliant; off campus I can confirm those assumptions." The desire to have their intellect affirmed beyond the institution was a commonality shared by all participants despite being labeled as "Gates Millennial," "National Merit," or "McNair" scholars, who each carried the expectation of "knowing it all because you're supposed to be the best and the brightest" (Charles).

Perspectives such as these, across participants, amounted to an "exceed expectations" mentality that was employed to cope with repeatedly experiencing what participants referred to as "intellectual shock and awe" (Ernest) when discovering their intellectual prowess. The "exceed expectations" strategy stemmed from having to clarify why participants received scholarships, how they managed to score highly on entrance exams (e.g., SAT), or even to describe family background as contributing to academic success. To this point, each participant scored above 27 on the ACT, three were Valedictorians, two were Gates Millennial Scholars, two were Southern Christian University (SCU) Presidential Ambassadors, and four lived in the Honors Residence Hall. Additionally, Eugene and George, the

two participants with the highest GPAs, were first-generation college-going students. Despite the aforementioned, participants viewed themselves as representative of a collective, intellectual Black male monolith, where being seen as smart hopefully meant all Black males were smart. Vertner clarified, “the assumption is Black males are not too bright. The only way I can unravel that perspective [stereotype] is by being at the academic forefront. Plus, I have to believe that we’re all smart because we’re all connected.”

Nathaniel held a similar belief: “If I excel in the class, outside of class maybe the perception of my academic effort can be transferred to other Brothers, in a positive way, making me my Brother’s keeper, and thinker!” Nathaniel, Vertner, and Charles felt the public display of intellectual prowess served to collectively uplift all Black males, while Ernest, George, Henry, and Robert viewed showing themselves to be intellectual acted as a reminder that they deserved to attend Southern Christian University like every other student who was admitted. Cognitively, each participant experienced exceeding expectations throughout their K–12 learning experience, which laid the foundation for constructing themselves as high-achieving students.

Black + Male + Nerd = Academic Anomaly

I wonder how they [White people] see me prior to knowing I am a nerd. Because I’m 6’3”, yet not an athlete, they pile all the Black stereotypes on me before hearing my academic credentials. Plus, as a male, some think I’m threatening, emotionally unavailable, or sexually promiscuous. So many layers! Look, I’m a Black male who is one of the smartest nerds you’ll ever meet, and for some those labels don’t match. Guess I’ll spend the rest of my life showing otherwise. (Charles)

Charles’s understanding that his identity is cumulative, yet exists independently in overlapping racial, gendered, and intellectual segments, is representative of having developed a heightened awareness of the intersections in an effort to make meaning of interactions with peers, faculty, and administrators. “Black + male + nerd = academic anomaly” is defined as a student’s ability to self-actualize and compare self-perceptions to environmental assumptions about what it means to be Black, male, and intellectual. Charles’s perspective highlights his belief that negative stereotypes about those who are Black and male are in direct conflict with positive assumptions often associated with being a nerd.

Being a Nerd - Being Black = Male Acceptance

Study participants described the PWI environment as less of a safe place to “be” authentically Black, but that it embraced their nerd identities. Specifically,

while attending SCU, participants made a conscious effort to lead with their intellectual credentials as a way to verify their having earned admittance to the institution. To illustrate, George described his plight: "Whether I am on campus or not, I make certain to let people know I am a Gates Millennial Scholar, which translates into the nerd who was so smart that a billionaire decided to pay for my education." When describing recognizing the value of being a nerd, Robert offered the following explanation: "I own being a nerd despite the associated awkwardness attributed to 'that' [intellectual] type of person. Despite all the negative behavioral comparisons, like being weird, nerd always equals one thing, nearly genius. Yep, that's me!" Viewing themselves as a nerd, Black, and male was a shared phenomenon across participants. However, due to varied levels of salience, the identity order was more or less pronounced for each student. To this point, both Robert and George, who were Millennial and National Merit scholars, referred to themselves as being nerds, first and foremost, Black secondarily, and then male. Although Vertner, Eugene, Charles, Nathaniel, and Henry identified as nerds, in contrast, being Black was their most salient identity. Vertner explained, "as a Black nerd there are different expectations. Faculty treat me like my opinions matter in class, but White girls are often hesitant to be teamed up for group work despite knowing I'm intelligent." Succinctly, Eugene lamented, "if White people at SCU could separate my nerd from my Black they would do it in a hot minute. The first makes their grades better, but the second makes some of them nervous." Eugene's perspective explains the belief by most participants that they would be better accepted by White peers if being a nerd was their only or primary identity, as viewed by the dominant culture.

Being Black + Being a Nerd = Male Tolerated

Henry described SCU as similar to the city environment when comparing his experiences: "White folks are White folks no matter whether I'm on campus or having lunch in the city; they act like I'm under suspicion until they understand I go do SCU, then it's all good. Well, partially good." Nathaniel provided similar insight about how he perceives interactions at SCU:

I rarely play the nerd card unless I need extra access, like entering the computer lab after hours. Even then, I get that look like, "you're Black; how are you a Gates Millennial Scholar?" It doesn't phase me because I have a lot to gain, but I know deep down some people only see me as Black or Black and somehow smarter than normal, so they keep me around just in case it is GRE or MAT prep time, then I get that text.

Nathaniel's response speaks of his understanding that being Black alone was less advantageous than when coupled with being a nerd, which highlighted his

perceived racialized, limited benefits. Vertner offered a similar perspective: “As long as I can bring it [intellect] to the table, they [White peers] will allow me to be around because they win when I’m present. If I were just Black, they wouldn’t care to know my name.” Each participant spoke of being authentically Black, which they framed as being their holistic self but within varying contexts, like when leading historically Black versus predominantly White organizations.

Notably, some participants also discussed having a greater will to avoid conforming culturally or purposefully muting Black authenticity at the cost of losing the freedom to be Black. Participants associated freedom dichotomously with the latitude to choose when to be authentically Black, versus race coupled with intellect to unfurl personal limitations, biases, and psychological responses to gendered racism (Mutua, 2013). In fact, presenting themselves as primarily Black meant participants were attempting to achieve balance between race and intellect, and doing so allowed for maintaining a “genuine center” (Eugene), or what Charles called, “knowing oneself to the point where I can enact autonomy and not lose myself while going through college.” Finally, participants understood being male as an unwavering constant, which served as a peripheral identity that was assaulted the least, but acknowledged most frequently by Black women, who participants perceived as interacting with them due to shared cultural ties, academic major similarities, overlapping organizational memberships, and “the possibility of finding a mate. I mean, Black women dig the complete package; an intelligent, Black man. Right?” (Nathaniel).

Intergenerational Fulfillment

Internships. Summa Cum Laude. Bank rolls. It all amounts to nothing if the work I do in college does not prepare me to transition into a profession that empowers me to earn for and provide for my [Black] community. I stand on the shoulders of giants! G-ma swept floors 60 hours a week to send my pops to college. He sacrificed financially so I wouldn’t be in debt upon completing college. The ultimate goal is crystal clear to me, uplift my old people, raise up my young people. Prepare the next generation to live well, better than I did despite the racism I faced. Hopefully, my work will buffer their trek. (Roger)

“Intergenerational fulfillment” refers to participants’ desires to meet elders’ and parents’ expectations of being excellent for the betterment of their communities both locally and globally. This perspective was central to participants’ beliefs that education is to be used as a catalyst for achieving Black equality and was adamantly expressed by each participant. The opportunity to accomplish community betterment was typically practiced in tandem with the completion of leadership responsibilities in co-curricular organizations. Specifically, every study participant

held an organizational role as a leader and actively involved themselves in multiple organizations at the highest levels. In occupying leadership positions in organizations, participants cited membership as a calculated benefit that abled them to secure professional development opportunities, which served to further distinguished them from other SCU students, even those who were equally accomplished academically. Henry explained, "being in organizations grants me access to the inner workings of the university. I can secure funding, create tutoring programs, bring speakers to campus, and get mentoring from administrators. Honor Council is the hub of my college network!" This acknowledgment was held by six of the seven participants, who viewed membership as not only necessary, but also as a purposeful endeavor that confirmed racial, intellectual, and disciplinary competency. Being involved in leadership roles within organizations that were connected to academic majors, like National Association of Black Engineers or Public Relations Student Society of America, was a frequently practiced strategy of participants. George elaborated on the benefit of being strategic about when to be involved on campus:

It is important that I position myself as the most efficient and effective leader within all of my organizations. Doing so positively vets the next Black male, while giving me opportunities to enter doors other Black students are denied. Basically, I can work this [White] side, while working for this [Black] side. At the end of the day, the more resources I can identify, and pass to my [Black] community, the better.

To this point, organizational memberships often provided participants with opportunities to facilitate the direct funneling of institutional resources to Black students on campus and the larger Black community. Being engaged in leadership roles also created moments for determining the best ways to gather information about environmental supports and resistance, which ultimately served as an invaluable resource for contributing to the retention of Black students, males in particular. Charles explained, "if I can identify the allies, we [Black students] win. One time, I knew the chair of a scholarship and referred Malcolm. He received the funding that kept him in school that semester. That is the fruition of work!" Participants attributed the ability to accomplish race-related goals to being identified as intellectual leaders on campus, which resulted in broad institutional support of organizational agendas that benefitted Black people. To illustrate, Black males in this study held a steadfast commitment to communal giving back, in the form of service, which was achieved on a large scale through the organizations they led. Robert, an officer in the SCU LGBT queer students of color organization, elaborated: "our organization is loaded! Last semester, I recommended we do

service in my community to give back, and get press. We cut like 11 yards, painted five homes, and cleaned the block. The tab for the hood, nothing!” Examples like these emphasized the need for being involved in organizational leadership, as a conduit for bettering the collective circumstances of all Black people. Furthermore, participants’ desires to “give back” were not limited to the Black community, but were recognizably the impetus for participants being actively involved in community service. Lastly, participants stated that being involved in leadership roles contributed to their ability to problem solve, advocate for students of color who were not Black, identify and accurately assess complex situations, and build sociocultural relationships with White faculty, administrators, and peers who would ultimately act on the behalf of Black people by championing Black communal issues like the adverse effects of police brutality.

Although the aforementioned themes are representative of excellence empowerment tactics, it is important to note that participants enacted these tactics in varying degrees and frequencies based on organizational context, the race of their peers, and situational circumstances. Furthermore, we recognize that participants’ abilities to enact the excellence empowerment tactics are the culmination of being excellent and not only representative of cognitive measurements (e.g., college entrance exam test scores or IQ exams). Therefore, traditional labels like high-achieving (Griffin, 2006; Wiggan, 2014) and gifted (Bonner, 2001; Flowers, 2012) are applied to our study participants as holistically encompassing.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Using Prakash and Waks’s (1985) four conceptions of excellence as standards of educational excellence (mental proficiency, disciplinary initiation, self-actualization, and social responsibility), the researchers demonstrated that African American male student leaders think about excellence across excellence conceptions. In fact, participants frequently vacillated between and across excellence standards in ways that not only empowered them to be excellent, but did so for the benefit of the Black community on campus and abroad. With respect to the first theme (“major focus as the ‘major focus’”), participants shared their investment in developing the second conception of excellence, disciplinary initiation (i.e., critical thinking) along with the more institutionally common standard that narrowly frames a student’s salary upon graduating as an “excellence” outcome. In addition, participant descriptions of how they wished to be perceived by peers recall the literature reviewed earlier in this article regarding self-actualized identity development as a college success outcome (Dancy, 2012; Flowers, 2012). However, given the theoretical nuance in this study, the researchers also push for

a discourse of excellence and not just success. Conceiving self-actualization as essential to higher education excellence nuances current institutional praxis, which standards matter, which outcomes matter, and which measurements inform change and priorities.

Like much of the literature reviewed in this study, the second theme (“Black + male + nerd = academic anomaly”) directly engages the identity tensions that occur when Black students perform in ways they and their peers deem “Black” (Dancy, 2012; Davis, 1994; Harper, 2013). Participants’ uncompromising commitment to resist identity performance is not only a form of internal resistance to environments that pressure a performance that puts White people at ease, but also reflects three forms of educational excellence. The first reflected form of excellence is disciplinary initiation in the evaluation of social dilemmas that can create very real individual problems and the ultimate decision to stay true to one’s self. Second, the unwillingness to perform or pose demonstrates advancement on the path to self-actualization. Third, participants’ linkage of the decision to remain authentic as tied to Black freedom upholds the social responsibility standard of educational excellence.

The third theme, “intergenerational fulfillment,” refers to Black male educational pursuit as a preparation for Black community leadership and advancement. In addition, the theme is rooted in a notion of collective support, justice, and responsibility. This finding aligns with previous studies that found similar Black male commitments (Dancy, 2012; Harper & Quayle, 2007). Intergenerational fulfillment aligns with the fourth conception of educational excellence as social responsibility.

Prakash and Waks (1985) argued that it is impossible for educational institutions to prioritize each conception of excellence compatibly. They elaborated:

The conceptions are incompatible in much the same way that the liberal and conservative and socialist positions are incompatible. One cannot be a liberal, a socialist, and a conservative all at the same time. One might say that liberals, conservatives, and socialists uphold the “same values,” for example, freedom and justice. Nonetheless, we know that while liberals and conservatives and socialists all support freedom and justice, they do not support the same values—because, as is notoriously well known, these different groups mean different things by the value terms *freedom* and *justice*, and apply these and other value terms to different situations. When we shift our attention back to educational excellence, the same logic applies. The value concepts in terms of which of the four conceptions are defined and elaborated have different meanings in each of the different conceptual frameworks, even though proponents of all “share the same values” of proficiency, self-actualization, and so on. (pp. 90–91)

Although we share Prakash and Waks's pessimism about the compatibility of educational excellence conceptions, we persist in the advocacy for a complex framing.

Evolving institutional conceptions of educational excellence is a political process. The higher education organization literature reveals the ways in which the first conception, mental proficiency, maintains the strongest base of support (McDonough et. al, 1998). The public perceives this school of educational excellence as meeting the perceived interests of many members of society. In addition, this conception (with its quantifiable measures of particular success measures) has the support of those who shape and administer education policies (Kuh et al, 2005). While members of the higher education community, particularly those in liberal arts, embraced a disciplinary initiation conception, these values are fast-diminishing in higher education as a result of academic corporatization (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Finally, social responsibility as central to higher education excellence remains the subject of debate as views diverge around affirmative action policy and other institutional efforts to recognize diversity and inclusion as a higher education outcome (Dancy, 2010a). The data in this study illustrates the roles of resilience, leadership, and community as essential to Black male persistence in settings they experience as anti-Black, in addition to holding exclusive value assessments. Until there is revolutionary change in higher education, Black male excellence tactics in areas judged less valuable for institutional accountability and control will receive less recognition and support.

NOTES

1. Although Black and African American are not historically synonymous, based on participants' framing of themselves as self-identifying with both terms, for the purposes of this study, each are used interchangeably.

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