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A Voice of Silence: Reentry Adult Black Male Students in Higher Education

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Abstract: While much has been written about the experiences of Black males, there is a dearth of empirical data that explores their educational experiences as adult reentry students into higher education. The goal of this qualitative study is to identify strategies to help support African American males successfully matriculate through college and graduate.

Introduction

Meeting the postsecondary educational attainment needs of adults in the United States is critical to the continued social and economic development of the country. As a result of current economic conditions precipitated by a combination of such factors as job loss, promotion aspirations, and dissatisfaction with status in life, postsecondary education is enjoying record enrollments of adult learners/nontraditional students whose age ranges from 24 and older (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). There have been numerous studies focused on understanding the emotional, psychological and social experiences adult learners encounter in their reentry into higher education. Noticeably, much of the research centers on the experiences of White male and females, and Black female Americans.

While there are studies that focus specifically on Black women and their journey through the educational process (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007), very little empirical studies have focused on the foray of Black males as they try to navigate the challenges of returning to higher education as adult learners. Consequently, many institutions face low retention rates among this population because they do not understand their experiences as reentry students and are ill-equipped to meet the unique needs of this growing student population (Aslanian, 2001; Battle, Alderman-Swain, & Tyner, 2005; Cuyjet, 2006; Kasworm, 2002, 2003). Therefore, an important outcome of the present study is to give voice to this marginalized group by uncovering how these institutions are supporting adult reentry Black males and to identify effective strategies to help them matriculate and graduate.

Research Design

The purpose of this interpretive qualitative study was to understand the experiences of reentry Black men to provide a blueprint on how to strategically design educational programs and provide appropriate support to Black males returning to higher education. A purposive

sampling technique was employed to select and interview twelve Black males ranging in age from 25-45 who had previously attended an institution of higher education, and had returned to complete their education. The participants were chosen from two universities located in Southeastern United States. The questions that guided this study were: 1) What are the major barriers to their reentry?; 2) What are the challenges they experience during reentry?; and 3) What are their major sources of support?

Findings and Conclusions

Several themes emerged from the study findings. First, the participants identified major barriers to their reentry which include a lack of understanding of the financial resources available to them, fear/internalized oppression, a lack of role models, and uncertainty of how to manage work, family and school. For example, Scott's comment references these factors,

Before I returned to school I felt like work as a self employed person would be an obstacle to returning to school but the desire was there. I believed at the time that I am at school may take away from my family and business. I also feared failing school. I really felt like it would have been difficult for me to balance work, family, and school. I have the pressure of my nagging wife who is asking me how can I squeeze in work school and family. It's not that she doesn't support me going to school but she was concerned about how I could manage all of my responsibilities.

Jason, on the other hand, talks specifically about the lack of role models in his life to demonstrate the value and importance of getting an education. He states,

I only had my father as a role model. My father didn't finish high school and believed that if you worked hard education wasn't needed. Back in the day education wasn't a priority. You had to work to support your family.

Timothy comments about the financial barrier he encountered:

Well, financially, I kind of overestimated my income and I thought it was going to be that simple to come in. Initially, when I came in, it was not too bad because I got a lot of grants and loans and stuff like that. had to take my time. I think I was only able to take 7 or 8 credits but then eventually I worked my way up to the sophomore status....early junior status the money started rolling in but the obstacles were mostly financial...

Similarly, Mike shares,

I didn't know where to start and I had no knowledge of the availability of funds for people like me, older adults returning to school. At the time I returned to school I had a job but it wasn't the most rewarding job. My wife and I made a tough decision for me to quit my job to go to school fulltime. This meant a significant reduction in income supporting my family with my wife being a stay at home parent who is in school as well.

Similarities surfaced in the participants' reflections on their experience upon reentry which centered on inadequate academic and career advisement, uncertainty of how to navigate

through college, and insecurity with use of technology. One participant points out, “although I am pleased with the academic advisement I have and continue to receive I am not satisfied with the career advisement...”

Lastly, respondents cited the following as major sources of support: their faith/spirituality, familial support, their desire to serve as a role model for family and children, and their intrinsic motivation to improve themselves professionally and economically. For example one respondent explained how family and finances influenced his decision to return to school. Kelly states:

Family....family and finances....I wanna be able to open a business, buy property in this lifetime, sooner than later....My grandmother past away 2 years ago (was emotional) from lymphoma and she begged me...I tell people she asked me...but she begged me to make sure I go back to college. I had spent a year in college in 1998. In May of 98 she got diagnosed with cancer and so I took the time off and so a year later she was gone. .It was traumatic for the family....But I remember about 4 months before she died when she was still speaking she begged me to go back to college....and my mother recently got sick and I had to move back home and help take care of her.

Kelly further reflects,

....[M]y mother had a full scholarship to college in 1974 and she spent a couple of years in school and got discouraged because it was a predominantly white institution and she did not have the encouragement from her father and mother to go back. .Now at 55, when I hear how she speaks of her regrets and she is so disappointed that all she did was raised kids, I feel obligated to make sure her sacrifice for me....isn't in vain...I wanna be able to not only help my mother in her later years but to also help myself....I know that my education will be key to me because I am smart. I talk well. .I know I can network and I can do all this. .A lot of people started businesses without degrees but for what I wanna do in life know those credentials are going to help me because they do make a difference.

Similarly, John speaks of how his children influenced him to return to school. He states,

Well, I look at my life and realized that I wanted to show my three boys that they must get a good education and that will require them staying in school and going to college. Basically I want to be a good role model for my children about the importance of education and I can see that they have benefited from me being in college.

Overall, when the participants were asked what could their respective schools do to help them complete their degree programs, three main strategies emerged which are consistent with Spradley's (2001) research on reentry adult Black males. The strategies include: 1) peer support in classes as an incentive for their learning such a learning support groups, the sharing of notes, and peer study sessions; 2) faculty-student relationships where the student feels that faculty are treating him fairly and recognizes the life circumstances he brings with to class as an adult student; and 3) extra-curricular activities whereby the student finds ways to volunteer and give back as a way to connect the application of learning to community involvement (Spradley, 2001; Quimby, & O'Brien, K. 2006.). The aforementioned strategies can provide administrators with needed information to guide the design of programs and activities to help support this population.

Implications

There is an alarming trend in the decline of traditional age Black males who are enrolled in and are graduating from higher education. Extensive study of this phenomenon persists. What has been learned about how to retain these students is that the following support should be provided: financial assistance, academic support services, mentoring program, and cultural/social support. Coincidentally, this same population is who largely represents the increase in reentry Black males and they, too, need the same resources coupled with an educational environment conducive for adult learners to improve their matriculation and graduation rates. The fact that there is an increase in the number of Black males age 25 and older, returning to higher education, warrants greater attention by educational institutions. These institutions must find ways to adapt to a changing clientele and design their programs to address the special needs this marginalized group.

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