

A Smooth Transition: A Phenomenological Approach to Understanding the Experiences of First-Time, Full-Time, Provisionally Accepted Black Male Students

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Abstract

This article is the result of research conducted provisionally admitted Black male students enrolled at four different public universities in the Southeast. The researcher sought to answer the following research question: What are the lived experiences of provisionally accepted first-time, full-time Black male students within their first year at a state college and state university?

Participants were selected based on having the highest and lowest Expected Family Contribution scores of the eligible population. The researcher utilized a phenomenological approach and multiple methods of data collection. This resulted in rich data that has been categorized into themes. The article concludes with implications for college and university faculty and administrators, as well as for future research on provisionally admitted Black male college students.

Keywords: Black Male College Students, provisional acceptance, student persistence, socio-economic status, phenomenology

1. Introduction

Students arrive on college campuses with varying levels of academic preparedness. While most admitted students meet admissions requirements, some students do not fully meet the requirements and are admitted on a conditional or provisional basis. These students may not have a high enough Grade Point Average (GPA), high school class rank, and/or standardized test scores (Adebayo, 2008; Palmer & Davis, 2012). As provisionally admitted students are particularly at risk for non-degree completion (Adebayo, 2008; Nora & Crisp, 2012), many colleges and universities have established conditions for the population to meet in order to gain full admission status. These include provisions such as remedial coursework for which college credit is not earned, GPA requirements, mandatory tutoring, and supplemental academic advising (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). These conditions, coupled with the socioeconomic factors, precollege experiences, and self-efficacy, may have an additional impact on provisionally accepted Black male students' social and academic experience within the higher education setting (Harper, 2012).

According to the university system where the research was conducted, 37% of the student population at two-year state colleges and 18% of the student population at four-year state universities require

remediation. There is only a 5% completion rate difference for learning support courses between two and four-year state institutions. More specifically, in comparison, two-year state colleges have a 93% loss of provisionally accepted students because only 7% of them graduate within 3 years; whereas, four-year state universities have a 75% loss of provisionally accepted students as only 25% of them graduate within 6 years (University System of Georgia, 2016). Each of the state two and four-year institutions provide remediation courses for provisionally accepted students.

State colleges and state universities are responsible for the most significant increase in graduation rates over the past ten years because of their accessibility nationwide (Doyle, 2010). State institutions provide admission and learning opportunities for students who otherwise would not be eligible to apply for admission to select university system four-year research and comprehensive universities. Both research and comprehensive universities do not fully admit students who do not meet their admission requirements. Minimum admission requirements include acceptable scores on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT and a minimum high school GPA (University System of Georgia, 2016).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Key Literature on Black Male College Students

Harper's (2012) qualitative study, "The National Black Male College Achievement Study," focused on Black, undergraduate men. This study was conducted at 42 different college sites with 219 participants. His participants were Black males who had been successful in postsecondary education. Harper discussed the many factors influencing the academic success, retention, and graduation of Black males categorized in three areas: precollege socialization readiness (family support, K-12 experiences, and college preparatory resources), college achievement (classroom experiences, engagement outside of class, and supplemental educational experiences), and post-college success (enrollment in graduate schools and career readiness). He found less than 50% of Black males graduate on time compared to nearly 80% of White males. With graduation rates at the lowest, the graduation rate of Black males was less than 4% in 2009, nearly the same rate as in 1976 (Harper, 2012). Moreover, Harper (2012) suggested financial stress is a major factor hindering academic success for black males, as 47% of them withdrew for financial reasons.

Understanding the lived experiences of this unique yet growing population of students, who will ultimately transition into the general population of students, warrants close scrutiny through the lens of qualitative research. In this case, the research may provide useful information for improving the social, instructional, and educational environment of provisionally accepted students. Capturing the unique personal experiences of first-time, full-time, provisionally accepted Black male students within the context of these institutions during their first academic year will provide insight for the development of more inclusive strategies for assisting and retaining provisionally accepted Black male students.

Further, Superville (2015) asserted there was an increasing graduation rate gap between Black and Caucasian students by nearly 20 points from 2009-2010 and 2012-2013, nationally. In 2012, the national

graduation rate for Black males was 59% and 80% for White males (Superville, 2015). Superville noted of the 48 reporting states, 35 states reported Black male, high school graduation rates were the lowest of all races and ethnicities (20%). This research provides insight on pre-college factors and missed opportunities to learn like the excessiveness of Black male students identified as special needs and out-of-school suspension. These factors may have a direct effect on this group of students' college readiness as only 16-20% graduate from college in Georgia (Superville, 2015).

According to Jenson (2011), there are several factors influencing student retention on an individual level (educational achievement, assertiveness, and contentment), institutional (academic commitment), and social and external level (social and familial support). These factors illustrate the multi-layered obstacles students encounter as they try to matriculate and successfully adjust academically and socially. These factors also influence student success (Jenson, 2011). Jenson suggested students' ability to integrate and immerse themselves in a new environment is based on the students' individual past experiences such as their academic performance in high school, characteristics, social skills, and study habits. Black male students often struggle with this transitional and integrative experience (Jenson, 2011).

2.2 Conceptual Framework

To gain an in-depth understanding of the lived-experiences of first-time, full-time, provisionally accepted Black male students, it is essential to also discover the essence of those experiences by analyzing relevant literature and reputable research. For this study, the researcher focused on the participants' pre-college experiences and self-efficacy through the lens of Pascarella's General Causal Model (Pascarella, 1985). According to the model, there is a significant relationship between the organization, its environment, and student retention.

There are many factors that influence student persistence and academic success. These factors include student retention, engagement, motivation, and ultimately their lived-experiences (Pascarella, 1985). To apply the General Causal Model to the lived experiences of the researched population, one must first consider precollege experiences and characteristics such as student demographics, academic success, and preparation. The next consideration in the model is student self-efficacy. These include motivations, emotional and behavioral responses, and overall resiliency. Finally, student engagement is applied to the model. This can be environmental, such as academic or social activities, or individual, such as cognitive development or student perception. All of these factors, when considered together, can be indicators of students' ability to persist and achieve academic success.

3. Methods

The researcher explored the lived experiences of first-time, full-time, provisionally accepted, Black male students at state colleges and state universities to address the following research question: *What are the lived experiences of provisionally accepted, first-time, full-time, Black male students within their first academic year at state colleges and state universities?*

The researcher examined the phenomenon of first-time, full-time, provisionally accepted, Black male students in a comprehensive manner and provided an awareness of their lived experiences. By allowing participants to reflect on their experiences, the researcher gained an understanding of their lived experiences as a participant of the phenomenon.

Potential participants were selected based on having the highest and the lowest Expected Family Contribution (EFC) scores. EFC was a determining factor because the researcher believed that participants with the highest and lowest EFCs would provide varying perspectives of how socioeconomic status may play a role in their pre-college experiences and how those experiences influence their ability to succeed at state colleges and state universities. From this group, a total of eight students self-selected to participate in this study.

The present study was limited by the participants' degree of comfort and ease conveying personal experiences and their perception and feelings during the interviews and focus groups. The study involved four institutions within the state: two state colleges and two state universities. The findings are not generalized to all state colleges and state universities.

Participants were asked to reflect on their lived experiences with the phenomenon. The researcher examined individuals' experiences through the exhaustive accounts of each participant through interviews and focus groups. To achieve the goals of this research, a purposeful, inductive approach was used to identify similarities of responses within the emerging data and to identify relationships between the participants and their personal experiences and the context in which they both exist. Data was collected using 90-minute in-person interviews, a Skype follow-up interview, and 90-minute Skype focus group. The richness of data from the in-person interviews helped construct the questions for the follow-up Skype interview and focus group.

Data was transcribed, coded, and categorized and then the researcher determined connections, established categories, and analyzed them according to patterns of similarity, frequency, causation, and sequence, also known as classification reasoning (Strauss, 1987). The following results provide an overview of student perceptions and describe themes associated with the researched question.

4. Results

Two overarching themes emerged from the data: "now and then" as well as "intervention and prevention."

4.1 Now and Then

One of the most prevalent findings was students were actively engaged in their academic success both presently and precollege. All of the participants struggled with mathematics in high school, there was a deficiency in their skill level in mathematics in college. According to the participants, because they wanted to build on their math skill set, they took every opportunity to seek assistance by attending after-school

tutorial programs in high school and in college. Both low EFC and high EFC students partook in after-school tutorial assistance. This study's findings support existing literature that reported pre-college characteristics and experiences, socioeconomic status, self-efficacy, student engagement, and social network systems are important to the academic success of Black male students (Harper, 2012; Wood & Williams, 2013).

The participants began to consider college at an early age. The most consistent response to the question "When did you first begin to think about college?" was between sixth and eighth grade. Due to the influence, support, and early exposure of what college could offer from their parents and middle school teachers, both groups considered college early. Preparation for SAT and ACT started as early as the ninth grade for both groups. After comparing the data between low EFC and high EFC, the data was also compared between state college participants and state university participants to identify similarities and differences between the two groups.

Each EFC group's precollege behaviors and characteristics were found to be consistent. Low EFC participants were found to have higher GPAs in high school and college, regardless of their enrollment in a state college or state university, than High EFC participants. Low EFC participants perceived their academic success in high school and college was due to their participation in after-school tutorials, on-campus tutorials, and working closely with their teachers and professors. High EFC participants described their participation in after-school support services and on-campus support services as limited or not at all. Participants were asked if they sought after-school assistance in high school and what on-campus resources they utilized for assistance with their writing and math. One participant stated, "I go to tutorial for help because I have always needed help. It wasn't something I had to train myself to do." Another participant stated, "Because I knew I had to do better than high school, I knew something different had to be done." Much like after-school tutorial sessions sponsored by the high schools, the on-campus tutorial and academic services were also free, readily available, and sponsored by the institutions. Tutors were best described as individuals who are knowledgeable, interesting, and fun. One participant stated, "It's easier to understand my math assignments in the [tutoring center] because the student helping also took the professor I was taking at the time."

All participants shared their interactions with their professors both inside and outside of the classrooms. These interactions were described as much needed and the encounters were encouraged by the professors. One participant stated, "Interacting with your professors is important." Another participant said, "The professors here are helpful. I like sitting with them and talking with them in their office more so [than] in class though." These sentiments were described by both low EFC and high EFC participants.

Despite the participants' EFC status or institution type, advisors played a significant role in student success. The participants spoke highly of their academic advisors. Their responses were often accompanied by a smile or grin. Each of the participants, according to the responses from the interviews and Skype focus

groups, have a continuous and helpful relationship with their academic advisors. One participant compared the assistance he received from his academic advisor to that of the assistance from his high school guidance counselor as he stated, “My advisor reminds me so much of my guidance counselor. She is always checking on me if she doesn’t hear from me in a while.”

The advisor-student relationship was also compared to a mother-son relationship. One participants stated, “My advisor is like a mother to me. Whenever I pitch an idea to her or let her know I need help with a class or something, she never lets me down.” There was only one participant who had a male advisor, and their relationship ended at the end of his first term. The participant did not care to express why.

For many participants, the support of their academic advisors mimicked the support of their family. The participants’ family supported them 100% as they pursued their college dreams. Most of the participants grew up in single parent households with mothers who attended or recently enrolled in college. Three participants had mothers who either did not attempt or graduate college. So, the “mother figure” the participants are drawn to are their female academic advisors.

Though the socio-economic status of the two groups were diverse, their precollege academic engagement and characteristics and lived experiences during their first academic year were so similar, differences were nearly missed. A repeated review of the data was necessary to find that both groups: low EFC students and high EFC students were equipped with the skills for academic success. What worked to help students succeed (participants had varying definition of success) in high school transposed itself into their habit for pursuing success at the college level despite skill level deficiency, behavior issues, socioeconomics, or parental level of education. Moreover, despite their institution type, the students found support in their academic advisors and social support services on campus.

4.1.1 Intervention and Prevention

All of the participants described their admissions process as a smooth transition. One participant noted, “I had stopped considering college until I went to a Black College Expo with a friend, and I met the admission recruiter from the school. We talked for a while. Before I left, he helped me with FAFSA and my admission application.” Another participant stated, “Adjusting to college wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be. I had to learn that I can’t just call. Face-to-face communication works best.” Despite their provisional admission, precollege experiences, and college level deficiencies, the participants were able to transition and integrate themselves to both two-year state colleges and four-year state universities.

Six of the eight participants, four from state colleges and two from state universities, regardless of being identified as high EFC or low EFC, were Pell recipients. These participants represented 75% of the participants in this study. One participant described his transition from student-athlete to student after losing his scholarship. He explained he lost his scholarship immediately after quitting the team. He later described having to “balance work and school to pay for school expenses and to help my mother pay bills.”

Another participant was a dependent of two military parents: one active duty and one retired. When asked if he received Veteran's Affairs benefits, he stated "I didn't know there was an office on campus that helps with that." He stated, "I didn't want to be a burden to my family, so I work to help them out."

Despite SES status, six of the eight participants (four low EFC and two high EFC) expressed their concerns about their financial aid counselors when they were asked to "describe important characteristics you look for in a financial aid counselor?" One participant stated, "They need to be on top of it. If they need to fire and hire new staff then they need to do that." Another participant suggested, "I feel like they should be better...umm...proactive to resolve some of the issues up front while explaining to students this stuff not at the end of the term when they add balances to people's account. It's never a fun experience." Not all of the participants' experiences were bad. One participant reported, "If you complete FAFSA on time, there will be no problem." Another participant stated, "If there is something wrong with my account, I can go to my financial aid counselor, and they show me how to find other means for paying for school." Six of the eight participants suggested they have or know someone who has encountered an issue with financial aid. The participants were asked "Have you encountered a bad experience with financial aid?" One student said, "A lot of people's classes get dropped here in the beginning." There was a concern with financial aid because students collectively felt they were not seen as students, but as a number. One participant stated, "No matter who you talk to in financial aid, they [are] either rushing, rushing you, or have an attitude for some strange reason. No matter how patient I try to be." Another participant said "No one explained to me telling me the difference in my financial aid options. I think one day talking to my advisor she explained to me the difference between subsidized and unsubsidized loans. This was way after I took them both out."

Low EFC participants graduated from high school with a B average, but did not attain standardized test scores high enough for full admission to their respective institutions. They did not have any precollege behavioral issues. Contrarily, participants with high EFC scores were found to have had precollege behavior problems and a slightly lower GPA. Combined, two participants were suspended 25 times in middle and high school. One participant stated "I was suspended twenty times in high school." When asked, "What were the reasons for your suspension?" one participant stated, "I was trying to be like my friends." Another participant stated, "I was doing what I saw others do in my neighborhood. I took home to school with me." Participants with low EFC scores did not have a history of high school or middle school suspensions. High EFC participants were found to have spent more time out of class in middle and high school due to their high in-school and out-of-school suspension rate compared to Low EFC participants.

One High EFC participant stated, "I have grown since high school. I monitor who I include in my circle now." Another participant stated, "I can't do what I did in high school. School is a more serious than high school." The students' precollege experiences and characteristics have not defined who they have become as a college student. The participant with the highest suspension rate was a New Student Orientation leader and has not had any disciplinary issues. According to the data, provisionally accepted Black male students

are involved and engaged with their professors in and out of the class and they seek academic support for intervention and prevention to improve their deficiencies.

5. Discussion

State colleges and state universities are responsible for the most significant increase in graduation rates over the past ten years because of their accessibility nationwide (Doyle, 2010). State institutions offer admission and learning opportunities for students who otherwise would not be eligible for admission to select four-year institutions. In Harper's (2012) qualitative study, he discussed the many factors influencing the academic success, retention, and graduation of Black males. He categorized these factors in three areas: precollege socialization readiness, college achievement, and post college success. According to Harper (2012), college achievement was influenced by classroom experiences, engagement outside of the classroom, and supplemental educational experiences. Post-college success included enrollment in graduate school and career readiness.

Understanding the lived experiences of this unique yet growing population of students, who will ultimately transition into the general population of students, warrants close scrutiny through the lens of qualitative research. In this case, the participants' analyzed data provided useful information for improving the social, instructional, and educational environment of provisionally accepted students. Capturing the unique, personal experiences of first-time, full-time, provisionally accepted Black male students during their first academic year provided fundamental data for the development of more inclusive strategies for assisting and retaining these students.

5.1 Making a Connection with Success

The participants in this study were age 20 or younger. On average, these participants have only been out of high school three years. Three of the participants from the low EFC group graduated high school with a B average and one graduated with a C average, although none had standardized test scores high enough for full admittance. Their parents were, and still are, actively involved in their academics. These participants also utilized high school tutorial services without it being mandated by their teachers. Much like their high school experiences, these participants struggled significantly in math. One participant stated "I had to retake college algebra one summer in high school."

The participants with high EFC scores had slightly lower grades in high school. Of the four, three graduated with high school with a C average and one graduated with a B average. Like the low EFC group, none scored high enough on standardized tests to be fully admitted to college. Each of the participants expressed their frustration with math and sought after-school assistance to improve their deficiency level in mathematics. One participant stated, "Math is something I have never been good at." The participants credited their parents for the push and the support services on campus, like writing and tutoring centers, for helping them bridge the skill gap for mathematics and writing.

Each of the eight participants passed their remedial course on their first attempt, during their first semester. Only 37% of the student population at state colleges and 18% of the student population at state universities require remediation (University System of [Blinded] State, 2016). Of that population, 7% graduate from state colleges within three years and 25% graduate from the state universities in 6 years. When asked “Are you on track to graduate on time?” each of the participants responded “Yes.” The findings from this study reflect Jenson’s (2011) assertion that there are several factors that impact student success, including assertiveness, academic commitment, and social and familial support.

In the present study, it was determined precollege experiences and characteristics impacted students’ lived experiences during their first academic year. The results of this study support Pascarella’s (1985) argument there are many factors that influence student persistence and academic success: student retention, engagement, motivation, and ultimately their lived-experiences. The results of this study indicate the participants shared similar academic success and preparation. Most students had B averages and sought academic support.

Additionally, the findings from this study support Jenson’s (2011) assertion that students’ ability to integrate and immerse themselves in a new environment is based on the students’ individual past experiences. These experiences include their academic performance in high school, characteristics, social skills, and study habits. According to previous research on the population, Black male students often struggle with social integration and maintaining study habits (Jenson, 2011). The findings in this study contradict that trend because each of the participants asserted they were actively engaged in their academic success. It is imperative to understand the dynamics influencing the academic success of Black males and develop strategies for assisting and retaining provisionally accepted students.

Each of the participants stated they were not assigned mentors by their institutions. Four of the eight participants have mentors who were from their neighborhood or someone from school. The findings from this study indicate there is a need for peer or faculty/staff mentorship on campus because these participants initiated their mentor relationship. When asked, “Would you like to have a mentor on campus?” one participant stated, “I wanted one, so I asked my advisor to be my mentor. She agreed, but she is helping me to find a male mentor also.” Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent (2004) concluded mentoring programs increase students’ confidence, thereby diminishing the likelihood of cognitive dissonance. Moreover, there are three ways to counter cognitive dissonance: change the disposition of the individual or group, familiarize oneself with a variety of resources, and eliminate or diminish the level of importance of unrelated ideas (McLeod, 2008). It is essential for this group of students to make a connection with an on-campus mentor. Mentors provide students with a tangible resource for both academic and emotional support necessary for their academic success.

On-campus support from academic advisors was a critical factor influencing academic success for this group of students. This type of support reflects their family support. One student asserted “My advisor is

the go-to person to help me with everything. When I was struggling in my remedial math course, she helped me find a tutor and feel better about myself.” Another participant stated, “My advisor is like my mom. She supports me without judging me.” This study affirms Bandura’s (1994) research which discussed advisors promoting student through development of positive self-efficacy.

5.2 At-risk for Success

Researchers concluded Black male students enrolled in college face multiple factors influencing their ability to persist (Harper, 2012; Wood & Williams, 2013). Students who were identified as low EFC were found to have a higher academic performance than those who were identified as high EFC. The present study found that these students had what Zimmerman (2000) described as increased motivation and increased autonomy for learning. Their increased motivation did not begin once they were admitted; their drive for success preceded their enrollment. This habit played a significant role for improving their academic motivation.

The common thread between students who were identified as low EFC and high EFC attending state college or state university is that they were automatically viewed as at-risk. Despite the participants’ differences in school enrollment and EFC score, this study found each of the participants’ efficacy beliefs impacted their emotional reactions, individualized efforts, and time spent preparing for academic success, the length of time the participants persevered during difficulties, and their resiliency (academic, social, or environmental) (Pajares, 1996). Each of the participants asserted their high school provided “Free after-school tutorial.” One participant stated, “I was surprised to see my principal teaching my after-school math session.”

The participants’ sense of self-efficacy was influenced by what Dewey (1938) called their continuous and interactive learning experiences. Their continuity in terms of lived, real world experiences and believed knowledge is the outcome of their enhanced prior learning experiences. Hence, one participant stated, “I have never been good in math. That was my only weakest subject. When my sister went to college for less than a year and came home, it was my motivation to do what I had to do to be better.” Most of the, the participants began to think about college in middle school. They were actively engaged in preparing for the SAT and ACT. One participant stated, “I bought my own SAT prep book and did the practice examples from it over and over.” Another participant stated, “I was involved in TRIO (Federally funded student services and outreach programs) and every Saturday we practice test taking skills.”

The participants’ precollege experiences and characteristics paralleled Hibbs (2012) self-efficacy strategies that influence Black male students, their mastery experiences, and most importantly, their overall academic achievement. The average GPA for low EFC participants was 2.28. The highest GPA for this group was 2.6. The average GPA for high EFC participants was 1.95. The highest GPA for this group was 2.43. There was a variance in majors to be considered. The majors ranged from Engineering to Marine Science.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Recommendations for Professionals

The findings from this study indicate that the socioeconomic status of Black male students does not predict academic success at state colleges or state universities. Institutions should assess students' individualized self-efficacy to build understandings of the internal, self-existing, self-perceived competence of provisionally accepted Black male students. Creating increased opportunities for student engagement will allow provisionally accepted Black male students to participate in a smooth transition into their college experience, countering potential pre-college characteristics developed in K-12.

Administrators at both state colleges and state universities should encourage faculty to become more engaged with their students, both inside and outside of the classroom to establish lasting relationships and mentorship. Peer mentoring programs could help first-time, full-time, provisionally accepted Black male students transition successfully as well. The participants have mentors, but they are not campus faculty. One participant asked his advisor to be his mentor. Further, both administrators and faculty should help the students' become engaged on campus. An assessment of students' interest is needed to evaluate the needs for clubs and organizations offered on both state colleges and state universities. This supports both Harper's (2012) concept of Black male college achievement and Jenson's (2011) factors influencing retention.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Given the increasing population of students requiring remediation at state colleges and state universities, college administrators need to learn more about students' common precollege experiences and characteristics and perceptions during their first academic year. One recommendation is to study Pascarella's (1985) General Causal Model, because it provided a formative understanding of how students' pre-college experiences affect their ability to transition, integrate, persist, and succeed academically in post-secondary education. Secondly, there is a need for research that explores various assessments of student interests for implementing on-campus clubs and organizations. Student involvement and engagement is also a measurement of academic success, integration, and progress. A third recommendation is to replicate this study at the same four institutions in three to four years to determine if any modifications have been made to improve the experience, retention, and graduation rates of Black male students. The final recommendation is to reproduce this study in a different setting such as two other state colleges and state universities within the system or in a different state to determine the impact of participants' precollege characteristics and experiences on academic success.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study support the need for assessing institutional programs, clubs, and organizations to attract the interest of a diverse student body. Additionally, it would be fitting to consider all of the social support services discussed in this study, for example: academic guidance and advising, student success

courses, learning communities, informed financial aid support, and social networks. One of the most prominent findings was participants wanted to engage and interact with their faculty both inside and outside of the classroom. It is imperative for administrators to require faculty to implement activities and assignments that facilitate engagement between themselves and their students. Mentorship should also be considered a significant entity for student involvement and engagement with faculty and staff apart from their academic advisors. Precollege experiences and characteristics influence students' behavior and tendencies during their first academic year. College level deficiencies can continue to be improved if programs like TRIO and after-school tutorials are offered. Students engaged in these programs are most likely to seek academic support during the first of year of college. State colleges and state universities that provide holistic social support programs for first-time, full-time, provisionally accepted students will continue to have increased retention, matriculation, and graduation rates of this population and of all students.

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