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*This chapter examines factors that predict and promote academic success, defined as grade point average and course completion, among African American and white male students in a large, urban community college district.*

## Factors Promoting Academic Success Among African American and White Male Community College Students

*Athena I. Perrakis*

Community college student demographics have changed dramatically over the past five decades. The system has grown tremendously during this time; large cities have experienced population surges that have transformed and in some cases overwhelmed community college campuses. Interestingly, recent demographic studies, national education statistics, and admissions data reveal that fewer male students of any race or ethnicity are enrolling in college, a trend that is roughly three decades old. Dwindling enrollment of male student populations across the country has raised questions about male student persistence (Evelyn, 2002). Those men who do enroll in college are not completing as many degrees (baccalaureate or associate) today as they did ten to fifteen years ago (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). The problem of reduced male representation in college is complicated by race; while men in every racial category are earning fewer college degrees now than ever before, some groups are faring better than others. The following questions arise: Who is underperforming, and why? Are there factors related to success for some populations that might also be associated with success for others? And how can community colleges, in particular, work to facilitate degree completion among male students in the light of reduced enrollment?

This study seeks to isolate factors associated with academic success, operationalized here as grade point average (GPA) and course completion,

among two male student populations within the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD): African American and white men. In order to determine the factors that are associated with academic success, two levels of analysis were conducted. The first set of analyses determined if gender was a significant factor in course completion and GPA for all students in the LACCD. Then the study sample was split by gender, and secondary analyses were conducted to determine if race was a significant factor for men in the LACCD, and if so, what similarities and differences could be noted between African American and white male students with regard to course completion and GPA. The result is a set of factors that promote course completion and high GPAs for both African American and white male students.

## Review of the Literature

Thomas Mortensen, a senior scholar at the Center for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, notes that the statistics for men and women attending college have almost reversed since the 1970s, when 56 percent of students who earned bachelor's degrees were men and 44 percent were women (Brownstein, 2000). Mortensen argues that feminists have silenced the debate regarding the apparent disadvantage men now face in college, noting that the idea of women as disadvantaged in higher education was once true but no longer is. Gose (1999) concurs that people aware of the gender shift on college campuses have not, before now, felt comfortable speaking about it for fear of feminist backlash. However, the achievement gap between men and women is becoming harder to ignore. In the LACCD, total male enrollment across racial and ethnic categories has dropped significantly over the past three decades. In 1974, seventy-six thousand male students were enrolled across the nine district campuses, compared to only forty-eight thousand in 2007. These figures are echoed in many other districts across the country and hint at a pattern of generalized male attrition.

In 1998, 133 women received a bachelor's degree for every 100 men in the United States (Evelyn, 2002). More recent data point to increasing gender disparity in terms of degree completion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Statistics like these are attracting widespread attention of officials at four-year colleges and universities; however, the gap between genders at the community college level has only recently begun to generate much scholarly concern (Evelyn, 2002). **Research shows that community colleges remain the predominant entry point for postsecondary instruction among students of color, in particular, among African American students.** Traditional theories of retention and involvement have been useful in providing a basis for current research but need to be developed further to uncover the interaction of factors—race, class, gender—that influence retention for diverse students in diverse institutions. Scholars like Bill Tierney call for a new theory of persistence and retention, more sensitive to difference and more capable of reflecting subtle processes involved in the devel-

opment and retention of students who reflect the new majorities and minorities in American higher education (Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora, 2000).

Levin and Levin (1991) reviewed the student characteristics claimed to have the largest impact on at-risk students in their article on academic retention programs: academic preparedness, adaptability, commitment to educational goals, perception of progress toward educational goals, willingness to seek academic assistance, self-confidence, and reasons for pursuing a college degree. In particular, they note a high correlation between parental socioeconomic status and level of education with retention (Levin and Levin, 1991). Barajas and Pierce (2001) also note that successful students are often those who are seen as having assimilated to the dominant norms and values of the majority culture, in society or on campus.

### **African American Male Retention**

Of all students in higher education, African Americans have the lowest male-to-female ratio (Cuyjet, 2006). African American college students in general, and African American men in particular, face specific challenges after enrolling at predominantly white campuses. One documented challenge is a demonstration of problems associated with strain theory, which posits that a strain develops in an individual who realizes that the products and pleasures of life available to other members of society are personally out of reach (Ellis, 2002). Rather than buy into an ideology of external dominance or superiority, some African American men adopt a nihilistic perspective that all values and beliefs can be dismissed as enigmatic and worthless (Ellis, 2002). Meaninglessness and powerlessness are the initial conditions out of which student alienation and attrition develop (Cabrera and Nora, 1994).

Once African American men begin to define their identities in opposition to the dominant culture of a particular college or university, a stronger likelihood emerges that they will feel alienated and subsequently engage in oppositional behaviors; this process dramatically reduces the likelihood of degree completion (Ellis, 2002). Since black men in American society already confront major challenges to success at all levels of education and are subject to lowered expectations by educational professionals, researchers are working to determine what factors facilitate success for this population and how institutions might remedy the problem of widespread African American male student attrition (Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton, 2001). Such factors might counteract oppositional and counterproductive behaviors that African American male students tend to exhibit in predominantly white educational settings, thereby enhancing their chances for social and economic mobility, especially if implemented in the community college setting where job skills and requisite training for employment are offered (Pope, 2006).

The number of black students enrolled in two-year colleges and the overall poor transfer rates among black students to senior institutions reinforce how serious the problem of attrition has become for African Americans.

According to 2005 National Center for Education Statistics data, black men have earned 5 percent fewer baccalaureate degrees since 1990. The same data set reveals that black men have earned 5 percent fewer associate degrees in the past seventeen years. Yet 3 percent more African American men today remain enrolled in community colleges after five years from the date of first matriculation. Given that the average time to transfer for an entering full-time community college student is three years, a student who remains on a community college campus after five years is statistically less likely to transfer. Pope (2006) affirms the lack of transfer evidenced by black students, noting that in 2002, African American students earned only 10.7 percent of all associate degrees awarded, even though they represented 12 percent of the total community college student enrollment.

Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton (2001) observe that African American men who feel capable of college-level work tend to complete the second semester of their freshman year in greater proportions than those who feel less capable; they are also more likely to persist to degree completion. Social support, defined as “perceived instrumental or expressive profusions supplied to the individual by confiding partners, social networks, and the greater community,” is also correlated to persistence and completion for African American male students (Lin, Dean, and Ensel, 1986, cited in Jay and D’Augelli, 1991). Outreach efforts to promote student disclosure of problems once they arise may help students who have difficulty recognizing that a problem exists, asking for help when they become aware of a problem, or asking for help in time for assistance to be of real benefit (Levin and Levin, 1991). Again, these efforts are particularly important for black men who are unlikely to reach out to counselors or college staff when they feel isolated or alienated on campus (Pope, 2006).

## Methods

This study employed a quantitative approach to research by using data collected from five thousand surveys distributed by the Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students (TRUCCS) project team at the University of Southern California. A quasi-experimental design was used to test the relationship between campus representation of white and black male students as minority populations and academic success. This is a secondary analysis of data that have been gathered, analyzed, and validated through the TRUCCS project. The final sample for this study consisted of 4,333 students from all nine colleges within the LACCD who participated in the TRUCCS survey and for whom transcript data could be acquired. For purposes of this analysis, these students became the experimentally accessible population from which data about white and black students were obtained. The number of white male students within this sample is 6.1 percent of the total sample; black men comprise 4.2 percent of the total sample.

Factor analyses were conducted to determine which variables would be included in multiple regression equations. Twenty-one variables emerged and were regressed on the two dependent variables, course completion and college GPA, which for the purposes of this study are employed as proxies for student success. The first set of analyses was conducted on the entire sample, with a block of interactions to determine, first, what variation in course completion and GPA was explained by the independent variables and, second, whether gender was a significant factor in course completion or GPA. Following this set of analyses, the sample was split by gender. The second set of analyses was conducted only on male students in the sample, again to determine, first, what variation in course completion and GPA for men was explained by the independent variables and, second, to determine whether race was a significant factor in course completion and GPA. Once race was determined to be significant, independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to isolate specific mean differences between black and white men in relation to variables found to be significant for male students through multiple regression analysis.

## Findings

Regression analyses conducted on the entire sample of students from the LACCD revealed that some variables were significant for men and women, while others were significant only for one gender (Table 2.1).

At the outset, the researcher expected variables related to socioeconomic status, employment status, and race to be significant for men but not for women. This turned out not to be true. Uniquely significant to men in the sample was a feeling of belonging on campus, which was not significant for female students. Race, age, high school GPA, calculus completion, reasons for enrollment, and dedication to persistence were significant for both genders in the sample.

For the variables of significance to men, a *t*-test was conducted to determine mean differences between the African American and white men in the sample. White and black men are similar in age (twenty to twenty-four years and twenty-three to twenty-six, years respectively), and both are similarly unsure whether they belong on campus. This is not surprising given how low their representation is on the nine LACCD campuses, where in some cases there is less than 5 percent representation of black or white men. Both groups had an average B– high school GPA, and both agree that is important to achieve their goals and complete their degrees. The main difference between African American and white men on these nine campuses is in academic preparation and performance. On average, twice as many white men have completed calculus as black men. White male students were also found to have a college GPA of .398 points higher than black students, a difference of roughly one-half grade. The difference in math achievement may explain in part the difference in college GPA.

**Table 2.1. Variable Significance by Gender**

<i>Variables Not Significant for Either Gender</i>	<i>Variables Significant for Women but Not for Men</i>	<i>Variables Significant for Men but Not for Women</i>	<i>Variables Significant for Both Men and Women</i>
Occupational status	Marital status	Feeling of belonging on campus	Caucasian
Being the primary wage earner	Intent to succeed academically		Age
Number of children			High school GPA
Others' opinions of the college			Calculus completion
Peer and faculty opinions of the college			Reasons for enrollment
Likelihood of transfer			Dedication to persistence
Highest degree desired			
Perceived obstacles to graduation			
Leisure activities			
Employment status			
Friends enrolled on the same campus			
Difficulties associated with race			

**Discussion**

This study found that a series of factors alone and in combination predict the academic success of male students (regardless of race) in the LACCD. At the outset of this project, an assumption was made that gender and race would be primary factors in the success and achievement of male students in the LACCD. It was surprising to learn that academic preparation was more significant than race or gender for students in this sample. The majority of the literature in higher education focuses on differences that have historically divided students; the findings of this study highlight the unexpected homogeneity of the LACCD student population. Two-year college students in southern California are more alike than they are different. Although there are obvious gender and racial differences among students attending the nine campuses, these differences do not directly influence student outcomes.

This analysis reinforces how much students are alike in their fundamental desire to succeed in college despite the stereotypes about difference

that researchers assume serve as obstacles to their success. Black and white male students feel similarly inclined to complete their courses and degrees; they are roughly the same age; both conclude that others' perceptions of the college they attend are not particularly meaningful or important; and both feel somewhat welcomed on the campuses where they are enrolled. Although the TRUCCS sample is diverse, similarities between African American and white men underscore the importance of promoting retention for all male students regardless of race or ethnicity.

## Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, the following are recommendations for practice:

- Consider the needs of male students in developing campus activities or workshops. For example, male students are less likely to solicit assistance or engage with counselors on campus, so direct outreach efforts targeted at male students would be beneficial.
- Develop mechanisms to make male students feel more welcomed on campus, and provide them with more of a sense of belonging. Ways to do this might include the creation of a fraternity-type organization where male students can interact with a common interest that is not solely academic but that bonds them with the campus nonetheless.
- Develop a series of day and evening programs targeted to male students so that students attending at different times of day can participate regardless of their off-campus schedules.
- Encourage mentorship by offering incentives for male faculty and male students to eat together on campus or work on common research projects. Male students need to see same-sex faculty and administrators as role models, and extracurricular relationships can help students bridge the gap between students' academic and personal lives.

## Conclusion

Hagedorn, Perrakis, and Maxwell (2006, forthcoming) published a pair of papers and corollary lists of positive and negative commandments for the community colleges to indicate ways in which community colleges help or hinder student success. Within the positive commandment list, the authors included faculty-student interaction as one of the ways colleges meet student needs. Within the negative commandment list, the authors noted that students need places on campus where they can study, congregate, and develop relationships. Both of these items address the variable within this analysis that was significant for all men across the nine campuses: a sense of belonging on campus. Male students need to feel a sense of attachment to the campus where they attend classes.

Never before has there been such a significant drop in the number of male students enrolled in institutions of higher education, so the need to maintain services and environments conducive to male success and achievement has not been as pronounced. Given the outcome of the analyses conducted here, policies and practices can be created to advance the interests of all men regardless of race to improve the enrollment and retention of male students. In short, this study suggests that if a policy or practice increases the enrollment and retention of white men, it is similarly likely to increase the enrollment and retention of black men and vice versa.

Beyond race and gender, policy is needed to examine and explore the role of academic diversity in college enrollment and retention. More funding and administrative expertise is needed to understand the academic spectrum of students who attend classes within the LACCD and other similar urban community college districts. As Hagedorn (2003) explains, much remains misunderstood about concurrent enrollment, reverse transfer, and postbaccalaureate enrollment. Differences in levels of academic preparation may in fact supersede differences in race and gender; research and policy is needed to better understand and assist students at different levels of their academic careers. For now, emphasis remains on traditional measures of difference—race, class, gender—while these other categories of difference remain largely unexplored in the literature or institutional policy.

Fundamentally, the most distinct form of diversity within this particular community college district is academic diversity, or diversity in preparation for college-level academic course work. If, as Hagedorn (2003) argues, academic diversity supersedes the importance of race, class, and gender as categories of significant difference among college students, a new model of student retention may emerge that foregrounds academic over demographic factors in predicting student outcomes and facilitating student achievement. Therefore, programs aimed at promoting adequate academic training for college courses will be beneficial in the process of retaining male students. The results of this study are also generalizable to other large, urban community college districts in metropolitan cities, where demographic changes are having a significant impact on student populations. Regardless of how many students of a particular race or gender are enrolled, however, this study reinforces that students who are well prepared for college will outperform their peers with less preparation regardless of their race or ethnicity.

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ATHENA I. PERRAKIS is assistant professor of leadership studies, chair of the higher education specialization, and director of the Community College Leadership Development Initiatives doctoral fellows program in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego.