Toward a Conceptual Model: African-American Male Students' Motivation, Persistence and Success in Community Colleges

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Abstract

 Over the past three decades, the social, educational and economic outcomes for African-American males have been more systemically devastating than the outcomes for any racial, ethnic or gender group. In 2009/10, the national high school graduation rate for African-American male (AAM) students was 52% while the graduation rate for Caucasian male students was 78%. On average, AAMs are more likely to attend the most segregated and least resourced public schools. In most states, the stratification of school quality works to minimize educational opportunities specifically for African-American students. In 2012, AAM students made up 4% of the currently enrolled male students in engineering according to the National Science Foundation (2012).

AAM students often begin their higher education journey at community colleges. According to the 2011 American Association of Community Colleges report, 44% of African-American students attend community colleges. Many community college students hope to transfer into a four-year institution to complete a baccalaureate degree. Community colleges provide commendable open-door democratic services for any student to achieve a higher education. However, the community colleges are often criticized for serving as a device that perpetuates social inequality for AAM students[1,2,3,4].

There is a desire and determination to facilitate student success in community colleges. That being acknowledged, it is hard to miss the deficit lens through which AAM student populations are viewed. They are often portrayed as victims, blamed for their lack of success, persistence to degree, or not transferring to a four-year institution, or portrayed as academically underprepared and require taking academic remediation[5,6].

The goal of this work is to develop a conceptual model to describe African-American male students' motivation, persistence, and academic success in community colleges. This model will include academic, institutional, psychological, and personal factors that may positively and negatively impact the students' academic experiences.

1. Introduction

According to the Schott 50 State report on public education and black males[7] in the last thirty years, the African-American male (AAM) group has seen more systemically devastating outcomes in the social, economic, and academic arenas than any other racial, ethnic or gender group. According to the same report, the 2009/10 high school graduation rate for AAM students compared to their Caucasian counterparts was 52% to 78% (SSR, 2012). AAMs have consistently staggering academic attainment levels, are more likely unemployed, are less healthy and have less access to health care, have high death rates, and are more likely to be incarcerated for longer times than males of other racial and ethnic groups[7]. On average, AAMs are more

likely to attend the most segregated and least resourced public schools. In most states, the stratification of school quality works to minimize educational opportunities specifically for African American (AA) students[7].

With the exception of a handful of research articles and scholarly dissertations, AAM students have faced negative rather than positive educational experiences[8,9,10,11]. In a democratic western society, students in general are receiving the message that if they work hard academically and obtain a college degree, then great opportunities come their way. Unfortunately, that does not hold true for the majority of AAM students. This American dream is shut out due to limited opportunities for higher education for AAM students[12].

Community College provides great benefits to the American society. Approximately 1,200 community colleges (CCs) in the U.S. enroll more than 8 million students annually, including 43% of U.S. undergraduates. CCs have provided access into higher education, affordable costs, a community location, and multiple paths leading to the workforce, a university transfer, and personal growth for all citizens while serving the local community[5]. CCs tend to serve the older population, women and minority, part-time students, and first generation students[5]. In addition, CCs are more likely to be the initial open door to higher education for many socioeconomically disadvantaged and minority students[4,5,13].

The first steps to developing a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) conceptual model to describe the current status of AAM students in the community college requires answering a series of questions. This work attempts to answer complex questions such as: What motivates AAM students to learn in CCs? How are their needs being met? How are they able to persist to successfully complete their personal and academic goals? How well have CCs prepared them for success beyond graduation? These questions are intertwined and cannot be answered in a simple independent way. The next sections describe motivation and sociocultural context, two important factors to understand AAM students' motivation to learn in CCs.

2. Students' Motivation

Motivation drives students to actively engage in the learning process. There are different reasons that drive students to participate in the learning process. Such reasons might be goal-, achievement-, or learning-oriented[14]. Students are internally and externally motivated by factors that contribute to their learning in CCs.

2.1 Internal Motivational Factors

Some students may be intrinsically motivated and self-driven to learn for the sake of learning rather than for achieving an external reward for their behaviors. Intrinsic motivation can be expressed as student's enjoyment, excitement, or interest in learning. Research indicates that

having a set of personal goals is considered a motivational factor for academic achievement among AAM students in CCs[16,17,18,19].

The individual learner is often motivated internally through his or her own self-perception, traits, experiences and backgrounds that shape his or her way of thinking and learning styles, and being a fully responsible individual rather than someone with the victim mentality mindset. Substantial empirical educational research points to common intrinsic motivational factors and barriers for AAM students in community colleges to include: community involvement, curiosity, challenge, and social interactions[20].

AAM students need to establish a set of personal, academic, and career goals to guide their educational journeys in CCs. These long- and short-term goals will ensure the students' commitment to obtaining their degrees and will motivate them to persist and ultimately succeed in their academic degrees[21].

AAM students enter colleges unaware of expectations of academic culture[21]. They are often underprepared academically, yet they often lack the understanding of the skills necessary to handle the various pressures that arise from the personal, social, cultural, and educational dimensions of their lives[21]. AAM students may face cultural norms and values that misalign with their own self, for example, "conventional behavioral expectations of college classes (assertion, competition, and individualism)"[21]. Students begin to doubt themselves and start to self-isolate and experience isolation by others, which increases their sense of alienation from the college. Trends indicated that AAMs with lower income, less confidence, and less ideal academic records are increasingly unlikely to be present on college campuses[22]. Time and time again, research has shown this increases their chance of attrition and hinders their potential for academic success[21].

On the contrary, large groups of AAM students are overcoming academic challenges and are successfully earning their high school diplomas and enrolling in two- and four-year institutions[22]. Griffin et al. (2013) provided strong evidence on how a national sample of AAM freshmen students embodied the cognitive, social, and institutional factors related to college access between 1971 and 2004. The study was of 214,951 AAM freshmen students, with fulltime status, and enrolled in over 1,112 baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities over three decades. The study revealed that AAM freshmen today have more affluent family backgrounds, better academic records, and greater confidence in their skills and abilities than their peers who entered college in earlier years. A need for a similar national study for CCs would be of great benefit.

Motivation is important in keeping students engaged in the learning process. Motivation can be nurtured and developed in and outside the classroom to empower AAM students to persist in CCs[20]. The next section describes the external motivational factors that influence the student's learning.

2.2 External Motivational Factors

Extrinsic motivation occurs when the student is motivated to learn based on a reward. External rewards in education may include academic grades, words of encouragements, and financial stability. Research shows that adequate financial support is a must to ensure the successful persistence and graduation of AAM students in CCs[21]. Financial aid, the amount awarded, and the portion of grants to loans are all crucial factors that AAMs consider while deciding to remain in school[21]. Financial stresses add to the students' sense of alienation and dissatisfaction in CCs, increasing their risk of dropping out and not persisting in CCs[21].

In addition to socioeconomic impact as a powerful external motivator, AAM students need to feel welcomed and affirmed at CC campuses. Classroom climates may be uninviting to students when held in large lecture halls. In addition, AAM students may feel intimidated, isolated, and ignored when the curriculum is impersonal and mono-cultural. Literature defines a mono-cultural perspective in the classroom as a culture that is completely dismissed and is viewed irrelevant by the instructor[21,23]. Ways of learning may clash with the instructor's teaching style, and therefore, learning becomes irrelevant to the students. When classroom conversations are being led by majority students and faculty, this becomes a constant reminder to AA students of their guest status. If students do not succeed academically, then they are misunderstood as underprepared, unintelligent, and unmotivated[21,23]. Students that are enrolled in CCs and 4-year institutions are typically motivated in a respectful and welcoming classroom environment that is supportive and inclusive to all ethnic groups, demanding high expectations and providing positive mentors and role models[14,21,24].

3. Students' Persistence

AAM students' academic persistence, graduation, and success rate entering CCs are alarming. The US Department of Education (2006) reported that a one year persistence rates for AAM students show low rates to continue their academic studies at CCs. AAMs have approximately 74% first year persistence rate, comparable to that of Caucasian (75%), Hispanic males (77%), and Asian American Males (91%).

In addition, AAM students have the lowest graduation rate than any other racial category, where only 16% graduate in three years. Their academic success has also been shown to be dismal with an average GPA of 2.64 in comparison to their Caucasian males (2.90), Hispanic (2.75), and Asian American males (2.84).

As educators and researchers, we must be cognizant of how persistence and academic success are being measured and how they can be over critical of CCs. It is important to note the lack of documented and published literature examining the persistence and academic success of AAM students in CCs. AAM students that attend CCs may be less engaged in campus activities due to lower social integration than seen at four-year institutions. Therefore, there is a great need to

expand the literature around AAM students attending CCs and what contextual factors account for their academic success.

AAM students' persistence in the CC learning process can be viewed through the perspective of adult learning theory and applying theory into practice (praxis). Adult learning theory and models bring focus to understanding the vital importance of context and its impact on the learners[14]. In particular, the following section reviews the impact of collaborative learning theory to better understand AAM students in CCs.

3.1 Collaborative Learning.

In CCs, collaborative learning among AAM students and their instructors take place in the classroom as project-based learning or problem-based learning. A project-based approach is applied in the classroom to connect students to knowing and meaning-making instead of a textbook approach or separate knowing. In an empirical study done by Cabrera, Nora, Crissman, Terenzini, Bernal, & Pascarella (2002), collaborative learning techniques were beneficial in value to all students (sample of 2,050 second-year students at 23 four-year colleges and universities), including AAMs[29]. These techniques include effective classroom discussions that led students to higher cognitive development and long-term knowledge retention as compared to traditional pedagogy[29]. It is important to note that collaborative learning approaches when combined with the different learning styles showed a higher significance for women and minority students[29].

In addition, Treisman and Fullilove's (1990) work illustrated that AA students enrolled in collaborative learning courses had higher GPAs, higher retention rates, and were more likely to major in mathematics than their AA counterparts enrolled in traditional courses. On the other hand, Tinto (1997) found that collaborative learning was effective in promoting persistence in college regardless of a student's gender, race, or ethnicity[29] (p. 22). Therefore, when done well, collaborative learning techniques provide effective classroom strategies that are beneficial in value to all students, including AAMs in CCs.

Research indicates that cooperative learning meets some of the conditions for successful contact situation for minorities to include these conditions: "Individuals collaborate rather than compete, equal status among participants is promoted, and the focus of the group effort is directed at solving projects"[29] (p. 22). Limited research suggests that students' personal characteristics such as precollege academic ability, the number of hours per week spent studying and some classroom-based activities like participating in group discussions, foster openness towards diversity.

On the contrary, some activities that are collaborative in four-year collegiate classroom (including mathematics) may be viewed as discriminatory and prejudiced to some students. Minority students may feel singled out and treated differently and feel isolated and alienated from college campus[29]. As a result, they may become unmotivated to engage in learning, and

possibly impact their persistence and success in the future.   Further research need to be conducted around collaborative learning at CCs to see if this also holds true for AAM students at CCs.

Since collaborative learning techniques seem to be beneficial and collectively encourages responsibility to all students, it seems that it's beneficial to incorporate it properly into CCs' practice[29]. Students break down stereotypes, learn to work together as groups, develop listening skills, learn the art of negotiating and compromising, learn interpersonal skills, and are exposed to diverse people. AAMs become active learners in the educational process; faculty also benefit by using different teaching strategies and are encouraged to use multiple perspectives when examining the classroom content area. Lastly, institutions benefit too, by retaining AAM students, encouraging faculty to try something new while instructing and producing graduates who are critical thinkers, problem solvers and more open to diversity, key conditions to live in the current fast moving, technologically and globally diverse society. In addition to student's motivational factors and persistence, AAM student's success is impacted by key success factors that are discussed in the next sections.

4. Students' Academic Success

Academic success for AAM students at CCs is mainly documented in doctoral dissertations with minimal occurrence in peer reviewed journal articles[45]. AAM students at CCs bring to their learning social, economic, and academic attributes. Research studies indicate that factors associated with academic success for AAMs at CCs are impacted by personal, institutional, academic, and psychological factors[19,21,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42,43,44,45].

Wood (2010) developed a conceptual model as part of his doctoral dissertation around the academic success of AAM students at the community college (see Figure 1). Wood's work consisted of a meta-analysis of 50 peer-reviewed articles around AAM students in CCs that guided his work. Wood conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 28 AAM students attending CCs in Arizona. Discussed in the following sections are the four factors that influence the academic success of AAM students at the community college.
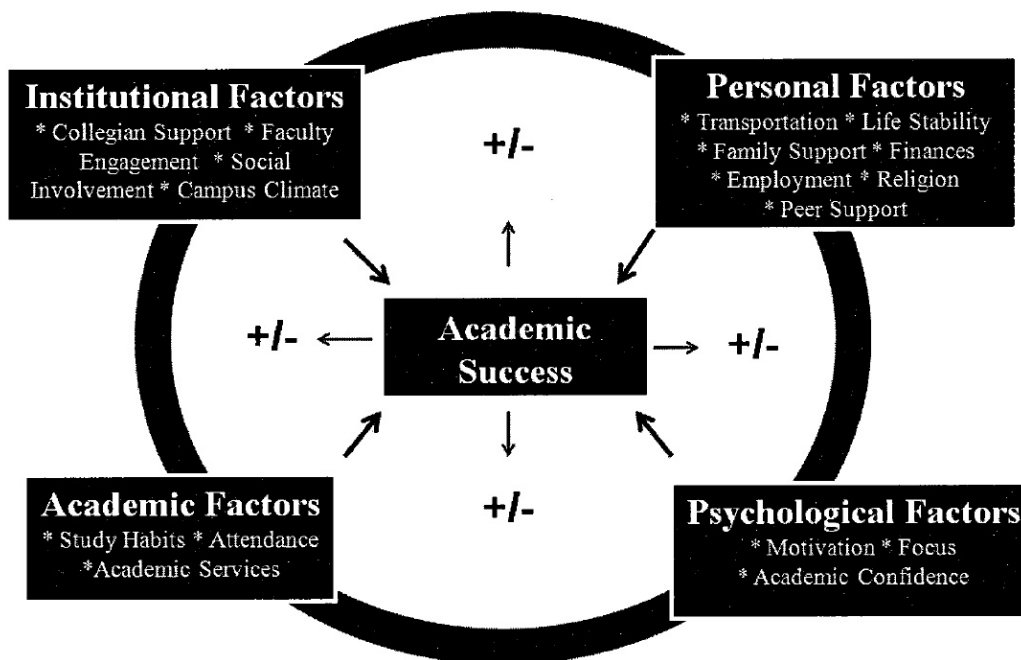
Institutional Factors
* Collegian Support * Faculty Engagement * Social Involvement * Campus Climate

Personal Factors
* Transportation * Life Stability * Family Support * Finances * Employment * Religion * Peer Support

+/-

+/- ← **Academic Success** → +/-

+/-

Academic Factors
* Study Habits * Attendance *Academic Services

Psychological Factors
* Motivation * Focus * Academic Confidence

Figure 1. Wood's (2010) conceptual model of African-American male academic success in the community college. Personal, institutional, academic, and psychological factor are interrelated and influence one another. The +/- symbols are indicators of the complexity of the relationships among these factors.

4.1 Key to Success through Personal Factors

According to Wood (2010), seven personal factors that contribute to AAM students' academic success in the community college include *transportation*, *life stability*, *family support*, *finances*, *employment*, *religion*, and *peer support*[45].

Transportation according to Wood's work was seen as a barrier to academic success of AAM students in CCs. The further away the students lived from campus, the more challenging the transportation became to students, especially those who rode the bus to class[45]. We have observed a similar occurrence with our AAM students who participated in our mentoring incubator initiative.

Life stability was a personal factor that impacted students' academic success. It is defined in terms of the students' relationship with others outside of campus (i.e. peers, family, or partners). When life became unstable for students, they distanced themselves from school, stopped studying, skipped class, or missed assignments. Examples of instabilities included a death in the family and critical illnesses[45].

Family support positively impacted the students' academic success. Female role model from the family inspired the students towards academic success and influenced them to excel academically[45].

Finances created personal barriers to many students' academic success. Lack of financial aid funding and financial stability was a distraction to students' educational focus and required the students to work while attending school[45].

Employment played a negative role in most of the students' academic success. The majority of the participants in Wood's study worked in the evening in physically demanding positions to financially support their academic endeavor, taking away valuable study time[45].

Religion played a positive support to students' academic success. Believing in God empowered the students and inspired them to excellence. Their faith enabled the students to overcome obstacles and to achieve their academic success[45].

Peer support seemed to personally impact the students' academic success. The majority of the students' external peer support seemed to convey a negative message about attending school. However, a handful of the students described external peers as an encouraging support to their academic success[45].

Additional research extends the seven personal factors discussed in Wood's conceptual model[19]. Wood and Palmer (2013) demonstrated the relationship between AAM student success in CCs and personal goals set by the students[19]. Personal goals are life goals of AAM students that promote their academic and psychological development. They are conscious and non-academic goals pursued by students and include goals pertaining to their intellect, social, political, economic, and spiritual goals. The three statistically significant personal goals pertaining for AAM students in CCs included: being a community leader, having financial prosperity, and experiencing residential mobility[19].

AAMs in CCs are more likely than other male students to set a personal goal of being influential community leaders[19]. Therefore, leadership roles such as student government, clubs, and sports, must be available to AAMs to encourage them to participate on CC campuses. In addition, setting up a student outreach extension and engagement for AAM students to advise high school students on the process of applying to CCs and share their experiences with high school seniors may also provide opportunities for AAM students in CCs to take on immediate leadership roles. Research supports the positive impact of leadership roles on students and how it may be applied in the classroom to assist academic progress and enhance student success among AAMs[19, 38].

Financial prosperity was another personal goal for 90% of the AAM participants in Wood and Palmer's empirical research study (2013)[19]. This personal goal may be supported by CC administrators in career counseling, financial aid specialists and transfer center staff, keeping in mind the autonomy of the students and not directing students toward specific majors that provide career options with high financial returns. Providing student professional workshops on managing finances might be of use to increase AAM students' basic financial literacy (i.e., personal budget and filing income taxes) and providing a space to address more advanced topics (i.e., investing and improving credit scores)[19].

In addition to community leadership and financial prosperity, AAMs in this study indicated a significant personal goal of residential mobility [19]. The majority of the AAM participants in this study expressed a great desire to move away from their perspective hometowns. Keeping this goal in mind, CC administrators can encourage students toward the possibility to transfer to 4-year institutions beyond their local area by encouraging attendance to college fairs. Also, students that are interested in the workforce after graduation may be interested in researching non-local companies that may be hiring[19].

4.2 Key to Success through Institutional Factors

Faculty-student interaction is one of the ways colleges meet student needs[45]. CCs are encouraged to provide places where students can study, congregate, and develop relationships to meet the students' needs and sense of belonging on campus. AAM students need to feel a sense of attachment and belonging to the campus where they attend classes to persist in their learning and to succeed academically. Mentorship is an apprenticeship process that has been identified as a great retention strategy. Mentors can be viewed as the supporters, encouragers, guiders, and challengers to students during their academic experiences in community colleges. Mentors often challenge the students to question their conceptions of self and the world around them and to formulate new, more developed perspectives[14]. Through this transformative learning process, mentors are to listen to the students and see how they are progressing towards their educational goals[40] (p. 21). Mentors share their personal- and academic-lived experiences with students to promote adult development. These mutual shared stories allow the mentors to provide support and a vision for, as well as to challenge, the students[14].

Mentoring programs provide a significant increase in enrollment and retention of AAMs and increase their overall satisfaction with their academic experiences[39]. Despite the benefit of formal mentoring, AAMs in CCs often find themselves short with time, energy and the ability necessary to participate in such well-designed programs and are limited due to the many responsibilities and barriers that put them at risk, such as family, work, lack of support, and lack of transportation[39]. "The ultimate success of any of these types of programs lies in the ability of community colleges to assist the student in dealing with the everyday challenges faced by minority students"[39] (p.32). Providing minority male mentoring programs is one institutional solution to ensure the success of AAM students. It creates a sense of belonging for students on CC campuses and maintains a sustainable service and environment conducive to AAM success and achievement[19, 39].

Multiple-level mentorship is where AAM students are exposed to a variety of individuals who are committed to ensuring that they adjust to life as college students. Individuals will be able to help students overcome some of the pre-college characteristics such as academic preparation and first-generation college student status, along with dealing with some of the conflicts that arise as a result of their enrollment in college, such as life-school balance.

Additionally, research shows that students participating in mentoring programs are more likely satisfied with their academic experience than those who do not participate in mentoring programs[21,39,41,42,43,44]. Pope's research results (2002) suggest that AAMs in CCs prefer multiple types of mentoring, both formal and informal[39]. AAM students in this study preferred peer-mentoring and faculty-student mentoring. Educational policies and practices can be created to advance the interests of AAM students to improve the enrollment and retention.

Mentorship promotes holistic adult development of the students. It is a process where the mentor/mentee relationship is reciprocal and nurturing to all involved. It supports AAMs' success and increases their confidence in their abilities to persist and overcome obstacles to complete their academic degrees. The mentoring relationship encourages the use of creative activities that can assist in looking for connections in unlikely places between apparently unconnected and disparate ideas and experiences. All of these experiences bring forth transformation and teach students strategies that cross cultural borders[14].

4.3 Key to Success through Academic Factors

Academic success of AAM students in CCs can be positively impacted through academic factors such as successful study habits, regularly attending class, and taking advantage of student academic services[45]. Wood's (2010) research demonstrated that the most effective studying time is shortly after each class, on a regular basis, and a few days before the next class meeting. Instructors can encourage their students to engage in these successful study habits to assist in their academic success. In addition, study groups seemed to provide academic support to the students on a peer level, where students are collectively learning from each other and working collaboratively to succeed in their academic experiences.

In addition to successful study habits, attending classes on a regular basis positively impacts the students' academic success. Faculty must work together to ensure that the courses offered to students are socially and culturally relevant and tied to the lived experiences of students.

Lastly, utilizing academic support services positively impacted the students' academic success at the CCs. These academic services that were available on campus included tutoring centers, libraries, and computer laboratories.

4.4 Key to Success through Psychological Factors

Psychological factors that emerged from Wood's (2010) in-depth interviews with the students included motivation, focus, and academic confidence. Internal and external motivation, as seen earlier, is key in students' persistence and academic success. Students' academic focus and personal commitment to their academic careers can also positively impact their academic success in CCs. Expressing an academic confidence also positively impacts the students' success in their educational experiences. Students that believe that they are capable in academically achieving their goals are more likely to succeed.

5. Conclusion

In today's competitive technological advances and global economy knowledge base, the U.S. must use its human capital to better position itself and invest in higher education attainment. The U.S. needs to regain dominance and display the ability to compete in the global marketplace, more specifically against China and India's massive growth in training its citizens in STEM fields. While minorities are projected to outnumber non-minorities, some researchers suggest that AAMs are in a worse predicament than other ethnic groups in terms of academic achievement and successful academic outcomes. Increasing higher education participation and attainment for AAMs is not only a matter of equity, but in the context of STEM, there is a sense of urgency. Increasing AAMs in STEM arenas has important implications for the global economy competitiveness because these fields are crucial drivers for the growth and development of the U.S. economy. Educators and policymakers should consider changing their current practices to encourage college participation and success among AAMs by: 1) improving the educators' quality for AAM students; 2) encouraging greater enrollment of AAMs in math and science college prep courses before entering college; 3) ensuring that AAMs have access to adequate resources to financially support their academic careers; 4) improving the quality of remedial educational programs which some research suggests facilitate access to education for AMMs; and 5) partnering colleges and schools to foster minority students' academic preparedness for college, which will reduce barriers to college access and promote the academic success[26].

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