100 Black Men of America
Education Committee Subcommittee on Higher Education Committee
Graduation Rates

College persistence and completion rates for students from backgrounds underrepresented in higher education have remained consistently lower than for whites. Research reveals that Black, Latinx, and Native American Indian or Alaska native students will not meet the nation's two most prominent attainment goals--a strong workforce and a healthy society (Nettles 2017). Black students who entered college in fall 0f 2011 had the lowest completion rates and the highest dropout rates across all higher education sectors. Further, Black male students experience the lowest graduation rates than Black females (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019).

College Choice. Choosing the right college or university is a critical part of any student's ultimate success. It is a stressful process from the self-discovery of subjects or fields of interest to researching institutions and making that big decision to choose that particular place. For Black and Latinx, the process proves even more daunting, often resulting in selecting the wrong major of an institution or one that does not have a compatible degree.   Several other " choice traps" that students and their parents should avoid, include:

- Waiting until the last minute to apply and then rushing through the process.
- Following a friend or family member without understanding the real options.
- Going far away from home, or staying close to home as the primary, if not only, reason to do so.
- Relying solely on what others think you should do.
- Assuming that one cannot afford a specific institution, without checking the financial aid available.

Of course, there are other considerations to consider in choosing the right fit. However, taking the necessary steps to understand what is essential, the student and the parent play a critical role in this process—for the student, spending quality time writing a compelling personal statement is necessary. Doing so serves as a self-assessment exercise and sends a clear message to the admission office about who you are and how you see yourself—for the parent or guardian, providing support and encouragement without placing limits on their aspirations. The next step is to research the institutions to determine whether they meet your needs and interests--selection is a two-way street. Students and parents have every right to ask the hard questions about what the institutions offer or do not provide for their students.

Transitioning to College. For all student types, most data estimates indicate that only 35 percent of undergraduate students enrolled in four-year institutions receive a bachelor's degree in four years (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Whitmore, 2006). When you review community colleges' data, only 50 percent earn an associate's degree in six to eight years (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003).
Pertaining to Black undergraduate students, 22 percent graduate in four years, 35 percent in five years, and 46 percent in six years (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019). There are a

variety of reasons that negatively impact these low numbers. One factor contributing to them is students of negative color transition to predominantly white colleges (PWIs) is racial discrimination that they endure (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Being one of the few examples of their race on campus is a complicated process to navigate, and Black students struggle to manage their identity in these campus environments. The lack of diverse faculty can also be problematic for Black students when they are not taught by faculty that look like or represent their race or ethnicity. This dynamic poses extreme challenges in developing an inclusive and comfortable environment for Black students (Smith, 1998).

Academic Achievement. Data collected by the American Council on Education in 2019 reveal that six-year completion rates for Black students trailed all other groups that entered four-year institutions in 2011:

Table 1. 2011 Six Year Completion Rates

Asian students	75.8%
Black students	**46.0%**
Hispanic/Latinx students	55.7 %
White students	71.1%

Much needs to be done to improve academic achievement among all groups, especially Black students. All is not lost. Increased retention and persistence can be achieved with concerted and strategic efforts by institutions, parents, and students to confront the barriers to ultimate success.

It is no secret that academic success is inextricably linked to several factors that have been substantiated by a long tradition of research urging institutions to understand student involvement and engagement as critical to their academic success. Such engagements require institutions to provide culturally relevant environments that undergird academic achievement, including intentional efforts to provide culturally sensitive advising and counseling. Students and parents should expect institutions to support "high impact" involvement in the life of the campus in ways that give students co-curricular activities to complement academic success. Such efforts include organizations that help students to explore their identities and creative interests. Social engagement in safe spaces can also enhance student academic achievement. In essence, academic success involves much more than classroom performance.

Student support systems. Student transitions to college will continue to be an essential reality for entering students. College student populations are becoming increasingly diverse as older, more mature students seeking to earn a degree. When a student of any background seeks higher education, the support systems must be in place to ensure that they have every opportunity to be successful. In their acclaimed book, I*nvolving Colleges: Successful Approaches to Fostering Learning and Development Outside of the Classroom* Kuh and Associates (1991) asserted that students that were successful in colleges surrounding themselves into communities that resembled themselves so that they would feel more comfortable in the broader campus

community. This notion is particularly important for Black students who transition to large (PWIs). The climate at PWIs can often be unwelcoming for students of color, and they spend their first months merely attempting to navigate the dominant culture in place, a culture that is primarily suitable for the traditional aged white students who attend. Without an informed understanding of the collegiate structure and processes that are in place. Many students of color fall behind quickly and never regain traction to be successful. This White Paper intends to provide timely information to assist Black students toward graduation which starts with successful navigation, a sense of belonging, and developing individual motivations towards academic success.

Navigating the college environment. As discussed earlier, the most crucial factor of college success is for students to understand the type of institution they plan to attend. Students and parents should have a deep understanding of the context of the institution they plan to enroll in. Students and parents deserve transparent communication about what type of financial, academic. Social, physical, and psychological demands and supports they will encounter at the institution. The ability to understand the institution's role in facilitating student success and communicating is a foundational feature of the environment.

Students must do their part as well. It is a two-way approach between the institution and the student to do well; it goes both ways for it to work. Many students enter college with savvy skills to navigate the space. They are not knowledgeable about the programs and opportunities available to them. Based on the family background of those who attended college or not, students will approach these supports differently. Often, and sadly, it's the students who could benefit from the support services offered that are least likely to take advantage of them.

Students and parents should understand that successful navigation in college is primarily dependent on the individual effort and the extracurricular activities available to them (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). When an institution admits a student, it commits to the success of that student. Students should be aware of the programs that are designed to facilitate transition into the institution such as teaching and learning spaces, and programs that provide academic support outside of class; they should also be knowledgeable of the personal counseling and career placement offices.

Sense of Belonging. For institutions to improve graduation rates for Black students, they must make students feel connected to the institution, meaning the campus climate promotes a sense of belonging. Very often, students who attend PWIs often feel a sense of alienation. If PWIs want to continue to attract and retain Black students, they must do a better job of creating atmospheres that provide a nice "feel" for Black students. An environment that encourages student involvement that leads to engagement at the institution is needed if students are to meet with success. There are more than a few responsible measures PWIs should take to support Black students on their campuses to feel they belong there.

Networking and Connections. Institutions must create spaces for students of like minds to work together, network, collaborate, and affirm one another either inside or outside of the classroom. For example, education students should have meaningful experiences to learn about schools and

teach in communities with teacher mentors that will ultimately hire them into those school districts. It is essential to know if these programs exist to provide high impact practices for student success.

Faculty/Staff Interactions. As a student, you should always feel comfortable talking with faculty about your academic success. Frequently, faculty intentionally or unintentionally impose an intimidating fear or uncertainty about being approached. Students on a campus that supports their academic development have faculty members who are willing to meet with them, encourage them, and assist them in the right direction should they require further assistance. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) data consistently highlight that faculty-student involvement is a top indicator of persistence in graduation for all students. One reason that students are less likely to engage with faculty is the higher number of adjunct faculty that teach. Because adjunct faculty teach fewer courses and offer limited access to office hours, they are less likely to seek assistance.

Strategic Extracurricular Activities. For students to continue with college persistence, they should be involved in meaningful activities that enhance their overall ability to be successful. Today's college students will have a variety of responsibilities such as family and work commitments that will limit the time available to be academically and socially engaged on campuses. Students must be involved in the appropriate racial/ethnic clubs and organizations that positively impact social support and networks, especially during their first year of college. It is not uncommon for Black students to feel the pressure to blend into mainstream organizations. At PWIs, Black students need organizations that will provide a community of support, warmth, and social niche. This sense of comfort of being a part of a community or external club will help students feel connected to their institution, thus improving their chances of graduation.

Retention and Persistence. Many factors impact student retention and persistence. Success in college requires persistence towards graduation, especially the grit from the first year to the second year. Many colleges rely heavily on first-year persistence as an indicator of their overall retention reports. Retention is measured by the percentage number of students who return the next year.

If colleges and universities want to be successful at persistence and retention, they must include systems that support decreasing student departure. Unnecessary student departure derails their aspirations of seeking a college degree. Based on research, below are the indicators for students who are profiled as needing increased support from higher education institutions.

Conclusion and Implications. This white paper sought to summarize critical characteristics for successful enrollment into college. The paper highlights how to transition to college, academic achievement, and a sense of belonging, particularly for students of color on white campuses. The paper also focuses on students' characteristics that may benefit from the support and institutions to minimize the dropout rates of these particular students.

Many factors should be considered as Black students prepare to attend and graduate from college. Institutions must be prepared to inform students and parents about the support services available to make informed decisions and plans. For many students of color, they are the first to attend college, so the ability to thrive in the first year is critical to their success. For colleges that seek to increase their graduation rates, they can only do this by understanding the whole student pathway, including where students come from and what they also leave for, and why. These will become the colleges that lead to more successful students and improve the overall institutional graduation profile. As high school students begin to engage with their counselors and other mentors, along with campus visits, they must ask relevant questions that will help lead them toward the finish line of success - graduation.

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