

“It takes fire to make steel”: Stories of two African American males finding purpose through their college experiences

By: Erik M. Hines, [L. DiAnne Borders](#), and [Laura M. Gonzalez](#)

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Abstract:

Purpose – This study aims to understand the asset and success factors that contributed to college completion of African American males who persisted through college. Only a dismal 22 per cent of African American males receive bachelor’s degrees compared to 41 per cent of White males (Kena et al., 2015).

Design/methodology/approach – The data were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. The authors interviewed two first-generation African-American males from rural backgrounds to capture their experiences of their process to college completion.

Findings – Themes, based in cultural capital theory, that impacted their college persistence were identified within their pre-college experiences, college experiences and post-college perceptions. Recommendations for helping rural African-American males attend and persist through college are offered.

Research limitations/implications – Only two participants from one predominately white institution in the southeastern USA were interviewed. Rural students from other geographical areas might have different backgrounds, challenges, assets and successes. Although the interview questions were based on relevant literature, they may not have covered all key aspects of the participants’ experiences. As in any qualitative study, biases of the researchers and research team may have influenced the results, although these were identified and shared before reading any of the transcripts and then discussed several times during the data analysis process.

Practical implications – Educators not only should try to address the cultural capital limitations of these men but also highlight and build on their cultural assets. These assets include familial and platonic individuals who see their potential for success and encourage them to attend college to become something better than what they see in their community, reverse role models who encourage youth to make different choices than they did, media-based examples of successful

Black students, cultural messages of strength and determination (e.g. Million Man March) and the exhortation to be an example that other African-American boys could look up to.

Originality/value – This paper addresses the need for K-12 and higher education institutions to understand how to assist first-generation, rural African-American males in getting admitted to college, matriculating through college and graduating from college.

Keywords: Rural | College | African-American males | Degree attainment

Article:

No one is a better source of instructive insights on what it takes for Black men to succeed in college than Black men who have actually succeeded in college (Harper, 2012, p. 25).

The plight of Black males in education is well-documented. Starting at the K-12 level, many experience low teacher expectations, limited academic preparation, higher expulsion rates and disproportionate placement in special education (Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2012; Harry et al., 2000; Moore et al., 2008). As a result, many see college as an unachievable aspiration.

Indeed, statistics confirm that degree attainment is elusive for most African-American males. Only a dismal 22 per cent of African American males receive bachelor's degrees compared to 41 per cent of White males (Kena et al., 2015). Nationally, African-American males make up less than 5 per cent of the college population, the same percentage as in 1976, and two-thirds of those who enroll in a college drop out before graduating (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010). Degree completion and persistence are lower for African-American males than any other racial/ethnic group (Stoops, 2004), male or female (Harper, 2012). In fact, Black women outnumber Black men on campus at a ratio of two to one, and they graduate with their bachelor's degree at a similarly high ratio (Black men, 34 per cent; Black women, 65 per cent) (US Department of Education, 2010). This disparity of educational attainment for African-American males must be addressed, as a college degree is a gateway to economic success (Perna, 2005).

Review of the literature

Little is known about the college persistence of rural African-American males. However, a number of researchers (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper, 2012; Palmer et al., 2009; Steele, 2000; Strayhorn, 2008, 2010) have sought to explain why African-American males do not enroll, persist and graduate from college. Identified issues include lack of academic preparation, financial restraints and the need to work, internalization of negative stereotypes, pressure to prove they are academically capable despite past achievements and faculty and college administrators' negative perceptions of African-American male students, all of which can lead to lower grades and, therefore, contribute to the abatement of college persistence for African-American males (Bonner and Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2012; Steele and Aronson, 1995). Although this approach highlights important barriers and challenges, it provides only a deficit view of the problem (Harper, 2009, 2012). Studies of African-American males who persist to graduation could provide a more informative approach, as little is known about African Americans who complete college (Strayhorn, 2010; Walpole, 2008). To date, however, researchers studying

African-American male college completers have focused primarily on high achievers (Fries-Britt and Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2009, 2012). They have reported that these students have high social and cultural capital, come from families of relatively higher socioeconomic status (SES), receive high expectations for going to college from parents, have outstanding K-12 academic records and have parents who know how to navigate post-secondary institutions, particularly college. Although such results are informative, not all identified factors are amenable to intervention (e.g. SES), and such high-achieving students are not the norm for any group of undergraduates, including African-American males.

Rural students represent the fastest growing segment of college students, yet little is known about their pre-college and college experiences (Byun et al., 2012a, 2012b). Rural students face unique challenges such as high poverty rates, lack of college planning counseling, low parental expectations and limited career and college preparatory courses, all of which can hinder college attendance and completion (Byun et al., 2012a, 2012b; Griffin et al., 2011). In addition, many rural students would be first-generation college students (i.e. students whose parents did not attend college) who face additional obstacles such as not understanding the financial aid process, unfamiliarity with the college culture and how to access resources on campus and adjusting to faculty expectations. Their parents are unable to provide them with information about the process of getting to and graduating from college and do not have the social networks that could be of assistance. These results regarding rural college students, however, primarily reflect the experiences of White college students; Black students made up less than 10 per cent of previous samples.

Rationale

What are needed are non-deficit studies of other subgroups of African-American male college graduates, such as those who grew up in rural settings. First-generation African-American males from rural areas, a minority within a minority, would face numerous and perhaps unique challenges in enrolling in and graduating from college, yet their challenges, and potential assets, have not been studied. Thus, in response to calls for within-group studies of both African Americans (Strayhorn, 2009; Walpole, 2008) and rural college students (Byun et al., 2012a, 2012b), the purpose of this study was to tell the stories of two rural, first-generation African-American male college students who attended and completed college. We chose to study African-American males who graduated from a predominately white institution (PWI) because the vast majority of African-American students attend PWIs (Strayhorn, 2009). These students; however, often report that they feel socially isolated and unsupported, experience pressure to prove their academic intellect and consistently combat negative racial stereotypes (Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008, 2009). Compared to their counterparts at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), they report lower grade point averages (GPAs), are less satisfied with their college experience and are less likely to persist to college completion (Walpole, 2008). Thus, the stories of two rural, first-generation African-American male PWI college graduates would offer unique insights regarding how they got to college, the challenges they faced and how they persisted to graduation. Our hope was to gain information about how to assist other African-American male students in their journey from a rural background to college degree attainment.

Theoretical framework

Cultural capital theory was chosen as a foundational theory, as it highlights how the presence or absence of resources can impact individuals as they seek social mobility. Bourdieu (1986) asserted that individuals possess several forms of capital, with cultural capital being resources acquired through family, social context and education that give them a particular social status or position. Cultural capital comes in three forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital refers to “dispositions of the mind and body” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 51), meaning a person’s dialect, attitudes, values and social norms, primarily transmitted through the family, but also received from community and school. Objectified cultural capital includes tangible, material possessions, such as automobiles, paintings, books and homes. Institutionalized cultural capital refers to societal recognition of credentials an individual has received or obtained, such as degrees, licenses, skills, titles and other qualifications. Cultural capital is tied to field, another Bourdieuan concept, which describes the setting in which groups decide which forms of capital are valued and which are not. Thus, a farmer’s understanding of weather and crop cycles is valued cultural capital acquired from life experiences in a rural setting, but this form of capital may not be valued in urban life.

As some forms of cultural capital are valued more than others in a particular field (Bourdieu, 1986), individuals may experience varying advantages and disadvantages in their efforts to maintain or attain a certain social status. First-generation, rural African-American male college students, for example, might be disadvantaged by their parents’ lack of knowledge about college planning (embodied and institutionalized cultural capital) and limited financial support (objectified cultural capital), yet might be advantaged by their parents’ high value for education or collective support from a church community (embodied cultural capital). Once enrolled in college, these students’ cultural capital could be enhanced by outreach programming or support of university faculty members, or disadvantaged by the lack of such supports to increase their college knowledge (embodied cultural capital) as they moved toward degree completion. Even those pursuing or those who have obtained a degree will still be subject to social evaluations of their race/ethnicity, gender, etc. Although our participants were lacking cultural capital related to college access, they apparently had cultural assets that helped them complete their degrees. Education is one vehicle for moving up in social class, so that persistence and success in college could increase cultural capital, depending on how it is evaluated by others in the social field. Cultural capital theory, then, served as a useful lens for identifying the assets and deficits in resources that influenced our participants’ pre-college, college and post-college experiences.

Methodology

Participants

Two African-American males who graduated from a mid-sized PWI in the southeast USA were interviewed for this study. At the time of the interview, they were 31 and 34 years old. Both reported that they grew up in very poor rural counties and both considered themselves to be first-generation college students; although one parent of each had received an associate’s degree from a local community college, no parent had attended a four-year college. Both had received bachelor’s degrees in African-American Studies (AAS). In addition, Sam (pseudonym) had completed a bachelor’s degree in political science and a master’s degree in English, and he was

enrolled in a doctoral degree program in education. He was an adjunct instructor at two four-year colleges. Kevin (pseudonym) was self-employed, the owner and operator of an assisted living facility. Sam was engaged to be married, and Kevin was married and the father of one son. During the years they attended the PWI, the percentage of African-American students rose from approximately 15 to 20 per cent and the number of African-American freshmen almost doubled, although data suggested that, for most of these years, about one-third of the African-American freshmen did not return for their sophomore year (compared to about one-fourth or less for White students).

Procedures

Potential participants were recruited through the AAS program due to the program's extensive alumni network. Five graduates responded to a Facebook posting soliciting participants and completed a 15-minute preliminary interview and supplementary questionnaire to determine whether they met the criteria for the study (i.e. African-American male from a rural area who was a first-generation college student at the PWI, had graduated no less than two years before). Kevin and Sam met the criteria and agreed to participate in a 90-minute semi-structured interview conducted in a confidential setting on the PWI campus with recording capabilities. Each received a \$100 gift card as compensation.

Interview questions were created based on the literature on college access and success, especially as related to sources of cultural capital for African-American males, first-generation college students and students from rural settings. The interview covered questions concerning the men's initial thoughts about attending college; reasons for wanting a college degree; the events, people and programs that influenced their college going; their experiences at the PWI; and the meaning of having a degree as well as current life and career situations. Audiotapes of the two interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

We used a narrative approach to tell the personal experience stories (Creswell, 2007) of the two participants, given our focus on learning the personal meanings the two men gave to their experiences around pre-college planning, experiences at college and post-college reflections. A narrative approach is particularly appropriate when the goal is to give voice to marginalized groups (Hays and Singh, 2012), as represented by our two participants. Participants' stories, or narratives, are often reported as an unfolding chronology, with a focus on the context (i.e. rural setting, PWI) and important themes within the participants' experiences. To identify themes, we used interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1996), an approach that is focused on how meanings are constructed in a social context. Following guidelines outlined by Smith and Osborn (2008), members of a research team (the first two authors – an African-American male and a White female – and two graduate student research assistants – an African-American female and a White female) independently read the interview transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the dialog, making notes in the left margin of notable words and phrases; these were compared and discussed during team meetings. Next, potential themes were noted in the right margin of the transcripts. These themes were reviewed and discussed in several team meetings, resulting in clusters of agreed-upon themes. The themes and transcripts were then reviewed by

an external auditor (the third author) who provided comments and suggestions, which were considered and, by research team consensus, incorporated into the clusters and themes. The final clusters and themes were then ordered by chronology, consistent with the narrative approach. Finally, an earlier version of the Results section was sent to the two participants for member checking; one responded and reported the results accurately reflected his experiences and his meaning-making of them.

Results

Pre-college experiences

The men identified a range of influences on their pre-college planning and decision-making. These are discussed in terms of embodied, objective and institutionalized cultural capital.

Embodied cultural capital.

Parents and other family members were primary influences for both, building a sense of what would be possible if they went to college. Kevin's mother used the "fear factor", saying she would kick him out of the house at age 18 years unless he went to college. Extended family members sent the message that "You're going to school. You're gonna leave home and you're gonna do better than what we did, hopefully". Kevin said:

I just didn't want to wind up like my grandfather or my father or my uncles. My grandfather, I could tell that he wished that he had had more from an academic perspective. I think he felt that he was less than a man because he had 21, 22 year old kids coming into his workplace telling him what to do and he had been working there for 20 years.

Sam remembered that "growing up I'd always heard my parents say that they wished someone had pushed them to go to college". His parents were avid readers who bought their children books, magazine subscriptions and a set of encyclopedias. Sam said, "We knew that literacy was something that was important because we saw our parents do it". He added:

College was appealing because it represented just knowledge, and I've always been a student of really random knowledge. I was kind of the geeky guy in middle school who would randomly read encyclopedias [...]. So it just always interested me to go to a place where the library is the central place to be, that the university is a place of knowledge.

In addition, his father suggested he would be a positive role model, saying, "If nothing else, you will be an example to other Black men in the area, your cousins". These messages received over time imprinted themselves on the consciousness of the participants, thus becoming embodied cultural capital.

Each also was encouraged by other adults (e.g. coaches, ROTC commanders) to go to college. Beyond encouragement, however, these adults offered little guidance in planning for and being prepared for the demands of college. Kevin also emphasized television shows that

“programmed” him to go to college, including *The Cosby Show*, *School Days* and *A Different World*. Bill Cosby, he said, “introduced me to a life I didn’t have access to at all. There were Black folks in school on those shows, so it was like, “I can go there”.” From these shows and other popular culture figures, Kevin heard, “College is the only option for you. It doesn’t matter what your family life was”. Kevin also emphasized cultural messages that pushed college during that time:

Brothers, we gotta work it out. Million man march. You know, let’s go try to get an education, man. We gotta expand our own minds if we’re gonna try to change anything. You can’t continue to wait on your oppressor to assist you in, you know, bettering yourself. You have to go and do that for yourself.

The men had mixed experiences with their high school counselors. Sam reported that his counselor originally wanted to put him in the trade school track, but he insisted on being scheduled in the college track. His counselors, he said, “were of little help”. Kevin reported that his counselors saw his potential, pushed him (and others on the honor roll) to take Advanced Placement courses and classes at the community college, and encouraged him to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). “They knew my family and knew my story, and understood the effects of a person’s household on their education”, he said, yet they seemed to believe that if he could get to college, he would succeed. Nevertheless, he reported that the counselor told him to go to a community college or trade school first. “I thought she was just hating on me cause I was a Black man and she didn’t want me to go to a university”, he noted, although some years later, he reflected that perhaps the counselor realized that he was not adequately prepared for a four-year college. Thus, participant stories reflected both positive and negative resources for building embodied cultural capital.

Participants also reported racial incidents at their predominately White high schools. Sam indicated, “It was difficult for the simple fact that there are still intractable racist attitudes in the area”. He said that his principal was racist, and cited:

[...] teachers who gave me grades that I did not deserve, in my opinion, I didn’t deserve, but because I was one of the achieving Black people in school, “We’re gonna hold you back as much as possible”.

He reported that when he entered the election for Student Government Association (SGA) President, they changed the rules, so that he was “suddenly no longer eligible”.

That incident is one that in my family we still talk about because that was one of the few times I’ve ever seen my father cry. He went to the high school to confront the principal but he couldn’t do anything about it.

He added:

Maybe that’s why I didn’t think college was primarily for me because if I was catching hell in high school, what was I gonna catch at college? Little did I know that college was gonna mirror high school all over again, some of the same things.

In terms of social field, the participants were learning that some groups would not recognize their cultural capital, no matter how many resources they built.

Objective cultural capital.

Both men saw a college degree as the way to escape limited opportunities in their rural environment and, thus, achieve a better job and a “better life”. Kevin said, “This place is dying. They’re closing all off the mills. You know, you have to go to college in order to have a chance now”. Thus, the poverty and lack of opportunity in the rural environment meant that there was little objective cultural capital available to the participants. Throughout high school, Sam was concerned that he did not know what his major would be, “But I knew that there’s a notion out here that if you get a college degree you’re gonna get a good job”. He added:

Being from a rural background, you saw college, or some people saw college, as a way to escape or to get away from rural life, which is working on the farm, manufacturing, all of that kind of stuff.

Education represented options to him.

Kevin’s “number one hurdle and challenge” in getting to college was money. He was determined to go to college, but “there were times when I didn’t think I could pay for it”, he said. He also mentioned a “lack of understanding” and “false expectations” about college because his parents could not provide much help due to their very limited knowledge of college planning activities, including the financial aid process. “I didn’t know anybody that graduated from college”, he added. As a result, he never had “a plan” except wanting to get out of his rural hometown. Sam added that he had to get past “self-defeating thoughts” that college might not be for him or that he would not get into a “good college”. In addition, he noted the limited resources in his high school, located in “the second poorest county in the state”. “I came from a very poor background but somehow I made it to college and graduated”, he said, noting this was part of his “testimony”.

Both men reported unattainable college choices. Kevin wanted to go to a military academy, and Sam wanted to go to a distinguished HBCU, “obviously because I’m an African American man and that’s the premier institution for an African American man in America”, but “it cost a bundle and I knew we didn’t have it”. Although their aspirations were high (embodied cultural capital), their concrete resources were few (objective cultural capital). Instead, each chose the mid-sized public PWI, which was far enough from home but not too far. Kevin’s high school chorus teacher, his only Black teacher there, recommended the music program at the PWI; his parents had suggested he consider a music major because “you can sing pretty well”. Sam was impressed by the Black student visitation weekend at the PWI. “They showed us the best of black. Everything that they had to offer that was black, they put it out there at black student visitation”. He also was impressed by the facilities and a message that attending a PWI was preferable to HBCU, which:

[...] they try to make you feel is a little lower than our education was. “We deal with, you know, all different races of people where they only deal with African-American people”. So you could look a little more assimilated.

Institutional cultural capital.

Importantly, both were involved in activities that allowed them to visit college campuses, and thus provided institutional recognition of their aspirations. Sam was involved in a TRIO college-preparation program throughout high school. TRIO and Upward Bound counselors encouraged him to get good grades and helped him prepare for the SAT. Kevin reported his ROTC commander and track coach continuously pushed him, “saying I would qualify”, and he cited the encouragement of the leader of a cultural arts group he joined. As part of the TRIO program, Sam participated in a summer research program on a college campus. He stated:

I had a sense of what college was. I had a sense of independence, going there during the summer months, doing research, and also having leisure time that you would have if you went to college, and what do you do with it? Do you study? Do you play?

Kevin attended invitational track meets and ROTC drills at an HBCU and a 4-H congress at another large PWI. Kevin also visited a cousin attending a nearby HBCU. There he saw students from other states and:

[...] brothers who were confident, walking around with something to believe in. They weren't just a black kid who didn't have nothing going for themselves. You saw brothers with suits on, walking to class. Everybody was busy. People had books and conversations. It was literally a different world than where I was from.

These experiences helped the participants see what capital could be accrued with access to formal opportunities and recognized credentials. Kevin was also impressed by the Black women he saw there: “Everywhere I turned there was a beautiful woman who seemed to be intelligent, who demanded more of a male”.

College experiences

Both men reported social and academic struggles as well as ongoing racially based challenges, some of which contributed to mental health issues but also, eventually, some new perspectives about themselves. Having experienced an important change in field (from small rural town to mid-sized university campus), the participants were at a loss to apply their previously held forms of cultural capital to the new setting.

Embodied social capital.

Little of their previously received resources or cultural attitudes prepared the participants for their new experiences, whether social or academic. Kevin described himself as “naïve”, saying that the first few days:

[...] shook my foundation, my whole world. My first day on campus I saw two dudes kiss. I had never experienced that before [...]. My roommate was a Korean. I'd never really been around that.

Like Kevin, Sam encountered some social situations that were quite different from his rural home, particularly in the coed dorms:

You're in close quarters with women who you weren't so much with in high school, and there was this appeal that, "You're a Black man living in my dorm. Let me get to know you. Let's hang out". And we did. I came from a rural background where White women were kind of off limits. That's something you just don't do.

Early on, both men reported challenging academic struggles. Both quickly realized they were not well-prepared academically. Sam said, "I thought I was decently prepared. I was wrong. I still had no clue". Kevin struggled to figure out the expectations (e.g. "Am I supposed to read the whole chapter before class? How am I supposed to act here?").

At first, Sam loved his independence. "You're on your own. Everything's gonna be fine. Don't worry about anything". But that new freedom soon became a major challenge. When one professor announced he did not take attendance, Sam thought, "Great. I can study. I did well in high school", but he flunked that class. He also missed an early morning class frequently and reported too much partying. "It was too much freedom all at once. No one really helped me though. That was something I really had to figure out myself". He was placed on academic probation at the end of the first semester, almost lost his financial aid and feared he would not be able to return to school. Like other first-generation or under-represented college students, he did not have a trusted guide to help him navigate his new environment.

The men's low GPAs contributed to other challenges, including some fairly serious mental health issues. Kevin thought about killing himself at the end of his first semester, "cause how can I go back home to my parents, my mom who thinks I'm the smartest dude she knows and tell her, "I can't do this"." Sam's GPA kept him out of a fraternal organization he wanted to join:

[...] because we know that fraternal organizations can be a major source of camaraderie among African American men. And so I really was outside of it all [...] didn't have a great sense of camaraderie. It really felt like I was doing it on my own. So that was a huge, huge challenge, and because of that I became depressed.

During his junior year, Sam reported, "I just had a total mental breakdown. I did not leave my room for a week. I was like, "This is crap. I'm not gonna do this anymore. I'm just tired. This is just too much"." He assumed that he would flunk out. He sought out the director of the multicultural affairs office, who urged him to approach his professors, explain what was happening and ask for extensions. She also gave him the name of an African-American male therapist off-campus. "And we talked about why was I sabotaging my college career. What are you doing, what are you not doing, and why are you not doing it?".

In addition to academic struggles, Kevin was involved with multiple abortions. He believed the abortion decisions probably would not have happened if he had not gone to college, “Because when you come to college, you feel like you’ve got something to lose”. He reported, “I didn’t have anybody to go talk to about it”, and did not consider talking to a counselor as an option. As a result, he became numb and began using drugs. “I walked around in a coma for a long time. I got high every single day”. But people did not realize his struggles “cause I walked around like nothing was going on in my life”.

Both men emphasized the support of persons on campus, White and Black, who took an interest in them and looked out for them. Kevin mentioned staff members in a number of student affairs offices, including one “who actually saw herself in me, saw the humanity within me and helped me”. Kevin indicated that several of these persons attended his graduation ceremony and he is still in touch with them. Both men emphasized the availability and support of the director of the office of multicultural affairs, a Black female who died unexpectedly while they were at the university. “Seeing everybody come together” when she died showed Kevin that “we really are a community, you know?” Sam appreciated her open door policy. “You could come and talk about whatever issues that were going on, and she had that policy because she knew we were catching hell on campus, quite simply”.

Kevin mentioned several African-American professors who supported him, saying, “I wish I would have found them my first couple of days”, especially those who also had been first-generation college students. “I wouldn’t have graduated without them”, he added. One would say, “You can really do this. No reason for you to give up now. You really have a brilliant mind. You just gotta believe in yourself”. Kevin found his AAS classes to be some of his most positive experiences, and not only for learning about prominent African Americans in history. “I had never seen a Black man holding class”, he noted. “You know, “folks gotta sit down and listen”. You know, pay attention”. He added, “Seeing someone who looks like you communicating effectively, teaching you, so you can see yourself there [...]. Maybe one day I can be sitting where you are”. He worked with one AAS professor to organize conferences, through which he got to meet well-known African Americans from across the USA, which were empowering experiences connecting old and new sources of cultural capital.

Kevin found himself through realizations about learning and being educated:

You know, the most important experience I think I had was I figured out what the difference between learning for yourself, learning to become educated to become enlightened, versus learning because somebody is telling you to.

He added, “It allowed me to realize myself, even in all the hardship”. He reflected:

I believed a lot of things that were wrong and this school helped me see, not only the wrong that was within me, but also the wrong that was within the world. But, seeing the wrong that’s within you is what you come here for. Cause if you can get the wrong that’s within you fixed, then you’re gonna be able to add something to fixing the wrong that’s in the world. It can’t go the other way and I had it backwards when I first got here. I thought I was supposed to come here and they were just gonna put all this education in

my head. Ain't nobody gonna give you nothing. You gotta go get it, brother. And I finally began to see that, you know?

Regardless your background, "you can do it", he said. In this way, he was able to create a new message of embodied cultural capital for himself, a new lens that integrated his culture and traditions with the new academic world he was learning to inhabit.

Objective cultural capital.

Sam's first days were full of optimism and high expectations. He said:

I immediately went to the library and checked out some books. We're not even in class and I'm walking to my dorm with books and people are looking at me like, "What's going on here?" So I made some friends my freshman year, people I'm still friends with to this day. I just totally felt free. For the first time I felt like this is what life is about.

Kevin struggled with finances that affected his academic performance. "I never realized I was, I didn't know I was poor, literally poor". He could not buy all of his textbooks, and didn't know who he could turn to for help:

They didn't have a liaison here to be like, "Okay, young black brother who's a first generation college student. Why don't you go talk to your professor? They have two or three extra copies. They might be able to let you borrow".

Kevin ended the first semester with a 2.1 GPA, saying, "Literally, I felt stupid. It was traumatic". He also felt somewhat trapped:

I shouldn't have come here. I wish I wouldn't have come here, but now I'm \$10,000 in the hole, so what am I gonna do? And my family, they're gonna think I'm a failure [...] And I got too much pride to say, "Let me go ahead on and go pack away from here", cause I don't want nobody thinking I'm dumb, that I can't do it.

It took some time for him to realize that "there were a lot of things that I just didn't know" about how to be academically successful.

Both also struggled with their college major choices for some time. Kevin felt like he had been pushed into business, and Sam was unhappy with his music major. Kevin reported not doing well in his business courses, but he was not failing them, so no one suggested he consider another major:

They would let professors give you whack grades just because you didn't come to class, even though I was passing the damn tests [...]. And that just made me more militant because the only people that I could relate to were militant brothers who were going through the exact same thing.

Kevin thought it was a "huge deal" to change his major; he did not do that until his junior year.

Sam realized he “loved singing but I didn’t like the discipline that it took” to be a classical musician. After a year he was clear “this is not what I want to do”. During his private studio lessons with the only Black professor in the music school, he would sing two songs and then break down in tears:

And I would tell her, “This is going on and I feel inadequate”. And so finally one day she told me, You know, Sam, you really do have a brilliant voice [...] but you don’t have technique. You really should change your major.

He immediately left and, on the way to the academic advising office, decided on a political science major “because I like politics”. The music credits, however, did not transfer easily to his new major, resulting in a low GPA and a six-year time span to degree completion.

Institutionalized cultural capital.

Although Sam and Kevin enrolled in the PWI when it was working to increase enrollment of African Americans, “the campus wasn’t ready” for them, Kevin said. Kevin reported campus police, not realizing he was a student, would ask for his ID. He added:

I was always feeling like I was having to prove myself to somebody; prove myself to this person sitting beside me that, “yeah, I didn’t just get in here because I’m black”.

The institution was not prepared to accept their legitimacy as students in some ways, which sent the message that they could perhaps earn a degree, but could not access the institutional recognition and cultural capital that would come with being a college graduate.

Both reported often being the only Black person, or one of very few, in a classroom, so that they experienced the spoken and unspoken question, “So what is the Black perspective?” directed at them. Kevin wondered, “So I’m speaking for the whole Black race?” Sam particularly felt the burden of representation:

You feel that you’re the only one, and the problem with that is you feel representative of every Black person [...]. So the question I had to deal with was how do you overcome the burden of representation? What does it mean you’re the only Black person in a class? [...] I always felt I had a little rebellious spirit. So I felt I had to represent, and I did.

He remembered several distinct incidents, such as a US history class when the professor asked, “What was the one good thing that came out of slavery?” and a student replied that the slaves were fed and clothed:

I was one of three Black people in the class. One never came and one was always mute. So when he asked that question everybody is looking at me like, “What is Sam gonna say?” So I said, “They were clothed and fed in Africa. That’s not anything that came out of slavery”.

During a Southern politics class:

[...] we're still talking around the race issue. And people are looking at you like, "What are you going to say? Is he gonna be an angry Black man today?" So trying not to be the angry Black man in class when someone said something stupid about race issues, whatever.

He quoted Toni Morrison from *Beloved*, saying:

You tried not to be the jungle they always thought you were. And so you're always needs more referencing.

He also reported experiencing "still this intractable racism" when he requested funding from SGA for Black organizations he represented.

As he approached graduation, Sam applied to be the class speaker at the ceremony, an incident "that mirrored my high school experience with becoming SGA president". His memory was that two people applied: himself and a White female. Suddenly, he reported, the procedures changed and they were asked to write and deliver their speech to a committee. After doing this, he was informed that he was ineligible to be class speaker because of his GPA:

And I'm like, "If that's true show me the policy that says that. Present me with the policy", which is one of the things I learned in political science. When you're dealing with people, know your rules, and insist that people show you the rules, show you the policy. Of course, they couldn't show me the policy [...]. So, again, the rules are changing, and that was a major thing I learned here, that the rules are always changing. The goal posts are always pushed back further and further. And so if you recognize that, then you don't have the burden of representation.

Again, those in the social field at the university were unwilling to acknowledge or validate Sam's cultural capital.

Over time, Sam gave up on the burden of representation. "At a certain point", he decided instead to say, "I'm not all Black men. I'm not all Black people. I'm Sam. So I'm gonna tell you what I think. I'm not speaking for everybody". He searched to find his own way:

What it is to be a Black man is whatever you make of it. It's not one set thing. It's not one set way of being a Black man or to perform Black masculinity. There are multiple ways of doing that, and you just got to find your niche in whatever that is and roll with what you've got. And what I had was I was a good leader. I spoke well. I could sing, and whatever talents I had, I used them.

He added that he learned to focus on what he could get rather than what he could not get:

So staying positive, period. And it was not something I learned overnight, but over the years of being here it was something I learned. I had to learn it or I wouldn't have

survived. You have to learn to be a positive person and not focus on your deficiencies, and I think Black men, we're always focusing on our deficiencies, always. We're not good enough.

Kevin said that many thought that he was too militant in response to racial incidents. Yet, he reported that being an African American at the university:

[...] made it exciting. Because not only was I having to deal with this college, but this college had to deal with me. I wasn't the soft guy. Like, I wasn't the one who was gonna just sit back. I forced them to deal with me and I think, because of that, and not just me, a lot of my friends, brothers have an easier time here now than we had when we got here, at least I hope they believe that.

He added, "I'm the brother who put together a protest here" that got the police chief fired.

Sam noted some paradoxes in being a Black man on a PWI campus:

Being a Black male means that you are at times the most hated person in America and the most loved. So you do get positive attention at a predominantly White school sometimes for being a Black male, i.e. White women just to be perfectly honest, referring to interactions in his coed dorm.

He added:

So there were advantages because sometimes you stick out in a crowd, and if you can speak well and if you represent yourself well and represent who you are well, people will notice that simply for the color of your skin. It sticks out because you're going against the grain of what people expect.

He noted that because he was a music major, he had to deal with others' assumptions that he was gay; at the same time, some Blacks expected him to be a rapper. "Again, you're going against the grain of not only what White society thinks that you should be but Black society thinks that you should be also".

Belonging and connection were important supports for both men. Both became involved in several Black organizations, such as the Neo-Black Society, the gospel choir and a program called Brother to Brother. The latter, Kevin reported, "was my savior for the first year", seeing "Black faces who, you know, cared about you". Being involved in these organizations was also Sam's "saving grace". These organizations also provided opportunities for validation. While this type of support can be seen as embodied messages of cultural capital, it is being framed here as a subset of institutional cultural capital. That is to say, if the larger predominantly White social field was less than willing to recognize the resources these men possessed, they found a more welcoming social field that did validate their contributions and resources.

Kevin wanted to join a Black fraternity, which meant that he had to increase his GPA. He attended summer school and got a 3.7. "And that made me know, "Whoa, I can do this"." Later,

he founded a Black fraternity chapter. “I think that’s big”, he reported, “because I put something at the college that can’t nobody ever take away that will actually help brothers”. When Sam realized that he could not join a fraternal organization due to his GPA, he decided:

You do your best with it, and what I did was I poured myself into community service, so much so that I won the MLK Community Service Award, which was a major validation. For once during my college career I felt validated in being here.

His GPA also prevented him from running for SGA President. “I served every role I could other than the one I needed the GPA for”, he said. “Being a political science major, I think I would have been a good leader, but in any event I still served in whatever capacity that I could”. He also was part of Model United Nations, representing an African country at the meeting at the United Nations in New York, “One of my best memories”. Traveling with the men’s glee club when he was a music major also was a positive experience, as interacting with others outside the classroom “was very important” for gaining recognition and feeling like a contributing member of the institution.

Kevin reported that he learned many academic success strategies from “sisters”, African-American females at the university. “They handle their educational business, and if you’re gonna deal with them and deal with them seriously, you’re gonna have to handle your educational business”. They pushed him to attend class, invited him to study with them, took notes in class for him, proofread papers and explained professors’ feedback:

And they’d challenge me and say, “Bro, you’re smart, man. You say some of the most profound stuff in class, but you gotta come to class. Don’t give a damn about what that white man is saying to you. Come on to school, man. Come to class”.

He added, “They saw in me something that I didn’t see in myself because I gave up on myself. And they pushed me”.

Post-college perceptions

In this section, the majority of identified themes dealt with institutionalized capital as opposed to embodied or objectified. This is logical, as the participants were reflecting on the time after they obtained the desired credential and how it changed their relationships with others.

Having a college degree provided benefits as well as costs for the two participants. Kevin spoke to this paradox:

This university was a fire. It was a cauldron. It literally was. They say it takes fire to make steel, though, you know? Like, iron, you can’t make anything worth anything without some time of a tribulation and this was my first real tribulation “cause high school wasn’t a challenge. This was a challenge. They weren’t gonna give me a grade cause I was black [...]. My professor did what he was supposed to do.

He added:

If I had come here and just breezed right through and made, you know, graduated in three years, I would have missed out on so much other stuff. And I would have been so much different as a person now. I would have been an arrogant prick.

Kevin graduated with over \$67,000 in debt from the financial aid he received. He had mixed feelings about the debt, saying, “It was an expensive lesson to learn”, yet adding, “It was a small price to pay for all the things that I was able to get from college”.

Institutionalized cultural capital.

Kevin said college gave him the skills and ability to see ahead, to see opportunities and how to take advantage of them. What he emphasized, however, was how the degree benefitted him in interactions with others, particularly that he could not be taken advantage of due to his education. He said that he can talk with his son’s teachers, for example, and he knows what his son needs to be successful in school. Similarly, he understands the business and medical aspects of running his assisted living center and effectively deals with nurses and other professionals. More broadly, he reported, “people treat me differently [...] like an educated person”. He added:

What that college degree does for you in the white community, is it makes them think that you can be functional around them. You are assimilated, literally, especially when you say “I went to a white school”. It makes them more comfortable in dealing with me for a lot of different reasons.

His son also sees the difference:

When I take him there [the PWI] and people are like, “Oh, Kevin, long time”, you can see the glow in his face. When I’m talking to his teacher and he can tell that I know what I’m talking about. When he asks me an algebra question and I can help him. That’s what going to college did for me.

Sam described his college degree as both a validation and a ticket:

I have a ticket to do more. I have an obligation to do more [...]. Now that you have the degree you’re a part of an elite group. What are you gonna do with it? What do you feel compelled to do with it?

Indeed, both men stressed the legacy they wanted to give to their children and their community. Kevin said that he wants to set an example for his son and the kids in his neighborhood. “My son will be acclimated to college before he gets there. It’s not gonna be a surprise for him”. He added, “Now my son can never look me in the face and say, “But you didn’t go. But you didn’t finish”. Because I went and I did it”. Kevin talks to the neighborhood kids about making a plan for college, a support he did not have, and he has taken them on college tours. He is also a part of a non-profit organization that promotes cultural and educational awareness with Black students and others. Kevin said that he felt fortunate to be in a financial position to be able to give back to the community with his time.

Similarly, Sam noted that his future children:

[...] won't be able to say, "I didn't know anything about college". They will because I'm gonna tell them [...]. And so that's what I see as the real legacy of my college education. You don't necessarily see education for yourself but you see it for future generations.

Sam, an Adjunct Professor at two universities, saw his teaching as another way to give back. The classroom, he said:

[...] is where I feel I do my best, because now I get to serve as a role model for other Black male students. They get to see a face like mine. For most of my college career I didn't have many Black male professors. So, yeah, I get to be that role model now, which is immensely rewarding on so many levels.

He saw his writing in a similar light:

But I want to write because I think that's one of the best ways or the second best – teaching is the best – the second best way to educate is through literacy, and indeed that's one of the major things my ancestors were not allowed to do was read. And so for me to become a novelist is a very profound idea.

Both men also saw additional degrees as important for their futures and for modeling life-long learning for their children and their community. Sam, who already had a master's degree, was enrolled in a PhD program with the hope of gaining a full-time academic position; "teaching is where my skills lie", he said. He was working on his first novel, his first step toward becoming a published writer and poet. Kevin was considering a Master of Business Administration program "to show myself what I'm truly capable of" and to gain skills to assist his wife with a business plan for opening up her own medical practice. He also was contemplating a law degree:

[...] to be able to help my community. A lot of problems that we have in our community are legal. We don't have enough Black males or Black lawyers who are willing to go work in the community.

Both men reported having to deal with perceptions of some Blacks, especially those in their rural home communities, that they were now "soft". Sam stated:

Unfortunately, the area I came from, if you have a college degree you're seen as less than a Black man. Your cred is questioned because in some way the fact that you made it through college means that you assimilated to a certain point, that you gave in to whatever, White supremacist thought, or the way you talk or the way you dress.

Kevin added:

You know brothers assume because you carry yourself in a particular way that you're soft. Unfortunately, wearing collar shirts and things like that. Unfortunately they look at that as a sign of weakness.

He added, however, "My son now knows that Black masculinity and education go together".

Both expressed concerns that Black males did not seem to appreciate education the way they themselves did when they were young. Sam stated:

Because sadly where it used to be in the Black community, it was said, "Go get your education. Go get your college degree". Not necessarily for a good job, but because it's an achievement. Education is something that your ancestors were not allowed to participate in. But now it seems to be this strain of anti-intellectualism in the Black community where you have the Black boys who are using the back-pocket folder system where they put all their papers in the back pocket [...]. Black boys don't want to appear smart.

Kevin believed that "education has been lost in our society, not just Black society". He added, however:

Black males are, in my opinion, just a litmus test. We are always going to be, you will always see the worst of the society in us because we are the most at risk [...]. Hopefully, we can fix it in our community because if I can graduate from college, anybody can.

Sam found that having a college degree meant dealing with the burden of representation again. He said:

And so the struggle is, again, unburdening yourself of representation. I don't represent all college graduates. I don't represent all Black male college graduates. I represent me, but sometimes people don't understand that.

He added:

There's also that burden of you know everything because you graduated so we're gonna come to you for everything. My uncle needs a job so you must have a connection because you went to college or you're a college professor. How do I get into college? So there's a burden of being this utilitarian person in the community that you have.

Kevin reported that his biggest challenge was dealing with his family. He stated:

When you go to college and you get all this insight and then you come back out and you try to help them, they fight you at every turn because what I didn't realize is, college was going to change me. Some good, I guess, some bad.

He added:

They see the world very differently than I see it now, because the problem with going to school is you are different. You do get educated. They send you here to learn something and you actually learn it. When you come back and try to teach it to them, they still look at you as the little boy, the child who doesn't know anything or, "he uppity now. He got a degree. He think he know everything".

Discussion

The pre-college and college experiences reported by Kevin and Sam reflected themes reported in previous research. Like other rural, primarily White students in previous studies (Byun et al., 2012a, 2012b), the two men were from low-income families, were first-generation and chose to attend a less selective college than their unattainable first-choice colleges. They and their families saw college as a pathway to greater employment opportunities and geographic mobility. Similarly, they cited parental influence as the key to their decisions to attend college. Unfortunately, Kevin and Sam reported mixed to negative interactions with their school counselors, again similar to other rural students (Griffin et al., 2011). Their efforts to obtain a college degree and increase their institutionalized cultural capital were beneficial in many ways, but costly as well.

Once on campus, Sam and Kevin faced challenges similar to those reported by other African-American students attending PWIs, including lack of academic preparation that contributed to low GPAs (Walpole, 2008). Most notably, Kevin and Sam faced negative stereotypes of African-American men and felt strongly that they had to prove themselves. Often, both were the only Black student or one of the few Black students in a class. Sam, in particular, felt the burden of representation and being a spokesperson, and reflected "stereotype threat" (Harper, 2012) in which he agonized over not confirming negative stereotypes of African-American males. Similar to Harper's (2009) college males, the two participants responded to campus racism in different ways. Sam repeatedly spoke about seeking "validation" and focused on involvement in student organizations and community service to achieve this goal. Kevin took a more activist approach, organizing a protest and establishing a Black fraternity on campus, for example. These activities allowed them to interact with other Black students and Black faculty as well as key administrators on campus, all of which have been shown to contribute to college completion (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010). Kevin and Sam defined their masculinity through their opportunities for leadership and service, although it should be noted that both men reported specific challenges from both White and Black peers. They expressed concern for the separation of masculinity and academic achievement they heard from the current generation of African-American males.

Some of Kevin's and Sam's experiences were similar to those of high-achieving African-American males, including the importance of parental influence around attending college, lack of support from school counselors, involvement in college service and leadership and impactful experiences with racism (Harper, 2009, 2012). Although both were encouraged to go to college by school personnel, neither Sam nor Kevin were among the "lucky few" (Harper, 2012, p. 10) who had at least one influential high school teacher who showed particular interest in them and invested out-of-class time to make sure that they had the needed information, resources and support for academic success. Once at college, there were other dissimilarities, as both Kevin

and Sam struggled with the financial burden of paying for college, did not participate in a summer bridge program, lacked outreach from Black male student leaders in their early days on campus, did not interact with other high achievers on a regular basis and did not establish relationships with faculty for some time. As a result, their academic paths were characterized by an uphill struggle to overcome early low academic performance rather than the early academic success reported by Harper's participants.

In a further, and notable, contrast to previous reports of African-American college students (Harper, 2012; Walpole, 2008), Kevin and Sam described rather severe mental health challenges resulting from their academic, social and racial struggles, including suicidal ideation and "a total mental breakdown". Like many African Americans (Broman, 2012), Kevin did not consider seeking out mental health counseling, while Sam was referred to an off-campus African-American male therapist by the director of the multicultural affairs office. In getting past these mental health issues, both men seemed to be fueled by determination to succeed and a refusal to admit to family and friends that they could not. Over time, they attempted, in different but individually important ways, to make their college experience their own, find personal validation, make a difference and have an impact on the campus. Each was able to find a purpose in their challenges and realize positive growth gained through their struggles, as perhaps best described by Kevin in the title quote, "It takes fire to make steel".

Through the lens of cultural capital theory, the men reported disadvantages and limitations typically reported in research of first-generation students, African-American male college students and rural students. Notably, their access to objectified cultural capital was limited in their rural environment; they were not surrounded by libraries, museums, material resources or institutions that allowed them to interact with such tangible representations of capital. For Sam, having a set of encyclopedias in his house was the closest thing he could identify to objectified cultural capital, and those resources were uncommon in the community. Their responses, however, also pointed to a number of cultural assets. Pre-college, they learned the value of education from family, some school personnel and leaders of their extracurricular activities and, for Kevin, the media and broader cultural messages about the need for Black men to become educated. The value, and privilege, of literacy, in particular, was a strong motivator for Sam. For Kevin, his grandfather served as a "reverse role model" ("don't end up like me") for pursuing a college education, embodying an important piece of cultural capital. Both men faced and successfully dealt with adversity, including racial incidents, that seemed to have prepared them to handle the adversities they faced at college, although they chose different pathways (e.g. community service, activism) in response to college challenges. Persistence learned in working toward their goal of attending college carried over to provide a grit and determination to succeed at college and earn institutionalized cultural capital. At college, the men eventually took advantage of available embodied cultural capital, including the director of the multicultural affairs office, African-American faculty role models, Black organizations, Black women students and others who encouraged and inspired them. As a result of achieving their degree, both men acquired greater embodied, objectified and institutionalized capital. Each has attained a higher social status due to their increases in cultural capital, which they intentionally are sharing with their families, students and the broader African-American community.

Several limitations of this study should be kept in mind. Only two participants from one PWI in the southeastern USA were interviewed. Both were AAS majors, which may have influenced their college experiences and reflections in unique ways. Rural students from other geographical areas might have different backgrounds, challenges and assets and successes. Although the interview questions were based in relevant literature, they may not have covered all key aspects of the participants' experiences. As in any qualitative study, biases of the researchers and research team may have influenced the results, although these were identified and shared before reading any of the transcripts and then discussed several times during the data analysis process. However, one participant said that the results were an accurate reflection of his experiences. Finally, Kevin and Sam attended the PWI several years ago. Replication of the study, at the same or other PWIs, could reveal whether rural, first-generation African-American male college students still face similar challenges today, or whether new programs (e.g. outreach, mentoring) are available and impactful. Longitudinal studies that trace students' experiences across their college years could provide even more detailed insights.

This study makes a contribution toward the call for more within-group studies of various college student demographics, including African Americans (Gordon, 2012; Strayhorn, 2009; Walpole, 2008), African-American males (Strayhorn, 2010) and rural students (Byun et al., 2012a, 2012b), as well as the call for non-deficit perspectives of students' college experiences (Harper, 2009, 2012). Our findings suggest that future researchers should consider a combination of variables rather than isolating one variable (e.g. SES, race, gender and first-generation status). It seems that Kevin and Sam's first-generation status and rural backgrounds were compounded by their race and gender, all of which contributed to stressful, if not traumatic, college experiences. Nevertheless, each found their own path toward not only graduation but also meaning and purpose through their college experiences. Each participant drew from their available embodied cultural capital growing up; they used some of this capital as assets at their college institution to their advantage and eventually discarded those that did not work. The participants had to navigate between understanding the norms of matriculating through college as well as negotiate cultural norms as a college educated individual when interacting with family and friends who are not college educated. Additional stories of how other challenged students overcome the odds to persist to college graduation would be instructive, providing valuable insights into how colleges can help others persist and complete their degrees.

Implications

Based on themes in this study, there are a number of implications for educators, especially teachers, school counselors and college student personnel seeking to help first-generation, rural African-American males persist and succeed in college. Importantly, these educators should not only try to address the cultural capital limitations of these men but also highlight and build on their cultural assets. These assets include familial and platonic individuals who see their potential for success and encourage them to attend college to become something better than what they see in their community, reverse role models who encourage youth to make different choices than they did, media-based examples of successful Black students, cultural messages of strength and determination (e.g. Million Man March) and the exhortation to be an example that other African-American boys could look up to. Educators can build on these expectations – embodied capital provided by family members, community members and mentors – by having equally high

expectations around Black males' high school achievement and providing the college access information Black males and their families are lacking.

Institutional cultural capital is only conferred when students get the college degree; therefore, getting students into college and not retaining them does not help them gain institutional cultural capital. Given the myriad of challenges our participants faced in college, we recommend that college student support personnel work closely with African-American males, particularly those who are rural and first-generation college students. Owens et al. (2010) offered a number of strategies for supporting Black males during their tenure in college that address many of our participants' struggles. They suggested higher education institutions collaborate with high schools to provide better academic and psychological preparation for college. Also, college student personnel should be committed to helping African-American males develop strategies to foster retention, such as mentorships with college faculty and staff, giving them the skills to navigate through the course selection and major process, as well help Black males understand their financial aid package (Bonner and Murry, 2012).

Likewise, Bonner and Murry (2012) recommended college counselors broach how racism and SES challenges may impact Black males' ability to complete college. Owens et al. (2010) suggested validating the experiences of African-American males by inviting them to discuss their experiences and showing empathy toward them. In addition, undergraduate African-American males should be a part of the dialog and consulted when institutions of higher education are designing support programs to help them persist and graduate. Harper and Kuykendall (2012, p. 25) believed that undergraduate Black males should be "engaged as collaborators and viewed as experts in designing, implementing, and assessing campus initiatives". They recommended not only including Black males who are campus leaders but also seeking out African-American males who are not performing well, such as our participants, for input to help them improve academically. This self-advocacy role for students can help them confirm their previously embodied cultural capital and build their sense of institutionalized capital.

College personnel can also reach out to African-American male college alumni, as they have many insights and cultural capital assets to share. As a result of their experiences, our participants were willing to share their stories in hopes of helping other young men from rural backgrounds. By participating in this study, they were also informing educators that defying the odds to pursue a college education and get a degree is more than just a miracle; it is a sustainable possibility. These men wanted a better life for themselves, but had little or no resources to achieve that; however, through embodied cultural capital assets such as encouraging messages from various individuals, they were able to transmogrify their situation of struggling through college into acquiring opportunities via a college degree that afforded them a better lifestyle and the ability to mentor other young men who are college students to help them successfully graduate.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to highlight the stories of two African-American men who persisted and successfully graduated from college. Their narratives both dramatize and humanize the difficult transition from an environment with very little objectified or

institutionalized cultural capital to a place where they emerged from the fire like steel, tempered and strong. Further consideration should be given to African-American males from rural areas, as little is known about retaining this population in the college pipeline. More importantly, we want to emphasize that this population is a minority within a minority and specialized support is warranted. Finally, the task of these participants acquiring new cultural capital in a new setting when their presence is questioned by some and their preparation is not fully adequate was a barrier to success. Nevertheless, it is extremely important to underscore that these men emerged on the other side and are now able to serve as role models, embodying a new type of cultural capital for the next generation.

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Corresponding author

Erik M. Hines can be contacted at: erik.hines@uconn.edu