

# BLACK STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

## What Leads to Success in College

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There is a wealth of research on Black college students and a second body of literature on Black families, but studies on the relationship between Black college students and their families are very limited. This project investigated the role of families in the lives of successful Black college students. The results suggest a model of eight connections between students and families that can be conceptualized in three stages.

*Keywords:* college students; families; persistence

**There is little doubt** that Blacks have historically been under-represented in American higher education and continue to be so today. For example, in 1970, more than 11% of the U.S. population was of African American descent (Bureau of the Census, 1970), but only 7% of students enrolled in colleges and universities were Black (Integrated Postsecondary Data System, 1997). By 1990, the number of Blacks grew to represent nearly 12% of the national population (Bureau of the Census, 1990), yet, in 1994, only 10.7% of college students were African American (Integrated Postsecondary Data System, 1997).

Experts who study enrollment patterns in higher education have searched for answers to explain this disparity (Allen, 1992). One explanation relates to the college-going rates between Whites and Blacks. For example, in the 1989 to 1990 academic year, only 57.3% of African Americans enrolled in higher education immediately after high school compared to 71.7% of their White counter-

parts (Nettles & Perna, 1997). To improve disproportionately low enrollment rates, colleges and universities try to support Black students.

There are multiple forms of support that institutions of higher education provide to students (Allen, 1992; Carroll, 1998). One form of support is academic. Academic support may be manifested in tutoring services, contact with faculty, and peer mentoring programs. Academic support is also provided through campus facilities like libraries and computer laboratories that support student learning (Allen, 1987; Tinto, 1993).

A second form of support that students need in a college environment is emotional support. Emotional support includes support individuals receive during periods of stress. This can take the form of providing assistance with coping or serving as a buffer in times of crisis (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Some students may receive this kind of support formally from services provided by campus counseling centers. Others may seek emotional support informally from faculty, staff, or peers in the campus community.

Still another form of support is social support. In the context of the college environment, social support relates to the friendship and social networks formed by students. Student clubs and organizations are examples of social support networks. Participation in collegiate athletics and intramural sports provides social support for some students. Still other students receive social support from interactions in living and learning communities in residence halls (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

A fourth form of support college students need is financial support. Students may receive financial support from multiple sources. One form of financial support is present in the various federal and state need-based programs. For instance, students may be awarded Pell grants or guaranteed student loans through the federal government. Students may also benefit from financial support programs offered through their state government. Financial support also may be provided from institutional resources. For example, some students may qualify for grants, loans, or scholarships directly from the institution of enrollment (St. John & Noell, 1989).

These forms of support (academic, emotional, social, and financial) are needed for all students regardless of race. However, some campuses have made special efforts to provide additional support for Black students. Support efforts range from the construction of cultural centers on predominately White campuses (Tomlinson, 1992) to addressing the role faculty and administrators play in retaining Black students (Schenider, 1992).

Despite the efforts of administrators on predominately White campuses, many Black students seek support from resources beyond those provided by the campus community, particularly from families. Black students at predominately White institutions rely on support from family members more so than White students at predominately White campuses and Black students at historically Black institutions. Therefore, frequent contact with family members is beneficial for Black students attending majority institutions (O'Leary, Boatwright, & Sauer, 1996).

The family is a conduit for educational attainment for several reasons. First, families are primary sources of academic potential. That is, the family is the first unit to develop and nurture the student's capacity for learning. Second, families set the parameters of community standards within the home environment. Such boundaries affect a student's outlook on the larger social order. Third, parents are influential in creating the context in which events and phenomena are evaluated. In this case, families provide the background for explaining meaning in life and the world. Another influence of family relates to social context. Parents provide students with a social environment that influences the way in which students view education. This can take place through school choice, career options, and overall higher educational aspirations (Teachman, 1998). This influence of Black parents has been documented in elementary and secondary settings.

For instance, Clark (1983) studied the academic achievement among 10 Black high school seniors of working-class families. Five students were identified as high achievers. The other 5 were identified as low achievers. Several patterns emerged related to academic success among the high achievers. First, parents were

expected to be involved in their children's education. Second, parents were emotionally supportive of their students. Achievement standards set by parents, coupled with students' acceptance of these standards, was another factor related to student success. Finally, parents were perceived as being nurturing and supportive of students' academic pursuits (Clark, 1983).

The partnerships between family members, teachers, and administrators have also been documented at the elementary and secondary levels. Epstein (1987) identified types of information that should be shared between parents and school officials including graduation requirements, academic policies, and the steps parents can take to assist students in school.

These studies suggest the kinds of support that families play in kindergarten through 12th-grade (K to 12) education. However, research on the support parents provide to students in higher education settings is scarce. This gap in the literature may exist because of the tenuous role of parental and family participation in the lives of students enrolled in institutions of higher education (Turrentine, 1999). Consequently, few studies have examined parental involvement in higher education settings. Those that have examined family relations in higher education have focused on parents' involvement in admission decisions and summer orientation programs (Flint, 1992).

Most of the research in family studies and the college environment has been conducted on White populations. As such, findings have been interpreted for all populations (Ball, 1993). The contributions research on the family has made are useful (Kiah, 1992); however, they have failed to examine the role family plays in the daily lives of Black students. By and large, scholarly activities in the area of family studies were not designed to delve into the social structure and cultural meanings of family life, nor were they designed to examine the intersections of ethnicity, undergraduate student experiences, and the family unit.

In examining the family and organizational structure of Black families, Dressler (1987) found that members of Black households

are more likely to seek and receive informal social and emotional support from family members. Traditionally, African Americans have relied on trusted family members or close friends to disclose and resolve sensitive issues. A heightened sense of distrust, suspicion, and stigma are attached to seeking assistance from trained professionals.

In another study, Kiah (1992) examined traits and attitudes related to Black college students' persistence and achievement. There is a strong correlation between family cohesion and Black student success. Nearly 70% of Black students reported that their family unit is cohesive. That is, family relationships are healthy and offer the appropriate amount of support and interaction. Further, roughly 48% of Black students perceived their mothers as the most influential family member with respect to their attitudes about education (Kiah, 1992).

Consequently, it would seem Black student retention is related to the support that students receive from family members (Mallinckrodt, 1988). Culturally, however, Black families are not monolithic. Diversity among Black families may exist politically, socially, and economically. Ethnic differences are also apparent among Black families (McAdoo, 1993). On the other hand, however, there are shared characteristics among most Black families. For instance, Black families tend to have a strong religious orientation (Cone, 1990); that is, Black families typically embrace the value of religion and its liberating power. They relish the reliance on a higher power and the practical application of religious principles in life (McAdoo, 1993).

Black families also are characterized by valuing extended kin relationships. These are blood relationships beyond the nuclear family (Staples, 1986). Grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins may reside in the same household with the nuclear family. Family kinship among Blacks may also be described as fictive. These kinds of kinship bonds are unrelated by blood; however, they are viewed as equally significant as blood relationships. Fictive kinship networks may include neighbors, church members,

and friends. The proximity, availability, and frequency of contact of extended and fictive kin sustain the helping tradition among Black families (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994).

Another distinguishing characteristic found in Black families is parenting style. Black parenting styles tend to be more authoritarian than White parenting styles. Moreover, Black parents generally are involved in the lives of their children well into adulthood. In one study, Black parents remained a significant factor in their offspring's adult years from age 18 to age 40 (Manns, 1997).

On the whole, African Americans value education. Earning a good education is viewed as the portal to economic security and family stability among members of the Black community. Although there is a disproportionately low level of achievement, getting a good education is highly regarded in Black communities (Ladner, 1998).

Finally, resiliency is a hallmark trait within Black families. In this sense, resiliency relates to the ability of Black families to endure, survive, and develop buoyancy in the face of crises and adversities. It also relates to the helping tradition present within nuclear and extended kin relationships (McAdoo, 1993).

In summary, there is a fairly extensive body of literature on Black students in college (Allen, 1987, 1992; Clark, 1983; Nettles & Perna, 1997). Additionally, scholars have examined Black families and their characteristics (Chatters et al., 1994; Cone, 1990; Ladner, 1998). There is also literature on the influence of family on education (Flint, 1992; Teachman, 1998). The relationship between education and Black families has been explored in the K-to-12 realm (Clark, 1983; Epstein, 1987). It would seem, however, that studies on the relationship between families and Black college students are more limited. The present study was designed to examine this gap in the literature on Blacks in higher education.

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of family in the life of African American college students. The study was specifically designed to develop a model of the factors that affect African American college students' motivation to pursue higher education and their ability to succeed in school.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

There were two groups in the study: successful African American college students and members of those students' families. The student participants were all seniors at one of two predominately White universities in a mid-Atlantic state. Both were large, public research universities, but one was located in a rural region whereas the other was in a major urban area of the state. The researchers purposely selected these two institutions as they had similar missions and so would likely offer comparable educational experiences to students but would offer very different types of communities. The difference in communities allowed the researchers to explore the experiences of Black students in diverse settings that might render the results of the study more meaningful.

All students were seniors at their respective institutions. The study was designed to look at the role of family in helping students succeed. Therefore, the researchers needed student participants who could be deemed successful. To that end, the researchers defined *successful* as having achieved senior status. It was assumed that students who were seniors were likely to complete their degrees and, hence, could be labeled successful.

The mean grade point average (GPA) for all student participants was 2.66 on a 4.0 scale. The overall sample consisted of 11 females and 9 males. Members of the sample contacted family members an average of 5.1 times per week. The average distance from home was approximately 130 miles. Thirty percent (30%) described themselves as independent students. Eighty percent (80%) of the overall sample lived off campus.

The 10 students from the rural institution were enrolled in degree programs including chemical engineering, economics, English, computer science, and sociology. The mean GPA for this group was 2.57 on a 4.0 grading scale. All participants were in their 4th or 5th year of college. This group consisted of 4 females and 6 males. Members of this sample ranged in age from 20 to 27. There

are other identifying traits related to this sample. For instance, 20% reported an independent student status. That is, they had released their parents from officially providing any financial assistance. The average frequency with which participants were in contact with family members was 3.1 times per week. Sixty percent (60%) of this sample lived off campus, whereas 40% identified themselves as residential students. Members of this sample lived an average of 197 miles from their permanent home. All students reported their marital status as single. None reported having any children.

The students at the urban site were completing various degree programs including mass communications, social work, psychology, and interior design. The mean GPA of this sample was 2.75 on a 4.0 grading scale. Forty percent (40%) of this sample identified themselves as independent students. The members of this group ranged in age from 21 to 43 years. One participant reported being a parent. The frequency with which students contacted family members in the course of a week averaged 7.1 times. All participants reported their marital status as single and all were commuter students. None lived at home with parents. Members of this sample lived on average 62.9 miles from their permanent homes.

Overall, family participants ranged from 22 to 52 years in age. Approximately 11.5% of this sample earned a high school diploma. Nearly 23% completed 1 to 3 years of college, whereas 40% earned a bachelor's degree. Twenty percent (20%) of the family sample had earned a master's degree.

Family members of the 20 university students formed the second group of participants. A family member of each of the student participants was invited to participate in the study. Ten rural family members agreed to participate, whereas 8 urban family members consented to be respondents. Two additional family members were invited to participate but declined after repeated contacts to be interviewed.

The 10 family members of the student participants who attended the rural institution had varied educational backgrounds. For example, 10% had earned a high school diploma, 10% had earned an associate's degree, and 30% had attended 1 to 3 years of college. Another 30% of this sample had earned a bachelor's degree,

whereas 20% had completed a master's degree. Members of this group were involved in a wide range of professions including a nuclear engineer, an educator, a homemaker, an accountant, and a registered nurse. In every instance, student respondents referred the researcher to a female member of the family to participate in the study.

Eight family members related to the urban students were participants in this research project. In this group, 12.5% had earned a high school diploma, 37.5% had attended 1 to 3 years of college, and 50% had earned a bachelor's degree. All but 1 of the participants were female.

#### APPARATUS

The researchers developed two interview protocols: one for the student participants and the other for the family participants. The protocols consisted of two sections. The first section sought demographic information about the participants including age, sex, and years of completed education. The second section gathered data about the role of family in the lives of African American college students. Participants were asked to describe ways that family members provide support to students. Respondents were asked if they thought their family relationships were typical. To generate data about roles, participants were asked to describe student and family member roles.

The investigators attempted to address issues of authenticity and trustworthiness when designing the study. Authenticity in qualitative research relates to whether the technique employed in the study is designed to elicit data relevant to the questions posed in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). To enhance authenticity, the researchers asked seven experts in qualitative research methods to examine the interview protocols and verify that they posed questions likely to elicit data about the role of family in the success of Black college students.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research relates to the credibility and objectivity in the collection, reporting, and analysis of data (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991). To enhance

trustworthiness in the study, two steps were taken. First, at the end of each interview, the key points the respondent had made were summarized. Participants were invited to add, delete, or change major points if they so desired. This step ensured that the researchers would accurately report data elicited from each participant. Second, the researchers provided transcripts of each interview to the respective participant and asked participants to review, edit, add, or change their comments as appropriate. This step was taken to ensure that participants were confident that the transcripts accurately reflected their opinions. Such participant review is a typical method of enhancing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Bryman & Burgess, 1994).

#### PROCEDURE

Data from participants were collected from in-depth interviews conducted between April 17 and September 6, 2000. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 75 minutes. All student interviews were held in a conference room at the student's respective campus. For family participants, telephone interviews were conducted. All interviews were audiotaped with permission of the participants.

The unit of analysis was the comment. The researcher defined a comment as any phrase, sentence, or series of phrases or sentences on a single topic. When participants moved to a new topic, the start of a new comment was noted. Data analysis occurred by open and axial coding. Open coding is the examination and breaking down of collected data. These data are grouped in categories for theme identification as themes emerge. Axial coding involves the process of sorting themes into groupings and categories when analyzing the meanings and interrelationships between categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Specifically, the researchers started by identifying major themes in the data. These themes were then grouped into three stages. Finally, the comments associated with each theme were assigned to one of three positions: positive, neutral, or negative. The frequencies of comments assigned to each position within each theme were then calculated. This approach enabled the researchers to look at

not only the themes that emerged from the data but the weight that should be accorded to each theme (based on the number of comments assigned to that theme) and the direction of support for each theme (positive, negative, neutral).

## RESULTS

The comments offered by respondents were grouped into eight themes that were subsequently organized around three stages of higher education. The stages, themes, and comments assigned to each position within each theme are summarized in Table 1.

The first stage in the higher education process related to precollege events and experiences. The findings revealed three themes that reflected precollege issues. Comments assigned to these three themes ( $n = 913$ ) represented more than 50% of all the comments offered by participants to suggest that the precollege stage accounts for a great deal of importance in terms of family-student interactions among Blacks.

The first and most frequently mentioned theme was family influence. Family influence consisted of ongoing encouragement as well as financial, moral, and social support. It also meant values instilled by parents and other family members early on in the lives of students. These values were taught at home and formed a foundation for individuals to use in managing the daily affairs of life. Family and student participants in this research project stated that these ingredients were important for personal and academic success, as they noted,

They [family] influence my behavior a lot because of my baggage—what I have picked up from home or my mother taught me and my grandmother taught about respect and honesty. I carry them along with me and I carry them along with me forever. The way I present myself, the way I do things, because they enforced that with me when I was growing up. It never left. My mother is like, when you leave home, you don't leave what you learned at home. You take it with you and you use it when you're away from home, and that is what I do. (urban student)

**TABLE 1**  
**Numbers and Percentages of Comments From All Participants**  
**by Stage, Theme, and Direction of Support (N = 1,801)**

<i>Stage/Theme</i>	n	% N
Precollege influences	913	50.7
Family influence	661	36.7
Positive	422	
Neutral	132	
Negative	107	
Macro perspectives on race	201	11.2
Positive	28	
Neutral	96	
Negative	77	
Factors of motivation	51	2.8
Positive	29	
Neutral	5	
Negative	17	
Early college influences	592	32.9
Negotiating environments	441	24.5
Positive	173	
Neutral	144	
Negative	124	
Sense of community	57	3.2
Positive	40	
Neutral	4	
Negative	13	
Spiritual support	94	5.2
Positive	81	
Neutral	10	
Negative	3	
Late college influences	296	16.4
Family expectations	202	11.2
Positive	121	
Neutral	49	
Negative	32	
Role models	94	5.2
Positive	79	
Neutral	12	
Negative	3	
Total	1,801	100.00

You've always grown up with your family and you feel safe and secure in talking to them and they are always there. [Rural institu-

tion] can't provide that because they don't know who [name of participant] is, and my family does and my extended family does. They know who I am. (rural student)

The second precollege theme related to macro perspectives on race. This theme reflected comments about how families had socialized students about race in general, their experiences with discrimination, and their perceptions of the larger American culture. The following comments are illustrative of this theme:

White Americans have never really had to go through what Black America has, and I think that one of the things that when you throw all of us together, most of my kids have gone to school with Black kids and White kids. So they know the different lifestyles. Just letting your kids understand that everybody can't have the same thing. We were born Black and we can't change that, but we can change how we live. (rural family member)

My parents taught me to know that, because I was Black and female, I would face obstacles but could still excel academically. (rural student)

The final theme associated with the precollege stage was factors of motivation. In this theme, participants discussed what motivated them to pursue higher education and persist in college. As the following comments illustrate, family and friends from home were highly influential:

It's not about me going to school and getting my degree and getting my job. That's nice, but it's about showing the other people, as far as the younger people and other members of my family, that it is possible, it's not just a little pipe dream. I'm here, I'm all right. It's not even about me. I don't even know how I could describe how my little cousins ask, "What were your grades like in high school?" or "How in the world did you do this and can I make it?" or just anybody asking me that. (rural student)

I have to stay in school just because I didn't want to let them down. Plus, I didn't want to let myself down and have to go back to [name of hometown], get into trouble. It is kind of a break from that. It's tough to live down there. I lost a couple of friends in the past three or

four years. If I was down there with them, I would probably be with them. I had to stay here to do what I have to do. (urban student)

The second stage reflected in the results focused on the influence of family in the early college years. The themes assigned to this stage addressed the factors that promoted success among Black students once they matriculated. A total of 592 comments were assigned to the three themes associated with this stage to represent nearly 33% of all comments offered by respondents.

The first theme in this stage related to negotiating environments or participants' perceptions of their minority status in a predominately White setting. Impressions about the university climate, culture, and challenges associated with students of color were explored. Participants reported what they did to survive and manage adverse situations in these environments:

It's one thing to go to a White school. Then there's another thing to go to a White school where there's no other people of color around it. Now that's deep! That is really hard. So it's difficult. If you are a Black person coming from a predominately Black place or mixed area, where you're used to seeing so many different people. Forget the school—just the area alone, whoa! Now that's a major adjustment. You have isolated yourself just by choosing to come here. That's moving from a place that you know so well, that you feel really comfortable with, coming to a place that's really uncomfortable. The transition, the adjustments can be hard when nobody else looks like you or has the same interests. That's going to be hard. (rural student)

We had to give her a lot of self-esteem in herself as a family. That is how to build a relationship strong, because in a predominately White school, they're not going to give you that. If you don't have it in your family or with yourself, your self-esteem could go down fast. (urban family member)

Rural and urban students reported that developing a sense of community with other African Americans on campus was crucial to their existence as students. This emerged as the second theme in the early college stage. A sense of affinity and connectedness between peers was desirable as the quote below suggests:

Sometimes, you just have bad days and you just need someone to talk to. Being here, you're definitely a minority and some of your White friends just can't understand some of the stuff that you go through on a daily basis. Generally, I can handle it, but sometimes, you just need someone who can just relate to what you are going through. (rural student)

In many cases, students developed fictive kin relationships with peers to achieve a sense of community. Fictive kinships are nonsanguineous relationships; however, they are valued as much as sanguineous relations. Individuals who participate in fictive kinships are accepted and function in a role of a blood relative as indicated by the following comment:

I also consider my close friends as family. We seem to support each other throughout school by sending each other cards and letters. (rural student)

The third theme revealed in the early college years related to spiritual support. Both student and family participants maintained that their abiding acts of faith contributed to students' ability to remain in school. These acts of faith included prayers, church attendance, and sharing scripture or inspirational writings with students:

My mom is going to pray on it. She tells my grandmother. My grandmother is a missionary and she is going to pray on it. My sister is going to pray on it. My brother is going to pray on it. So it is not really so much financial, but I like lean on them for emotional and spiritual support. (rural student)

My family is Muslim. My mother is a single parent raising five children. She constantly makes references to God as far as her support. God will work, not just praying to God and not doing your work. She definitely believes there is a strong relationship to praying and actually making a step to producing what you pray for. She always believes in that—not just for prayer, but prayer and work. Then you get the results that you pray for. That is what is in our conversations a lot. Praying to God then going to work. (urban student)

The final stage revealed in the results related to late college influences. The focus in this stage is on factors of family influence that extend beyond higher education but for which college is the foundation. A total of 296 comments or 16.4% of all comments were assigned to this stage, which also consisted of two themes.

The first theme, family expectations, related to the economic, social, and emotional investment that African American families place in their students. As family members placed certain investments in the lives of students, specific family expectations accompanied these investments:

Like my uncles, they never graduated from college so their children are the only thing they have to get a degree. They kind of say that's their degree, too. My mom kind of says my degree is hers. Kids have to do the living that the parents didn't have a chance to do. (urban student)

My mom didn't graduate from college. She took classes but didn't graduate. I believe that if you graduate from college, then you bring your family a certain status. Well, my child went to [name of the university], 'cause your parents do talk about you. (rural student)

The second theme that emerged in the late college stage related to role models and mentors. This theme is linked to participants' sense of obligation to provide personal assistance to other individuals. This assistance included providing advice, information, and serving as an overall resource to others. In essence, this theme was related to the act of shepherding a person through a process or experience. In some cases, students found role models in others. In other cases, students served as role models for others:

And the two brothers right before me, they went to [name of university] and [name of university]. They graduated. My oldest brother, he was the first one to go to college, so all the stress was on him. So he was expected to do well and put forth the effort and come out of school in a reasonable amount of time. I have seen my brothers succeed in college and seen them succeed in life now. (rural student)

In my family, it's like they kind of look up to me. They look to me because I have two younger cousins that are about to enter college,

and they have been looking at me for the last 4 years as a role model for them, so I have been taking that role on. (urban student)

## DISCUSSION

The results of the study offer some important implications for a variety of constituencies. These include not only Black college students and their families but those who work to recruit African American students to higher education and those who assist those students in succeeding.

Consider, for example, the themes associated with the precollege stage: family influence, macro perspectives on race, and factors of motivation. The evidence suggests that families lay the groundwork for success long before Black students get to college. In this study, the term *family* included extended family like grandparents, aunts and uncles, and fictive kin (neighbors, church members, friends). Black families that aspire to send their children to college, then, need to establish expectations with respect to education early in their children's lives. They need to instill values and beliefs in their offspring that will help them persevere through difficult times to achieve their goals. Although, for some families in which no one has attended college, it may be difficult to help children understand what it will take to get to (and through) college. In such instances, fictive kin can play a critical role. These individuals are considered as important as blood relatives, so those who have been to college may need to work with children to establish realistic expectations about higher education. Family members and fictive kin can help their children by talking with school counselors about college aspirations for their sons and daughters. They can also encourage their children to participate in federal or state programs offered by schools to work with youngsters on the skills they will need to succeed in college (Talent Search or Upward Bound, for example).

Family and fictive kin can also be aware of the influence they have on their children in terms of perspectives on race. The way they talk with their children about race and the experiences they and their offspring have with race all influence children when it

comes to college. Whatever steps parents and other relatives can take to help children understand how to succeed as a minority in a majority culture will help those children as they persist in education.

Finally, family can help ensure that their students are motivated. The results of this study suggest that a college education offers Blacks career opportunities and social mobility. What motivates precollege students is having a role model or serving as a role model. Family and fictive kin can help children by holding them up as models to other children and introducing them to others who have succeeded in education. It is also important to note the lack of male role models for young African Americans. All but one of the family members in this study were female. Moreover, student participants routinely reported the influence of females in their lives but did not report the same for males. Families that make an effort to introduce their children to male role models (for instance, teachers, ministers, and recreation leaders) will provide them with some much-needed balance in terms of who succeeds in life.

Two other groups can also assist young Black children institute expectations regarding higher education. The first consists of current and African American college students and Black alumni. These individuals understand the rigors of postsecondary education—both the personal and the academic challenges and rewards. As the evidence in the study suggests, many students are already serving as mentors for siblings and cousins. They might expand their role, however, and develop relationships with other younger children who might not have a role model with respect to higher education. If each current Black college student adopted one other child and helped prepare that child for college, the numbers of African American college students would grow exponentially. This is particularly true of Black, male college students given the paucity of male role models in higher education.

The second group that might make a difference includes those who work to recruit Blacks to college. The findings of this study suggest that there is a need to work with whole families to promote college attendance. This means introducing programs for families of elementary and secondary school children so that precollege

events and experiences are purposefully introduced. Such programs would assist families in instilling educational values and aspirations in their children. Families might also benefit from discussions about race and how to deal with discrimination. These programs might also offer advice on how to motivate young Blacks to aspire to higher education and teach children about the doors that a college degree can open.

There are also implications for these groups with respect to the second stage in the model, early college. The themes associated with this stage include negotiating environments, a sense of community, and spiritual support. For families and fictive kin, this suggests that they need to make sure their students understand how minority students in a predominately White university can survive in both the academic and the social realms. This means family members need to familiarize themselves with the resources available to their students so that they can encourage their students to use those resources should difficulties arise. Likewise, families can talk with students about the networks of faculty, staff, and friends they are forming for themselves. The data suggest that having support networks on campus creates a sense of community for Black students. Again, families may not know many (or any) other Black students or faculty at the university, but by encouraging their students to seek out relationships with members of these groups, they can assist their students in creating a support system. Finally, the findings of this study suggest that spiritual support is important to student success. Families can make sure their students have a religious organization with which to affiliate while at school. They can also remind students of their faith and encourage them to use that faith to weather the challenges they encounter and celebrate the successes they achieve on campus.

Current Black students and alumni can also take action to assist others in the early college stage. For students, this might mean adopting a little brother or sister for whom they can serve as a resource about navigating the academic and social milieus on campus. They might introduce new students to campus organizations or Black faculty and staff members through which support networks can be created to ensure the new student develops a sense of com-

munity. Making sure new students are aware of the religious organizations in the local area might also help ensure that new students can obtain the spiritual support associated with success.

Finally, campus administrators can take steps to promote success among Black students in the early stages of their college careers. Although most institutions offer orientation programs that introduce new students to the resources and services available on campus, the findings of this study suggest that certain additional measures might assist African American students in succeeding once they matriculate. Actively helping students negotiate the new environment, for example, might involve offering seminars for small groups of Black students in which the problems they encounter are discussed and the successes they achieve are acknowledged. Such programs might also promote social networks among students and between students and staff leading to a stronger sense of community among students. Finally, administrators might offer more assistance in the area of spiritual support. Many professionals, particularly those at public institutions, are hesitant to get involved in issues of religion or spirituality with students given the taboos associated with mixing religion and the state. The findings of this study suggest, however, that administrators would be well served to attend to the spiritual needs of new Black students if they wish to promote their success.

Finally, it is important to examine what these constituencies can do in terms of the third stage of the model, the late college stage. Recall that the themes associated with this stage included family expectations and role models. Moreover, these themes suggest what is important to student success at the end of their college careers and beyond. The findings reveal that successful students feel an obligation to their families and believe their personal triumphs are triumphs for their families, as well. They believe they need to repay their families for the support they have received. For some, this debt may be repaid by serving as a role model for younger members of the family and mentoring others through the educational process. To promote success late in the college career, then, family members and fictive kin may want to listen to how their students express themselves. Are they talking about their obligation to

the family? Do they aspire to help others succeed in college? These could be considered signs of students who continue to succeed as they approach the end of the university experience.

Although it is difficult to identify steps that might be taken by students themselves at this stage, there are things that alumni can do. For one, Blacks who have recently graduated can offer to serve as mentors and role models for upper division students at their alma maters or at local colleges and universities. In one way, this may serve to meet the payback needs of alumni. Additionally, it models how to serve as a mentor for upper division students who may assume such a role when they themselves graduate.

Finally, administrators can help students late in their college degree programs. They might offer programs in which students discuss the degree to which they feel indebted to their families and what steps they plan to take to acknowledge the support family and fictive kin have provided for them over the years. Professionals might also establish programs that connect recent alumni to upper division students. Doing so would provide a mechanism for alumni to serve as role models and meet their own expectations of repayment. Such programs would also be self-promoting. Alumni would work with upper division students who would soon become alumni and might, therefore, be more likely to mentor upcoming upper division students. Finally, administrators can capitalize on existing programs that can enable students to acknowledge the support they have received from family. For example, many institutions offer family weekends and convocations, and all sponsor commencement ceremonies. These rituals provide a wonderful opportunity to pay tribute to families and kin. Moreover, they enable students to express their indebtedness to those whose support has been so central to their success.

Overall, then, the three stages in the college success model brought to light in the study suggest implications for practices for families, students, alumni, and administrators. But it is also important to note the dynamic nature of the model. The three stages suggested by the data revealed that the groundwork to succeed in college is laid by family members and fictive kin throughout childhood and that the success experienced by students extends

well beyond graduation. Moreover, there is a need for different forms of support at different points in the college career. Finally, the model suggests that success in college among Blacks can be cyclical if those who succeed actively repay those who sustained them by supporting others to aspire to higher education.

This is not to say that further research on the role of family in college student success is not needed. Clearly, more studies need to be done. For instance, this study examined only students at public, predominately White, research universities. Future investigations on the role family plays for Black students at community colleges, liberal arts colleges, or comprehensive universities would broaden the scope of knowledge about success at different types of schools. Likewise, exploring the factors that promote success among students at historically Black colleges and universities might offer some insights into what works in both types of academic environments. Additional studies that examine any one of the three stages in the model in greater detail might lead to richer descriptions of the themes associated with each stage. Another area for consideration is the development of a quantitative study. Survey research, for example, might be useful in assessing the importance of each of the factors uncovered in the present study from a much larger number of participants.

It is also important to note the limitations of the study. The first limitation was the nature of the design. The study employed qualitative research methods and, as with all qualitative studies, the results are generalizable only to the particular samples within this study. Other limitations also relate to the qualitative nature of the study. For example, it was possible that the interview protocol did not include questions that would lead participants to talk about other elements related to the role of family. Likewise, it is possible that participants interpreted questions differently than the researcher intended. If so, this might have influenced their responses and, hence, influenced the results of the study. Other limitations related to the sample. Participants in the study included students and family members from only two postsecondary institutions. It is possible that these participants differed in some important way from suc-

cessful Black students and family members at other schools. Any of these limits could have influenced the results of the study.

Despite these limitations, though, and the need for further research, the findings of this study provide an initial model of the connections between family and success in college among Black students. This model suggests that the foundation for success in college is laid in childhood and nurtured through different stages of the college career. Moreover, the effects of success in college and the role of family in that success are carried over in the postgraduate years. One initial interpretation, then, suggests the socially reproductive nature of the model. That is, it provides families, students, alumni, and administrators with an agenda that can be followed that should lead to success in education. These successful students are then more likely to promote success among the next generation of children in the family, so the model for success is generative for multiple generations within the same family. It would seem the next step is to further refine the model through additional research so that it is meaningful for all Black families, not just those whose members have succeeded in higher education.

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