



OHIO EDUCATION
RESEARCH CENTER

Closing the Participation Gap for African American Men in Higher Education

RESEARCH TEAM

Debra Thompson, PhD
Ohio University

James L. Moore III, PhD
The Ohio State University



IMPORTANCE

In spite of the clear personal and public benefits of a college degree, America's participation gap, defined as the difference between current attainment rates and what they should be in order to provide an adequately prepared workforce, is wide: in 2010, the 4-year graduation rate was 31.3 percent nationwide and 30.3 percent in Ohio. Disturbingly, these attainment disparities are codified by race and gender. Nationally, just 16.4 percent of African Americans graduate in four years and the same holds true for only 11.2 percent of African American males. Estimates by the College Board indicate that in Ohio just 8.1 percent of Black men who enroll in 4-year public colleges graduate in four years. Graduation rates improve slightly after six years, rising to 26.1 percent, but the point remains: of the few African American men who enroll in higher education, we are losing three-quarters of them. The success of African American men in higher education is of vital interest to all Ohioans. Not only will improvements for these men result in better social conditions for communities of color, but it will also create a generation of skilled workers that is desperately needed to inspire and fuel Ohio's economic prosperity.

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this project is to determine the factors that support or inhibit the post-secondary educational attainment of African American men in Ohio. This project also fills a research void by providing a comprehensive, systematic, and empirically-based analysis of statewide policies and institutional programs and practices currently in place in Ohio's four-year public universities as well as critical insight into African American men's perceptions about the success of these initiatives. This research defines and focuses on three dimensions of academic success: access, retention/persistence, and engagement. Access describes the series of facilitators and barriers that enable or constrain students' abilities to attain a college degree. Barriers to access are categorized in two ways: income barriers are financial constraints, which can be prohibitive for either the individual or family unit, while information barriers restrict individuals' abilities to navigate the necessary procedures for attaining higher education. Retention, or persistence, describes higher education students' continuation from one term to another until graduation. There are four central tenants for successful persistence and avoidance of attrition: peer support, faculty support, involvement in campus life, and obtainment and use of social capital. Engagement can help to measure a college's success at integrating, challenging, and stimulating its student body, often key in preventing attrition. Four spheres of engagement increase the likelihood of persistence: academic engagement, behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and psychological engagement.

RESEARCH DESIGN & DATA

The research employs a three-pronged approach to examine the current status and future trajectory of African American men's participation gap in higher education.

1. **Policy:** Mixed-methods research on statewide policies pertaining to the access and retention of African American males in the K-16 education pipeline using a wide variety of data sources, including publicly available government documents, internal



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OERC PRIMARY STAFF

The Ohio State University

Josh Hawley, EdD

Director

Sunny L. Munn, PhD

OERC Project Manager/
Postdoctoral Researcher

Randy Olsen, PhD

Data Lead

Lisa Neilson, PhD

OLDA Research Manager

Lauren Porter

CPDS Project Manager

Wright State University

Jill Lindsey, PhD

Research Lead

Suzanne Franco, EdD

Faculty Research Fellow

OERC PARTNER REPRESENTATIVES

Battelle for Kids

Brad Mitchell, PhD

Erin Joyce, MA

Battelle Memorial Institute

David Burns, MA

Case Western Reserve University

Claudia Coulton, PhD

Rob Fischer, PhD

Community Research Partners

Yvonne Olivares, PhD

Miami University

Sarah Woodruff, PhD

The Ohio State University

Ann O'Connell, EdD

Ohio University

Greg Foley, PhD

Anirudh Ruhil, PhD

Strategic Research Group

Kathleen Carr, PhD

University of Cincinnati

Debbie Zorn, EdD

Sam Stringfield, PhD

Wright State University

Suzanne Franco, EdD

Jill Lindsey, PhD

government documents attained through access to information requests, NCES and IPEDS data, and semi-structured interviews with political elites, policymakers, and stakeholders.

- Programs:** Mixed-methods research on institutional programs pertaining to the access, retention, and engagement of African American males in higher education from a representative sample of four-year institutions in the University System of Ohio using data from institutional enrolment and retention statistics, program documents, reports and budgets, and semi-structured interviews with university administrators, program directors/coordinators, and other stakeholders, including students.
- Participation:** Mixed-methods research on the experiences of African American men currently enrolled in programs at a representative sample of four-year institutions in the University System of Ohio, focused on data derived from semi-structured qualitative interviews.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Preliminary findings at all levels indicate that policies tend to be broad and color-void, failing to take into account the unique challenges faced by African American males.

- The K-12 achievement gap for African American males is dire; only 45 percent of African-American males graduated during the 2009/10 school year, in comparison to the 80 percent of white males who graduated, a 35 percent gap. Among 49 states and the District of Columbia, Ohio ranks 46th out of 50 in African American male K-12 graduation rates.
- Disciplinary policies are particularly prohibitive to student retention. Ohio Revised Code 3313.534 mandates all schools to have a policy of zero tolerance for “violent, disruptive, or inappropriate behavior.” The wording of the law is vague, which gives schools significant flexibility when deciding which students to suspend. The U.S. Department of Education recently revealed students of color – especially males – are more likely to be suspended or expelled beginning as early as preschool.
- It is unclear how the adoption of Common Core Standards in 2014-15 will affect students from at-risk population groups.
- Statewide higher education policies focus on overall achievement, rather than creating and funding group specific goals. While some policies have been relatively successful (e.g. Student Support Services (SSS), Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, and Achieving the Dream), most do not contain any consideration of the challenges specific to African American men.
- The 2009 performance-based funding formula provides additional funding for institutions that accept students from at-risk populations; however, there is no indication that students with multiple risk factors are given greater weight than students with only one. Because African American males are more likely to have multiple risk factors, this may actually create a disincentive for institutions to enroll these students.
- At individual institutions there is a wide variability in the effort put into access and retention of African American males. However, there are one or two standout programs among the public universities that could be modeled elsewhere in order to improve each institution’s success in this area. One especially impressive example is the Todd A. Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male located at The Ohio State University. Unfortunately, many institutions are struggling to address the needs of this group and the majority of four-year public institutions in Ohio fall below the 50th percentile in the national rankings for the graduation of African American men.

Suggested Citation

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