"I am because we are:" collectivism as a foundational characteristic of African American college student identity and academic achievement

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Abstract   This study extends current research on African American college student achievement by focusing on collectivism, a key characteristic of African American racial identity. Collectivism serves as the framework for analysis of students' beliefs about the purpose of higher education, conceptualization of their roles and responsibilities as students, and the ways that students measure academic success within the context of a predominantly White university. Given that a conflict between students' background and the culture of the university environment can exist, the findings offer educators insight into the unique experiences and achievement aspirations of African American college students and strategies to effectively mentor and support them.

Keywords   African American college students · Racial identity · Collectivism · Academic achievement

1 Introduction

One of the unique aspects of African American racial identity is collectivism, which has been defined as an individual's concern with the advancement of the group to which he or she belongs (Akbar 1991; Allen and Bagozzi 2001; Nobles 1991), and is expressed by the African proverb that states, "I am because we are, and therefore, we are because I am." In other words, collectivism is characterized as an individual's sense of connection to and responsibility for members of their group (Taylor and Moghaddam 1994; Triandis et al. 1988). The African American racial community's boundary is defined as an abstract, yet tangible force that separates insiders from outsiders and offers safety and security for its members (White 1998). Moreover, for

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individuals who are members of a minority group, traditionally under-represented, or are viewed as deficient and pathological by dominant culture, the need for community and inter-connectedness can be great (Heath 1998; Jagers and Mock 1995; Phinney 1990).

Racial identity is described as identification with a particular group (Phinney 1990), as an individual's conception of their racial group membership (Bernal and Knight 1993), and as a construct which operates on two levels, both self and the group (Hernandez-Sheets 1999). It also refers to an individual's perception that he or she shares a "common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms 1993, p. 3).[1] The term racial identity has also been used to group individuals based on physical characteristics.

Ethnic identity, a construct that is similar to racial identity and equally as complex, is a social construct that is not limited to similarities of physical characteristics; rather, it is the sense of similarity based on traditional cultural practices, beliefs, and language (Phinney 1990).

African American racial identity theory and research suggests that one's identity is multidimensional and is created and constructed by interaction with others and surrounding environments (Allen et al. 1989; Cross 1991; Sellers et al. 1998; Shelton and Sellers 2000).

Research also suggests that collectivism is a critical aspect of African American identity as its roots can be traced to African and African American culture (Nobles 2006). Amongst African peoples, a collectivistic worldview helped to ensure the survival of the tribe and was characterized by responsibility for others, and protected members from alienation and loneliness (White and Parham 1990). Modern-day collectivism is also reflected in the extended family structure and in fictive kinship, in which are people who are most often not related to the large family core, but are considered family members (McAdoo 1998).

The present qualitative study examines the nature of collectivism and its influence on African American college students with particular attention paid to students' beliefs about the value of higher education and academic success, their perceptions of their roles as students, and their stance toward the African American campus community within the context of a predominantly White university.

2 Literature review

2.1 African American college students and racial identity

The literature on the relationship between African American identity and academic achievement within predominantly White schools and institutions has provided varied findings about the impact of racial identity on academic success. For example, African American students who distance themselves from their racial identity, or "act White," perform at higher levels than those who do not (Fordham 1988; Fordham and Ogbu

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[1] For the purposes of this study, the term "racial identity" is used. However, the terms "ethnic" and "racial" are used when it is necessary to underscore the differences in the concepts.

1986; Witherspoon et al. 1997). Further, an internalized racial identity is negatively related to African American students' adjustment to college (Anglin and Wade 2007). Others have found that African American students who identify with other members of their racial group fare better academically than those who do not (Goodstein and Ponterotto 1997; Harper and Tuckman 2006; Spencer et al. 2001; Way 1998). Despite these conflicting perspectives, it is evident that situational and environmental factors influence African American college students' racial identity as well as academic achievement.

Research indicates that upon entering college, African American college student racial identity is shaped by personal experience, socio-economic status, and social class (Allen 1998, 2001; White 1998). However, African American students at predominantly White institutions may find that the university environment can be a source of: exclusion of various forms of racial and racial expression and isolation (Hooks 1989; Nasir and Saxe 2003); differential treatment (Thompson et al. 1990); heightened feelings of loneliness (Allen 1992); a paucity of services and programs geared to increase retention and graduation rates (Hurtado et al. 1998); and subtle assaults against them, or micro-aggressions (Solorzano et al. 2000) As a result, students often experience an increased affinity for and commitment to their racial group (Saylor and Aries 1999). The need for community is often sufficiently fulfilled at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Berger and Milem 2000), so when compared to their counterparts at predominantly White institutions, African American students at HBCUs report increased levels of academic success. For example, a study examining the impact of the university environment on academic self-concept, which was defined as an individual's perceptions of his or her academic ability, revealed that students attending historically Black colleges reported having positive student–faculty interactions as the most significant variable in predicting self-concept (Cokley 2000). On the other hand, for African American students at predominantly White institutions, grade point average was a better predictor of self-concept. Cokley's study suggests that students in both historically Black and predominantly White institutions thrive academically when they adapt to and excel at what the university values most, either grade point average, interpersonal relationships with faculty and peers, or a combination of both.

3 Rationale for present study

This study employs as its theoretical framework a situational or contextual nature of racial identity as it manifests for African American students within the context of a predominantly White university (Sellers et al. 1998; Shelton and Sellers 2000). It examines the degree to which students' racial identity in general and a collectivistic worldview in particular is more or less salient. It also examines how collectivism influences students' beliefs about higher education.

Collectivism, which is characterized by interdependence and the desire to strive toward the survival of the group, is evident in the African American community in a number of ways. A historical view of education reveals that collectivism is reflected in African Americans' early pursuit of knowledge; their goals were to assert and affirm

their humanity and to advance African Americans as a whole. In the segregated south, for example, African American students were encouraged to learn, and were taught (most often by members of their home communities) to maintain a sense of dignity and pride in spite of erroneous messages from the dominant culture that they were racially and intellectually inferior (Perry 2003a, b).

Collectivism has also been found to sustain the family structure, which includes the nuclear family, extended family and, as previously mentioned, fictive kin, or those who are not biologically related but are considered part of the family (McAdoo 1998). Collectivism is also reflected in neighborhood or community interventions aimed at increasing the emotional well-being and physical safety of it members (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999); in community psychology, which focuses on community empowerment along with self-actualization (Brookins 1999), and spiritual practices that have been traditionally associated with the African American church (Cook and Wiley 2000).

Although researchers have examined the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement among college students in general, few studies have actually examined the singular impact of collectivism on school success (Oyserman et al. 2001; Phinney et al. 2006). The present study addresses the gap in the literature by examining the specific ways in which collectivism influences African American college students' beliefs about the purpose of higher education.

4 Method

As neither the subtleties of interaction nor one's interpretation could be understood solely by quantitative means (Kuh and Love 2000), qualitative methods (Glaser and Strauss 1967), allows participants voices to be heard and their experiences made explicit (Delgado 1995), and is useful in studying identity because identity is constructed within a social context. An exploration of racial identity within the context of higher education can reveal the often unchallenged power dynamics that college students negotiate.

4.1 Setting

The research setting for this study was a large public university in the western United States. At the time of this study, the total undergraduate population was 23,835. The total number of African American undergraduates was 879.

4.2 Recruitment

The researcher recruited participants by visiting a number of undergraduate classes. Classes visited were those that typically attracted relatively large numbers of African American students. Most often, these courses were offered in Ethnic Studies and African American studies programs. Classes whose course content typically did not address race or ethnicity were also visited. In considering the recruitment process,

the researcher acknowledges the possibility that recruiting students from different classes (ethnic studies and non-ethnic studies) could potentially skew the responses. However, unless it could have been established that those students who were recruited from ethnic studies classes would in some way be more conscious of their racial identity than those recruited from non-ethnic studies classes, one cannot be certain of such an effect. Further, it is possible that the participants recruited from the non-ethnic studies classes would also identify very strongly with their racial background. The researcher sought to obtain a sample that reflected the diversity of the student population at large and that considered the possibility of individual differences within the African American college student population.

After receiving the verbal consent of the instructors, students were informed that the study would explore racial identity and academic achievement, and were given a participation form so that those who were interested could provide their contact information. Thirty students indicated initial interest; each student was contacted by telephone by the researcher. During the telephone conversations, students were re-familiarized with the study and were told that the study focused on African American college students, racial identity and academic achievement. During this interaction, students were also asked if they would be willing to participate in an individual interview which would take approximately two hours. Ultimately, sixteen African American undergraduates agreed to participate.

4.3 Participants

Four first, second, third and fourth-year students were interviewed, and the 16 participants varied in terms of major and pre-college educational backgrounds (see Table 1). All participants were between the ages of 18 and 25. Five of the 16 participants were males and 11 were females (see Table 1). To understand students' pre-college beliefs about higher education, students were asked to provide information about the types of high schools they attended, and whether they were encouraged by family members, peers, teachers or other community members to attend college. Students reported attending private, middle-class and predominantly White high schools, urban predominantly African American and Latino public schools and were encouraged by family, peers and community members to pursue higher education. Students referred to themselves as Black or African American.

4.4 Interviews

Interviews were conducted in an office located on campus and participants were informed that the study dealt with racial identity and academic achievement. Prior to the start of each interview, participants were given two consent forms which explained the nature of the study, granted permission to use the audio-taped interview data, and were informed that their identity would be kept anonymous and responses confidential. Students signed both consent forms, were given copies for their personal records. Each participant was interviewed by the author for approximately two hours.

Table 1 Participant description

Name	Gender	Year in College	Major
Andrea	Female	First	Intended Mass Communications and African American Studies
Bridget	Female	First	Intended Molecular and Cell Biology
Clarissa	Female	First	Undeclared
Randall	Male	First	Undeclared
Carl	Male	Second	Intended Social Welfare
Joanna	Female	Second	African American Studies
Monica	Female	Second	Intended double major in African American Studies and Pre-Med
Jennifer	Female	Third	Double major in African American Studies and Political Science
Karen	Female	Third	Sociology
Fred	Male	Third (Transfer Student)	Undeclared
Leann	Female	Third (Transfer Student)	Undeclared
Marcus	Male	Third (Transfer Student)	City and Regional Planning
Carolyn	Female	Fourth	Ethnic Studies
Jeff	Male	Fourth	Rhetoric
Vicki	Female	Fourth	Legal Studies
Christyl	Female	Fourth (Re-entry)	Social Welfare

Note: Transfer Student refers to students who began their college careers elsewhere and transferred course credit with the purpose of continuing their education and earning a bachelors degree. Re-entry Student refers to students who began college at an earlier period and decided to withdraw or "stop out" of their academic programs. After a few years, students return to complete course requirements

Semi-structured interview questions were refined after conducting pilot interviews and follow-up meetings with two undergraduate research assistants (see Appendix for interview questions). In interviews with actual participants, questions were asked systematically and follow up questions were asked when clarification was needed (Lincoln and Guba 1985). All interview transcripts were kept confidential.

4.5 Data analysis and trustworthiness

Each interview was assigned a number and later transcribed by the author. Using methods as outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), recurring terms, themes and assumptions were noted on each line of the participants' transcribed interviews. Data were then coded and analyzed using methods by the author. Specific attention was paid to students' beliefs regarding: (1) the purpose of higher education, (2) ideas about their

Table 2 Interview coding scheme

Purpose of Higher Education (PHE)	Purpose of Higher Education/Roles and Responsibilities (PHE/RR)	Roles and Responsibilities (RR)	University environment (UE)
Choice	Economic Stability	Awareness	Competition
Equity	Empowerment	Community (home)	Hoop Jumping
Family History	Finding a Voice	Community (school)	Prestige
Peers	Knowledge	Help-Giving	Research versus Teaching
	Learning	Obligation	School as war
	Preparation	Playing Catch-up	Status
	Resource Allocation	Help-Seeking	Students as guinea pigs
	Studying what you love	Responsibility (self)	Students as slaves to University
		Responsibility (others)	Individualism
		Role of "elders"	Power

Note: The category Purpose of Higher Education/Roles and Responsibilities (PHE/RR) was created to represent the complexities of students' beliefs

roles and responsibilities as African American students, (3) their roles and responsibilities outside of the university environment, and (4) their perceptions of the university environment (see Table 2).

For reliability, five meetings with the author and a team of seven coders were conducted over the course of one semester. The team consisted of five doctoral candidates and one faculty member that conducted qualitative research on issues of race in education. Each coder was given raw transcripts (with pseudonyms given to protect the identity of each student), and were instructed to consider students beliefs about the purpose of higher education, students' roles and responsibilities and their perceptions of the university. Coders conducted line-by-line contextual analysis also noting recurring terms, themes and assumptions each line of the participants' interview transcript and provided feedback on the author's initial impressions and analysis (Bogdan and Biklen 1998).

5 Findings

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this work is to examine the specific ways in which collectivism shapes African American college students' beliefs about the value of higher education. Collectivism is reflected in the extent to which students felt responsible for promoting the academic success of the African American student community. Findings are organized according to: (1) college students' perceptions of the university environment, (2) the purpose of higher education, (3) ideas about their roles and responsibilities as African American students, and (4) their roles and responsibilities outside of the university environment.

5.1 The university environment

Researchers have examined the impact of different college environments on African American students' persistence, success, relationship with members of their racial group and self esteem (Goodstein and Ponterotto 1997; Oyserman et al. 2001). At predominantly White institutions, African American students often perceive that they are neither welcomed nor appreciated on campus, resulting in a lack of involvement in the larger campus community (White 1998). In this type of environment, African American students will seek the safety of their collective racial group. When asked about the level of campus involvement, one participant indicated that she did not see herself as part of the campus community or part of the mainstream.

> I guess I could be if I put some more effort into it. But, the events I attend are usually the African American events. If I am in classes all day with other students I want to go to something that is Black. (Andrea)

Another participant described his daily interaction with other students as lacking diversity, although the campus environment is racially and ethnically diverse. He related:

> There are a lot of people at [this university], but on a daily basis, I really don't talk to many White people or Asian people. I don't really talk to many Latino people. I went to a football game last week, my first one, and that was pretty cool. But for here, mainstream, I don't even know what mainstream is here. I don't feel a part of it. (Jeff)

Further illustrating this point, another participant shared that after being "burned" when attempting to join non-African American or mainstream student clubs, she was less likely to participate on campus at all:

> I really don't see a lot of African Americans doing things in the broader spectrum of the University. Maybe [because of] not being accepted, or, we don't want to have to deal with other races telling you can't do this or being rude to us. (Andrea)

Clearly, students' sense of belonging was challenged by the lack of diversity and representation in the larger campus community.

5.2 Purpose of higher education

Participants reported that what influenced their beliefs about higher education was the need for self and group empowerment, which referred to the idea that the African American community at large benefits when one African American student is successful. Participants perceived self-empowerment as the acquisition of knowledge and information that would serve them and the African American community. Education was important because it fostered a sense of liberation, control over their circumstances, and, for some, provided escape from negative life situations. When asked

why African American students sought higher education, one participant addressed the importance of fostering personal growth:

> For African Americans, the more education we have the more good we can do for others and ourselves. With education, it just seems like the world opens up a little bit more because we have an understanding of various aspects of this world. Without education we are limited. Totally limited. (Leann)

To understand self and group empowerment in the context of a predominantly White institution and whether this empowerment reflected a collectivistic attitude requires an examination of the ways in which students negotiated their racial identity. To that end, participants were asked to define their roles and responsibilities as African American students. Achieving academic success, giving back, and creating a network of peers, staff and faculty were critical factors in empowering and supporting other African American students as well as their communities at home.

5.3 Roles and responsibilities as African American college students

5.3.1 Achieving academic success

When asked to define academic success, participants indicated that the learning process and receiving their degree were more important than the specific grades earned. The notion of collectivism was evident in students' desire to maintain positive perceptions of African Americans on campus. This served to increase their academic self-confidence and their perceived ability to support the African American campus community, and was achieved largely through academic success and preparing well for class discussions. One participant related:

> It goes deeper than getting a letter grade. To me, academic success depends on whether or not, at the end of the semester, I developed a particular passion for something that was brought out in the course. (Karen)

Another student placed less value on grades than he did on the ability to complete his education:

> For me, it's not necessarily about getting an A on that midterm, it's just completing that midterm. You go through the motions and you do it enough and you'll get to where you want to be, so, whether you graduate summa cum laude or whether I just barely make it out…I just know that grades are not an accurate reflection of who I am. (Jeff)

Participants chose not to let their academic careers be defined by outside evaluation or the fear that they would be perceived by others as intellectually inferior. Rather, an important test of academic success was one's ability to formulate opinions and ideas about the world. This ability reached beyond applying information to "every-day" situations. For example, one participant suggested that if an individual could critically examine information, develop well-reasoned conclusions, and, most importantly, teach others with it, then he or she was truly successful:

I would say that once you've graduated from college, you should be able to lead others, not only with what you've learned, but also with how you interpret your surroundings. It's not necessarily about getting straight A's. Straight A's are good, [but] when I graduate from college I want to have a better world view a better idea of how the world works. (Marcus)

In addition to critical thinking, participants also related that another important aspect of academic success was participating in and contributing to class discussions. They described the importance of "speaking up" during provocative discussions about ethnicity and race especially when they were one of a limited number of African American students present. Their presence could combat the stereotyping and bias which often surfaces in university contexts (Steele 1999, 2003). The threat of being stereotyped did not appear to influence students' responses; participants explained that their purpose in participating in class discussions was not necessarily to "represent the race" but to demonstrate self-confidence and receive respect from students and professors. For instance, one participant chose to be what she described as "radical" as possible in order to stimulate critical thought and discussion about race relations:

One time, in class, I was asked if race relations would improve and I said no. I was asked why. And my response was, "As long as there is a little White boy in a community in Iowa that knows that there are no Black people in the community but he knows the word 'nigger,' there will never be change in race relations. It starts with how you socialize children." [In response to this] mouths dropped, because they never thought about race in an immediate concept, because everyone else in the class is White or Asian, so it affects them differently if at affects them at all. (Karen)

Another participant believed that the mere presence of African Americans could help contend with negative stereotypes in the classroom:

I think that African American students definitely add a certain aspect—especially educated and goal-oriented students—they represent what others can achieve. And so I think it's really important that in the surrounding communities, all of the kids see the African American population here because then they will see that it is possible and that there are others like them that are achieving and succeeding. I think it also helps to open the minds of other people of different races on this campus. Just because somebody is a different ethnicity from you doesn't mean that they have a different capability of succeeding. I think that that's what being African American brings to the [campus] community. (Randall)

Participants were aware of subtle discrimination and stereotyping. However, as evidenced by their responses, a collectivistic worldview allowed them to focus on what they indicated were their responsibilities as African American college students. These were related to achieving academic success and to stimulating critical thought and discussion around race and ethnicity. The following section addresses collectivism from the perspective of roles and responsibilities to the African American community.

5.4 Roles and responsibilities to the community-at-large

5.4.1 Giving back

Participants valued community success and attempted to achieve this through what they referred to as "giving back." Students described "giving back" as building community with other African Americans on the college campus as well as in their home communities. "Giving back" is the responsibility of African Americans to mentor others and give support and encouragement that they themselves received. This desire was present for those whose home communities were predominantly African American as well as for those from multi-racial communities. "Giving back" meant involving themselves in the surrounding community as tutors, mentoring neighborhood youth, and participating in environmental and social justice campus and community organizations. For example, one participant expressed:

> I do plan on giving back because I'm at this university and I've experienced a lot of things. I've exposed myself, through my own education, to the disadvantages and discrepancies that need to be fixed. I want to be able to give back and help and change and do whatever I can. (Carl)

For another, the desire to give back was heightened because of the absence of role models in her life prior to coming to college:

> A college campus representative [never] came to my school. I didn't see a professor or executive person coming into the ghetto saying, 'We want you to come, and we want to give you an opportunity'. (Jennifer)

The lack of pre-college mentorship was the impetus for her return to her home community to prepare younger students for the opportunities and inevitable challenges that their pursuit of higher education might pose. Along with other participants in this study, Jennifer took ownership over and responsibility for her academic career and for the welfare of her campus and home communities. Similarly, another related:

> Basically, since I've been in college, I realized that I didn't get here by myself—community people played an important role in getting to where I am today. Someone took their time to help me, and so my obligation is to help somebody else. Through higher education, I can encourage and educate other people to do the same and follow in my footsteps. I can make it seem less intimidating for other people. (Randall)

Their goal was to create a safe place in which they could receive support and mentorship while establishing themselves as young scholars.

As participants commented on their experiences and their potential for affecting positive change in their home communities, they indicated that they were willing to sacrifice comfort and familiarity if their lives could somehow benefit the lives of people at home. One participant shared:

> My ultimate career path is to be a college professor in a Sociology department somewhere. I think the giving back should be done all along the way, because

now there are so few role models for Black children that they need to see what I have to do at every step of the way. (Keisha)

Another participant related:

I don't build up my community who will? Being educated, I think, it's like "to whom much is given, much is required." God blessed me so that I can be a tool to bless others. I frown upon those who forget. I don't think you should ever forget where you come from. I also don't think you should allow it to be chains around your ankles and prevent you from keep going forward. But we should remember to give back and help our community. (Jennifer)

Yet another participant commented:

My desire to go to law school came to be because I did go to an inner-city, mostly African American high school. I've experienced things through school work and interactions period that I don't like. I was brought up that knowledge is power, so I have to come here to get the knowledge and then go to law school to get knowledge and make change. (Joanna)

Participants were clear about their responsibilities and roles as contributors to their community. Interestingly, when asked how they planned to fulfill their roles, they indicated that the development and maintenance of support networks among faculty was necessary in order to achieve participants' collectivistic goals. The next section illuminates these findings.

5.5 Faculty presence and support

Research on African American college students' experiences has shown that student–faculty relationships have the potential to strengthen African American students' self-concept within a predominantly White institution (Heath 1998; Thompson et al. 1990). Moreover, studies have examined the role of African American professors in students' persistence and academic success and found that students' feelings of isolation and alienation were allayed by the involvement of at least one African American faculty member in their academic lives (Allen 1992; Dorsey and Jackson 1995). Similarly, a major factor that contributes to a thriving African American undergraduate community at a small liberal arts college is the presence of Black faculty (Person and Christensen 1996). While students at predominantly White institutions indicated that increasing the presence of African American faculty was necessary to provide African American students with effective and caring mentoring (Grant-Thompson and Atkinson 1997), the cross-cultural competence of White and other faculty improved students perceptions' of faculty members' ability and desire to provide effective mentorship (Koger 1995).

When asked about the presence of African American faculty support, participants related that they wanted to see increased numbers of African American or other faculty of color:

It's been the most rewarding experience here to have minority faculty. You don't necessarily have to be Black. Just a minority that is aware. It feels nice having

them (faculty) relate to you and as far as they understand. We need more Black faculty here. That is what the world is made of. There are millions of people of color in this world and we need them here in academics to hear and discuss their viewpoints. (Monica)

Participants also indicated that they would be responsive to non-African American faculty as well:

This school pushes openness and understanding and is trying to increase minority enrollment, so there is a sense that when you come and present yourself and what you're interested in, the majority population might be a little bit more open to try to help you further your research or get you the help that you need. Even though they may not be Black individuals. (Carl)

Overall, participants were responsive to any faculty member who demonstrated a genuine interest in helping them achieve their personal and community goals. The end result would be a cohesive community that was engaged in meeting the needs of its members.

6 Discussion

Despite an institution's reputation of racial and racial diversity, there is a distinct difference between having diverse groups on campus and actually creating the infrastructure (i.e., faculty, staff, retention efforts, etc.) that facilitates academic advancement. As a result, students may experience a paradox between what they believe about the benefits of education and their actual academic experience within the campus culture (Mickelson 1990).

Collectivism impacted the African American students in this study such that in spite of racism and discrimination, a collectivistic framework fostered the academic confidence necessary to ensure their survival and success. The findings of this study indicate that African American college students persist because of a worldview that sustains them in spite of a challenging university environment.

African American students enter college with beliefs about the purpose of higher education. Arguably, the reasons those beliefs exist is because of their perceived position in society. The idea that one attends college simply to learn and develop intellectually is considered a universal belief. However, that students believe that they must accomplish twice as much to prove their educational worth as compared to others, along with the threat of being stereotyped as intellectually deficient (Steele 2003) underscores the reality that African American experiences at predominantly White schools can be fundamentally challenging (Fries-Britt and Turner 2001). Although participants acknowledged that stereotyping did exist, their responses reflected the idea that collectivism was a critical component of their racial identity and facilitated their success. As active participants in the African American community, they learned to focus on their academic goals in the midst of isolation, stereotyping, and the absence of African American faculty and staff who could serve as role models and mentors.

What challenged participants' collectivistic approach to academic achievement was their existence within three separate and distinct communities: the home community, the African American student population, and the larger campus environment which consisted of non-African American students, staff and faculty. When participants experienced subtle racism and discrimination, they indicated that they felt disconnected from the larger campus community and were not thriving academically. However, participants took responsibility for their learning and tended to seek support from within the African American community. In doing so, they reported feeling academically successful.

Critical to these participants' academic and personal success was support from African American and other faculty, staff and peers. When African American faculty and staff, as well as their non-African American counterparts who were concerned with African American student retention, communicated to students that their contributions both inside and outside of the classroom (i.e., participation in student groups, student activism, etc.) were valued, participants reported having greater ease in fulfilling their academic goals.

7 Implications

Faculty and student affairs professionals generally desire to understand and acknowledge students' experiences so that they are better equipped to meet the needs of their students. Those concerned with the success of African American college students at predominantly White institutions are often responsible for programs such as Bridge Programs, faculty/student mentorship programs, and recruitment and retention programs that are designed to promote student academic and personal development. An understanding of an African American collectivistic orientation and its impact on students' beliefs, goals, and challenges can be the impetus for the creation of faculty and staff advisor development programs, research groups, and colloquia.

Within higher education settings, for example, collectivism is often reflected in the development and presence of African American student groups. These include African American Greek-letter organizations, pre-professional clubs (i.e., health, business, and law), gospel choirs, and "theme floors," or areas in dormitories that are designated living spaces for African American students (White 1998). Often, these opportunities create a sense a belonging and purpose for students.

Further, when educators possess more than a cursory knowledge of their students' identities and home experiences, they demonstrate an authentic interest in these students' lives (Valenzuela 1999). As evident in research on K-12 education, caring often results in positive academic outcomes for students (Conchas 2006). Three concrete strategies for faculty to demonstrate caring are: to provide students with supplemental readings based on their academic interests, increase their accessibility, and attend student-organized functions to which they are invited.

Admittedly, caring, which often requires that teachers extend themselves to students, may be difficult to achieve at large institutions where bureaucratic demands prevent college faculty from devoting extra time to their students. However, findings from this study indicate that faculty and staff members are an important part of African

American college students' collective network. The guidance and support of faculty and staff are key factors in helping students experience a sense of belonging to the campus community.

8 Limitations and future directions

Findings from this study underscore the need for a more holistic approach to understanding African American identity. Future research on African American college students involves a consideration of the influence of collectivism on: students' pre-college school experiences and beliefs about higher education, their academic achievement during college, and the formation of personal worldviews that governs their lives after college.

Although students in this study felt most supported by those who helped them create connection and community within the university environment, additional research which examines the educational experiences of African American college students at predominantly White universities who do not share this collectivistic worldview is also needed. A larger sample size would allow for student differences in racial ideology to emerge. Additional research on African American students and collectivism with larger sample sizes is needed to understand the larger societal forces that hinder and foster student achievement.

Finally, African American college students at predominantly White institutions are not solely concerned with issues that are endemic to African American racial identity; they are also faced with the challenge of negotiating an academic identity while creating a social identity that exists outside of the African American community. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data would provide a more comprehensive analysis of identity and academic achievement, especially as it may uncover additional useful information about students' self perceptions and their beliefs about how they are perceived as African Americans in the predominantly White university. Given the realities of the university environment, the idea of individual differences is compelling as it pertains to African Americans who have been traditionally characterized by their concern with the advancement of their own racial or ethnic group (Akbar 1991; Allen and Bagozzi 2001; Nobles 1991, 2006). This phenomenon should be further explored in research on various African American college student populations to provide researchers and educators with the knowledge necessary to better mentor, advise, and educate their African American college students.

Appendix

Interview questions

What are your purposes for attending college? How did those purposes or goals come to be?
What was the role of family in shaping your views? Did family members attend college?
What was the role of peers in shaping your views?

How would you define academic success?

If you experienced academic difficulty in a particular class, what steps would you take to remedy it?

How would you define your role as a student?

In what ways has being African American affected your desire for higher education and your success as a college student?

If you had to describe what it's like to be an African American college student at a predominantly white university, what would you say?

Does the fact that you are an African American college student at a predominantly white university have any impact on your academic success? How?

To what extent do you feel like you are part of the larger campus community?

What extra-curricular activities, if any are you involved in? How has this involvement contributed to your academic achievement?

In what ways, if at all, have you encountered any racial/racial discrimination at this university?

What observations can you make about the level of unity within the African American undergraduate population?

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