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## African American males in higher education: Where are they? And why?

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### Abstract

Little attention has been given to the lack of African American males in significant numbers in college and universities. African American males are not found in representative numbers in postsecondary institutions in proportion to any other group. African American males students make up 2.1 % of the United States population; in contrast they only represent .04% in postsecondary institutions (Anderson, Carter, Malizio & San 1989). This paper will explore some of the reasons for this phenomenon and the resulting impact on both the educational system and society at large. It will address the following questions: (1) Where are African American males in America's higher education system? and (2) Why are there so few in proportion to other groups? In order to answer these questions this paper is divided into the following discussions: (1) the relationship between African American males and (a) Caucasian males (b) African American females; (2) the social and demographic indicators and trends in elementary and secondary education; (3) the social and demographic indicators and trends in higher education; (4) the historical perspective of African American males in academia; and, (5) recommendations.

**African American Males in Higher Education:  
Where Are They?  
And Why?**

**A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
and Counseling  
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**In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts in Education**

**by  
Wilfred M. Johnson  
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## Abstract

Little attention has been given to the lack of African American males in significant numbers in college and universities. African American males are not found in representative numbers in postsecondary institutions in proportion to any other group. African American males students make up 2.1% of the United States population; in contrast they only represent .04% in postsecondary institutions (Anderson, Carter, Malizio & San 1989).

This paper will explore some of the reasons for this phenomenon and the resulting impact on both the educational system and society at large. It will address the following questions: (1) Where are African American males in America's higher education system? and (2) Why are there so few in proportion to other groups? In order to answer these questions this paper is divided into the following discussions: (1) the relationship between African American males and (a) Caucasian males (b) African American females; (2) the social and demographic indicators and trends in elementary and secondary education; (3) the social and demographic indicators and trends in higher education; (4) the historical perspective of African American males in academia; and, (5) recommendations.

## Introduction

The educational system has long been bereft of adequate attention to the experiences and contributions of African Americans - - both men and women - - to American life. In the educational arena Dr. Richard A. Siggelkow, Professor Emeritus, SUNY - Buffalo, contends that,

"Blacks remain seriously underrepresented in higher education and according to most sources the problem is getting worse. Despite the fact that more blacks are graduating from high schools than ever before, the percentage of 18 to 24 year- old blacks entering college fell from 38% to 27% between 1976 and 1985" (Siggelkow, 1991).

Practically little or no attention has been given to the lack of presence of African American males in colleges and universities. This leads one to ask two questions, " Where are the African American males in America's higher education system? and Why are there so few in proportion to other groups?"

This lack of presence of African American males in the higher educational system is reflected in the materials available to scholars. Unfortunately, little is available in print to begin the search for knowledge concerning African American experiences in the higher educational system and the resulting impact on the system and society. Though scholars frequently look at the many similarities between races, cultures, sexes, etc. and conclude that we all have equal potential for individual development, they often fall short of identifying or accurately identifying, in whole or in part, the reason(s) for the differences in the realization of

that potential. The seemingly simple answer is not so simple after all. It rests in the understanding and acceptance that externally imposed restraints, from the influences of social institutions and values impinge on the African American male's opportunities negatively. And that the primary negative influence is racism according to Dr. Richard Siggelkow a professor at SUNY-Buffalo college. Siggelkow stated that, "Racism exists in every part of American society. On campuses it has cropped up and became exposed" (Siggelkow, 1991). Siggelkow contends that racism is evident in the decline in the percentage of black students and can be seen most dramatically in the drop of enrollment of black men. Siggelkow addressed the fact that between 1976 and 1986 black males enrollment actually dropped from 470,00 to 436,00, the largest decline for any racial or ethnic group (Siggelkow, 1991). Dr. Paul Hill Jr. the author of *Coming of Age For The 21st Century* explains that, "it's clear that African American men are not like European men and that race is still an important variable for understanding the role of African-American men in society" (Hill, 1987). Racism is defined in this paper as the lack of knowledge in regards to other cultures and their customs.

This focus lends political ramifications to the questions. Taking a closer look at the politics of African American males in higher education means to consider not only what it is, but why it is, and what it can be. "Politics," is used here in its widest sense to mean any situation or relationship of differential power between groups or individuals.

The remainder of this paper will focus on: 1) African American Males in relationship to the educational system and how well they matriculate through the system, 2) what effects the educational system has on the African American Males in grades K -12 that may or may not affects their decision to continue their education; and, 3) the reason why there are so few African American Males in proportion to other groups in the postsecondary system.

In this vein the following issues will be considered and discussed: 1) the relationship between the African American male and, (a) Caucasian males and (b) African American females, 2) the social and demographic indicators and trends in elementary and secondary education, 3) the social and demographic indicators and trends in higher education, 4) the historical perspective of African American males examining the pre and postsecondary education period to illustrate where the problem started and where some of the solutions lie; and, 5) recommendations.

The answer to where African American males are is an easier base from which to start. African American males are not found in postsecondary institutions in proportion to any other group. According to Carter & Wilson this is attributed to the fact that they are academically underprepared, unemployed or underemployed, "hang out" in the streets, or in prison (Carter & Wilson, 1988). This phenomenon has a direct



relationship to the social and educational system and how African American males compare within this system.

### Relationships

African American males have a lower average age than white males and are outnumbered by African American females. As Carter and Wilson stated in the 1988 Seventh Annual Status Report - "Minorities In Higher Education" (Carter & Wilson, 1988):

In the U.S. population the median age for the Black male is 23.2, but for white males it is 29.4. For every 100 Black females there are 90.6 males, compared with 95.2 white males to every 100 females. Estimates of Black male census undercounts would reduce the male-to-female disparity somewhat, but there would still be more favorable ratio among whites. (p. 12)

Social and demographic factors have a major affect on the numbers of African American males in America's higher education system today.

The report also noted that the number of Black males is affected by the following: (1) debilitating health problems to a greater degree than males in other ethnic and racial groups; (2) a greater chance of being raised in single-parent households (30% in 1980) with fewer male role models; (3) increased likelihood of being a welfare dependent; (4) living below the poverty line (between 1973 and 1986, average real annual earnings of Black males ages 20 to 24 fell by 50%). Black men have higher death rates, and lower life expectancy. This study indicated that the death rate for Black males is 1,016 per 100,000, while for white males it is 695 per 100,000. And the life expectancy for Black males is 63.7 years and 70.7 years for white males (Carter & Wilson, 1988).

These data suggests that the loss of African American males at any point along the social and educational pipeline is more conspicuous and has proportionately greater consequences.

Paul Hill, (1987) the author of *Coming of Age for The 21st Century*, commented that, " The African American male is at risk! An assortment of conditions indicate that the Black male is definitely threatened and endangered. African American male endangerment is related to exposure to unfavorable social and environmental conditions" (p. 67). Hill concluded from this study that, African American men are not like European men and that race is still an important variable for understanding the role of African American men in our society (1987). The literature regarding African American males suggests that education is the foundation of the problem and within our educational system, is where those interested in finding solutions must start.

#### Social and Demographic Indicators and Trends in Elementary and Secondary Education

*Tough Choices For Educational Equity*, a study conducted by David W. Hornbeck the Superintendent of the Maryland State Schools, suggests that schools in the U.S. have failed their students. This is summed up in Hornbeck's statement that, " The fact remains that millions of our youth are destined to a life of poverty and worse, due to our failure as a society to unlock the doors of school success for them," (p. 16).

Hornbeck's premise is that all children are worth saving and education is the way to accomplish this goal.

Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu, a national education consultant with African American Images, discovered an educational development in young African American males, called the "Fourth-Grade Failure Syndrome". Dr. Kunjufu (1985) noted and described the interrelationship of the educational and personal outlook stages and growth of the African American as follows:

When blacks enter first grade the stories they create express positive feelings about themselves in the schooling situation, but by the second grade students' stories express 'negative imagery of the teacher and school environment' and by the fifth grade the overall feeling expressed by students is that of cynicism. In other words, upon entering school in primary grades, black children possess enthusiasm and eager interest, however, by fifth-grade the liveliness and interest are gone, replaced by passivity and apathy. Primary grades presented a more nurturing environment than intermediate or upper grades. In early childhood education much of the activity is child-teacher centered and child-child interactive. In primary grades, blacks progress and thrive at the same as their white counterpart until the third grade syndrome. I found after the third grade, the achievement rate of blacks began a downward spiral which tended to continue in the child's academic career. The classroom environment was transformed from a socially interactive style to a competitive, individualistic, and minimally socially interactive style of learning. (p. 6-7)

Dr. Kunjufu, (1985) points at some reason for hope, in his book *The Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*, the major reason he stated was, "If the fourth grade failure syndrome is recognized in it's early stages then it can be treated" (p. 6-7).

Dr. Richard C. Richardson Jr., a professor in the College of Education and associate director of the National Center for Postsecondary Governance and Finance Research Center at Arizona State University, Tempe, suggests that the lack of positive role models for Black males is a major problem when they reach the secondary education system because of its dominance by women (Richardson, 1990). Forty-six percent of secondary school teachers are women while only 3.2% are Black men. This statement was in relationship to the assertive behavior by African American males that is encouraged in the home and on the playground and is usually seen as negative in the classroom. This style of behavior is seen as disruptive and threatening by many teachers. A statement in the 1988 Seventh Annual Status Report - "Minorities In Higher Education," concurs with Dr. Richardson's premise, "Schools can significantly control the future life prospects of their students. Thus, when teachers consistently give less attention, less praise, and more criticism to Black males, their chances of educational attainment are thereby diminished" (Carter & Wilson, 1988 p.22).

The study also contributed this relationship (teacher to Black male students) to low grades because of teachers' low expectations of these students. In addition, this fear is directly related to the rate that Black males are disciplined, expelled, and suspended. A national study mentioned in this report found that Black males account for 29% of suspensions, 27% of expulsions, and 29% of corporal punishments (Carter & Wilson, 1988). Little has changed from the 1988

to the 1989 Eighth Annual Status Report on Minorities In Higher Education. The 1989 report indicated that the outlook for minorities is bleak (Carter & Wilson, 1989).

From the cumulative findings of the negative impact of socialization and early schooling on African American males, one can understand the diminution in self-image as a result. And, in turn, one can relate this information to how the diminished aspiration would contribute to limited motivation to finish high school and pursue higher education for African American males. After focusing on the K -12 school system the next logical step is to assess the impact of the postsecondary educational arena on the African American male.

#### Postsecondary Education

Although this section will only focus on the African American males as undergraduate students, it is duly noted that African American males are underrepresented at all points in the higher educational process.

Some of the barriers facing African American males in the postsecondary education environment are: the challenge of access, the lack of role models, racism, financial aid, multicultural curricula, a diverse environment, and the lack of collaboration between the faculty of two and four year schools (Carter & Wilson, 1988). This list is in no way inclusive of all the barriers but is representative of some of the major problems facing the African American male in the higher education environment.

There have been many studies conducted regarding the underrepresented student population in regard to effects of the lack of role models. Dwayne Eugene Wilson, the Academic Support Coordinator at Cooper Union School of Engineering stated that, " Most Black males face a nonsupportive environment with no mentor and role models to provide encouragement and inspiration to Black male students to complete their undergraduate degrees and continue on in graduate schools," (Wilson, 1990 p. 7). The absence of the African American male role models has a more significantly negative outcome as inherent in the declining number of African American male doctorate candidates. As stated in 1988 Seventh Annual Status Report - Minorities In Higher Education, " The percentage of African American full-time faculty in the U. S. changed from 4.4 % in 1975 to 4.1 percentage in 1985" (23). This study suggested that, the majority of these faculty members were female (Carter & Wilson, 1988). The report also noted that, African American role models gave their graduates a higher degree of aspiration and self-confidence than did White faculty members. Without this support from African American faculty and staff a disproportionate number of African American males will continue to rely on their peer group for learning values and appropriate behavior which may not be conducive to their learning environment. Dr. Maurice Collins (1990), an associate professor of education at Grand Valley University, supported Carter and Wilson by stating that:

1. There was a 27% drop in the the number of Black students receiving doctoral degrees between 1977-1986.
2. The number of doctorates in education received by Blacks declined 26% between 1982 and 1986, compared to only 9% for Whites.
3. Black males decreased by 40% during the same period.  
(Collins, p. 57-60).

Reginald T. W. Nichols, Headmaster, President of Fellowship Academy went as far as to state in the article, "Are We Winning The Struggle Against Educational Genocide," (p. 7), that "he believed that the system has failed minority students due to the lack of role-modeling leadership" (Nichols, 1990).

Taking a look at racism, Dr. Gerald J. Pine (1990), a professor of education and Dean of the School of Human and Educational Services at Oakland University, summed up the issue of racism so elegantly in the article "Rx For Racism,": Imperatives For America's Schools (1990):

Blatant, crude, egregious, and overt racism comes out of the closet again and into our schools. Documented accounts of public slurs, threats, racist slogans, physical assaults, and racial conflicts now ring disturbingly from schools in every region of the country. Racism, prejudice, and discrimination are shamefully sabotaging our nation's efforts to provide a high-quality education for all children. (p 593-594)

Sue Kemnitzer, the Executive Director of the Task Force on Women, Minorities and the Handicapped in Science and Technology stated that,

"minorities are not being nurtured in education so that they complete their bachelor's degree" (Kemnitzer, 1989). Dwayne E. Wilson addressed the issue of racism in a more direct way, by addressing racism from a institutional prospective:

Black men and other minorities, they must pay less attention to recruiting those who are the academic creme de la creme, and give more support and cultivation to the average students who are solid performers, molding them into being the bright stars and leaders of tomorrow. (Wilson, 1990, p. 34)

The literature suggests that racism is the foundation of the problem that the African American males have had and will have to deal with now and in the future.

Access has always acted as a major barrier for all minorities but especially African American males. J. Lance Kramer examined some of the problems facing continuing education for minorities. Kramer acknowledged that only recently have we learned that access and opportunity were not sufficient without an environment conducive to community and self esteem. Kramer stated that, " inhospitable environments for minorities negate access and afford opportunity only at the cost of self denial and cultural surrender" (Kramer, 1989 p. 3).

In examining financial aid, Dr. Donald Stewart, President of the College Board, stressed the important relationship between financial aid and minority access. Dr. Stewart (1990), commented that, "The financial aid issue is a particular problem for minority kids. Most of us have grown up being fearful of debt". Stewart suggested that federal aid is



increasingly loan-based and that he did not see any changes coming from Congress, so debt will continue to be a deterrent for a lot of minority students. Perhaps, looking at this dilemma from a historical perspective will assist in expressing the magnitude of the problem facing the African American males in America's educational system

#### Historical Perspective of African American males in Higher Education

A study conducted by Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, (1990) president of George Washington University indicated that,

It is difficult for the majority culture to understand that for the U. S. today, multiculturalism is synonymous with national survival. It is obvious that we have become a multicultural society and soon the Hispanics and Blacks may constitute a numerical majority in America (Trachtenberg, p. 610-611)

Without a sense of belonging, it appears that minorities have a difficult time believing in the educational system. Many theorists indicate that diversity can only be reached through a multicultural environment where all students benefit and grow from learning about all cultures (Nichols, 1990). Nichols stated the following as a possible reason why this type of an environment has not developed, "It might be that educators are not ready to empower poor urban and African American children through equal education for all children, because in doing so they would lose some of their own future control" (Nichols, 1990, p. 7).

While examining barriers that deterred African American males from pursuing a bachelor's degrees, Dr. Judith S. Eaton commented on the need to have better communication between two year and four year

educational institutions. Dr. Eaton stated that over half of the minority students attending postsecondary institutions are enrolled in two year colleges (Eaton, 1989). Eaton implied that if this collaboration could exist, it would mean a win-win situation for all the players, especially for minorities, by creating a pathway to a bachelor's degree. Eaton's study suggests that before this collaboration could begin, faculty of the four year institutions would need an attitude adjustment in order to effectively relate to the faculty of community colleges. For this utopia to exist, the first step would be to have the faculty members of four year institutions realize the community college environment is a viable legitimate academic experience. Once this attitude adjustment took place mapping out new strategies for higher education could begin.

As stated earlier this list is by no means inclusive of all the barriers but it does represent some of the major problems facing the Black male in higher education environment. In the next section of this paper, I will be discussing additional problems and solutions to the African American males' dilemma.

### Recommendations

As stated in the beginning of this paper, the answer to the two questions - - "Where are the African American males in America's higher education system? and Why aren't they in large numbers present in the higher education system?" - - are, at first glance, not as simple as they might seem. It is found in the understanding and acceptance that

externally imposed restraints and the influences of social institutions and values impinge on the African American male's opportunities negatively. That the primary negative influence is racism (Carter & Wilson, 1988).

Although scholars point to the the fact that African American males are disproportionately found to be academically underprepared, unemployed or underemployed, "hanging out" in the streets, or in prison, (Carter & Wilson, 1988) they fail to identify racism as the primary negative influence or to what extent this phenomenon is in direct relationship to the educational system. In order to detect where the problem began, developed and how it manifest itself into a lack of representation in academia, as well as to examine solutions to the problem, we have examined the pre and postsecondary education periods. It is not enough to say that African American males are not found in higher education in record numbers, we must address the fact that without some assistance from outside forces the trend will not change.

I have gone further to identify some of the barriers that African American males are facing. America is wasting a valuable human resource. The slogan used by the United Negro College Fund is true, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

The answers examined herein, only target a part of the reason why African American males are underrepresented in academia. Admittedly, the reason for absence of African American males in the higher education system, as the data indicated, rests in part with the African

American male but it must also be shouldered by the educational system. However, it is imperative to understand that as Ed Wiley III and Jacqueline Conciatore stated that, "to resolve this lack of presence of African American males in higher education system one must start with the boy" ( Wiley & Conciatore, 1989, p.6).

While researching information on this subject, I realized that more than ample time has been given to affixing blame. I became acutely aware of the urgent need to develop solutions.

I believe that one such solution, the most fundamental will be the hardest to garner support. That is this- -the young must be taught by teachers who have an understanding of the African American males' problematic political position and the potentially antagonistic conditions under which they must work, live and exist. These individuals must including the horror historically faced African American males' in a white male dominated society. These teacher must also include these implications in every aspect of their lives, including but not limited to "the life of the mind." This phrase is used to describe the extent to which the forms of oppression have taken, specifically aimed at discrediting African American males' intellectual power.

Another solution can be found in the belief of many that more African American male teachers and administrators are needed to serve as role models throughout the education system. Dr. Maurice Collins suggests that one of the most successful means of encouraging Black and other

minority persons to remain on predominantly white university and college campuses is through a mentoring program.

Another solution places emphasis on the development and implementation of a multicultural curriculum as an essential aspect of improving the educational process for all students. A multicultural curriculum breathes life into the adage, "control a man's mind, you control the man. But allow him to think and you create a true person." This adage must become a reality for all if we are in the business of educating people. This can only be accomplished by communicating truth and reality, by telling the complete story of history and human experience of all cultures and genders. This process will assist in tearing down the walls of racism.

And finally, the problem of access can be solved by finding new ways to decrease the federal and state financial aid from loan-based to more grants based programs for all students. In addition assisting in preparing all students with the necessary skills to succeed in our school system and in our society. These suggestions on strategies are possible if we are willing to take a stand for educational equality, through effectively planned executed strategies that are inclusive of all the players. These solutions will not come over night and they will not come cheaply. The most difficult change that America must make to help the African American male attain a place in the higher education system, in ratios that are proportionate to their population, will be a change in attitude. If

America is to continue to grow, prosper and remain a great nation, all of its citizens must be educated and play a part in its future.

In developing solutions to this dilemma I believe one must start first within the Black community by rebuilding the family structure and refocusing the importance on educational attainment. This solution could be reached by developing pride, motivation and hope within the family and the community at large by: 1) accentuating the positive (role models, etc), 2) assisting in developing avenues to success through educational attainment (jobs), and 3) getting involved in the educational process, assuring that all students are given high expectation. Then the next step would be to have the government work within the confines of the educational attainment for all of its citizens. Meaning, developing and supporting an educational system whose interest lies in educating all students no matter of their color, gender, race or ethnicity.

If the statistics stated in this paper are correct, and I believe they are, then the African American males are disproportionately at risk in American society! In enabling this dilemma, America has inflicted an injustice that may have a very lasting negative effect on a growing sub group in our society. As stated earlier in the paper, America cannot afford to lose any of its potential brain power. In addition, I believe that our national goals are diluted and strategies compromised for the sake of maintaining the status quo, or because of a lack of vision. The task of finding solutions rests on all of our shoulders in the educational system

and in society at large. I conclude that America can no longer afford to waste this valuable resource.

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