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How Higher Education Forgot about Non-Traditional Aged Black Men:
Narratives from Non-Traditional Aged Black Men During the College Application Process

By

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Abstract

This qualitative study used portraiture as a research method to highlight and understand the lived experiences of three Black-male, non-traditional aged learners during the college admissions application process. Much of the research around the college admission process for Black men is historical with focus on the overarching impact of historical court decisions, diminished school resources, and ethical college admission practices to increase access for traditionally aged minority students, but very little research exists on how Black non-traditional male learners make meaning of their college application experiences, or the spaces where their stories are being told. I captured some of those stories in this research.

Aim

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of non-traditional aged Black men (over the age of 30) as they navigate the college admissions application process to understand the barriers that may have stopped them from successfully matriculating in colleges and universities.

Problem

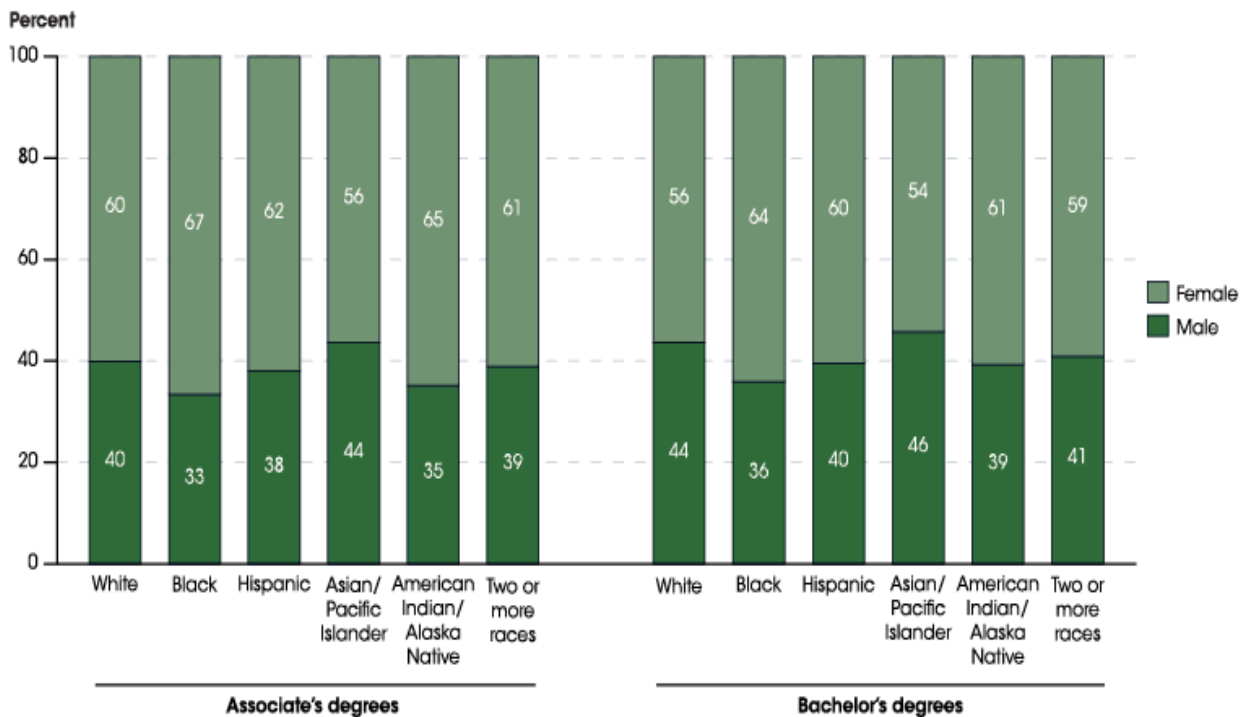
While college admissions experts predict that there will be an overall decline in undergraduate enrollment at colleges and universities in the next 10 years from traditional-aged students, the non-traditional aged undergraduate enrollment is expected to increase. Non-traditional learners are a “forgotten population of students in the conversation about educational access (Bohrman, et al., 2019, p. 28)”.

Kasworm (2008) and Perna and McLendon (2014) have emphasized that this reality is heightened among non-traditional Black male learners as the largest demographic of Americans interested in obtaining a college education. Based on findings reported by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP, 2019), Black men are among the lowest acquirers of higher education credentials, only achieving more than Latino identified men in the United States. Supported by data from the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC, 2018), the problem is that a significant percentage of Black men (43%) with an interest in returning to college do not complete the application process, which ultimately can limit their life choices (Kasworm, 2008 & 2014; Perna, 2016). As Wright and Graces (2018) articulated, “success begins prior to enrollment with the admissions process where expectations about the education experience are forged” (Wright & Graces, 2018 p.59).

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Figure 1

Percentages of degrees conferred 2015-2016 academic year by sex and race as provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2019).



Significance

Higher education must begin to assess its role in producing contributing members to society; given the significant disproportionality of education to income ratio for people who do not have a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). As a society, we must address the inequality of college access for all Black men. Especially in an age of college admission bribery scandals from people who simply have the financial means to gain access. The attainment of a college degree is nearly required to be considered for careers that are better able to sustain an individual. With a significant percentage of Black men not having this access, they are more likely to turn to destructive ways to make ends meet for their families and themselves (Bethea, 2016; Dancy, et al., 2014; Flores & Horn, 2017), which ultimately impacts factors outside of the scope of this research. This reality is amplified in the stories of non-traditional aged Black men as they attempt to navigate the added pressures of head-of-household responsibilities. There is an evident difference economically between individuals that have obtained a degree and those that have not, and with Black men facing double the challenge to attain access to these degrees, it is

paramount to hear their experiences to better support their needs.

Research Findings

Framework

Perna's (2006) integrated college access model contended that various factors impact a minority student ability to attend college, such as the communities in which they reside, resources available, the high schools they attend(ed), and the states in which they live. Perna asserted, "if each of these factors are considered by admission professionals and community partners during the decision-making process for college admissions, underrepresented minority students will gain an equal playing field in representation as students in college" (p. 122.).

Method

Portraiture was used to capture the experiences of the men participating in this study. Cemented in a constructivist worldview and initiated on a phenomenological epistemology, portraiture is a methodology that links art and science, integrating "the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). Because the educational environment has significantly changed newer understandings of the "college student must be considered" (Witz, 2006, p. 254). Education leaders are called upon to seek more relevant approaches to gather stories than the traditional forms of qualitative research (Tuck & Yang, 2013). Portraiture bridges the gap between this need in scholarship and understanding the true experiences of under-represented minority students by re-envisioning inquiry in an under-researched student population (Brooks, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2013).

Over the course of one college recruitment season, I observed each participant with their families in home settings, interactions with their resources, college admission offices, counseling staff, and finally in their peer-to-peer interactions. Each participant was observed in a variety of settings for about two weeks at counseling meetings, peer gatherings, casual interactions in school and home, counselor programs, and all interactions around college prep. Remaining in alignment with the portraiture framework, two phases of interviews were completed with each participant to ensure the consistent development of the portrait.

Table 1

Data collection and analysis timeline

Data Collection	Data Analysis	Construction of Portraits
Interviews and Observations	Phase I-Open Coding	Portraits constructed
Transcription	Phase II—Narrative Coding	Results Reported
	Phase III- Pattern Coding	Conclusions and Implications
	Emergent Themes Decided	

Research Questions

This study was guided by the overarching question:

What are the experiences of Black male non-traditional aged students engaged in the college admissions process at mid-size moderately selective public universities?

It was further supported with three underlying sub-questions:

1. What are the barriers, if any, that non-traditional aged Black men (over the age of 30) encounter as they work on completing the college application process for the first time?
2. What institutional factors, if any, impact non-traditional aged college Black men in the college application process?
3. How do non-traditional aged college Black men who are applying to college for the first time describe the college application process?

Discussion of findings

Based on the interviews, observations and data analysis, I constructed three portraits that provide rich details about each participant and their college application experiences. Each of the men of this study highlighted the trials and triumphs of their own process. Findings from each of the men's experience provide a clearer picture of what admission professionals should consider in enrolling their classes. Although each of the men provided their own experiences, they are interconnected through their journeys. Analyzing the portraits alongside their assumptions about the college application process, I found that the experiences of applying to college for the men in my study concentrated on three main areas: (a) *fear of the process or not having enough to contribute to be successful in applying*, (b) *support from others that are knowledgeable*, and (c) *being in an environment conducive to successfully completing the application*.

Analyzing each of the portraits three themes emerged: (1) their early education experiences, (2) their actual college application journey, and (3) the advice they would give to other non-traditional Black men in their shoes. Focusing on the key findings of this study, the men's experiences support new knowledge of what other non-traditional Black men could face as they apply to college for the first time. Based on these findings, it is concluded that non-traditional Black men's college access must factor in decreasing fear, advocate for support, and promote environments where adequate knowledge of the college process is accessible.

Conclusions & Implications

While this study represents a worthy beginning, it is my hope that it serves as a springboard for further dialogue and research about Black male non-traditional learners. As with many studies, this study raises more questions than it answers. The men that were interviewed as part of this study highlighted a sample of experiences that warrant further exploration, which could provide even more understanding on non-traditional Black male learners. Their stories provide additional context to the literature around college access issues, but do not do justice to the larger issues at play, such as socialization, historical support, notions of success and career, race culture in America, and the relationship between Black men and higher education historically. Due to the limitations of my study, further research should be conducted on more non-traditional aged Black men in other cities. In addition, research should also be conducted to explore the stories of non-traditional aged Black women learners. These types of studies may help open more dialogue about how to close the achievement gap. While the research may not get to all of the answers, it may help more non-traditional learners feel empowered that their voices matter when admissions professionals and senior level enrollment managers at four-year institutions are considering their entire applicant pool.

This study focused on the application experiences of three non-traditional aged Black men. Utilizing a qualitative methodology - portraiture, participants were observed, two phases interviews were conducted, taped, transcribed, and analyzed to create deep narratives (portraits) to illustrate the experiences of my participants as they applied to college for the first time. Themes of *fear, support, and environment* emerged as their experiences were transformed into their portraits. There are vast opportunities to understand the experiences of the non-traditional aged college student, but it is paramount for educational advocates to comprehend the true needs of the Black male non-traditional student. The men in this study are important examples that shed light on a process that seems to be designed to forget them. With the knowledge uncovered in the portraits in this research, college admission offices may now have a frame of reference as to how to adequately include this demographic in the shaping of their undergraduate classes.

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Author Biography

Dr. Kenneth Jones is a college admissions expert whose research focuses on non-traditional aged Black men and their experiences applying to post-secondary educational opportunities. His current work in higher education positions him to manage educational relationships for the world's only online research program that provides college credit to high school students. He also leads a team of college admission advocates supporting first-generation, non-traditional aged learners as they embark on their higher education journey. Ken obtained his bachelor's degree in speech from Jackson State University, and his master's degree in non-profit management from Drexel University. Dr. Jones is a 2020 EdD graduate of the Educational Management and Leadership program also from Drexel University.