Surprise, Sensemaking, and Success in the First College Year: Black Undergraduate Men's Academic Adjustment Experiences

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Background: *Much has been written about Black undergraduate men's out-of-class engagement and social experiences, identity development, participation in intercollegiate athletics, and college enrollment and completion rates. Too little is known about their academic readiness and first-year college adjustment.*

Purpose: *The purpose of this study was to understand Black male students' academic transition experiences in the first college year, with a particular emphasis on how they resolved academic challenges with which they were confronted.*

Setting: *This study was conducted at 42 colleges and universities in 20 states across the United States. Six institution types were included: private liberal arts colleges, public research universities, highly selective private research universities, public and private Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and comprehensive state universities.*

Participants: *The sample was comprised of 219 Black undergraduate men, mostly juniors and seniors, who maintained high cumulative grade point averages, were extraordinarily engaged in a range of student organizations, held multiple leadership roles on campus, cultivated meaningful relationships with faculty and administrators, participated in enriching educational experiences (e.g., study abroad programs), and earned numerous merit-based awards and honors for their college achievements.*

Research Design: *Qualitative research methods were used in this study. Specifically, phenomenology was used to understand what Black male students experienced in the first college year and how they experienced the transition phenomenon.*

Data Collection and Analysis: *Individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with all 219 participants. Each interview was 2—3 hours. Moustakas' (1994) process for phenomenological data analysis and Harper's (2007) trajectory analysis technique were used to analyze data collected for this study.*

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Findings: *Two thematic categories of findings are presented in this article. First are reflections from students who experienced turbulence in their transitions from high school to higher education. Being underprepared for the academic rigors of college, the surprising mismatch between academic effort and first-year grades, the racial composition dissimilarities between their high schools and college campuses, and feelings of cultural misfit were factors to which participants attributed their initial adjustment challenges. The second category includes insights from achievers who transitioned seamlessly to college. They attributed their successful starts to strong academic preparation, prior experiences in demographically comparable educational environments, participation in summer bridge and college transition programs, and academically profitable relationships they cultivated in student organizations.*

Recommendations: *This article ends with several suggestions for helping Black undergraduate men adjust more seamlessly and resolve surprising academic transition issues encountered in the first college year.*

More has been published about Black undergraduate men over the past 15 years than any other racialized sex group in higher education (Harper, 2014). Specifically, 13 books, dozens of research and policy reports, and more than 70 peer-reviewed academic journal articles pertaining to Black male collegians have been published since 2000. Studies have been situated in a range of postsecondary contexts, including community colleges (e.g., Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2014; Flowers, 2006; F. Harris & Wood, 2013; Wood, 2012a, 2013; Wood & Palmer, 2013; Wood & Turner, 2011), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (e.g., Harper & Gasman, 2008; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009; L. D. Patton, 2014; Washington, Wang, & Browne, 2009), and predominantly White institutions (e.g., Harper, 2009, 2013; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b). Additionally, each chapter in Hilton, Wood, and Lewis' (2012) edited book, *Black Males in Postsecondary Education*, focuses on outcomes and experiences in a different institutional setting, including religiously affiliated colleges, for-profit institutions, and Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Researchers have studied Black undergraduate men's access to college (e.g., Harper & Griffin, 2011); encounters with racism and racial stereotypes (Harper et al., 2011; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007); identity development, expression, and intersectionality (e.g., Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2007; W. G. Harris, 2003; McGuire, Berhanu, Davis, & Harper, 2014; L. D. Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, 2013; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012; Strayhorn & Scott, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013); classroom and out-of-class engagement trends (Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2006a; Wood, 2014); participation

on revenue-generating intercollegiate sports teams (e.g., Beamon & Bell, 2006; Donnor, 2005; Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Martin & Harris, 2006; Singer, 2005); and college completion rates (Harper, 2006b; Harper & Harris, 2012). Palmer, Wood, Dancy, and Strayhorn (2014) offered a comprehensive synthesis that includes many of these studies and other recently published literature on Black undergraduate men.

Despite the attention devoted to Black male collegians across a range of institution types, too little emphasis has been placed on their academic experiences and outcomes. Besides Strayhorn, Johnson, and Barrett's (2013) study on two formerly incarcerated Black men's adjustment to predominantly White institutions (PWIs), we found no other published research that explicitly examines Black men's first-year academic transition experiences. No article published between 1989 and 2014 in the 52 issues of the *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition* focused on this population. Some scholars have studied, in the aggregate, adjustment experiences of minoritized[1] students at large PWIs (e.g., Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Hurtado et al., 2007; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Terenzini et al., 1994; Thompson & Fretz, 1991). These studies consistently show that students of color experience higher levels of racial stress, receive less validation of their academic competence, and encounter significantly more academic and social adjustment challenges than do their White peers (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008). With the exception of a handful of studies conducted at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (e.g., Palmer et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2010; Palmer & Young, 2009), researchers have not devoted much attention to examining college readiness and the first-year academic adjustment experiences of Black undergraduate men. Given this, the present study focuses on first-year adjustment experiences across a range of postsecondary contexts.

There are two justifications for our focus on the first college year. First is Black undergraduate men's alarming rate of college completion. According to Harper and Harris (2012), only one-third of Black undergraduate men who start college graduate within 6 years, which is the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in U.S. higher education. As has long been the case, most students who drop out of college leave in the first year; many attribute their departures to a range of addressable adjustment issues (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Strayhorn, 2012; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Tinto, 1993, 2012). Our second rationale is related to the deficit-oriented manner in which Black men are typically studied. Most examinations of

topics like academic adjustment would stop at simply cataloguing difficulties these students experience and using those insights to explain high attrition rates. Our study aims to identify both seamless and tumultuous first-year transition experiences. Regarding the latter, we were most interested in understanding how Black men who initially struggled in the first college year overcame such challenges, became academically stable and high performing, and ultimately persisted through baccalaureate degree attainment. This approach was informed by Harper's (2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework, which presumes that much can be learned from Black men who succeed, including those who initially struggled as freshmen. We were particularly interested in understanding how Black males who persisted and made academic achievements made sense of their transitions to a range of postsecondary institutional contexts. A classic theory pertaining to organizational entry, newcomer socialization, and turnover proved useful in our analysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical perspectives on "surprise and sensemaking" among newcomers to organizations (Louis, 1980) are used in this study. Louis' model emerged from the turnover and socialization literature in business, and is useful for exploring how newcomers, such as first-year college students, cope with transitions and reconcile the surprising misalignment of expectations and actual experiences. This framework considers the expectations newcomers bring to a new organizational context. In higher education, this would entail what students expect college to be like, how they expect to be treated, and the relationships and outcomes they expect in exchange for their academic effort, time away from family, and financial investment. Louis explains that unrealistic and unmet expectations often lead to transition turbulence and high rates of departure.

Louis (1980) theorized that *change*, *contrast*, and *surprise* are major factors that shape how newcomers adjust to and make sense of new organizational contexts. Change is most concerned with differences between old and new settings—the more incongruent they are, the more the newcomer must cope. An example of this would be the juxtaposition of one's low-resource high school with a wealthy, highly resourced college environment. Louis asserted that change differences are publicly knowable, meaning one could research them ahead of time by placing data about one context alongside another. She argued that contrast, on the other hand, is more private and personal: "Contrast is, therefore, person-specific rather than indigenous to the organizational transition. That is to say, for two people undergoing the same change (e.g., leaving Stanford

and entering Merrill Lynch), different contrasts will emerge" (p. 236). Reflections on a prior context (e.g., one's racially diverse church community) can trigger contrasts with the new context (e.g., one's racially homogeneous college town) in ways that cause the newcomer to evaluate the new context with the same expectations as the one left behind. Louis further explained that newcomers might attempt to bring aspects of the old role and context into the new situation or setting; however, letting go of past organizational features is oftentimes a necessary part of the transition and socialization process.

Surprise is one's affective response to differences between expectations and realities during her or his transition to a new organizational context. Louis' (1980) model includes five forms of surprise: (a) when there is early consciousness of unfulfilled expectations; (b) when performance expectations of self or the transferability of one's skills from a previous environment to a new setting are unmet; (c) when aspects of the new role are unanticipated; (d) when new experiences and environments feel differently than the newcomer expected; and (e) when newcomers bring cultural assumptions from a prior place to a new culturally dissimilar context. Regarding these, Louis explains that cognitive revision is often necessary for coping and reorientation. Sensemaking is the process by which individuals interpret and cope with surprises. She explains:

> Sensemaking can be viewed as a recurring cycle comprised of a sequence of events occurring over time. The cycle begins as individuals form unconscious and conscious anticipations and assumptions, which serve as predictions about future events… discrepant events, or surprises, trigger a need for explanation… based on attributed meanings, understandings of actors, actions, and settings are updated and predictions about future experiences in the setting are revised. (p. 241)

METHODS

This article uses data from the National Black Male College Achievement Study, the largest-ever qualitative research project on Black undergraduate men. Data were collected from 219 students at 42 colleges and universities in 20 states across the United States. Six institution types were represented in the study (see Table 1). The following research questions were explored in analyses for this article:

1. What were Black male achievers' first-year transition experiences to 4-year colleges and universities?
2. What factors influenced seamless or turbulent transitions to their respective institutions?
3. How did Black undergraduate men resolve and make sense of surprises encountered during their first college year?

Table 1. Participating Institutions in the National Black Male College Achievement Study

Institution Type	College/University
Public Research Universities	University of Illinois
	Indiana University
	University of Michigan
	Michigan State University
	The Ohio State University
	Purdue University
Highly-Selective Private Research Universities	Brown University
	Columbia University
	Harvard University
	University of Pennsylvania
	Princeton University
	Stanford University
Private Historically Black Colleges/ Universities	Clark Atlanta University
	Fisk University
	Hampton University
	Howard University
	Morehouse College
	Tuskegee University
Public Historically Black Universities	Albany State University
	Cheyney University
	Florida A&M University
	Norfolk State University

Institution Type	College/University
	North Carolina Central University
	Tennessee State University
Liberal Arts Colleges	Amherst College
	Claremont-McKenna College
	DePauw University
	Haverford College
	Lafayette College
	Occidental College
	Pomona College
	Saint John's University (MN)
	Swarthmore College
	Vassar College
	Wabash College
	Williams College
Comprehensive State Universities	Brooklyn College, City University of New York
	California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
	California State University, Long Beach
	Lock Haven University
	Towson University
	Valdosta State University

SAMPLING

Criterion sampling—the strict inclusion of participants who satisfy some specific, predetermined set of qualifiers (M. Q. Patton, 2002)—was used in this study. According to M. Q. Patton, criterion sampling is especially useful for in-depth qualitative interviews, as the accuracy of participants' shared experiences is more easily ascertained, thus enhancing the quality of data collected. Administrators such as presidents, provosts, and deans of students nominated and senior student leaders (e.g., student government association presidents) helped identify Black male undergraduates who maintained cumulative grade point averages (GPAs) above 3.0, established lengthy records of leadership and engagement in multiple student organizations, developed meaningful relationships with campus

administrators and faculty outside the classroom, participated in enriching educational experiences (e.g., study abroad programs, internships, service learning, and summer research programs), and earned numerous merit-based scholarships and honors in recognition of their college achievements. Nominators identified 221 men who satisfied these criteria; all but two agreed and ultimately participated in this study. Presented in Table 2 are demographics of the sample.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Demographic/Characteristic	%
Institution Type Attended	
Public HBCU	15.5
Private HBCU	19.2
Private Research University	18.7
Public Research University	14.6
Liberal Arts College	20.6
Comprehensive State University	11.4
Class Year	
Freshmen	1.4
Sophomores	17.3
Juniors	35.2
Seniors	46.1
High School Type and Racial Composition	
Public - Predominantly Black	28.6
Private - Predominantly Black	5.9
Public - Predominantly White	17.2
Private - Predominantly White	16.1
Public - Racially Diverse	27.4
Private - Racially Diverse	4.8
Socioeconomic Background	
Low Income	17.8
Working Class	38.9
Middle Class	39.5
Affluent	3.8
First Generation Bachelor's Degree Earners	49.5

These criteria were used because decades of research on undergraduate students clearly indicate that those who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities on college and university campuses are more satisfied with their experiences, have a higher likelihood of navigating institutional obstacles with success, and come to enjoy a more robust set of educational outcomes than do their peers who approach the college experience more passively (Kuh, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Specifically regarding persistence toward degree completion, Harper and Quaye (2015) assert:

> While the reasons for student persistence through degree attainment are multifaceted and not easily attributed to a narrow set of explanatory factors (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004), we know one point for certain: Those who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities, both inside and outside the classroom, are more likely to persist through graduation. This assertion has been empirically proven and consistently documented by numerous higher education researchers. (p. 3)

Assuming this holds true, then it is conceivable that much can be learned from actively engaged Black male student leaders about their experiences with first-year navigation and persistence.

DATA COLLECTION

Face-to-face, two- to three-hour long individual interviews were conducted with Black male achievers who were nominated for this study. When necessary, follow-up interviews were conducted via telephone. A semistructured interview technique was used, which simultaneously permitted data collection and authentic participant reflection (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Although standard questions and protocols were used in the interviews, discussions often became conversational, thus allowing participants to reflect on themselves and their college adjustment experiences. One interview question was especially relevant to the aforementioned research questions: What can you recall about your first-year college adjustment experience? Was it smooth or did you experience any kind of turbulence in your transition? Participants who reported seamless transitions were asked to identify factors that facilitated the ease of their college adjustment. Conversely, those who encountered difficulties were asked to describe those challenges and talk about what eventually enabled them to overcome initial transition troubles. Insights into the participants' first-year experiences were also ascertained from their reflections during other points in the interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS

Each interview was digitally recorded and professionally transcribed; the national study yielded over 4,500 single-spaced pages of transcript data. Techniques prescribed by Moustakas (1994) were systematically employed to analyze data collected for this study. The lead author first printed and read hard copies of each transcript. Margins were marked with reflective comments regarding his suppositions and preliminary judgments about the data, a technique Moustakas and other qualitative methodologists call "bracketing." After bracketing, 166 recurring topics, trends, and patterns were identified and reduced to simple code words. Transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, for line-by-line coding. Specifically, code words were applied to sentences, concepts, and passages of text in each participant's transcript. This process resulted in the production of 166 code reports that captured insights into various aspects of participants' shared experiences. These code reports included statements, illustrative examples, and stories from participants across the 42 campuses.

An additional step included a written trajectory analysis statement (Harper, 2007) for each individual participant. Statements included details about how he navigated his way to higher education, strategies that proved most effective in responding to academic turmoil, and so on. These written trajectory analyses were comprehensive versions of what Moustakas (1994) called textural summaries (what the participant experienced) and structural summaries (how he experienced the phenomenon), which are essential components of the phenomenological data analysis process. These transition-related code reports, along with highlighted text from the 219 trajectory statements, were used to build the findings presented in this article.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND METHODS OF VERIFICATION

Several steps were taken to ensure quality and trustworthiness in this study. First, credibility was addressed through member checks, follow-up interviews via telephone, and what Lincoln and Guba (1986) termed *referential adequacy* (the storage and accessibility of interview audio files, transcripts, analysis records, etc.). Second, an informant team consisting of a subset of participants from each institution type was established for member checks. This team, representing over 25% of the sample, routinely reads and provides feedback on written interpretations of their collective experiences, including this article. Third, feedback from a 23-member advisory board established for the National Black Male College Achievement Study

was solicited. These colleagues played the role of a "peer debriefing team" (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) as the lead author engaged in substantive conversations with them throughout the research process, shared with them drafts of his papers for feedback, and revised his work in response to their helpful suggestions and critiques.

LIMITATIONS

Despite efforts to ensure trustworthiness, two methodological shortcomings are readily apparent. First is the use of GPA in the sample selection; only Black male undergraduates with 3.0 GPAs and above were permitted to participate. A few researchers (e.g., Strange et al., 2002) have rightly acknowledged that some students manage to navigate the complexities of college environments despite having below-average grades. Also, perhaps there were other Black men on the 42 campuses whose transition experiences would have been useful and instructive. Unfortunately, these students were excluded because they did not satisfy all the criteria for participation, such as the minimum GPA requirement. Second, given the limited number of administrators who were asked to nominate Black male achievers on each campus, selection bias likely prohibited certain students from being nominated to participate in the study. Although most administrators conferred with other colleagues before offering a final list of nominees, high-profile student leaders whom these nominators knew well were identified. There very well could have been other achievers on the 42 campuses who were overlooked because they had not interacted or formed relationships with the nominating administrators. To address this, participants were routinely asked at the end of each interview to name other Black undergraduate men on their campuses who fit the profile for this study; however, rarely did their lists include peers whom nominators failed to identify.

FINDINGS

Presented in this section are findings from interviews with the 219 Black male achievers. Themes are clustered in two categories. The first includes insights from participants who experienced challenges in their college transitions. Their stories are substantiated with examples of personal and institutional factors that helped them overcome first-year adjustment problems. The second category includes insights from achievers who transitioned seamlessly from high school to college. Explanations for why they got off to such smooth starts are offered. In both thematic categories are examples of how participants made sense of their first-year adjustment experiences across a range of institutional contexts.

TURBULENT TRANSITIONS: OVERCOMING FIRST-YEAR ACADEMIC STRUGGLES

Although the mean cumulative college GPA for the sample was 3.39, not every Black male student interviewed for this study had always been academically high performing. Several encountered academic difficulties in their first college year. Participants who reported tumultuous first-year experiences primarily attributed them to insufficient academic preparation. Many felt academically underprepared for the expectations and rigors of college-level work. "I thought I was ready for college, but the workload and differences between my high school and Tuskegee totally surprised me. I had to get used to that," one senior recalled. While some described their high schools as having weak college preparatory curricula, many others attended schools that offered rigorous courses, including Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB). Despite having taken a series of AP courses in high school, one Haverford student still felt insufficiently prepared compared to other undergraduates on his campus:

> I came from a predominantly Black high school. I wasn't as prepared for college as I would have liked to have been. I did take advantage of Advanced Placement courses, yet our curriculum wasn't as strong as that of my peers here.

In addition to feeling inadequately prepared by their high schools, many also underestimated or had unrealistic expectations about the rigors of college-level course work. Reportedly, they were not prepared for the number of assignments, the fast-paced nature of college level courses, the magnitude of academic expectations, or the time commitment necessary to study and successfully complete assignments. A Towson student remarked, "I was totally surprised by how much harder I was expected to work. It was a shock to my system. This took some getting used to." Another student added, "My high school teachers did a poor job of helping me understand how different college courses would be. I blame them." Others in the sample offered similar sentiments regarding their insufficient understandings of what would be expected of them in college.

Another surprise was what we are terming the *effort-expectations mismatch.* Participants who dedicated the time and effort necessary to complete projects expressed frustration with grades. One Stanford student stated, "Academics were really tough, because I was very frustrated by putting in a lot of effort and I wasn't seeing a lot of results in terms of grades." Others told stories of studying in ways they had studied in high school, but not receiving the same academic results. Some even talked about staying up all night preparing for exams or writing papers and being surprised that

their effort did not produce better results. This was so surprising to these achievers because they had established previous routines that were no longer proving effective. "I kept getting F's, but I wasn't slacking off at all," a junior at Valdosta State shared. "It became very clear to me that I needed a new strategy. For the first time in my life, I got a tutor." This same student went on to reflect on how taking advantage of tutoring required him to put his ego aside by seeking the support necessary for academic improvement.

Like the Valdosta State student, a number of participants struggled with no longer being the highest-performing students in their classes and schools. Some were high school valedictorians and salutatorians, and were therefore accustomed to earning A's and being praised for their exceptional academic performance. "I earned my first-ever B here at Williams in my freshman year . . . I didn't know how to make sense of it because it was so unfamiliar to me." Also shocking to others was the misalignment between their anticipated performance and freshman year grades. One Princeton student offered the following:

> I think the most challenging part was in high school I was good at things, I was recognized as being the top student, but when I came here, everyone was like that. So, I think I immediately felt like just another fish in the sea.

Recalibrating performance expectations seemed useful to many participants who encountered academic turbulence in the first year. Here are two relevant reflections:

> I think one of the biggest things is knowing it is okay to encounter struggle. I mean, I've encountered several struggles here at Stanford . . . I've managed to realize that self worth is not tied up in those grades…then you realize that you may have to change your technique, so be prepared to change the way you think about things, be prepared to change the way you learn things, and don't give up just because something may not come easily to you right away. (Senior, Stanford University)

> When I came here my first semester I was encountering all the issues and problems I didn't have to worry about when I was in high school. However, I realized there was never a bad day to ask a professor for help or to have a study session with other students. (Junior, Swarthmore College)

Many others said they had come to understand that pursuing academic perfection was unnecessary, there was more to college than near-perfect GPAs, and it was okay to ask for help. They clarified that they were never

comfortable settling for poor grades, but instead understood that receiving 4.0 GPAs in college demanded an unrealistic level of skill and effort.

Initial academic turbulence discouraged several achievers in this study from immediately becoming active in campus activities and pursuing leadership positions in student organizations. This, too, was surprising to them, as many had come from high school contexts in which they could effectively balance academics and extracurricular activities. Accordingly, they were forced to revise the engagement expectations with which they entered college. One junior explained:

> I realized right away that I couldn't be into all the things I was into in high school—sports, clubs, community service, and stuff like that—because my grades weren't tight like they were in high school. Only going to class and studying actually made things worse. I felt disconnected in ways that I think actually had a negative impact on my grades and overall transition to Morehouse.

Like this young man, others were able to identify their limitations and revise their unrealistic engagement expectations early on in their collegiate experiences. But interestingly, almost every student in this study (including those who did not experience academic transition challenges in the first year) said the more he became engaged on campus, the better his grades were. A Norfolk State senior gave this explanation: "When you're involved, you're busy; you have less time to waste. So, when it's time to study, you have to focus because your time is limited and you've gotta get back to other responsibilities." There was near-unanimous agreement on this perspective across the sample. Others added that membership in student organizations gave them access to academically high-performing peers upon whom they could rely for accountability, role modeling, notes, focused study sessions, and other forms of academic support. "When I got my first C, I knew I had to find some students to be around who were doing better," a Cal State Long Beach participant added. However, he and several others said that initially locating these academically higher-performing peers was difficult.

Many achievers reflected on difficulties integrating socially during the first-year transition, which they believed affected their academic performance. In addition to those interviewed at the 30 PWIs in this study, students at public and private HBCUs also expressed concerns about the social environment. A number of participants articulated feelings of "culture shock" when they arrived on their respective campuses. This impression of shock often prevented them from feeling a sense of belonging. One student described how such feelings affected him in classrooms at Occidental College:

> Socially it wasn't the best year because I was coming to terms with my surroundings in class. I was the only Black or Black male in class and it was just like I didn't know where I fit sometimes. So, I would just basically come to class only to learn and not to even try to see who was around me. I did not like that.

Regardless of institution type, students expressed a sense of anxiety when attending institutions that were racially homogeneous. "Being at a predominantly white school, after not being in a predominantly white school since elementary school, since about fourth grade, it was a culture shock coming to Haverford," one participant attending a liberal arts college explained. Similarly, an HBCU student remarked, "Coming from where I come from, it took me a while to get used to being around so many brothers. I have never seen so many Black people at one place at one time." Many students responded to these new racially unfamiliar social environments by retreating inward. Self-imposed seclusion increased adjustment difficulties by severely limiting their social and academic networks. In contrast, some others realized the necessity of confronting the uneasiness they felt by becoming involved and connecting to the campus community. One student stated, "It was either fight or flight. Either I had to become part of that community or completely leave it all and be miserable here; I don't like being miserable. So, after my freshmen year I decided to get involved."

Cultural fit and racialized experiences affected academic and social adjustment across particular campuses in this study. There was a noteworthy degree of pressure experienced by Black students at the PWIs that participants attending HBCUs did not report. Several men across the 30 predominantly White campuses conveyed a sense of anxiety regarding academic performance and perpetuating racial stereotypes when they were the only minoritized or Black male student in their classes. For example, a Lafayette student recalled the following: "I was trying to conduct an experiment and my TA is looking at me like I'm that Black student that doesn't know what he's doing. I felt really nervous about, am I representing my people in a right way?" Other achievers expressed feeling as if they did not belong on their campuses due to recurring racial incidents. A Columbia student noted, "There were a series of racially motivated events that happened here that really left me feeling uncomfortable, as if I didn't belong here." These situations were academically distracting, he and other students said. Getting involved in the Black Student Union, National Society of Black Engineers, and ethnic student organizations helped students make sense of these kinds of incidents at PWIs. Doing so also put them in the company of other, oftentimes older Black students who could help

them process racial situations and skillfully craft useful responses to stereotypes, microaggressions, and other racialized experiences that threatened to undermine their academic goals. Others talked about the role of cultural centers in bolstering their sense of belonging:

> The intercultural community center was the springboard that launched me into leadership positions at Occidental. So, I came here not feeling like I belonged and I'm leaving feeling like this is my school.

Again, participants at PWIs made clear that as they became more engaged and socially comfortable on campus, their grades improved and classroom engagement increased.

Students attending private HBCUs also reflected on issues of cultural misfit. Specifically, some did not feel sufficiently steeped in Black culture. A Morehouse student confessed, "When it came to music and other aspects of Black culture I wasn't really familiar with those." Participants addressed this issue by immersing themselves into Black culture and taking advantage of out-of-class engagement opportunities on campus. "Eventually I came out of my shell and began feeling and navigating my way through Hampton and saw the light at the end of the tunnel," one senior shared. Like their peers at PWIs in this study, HBCU participants, especially those who had come from less racially diverse precollege environments, attributed a portion of the resolution of their first-year academic adjustment challenges to establishing relationships with peers and professors outside the classroom. Membership in student organizations also helped facilitate this for them.

SEAMLESS STARTS: HOW SOME ACHIEVERS AVOIDED ACADEMIC STRUGGLE IN THE FIRST YEAR

While some achievers experienced tumultuous transitions from high school to higher education, several others in this study reported relatively seamless transitions to their respective colleges and universities. The most widely cited enablers of their smooth adjustments were the academic and social preparation they received in high school, their participation in institution-sponsored summer bridge programs, and their abilities to build new friendships and maintain preexisting social networks. First, these students maintained that their high schools offered rigorous curricula that effectively prepared them for academically challenging college courses. In fact, some reported their secondary school curricula were just as rigorous, if not more so, than their first-year college coursework. Here is how one student described his preparation for Swarthmore:

> My high school does a very good job of preparing students for college. They say that in the brochures. It was true. I was able to really just come in and kind of take care of business. I knew how to schedule my time, I knew how to choose times when I could have fun and choose times when I had to sit down and do my work.

Another participant added, "A lot of the work that I had in high school, I guess, is equal to or rivals the work I had at Penn my freshman year. My high school classes were difficult. I was taking AP courses and my teachers were very driven individuals and they pushed me really hard." These students felt prepared for college because their high schools offered a simulation of the academic environments they would encounter once they entered higher education. They believed this emulation helped them develop effective study habits and more appropriately shaped their academic expectations, which eased feelings of being overwhelmed in first-year courses.

Additionally, among Black undergraduate men who attended the 30 PWIs, several spoke about coming to college prepared to deal with a lack of racial diversity. This preparation was largely attributed to having attended demographically comparable K–12 schools. This similarity eased feelings of "culture shock." A student at Saint John's University noted:

> For me, the adjustment was easier because I went to a basically all-white high school. I think if I would have gone to a diverse high school and then kind of been thrown in the fire here, it would have been a lot harder. Getting adjusted hasn't been too bad, but with my having that background it was a little bit easier because I dealt with stuff in the past in high school. In fact, high school was probably a little worse than up here.

This example illustrates that the predominantly White high schools some students attended prepared them for equally low representations of Blacks and other minoritized students in college. Additionally, participants felt attending boarding schools and summer camps helped them adjust to living away from home. "I went to band camp for two weeks when I was in the eighth grade. I went to Japan for two weeks by myself. I never had a problem being away from my parents and being away from home at all," a Clark Atlanta participant asserted. Prior experience with being autonomous allowed him and other students to focus on their studies because they did not have to deal with the typical challenges that arose with being independent for the first time, they posited.

Those who transitioned seamlessly to college also attributed their first-year academic success to participation in formal college transition

programs. These programs brought students to campus during the summer between high school and the start of their first college year. Throughout the duration of the programs (usually six to eight weeks), students were introduced to various campus resources, provided support in areas of academic weakness, exposed to college-level work, and encouraged to form friendships and support alliances with other program participants. The overall goal of these summer bridge programs was to prevent students from becoming overwhelmed during the first college year. An Albany State student explained:

> Doing the *Armed for Success*, I kind of got used to the campus before a lot of people. When I came back for orientation I felt like I was actually somewhat of an upperclassman because I was telling people this is there, this is there, you can go here for this and this is closed at that time.

Similarly, achievers at PWIs found summer bridge and pre-freshman programs targeted specifically toward minoritized students helpful in their transitions to higher education. For instance, a student at Brown University suggested its program gave him a "strong base in the student of color community," which made him feel "more comfortable to jump in with the other 1,500 freshmen students." The Groups Program at Indiana University, the SUPER Program at Michigan State University, the Business Opportunities Program at Purdue University, and the Minority Engineering Program at Ohio State, were other programs participants at the public research universities cited. A sophomore recalled the following about his transition to college:

> Because of the SUPER Program, it was a smooth transition. We came in and we saw the same group of minority students in each class . . .. When I moved into the fall semester, I already knew the campus and I had friends from the SUPER Program. Other than adjusting to the big classroom with the lecture halls, it was really no big adjustment from high school to college because of that summer program and the friends I made through it. It automatically gave me friends; I'm still tight with most of them today.

The support participants received from those college transition programs often extended beyond the summer residencies. Most remained connected with these programs by serving as peer mentors during their sophomore, junior, and senior years. Furthermore, achievers credited much of their academic success to the support and advisement they received from directors and other staff members in the summer bridge program offices.

Beyond these college transition programs, participants across all institutional types recounted numerous ways information sharing and guidance from older student leaders proved academically beneficial. One student reflected on the role peers in the Tennessee State University Show Stoppers Choir played in his transition experience:

> I had an opportunity to form some good relationships with about 15 upperclassmen whom I saw daily through our practices. If I had any questions about what was going on at the university, what parties to go to, what classes I should take, what teachers to take, I had a good sounding board every day where I could ask questions.

Similarly, a Haverford student noted that older peer advisors, peer awareness facilitators, and honor code leaders helped him select classes, stressed to him the importance of the honor code, and helped him adjust to the predominantly White campus culture. Participants elsewhere felt freshman year engagement in co-curricular activities was especially beneficial in developing new friendships. Becoming involved in student organizations and other campus activities helped these young men meet peers who shared similar interests, which helped them preoccupy their time before feelings of isolation and homesickness ensued. An account from a Williams student exemplifies this:

> I became a part of other groups on campus, kind of spread out a little bit more, got to know more people, and I was able to talk and share experiences with a lot of other people. I realized that I wasn't the only one going through these culture shock issues.

The support participants received from these networks engendered a strong sense of belonging early on, which they believe enhanced their academic success. It is important to note that some achievers, especially those at public HBCUs and comprehensive state universities, brought preexisting academic networks to college with them. That is, several academically focused peers who graduated from their same high schools ended up enrolling at the same institutions. These men suggested that having classmates from their hometowns and high schools greatly eased their academic adjustment because they did not have to search as hard for friends who could double as study partners. "A bunch of us came from the same school in South Central. We already knew each other's academic strengths. They were the ones I initially studied with. We kept each other focused, we held each other accountable," a Cal Poly participant recalled.

Some participants felt they were successful because they did not overcommit themselves in their first two semesters. These men decided early on that they were going to first focus on their academic coursework, build

solid GPAs and study habits, and then become actively involved in campus activities and student organizations. This sentiment was concisely characterized by a junior at Harvard University who noted, "I just wanted to get a feel of college life first. I wanted to make sure that I created a good academic stepping stone for myself and get a good GPA." He later became highly engaged in co-curricular activities, but only after he was comfortable with his academic performance. Others in the sample took a similar approach.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study makes an important contribution to the growing body of scholarship on Black male collegians because of its focus on academic transitions and first-year adjustment. Additional studies on identities, social experiences, racial encounters, sports participation, and other commonly studied topics are warranted, but so too is more research that offers insights into factors that enable or undermine Black undergraduate men's academic achievement. Many students drop out of college because they can no longer afford the cost of attendance (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Tinto, 2012). However, some others fail to persist through baccalaureate degree completion because they are academically underprepared for the rigors of college-level work and their academic transition challenges are never sufficiently resolved. Retaining and graduating Black undergraduate men at higher rates necessarily entails identifying what works in improving their classroom experiences and academic outcomes. Scalable resources and replicable strategies that helped the 219 participants in the National Black Male College Achievement Study reach their academic goals are discussed in this section.

Louis' (1980) model of surprise and sensemaking was particularly useful for interpreting our participants' transition experiences across a range of institutional settings, many of which were compositionally and culturally unlike their precollege residential and schooling contexts. Although they were reflecting retrospectively, students in our study were once what Louis refers to as organizational newcomers. Our participants, as newcomers, had to adapt to and were socialized by the academic environments at their respective institutions. Yet, the characterization of their transitions (turbulent or seamless) was largely influenced by how they made sense of academic, social, and cultural changes, contrasts, and surprises.

There are clear differences between those who had academically seamless first-year experiences and those who encountered academic turbulence. The former did not reflect on many experiences that exemplified

Louis' (1980) five forms of surprise, whereas students in the latter group did (albeit to varying degrees and sometimes not all five). The early strugglers expected college to be academically less challenging; they expected their effort to match their performance in ways it had in prior schooling contexts; they did not anticipate racial stereotypes in predominantly White postsecondary contexts or difficulties connecting socially to other Black students on HBCU campuses; they did not expect to feel academically less accomplished or like their high schools had insufficiently prepared them; and they expected to encounter academically comfortable cultures that mirrored those from which they had come. These unfulfilled expectations are what these particular participants used to make sense of their first-year academic struggles.

How students made sense of the incongruence between their old and new settings affected their adjustments. That is, those who came from compositionally similar contexts adjusted with greater ease. This was true of PWI students who attended predominantly White K–12 schools and HBCU students who attended predominantly Black K–12 schools. This finding neither calls for ongoing racial segregation nor signals a need for students to choose colleges that are demographically comparable to their prior schooling contexts. Instead, it suggests that finding ways to expose young men to racially unfamiliar contexts in substantive ways well before they choose a college or university could be helpful in their first-year transitions. Having Black boys who live in predominantly Black communities enroll in dual enrollment programs at PWIs could help acclimate them to environments in which they may someday be students. Likewise, having Black boys who live in predominantly White communities participate in college preparatory initiatives offered on HBCU campuses might also be effective. Expanding access to more public information about what makes some colleges culturally and otherwise different from others would allow students to make more informed choices that engender fewer surprises. The College Board's Big Future website and the U.S. Department of Education's College Navigator are two of numerous free online resources.

Louis' (1980) conceptualization change was also evidenced in our findings concerning perceived differences between the rigor of one's high school and college curricula. Many achievers we interviewed who had tumultuous first-year experiences felt insufficiently prepared. Consistent with Louis' perspective, we argue that differences between one's high school and college contexts are publicly knowable. The challenge, however, is in engaging Black male high school students in coursework and classroom norms that feel more collegiate. The College Board (2012) reported that 80% of Black high school students whose PSAT scores

signaled that they had potential to perform well in AP courses never took such courses. Expanding Black students' access to and success in AP courses, the IB program, and other rigorous curricular experiences has to become a more serious priority for high schools and the College Board. However, simply offering AP courses does not necessarily guarantee their rigor. Participants who transitioned seamlessly said they knew what the academic norms and expectations were because they had experienced some version of them in high school. Given this, high school teachers should require students to study (as opposed to simply completing homework) and progressively teach in ways that mirror what students are likely to experience in college. Furthermore, increasing the number of Black male high school students who take advantage of dual enrollment options at local colleges and universities could also help address this problem.

The person-specific nature of contrast that Louis (1980) described also appears to account for differences in our participants' first-year adjustment experiences. Those who struggled most in the first college year encountered difficulties in contrasting their prior and present academic performance outcomes. The same effort that earned them good grades in high school was not yielding the same results in college. Many men were shocked by the reality that they were struggling for the first time. It might be presumed that one who was valedictorian or one of the highest achieving students in his high school is not in need of much academic support. Findings in this study contradict such assumptions. Fortunately, some participants recognized the need to seek academic help, including tutoring. But what if they had not? This question might help explain, at least in part, what differentiates the academic achievers who got off to turbulent starts we studied from Black undergraduate men who ultimately withdrew from college for academic reasons. This should be examined in a future study that includes subsamples of students who still struggle academically beyond the first year (e.g., Black men on academic probation) as well as those who dropped out of college.

Prior research on the adjustment experiences of minoritized students at PWIs (e.g., Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 2007; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Schwitzer et al., 1999; Smedley et al., 1993; Terenzini et al., 1994; Thompson & Fretz, 1991) acknowledges how negative social experiences affect sense of belonging and academic performance. Participants in our study who transitioned seamlessly were able to cultivate early social relationships that also proved to be academically profitable; in some instances, they brought these relationships with them from high school. Encouraging students to sustain relationships with peers on their college campuses who graduated from their same high schools might be

effective in certain institutional contexts. This recommendation feels counterintuitive, as connecting first-year students to diverse peers who attended a range of high schools in undeniably beneficial (Locks et al., 2008). Perhaps a combination thereof is best, given that several participants in our study who attended public HBCUs and comprehensive state universities insisted that coming to college with groups of friends from their high schools instantly gave them study partners who held them accountable and validated their academic competence. This is possibly explained by the regional nature of enrollment patterns at these institutions, a possibility that should be explored in a future study.

Finally, the significant roles that summer bridge programs and engagement in student organizations cannot be overstated. Coming to campus the summer before the start of one's first college year allowed students to cope with many of the changes, contrasts, and surprises that shape how newcomers transition from one organizational context (high school) to another (higher education). Achievers deemed particularly beneficial the opportunity to build friendships that quickly evolved into academic partnerships with other program participants, be introduced to campus resources that later proved academically helpful, and juxtapose old and new educational environments in advance of having to do so in an academically more consequential way. Likewise, getting involved in student organizations proved useful for those who transitioned seamlessly and eventually for those who experienced turbulence in the first college year. Helping students determine how to best pace their engagement is essential. On the one hand, strugglers wished they had gotten engaged sooner, as doing so would have given them access to academically important relationships. But on the other hand, those who transitioned with ease said they were deliberate about not taking on too much too soon. It therefore seems that low-levels of engagement (membership) in a small handful of student organizations might give newcomers appropriate levels of access to student leaders who can provide valuable information about particular majors, courses, and academic resources; teach them how to skillfully navigate racial microaggressions and stereotype threat in classrooms—what Harper (2013) termed *peer pedagogies*—and help them make productive sense of changes, contrasts, and surprises they are experiencing in their new academic contexts.

CONCLUSION

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), 955,400 Black undergraduate men were enrolled in college in Fall 2013. If current attrition rates remain constant, more than 636,000 of these students will depart institutions of higher education without earning their degrees within in six years. Jackson and Moore (2006) asked if Black boys and men are endangered or ignored at all levels of education, and argued the following: "In general, the existing body of knowledge is both limited and disjointed. It neglects to examine collectively the educational experiences of [Black] males throughout the educational pipeline" (p. 202). Paradoxically, the burgeoning body of published research on Black men in postsecondary contexts has largely ignored their academic experiences and outcomes. Readiness for college-level work has to be studied with the same degree of regularity, as do other facets of Black men's lives in collegiate contexts. Moreover, helping more Black undergraduate men overcome challenges that threaten their academic goals in the first year and beyond has to reach the same level of importance as other dimensions of success. This study focused specifically on academics and college adjustment. Much more about Black men in college classrooms and labs, study groups with peers, a range of engagement situations with professors (e.g., office hours, advising appointments, service learning, and supervised research experiences), and other academic encounters remain to be studied.

NOTES

1. "Minoritized" is used instead of "minority" throughout this article to signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social milieu (e.g., their families, racially homogeneous friendship groups, or places of religious worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness.

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