

Running Header: [I WANNA BE LIKE MIKE: AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ACHIEVEMENT]

I Wanna Be Like Mike: Collegiate Gaps in African American Academic  
Achievements and Degree Obtainment

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## Intro of Topic Area

This researcher began the question with experience. Knowing that raising an African American boy would have its challenges, with many cross-sections, this researcher pondered all social and educational systems that would undermine his social and financial capital. One particular day, at 11, he could distinguish where many of his engineering camp friends were socially and economically versus where we, as a family, desired and strived to obtain... He said, "I was in camp today and they asked us *how many of your parents or the people you know are engineers?!*" Enthusiastically speaking, to parody many of the young men and women who were from middle class and upper middle class families, Scooter lamented sharing being the only AA male and young person who didn't know an engineer. His response made the researcher cringe... to think we strive for middle class aspirations, but single-parenting and being the *first* in the family to attend college, Scooter would have to fill his own shoes as a legacy student, someday, one generation removed from being a subculture of historically underrepresented backgrounds who obtained degrees at the bachelor's level, let alone a master's level. Being the person he is... he begins to recite Langston Hughes to cheer me up:

*Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor—  
Bare.  
But all the time*

*I've been a-climbin' on,  
And reachin' landin's,  
And turnin' corners,  
And sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.  
So boy, don't you turn back.  
Don't you set down on the steps  
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.  
Don't you fall now—  
For I've still goin', honey,  
I've still climbin',  
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*

The researcher asks what the poem means to him, and quite light and frank he shares, “I have my work cut out for me... you want me to do better than you.”

## **Background of the Problem**

### *The Dilemma of First Generation Students*

From its early documentation, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 1998, qualified first generation students as a demographic whose parents have not completed a degree higher than a high school diploma; however, looking at data from the NCES report, between 1989-1990, for students not qualified as first generation, 23 percent of these students had parents with some college experience whereas 34 percent of these students had parents who had not obtained a bachelor's degree. Today, universities, like, Chapman University, and organizations that support first generation students ([imfirst.org](http://imfirst.org)) have modified the National

Center for Education Statistics' old definition to share that a first-generation college student is defined as a student whose parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have not completed a bachelor's degree. This means that you are the first in your family to attend a four-year college/university to attain a bachelor's degree (2015).

When student practitioners, or higher education administrators, look at the rate of attendance for first generation college students, College Board, a not-for-profit organization that connects students to college access and opportunities, shares that these students are significantly underrepresented on American college campuses. College Board, in 2013, held an annual conference where Kara Balemian and Jing Feng shared statistics about *First Generation Students: College Aspirations, Preparedness, and Challenges*. From the study shared out from 2001 statistics, who attended college within the first year of graduating high school, 54 percent of these students' parents completed high school, while 32 percent of these students had parents who completed less than a high school diploma. Quite significantly correlated to the statistics of first generation students whose parents attained of a high school diploma or less, the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) did a 2011 study on first generation students who had parents who obtained a degree, later in life, or had some college experience:

While 42 percent of students whose parents attended college graduated within four years, only 27 percent of first-generation students graduated within four years.

While nearly 60 percent of students whose parents attended college graduated within five years, less than 45 percent of first-generation students graduated in the same time frame.

While 64 percent of students whose parents attended college graduated within six years, only 50 percent of first-generation students earned their degrees in that time frame.

From this UCLA study, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA looked at the enrollment of first-generation college students who began college in 2004 and tracked their graduation rates at both private and public institutions. According to *Completing College: Assessing Graduation Rates at Four- Year Institutions*, the study not only looked at the correlation of degree obtainment from parental education status, but the success degree obtainment rates of first generation students between public and private institutions between 4 and 6 years at attending post-secondary education: “The study found that private universities graduated 64 percent of students within four years, while public universities graduated only 37 percent of students within four years. Within six years, private schools graduated 78 percent of students, while public universities graduated less than 66 percent”(DeAngelo, Frank, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011).

### *Understanding Black Male Success*

The pressure to educate AA Males stems from the acute disparities nationally surveillance; while social turmoil of broken neighborhoods in low-socio-economic communities challenge mis- education policies that filter for-profit prison systems. In 2008, only 47% of AA males graduated from US high schools, compared to 78% of white male counterparts. Harper (2012) shares that for the AA males who actually attends college, there is an overrepresentation of AA males in athletics. “In 2009, they were only 3.6% of undergraduate

students, but 55.3% of football and basketball players at public NCAA Division I institutions” With further research, data has reflected that though the representation is high in athletics, there is a low completion rate for a degree. “Black male college completion rates are lowest among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in U.S. higher education (Harper, 2006a; Strayhorn, 2010).”

**Bigger Question:** Is it possible to associate retention and degree obtainment between 1<sup>st</sup> generation AA males who participate in academics as a student athlete or TRIO student success student with a higher likelihood of obtaining their first degree?

### **Rationale for the study:**

What are the cracks in education that reduce the degree obtainment of AA males who participate in success programs or continue their education as “student” athletes? How can administrators reduce/mitigate the collateral damage of degree deferral or dropout rates for this population? What is the educational climate needed to support 1<sup>st</sup> generation AA males?

### **Significance of the study**

Critical race theory asks how we are bridging the economic and educational gap to create equality within leadership, communities, and the labor market. If we cannot diversify AA male presence in leadership and job markets how can we provide support regarding the health of AA communities that have a history of emasculating them?

### **Assumptions**

For the researcher, the optimism around dispelling social myths that “black boys don’t want to learn or have to choose between being cool and educated.” The researcher hopes to look at

family and school labels from secondary education being indicators of success and get a depiction of why these circumstances affect outcomes.

### **Limitations**

Midwest local of data. Research will use a previous study to create validity to study done at University of Michigan with looking at the programs available to students on college campus; as well as how college administration affects degree obtainment. Researcher hopes to unveil how Midwest institutions described can alleviate limitations that are perpetuated in the Midwest for colleges and secondary institutions where dropout rates are higher than others.

## Resources

Harper, S. R., Williams, C. D., & Blackman, H. W. (2013). Black male student-athletes and racial inequities in NCAA Division I college sports. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education

Ladson-Billings, G. (2010). Just What Is Critical Race Theory And What's It Doing In A Nice Field Like Education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 7-24.

Njororai, W. (2012). Challenges of Being a Black Student Athlete on U.S. College Campuses. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 40-63.