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Standing At A Crossroad: An Examination of Societal Expectations on the Attitudes of African American Men & Women towards Academic Achievement at a PWI and a HBCU

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Government Department from
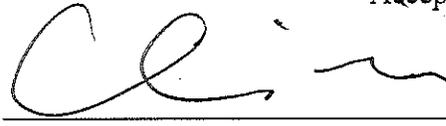The College of William and Mary

by

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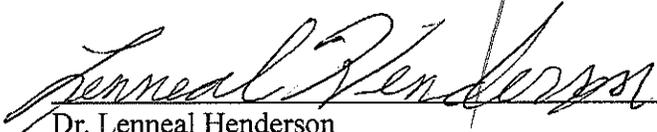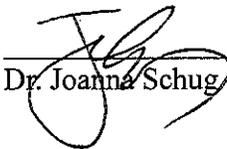
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Standing At A Crossroad: An Examination of Societal Expectations on the Attitudes of African American Men & Women towards Academic Achievement at a PWI and a HBCU

Dara N. Bright
Spring 2018

Acknowledgements

Abstract

This research explores the intersectionalities between race, gender and institution and the role these variables have on the types of social expectations African American men and women experience. Through this study, I delve into how these factors impact their attitudes towards educational achievement at the collegiate level. The findings revealed five themes that emerged at the two institutions. Notably, the tendency of African American women at a predominantly white institution to be almost twice as likely as African American men to rely upon the black tradition of self-help. Alternatively, African American men at a historically black college or university were more likely to rely on the tradition of self-help in comparison to African American women. I argue that institution culture and expectations shape the behaviors exhibited across lines of race and gender. This study provides policy recommendations for these two types of institutions, as well as, culturally inclusive practices that would be highly beneficial to the growth, support, and security of African American men and women attitudes as they work towards educational achievement.

I. Introduction

Since the late 1980s, scholars have pondered the cause of the vast discrepancy between African American[1] men and women and their white counterparts in educational attainment. Many have touted the prison-industrial complex as the primary cause for the disparities. The prison-industrial complex that disproportionately jails black and brown men has at least 12 states that have more than half of the prison population as African American. Black men comprise 38% of state prisoners though black men only account for about 6% of the U.S population (Nellis, 2018).[2] Other scholars place significant emphasis on the role of socioeconomic status while still others focus on systematic discrimination in the educational system. Although these are all important, and indeed contributing, factors little is known about how the intersectionality between race, gender, institutions, social expectations, and social dynamics influence the attitudes of collegiate African American men and women towards their ability to achieve academically. Scholars often focus studies primarily on African American men's educational attainment through a deficit lens and neglect to place similar attention on African American women (Britt, 2017; Pollard, 1993). Limited research explores how the climates on these collegiate campuses impact not only each in-group's attitudes but ultimately their ability to complete their postsecondary career (Wawrzynski, 2005; Chesler, 1997). Research shows that the intricacy of white racial attitudes and the ambivalent nature of these racial attitudes on predominantly white campuses (PWIs) held by faculty members towards black students highlights the critical role institutional context can play in eliciting either the positive or negative

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[1] In this study, the term African Americans (used interchangeably with "Black, and "Black student") was used to describe Black students whose are descents of slaves in the United States.
[2] Nellis acknowledges that these statistics do not account for African American prisoners in private-for profit prisons

aspect of these ambivalent attitudes in their engagement with their black students (Stassen, 1995). There is a segment of African American men and women who do excel and successfully obtain their degree within six years of matriculation, regardless of whether they complete their education at a predominantly white institution (PWI) or a historically black college or university (HBCU); but few researchers have captured a comprehensive image of how race, gender, and institutional context influence the conditions and experience of that success. This paper seeks to explore how social expectations influence black men and women's attitudes towards academic achievement at two different types of institutions, a HBCU and PWI.

II.   Literature Review

The common thread among the existing literature is the prevalence of two themes: first is the tendency to either focus solely on the educational attainment of African American men or to analyze African American students as a monolith. The second thread is a unitary focus on either predominantly white institutions or on historically black universities (Maruyama et. al 2005; Trujillo 1986). A small literature explores the intersectionality of race, gender, and institutional context and the role these factors play in the types of social expectations black men and black women will experience as well as impacts on their educational achievement. The purpose of this paper is to study and provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of societal expectations in relationship to race, gender, and institutional context.

My research operates at the intersection of multiple fields of study: political science, education, sociology, and African American studies as it attempts to tackle how the role of individuals, different institutional contexts, diversity, culture and gender engage with one another. Utilizing literature from various disciplines allows this paper to grapple with these concepts and make meaning of their influence in the web that constructs black students'

experiences. By imposing an interdisciplinary approach, I am able to better inform my work and the connections that exist across academic fields that may not always be explored.

Previous research on the importance of institutions have tended to focus on the level of the classroom. Common practice for scholars in political science domain is to evaluate college cultures and social expectations through the role of faculty's teaching, learning, mannerisms, and expectations on the achievement of African American students (Wawrynski 2004, Chesler 1997). Faculty views are crucial to understanding a campus' racial climate because faculty play an influential role on the campus, from constructing the curriculum to formulating research that defines a department's culture and partaking in the conversation on the campus' standards (Park 2009). Unlike other positions, like the Board of Visitors or a President, faculty and their views are not for a set term or timeframe. After being tenured, these individuals shape the culture on campus indefinitely (Park, 2009). Thus, understanding the views and attitudes of faculty toward racial and ethnic diversity provides viable and quantitative data on how best to curtail the potential negative effects of biased perceptions and how to nurture the potential existing positive effects. It is important to note that a substantial amount of the literature on this subject utilize the term racial diversity. The term suggests that colleges and universities are both interested and invested in all students of color, but after further investigation, I found that when scholars used the term racial diversity the focus was usually on the dynamic between black and white students.

The shortcomings of the political science research are few; however, it fails to grapple with professors who do successfully engage with dialogue, and interactions, on race. Initially political science researchers hypothesized that those professors who engage successfully with race in the classroom do so as a result of training experience, influence of professor's race, facilitation strategies, and ability to recognize difficult dialogues (Sue et. al 2007). However,

these hypotheses do not pose whether these factors are dependent on making the dialogue meaningful. This notion of "meaningful" dialogue means that it's more than just being able to discuss racial issues in a monocultural classroom, but the students are able to process the implications and messages from this dialogue and make it applicable to their life. In the context of a PWI, African American are often required to be the "experts" (Chesler, 1997), but often times they enter the classroom with a well-versed knowledge of their peer's perception of themnstead of the classroom climate being more welcoming to diversity and different racial experiences black students could potentially feel more isolated as a result of feeling like they must serve as props for white students' learning about the world.

The primary area of failure in the literature is the lack of exploration on professors teaching, attitudes, and behaviors across institutions. Intriguing to explore would be whether the faculty perceptions of and expectations for students of color differ based on gender. Studies have already shown that men and women, generally, do not receive the same treatment (Jones 2005). Do students of color, black students particularly, on white campuses experience additional differential treatment based on gender and race?

Within the field of social psychology, social psychologists address the issue of individual action by evaluating the attitudinal language of black student's peers and institutional programs provided by universities (Hamilton 2010, Shabazz 2015). In doing so, scholars draw conclusions based on social behavior theories. These studies demonstrate the "why" behind the black student's peers' behavior. This literature informs my research to be able to understand the imposed social expectations on African American students. However, it lacks a consideration of race and gender. Lewis et al. (2000) found that White students' behaviors often have a negative impact on students of color, "especially patterns of White color blindness and color

consciousness, along with racial or ethnic stereotyping" (74). Lewis et al. arrived at this conclusion after study the experiences and interactions of various groups of students of color with their white peers on a PWI college campus conducted to identify the challenges these students face. Students of color often felt that white students labeled them as "affirmative action attendees;" pressures or expectations to assimilate or to be "representative" of their race; exclusion and marginality (81). Students often felt left out of study groups, partner work, or classroom discussion. Many of the established networks available to white students were perceived to be "closed off to and difficult to access" for black students; while for many students of color they also felt there was great white resentment and hostility about affirmative action (Lewis et al, 2000). The widespread, and widely untrue, perception that minority students gained acceptance based on "diversity" or "preference" still lingers (77). These themes in conjunction with "poor advising, counseling, and channeling of students' resources" have caused internal "psychic struggles and trauma" for students of color that Lewis et al argues leads to them paying an intangible "extra cost for a college education" (80).

  These behaviors and attitudes towards black students' existence and attempts to obtain academic achievement on white college campuses is not lost to black students. Black students often feel the classroom is not a welcoming or inclusive environment (Chesler 1997). In an attempt to rectify these sentiments at the University of Michigan, Chesler conducted focus groups of various ethnic groups and found common problematic behaviors that faculty engage in. Students of color asserted that the curriculum and classroom interaction often exclude them, faculty sometimes take overt stances in class against diversity issues and initiatives, out of class interactions with the faculty are minimal and difficult, faculty appeared to seem uncomfortable or cautious with them, and classroom structures and pedagogical approaches are too limited;

relations with white peers in class sometimes are problematic. But as there are social barriers, the perceived role and behavior of faculty on African-American students influence their attitudes toward their place on collegiate campuses and whether academic success is obtainable (Chesler 1997).

Amid the education literature's work is the acknowledgement of different institution types. Within this literature, the distinction made among various forms of institutions addresses a major deficit in previous literature from other disciplines that treat institutions as a monolith. Though the numerous studies within this domain address the influences of institution types, this literature primarily fails to grapple with the intersections between culture and gender. A myriad of education literature comparatively examines the educational effectiveness of faculty at PWIs and HBCUs and most conclude that there is no significant difference between faculty-student interaction and that black students' quality of relationship may be higher on PWI campuses (Kim 2002; Harper 2004); however, there is another sect of the literature that both contradicts and disproves these findings (Chickering & Gamson 1987; Bellas and Toutkoushian 1999). One study found that though African-American students may have "higher quality relationships at PWIs" they received more institutional support at HBCUs (Shaw 2012, 15). Furthermore, the emphasis placed on campus support (i.e.: programs, etc.) in previous studies may not be as great of a factor as faculty's teaching and learning practices. Those effective practices and expectations assumed at HBCUs are "active teaching, more importance placed on reflective learning, and greater emphasis on personal and social responsibility" (14). Even still with this comparative study, there are certain limitations to the findings in this study, such as the characteristics (i.e.: population size) of the institutions that some scholars believe influence faculty behavior and the findings other effects (i.e.: engagement). Though it is presumably that

there is a positive correlation between faculty teaching styles and student's academic success, the need remains to explore how these two concepts interact with one another.

The domain of African American literature seeks to address an important aspect of black students' perception of social expectations and their attitudes towards academic achievement: culture. Unfortunately, the intersection between black culture and gender in an educational context are not explored within this literature (Shabazz 2015; Bowman 1995). Those few studies who attempt to grapple with gender inevitably drop the influence of institution types. Thus, the primary purpose of the African American literature is the focus on the impact of race, gender, and institutions. Only a couple of scholars attempt to connect the intersection (Chavous et al. 2004; Fries-Britt 2001).

Available research allows us to evaluate how the perception of societal expectations by African American men and women structure their attitudes towards academic achievement; however, most of the literature examining African-American students' perception of higher education treats this group as a singular aggregate. Fries-Britt (1998) argues that in addition to the expectations of their white peers, high ability Black students can and do experience isolation from their peers in addition to balancing their identity against society's, their campus', and their own community's expectations. Accused of acting white by members of their own racial community and ostracized by their white peers as given preferential or special treatment or even being told they do not belong, black high-ability collegiate students must learn to achieve this delicate balance. Fries-Britt's study found that the experiences of high-ability black students in a prestigious merit-based setting constructed solely for black students was likely to be far different than the experiences of high-ability black students without a community of like-minded individuals. In this study, these Black students felt their plight to be more bearable because they

were surrounded by other like-minded Black students who acted as a support group for each other (Fries-Britt). Within this study, there are tremendous implications that can provide policymakers with the ability to formulate practical next steps; however, this literature misses a key component: gender.

There is a small sect of literature that attempts to confront the intersection between black gender-specificity; but, in doing so, these scholars often remove the dynamic of geography and institutions. In one study, students acknowledged the behaviors of faculty that were more positive such as professors that led open discussions of racial issues that avoided the assignment of "expert status" and the presence of faculty of color. Most importantly, this study demonstrates that black students and students of color are aware and notice the microaggressions[3] as well as the differential treatment. On average African American students experience more incidents of differential treatment in college-related situations than non-black student of color (Suarez-Balcazar). College-related situations were defined as social situations and various types of events (parties, sport events, dorms, cafeterias, parents, administrative personnel). Interestingly enough, this study included black gender-specific reactions. Black women, and other women of color, are more likely to rate situations higher for the "degree of offensiveness" and the "degree of discrimination." This shows that women have a greater sensitivity to racially offensive and discriminatory language. Other studies hypothesize that perhaps women are more likely to think about "how other people feel, which has been associated with higher empathy." As a result, the study showed that even if the offensive behavior or language was not directed at them, they were more likely to identify it as problematic and respond accordingly (Suarez-Balcazar et al 2003).

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[3] The definition utilized in this paper to define microaggressions is borrowed from (Solorzano et. al. 2000)
"Microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward
people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (9).

This concept of social awareness to differential treatment is central to evaluate in the context of my research because the data evidence that women view and process experiences differently than their male counterparts. This remains statistically true across racial lines. The implication of this difference is that women are more likely to respond to being treated differently which is an important aspect of determining the factors to achievement. Arguably, an understudied variable in evaluating black gender.

Invariably, the challenge in bringing together these disparate studies is the inability to draw consistent and comprehensive conclusions. Despite this challenge, all of the examined literature provide insight for trends and behaviors evident in different scenarios. Researchers explored embedded social networks, culture, and institutional context to systematize the experiences of individuals. But the puzzle of intersectional experience remains as the relations between institution, gender, and race do not appear as co-variables in any studies. Thus, the need for my study. I will explore these intersections as they pertain to black men and women's attitudes towards academic achievement, embedded in a predominantly white institution and a historically black college. After drawing conclusions based on the study, I will conclude with recommendations to institutions on best practices in supporting a positive academic experience for black women and men.

III. Methodology

The research question underlying my study is how social expectations influence the attitudes of black men and women towards academic achievement at a predominantly white institution (PWI) and on historically black college (HBCU). This question explicitly explores the intersectionality between race, gender and institutional context. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were utilized with the intent to "yield exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory data"

(Hesse-Biber, Leavy 2010). Semi-structured in-depth interviews are interviews in which a researcher asks participants a series of questions to guide the conversation on a specific topic. By employing a semi-structured interview technique, it gave participants the opportunity to share background information that may not be directly tied to the question asked but provides context to their experiences. The semi-structured interview format allowed this research to allow the conversation to flow more naturally and provide me with the opportunity to have the participants elaborate on an interesting comment, statement, or expressed belief. This structure was chosen because it did not confine the research to a narrow set of questions that would not allow me to explore an interesting point that may not initially appear to be directly relevant to the study but simultaneously maintained focus on the topic of social expectations and experiences around academic achievement.

Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (2010) suggest that in-depth interviews are the most appropriate qualitative design when the researcher is "looking for patterns that emerge from the thick description of social life recounted by participants" (139). Furthermore, this research intends to focus on an "issue-oriented" topic, Jeffrey Johnson (2002) argues that in-depth interviews prove particularly useful when research focuses on a particular issue. Most importantly, this methodology was selected on the premise that in-depth interviews are one of the most effective methodologies to explore and "access subjugated voices and getting at subjugated knowledge" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010). In many traditional research processes, the voices of marginalized and minority individuals are often ignored or rendered unheard. By providing participants, in this case black students, the opportunity to share their experiences, this research provided them with a platform to voice their unique understanding of their social position in society. As such, I am able to examine "hidden" knowledge – knowledge that is

often not openly articulated – that emerged through a series of questions that challenged participants to critically think about their understanding of their social surroundings.

As a researcher who is a second-generation, lower-middle class, college student from a very urban and African American city, I recognize my own social position vis a vis my research subjects. Initially, I expected students to have experiences that were similar to my own. For instance, I had not encountered nor was I familiar with the experience of wealthy black students whose social expectations were already formulated prior to coming college. Many of them had been the minority in their class, school, and sometimes city prior to enrolling at the predominant white institution. This gap in experience meant that I entered into many of the dialogues with the assumption that certain explicit social messages had the same impact on them as they did on me. My own perceived notions may be an issue because I analyzed the data through a constructivist epistemology paradigm. This paradigm was selected primarily because it attempts to focus on "the meaning making activity of the human mind" (Crotty 1998, p. 58). However, I made decisions to include data that contradicted my own personal views and thoughts to demonstrate the plethora of voices and experiences that exist within lines of race and gender.

On the other end of the spectrum, I encountered students who were first generation, middle-class individuals who had myriad perspectives and understandings about how they processed their ability to achieve in various contexts. After addressing my biases and acknowledging my preconceived notions, I reworked the study design and included information that I did not "understand" or did not fit into my understanding. I did not exclude information that did not fit the narrative. The data provided is holistic so that readers may draw their own conclusions instead of what I believed to be true.

This study was conducted at two top-tiered institutions, one public PWI campus and one HBCU campus, both in the Mid-Atlantic region. Both institutions were deemed top-tiered within their respective categories by U.S News & World Report. The predominantly white institution, pseudonym Johnson University, is a small public liberal arts college that is a part of a select group of institutions prestigious enough to be called "Public Ivy," which means that it provides the academic rigor and quality of an Ivy League institution at a public-school price. For the academic year 2016-2017, the total undergraduate population was 6,276 and the racial/ethnic minority students comprised 30.8% of the student population including 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 8.4% Asian, 7.5% Black/African-American, 9.7% Hispanic/Latino, 5.0% Multi-race (not Hispanic/Latino) and 0.0% Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander.

In the "America's Top Colleges" produced by Forbes, Johnson University in the top ten of public colleges and top 75 colleges overall. At this institution, African American students graduate at a lower rate than their peers (73%, 83% respectively). Overall Johnson University's four-year graduation rate is 83% and six-year graduation rate is 91%. The African American graduation rates from Johnson University mirrors other universities in this elite bracket and thus makes this site a strong environment for reliable data and creates potential for consistent results if other researchers opted to replicate the study.

The historically black institution and college selected for this study is pseudonymously called Armstrong University. This college is a relatively small private school and part of an elite number of HBCUs identified by US News & World Report as a top-tiered HBCU. For the 2016-2017 academic year, the total undergraduate population was 3,836 and the student profile included 0.3% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 0.8% Asian, 91.4% Black/African-American, 1.4% Hispanic/Latino, 4.2% White, 0.1% not provided.

This institution only reports its six-year graduation rate which is 64.9%. The graduation rate breaks down to gender with similar numbers. The graduation rate for women obtaining bachelor degrees is 59.5%. While the graduation rate of men at Armstrong is 47.5%. Armstrong's college further breaks down the graduation rates by race and ethnicity: White students (33%), Black/African American (63.2%), Hispanic (75%), Asian (0%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (100%). This college, in comparison to other HBCUs of similar caliber, falls within the typical range of graduation rates. Similar to Johnson University, the typical nature of the graduation rate from this HBCU in relation to its peer institutions also make this site a strong climate for reliable and replicable data.

Initially a random sampling method was utilized, but as the research process progressed, the snowball sampling technique became the primary mode of sampling. The difficulty in finding participants through a random sample precipitated the move to a snowball sampling technique. This study's sampling technique, snowball sampling, was not ideal for in-depth interviews because it created a sampling bias. My data results may have similar responses as a result of the snowball method and students identifying friends who may have comparable views. Often times, most participants were drawing from their friends and immediate peer groups; but, this technique did provide the opportunity for me to reach out to other faculty, staff, students who thought of other individuals who could lend useful insights. So, though this study is not without reliability risk, this study's methods hold potential for invaluable data.

The selection criteria for the in-depth interviews included Black students who were born in the United States and with at least one parent who identified as African American. These African American students were required to be at least full-time sophomores attending Johnson University or Armstrong University at the start of this research. African American students

graduating prior to the conclusion of this research or a recent graduate (less than three months) were also permitted to join this study. For instance, a student graduating in May was eligible to be included in the study contingent on them completing their interview with the researcher by July. Along similar lines, students graduating in the fall were also eligible to be included in this study.

Participants in this study were initially contacted through group messaging. At both Johnson University and Armstrong University, the black students had an exclusively "black" chat in which only African-American and Black students were allowed to join. As a member of the Johnson University group messaging chat, I attest that the regulation of "blackness" was harsh. For instance, a student who identified as half-black with a parent who was Cape Verdean and another parent who was South East Asian was quickly thrown out. I acknowledge this regulation to bring light to the fact that upon advertising to the seemingly inclusive black population, there may be individuals who were excluded in this study at Johnson University. This initial note reached 363 black students attending Johnson University at the time (July 2017). As Black/African American students comprise approximately 7.5% of the student population at Johnson University, my inquiry reached approximately 77% of the black student body population. The message sent in this group message can be found in Appendix A. Students who were interested in participating in this study were asked to "like" the message and they would be contacted accordingly. From this outreach I contacted by five participants and with the assistance of the snowballing sampling technique, obtained my additional participants.

Through my summer internship at my hometown, I met a recent graduate from Armstrong University who granted me access to their "black" chat, and by proxy sent my message to over 1,500 students. This group chat was not deemed "black specific" but contained a

large portion of the student body. Statistically speaking, of the 3,836 undergraduates, approximately 41% of the students received this message; however, I only received two participants through this forum. Subsequently, I reached out to the President of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) at their college to ask them to share this information with members of their Greek Life. The National Pan-Hellenic Council, also known as the Divine Nine, is the Council containing the nine historically black fraternities and sororities which include Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated, and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Incorporated. In contacting the NPHC President, I received no response. I then proceeded to contact the Director of Student Activities, as well as the two Assistant Directors' of Student Activities via email requesting their office to share my request for research participants (Appendix B). I received no response from their office. My final attempts to make contact with individuals at Armstrong University consisted of sending a formal letter via email to all of the Department Chairs at the College. Similarly, I received no response. As a member of a sorority within the Divine Nine, the graduate advisor to my undergraduate chapter reached out to other students through her affiliation in Jack and Jill. I received no participants through this channel.

Upon receiving the needed number of participants at each institute, I sent out an email (Appendix C) and invited the students to schedule an interview time utilizing a scheduling doodle poll. Most interviews occurred either in the institutions' library or at a local coffee shop, depending on the timing of the interview.

Seven African American men and nine African American women were selected to participate in the study from Johnson University. Seven African American men and seven African American women from Armstrong University elected to partake in this study. A variety of majors were represented among the participants, including, Finance, International Relations, Economics, Kinesiology, Physics, Hispanics, Public Policy, Marketing, Business/Economics, Philosophy, Journalism, Neuroscience, Sociology, Linguistics, Psychology, Anthropology, Gender Studies, Business Management, Government and English. Five of the participants at Johnson University held minors in subjects that include Arabic, Dance and Gender Studies. At Armstrong University, two of the participants held minors in the psychology and marketing departments. The majority of the remaining participants held double majors which are mentioned above.

Six of the nine African American women participants at Johnson University were members of various Black-Greek letter organizations (BLGO). The remaining three women were not affiliated with any Black Greek letter sorority. Of the seven African American men, six of these participants were affiliated with Black-Greek letter organizations. Comparatively, six of the seven African American men participants at Armstrong were members of various Black-Greek letter organizations (BLGO), while only three of seven African American women participants were members of BLGOs. The remaining participants were unaffiliated with black Greek life. The surveyed men were a part of the following organizations: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated, and Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated. The surveyed women were members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated.

Other important features of the surveyed participants at Johnson University consists of:

- Three (3) African American men on athletic scholarships
- Two (2) football
- One (1) soccer
- Four (4) African American men were juniors
- Three (3) African American men were seniors
- Two (2) African American women were sophomores
- Three (3) African American women were juniors
- Four (4) African American women were seniors

Important features of the surveyed participants at Armstrong University consists of:

- Two (2) African American men on athletic scholarships
- Both football
- Four (4) African American women were seniors
- Three (3) African American women were sophomores
- Five (5) African American men were seniors
- One (1) African American man was a freshman
- One (1) African American man was a junior

IV. Results

The purpose of this section is to share the lived experiences of 17 African American men and women at Johnson University and 14 African American men and women at Armstrong University. This case study explored the perception and prevalence of social expectations on African American men and women's attitudes toward academic achievement. I first present themes that support existing literature as well as augment the scholarship with new discoveries on what influences of social expectations on African American men and women. Next, I provide a comparative analysis on the prevalent themes at each institution. After doing so, I draw recommendations that might ameliorate the conditions that may negatively influence their

attitudes towards academic achievement at these two institutions. In the process of making recommendations, I also highlight best practices on each campus that elevate and propel academic achievement for each gender group.

The following themes manifested amongst the two genders in various ways at the two universities. I will first discuss the theme that varied primarily as a function of institution-type (Standard of Excellence, Failure is Not an Option). Next, I delve into the themes that varied in relation to the intersections of race, gender and institution (Endurance as a Means of Survival, Disconnect from Professors & Social Networks, Tradition of Self-Help). Finally, I will discuss the theme that arose between black women and black men (The Struggle).

    a.   Expectations

        i.   Standard of Excellence, Failure is Not an Option

The first theme that emerged across participants is the perception of a particular standard of excellence that pushed students to perform well academically. Part of this standard is a perception that "failure is not an option." Students articulated that they felt they had no choice but to excel. All four sub-groups of students shared that there were detrimental repercussions for failing at their school. I found that perceptions of both a standard of excellence and of the unacceptability of failure were most influenced by institutional context. Johnson University students spoke to defying the stereotypes held by faculty members, while Armstrong students referenced the danger of being the 'outlier' if one was not successful.

At Johnson, the need to push the standard of excellence stems from the perceived need to defy stereotypes and social stigmas. It is bred out of fear and often a sense of inadequacy. The phrase "failure is not an option" for Johnson students relates to the fear that if they fail then they

will confirm biases that they feel their campus community holds. The collective sentiment at Johnson is that the task of properly representing one's blackness sometimes felt daunting. Most of the African American men interviewed at Johnson who articulated that there were strong social expectations to excel manifested in the imperative of the need to succeed, to be a remarkable leader, and to avoid stereotypes. As my research contains multiple athletes, I found the added label of black student athlete also added another layer of the need to "manage" blackness in relation to excellence. These men expressed how the institution valued their black bodies, but not so much their black perspectives and voices.

> *As black students, [we're expected to] keep a quota and be thankful we're here. Being an athlete adds to that and we come here to play for this school and that's what we're here to do. They don't want your blackness. It was a problem last year when me and my line brother took a knee last year [for police brutality] during the national anthem. But you know, we already knew what it was. —Caleb, Senior, Johnson University*

Caleb's experience speaks to the triality of his identity: black, man, athlete. At a PWI, like Johnson, Caleb's very existence in this white space is often called into question when he attempts to voice his objection to his community's marginalization in America. While African American women at Johnson University also articulated similar attitudes, their stories paint elements of the unique experiences that black women have in white spaces, and in their own community.

> *As a black woman—can't be tired, must always be motivated without any help from anybody, must be strong. We should be passing our classes. Must be on our grind 24/7. We should be involved in our campus community. Socially, there's a sense that you must*

be overly active, good grades, respectable. Because I'm black, you almost can't be

sexually active. The African American woman here should be pure. –Mariam, Junior,

Johnson University

Sometimes, academically, professors don't expect much. They think you will fly under the

radar and you will not be one of those outstanding students who will do the best. I feel

like they expect me to be enthusiastic about everything--I already have to work twice as

hard to have half as much but the expectation to have 100% energy and drive 24|7 is

frustrating because we're human. We are expected to not go through things, but we do

like everyone else. We struggle but it's like there's an expectation for us to not have those

experiences. –Jasmine, Senior, Johnson University

Mariam and Jasmine's statements highlight how this standard of excellence manifests in black

women. They both articulate that they feel the need to be perfect, and not struggle. But though

both women acknowledge these social pressures, Jasmine perceives that her faculty and

professors do not expect her to be exceptional. As a result, she states that she has to work "twice

as hard to have half as much." While Mariam perceives that she must be exceptional. The

implications of her statement assert that the communicated messages from professor leave her

with the need to be close to perfect. This distinction between the two black women is important

because institution, gender, and race all remain constant; however, Mariam and Jasmine are in

two different academic fields. Mariam is a humanities major, studying Anthropology while

Jasmine is a STEM major, studying computer science. Historically, and presently, women in the

STEM field tend to be far more underrepresented. Jasmine is both black and a woman. She is a

double anomaly and often one of the black women in a lecture hall of fifty plus students.

I conclude that on this PWI campus, there are spaces, like STEM, that are particularly exclusionary. Resultantly, black women are not only not expected to fail, but they are often treated as caricatures. The image of strong black women who neither struggle nor experience emotions, who do not battle the reality of their position on the campus. Mariam's experience, by contrast, may be a testament to stereotypes and expectations of black women in the humanities. The humanities and the arts, particularly education, are fields that black women typically received degree in. Professors may hold the expectation that as a black woman, Mariam should do well not in response to her individual skills or abilities but because of preconceived notions of the capacity to excel. Nevertheless, both women shared how black women on white campuses feel the need to be perfect in order to either defy stereotypes of inadequacy or fulfill preconceived notions of success. For them, there is no room for error.

Teresa shares this sense of the necessity of succeeding but adds the element of peer comparison with white counterparts and affirms that the ignorance of professors is an issue in structuring their experience of expectations of excellence. She stated,

> *Social expectations—academically, pressure to succeed with flying colors…pressure to be above and beyond and push for excellence within our own community. It's not a bad thing but it's stressful. It's always a pressure to be twice as good as your white counterparts. The attitudes outside of our community is that you don't start with a base line credibility. You have to prove yourself. A lot more apparent in the business school. They're constantly maneuvering around these power dynamics between student and professor as well as ignorance that may exist on the professor's behalf. –Teresa, Sophomore, Johnson University*

In addition to feeling that there was a standard of excellence, often self-imposed based on perception that they must exceed expectations, some black women at Johnson felt that there were certain pressures from their own community. Some black women at Johnson felt frustrated by the lack of support from black men on the campus to fight for the racial cause. One black women at Johnson University also discussed social expectations from within their own of being "pure" sexually. When asked to expound on how this fit in with how this impacted her experiences at a predominantly white institution, one black woman respondent articulated that this standard around black female sexuality and purity made her feel like she needed to be "perfect." She could not fail. She could not falter. In our conversation, I sensed that this had taken a toll on her mental health, for she stated that she often felt easily "overwhelmed." Though this is the narrative of just one black woman, I found it notable to mention the aspect of mental health because of high social expectations. Both men and women at Johnson University shared stories and experiences over their collegiate careers that invariably spoke to the cost to mental health in obtaining this standard of excellence. The neglect of mental health as a common theme for black students at JU was most prominent during the discussion of what they felt the social expectations were of them. As they listed the various titles, roles, and obligations that they took on, I noticed that it was often at the expense of self-care. Julian, a senior black male at Johnson, statement capsulated this.

> *I feel like I'm always going and going and going. My Sundays are committed to student assembly. Very rarely do I have my "me" time. It's a lot to be everything to everyone. It may be a personal thing though.*

Julian's need to 'be everything to everyone' is echoed by many black students. In follow up questions when asked how they handle these expectations, most students chuckled and

acknowledged that they needed to do a better job of balancing. They also asserted that their "job was never done" at Johnson. So, though they saw this standard of excellence as having negative impacts on their mental health, the "failure is not an option" mentality driven from fear of conforming to stereotypes often propelled them to overextend themselves.

At Armstrong and Johnson, both sub-groups expressed nearly identical social expectations from their respective institutions. Black women at both schools vocalized the added pressures from black men in their campus community. Though this theme arose at both schools, they were communicated in relation to two very different emotional contexts: fear versus empowerment. At Armstrong, the motto and culture require students to embody black excellence, to strive towards greatness in everything they do. To ensure that this motto is fulfilled, the institution inserts networks and a strong sense of community within the student body and as one student described, "*initially it felt like we were a bunch of crabs trying to get to the top but then I learned when I excel then so do my classmates. We use each other to push each other forward.*" This experience captures how students at Armstrong are often empowered by their peers to excel because the culture dictates so. Whereas Johnson's culture is one embedded in fear. Black students worry about their behavior fitting into stereotypes and this distinction creates vastly different results. Black students at Armstrong view this standard as positive and thus tended to be more confident about their abilities while black students at Johnson viewed this fear-driven standard as negative. As a result, they tended to be more worried about their abilities to excel.

A theme that emerged from the Armstrong experience of the standard of excellence concerned personal appearance.

There is a standard of excellence from your appearance and beyond. You're expected to be together for all the occasions. It's not that you have to conform to being an Armstrong woman/man "stereotype" but the expectation is for the better. It's taught me that you never know who's watching and you should always look presentable. --Lynette, Junior, Armstrong University

Several African American women expressed their frustration with respectability politics in which they felt that sometimes their black male professors policed their behavior a little more harshly:

[You must] be classy and refined. You can't be loud or distasteful with your language. Black male professors look down if you curse or if you wear anything inappropriate. It can't shout attention. But the women professors tend to me more understanding with how you speak and how you dress. But at [Armstrong] there is most definitely a certain "dress code" or standard that they expect you to uphold. --Alyssa, sophomore, Armstrong University

The high social expectations at Armstrong that requires students to embody black excellence coincides with students, both male and female, feeling that they were also given the tools to succeed post-graduation. Though African American men at Armstrong did not believe that professors were invested in their academic success, generally, they did feel that there were a "handful of good ones" who "looked out" by providing them with internships, networks, and post-graduation opportunities. Armstrong is distinct in this way because the imposed social expectations align with the resources provided to the students in order for them to meet the standard of excellence. This standard of excellence supersedes academics and grades. Students as Johnson perceived a more holistic sense of both expectations and resources for black students'

success. All of Armstrong's students highlighted at least three to four professors who had been central to them obtaining an elite job, research opportunity, or connection.

Importantly, the perception of the need for excellence and the impossibility of contemplating failure is connected to perceptions of the institution's expectations. At Johnson, the need for success and to maintain this standard of excellence stems from a fear to confirming negative preexisting biases, prejudices, and behaviors; Armstrong's communicated dedication to black excellence was experienced as empowering its students. The notion at the HBCU is that students should be imbued with confidence that despite what society says; they are destined for success. The students at Armstrong often discuss feelings of anxiety if they fail to uphold the ideal of the Armstrong woman or Armstrong man. For these students, the notion that failure is not an option is tied to the premise of success as the norm. If they fail, it is their own fault and these students feel that accountability. The narrative of belonging and 'who' can be successful shapes how these students frame their own academic achievements and long-term accomplishments.

ii.   Endurance as A Means of Survival

The second theme that emerged across participants is the necessity of enduring as a means of survival, expressed consistently by students at Johnson University. This concept discusses the importance of hard work and striving towards academic excellence in spite of social barriers. I found that endurance as a means of survival manifests specifically at Johnson University, and its impact on black students is most influenced by institutional context. Students at Armstrong University do not discuss the importance of hard work in the same manner. Its manifestation will be highlighted in this section; however, greater discussion will be given with the theme entitled "The Struggle"

Some of the common attitudes from both men and women at Johnson University were:

You have to work harder to get the same results. I won't always have the same resources as my peers, not just as a race thing, here everyone is not given the same chances or resources. But my end goal drives me not my surroundings.—Michael, Senior at Johnson University

I believe in my ability to succeed here, even though it was "touch and go" for a while but I've proven to myself over time and to others that I can do it. —Rico, Junior at Johnson University

I have to demonstrate effort and sometimes work harder so that I don't come across as not trying or not caring. It pushes me to do more/work harder or at least try to.—Monica, Sophomore at Johnson University

These students all express some varying levels of self-doubt in their ability to thrive at Johnson University, sometimes because of race or gender. Black students at Johnson University often felt self-doubt about their ability to excel because of the perceived prejudices and in response to this, they worked harder and felt that they must endure through the experience.

In contrast, Armstrong University's black women's attitudes towards success is often the result of their professors' investment and influences their perception of the work they must do in order to not just survive but also thrive academically. This experience is different from the one black women at Johnson University have, in which they must strive work hard in spite of a perception of their professors' lack of investment or support. Throughout the interviews, there was an understanding that professors pushed students towards this standard of excellence. These

students did not express self-doubt and knew that working hard would pay off. Professors who saw students working to their full potential often provided these students with internships, scholarships, and opportunities without being asked. Black women, like Tiara, viewed their professors' investment as helping her achieve this standard of excellence.

> *It helps a lot to have the help, support, and investment because people assume my major is easy but it's not. We have to work hard and it helps to have that network of professors when you're struggling through it. –Tiara, Sophomore, Armstrong University*

At Armstrong, the importance of professors' investments in success varied by gender. Black men's attitudes towards success was not contingent on their professors' investment of success or lack thereof. Malik, a junior, shared the following:

> *It [investment] doesn't impact how I think about my success—sometimes a professor challenges me even when I don't feel like I'm up for it. I mean, which is cool but it's annoying while I'm in their class.*

Such a gendered differentiation in the importance of professor investment did not emerge at Johnson. Black students at Johnson and black women at Armstrong all acknowledge that their perception of their major professors' investment and social expectations shaped their perception of their ability to succeed academically. But the importance of professor investment was usually couched in a racialized understanding of how hard work was rewarded. All students surveyed at Johnson University discussed endurance as a means of survival. Their interviews revealed that this comes from a sense of displacement and "otherness." Throughout the interviews, the phrase "working twice as hard for half as much" appeared over a dozen times. This experience is much more salient for students at Johnson, the predominantly white institution. I suggest that the reason why the perception of the need to "work twice as hard for half as much" appears so often

at Johnson and not Armstrong is the ways in which whiteness comes to define (or not define) students' experience.

At Johnson University, white students are the point of comparison for black students to gauge success. Once white students are removed from the immediate picture, as at an HBCU like Armstrong, the only point of comparison or focus of success becomes one's' own group and one's institution. Thus, we can interpret the emergence of a gendered difference at Armstrong as part of the declining significance of racial difference as defining students' academic experiences. The institutional context allows us to discuss how black students conceptualize their own success when pinned against another race of students. The conclusion for students at Johnson is that they are always "behind" or "not doing as well" as their white peers. Later, I will discuss the meaning of endurance and how it manifests distinctly for Armstrong students in greater depth.

B. Resources

I. Disconnect from Professors & Social Networks

The third theme that emerged across participants is the perception of indifference, or divestment, of professors. All students at Armstrong and Johnson generally perceived that professors do not care about their academic achievement, apart from the "diamonds in the rough." However, the response to this experience varies across institution and gender. Black women at Johnson University and black men at Armstrong University both articulated that professors were not invested in their success and were less likely to utilize them as a resource. While black women at Armstrong and black men at Johnson felt that while these professors' may not be invested in their success, they were more likely to utilize them as a resource. The question arises as to why these responses vary across lines of race, gender and institution. Black women at Armstrong were in black spaces on their campus and thus felt more empowered to ask for

help. While black women at Johnson, already confronting stereotypes, implicit biases by faculty and their own biases, often felt that nothing good could come from asking for help in these white spaces. These black women worked within a double consciousness[4] and worried about perception if they were to be assertive in their pursuit for academic assistance.

When asked to elaborate on what they would hope to be different with their collegiate career, most participants at Johnson University (12 of 17) spoke of their social environment and the support networks on their campus. The remaining participants referenced their own work ethic and/or course choices. Four participants explicitly stated that they would want more inclusion and attainable resources. The "attainable resources" that these students referenced were usually professors. Specifically, these students stated that they would want their professors to check in more even if it's in "small group settings." Furthermore, some students expressed frustration with the lack of support networks during and after their undergraduate career. Alisha, a sophomore, and Malcolm, a senior, expressed these sentiments explicitly in our interview. Alisha spoke directly to the need for additional support during her undergraduate career and how having that support would make her feel.

> *Knowing that there is a professor who is going to have my back comforts and motivates me. It makes me feel like everyone is not out to correct and tear you down or manipulate you into a different type of person but instead interested in your growth and development as a student.*

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[4] W.E.B. DuBois coins this term in his book *The Souls of Black Folk.* Double consciousness is "a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warrings ideals in one dark body…" (23). This double consciousness refers to how black people understand their place in society according to white people and how they view themselves.

While Malcolm, now a senior and facing the dilemma of post-graduate options discussed how the disconnect from faculty affected him in this moment as well as his desire for additional support post-graduation.

> *I'd love more postgraduate support. Having help finding grants, jobs and clues into viable options. In a lot of ways, you literally just graduate. The school kind of drops you and doesn't give you attention for post-grad support. Particularly, if you are not on the law, business, or consulting track which is the career center's primary focus. You kind of have to figure it out on your own. But diversity is also a huge issue. —Malcolm, Senior at Johnson University*

It is evident that African American students at Johnson feel that they are alone and without help. Throughout my interviews, students—both male and female—articulated their frustrations and fears of being without faculty and social networks that were invested in not only their short-term academic success but also their long-term prosperity. Some African American students also expressed their experiences with implicit biases, prejudices, attitudes, and stereotypes without conscious knowledge, held by some faculty members about their ability to succeed. This concept appeared most prominently in interviews with students majoring the natural sciences. African American women attending Johnson articulated several instances in which implicit bias held by faculty members influenced their attitude towards their ability to achieve.

Rochelle, a senior, discussed her experience in a professor's office hours after doing poorly on a test. The professor told her "*I'm not saying that you're unintelligent but I am saying that my class is just hard and your grade on your first test suggests you probably won't do well in my class*" After this encounter, Rochelle stated that when "*I knew I wasn't passing, I kind of*

stopped. I stopped trying, [putting in] effort. I knew I couldn't go up. There was no benefit. I wasn't learning, I wasn't getting good grades. There was nothing." This experience of low expectations is one lived experience shared by black women at Johnson University. At Armstrong University, though, there were far more varied responses with regards to professors' investment in their students' success. Both African American men and women at this HBCU stated that it was a "mixture—some here to collect a check while others genuinely care"— this mixture will be significant in the later examination of themes at Armstrong University.

Black men at Armstrong often perceived their faculty members as "incompetent." They often described their work as unchallenging and expressed annoyance with the professors' divestment. As exhibited in Richard's statement,

> *For undergrad, no one really studies. Everyone kind of finesses. It wasn't stimulating. [You're] paying for a degree not knowledge. I wish professors were better selected: neither passionate or qualified. A lot of them [professors] don't have people skills. They [professors] need to not close off when you don't understand something. In higher education, we don't acknowledge that a degree doesn't determine your ability to teach. I wish professors didn't make it easy for students. --Richard, Armstrong University, Senior*

Despite the fact that black men at Armstrong and black women at Johnson share the perception that the professors were unhelpful, Black men at Armstrong do not see themselves as dependent on professor investment, unlike black women at Johnson. Rather, these men utilize an "I" centric approach to their education. I theorize that the difference here is gendered and tied to the individualism present in most constructs of black masculinity. Black masculinity is different from dominant culture masculinity as it prescribes to an additional layer of "rules" to define the racialized self. Black men attempt to navigate how they are perceived by the dominant society

while fulfilling the expectations placed upon them. In doing so, they often believe that they need to rely solely on themselves to not appear weak. Greene (2008) likens the present-day image of black masculinity to how black men perceived manhood during slavery. Manhood during slavery did not exist for black men because manhood was defined within a white context. When black male slaves became free, they sought to become like their male masters, except the notions of manhood were intensified. Black men did not only want a woman and a house but rather they wanted abundance. They were hyper-masculine (Greene 2008). White men were not perceived as needing anyone because they maintained social power and black men internalized this. Over generations, black men often veered from participating in anything that they perceived as weak-- from homosexuality to dependence on welfare.

A secondary question then arises, why does this gender difference not manifest at Johnson? I speculate two reasons are at play. First, three of the seven black men interviewed at Johnson are athletes and are provided with additional resources, advisors, and a slew of individuals invested in these men's academic success so that they remain eligible to play their respective sports. Second, the remaining male participants discussed using their professors as a resource with a sense of entitlement. They all felt that it was their right to obtain help. Two institutions produce four different responses across genders, and even within genders. Further research is required to explain what social factors allow individualism of black masculinity as opposed to male entitlement to arise at Armstrong and not at Johnson.

ii.   The Value of Friends and Family

Interestingly, we would presume that cultural attitudes would inform us to the value of friends and family but with my informants this is not the case. The experiences of black women

at Johnson does not follow the pattern of experience as it pertains to race or gender. Based on the interviews of the other black students, we would expect there to be less dependency and reliance of family. But these women have a very different experience with family relationships. When discussing majors and the decision to either alter or pursue a career path at Johnson, there was extensive emphasis on the role of parents or guardians in helping these students carve a path. Most students, regardless of gender, entered college knowing what they wanted to do either through previous exposure or parental guidance. Gender matters at Johnson when students describe the source of their guidance: black women at Johnson only cited their family as major influencers on career paths while black men often cited exposure to fields of study in high school. By contrast, at Armstrong, four out of seven African American women and three out of seven African American men argued that their professors were crucial in shaping their decision to pursue or alter their major/career path while no students at Johnson stated the same. Generally, black women and men at the HBCU did not discuss the role of family members as major influencer in their career path.

At both institutions, every student, whether male or female, discussed the vital role of their friends on their academic decisions and successes. Statements such as "friends help keep me grounded" and "we're in this together" show the importance of friend groups in their academic journey. Friends often served to provide words of encouragement and accountability for these students. Specifically at Armstrong University, African American men were more likely to emphasis the importance of peers and themselves in their support circles. This diverges from African American women at Armstrong who focus on the importance of friends, alongside professors and family. Johnson University's students, regardless of gender, discussed the need for friends in their journey towards academic success.

The distinction within the value of friends and family theme is the importance of family in shaping life decisions for black women at Johnson while one's self and professors played impactful roles for all other groups of students. This marked difference has no ready explanation from the informants themselves and deserves further research. Some clues exist in extant theories of black feminism that center on the importance of the family for black women (Patricia Hill Collins, 2000). I hypothesize that JU's black women often seek career guidance that they do not believe their friends or peers can provide and thus turn to family. In the absence of strong institutional support, black women turn to family. Black women at Armstrong have expanded their sense of black support with this larger community of support and feel that this guidance can be obtained from their professors and faculty. But this does not hold across gender as is the case for black men at Armstrong and Johnson. Black men at JU described lived experiences and prior exposure as their path deciders and did not utilize anyone around them. Armstrong's black men (3 out of 7) did describe professors as influencing their desire to either pursue or alter their major path. The other four stated that they "just figured it out." In the absence of strong institutional support, black men are unaffected in their decisions and pathways for careers. Gender and institution play overlapping and intertwining roles in this area of academic achievement for black students.

    iii.   Tradition of Self Help

In the discussion of resources, an important concept emerged: the tradition of self-help. The theme is a term adopted from an ideology embedded in the black church. The black church is a cornerstone of the black community. The notion of self-help originally stemmed from freed black slaves' desire to create institutions (universities, religious denominations, and businesses) that propelled their own people forward. This concept emerged shortly after the Freedmen's

Bureau of the 1870s, northern carpetbaggers, and Christian evangelicals came down to the south to "help" the poor blacks. The actual lack of meaningful help led black leaders in the church to decidedly reject help from well-meaning, but often racist, white people. This concept reemerged during the civil rights movement when black student organizations understood how crucial it was for them to help themselves and for them to be in the forefront of the movement instead of letting whites dominate the movement. For this paper, the tradition of self-help is defined as black students holding themselves responsible for propelling themselves forward academically by utilizing their own social networks. Within this tradition, we should expect to see a disconnect between those in positions of power and black students' internal responsibility to be responsible for self-success.

I found that every subgroup had vastly different experiences at both Armstrong and Johnson University. African American women at Johnson were less likely than their African American male counterparts to utilize their professors as a resource for help even when they were at risk of failing. Often these women cited reasons such as "fear that they would think I was stupid," "I couldn't articulate why I was struggling," and "I thought I could figure it out on my own" as to why professors were often the last option that they reached out to for help. Those African American women who did venture to their professors' office hours often had their fears confirmed. For these black women at a predominantly white institution, their perception of unhelpful faculty was sometimes confirmed and sometimes became a self-fulfilling prophecy. These women's expectations of their professors led to a distrustful attitude towards instructors that in turn created a scenario in which professors were interpreted as indifferent. While other times, African American women at Johnson who ventured to their professors' office hours often had their fears confirmed by condescending and demeaning comments.

Yes—in the beginning I was coasting. I was nervous/embarrassed to go to the professor. I prefer to get things on my own. I realized I had to buckle down and ask for help. But I didn't feel prepared for the course. Particularly because I had no background knowledge. I was right to feel this way. Professor didn't think I knew anything and that I didn't have the ability to communicate why I was confused. – Rachel, sophomore at Johnson University

My department shaped my perception of my ability to succeed. Prior to changing my major, I thought I couldn't prosper here, particularly with how things were taught and how professors treated students. One professor said, "I don't think you're unintelligent--I just think it's a hard course." He never offered any real help or invited me to his office. – Jennifer, senior at Johnson University

Yes, I could go to office hours but the lack of support in the department and from prior professors taught me to rely on myself. I usually ask myself "how can I fix this?— Rochelle, junior at Johnson University

Professors' office hours were always very unhelpful. I didn't pass the class because of the way the teacher taught. [They] catered to people who clicks easily. Students who learn by doing, and who needed guided help, you were at a loss. The teaching style didn't help. When I knew I wasn't passing, I kind of stop[ed]. I stopped trying, effort. I knew I couldn't go up. There was no benefit. I wasn't learning, I wasn't getting good grades. – Bella, senior at Johnson University

I'm not the type to talk to professors. [I] fear that they don't understand me. –Shelly,

sophomore, Johnson University

 In the absence of institutional support, most women at Johnson would later elaborate on the use of self-discipline and the focus on late nights studying to accomplish their goals. These instances reaffirmed for these African American women at Johnson University that they should rely on themselves for assistance, despite feelings of despair or frustration. Black women who did not consider their professor's office hours a resource also articulated that most of their success stemmed from hard work, peers, and utilizing outside sources. None of the African American men cited the same for their success. African American men would also often mention one or two "diamond in the rough" professors who made them feel supported, a sentiment not shared by black women at Johnson. Both groups at Johnson who used peers as a resource found them helpful.

 Despite this firm tradition of self-help most present in African American women at Johnson University, they were more likely than their African American male counterparts to be satisfied with their academic collegiate career (8 out of 9 and 6 out of 8 respectively). Black men at Johnson University were less likely to be influenced by the tradition of self-help as evident in their behavior and engagement with faculty and staff despite the perception that some of these faculty members have minimal investment.

I used office hours the most [to take my challenging class]. Japanese was hard. But going

to the professor's office hours, you get to know them and now you're not just another

student in their class. – Michael, senior, Johnson University

The above quote is one instance of black men at JU relying on their professors. Michael is an athlete and describes his professors and advisors as very invested, though he does acknowledge that this is not common. Similarly, Rashaad articulates that he utilizes a similar method to pass his Accounting class. The professor's office hours were his greatest resource in spite of disclosing earlier in the interview that the professors in his department have "*absolutely no investment. The professors pride themselves in the investment they put into their students but aren't invested in what I do with this knowledge or information. For instance, post-graduation. They care about immediate results but there is no genuine investment that extends beyond their class.*"

When asked to articulate how professors made you feel like they were invested, students continually cited these characteristics: "willingness to ensure you are understanding, whether it's slowing down or office hours," "acts of care [which include] getting to know you on a personal level, attempting to develop actual relationships, helping me formulate academic plans, working with me to establish I can do well" and "checking on my personal well-being." These faculty members who were cited as invested in student success were minorities 8 out of 10 times. Encouraging statements such as "I need you to be better than me; I need you to go out and do great things" often made these students feel like success was a possibility.

Alternatively, at Armstrong University when asked the same questions I found that African American men (6 out of 7 respondents) were more likely to rely on view their professors' negatively and rely on their peers for help. This is apparent when Marcus, a junior at Armstrong University explained that he relied mostly on himself.

> *To be very honest—it doesn't matter about the [professor's] support. I'm very intrinsically motivated. They give the information but I don't really use them as a resource because a lot of them are either not qualified or not passionate. The rest just*

don't have people skills. I know that I can finesse and do the work myself. If I think I need
help, I'll use my peers but no, I don't really need anyone else--Marcus, junior at
Armstrong University

By contrast, African American women were likely to perceive their professors positively (9 out of 9). However, African American women at Armstrong perceived this level support as uncommon at their university. For them, the amount of investment received by their faculty was perceived as unique to them. The women at Armstrong expressed stronger groups of support and a distinct determination in "being the best." This notion of being the best may stem from the fact that there are far more women on Armstrong's campus and the competitiveness, per one participant, can be "real." Overall, it appeared that men at Armstrong felt they had weaker support systems than their women counterparts. During the interviews, I was not able to pin down an explicit why; but as discussed above, men at Armstrong seem to perceive a certain entitlement to success. While professors were utilized by both sub-groups (to varying extents) at Armstrong, it is important to acknowledge that the tradition of self-help is not any less prominent particularly because at least 85% of all Armstrong professors are either black or are people of color. Thus, it is likely that these students perceived these faculty members as part of their tribe or network.

There is an interesting overlap in response between African American women at Armstrong and Johnson. Both groups, when asked how they were able to pass their challenging courses, had majority of responses include "grace of God" or "blood, sweat, and tears" (5 out of 9 at Johnson and 4 out of 7 at Armstrong). Two interesting notes must be made. First, though black women at Armstrong utilized their faculty members there was still a strong sense of responsibility for their own education and outcomes. Several women stated that "there are plenty of internships and opportunities to do well but you have to want it." In addition, these

colloquialisms that appear in black women's responses suggests that there is a way in which black women process their experiences. Black women have a 'I got through it because I had to' mentality that did not appear in black men's interviews. When faced with a challenging course, men at Armstrong occasionally stated that they would cheat if they needed to pass. Black women tended to focus on endurance and no women mentioned cheating at either university.

During my own investigation, as it pertains to utilizing campus resources, Johnson University had substantial resources for its students including a Writing Resource Center, a tutor zone, and peer advisors, while Armstrong did not have the same amount of resources. There was a tutoring system that two students stated that they used and "found helpful" but when asked what existed all four sub-groups were mostly unaware of, or uninterested in, these resources. These students lack knowledge, or lack of use of, campus resources relates to the concept of self-help. Black women at Johnson utilized their peers and self heavily as a response to a lack of resource. Like the black women at Armstrong, they built strong social networks amongst themselves and with others in their class. Most interesting is that although these women at Armstrong articulate that professors as a major resource, they only describe self-reliance when referring to how they succeed. Who these women say they rely on versus who they actually rely on in practice greatly differs. Black women at Armstrong thrived academically with the knowledge that help was attainable if needed. Black women at Johnson also focused on self-reliance; but often also described feelings of anxiety and depression connected to their academic workload. As discussed above, black women at both institutions felt a strong sense of responsibility for their own academic achievement.

This response is decidedly gendered. Black men at Armstrong relied on themselves and described no additional resources while black men at Johnson described relying on professors.

Unlike black women at Armstrong, who men say they rely on and who they rely on in practice aligns. When discussing difficult classes, the use of professors was repeatedly mentioned. Black men across institutions responded similarly to their experiences and they felt their academics reflected the amount, or lack, of support they received. The varied responses are dependent upon interconnected factors. Institutional context, race, and gender influence the perception of resources these students have access to.

C. The Struggle

At Armstrong, there was a unique experience and theme did not exist at Johnson: "the struggle." The struggle, for the purpose of this paper, is defined as a unique series of challenges that persist throughout Armstrong students' undergraduate years. Throughout the interviews, I learned that Armstrong as an institution had its difficulties and challenges. As a historically black college, it is distinct by its very existence. While I conducted my interviews, Armstrong was undergoing internal distress. There were various social and financial issues that arose and were being addressed at a town hall meeting with their administration. Because these issues were pressing and at the forefront of many of my interviewees' minds, some distinct characteristics of Armstrong's social environment were highlighted. Students described the "Armstrong Runaround" with the financial aid office, the lack of transparency of fund allocation from the administration, the dated campus resources, the overworked and overstretched faculty members, and the poor food options.

Through the discussion of these topics, students' perceptions of Armstrong's culture emphasize two things: students are broken down to be built back up and the importance of strong community. When asked to describe their first impression of Armstrong and their thoughts on their freshman year, many expressed that they were overwhelmed by this standard of excellence

and did not feel like they fit in. By struggling and learning the "catch-22s," they developed resiliency. Brad, a senior at Armstrong, highlights this concept during his interview:

You learn how to "finesse." "The Armstrong Runaround" [happens because] departments are intricately involved with one another. For an override, you have to run across campus to get into classes. I get into the class, do well, and then a professor enter a wrong grade at the end of the semester. My scholarship money was taken away and it took me five weeks to get back into school. In the meantime, I wasn't allowed in the doors [Armstrong campus] because my aid was taken away and I technically hadn't paid for my room.

For Brad to get back onto campus, the professor had to alter the grade after the semester ended; however, as he was technically no longer an active student, he said that he was being sent to different offices and the hassle became frustrating. He was receiving the "runaround." But to be an active student in good standing, he had to have the professor change his grade. This back and forth is one instance of The Armstrong Runaround that Brad describes as both frustrating and a part of his school.

This is like "Endurance as a Means of Survival" at Johnson except the implications and results are vastly different. Black women at Armstrong perceived these experiences as necessary to becoming the best and more appreciative of the "struggle" while black men at Armstrong expressed annoyance at and frustration with the system. Through my conversations with these students, the "struggle" is best described as the continual difficulties and challenges faced by Armstrong students that both unify and define their experience at their institution. Both groups coped differently with these social expectations. The difference in responses to their plight appears to be a result of gender entitlement. Black women feel that they need to go through the

struggle to become stronger and more prepared whereas black men felt a sense of entitlement. They viewed these struggles as barriers that stopped them from doing what they needed to. The language used by black men surrounding their "struggles" denoted feelings of their experience burdening them. These struggles influenced the narrative of individual academic struggle by adding a layer of challenges to the students' daily lives. As students navigate college life at Armstrong, they also encounter institutional problems that contribute to their anxiety that they may not overcome all that is hurled at them and become successful.

V. Conclusion

a. Summary: The Relationship Between Expectations to Academic Achievement at Johnson and Armstrong University

After months of studying transcriptions, participants, and the two institution's cultures, black women at Johnson University were the only group that were academically hindered by social expectations. Though black men at Johnson also expressed similar social expectations, none of the men failed any courses nor changed their majors as a result of their perceptions. Three African American women at Johnson did. In this manner, institutional context greatly impacted not only how black women perceived social expectations, but also how they internalized their academic achievements. While at Armstrong, social expectations propelled both groups to excel academically. No one expressed anxiety or feelings of being overwhelmed

because of the social pressure to excel. Both groups of black men felt less connected to social networks of their peers and were more likely to feel confident about their academic success. In this manner gender and race matter far more. Black women were more likely to perceive academic and social challenges as necessary experiences in their undergraduate career. For black women, the struggle was crucial to their existence in higher education while black men viewed it as a hindrance. This gendered response shows the importance of studying academic achievement along lines of race, gender, and institution.

Black women at Johnson were more likely to perceive themselves as not doing well and not measuring up to their white counterparts, even though their GPAs suggested otherwise. The overall undergraduate average at Johnson University was 3.404. The average GPA for the black women interviewed was roughly 3.28. While the black men interviewed at Johnson were more likely to perceive themselves as doing "alright" or mostly comparable to their white counterparts, their GPA average was roughly 3.16. As previously discussed, black students are constantly comparing themselves to each other and to their white peers. The self-reported GPAs show that black students do lag behind their peers; however, I hypothesize that this difference of perception of success stems from how black men at Johnson formulate their career paths. As previously discussed, black men came into college with exposure and knowledge of their career paths. Thus, knowing what is required of them to achieve these goals prior to entering college affects how they perceive their academics. For these black men, they may be on par for their majors. Black women did not articulate similar experiences. At Armstrong University, both groups interpreted themselves as successful. Black women held a 3.60 average GPA and their male counterparts had a 3.47 average GPA.

B. Limitations of the Study

This study contains four major limitations. One limitation was the pool of participants that were included in this study. Though extensive measures were utilized to reach out to the entire African American population on both campuses, in the end some of the participants agreed to interview based on our previously established relationship. In other words, these participants sat down to be interviewed because they knew me and sought to assist me in completing this project. Thus, this engenders a unique challenge to my research. The second limitation was a result of the first. Because some of the participants knew me prior to our interview, this may have skewed their responses to my questions. Thirdly, though every interview was transcribed, I recognize and acknowledge that I am not exempt from filtering others' views through my own perception or perspective. The final limitation was that not all interviews were able to be collected in person. Because of scheduling or time restrictions some interviews (two at Johnson University; five at Armstrong University were collected through Skype or phone calls. The utility of these results may vary slightly as these students were either not aware of my race and may have responded in a manner that reflected some uncertainty in my ability to comprehend their experiences. Alternatively, these interviews may have more unbiased responses as they were not able to form perceptions based on appearance.

VI. Discussion & Findings

This section will discuss the implications for the study's finding and provide policy recommendations. I acknowledge that my findings are restrictive to top-tiered universities and the lived experiences cannot be generalized to all HBCUs nor to all PWIs. However, I hope that in highlighting the strengths and deficiencies at both types of institutions for the two gender groups, I have illuminated the need for the following policy recommendations. Scant research exists that connects undergraduate social expectations and attitudes about one's academic

achievement to post graduation outcomes and job placement. However, a study by Cerri Banks (2009) explores cultural capital and college success of black women. Banks found that achievement and resilience were factors for collegiate success for black women. But the study does not probe further. Thus, additional research is needed in order to draw conclusive statements about the relationship between the three variables, but I hypothesize that those black women at Johnson University with weaker social networks and a lower sense of self-success will tend to "low-ball" themselves when applying to jobs and graduate programs. The social expectations of Armstrong University lead to a false sense of comfort in which students often do not feel that they need to work hard because these professors "want me to succeed." This is not inherently bad however. Overall, there are areas of improvement for both schools to nurture the needs of the four sub-groups which I have detailed below.

C. Policy Recommendations

I. <u>Recommendations for Johnson University</u>

<u>Issue:</u> Black women at Johnson University often described feeling that professors lacked investment in their learning and academic growth. The disconnect from faculty members often stem from the perception of biases and microaggressions

A. **Solution:** Faculty Development

Institutions, such as Texas A&M University-San Antonio, requires that its faculty and staff participate in cultural competency training to better engage with their students. Mandating this program will assist with the social and cultural barriers between black women and their instructors

This initiative has the potential to be effective under the following conditions: The institution must be willing to incentivize professors and faculty to develop meaningful relationship with

students and maintain mentorship with students by using it as a prerequisite for the tenure track. The tenure track should not solely be based upon a professors' academic record and research. A component of tenure track requirements should include the professors' track record with the success of their students (factors should include GPA, graduation rate, and student development—ensuring access to opportunities such as study abroad and internships)

B. Solution: Expand the Athletic Model of Academic Support

Throughout the paper, black men at Johnson University who were athletes spoke to the support they received as a result of playing for the school. Black men and black women should receive academic advisors who focus on the student's timely graduation, links students to academic resources (i.e.: tutoring, etc.). The current model at Johnson for academic advising links students to faculty members in their sophomore year as they declare their major. However, this model is ineffective as often one of three scenarios play out:

- The preconceived biases lead black women to randomly select a major advisor to sign off on paperwork, and she does not engage further with the professor after the initial meeting

- The black woman (or faculty member) attempts to maintain an engaging relationship, but because the student's interests do not align with the professor's research interests the relationship often does not stick.

- Black women do select a professor who attempts to meet regularly and demonstrates investment. But according to some black women interviewees well-meaning advisors often impose their own microaggressions about the student's potential to succeed in the field and does not offer them the same opportunities. This sentiment was expressed repeatedly for the STEM field.

Issue: Similarly to professor disconnect, Johnson University boasts about its small student-to-professor ratio but there are no meaningful connections between the two groups. Black men and black women both discuss the lack of meaningful connections between their professors. Even if they felt that they did extremely well in a course, they did not feel that they could reach back out to their professor for recommendations or internship opportunities.

    A. **Solution:** Train faculty and professors in effective communication, listening, and teaching styles

    B. **Solution**: Focus Groups.

The institution should conduct focus groups for black women and black men separately to explore further how the divide between faculty and students could be reduced--particularly across lines of culture and race. I recommend the interviewers be professors of color in order to minimize feelings of intimidation or reluctance to fully disclose. This recommendation stands with a caveat however: professors of color should be properly compensated for their work. This data collection on behalf of the institution should be a part of larger effort at Johnson University to match diversity rhetoric with action and financial backing.

Issue: African American men and women at Johnson University (JU) articulated the stress of biases and feeling disconnected from social networks, often with no direction for post-graduation options.

    A. Solution: Broadening Social Networks

JU should connect its undergraduate students to three to five alumni within their field after students declare their major their sophomore year through a matching program. Alumni can elect to participate or not.

II.   Recommendations for Armstrong University

Issue: African American men often expressed frustration with not feeling challenged in their academics.

    A. Solution: Rebalancing Academics

 While still maintaining the culture of support, provide a more rigorous workload and require intelligent stimulation with more discussion based courses, even in STEM.

Issue: African American women at Armstrong expressed empathy and men expressed frustration at the amount of work that their professors and faculty had. They argued that it often led to them not having time for office hours and not always able to give their students' the attention they needed.

    A. Solution: Redistributing Faculty Workload:

- Hiring more faculty and redistributing the amount of work (number of lectures, etc.) assigned.
- African American students did not feel that they had access to strong academic resources like a writing center to help students develop writing skills

    B. Solution: Increase Campus Resources.

Invest in academic resources and market it to freshman.

III.   Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

    Issue: Black students at both the PWI, Johnson University, and the HBCU, Armstrong University, gave gendered responses to one category: struggle. The concept of struggle-- the continuous battle towards success is often perceived as necessary and important to black women while black men saw it as a burden. The difference becomes relevant when

evaluating how these groups cope with academic failure and hard work. For black women, the appearance of support in their academic environment either makes or breaks their attitude towards academic success

A. **Solution:** Create, and ensure the longevity of, environments for black women that make them feel empowered and supported. This goes beyond adjusting the culture of disinterested faculty members in higher education. The solution suggests that it would be beneficial for higher education institutions to develop networks for black women that extend beyond their immediate circles, which supports and nurtures their academic growth. For instance, Georgia Institute of Technology has a Center for the Study of Women, Science and Technology (WST). Its mission is to "promote the recruitment, retention, and advancement of female students and faculty in science, technology, engineering and, math (STEM) fields" Higher Education Institutions should utilize this model and create Centers for the Advancement of Black Women at their respective universities and across institution types to further broaden their sphere of support network.

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Appendix A:

Scripted Message Sent to Virtual Group Messages, Faculty at Armstrong University, and to NPHC President

"Good Afternoon [Person(s) Name],

I trust all is well with everyone. I'm a senior at the College of William and Mary conducting research for my Honors Thesis. I am conducting interviews as part of a research study to increase our understanding of the retainment factors of African American men and women on a HBCU campus versus a PWI campus. The interview takes around 30 minutes and is informal. We are simply trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives of being a student at Historically Black College & University. Your participation will be a valuable addition to my research findings and if you are willing to participate please email at dnbright@email.wm.edu. Thanks!

Warm Regards,

Dara Bright"

Appendix B

<u>Interview Questions</u>

- Are you satisfied with your academic collegiate career?
  - Why?
  - What would you hope to be different?
- What are you hoping to major in/what are you majoring in?
  - Why? How did you come to this conclusion?
  - What is your perception of your major professors' investment in your success? (Success: graduation, passing GPA, etc.)
  - Do you feel supported in your endeavors on your campus?
  - Who makes you feel supported?
    - Are there any individuals on your campus who shaped your decisions to either pursue or alter your major/career path?
  - Do you feel that there are professors invested in you doing well?
  - What have they done to show this? Or not show this?
  - Do you feel like that is common at your university?
    - How does that shape your perception of your ability to succeed academically?
- Do you think the type of university you chose has made a difference in how you are supported?
- Have you ever had a challenging class?
  - Did you pass it?
    - If not, why don't you think so?
    - If so, how did you pass it?
- Does your campus provide resources to help you maintain passing grades? (D+ and above)
  - What resources are these?
  - Did you have helpful resources/professors/instructors/mentors to assist you in taking on this course?
- Social expectations?
  - Do you think it is harder for a woman/man to succeed in college?
- what are you involved in on campus?
- `why?
- describe your first impression of Hampton your first year?
- was there a culture shift from your hometown?
- what made you choose an HBCU?
- how did you adjust?

Appendix C: DEBRIEFING FORM

Thank you for participating in our study. Please feel to ask us any questions regarding the study, at any time. Do you have any questions for us now?

If you have questions or concerns later, you can reach us with the contact information provided below.

Dara N. Bright
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757-221-2041

Please remember, you have the right to rescind your permission for us to use your data in our study. You have the right to change your mind about having your name associated with summaries and reports involving your interview. You may obtain a copy of the research results. All you would need to do is contact Dara Bright or Dr. Claire McKinney and let us know.

If our procedures have triggered unpleasant feelings for you, or if you are experiencing distress and would like to talk to a counselor or therapist, you may seek assistance from the following services:

Signature: _____

Name (please print): _____

Date: _____