2017

Retaining Black Female College Students: The Effects of Meritocracy on Their Ideas of Success

Tiffany Steele
Ohio State University - Main Campus

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/csal

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Retaining Black Female College Students: The Effects of Meritocracy on Their Ideas of Success

Tiffany Steele, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH

The idea of merit-based education has plagued institutions of higher education for a substantial amount of time. The notion that ability, talent, and effort ultimately determine the success of an individual perpetuates the false ideology of all people have equal opportunities at success. In terms of education, using a merit-based lens magnifies the oppression of marginalized student groups specifically, Black female college students. Through a synthesis of the current literature, intersections between the use of merit in education, defining academic collegiate success and Black female students in higher education were discussed to explore the potential influence meritocracy has on how Black female college student define collegiate success. At the conclusion of the article, recommendations are shared on ways to support marginalized students in merit-based environments based on prior research.

Keywords: Black female, college students, meritocracy, student success

When thinking about higher education in America, the most prestigious institutions have usually been determined using a ranking system called the Carnegie classification. As education has developed and student populations have grown, so have the needs and expectations placed on colleges and universities. It is important now more than ever for institutions to attract and meet the needs of majority college students to stay competitive amongst all variations of higher education accessible to date. Once students are recruited and begin classes, a new race begins to prove the success of the institution through various percentages such as retention rates, graduation rates, completion rates, institutional diversity, and many other categories to be displayed on sites such as *US News World and Report* or *Times Higher Education*. However, the origin of these measurements and what they actually mean are both still ambiguous. When exploring the definitions of these rates at various institutions, it is clear that most colleges and universities have their own idea of what they are measuring and how to measure it (Hagedorn, 2012). Although there are clear discrepancies in the ways in which society ranks the success of our institutions, these rankings are still used to hold many institutional types to a different standard because of their legacy of prestige. This legacy of prestige can seem racially motivated when examining the exclusive group of students who are most likely to be considered for admissions. This exclusive group of students typically consists of White, affluent students, as they are the largest student population in

colleges and universities across the country. Ultimately, the exclusivity diminishes the access of marginalized groups based on the false idea of merit in gaining an education.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the current usage of merit in education magnifies the oppression of marginalized student groups, specifically Black female college students by the perpetuation of rewarding the privileged students based on inequitable educational standards amongst the two populations. In addition, the paper will investigate how the definition and characteristics of merit can possibly influence how Black female college students define collegiate success. Through a synthesis of the current literature, three areas will be discussed: a) the use of merit in education, b) the definition of academic collegiate success and c) the influence of meritocracy on Black female students in higher education. To conclude, intersections between these three areas will be explored. Recommendations will be provided to discuss ways to support overall marginalized student populations and, more specifically, Black female college students in a system of higher education dominated by merit used to oppress their marginalized identities.

Use of Merit in Education

Merit has multiple definitions but when used in education it is typically centered around being rewarded for talent, ability, and effort. The ideology of meritocracy asserts that, regardless of social positions, economic class, gender, race, or culture, everyone has an equal chance at becoming "successful" based purely on individual merit and hard work" (Au, 2016, p. 46). Young's (1958) equation for merit, $M = I + E$, distinctly defines merit as the sum of natural ability combined with effort. This definition is the quintessential description of "the American Dream." The idea of individuals thriving based on privileges earned ring through the halls of impoverished school districts with barely enough resources to educate each child within the school system (Baez, 2006). "Day after day students' performance in the classroom are then converted into their educational worth and ability to succeed. However, their educational *worth* ultimately represents the *value* of the schools or districts they inhabit. The need to prove one's talent, ability, and effort leads to a monetary benefit that can make or break a school's existence. The pressure to perform, established at an early age, follows students well into their high school experiences and impacts their collegiate futures. An example of merit in action can be viewed in the use of standardized testing throughout elementary to collegiate entrance examinations.

Standardized tests have been used for years within school systems, especially public, to determine the amount of funding they are eligible for and essentially the value of the school itself. No matter the district, student population, teachers, or educational resources, schools within the same districts receive the same test. Using the idea of merit as a framework, students who or school districts that perform poorly hold the sole responsibility of failing if they do not reach a certain score that is deemed acceptable (Au, 2016). Since historically impoverished areas typically receive less support educationally, their test scores suffer due to their lack of resources but acute pressure of "teaching to the test." Low test scores and the educational failure of the working class and children of color are then due to their own deficiencies such as lack of hard work or lack of grit (Au,

2016). Therefore, social stratification of individuals and institution is accomplished through usage of standardized testing as the scores are viewed as evidence of merit (Baez, 2006).

Although research has been shown that this form of testing is biased based on stereotype threat experienced by marginalized students, standardized tests are still used to this day to not only determine funding eligibility but also educational opportunities for prospective college students. Stereotype threat can be defined as the potential fear members of negatively stereotyped groups have of being reduced to or confirming any preconceived negative notions readily associated to the particular group they occupy (Steele, 1997). For example, Walton and Spencer (2009) discovered through the meta-analysis of a sampling of 18,976 students that when stereotype threat is reduced, students who typically experience stereotype threat outperform nonstereotyped students. Therefore, when demographic characteristics that can present privilege or challenge, such as race, are removed, the educational playing field becomes more equitable allowing for all students to prove their innate potential. More studies confirm that even when controlling for factors such as the college selection processes based only on test scores, a student's ethnicity and social class display a large indication where the student ends up (Mijs, 2016). These indications are represented in the college enrollment statistics of 2016 in which minority students such as Black or Hispanic enrolled into two year colleges at higher rates than Asian and White students or higher rates of no degree attainment at the end of the projected sixth year of diploma or degree completion (Shapiro et al., 2017). Overall, tests commonly used to equate intellectual ability systematically underestimate the academic potential of negatively stereotyped individuals and perpetuate oppression, particularly for those who are racial minorities (Walton, Spencer, & Erman, 2013).

When looking at the research based on the experience of Black women in college, it is possible to identify the ways in which merit can impact their educational journey. Although their development will be discussed in greater detail, undergraduate Black women are socialized by their surroundings and familial structure in defining themselves as women (Porter, 2016). Therefore, since it is possible that the composition of an institution (i.e., mission, characteristics, and climate) influences the self-concepts and experience of Black women in college, institutional values should be examined by higher education researchers of student success (Zamani, 2003). If institutions of higher education are grounded in the ideology of merit, natural ability and effort, hard work only, and achievement, then these factors can influence the way Black women see themselves and make meaning of their capabilities in college due to the influence of their surroundings. The ideal traits of a meritocratic woman in today's society; sensitivity, friendliness, cooperativeness, and loyalty (Mijs, 2016), out right conflate with negative stereotypes held about Black women being considered aggressive, loud, stand-offish, and unwelcoming. When placed in an environment that portrays an individual as the opposite of what is valued and what is deemed standard, a person may be forced to disassociate from their personal beliefs to assimilate to their surroundings, including the way they define attributes of their success.

Definition of Academic Collegiate Success

When measuring success, there may be many ways in which collegiate success is studied. These definitions in terms of institutions usually consist of measures of retention, persistence, and graduation rates within the span of six years. However, research focused on the ways students define success in college can be categorized in a more complex matter. For example, when students were asked to explain what they viewed as success in their transition to their first year of college, three themes emerged: good grades, social integration and the ability to navigate the college environment (Yzaedjian, Toews, Sevin, & Purswell, 2008). Good grades represented the need to pass classes to do well academically and persist towards graduation. Social integration described the relationships students developed with their peers and how well the felt they "fit" or belonged to their campus community. Last, the ability to navigate the campus noted a level of comfort with the surrounding environment, which could help students build confidence in their belonging to the institution. However, the sample used to conduct the study was more representative of Hispanic students, 41% of the sample, and White students, 36% of the sample (Yzaedjian et al., 2008). Some researchers of college student success may argue that the idea of success may have a different meaning for other minoritized student populations.

Vincent Tinto (1987) created his original model of student college departure based on a student's ability to disengage from prior beliefs and fully assimilate to their new collegiate surroundings. Student success is said to be predicted when evaluating a student's ability to integrate both academically and socially to their surrounding campus during their first year (Tinto, 1987). Although these findings support the importance of Tinto's (1987) student departure theory, they lack the ability to account for cultural factors that impact success for minoritized students. As mentioned by Guiffrida (2006), Tinto's past model needed revisions to include an element of cultural sensitivity as some minoritized students may be more reliant on cultural traditions and familial relationships as a means of external support during their collegiate experience in comparison to majority students. Most data when shared about student success are rarely disaggregated to explore the experiences of these students, leaving the dominant population's experience to represent the experience of all students. Still, minoritized students or low-income students may experience college differently since traditional U.S. values centered on the importance of hard work to change your inherent life circumstances play a more crucial role in shaping how they view success (Sullivan, 2005). The traditional values these students are taught do not always reflect their lived experiences and circumstances, therefore, when looking at Black women in college as minoritized students, they need to be given an opportunity to create their own definitions of collegiate success that are relevant to their lives and not tainted by the dominant narrative. The standards of success they are held to were not made for them to attain and as a result, these standards will never truly encompass their compatibilities unless they are shifted.

Influence of Meritocracy on Black Female College Students in Higher Education

Black women are successful in reaching the realm of higher education, specifically in comparison to their Black male counterparts who they outnumber population wise (Cuyjet, 2006). Although this accomplishment is significant when considering the educational history of Black people in America, Black women are still behind in terms of completion of college in comparison to their Asian, Hispanic, and White female counterparts. As of 2016, 42% of Black women completed their college education in comparison to 50% of Hispanic women, 66% of White women, and 69% of Asian women (Shapiro et al., 2017). Aside from their preparation for college in elementary and high school, other factors can impede the success of Black women. As individuals with two severely marginalized identities, being a woman and being Black, Black female students are often invisible in college and university settings (Zamani, 2003). Black women are, therefore, a considerably rare population studied within higher education contexts. Due to such success as mentioned earlier, a false narrative is created about Black women in college in which, as a student population, an assumption is made that these women are a monolithic group with no detrimental issues that need further exploration. However, Black women have very unique and sometimes troubling experiences when placed in the college environment, including within-group issues.

Past research on Black women in college placed this student population in a one-size-fits-all framework of the entire Black community ignoring the within-group difference that affects them (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Most of the current research on Black female college students has been done by Black female professors. Topics of their research include sharing the narratives of Black female students, discussing their unique identity development, addressing issues commonly ignored by dominant culture for this group, and contributing positive outlooks and findings to prior research on the topic of the Black female experience in education. For example, Porter (2016) developed a revised version of her original model of identity development in Black undergraduate women to serve as a point of reference when exploring the experiences and supporting Black female undergraduate students. The model consists of key assumptions: personal foundations, pre-collegiate socialization, collegiate socialization and articulation of identity, that inform the development of Black undergraduate women in conjunction with the importance of role modeling, influences of media and the constant intersecting identities of being both a woman and Black (Porter, 2016). This model is important to consider when evaluating how Black female students define success and what factors contribute to the development of their definitions such as the personal foundations they developed and the socialization processes experienced. Examples of attributes within these personal foundations and socializations are familial influence or self-identifying as emotionally strong. It is important to explore if Black female college students incorporate these ideas into factors that contribute to how they define success.

When reviewing the literature on Black women in college and their success, much of it is attributed to individual factors rather than considering the role an institution can play in supporting or hindering this success (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Most of the

research follows the ideological perspective of merit in which a deficit approach is taken to discuss what Black women are not doing to be more successful. Some researchers argue, based on the idea of individually created success, that it would be more beneficial and empowering to challenge this student population to take control of their success in college, however, Black female college students are expected to meet the unspoken educational "standard" and not encouraged to defy it. With psychological factors such as academic self-concept for Black women being influenced by facets such as institutional racism, their experiences as marginalized individuals within higher education reinforces the development of negative self-image (Thomas, Love, Roan-Belle, Tyler, Brown, & Garriott, 2009). Therefore, positive identity development for Black women can be impacted based on the composition of an institution. However, it is said that a sense of belonging can never exist for Black women on a college campus because there is no common personal or cultural fit between them and the dominant culture, possibly hindering their success (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Finally, most current studies focused on exploring the success of Black female college student success generalize the experience of all Black women. Instead of exploring other contributors to identity such as social class or sexual orientation, current research has difficulty acknowledging within-group issues and intersections of other identities besides race and gender that can impact the ways in which one defines themselves as successful.

Synthesis

After discussing the three topics separately; the use of merit, the definition of academic collegiate success and the influence of meritocracy on Black women in higher education, it is important to highlight the common thread between them and the connection that brings us closer to answering the question: Does the use of merit in education impact the ways in which Black female college students define success? Through reviewing research and my own personal experience as Black woman in college, I would argue that it does. The idea of merit based education, awards, recognition and so forth have been instilled in children as important for a very long time. Specifically, during my experience in the public school system, students were awarded for doing well on standardized tests that contributed to the funding of the school because (a) they wanted us to continue to do well on these tests since they happened consistently and (b) based on the circumstance of being Black children from Detroit, it was expected for us to fail. Students were taught to be the exception and to work hard in order to be successful while being completely unaware of the societal and cultural factors at play, hindering our educational access to resources.

So, when discussing the existence of merit in education, one must also discuss how it conflates with social and cultural factors that influence the development of students. Particularly for Black women and their development, familial influence and socialization are important. In Porter's (2016) articulation of identity in Black undergraduate women, many of the students in her study describe family members pouring into them the idea of being strong-willed, responsible, hard-working, and a responsibility to take care of others that led to the formation of their identities. The underlying message of merit is to promote the idea of hard-work and stimulate effort in

order to succeed (Mijs, 2016). If this is true, is it too much to argue that merit could potentially reinforce the messaging Black women in college receive culturally on being successful? Of course, future research needs to be conducted in a way to actually measure the possible influence of merit on success amongst this student population. However, I believe that Black women in college are unknowingly ascribing to the ideas of merit because they reflect some of their own ideologies and beliefs.

Overall, the usage of meritocracy in education can influence injustice and educational inequity for marginalized students, specifically Black women in college. The oppressive nature of the idea of merit that attributes failure to those who do not succeed can be detrimental to the development of one's self-concept. The effects of merit in education in addition to most collegiate environments where Black women are not valued together can create a negative experience for Black women in higher education. For these reasons, there must be ways for post-secondary institutions and even elementary and secondary institutions to accommodate their Black female students. Some merit scholars have suggested various ways to alleviate the pressure of merit in education.

Recommendations

Within the synthesis of research on meritocracy in education and experiences of Black female college students, two areas for recommendation emerged: rethinking standardized testing and the presence of affirming spaces on college campuses.

Rethinking Standardized Testing

One recommendation is to eliminate them completely or offer new test-optional preferences with alternatives when the presence of a standardized test results can influence things such as admissions. Baez (2006) notes that individuals should reject their meritorious urges of proving their worth and value through educational means such as standardized assessments to evoke change within our educational system. However, there is much conflict around this idea based on the monetary value standardized tests have and how embedded they are in the educational system. Although test scores are not the sole factor for admissions to elite schools they remain the most important criterion for admission to selective colleges and universities (Baez, 2006). It would be hard to get full support on demolishing standardized tests but the impact could be beneficial for marginalized populations that lack the capital to succeed on those tests and within those testing environments. In relation to this recommendation, many researchers acknowledge the difficulties of eliminating standardized tests, as they are not always regulated by colleges and universities, and discuss ways to change environments into more student affirming spaces instead.

The Presence of Affirming Spaces on College Campuses

The idea of removing psychological threats from school and testing environments sounds daunting but there are many feasible steps possible to achieve this goal. First,

students need to feel welcomed in their educational environment, both children and college-aged students. Creating an environment where students are valued and affirmed helps remove doubtful thoughts that hinder performance in both school and on standardized tests. Creating a sense of belonging for students who marginalized in most of their environments can make a difference in performance, identity development, and overall self-concept (Strayhorn, 2012). These recommendations, however, can only be successful if those in power or positions of influence reflect on their actions. Those who make decisions that impact education, interact with marginalized students, and have an influence over their educational experience need to evaluate if they are reinforcing merit based educational environments. A lack of awareness in perpetuating the use of merit is just as detrimental as the well-known intent of usage. Once more aware, individuals can let go of the blaming individuals for failing to succeed in an inequitable environment.

Most recommendations shared thus far have been quite general for all marginalized groups, however, when discussing the needs, specifically, of Black female college students' spaces of affirmation should be discussed. These spaces are not necessarily used to reinforce their identity as Black women as this identity may be a salient feature for Black women seeking these spaces. These spaces, more so, are used to affirm the experiences and presence of Black women in campus environments, especially predominantly White institutions. A current example of these affirming spaces for Black women lies in the usage of "Sister Circles" for professional and graduate Black women. A sister circle can be defined as a structured discussion held by women of color exploring the complexities of holding multiple marginalized identities while navigating everyday life (Niskode-Dossett, Boney, Bullock, Cochran, & Kao, 2012). This powerful affirmation tool has been noted to help Black women relieve issues such as anxiety and panic attacks due to their confidentiality, lack of much stigma, and supportive atmospheres (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Merit can produce the notion of who "deserves" to be at an institution based on talent, ability, and effort. Affirming spaces such as sister circles centered around encouraging the academic self-concept can increase the thoughts of "being good enough" and allow the defining of their own reality and what success means as a Black woman seeking a college education.

References

Au, W. (2016). Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes, standardized testing as a racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Educational Policy*, *30*(1), 39–62.

Baez, B. (2006). Merit and difference. *Teachers College Record*, *108*(6), 996-1016.

Cuyjet, M. J. (2006). *African American men in college*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Guiffrida, D. A. (2006). Toward a cultural advancement of Tinto's theory. *Review of Higher Education, 29*(4), 451-472.

Hagedorn, L. S. (2012). How to define retention: A new look at an old problem. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for success* (2nd ed., pp. 81-100). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Howard-Hamilton, M. F. (2003). Theoretical frameworks for African American women. In M.F. Howard-Hamilton (Ed.), *Meeting the needs of African American women* (pp. 19-29). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hughes, R. L., & Howard-Hamilton, M. F. (2003). Insights: emphasizing issues that affect African American women. In M.F. Howard-Hamilton (Ed.), *Meeting the needs of African American women* (pp. 95-105). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mijs, J. J. B. (2016). The unfulfillable promise of meritocracy: Three lessons and their implications for justice in education. *Social Justice Research*, *29*(1), 14–34.

Neal-Barnett, A. M., Stadulis, R., Payne, M. R., Crosby, L., Mitchell, M., Williams, L., & Williams-Costa, C. (2011). In the company of my sisters: Sister circles as an anxiety intervention for professional African American women. *Journal of affective disorders*, *129*(1), 213-218.

Niskode-Dossett, A. S., Boney, M., Bullock, L. C., Cochran, C., & Kao, I. (2012). Sister circles. In P. Pasque & S. Nicholson (Eds.), *Empowering women in higher education and student affairs: Theory, research, narratives, and practice from feminist perspectives* (pp. 194-212). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Porter, C. J. (2016). Articulation of identity in Black undergraduate women: Influences, interactions, and intersections. In L. D. Patton & N. N. Croom (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on Black women and college success* (pp. 88-100). London, England: Routledge.

Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P. K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A., & Hwang, Y. (2017). *Completing college: A national view of student attainment rates by race and ethnicity – fall 2010 cohort* (Signature Report No. 12b). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American psychologist*, *52*(6), 613.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Sullivan, P. (2005). Cultural narratives about success and the material conditions of class at the community college. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *33*(2), 142-160.

Thomas, D. M., Love, K. M., Roan-Belle, C., Tyler, K. M., Brown, C. L., & Garriott, P. O. (2009). Self-efficacy, motivation, and academic adjustment among African American women attending institutions of higher education. *Journal of Negro Education*, *78*(2), 159-171.

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Walton, G. M., & Spencer, S. J. (2009). Latent ability grades and test scores systematically underestimate the intellectual ability of negatively stereotyped students. *Psychological Science*, *20*(9), 1132-1139.

Walton, G. M., Spencer, S. J., & Erman, S. (2013). Affirmative meritocracy. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, *7*(1), 1–35.

Winkle-Wagner, R. (2015). Having their lives narrowed down?: The state of Black women's college success. *Review of Educational Research*, *85*(2), 171–204.

Yazedijan, A., Toews, M. L., Sevin, T., & Purswell, K. E. (2008). "It's a whole new world": A qualitative exploration of college students' definitions of and strategies for college success. *Journal of College Student Development*, *49*(2), 141–154.

Young, M. D. (1958). *The rise of the meritocracy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Zamani, E. M. (2003). African American women in higher education. In M.F. Howard-Hamilton (Ed.), *Meeting the needs of African American women* (pp. 5-18). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Correspondence for this article should be addressed to Tiffany Steele at *steele.868@osu.edu*.
.