

Retention of Undergraduate Black Men

Executive Summary of Preliminary Research

As part of Cornell University's Toward New Destinations initiative, Student and Academic Services identified as one of its goals improving the graduation and retention rates for undergraduate Black men to bring them to parity with all Cornell undergraduate students. A team was created to develop and implement processes to evaluate attrition and recommend retention strategies that lead to an increase in the graduation rate of undergraduate Black men. Specifically, the task force focuses on creating an environment where undergraduate Black men can thrive and be successful at Cornell.

In January 2013, the members of the Task Force for the Retention of Undergraduate Black Men hosted focus groups at the annual Men of Color Council retreat. Five focus groups were facilitated by team members, staff volunteers, and trained graduate students. Thirty-five men participated in these focus groups, most of whom were undergraduate students (one group consisted of six alumni). One additional opportunity to participate was offered following the retreat. One student was interviewed at this time, for a total of 36 participants, 30 of whom were undergraduates (about 10% of the undergraduate Black men at the time). Thirteen of the men were immigrants to the US; ten were first-generation college students; and 13 were members of Greek Letter Organizations. The focus group protocol is included as an appendix to this report. The purpose of this study was to seek feedback from undergraduate Black men about their success. Research questions addressed in the study included:

- How were aspirations for postsecondary education cultivated among undergraduate Black men who are currently enrolled at Cornell?
- What compels undergraduate Black men to pursue leadership and engagement opportunities on this campus?
- How do undergraduate Black men manage to persist and earn their degrees, despite transition issues, racist stereotypes, academic under-preparedness, and other negative forces?
- What resources are most effective in helping undergraduate Black men earn GPAs above 3.0 in a variety of majors, including STEM fields?
- How do Black men go about cultivating meaningful, value-added relationships with key institutional agents?

The number of Black men enrolled at Cornell is very low, with between 70 and 85 students starting as freshmen each year. Persistence is fairly constant for the first three years and equivalent to other student populations. It decreases between the junior and senior years, so that by the end of the senior year, graduation rates are on average about 69% of the students who entered (Cornell Office of Institutional Research and Planning). The table below depicts the six-year graduation rates of all Cornell students, all Cornell men, all Cornell non-URM men, and all Cornell Black men from 2004 until 2008:

Year entered	ALL CU	All CU men	Non-URM men	Black Men	Difference (non-URM and Black men)	Difference (all men and Black men)
2004	93%	90.30%	93%	80.95%	12.05%	9.35%
2005	94%	91.11%	94%	78.69%	15.31%	12.42%
2006	93%	89.44%	92%	83.33%	8.67%	6.11%
2007		89.23%		80.56%		8.67%
2008		89.42%		80.70%		8.72%

Source: Cornell University Office of Institutional Research and Planning

Major Findings

The themes that emerged from the focus groups with Black men were institutional and personal support, involvement, the competitive academic environment, and resilience. The constant thread running among all of the themes was the importance of relationships and connection with others. Participants believed that when students were not involved and did not have sufficient support to manage the competitive environment, they were much less likely to thrive at Cornell and may have decided to leave before graduating. Enrollment data indicate that this often occurs between the third and fourth year.

Institutional Support

One of the main reasons the Black men interviewed chose to attend Cornell University was the financial aid package they were offered. Other contributing factors described were: the university's academic reputation, alumni networks, and the sense of community that was seen through participation in programs such as Diversity Hosting Week/Month or through visits to spaces at Cornell like Ujamaa Residential College and the Office of Minority Educational Affairs (now OADI and The Center for Intercultural Dialogue).

Many participants described the sense of community they experienced when visiting Cornell as a major deciding factor to attend the institution. Diversity Hosting Weekend—a program that invites newly-accepted students of color to campus for a weekend—introduced these students to student life at Cornell.

Cornell's commitment to diversity, as seen through the existence of programs such as Diversity Programs in Engineering and the culturally-based residential program houses, also contributed to participants choosing Cornell. Additionally, participants met with staff members in different colleges or offices that took special interest in their matriculation and overall achievement at Cornell.

Overall, the opportunities Cornell offers made it the best institution for participants to attend. Its academic reputation, as well as the connections students can make (faculty, staff, alumni, etc.) all contributed to why students chose to enroll. It is important to note that the sense of community had a primary role in students feeling comfortable making that decision.

Several men commented on the transition from high school to college. The Pre-Freshmen Summer Program (not attended by all participants in this study) was reported to be helpful, but “not enough.” Students arrived at Cornell with varying levels of readiness. Therefore, assistance with study skills/habits, and ease of accessing tutoring were mentioned as being helpful. Several men also mentioned that stronger support and more staff (not faculty) advisors in each college could help support them academically. A few men also suggested that having access to professional networks and being taught and encouraged to tap into these resources would be helpful.

Some of the participants perceived Cornell as a “big monster” and wished they had known this prior to coming. A welcoming environment was cited as being critical to success, with one comment about how people could be more open-minded. One man recommended moving the Center for Intercultural Dialogue and the Africana Studies and Research Center from their locations on the periphery of campus to Central Campus so that they were more accessible to all students.

Personal Support

One important theme from the participants was the role particular staff members at Cornell have had in helping students become successful. The staff members mentioned during the interviews were almost always cited by more than one student. Their commitment to helping Black men succeed was apparent in the number of anecdotes students had about their individual experiences working with these staff members.

Community was also mentioned in several contexts. Several men mentioned sharing their experiences with racism with new students and that mentorship and advising had been important in their success. Having other people of color on campus to talk with was important and helped to create a welcoming, inviting community, as well as a community that would “have [their] back” during more challenging times. For some of the participants, administrators who were like surrogate family played a major role in their success.

Involvement

Because there are very few Black men at Cornell compared to the overall student body, it is easy for Black men to feel isolated. However, the men interviewed seemed to all agree that there were existing communities in which they felt welcomed and in which they could thrive. Student organizations played a major role in helping Black men at Cornell find their community and provided them with the support they needed to succeed at Cornell. They also shared that being role models to younger students helped them realize their own success.

Competitive Academic Environment

When asked what it meant to be a Black man, many of the participants discussed defying the odds and defeating stereotypes. Overall, the men interviewed explained that less is expected from them as Black men. Dr. Claude Steele’s theory of stereotype threat was mentioned during the interviews and the participants felt that as Black men in a predominantly white institution, it was important for them to work even harder so that they did not fall behind their white peers. Many participants highlighted that this added pressure motivated them to achieve, however, they believed that this pressure also

contributed to some of their Black peers not being able to succeed at Cornell. Participants found experiences with being stereotyped as athletes, or hearing about racist acts on campus toward Black students as disappointing and troubling, but not as a major factor in Black men being unable to succeed at Cornell.

The definition of success varied among the participants; however, goal setting was a common practice to help them realize their successes. For these men, achieving the goals they set for themselves made them feel successful; and setting new goals contributed to their overall drive to do better and be successful. Other than goal setting, participants believed that continually challenging themselves gave them the opportunity to continue to be successful.

Tangible outcomes of their hard work were strong indicators of success for these participants. When asked to explain how they knew they were successful, the participants often spoke about receiving internships, research opportunities, recognition from a faculty or staff member, and being on the Dean's List. Others attributed their success to the opportunities they have taken advantage of at Cornell. They mentioned reaching heights others were excluded from as both a motivational factor for them as well as a reminder of how successful they are.

Many participants were the first in their family to attend an Ivy League institution, and ten were first-generation college students.

Resilience

When asked about factors that helped them be to be successful at Cornell, the men focused on internal and external motivations. A strong sense of self, persistence, and community were the main themes that emerged.

Several men mentioned that knowing themselves well, believing in themselves, listening to themselves, and being self-motivated were major factors in their success. They cited these characteristics as being ones that they could call on to help them persevere through situations when they or others doubted their own abilities or when they faced racism. Sense of self was also mentioned in the context of advocating for oneself and knowing when to seek help.

Cornell offers a large range of extracurricular opportunities along with a highly competitive academic environment, and students talked about how easy it was to be distracted from their goals. Interestingly, while the competitive environment at Cornell was sometimes seen as a difficulty, it was also perceived as a motivating factor. They frequently cited their social and professional networks, mentors, and their own persistence toward their goals as critical to being able to succeed at Cornell.

Recommendations

Throughout the interviews, the men described their success in their ability to permeate different communities, utilize resources on campus, and establish a supportive network of friends, staff, and faculty. Using these successful undergraduate Black men as guides, the following recommendations emerged from this study:

- Provide institutional support focused on the success of undergraduate Black men.
 - Make the success of undergraduate Black men everyone’s responsibility, not just those who work in Diversity programs and support areas.
 - Train staff and faculty to be supports and align the culture toward the success and thriving of all students.
 - Hire additional professional academic advisors in the colleges.
- Provide consistent, reliable support networks for Black men that persist beyond the Pre-freshman Program and the first year.
 - Provide more opportunities for students to talk with each other and with older mentors about the challenges they are facing at Cornell.
 - Create new and support existing communities of support to make students feel more connected and less overwhelmed.
 - Teach students how to network and provide opportunities for networking to occur.
- Educate accepted students about Cornell and its size. Prepare them for the “big monster” that Cornell is.
- Research retention programs and initiatives across the United States and glean information that can be useful to Cornell’s initiatives.
- Encourage greater enrollment in the Intergroup Dialogue Project co-sponsored by OADI and 6-2-6. This for-credit, multidisciplinary class is taught by trained student facilitators. Each semester the topics discussed change. Some topics that have been addressed in previous semesters include socioeconomic status, race, and gender.
- Conduct exit interviews within each college with undergraduate Black men who are leaving Cornell without graduating. This will provide important data about the Cornell environment, factors that lead to success or failure, and reasons students depart without graduating.
- Institutionalize the Men of Color Skills Seminar (AEM 4940) and expand to additional colleges. This 1-credit course is taught by Cindy van Es and Cate Thompson and incorporates speakers from a variety of industries who share their paths to success. Student assignments focus on building and improving leadership skills with opportunities to practice in a controlled environment.
- Incorporate the SWAG Orientation event into University Orientation. This event brings together new-to-Cornell students with returning students to introduce them to each other and the Cornell environment. The purpose of this event is to create a welcoming and supportive environment for Black men at Cornell.
- Create a task force to focus on faculty- and staff- of color retention and recruitment. As we described in this report, these members of the University community have an influential role on the Undergraduate Black Men at Cornell. It is important to actively engage in retaining them and recruiting additional faculty- and staff-of-color to work at Cornell.
- Develop a faculty/staff mentor component in the Men of Color Colleague Network Group. These faculty and staff would serve as mentors to Undergraduate Black Men.
- Provide data on admissions, matriculation, retention, and graduation for undergraduate Black Men. Because of the small numbers of students in this population, the University has been

reluctant to share these data. On the other hand, it is impossible to measure improvement without the information as a guide.

- Implement further research on the topic of thriving and success at Cornell and post-graduation.

Methods could include:

- Exploring responses on the PULSE and Senior Survey to questions about community and connection.
- Looking more closely at student achievement prior to and after the creation of OADI and 6-2-6.
- Hosting additional focus groups and interviews.
- Examining course data, particularly for courses like AEM 4940.

Focus Group and Interview Questions

Facilitators will select from among this list of questions, which is longer than needed for a one hour focus group. It is intended to offer flexibility based on the tenor of the group discussion and for use in interviews.

- Why did you choose Cornell?
- Why have you remained at Cornell?
- How do you define success? (all groups will be asked this question)
 - What drives you?
- In what ways have you been successful at Cornell?
 - What and who (individuals, organizations, departments, outside factors) have contributed to your success?
 - What services, resources and/or opportunities exist at Cornell that demonstrate Cornell's support of the retention and success of undergraduate Black men?
 - Are there *other* services, resources, opportunities you would recommend Cornell consider creating/offering (or promoting more widely) to further support the retention of undergraduate Black men?
- How many groups are you involved in?
 - What types of groups?
 - How have these groups contributed to your success?
- What leadership opportunities have you had?
 - How and where have you learned leadership skills?
- What does being a black man/woman mean to you?
 - How does this belief inform your actions/decisions?
 - From whom did you learn this?
 - What obstacles have you faced in living out this belief system?
- What impact has racism had on your experiences here?
 - How have you successfully handled racism at Cornell?
 - How have you risen above others' expectations of you? What strategies do you use?
- Does religion play a role in your definition of self?
 - What support have you had at Cornell for this part of your life?
- What do you believe to be the greatest factors influencing the success (retention) of undergraduate Black men at Cornell?
- What do you believe are the greatest determining factors influencing the attrition of undergraduate Black men at Cornell?
- What recommendations do you have for other Black men who might be struggling with being successful at Cornell?
 - What barriers have you experienced to success and how have you dealt with them?
- If you could change something about Cornell, what would it be?

- What do you wish you had known about Cornell before you arrived?
- If you knew what Cornell would be like, would you have still come?