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## Yes, We Can Rule The World- Advancing our Black Male Mentoring Programs

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## Yes, We Can Rule The World- Advancing our Black Male Mentoring Programs

### Cover Page Footnote

Trevor McCray (he/him/his) is a career services practitioner in higher education and a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Arlington in the K-16 Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program. His research focuses on Black male elementary teachers and how ecological systems influences their teaching experience and decision. He's passionate about further diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within the workforce and addressing social inequalities with the spectrum of the K-16 education system. To connect further, please connect with Trevor via LinkedIn Trevor D. Mccray.

## Yes, We Can Rule the World: Advancing Our Black Male Mentoring Programs

Trevor McCray

*This article will address the lived experience of a Black male higher education practitioner who served as an advisor over a Black male mentorship program. While the summer of 2020 brought awareness to the life of individuals who identify as Black and Brown, with the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, there have been numerous attempts to right some wrong in America. This practitioner will share his experience, expertise, and perspective on the performative anti-racist measures, anti-Black rhetoric, and lackluster efforts of universities and colleges investing into people of color mentoring initiatives. As a result, higher education administrators have rebranded and reinforced new meanings for how universities and colleges can invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, which as social justice advocates, we know could potentially fall on deaf ears, depending on the institution. However, moving forward, justice-minded practitioners have the opportunity to challenge and hold universities and colleges accountable, particularly predominantly white institutions (PWIs), to promote and invest in Black Male Mentorship Programs intentionally. We are no longer waiting for the right time; we can rule the world with the stroke of a pen and the power of the tongue.*

*“I am going to keep it Black, but I am going to keep it brief.” – Lynae Vanee*

*Keywords:* Black crit, anti-Blackness, Black, predominantly white institutions, African American, whiteness, affinity groups

Why do we have Black male initiatives at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)? Some would feel this is a way for PWIs to check a box and specify they offer a resource for Black male students. Others may argue that it is a performative measure that’s poorly invested and has little direction. Although the concepts appear beneficial for our Black male students, are there crucial conversations about the sustainability and impact of the

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program's intent? Before we branch off into the intent, PWIs must understand their anti-Black rhetoric, policies, and structures, for an impact to be felt on the grassroots level. While Black students navigate and explore their existence at PWIs, some PWIs (e.g., University of Kentucky & Auburn University) have acknowledged or became aware of the lack of interest in their Black student population on their campus after George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's murder. Specifically, Auburn University's very own Dr. Taffye Clayton, provides spaces and dialogues for the advancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to ensure that these conversations are at the forefront and at the core of their institution to understand the complexities of different student populations (Clayton, 2021). For example, Black male students have struggled academically, personally, and professionally at PWIs (Parker, Puig, Johnson, & Anthony, 2016). Inadvertently, causing Black males to lack academic intellect, lack of involvement, and invisible identities (Ellison, 1995). Unfortunately, these issues often stem from racism and anti-Black practices ingrained into the structures of their PWIs history, culture, and traditions. As a result, Black students, more specifically Black boys, have experienced a feeling of unwelcomeness (Powell, 2021). As a result, PWIs negatively impact Black male students' experiences, retention, and involvement on their campuses.

Additionally, according to Post Secondary National Policy Institute (2020), their fact sheet reported, Black students' undergraduate enrollment have decreased between 2009 and 2019 from 2.5 million students to 2.1 million students. In addition, United Negro College Fund states, "only 57% of Black students have access to full range of math and sciences courses necessary for college readiness, compared to 81% of Asian American students and 71% of white students" (2020). Compared to their non-Black peers, Black students enrolled in four-year public institutions and complete their degrees in six years on average at 45.9% (Bridges, 2020). Specifically, Black men are often the lowest with a completion rate of 40% (Bridges, 2020). In 2017, the Department of Education reported that Black males ages 16 to 24 were the second highest dropout with a rate of 8.2%. The recent data was provided to share some insight into what Black students, specifically Black male students, on college campus often experience when it comes to educational disparities and degree attainments. More specifically, I am sharing to focus on the Black male voices who are critical to this research topic and initiative to change the narrative for Black male college students.

This Scholarly Personal Narrative will dive into my experience as a Black Male advisor of a Black Male Mentorship Program at a PWI in East Texas (population of 12,000) with a 20% Black student population, and approximately a thousand Black male students online and in-person combined. At the same time, I will be offering insight and recommendations for PWIs to research their anti-Black practices and creating critical conversations on investing in the intentionality of these programs at their campuses. Further, this paper will empower Black males attending PWIs to understand their true power and the purpose these programs serve for the better making of Black males and their identities at PWIs. Finally, I want the audience to review this text and begin to challenge the dominant structures of whiteness implemented by PWIs and their relations to these programs. As Nas ft. Ms. Lauryn Hill states in their 1996 song, *If I Ruled the World*, “If I ruled the world, I’ll free all my sons.” Black males could genuinely be in a free world, rule the world, and freely develop their intellectual property without limits. However, this is only possible if meaningful investments and intentional inclusion into Black male achievement programs at PWIs are strategic goals of the institution.

Also, the audience should know that this text will be unapologetically Black. As a researcher and practitioner, I am an unconventional thinker, and I pride myself on disrupting the status quo.

### **Livin’ for Today’s Dedication**

I dedicate this article to the forty plus Black male students involved in the Black male mentorship program at the university I worked for previously. I also want to thank the brilliant Black males who co-advised with me, because of our synergy and passion for uplifting Black males, it aided in the success of our program. The level of power and perseverance these young Black men showed at a PWI was impeccable and will forever have a heart-felt impression on me as a Black man. I am grateful for that experience’s, impact, and influence this program had on my higher education journey as a practitioner. Additionally, it was because of the past Black male predecessor that I was able to lean on their shoulders for Black male guidance, which has poured into numerous generations that have encountered the Black male mentorship program. Finally, a dedication to the politicians who were able to see the vision and created a foundation that has aided in the advancement, retention, and completion of over 300+ Black males on an undergrad and graduate college level.

## Methodology

The methodology for this paper as mentioned previously is a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) (Nash & Bradley, 2011). Nash and Bradley's approach to SPN and its relations to combing scholarship, personal stories, and universalizable themes create a larger worldview that links to the personal narrative. Likewise, Hyater -Adams articulates that, "personal narrative expands the pool of those interested in contributing toward, scholarship, especially with non-traditional and marginalized voices" (2012, p. 38). Hall (2011) furthers this approach by acknowledging that SPN provides privileges to both the process and product, while other methods of traditional scholarship turn a blind eye to personal experiences.

### **Glimpse into Time: PWI's Relations with Black Students**

PWIs are universities and colleges designed and created for the education of white, middle-aged male students. According to Robertson and Chaney (2017), Black males at PWIs have been placed into a social system that only identified their identities through the lens of "niggerization." Harper (2009) explains niggerization as reinforcement of racist stereotypes on campus and do not belong there. Additionally, some of these students are often beneficiaries of affirmative action (p. 700) at PWIs, creating equal opportunities and avenues to access educational advancement. Mullen (1988) defines affirmative action as an attempt to move the needle forward and provide opportunity and equality for women (sex) and racial minorities (race) groups that have historically been discriminated against and underrepresented. However, Wright (2016) affirms that most PWIs lacked best practices for intentional inclusion for a diverse population after establishing affirmative action. Feingold (2019) adds, "universities have become susceptible to diversity drift, whereby good intentions invite unintended and at times perverse consequences" (p. 14). As a result, Black students were inadvertently ostracized and placed into environments that lacked support, were poorly equipped to assist with their needs, and were unwelcoming, ultimately affecting their identity as a minority group (Steck, Heckert, & Heckert, 2003). Furthermore, when one thinks about Black males' development, feelings of alienation, marginalization, and social isolation impact their sense of belonging, aiding in retaining these students (Strayhorn, 2018).

Although the article will not focus on Black women, its noteworthy to know that Black women who attend PWIs have expressed: gender racism (Bailey, 2021), racial tension, and experience stress-inducing experience environments causing effects to Black women's mental health (Shadid, Nelson, & Cardemil, 2018). Moreover, Coles and Powell (2020) added that where whiteness exists, anti-blackness will be attached both in bodies and institutions (p. 122). Harris (1993) defines whiteness as a property that offers benefits and protection that affirms white people are superior beyond any other race. These problematic notions within PWIs foundation are salient and traditional practices unwittingly places barriers and restrictions on affinity group initiatives, precisely Black male initiatives.

### **Black Male Initiative Programs**

Black Male Initiatives (BMIs) programs have become popular initiatives over the past twenty years to provide support, resources, and familiarity to Black male students. Often the members in BMI programs identify as "first-generation," which means that they are the first ones in their immediate family to pursue higher education. According to some scholars, BMIs are spaces for social and cultural capital, Black male identity development, and three pillars of graduation: retention, persistence, and completion (Brooms, Goodman, & Clark, 2015; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). DeRosa and Dolby (2014) argue that first-generation college students see college as an opportunity to move beyond their current circumstances. Yet, they are left out of the university experiences and values in the sense of pride and representation, which bleeds into these students' understanding of belonging at PWI institutions. Uniquely, these programs have been found to combat isolation on PWI campuses and develop a peer bonding mechanism that creates a sense of belonging and connectivity to the campus (Zell, 2011). Several scholars found beneficial purposes for BMI programs on PWI campuses. Harper's (2007) study found that memberships in peer groups helped Black males' development and allowed them as peers to support, uplift, and encourage their leadership and college achievements. Additionally, Barker & Avery (2012) found that Black male students gain academic footing when they are can engage in social and academic engagement with their faculty and affiliates associated with the program. Also, the participants in the study expressed the importance of the program's leadership (advisors, staff, faculty, etc.), who served as role models, while having a seat at the table to bring critical issues and recommendations to

the university to engage in “public discourse” (Barker & Avery, p. 84).

In addition, these programs provide opportunities for career development, which has often been neglected when it comes to Black males (Chung, Baskin, & Case, 1999). Chun et al., 2019, shared those Black men are higher contributors to unemployment due to racial discrimination, educational attainment, unstable parental guidance (father absence), positive role models, and vocational choices (p. 161). In 2013, Cornileus found that Black men develop career interest through internal and external organizational resources and formal and informal learning (p.457). Furthering the importance of why these programs serve more than the capacity of a safe space, it provides opportunity and access to material that’s often neglected by PWIs student affairs functional areas.

These programs are often housed at institutions that have little to no historical roots tied to the education of Black people. Yosso, Smith, & Solorzano (2009) and Brooms (2018) express that counter spaces are created to combat their frustration, micro-macroaggressions, and racial discrimination and build a community on these campuses to provide a sense of cultural and safe space for them to relate to one another. In addition, Brooms (2018) states these programs ultimately serve as spaces they can call their own while serving as a one-stop-shop to provide holistic needs for Black male students.

Here are a few notable programs that I have had the privilege collaborate with that helped develop me as an advisor: Louisiana State University Black Male Leadership Initiative (BMLI), Texas A&M University-Commerce, African American Male Mentorship Program (AAMMP), City University of New York-College of Staten Island Black Male Initiative (BMI), and Richland College, Male Achievement Program (MAP).

The enriching content regarding BMIs helps understand the historical underpinnings that Black male students face and the importance of these programs’ existence. Additionally, exploring this study through the lens of SPN allows for me to share my experience as an advisor of a BMI through the lens of Blackness. At the same time, calling attention to anti-Black structures often overtly expressed or covertly performed when funding and valuing BMIs.

## **Theoretical Framework**

I situate the literature through the lens of BlackCrit, which focuses on Blackness and anti-Blackness, differing but expanding on the lens of Kimberle Crenshaw, Critical Race Theory (CRT), which primarily brings awareness to race and racism. I chose BlackCrit to allow a deeper connection to understand further how America is an anti-Black society that implicates all people, structures, and institutions (Cole & Powell, 2020). As Cole and Powell (2020) state, the goal of this theoretical framework is to understand that as scholars, we are not concerned with the general practices of racism but how its impact has specifically enforced cruel punishment against Black bodies in U.S. history (p. 118). Additionally, as I position Blackness in BlackCrit, the discussion is centered around the Black existence looked upon as disgusting and problematic (Dumas, 2016), connecting this notion of whiteness and its infiltration into the system that restricts the life for Black folks (Harris, 1993). Although PWIs' intentions seem resourceful to students of color, specifically Black male students, the effort is performative and lackluster. Therefore, when creating avenues for minority-based initiatives, one must be aware of the historical components that impede the success of these individuals. As researchers mentioned with SPN, it provides a space for personal narratives to be shared that are often left out of traditional scholarship, minimizing their experiences and voices. Pairing SPN with BlackCrit allows for the authenticity of marginalized voices and celebrates Blackness through the literature. While also challenging the traditional whiteness of scholarship and centering the voices on the often voiceless.

### **Black Diamonds and Pearls Experiences**

To experience Black men eagerly excited to develop, learn, and graduate will always be the highlight of these programs and a true example of Black boy joy embracing their Blackness. It's because of these Black male initiatives at PWIs, where Black male students often flourish. Broom's 2018 study found that 63 Black college men expressed that BMIs provided holistic support, engaged their Black male identity, increased Black male persistence, and provided socio-cultural capital. While overseeing the Black male program, the advisory team invoked intentional, crucial, and impactful conversations; we helped some young men grow from young-minded individuals to grown intellectual men. We created a bubble outside

of the university, allowing their intellectual freedom and growth to run wild while pushing past the negative stereotypes and systemic barriers they faced internally and externally. For example, one of the young men had an opportunity to create a handbook for the young men in the program to aid in their understanding of the program and their responsibility. Allowing this young man to showcase his skillset provided tangible skills needed for his career development. In addition, some of the young men in the program became lifelong friends, fraternity brothers, homecoming kings, and Recognized Student Organizations (RSOs) e-board members (president, vice president, etc.).

Through the program's foundation, they successfully gain the tools needed to navigate PWIs and their Black identity. Celebrating small wins, we were able to revamp the mission and vision statement for the program. We developed five pillars that guided the operational components of the program: mentorship, academic enhancements, socioemotional programming, leadership development, and involvement. I would be remiss if I did not share the negatives; we lacked stability in full-time advisors, lost Black males along the way, and experienced university issues. However, one of the successes we are proud of is implementing the Black cultural enrichment trip. Students experience Memphis, TN, Jackson, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana to learn the historical context of Black activists and contributors to Black life in those areas. The young men were exposed to a Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Jackson State University, while also exploring other tourist facilities in the various cities, aiding in developing their human capital. Before I took over the program, there were budget cuts towards the program, decreasing the opportunities for resources, growth of the program, and financial support. However, in 2019, we received the first increase since the school year of 2013-2014 in student fees for the program's operational budget by 33 percent. Even though creating a pitch to fund this program is another form of gatekeeping, this was a long-overdue celebratory moment for the program and its history on the campus.

### **No Supporters; Conscious Performative Actors**

PWI universities and colleges often create performative statements and bubble gum action plans whenever injustices are inflicted onto Black people, specifically Black males, but fail to have tangible actions plans. Bub-

ble gum action plans are in the form of diversity statements or one time funding donations that's due to a media moment that has went viral. For example, Feingold 2019 states, "institutions often seek "diversity" without first having done the work to define, precisely, why they want diversity, or to identify, concretely, what forms of diversity efforts will get them there" (p. 14). As a lead advisor, I walked into a program that needed revamping and university support. However, due to the lack of sustainability, the university decided to merge the program operational budget under student fees, where we had to bargain with the student fee committee each year to inform the university of the importance of the program. While in this pool for university funding along with other student affairs departments, the imagery this provided added to the list of academy gatekeeping measures and anti-Black rhetoric impacting Black students' matriculation, specifically Black male students.

Historically, the university provided space for this program through the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life. Through a state grant that was awarded to the university fraternity and sorority life office in 2010 to create a pipeline for the Black male greek letter organizations a part of the historic National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). Additionally, before the president's death, the university mentioned that they would match the total amount of the grant, which never transpired. Due to the continuous turnover of Black student affairs professionals at the institution, the program's sustainability became weary, accountability became obsolete, and the funding depleted, leading the university to make it a school-based funding program, relying on the fees of students.

Although the institution provides a space for Black males, this is only contingent on the premise that Black male higher education professionals who are full-time workers will commit to the volunteer role to oversee the program. As one of the Black male advisors, I became one of three of the volunteers that became involuntary saviors of the Black males on campus. We were charged with providing representation when the university needed Black male presence while trying to grow the program with a budget that only covered a quarter of the Black males in the program. As a Black male practitioner, an invisible tax began to develop, and it became more so of an action item for the university regarding what young Black scholars could do for the university, and not what both parties could do to change the narratives of Black males and their relationships with PWIs. In

addition, numerous conversations were held with the university administration to discuss sustainability and funding, however, it began to appear as though we were begging for the university to provide some relief to move the program forward.

Even though the program was being offered to Black males on the campus, the university actions were anti-Black and often saw these young men as a threat socially and academically, and not worthy of the advancement that the university brags about. While being housed under the leadership office, we were a part of an organization char that consisted of four affinity-based programs: Black Women's Initiative, Latina Women's Initiative, African American Male Initiative, and Latino Male Initiative. To give you an idea, affinity-based programs are initiatives that serve diverse student populations, typically, Black, Indigenous and/or people of color (BIPOC), who are grouped together according to the university and colleges strategic plans or organization charts. Through our solidarity we served as support groups for one another and sound boards to increase opportunity and resources for our population of students. However, the university had no problem supporting the Latino male organization because it became a university mission to become a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and had university administrators a part of their leadership board. Imagine the teeth pulling we had to do to have our Black males recognized. Case in point, there were moments where we had to compete with the Latino male organization for housing, programming, and faculty/staff participation. Even with strong efforts to work collaborative, the Latino male program success became praise around campus, and the exclusion of the Black male program became prevalent across campus.

Typically, when the university donated funding to our affinity-based programs, it was a one-time funding fee, which was great for short-term gains. However, how will the programs survive if they live on bargaining rates offered by the hands of white folks at PWIs? In the words of Keke Palmer message during a Los Angeles protest in 2020, "that ain't enough for me." PWIs must do more for the sustainability of these programs if they want to see a return on investment. One cannot support a movement when its beneficial because of the current time but be careless with accountability and absence after the moment has subsided. If white people are going to help us rule the world and level the playfield, then do just that because if not, we will continue to experience patterns of anti-Blackness when it comes to the sustainability of these programs on PWI campuses.

## When We Rule the World

Yes, we can rule the world and institutions, specifically PWIs, by creating collaborative partnerships and enriching dialogue that provides historical context and best practices for advancing Black male students. Then, with progressive practitioners and administrators, guidelines and expectations could be implemented across the university when initiatives or programs for affinity groups, specifically Black male programs, are developed.

As the late Martin Luther King Jr. expressed in his 1963, Letter from Birmingham Jail, “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” We are no longer waiting for developmental and educational resources or the acknowledgement of our intellect, freedom, and power. More importantly, discussions relating to the underpinnings of anti-blackness and Blackness must be at the forefront of any conversation on PWIs campuses. The fact is that PWIs must consider and acknowledge that Black bodies were never a part of the blueprint for them to be students at their colleges and universities. As the old saying goes, what you reveal is what you will heal, and if PWIs are unable and unwilling to address their constructs and the whiteness that surrounds them, I recommend that they stop their performative measures because it’s doing more harm than good. Therefore, I conclude this article with a few ways that PWIs and Black male initiatives can further their agreements and investments moving forward.

- PWIs must intentionally and strategically develop operational plans resembling the university model to provide insight into the program’s sustainability.
  - o Furthermore, these programs and initiatives should not be the first thing on the chopping block when budget cuts become an issue for the university unless the university articulates in writing how this population of students will receive the same support without the program or initiatives.
- Black male student identity development matters!
  - o Provide a space for Black males to develop personally, academically, and professionally and create a space that’s welcoming of their Blackness. Steck et. al (2003) mentions that the role of identifying one’s race is crucial for the develop of individuals who identify as minority.

- o In addition, train, educate, and inform faculty in every department to understand the barriers these students face and best practices to diversify their pedagogical approach.
- Black male programs are not the token programs for performative marketing (brochures, websites, or servants for alumni and the university).
  - o For example, the students representing these programs are not for PWIs token stress: expressing multiple demands on these young men being Black or expecting them to show greater competence (Jackson, Thotis, & Taylor, 1995) or tokenisms: relying on this percentage of students to be a monolith for the population of Black students, specifically, Black male students (Kanter, 1977).
- Campuses should create and hire a dedicated staff role or roles to assist with the program's funding and serve as a voice to advocate for the program's needs.
  - o The one-dimension approach of having Black male practitioner devote their time is inadvertently a demise to the program sustainability, which feeds into BlackCrit indirectly.
- Finally, education is key, and for one to be free and liberated (bell hooks, 1996), there must be an acknowledgment of the system and its role in keeping Black males from achieving success at these institutions.

While there are efforts to normalize intentional inclusivity, predominantly white institutions must be held accountable to move the needle forward to create actual change. Black males can no longer be the “most wanted” or “token athletes” on these campuses. Ultimately, we can rule the world by making sure PWIs intentionally challenge the internal and external structures perpetuating anti-Black practices and acknowledge and celebrate the presence of Blackness their Black students exude. Imagine that!

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