

# Cultivating Affirming Community:

Black Men During Their First Year of College

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# Executive Summary

At a moment of profound uncertainty and transformation in higher education, this report reexamines the role of space and responsive supports in shaping Black male college student success. With extensive rollbacks of programs, supports, and policies intended to improve the enrollment and retention of underrepresented student groups on U.S. college campuses, I want this report to serve as a reminder of the importance, utility, and integrity of inclusive resources. I present findings on the impact of a responsive first-year seminar for Black male students at a large Predominantly White Institution (PWI).

Findings show that first-year Black male students who completed the First-Year Resource Seminar (FYRS) reported increased feelings of campus community, connectedness, and empowerment. FYRS, while open to any freshmen or transfer student of the PWI it was located at, maintained a high yield of participants from racially underrepresented backgrounds. To meet the unique and often invisible needs of each cohort, FYRS was designed to acquaint participants with formal campus resources and to provide a space for students of color to meet, cultivate community, and engage with their realities as students of color in higher education.

In this work, I focus on a subset of FYRS students: Black male students who completed the seminar between 2016 and 2021. Black male students' enrollment and retention at flagship universities remain a pressing issue in education. While institutional investment in Black men in college has fluctuated over time, recent shifts in universities' allocation of resources for responsive support for vulnerable and historically underrepresented populations have created distinct challenges for Black male students. As such, in this report, I highlight the impact and effectiveness of a former responsive resource seminar (FYSP) on the experiences and outcomes of Black male participants. FYSP was initially designed to support underrepresented students directly; however, in 2024, amid national divestments in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, it was restructured, renamed, and shifted away from its original purpose and procedures. Given the ongoing challenges in Black male enrollment and retention at flagship institutions, this report highlights the enduring value of student-centered retention initiatives.

As such programs continue to be promoted as mechanisms for improving outcomes, this work argues that their effectiveness must be evaluated through the voices, experiences, and realities of Black male collegians themselves. I conclude with recommendations for how colleges and universities can more directly and responsively support historically underrepresented student populations.

# Introduction

Black male collegians, despite their presence and demonstrated academic proficiencies, are continually viewed and understood through largely deficit ideas (Amechi et al., 2023; Brooms, 2020). This context reflects broader challenges facing Black male students across the K-12 higher education nexus. It raises questions of what institutions can and should do to address the inequities that shape their educational experiences. I situate this report within a particularly interesting moment: the nation's commemoration of the 100th Black History Month, occurring against a socio-political backdrop marked by the widespread dismantling of college- and university-based equity and inclusion initiatives. Within this context, the First-Year Resource Seminar (FYRS)—a program established to support the retention of first-year students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds—represents one of many responsive initiatives that have recently been scrutinized. The circumstances surrounding both its creation and its restructuring (into a program compliant with university shifts away from programs considered DEI-centered) underscore the fragility of equity-oriented programming in higher education and demand closer examination and (re)consideration.

The purpose of this work is to articulate how institutions can more responsively support students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized. While the academic success and well-being of all students should remain a core goal of colleges and universities, recognizing the distinct contexts and experiences of diverse student populations is not divisive (as some would suggest); rather, it is essential to cultivating institutional environments that enable success for all. Accordingly, I examine the impact and effectiveness of a former responsive resource seminar on the experiences and outcomes of Black male participants, offering insight into the role such programs play in fostering academic success, belonging, and persistence.



# Relevant Literature:

## Black Men in College

Research on Black male students in higher education has long documented the racialized barriers that undermine their academic success, sense of belonging, and degree completion (Brooms, 2018; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt, 1998, 2004; Harper, 2015). These challenges extend beyond notions of resource gaps or presumed under-preparedness. Instead, Black men in college navigate a myriad of structural, psychosocial, and environmental obstacles shaped by racism, underrepresentation, and institutional neglect. In the context of predominately white institutions (PWI), Black men often also face the burden of “onlyness,” defined as the “psycho-emotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one’s same racial or ethnic group” (Harper et al., 2011, p. 190). Onlyness names the heightened sense of visibility, isolation, and the constant demand to negotiate hostile or exclusionary racial climates. Scholarship that has identified recurrent challenges impeding Black men’s higher education experiences also includes racially hostile campus climates, microaggressions, limited access to resources, social and cultural isolation, and financial strain (Brooms et al., 2015; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Lett & Wright, 2003; Palmer et al., 2014; Solórzano et al., 2000). These barriers are often intensified at PWIs, where Black male students (alongside Black students more broadly) frequently describe the environment as unwelcoming, racially antagonistic, and harmful to their academic and social integration (Allen et al., 1991; Brooms, 2018; Fleming, 1984; Mwangi et al., 2018; Rankin et al., 2005; Strayhorn, 2013). Hostile campus racial climates not only undermine belonging but also hinder persistence, engagement, and performance.



Despite claims of increased diversity (and commitments to diversity) on college campuses, many colleges and universities remain woefully inept in successfully admitting, supporting, and graduating Black men from their institutions (Harper & Harris, 2012). For decades, retention rates for Black men have lagged behind those of their peers, a trend documented consistently across national data sets (Naylor et al., 2015; NCES, 2019). Even at large universities where Black men substantially contribute to revenue-generating athletics programs, their graduation rates remain disproportionately low (Harper, 2012; NCES, 2019). These persistent inequitable outcomes underscore systemic failures rather than individual deficits and should be considered as such.

Although challenge-centered narratives have long dominated research on Black male students, an expanding body of scholarship increasingly emphasizes the supports and resources that promote their success. Peer groups have been shown to offer critical socio-emotional support, academic collaboration, resource sharing, and spaces for affirming identity (Allen, 1992; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Brooms, 2018, 2019; Druery & Brooms, 2019; Harper, 2017; Strayhorn, 2018). These networks often serve as counterspaces where students can process racialized experiences, validate one another, and cultivate strategies for persistence (Harper, 2012). Affirming peer spaces, whether at PWIs or HBCUs, are consistently associated with heightened engagement, confidence, and academic success among Black male collegians (Fries-Britt, 1997, 2012; Flowers, 2012).

Additionally, mentorship and faculty-student relationships can also be effective in supporting the experience and outcomes of Black male students. Black men who develop meaningful connections with faculty and staff often leverage those relationships for academic guidance, personal support, and institutional navigation, all of which support retention and degree attainment (Brooms, 2020; Fries-Britt & White-Lewis, 2020). Such relationships help redress hostile or indifferent institutional environments.

When considering the state of Black men in college and the research examining them, extant literature has documented significant and recurring racial challenges; it also highlights the resilience, agency, and adaptive strategies Black male students employ to succeed. Whether through cultivating peer communities, developing mentoring relationships, or drawing on personal and cultural strengths, Black men demonstrate persistence despite systemic barriers. This body of scholarship calls attention not only to the structural inequities that impede their success but also to the conditions, relationships, and institutional practices that meaningfully support it.

# Researcher Positionality

As a Black male researcher and product of Los Angeles public schools, much of my scholarly work has been shaped by a commitment to understanding and supporting students whose identities and experiences resemble my own. My personal background and proximity to this study's participants serve as important assets, offering insights into the structural and experiential realities that Black men often navigate in higher education. However, I intentionally avoid conflating shared racial identity or similar schooling histories with an assumed or exhaustive understanding of participants' lived experiences. Drawing on Milner (2007) and Watt (2007), I approached the development and implementation of this study with attention to how my identities, experiences, and prior knowledge inform my role as a researcher and shape my interpretation of participants' narratives. I remained attentive to potential biases by rigorously evaluating all immediate and evolving interpretations.

Throughout the research process, I treated participant responses as opportunities to listen deeply and authentically, actively working to suspend judgment, memory, and assumption. My experiences as a Black man who attended a PWI further inform my understanding of the challenges many Black male students face within higher education. I hold both empirical and experiential awareness of the racialized barriers that structure Black men's academic journeys, and I am professionally committed to forwarding resources, programs, and institutional practices that benefit their educational outcomes. My desire to learn from them, to understand the particularities of their experiences, and to represent their voices with care and integrity grounds this work. Ultimately, my investment in this research is animated by a broader commitment to educational equity and a belief in higher education's responsibility to deliver on its promise of access, support, and opportunity. This research extends from that commitment and reflects my effort to balance proximity with objectivity, identity with inquiry, and empathy with rigor.

## Research Approach

For this study, I employed a qualitative methodological approach, including semi-structured focus interviews with Black male FYSP participants. At the close of each FYSP seminar, Black male students were invited to participate in exit focus group interviews to discuss their experience. The following data are from focus groups conducted with Black male seminar students from the FYSP 2016-2021 cohorts. There were 31 participants across six focus groups.

# Findings:

## The Importance of Responsive Spaces

Participants' interview responses highlighted three major strengths of the seminar in supporting their experiences and outcomes: increased sense of campus community, empowerment, and impactful engagement with faculty and graduate students. The excerpts that follow illustrate these themes and demonstrate how the seminar supported Black male participants.

### Campus Community

Participants were adamant that, as first-year students, the FYRS was both a space and an opportunity for them to connect with other Black male students, bolstering the community on their campus. David, a then-freshman student, explained that the seminar “created a support system that is really great, and they make sure you know that all the problems that you’re going through right now, they went through as well.” As David explained, enrolling in the seminar provided him with a community-like support system of peers he had not yet formed or encountered at his university. Similarly, Amir, a first-year transfer student and cohort mate of David, shared:

For me, I felt definitely recognized by the other Black students there. It’s that recognition that helped me feel a part of a community. You know, being at community college, I was the Treasurer for two years, so everybody from the president of the school knew me to the students. I was always engaged, I was involved. Now, coming here, being a commuter student, living off campus, and travelling, it can be hard. But I knew I belonged here once people started recognizing my face, and they would say hello or what’s up while I’m walking in between classes. Having people see you and they know you by first name. I think, for me, that’s what made me feel like I belonged, and it wasn’t until the seminar that I felt that.

Amir provides an interesting evaluation of the program, one that complements David’s sentiments and echoes that the seminar provided him with a sense of community. Moreover, Amir details his experience as a transfer student, moving from a campus where he was widely known to one where he felt isolated. However, given the space in FYRS, he was able to foster a campus community that alleviated these feelings of loneliness. I also read Amir’s use of the word “see,” not merely as visibility on campus, but as validation, being recognized and affirmed by other Black male students who acknowledge and value his presence. David and Amir’s description of an increased sense of campus community was shared across Black male seminar participants.

## Empowerment

In addition to an increased campus community, Black male FYRS participants also reported becoming more empowered as students on their campus. Particularly, Jaden explained that he rarely spoke in his other classes because he worried about how his peers might perceive him, an anxiety many Black male collegians experience. However, in the seminar, he described cultivating a sense of empowerment, demonstrated one way through his class participation, noting:

I never stopped talking in seminar because there was no judgment. Most people can relate to what you are saying, and the content was on point. So, participation and attendance was never a problem for me there. I looked forward to going every week because I had a lot to say.

Jaden credits his willingness and enthusiasm to participate to being in a space with other Black men who shared similar experiences. He pointedly describes the seminar as judgment-free, underscoring that (unlike other spaces on his campus) it allowed him to engage openly with his distinct experiences as a Black male without fear of dismissal or invalidation. Jaden's evaluation exemplifies a commonly identified aspect of Black male participants' experiences in the seminar: it created conditions in which they felt confident, affirmed, and safe enough to express their ideas without fear of judgment, thereby strengthening their sense of agency and self-efficacy.

## Engagement with Faculty and Graduate Students

The final impactful element of the seminar, as described by Black male participants, was the opportunity to engage with Black graduate students, faculty, staff, and members of the broader campus community. Kyle explained:

I feel like the seminar opened another gateway to different Black students. Not just the Black students who are always involved in campus activities, but also sports members, Black professionals, Black high officials on campus, and Black faculty. This allowed me to see how many Black people I truly related to.

Presentations, guest lectures, and panels that introduced students to the larger on-campus Black community were core components of the seminar. As Kyle emphasized, most Black students at his university have limited exposure to the full diversity of Black presence on campus. Through the seminar, however, participants were afforded a unique opportunity to engage with individuals who understand their experiences, including Black students, faculty, staff, and professionals across multiple departments, roles, and levels of the institution.

# Discussion

In examining the aspects of FYRS that Black male participants identified as most significant, interview responses identify and illuminate the elements that made the program responsive to them. Consistent with existing research on the retention of Black male students in higher education, analysis reveals that community, connection, validation, and networks are not merely aspirational or lofty ideals, but central mechanisms shaping the effectiveness of institutional resources and the experiences and outcomes of Black male collegians. Although these elements are not easily quantifiable, they are repeatedly documented in the literature, including this study, as named by Black male students themselves as defining factors in their academic journeys. This research revisits the importance and effectiveness of responsive supports for vulnerable student populations on college campuses and universities, specifically Black male collegians. A greater sense of campus community, empowerment, and impactful engagement with faculty and graduate students were identified as outcomes of the FYRS program for Black male participants. This impact signals the (enduring) promise and potential of programs like FYRS to meet the needs of underrepresented students attending colleges and universities.

In this research, I leverage qualitative data to emphasize the importance and utility of responsive programs for Black male collegians, a message applicable to other vulnerable student populations as well. The challenges facing these student groups have not disappeared, yet there has been a substantial decline and elimination of resources and programs designed to address them. As students, university officials, and other stakeholders consider the state of responsive supports on college and university campuses, this work reminds us of the need and impact of responsive supports, whether they are like FYRS or differ.



# Recommendations

As colleges and universities (hopefully continue to) work to strengthen resources serving increasingly diverse campus communities, the programmatic recommendations below are intended to inform the effective design and implementation of programs like FYRS that promote inclusion and excellence.

## Establish Safe and Brave Space Classroom Guidelines

Students consistently emphasized the importance of clear, safe, and brave space guidelines in fostering meaningful engagement. For many, the seminar was the first classroom where instructors intentionally cultivated a caring environment in which Black male undergraduates felt secure enough to share their experiences as marginalized students. To replicate this impact at other PWIs, educators and administrators should deliberately establish classroom norms and practices that encourage open, critical reflection without fear of dismissal or judgment. When students feel safe to speak honestly, engagement deepens and learning benefits everyone.

## Tailor Content Specifically to Incoming Students

Students in the study were made aware of numerous resources, opportunities, and organizations designed to support their outcomes and goals. Across cohorts, students expressed gratitude for learning about support services, but first-year and transfer students alike said they wished they had known about them sooner. It is recommended that universities tailor the course to address the many needs of incoming students, specifically, needs that consider raced and gendered interactions and their impact on student experience and retention.

## Expose Participants to Community-centered Graduate Students, Faculty, and Staff

Students consistently highlighted the impact of engaging with graduate students, faculty, and staff—particularly Black male professionals. These interactions strengthened their sense of belonging, increased campus engagement, and reinforced high academic expectations through shared experiences and mentorship. Given the limited opportunities Black male students often have to connect with Black professionals at PWIs, institutions should intentionally create structured opportunities for cross-level mentorship and community building. Introducing first-year students to graduate students and professionals not only supports undergraduate persistence but may also increase interest in graduate study and education careers, helping address underrepresentation across higher education.

# Conclusion

I wrote this report to revisit the value and utility of responsive supports for Black male collegians at a moment when many such programs are being questioned, reduced, or eliminated. Through this mixed-methods examination of a first-year resource seminar that no longer exists, I found clear evidence that these supports go beyond symbolic gestures or supplemental supports and helped students actively cultivate critical academic and navigational skills early in their college experience. Black men who participated in the seminar earned higher cumulative GPAs than their peers and, equally important, reported feeling seen, supported, and empowered within an institutional context that often marginalizes them. The seminar functioned not only as an academic resource but also as a space where students cultivated community, developed confidence, and engaged meaningfully with Black graduate students, faculty, and staff. These outcomes were the result of intentional design and responsive community, not chance.

At the same time, this research invites readers to grapple with how such work can be sustained in the current socio-political climate in the United States. Amid political pressure, legal scrutiny, and intensifying public skepticism toward equity-oriented efforts, programs like FYSP have become increasingly vulnerable, even as the conditions that necessitate them remain unchanged. I offer this study not as a nostalgic account of a lost program, but as a challenge and invitation to institutional leaders. Black male students continue to navigate racialized challenges on campuses, whether or not institutions are willing to name them. When responsive supports are dismantled, the burden shifts back onto students, and the cost manifests in diminished opportunities and belonging. The question, then, is not whether colleges and universities can find ways to support Black men under current constraints, but whether they are willing to do so with intention, courage, and accountability.

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