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# CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

## Trauma, Environmental Stressors, and the African-American College Student: Research, Practice, and HBCUs

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*African-Americans from under-served backgrounds are more likely than other racial and ethnic groups, including Asians, Hispanics and Whites, to be exposed to traumatic events (Alim, et al., 2006; Porsche, Fortuna, Lin, & Alegria, 2011). Overcoming a singular or continuous traumatic event can have a long-term impact on the socio-emotional development and academic performance of students from high-risk communities. Traditionally, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) provide nurturing environments, which insulate students from a variety of external stressors including relationships with family members. However, educating students from under-served communities is difficult. HBCUs educate a higher percentage of African American students from under-served communities in comparison to predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Richards & Awokoya, 2012; Walker, 2014). Unfortunately, there is little research that examines how traumatic events have an impact on African-American students attending HBCUs.*

### BACKGROUND

College students are exposed to a variety of traumas. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2000), trauma is a “direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the

physical integrity of another person” (p. 463). Examples of traumas include: sexual assault, domestic violence, physical assault and natural disasters. Providing support to students exposed to a single or multiple traumatic events is important. Frequently, survivors or witnesses struggle to cope after a trauma, which can lead to maladaptive behaviors including self-injury and drug and alcohol abuse. Without family, school or peer support, students’ academic performance and social relationships suffer.

A study by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2011) determined that more than half of the respondents diagnosed with a mental illness struggled to cope while attending a post-secondary institution. The figure is troubling considering that HBCUs educate a higher percentage of African-Americans from under-served communities in comparison to PWIs. Ensuring HBCUs have the resources to combat mental illness is linked to their long-term success. In spite of obstacles like mental illness, HBCUs continue to play an important role educating African-American students. Ignoring problems associated with mental health would hamper efforts to increase the six-year graduation rates for African-American students.



Examining the experiences of students from HBCUs is important because they produce 18% of African-American college graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Determining what impact, if any, trauma has on students at HBCUs could help school administrators, counseling centers, faculty and residence life staff develop a template to address specific mental health problems including depression and anxiety (Boyratz, Horne, Owens & Armstrong, 2013). African-Americans, particularly males, rarely seek support from mental health practitioners because of cultural mistrust (Terrell & Terrell, 1981; Williams & Justice, 2010). Developing programs that encourage African-American students exposed to traumatic events to speak with counselors could lower attrition rates at HBCUs (Sharkin, 2004).

## THE STUDY

Identifying policies and programs that increase academic performance, retention and graduation rates are vital to the future of HBCUs and their students. This research brief examines the experiences of 227 African-American undergraduate students at a public HBCU located in the Mid-Atlantic. Three research questions guided the study: (a) What are the number of exposures to trauma, the frequency of exposure to traumatic events, and the age of exposure to trauma as measured by the Trauma History Questionnaire (THQ) for African-American undergraduate students attending a public HBCU? (b) Is there a statistically significant relationship between the number of exposures to trauma, the frequency of exposure to traumatic events, and grade point average for African-American students attending a public HBCU? and (c) Is there a statistically significant predictive relationship between the number of exposures to trauma, the frequency of exposure to traumatic events, and grade point average for African-American students attending a public HBCU?

## MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS THAT WORK

*Post-secondary institutions throughout the United States are facing increasing pressure to meet the needs of students struggling to overcome environmental stressors including trauma. According to a report by the American College Health Association (2013) more than 30% of students reported feeling depressed. Ensuring students have access to comprehensive mental health support can help students cope with traumas including intimate partner violence and sexual assault.*

*Two organizations have developed programming that should be replicated at HBCUs. The **Jed and Clinton Health Matters Campus Program** provides professional development, program evaluation and technical assistance to colleges and universities. Their multi-faceted approach focuses on student mental health, academic performance, wellness and identifying students at risk for depression and suicide. Similar to the Campus Program, **Active Minds** is a national organization with college affiliates throughout North America. Active Minds encourages students to confront mental illness by providing training and support.*

This study used Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Bioecological Systems Theory as the theoretical framework to examine how traumatic experiences affect the academic performance of students from a public HBCU. The researcher administered the THQ and collected demographic information from participants including grade point averages, gender and academic classification.

The university's Office of Institutional Research used a random sampling procedure to identify 2,000 African-American students. From a sample of 2,000 students, a total of 232 responded to the survey and 227 completed the survey. Participants volunteered for the study and were not under any pressure to complete the survey. Each participant was contacted via email (provided by the Office of Institutional Research), which included a recruitment letter and link to the survey. After logging on to the website, participants were asked to read and provide electronic consent before proceeding to the survey.

### Six Measures of Trauma for the Study

1. Age of initial exposure to crime-related event
2. Frequency of exposure to crime-related event(s)
3. Age of initial exposure to general disaster and trauma-related event
4. Frequency of exposure to general disaster and trauma-related event(s)
5. Age of initial exposure to physical and sexual trauma-related event, and
6. Frequency of exposure to physical and sexual trauma-related event(s).

### Participant Responses to Open-Ended Questions

*“I experienced two earthquakes in my life of at least magnitude 5.0. Also experienced two major hurricanes in my life. Each time was very traumatic—especially the earthquakes (the one in California).”*

*“Someone came up to me at gunpoint to rob me for everything that I had. I refused to give them anything and he pistol whipped me and said, “If you do not give me your money and shoes I will shoot you.” I will never forget this day.”*

*“One time when I was going to school, I found a woman who was just killed that morning on the roadside.”*

## RESULTS

Participants' demographic profile data, including age and gender, are included in Figures 1 and 2. In addition, Figure 3 includes the percentage of participants who responded to a question examining their exposure to a traumatic event. Most of the participants who responded were female, and the vast majority of respondents were in the 18-24 age range. Of these, over a third have experienced a situation in which they felt their life or well-being was in jeopardy.

Participants' responses to the study's open-ended questions (see pg. 5) reflect the layered experiences of participants. These responses demonstrate the variety of traumas HBCU students may come across, from natural disasters to violent crime and death. Supporting HBCU students exposed to various stressors is critical. Students with limited familial or institutional support could face significant barriers including feeling isolated from peers and faculty members.

From the data collected, grade point average was not correlated with exposure to trauma. The study found: (a) participants were exposed to a variety of traumas, with exposure to death and natural disasters being the most prevalent; (b) there was no relationship between the six measures of trauma and college grade point average; and (c) none of the six measures of trauma were predictive of college grade point average.

The study did not examine the effect of the HBCU environment itself on the trauma-related experiences of African-American students. The findings simply suggest that students from HBCUs are exposed to traumatic events. However, the lack of correlation between college grade point average and trauma suggests that students' intrinsic qualities such as resiliency may be mediating traumas' impact on HBCU student academic performance. This speaks to how crucial it is for HBCUs to cultivate environments that mitigate the traumatic experiences of their students.

FIGURE 1: Distribution of participants' self-reported gender.

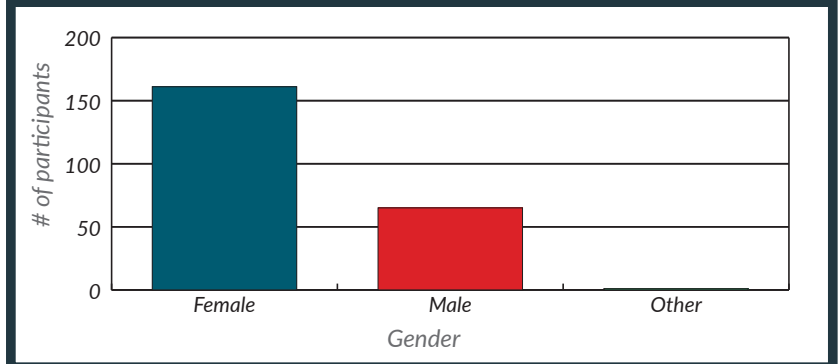


FIGURE 2: Distribution of participants' self-reported ages.

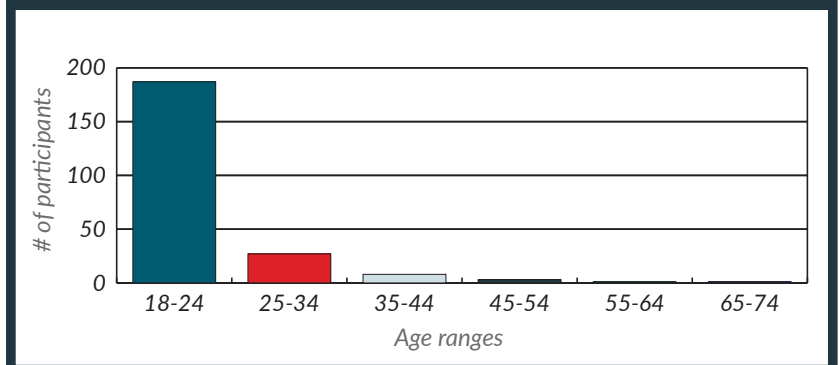
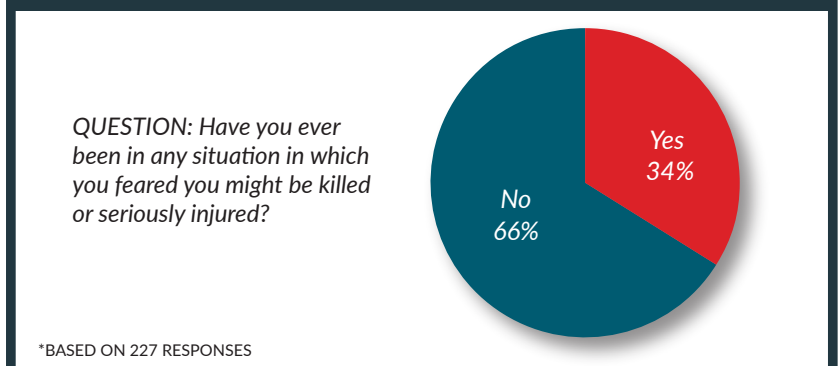


FIGURE 3: Participants' responses to a sample question regarding trauma.



## THE CHALLENGE

HBCUs that provide comprehensive support services should continue to monitor students struggling to overcome traumatic events. Institutions with limited services should consider increasing funding to counseling centers. Increasing awareness through campus-wide initiatives would help students suffering from depression or anxiety. Freshman orientation and other campus events provide HBCUs with an opportunity to highlight resources and mentorship programs available to students struggling to overcome a traumatic experience. However, destigmatizing mental health within the African-American community will require a coordinated effort from school administrators, faculty and residence life staff.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

*HBCUs should consider implementing the following policies and programs to ensure students have access to comprehensive mental health support services:*

- *HBCUs should offer to screen new and returning students for depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).*
- *HBCUs should develop webinars, weekly/monthly events designed to destigmatize mental health within the African-American community.*
- *HBCUs would benefit from coordinating with local hospitals and mental health clinics to ensure students have access to services outside of campus to talk with mental health professionals.*
- *HBCUs should coordinate with local, state and federal mental health organizations to educate administrators, faculty and auxiliary staff on the importance of recognizing students struggling to overcome traumatic events.*
- *HBCU administrators should consider developing a 24-hour hotline that provides students with immediate access to a mental health practitioner.*



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