

## **The Parental Investment of First-Generation African American Rural College Graduates in Cultivating College Student Success**

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This qualitative study examines the parental investment strategies of first-generation African American rural college graduates in cultivating college student success. Extant literature has demonstrated that the role of the family is necessary to support the college student and that the investment of the parent is paramount to student college completion. With more African American first-generation college students earning degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), it is necessary to place the spotlight on how college-going families are created within newly educated Black parental cohorts. Recent studies discuss student-faculty mentoring, college satisfaction, institution-wide activities, and bridge programming that seek to prepare the underprepared (Harris, 2010; Strayhorn, 2010; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007), but more dialogue is needed that detail the total investment rural parents are making to cultivate positive college outcomes. Although educational attainment is an important goal for African American rural residents, research detailing strategies that cultivated student college completion among this population is needed to fill gaps in the literature.

The objectives of this study were to uncover the parental investment strategies and educational beliefs of African American first-generation rural college graduates and discover how these strategies work together to create second-generation college graduates. Based on the objectives, two research questions were framed to identify parental investment strategies that parents impart to ensure success of their children:

- (a) What parental investment strategies do first-generation African American rural parents use to cultivate college success in their children?
- (b) In what specific ways do these parents transfer their educational beliefs to ensure college completion?

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study utilized concepts from Lieberman's Transgenerational Theory (TGT) and characteristics from Parental Investment literature. It was designed to give voice to the African American rural population. The concepts of language, bonding and family

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evolution within TGT and communication, involvement, cognitive/intellectual stimulation and personal endorsement in parental investment framed this research in an attempt to contribute new knowledge to the field of higher education. According to Lieberman (1979), there are critical periods of learning in childhood during which acquired behaviors, beliefs, and practices are not only transferred but also molded into the child. Specifically, TGT deals with the rules that “govern the communication of acquired practices, behaviors and beliefs between generations” (p. 347). According to Henry et al. (2011) and Adelman (2005), parental investment in the child’s education directly affects the child’s educational outcomes “at both the individual and school district level among youth residing in rural communities and towns in the U.S.” (Adelman, 2005, p. 1164). Interview questions were based on the fusion of the two concepts.

## **Method**

This study utilized qualitative research methods for data collection and analysis. A sample of rural African American first-generation college graduates (FGCGs) with children who have completed college was deemed appropriate to gain information to address the research questions and to understand how a college-going family is created in rural areas. “Sophisticated understandings of how diverse populations of students navigate their ways to and through higher education are warranted” (Harper, 2007, p. 56).

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants (Merriam, 2009). The following criteria were used for inclusion in the study: (a) African American; (b) former or current resident of Rural Area 1 or Rural Area 2 (former residents include parents who raised their children in the area but no longer lived in the area); and, (c) a FGCG and second-generation college graduate from any 4-year public or private college or university. Participants were invited to refer other residents of the area who met the criteria. Each family group included parents (mother and/or father) and at least one adult child (male or female). Data collected through interviews and documents were analyzed utilizing content analysis. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and their adult offspring (12 participants total). This small sample was chosen to increase depth of understanding and reduce generalizability by allowing the process differences in each household to emerge (Patton, 2002). In an effort to collect thick and rich data, the participants were interviewed in their own homes or workplaces, in a study room in the Freedmen University (pseudonym) library, via telephone, and/or via email.

Participants were selected from two southeast rural areas within the same county. The 2010 census recorded that the population of the county was 43,205, of whom 25% were African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). As of 2010, Rural Area 1 had a population of 5,770, of whom 39% were African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b). Rural Area 2 had a population of 5,576, of whom 89% were African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). Recruitment began by gaining access to a local church and members of all nine of the African American Greek-Letter Organization alumni chapters (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority,

Inc., and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.) in the area. The African American church was selected due to its years of strength and support for the African American community and its promotion of education (Shankle, 2009).

## Results

The results of this study communicated the parental investment strategies and educational beliefs of this population. Data analysis revealed six themes: (a) Catch Them Early, (b) “Set the Tone,” (c) “Keep Them Busy,” (d) “Don’t Let Them ‘Break Rank,’” (e) “Encourage Advancement,” and (f) “Tell the Generations.”

A review of these themes suggests that success was realized through the beliefs of the parents and the strategies that they implemented to help their children to be successful. The participants created strategies and a set of beliefs concerning the value of higher education to help their children discover their own paths to their individual success. Success in general was not the goal; rather, success was measured according to the child’s own interests, talents, and skills. The parents did not feel that they “owned” their children and did not approach promoting college success for their own benefit or to be able to brag of their children’s accomplishments as a result of their influence. Surprisingly, most of the participants in this study replied that they could have received more support from middle and high school staff. The counselors failed to promote a variety of colleges (especially predominantly White institutions) and assisted sparingly in the college application process. The participants reported feeling counselors were biased based on their promotion of workforce and trade programs over college programming.

The results also show that the parents were not considered to be at-risk as the term is defined in first-generation college student literature. The first-generation college graduates were reared in safe, stable two-parent homes, mostly encouraged to attend college by their parents, siblings, or peers. In addition, they demonstrated high motivation to succeed. Based on the findings of this study and the need to craft a comprehensive definition for parental investment, it is recommended that parental investment in college student success be defined as *a combination of support mechanisms, fostered by parents and other investors, involving the consistent communication of a set of beliefs, early exposure, a positive family dynamic, and the utilization of community resources with the intent to cultivate college success in a child.*

## Implications

The first-generation graduates in this study parented second-generation college graduates armed with a solid foundation of support, firm belief, values of success, advanced degrees, and the intent to transfer their beliefs to their children and other family members. Thus, a college-going culture was established within these family units. Although this study provides insight into the participants’ experiences and presents feasible recommendations to assist other parents and academic institutions, it also points to areas where further research is needed. Ten families cannot serve as one voice for the entire rural population; gathering more information can inform studies concerning

colleges and universities and family studies on this topic. Five recommendations for research are presented as a result of observations made during this study:

- (a) Inquire further into the parental investment strategies of first-generation African American rural college graduates.
- (b) Study and compare the parental investment strategies and educational beliefs of African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic rural FGCGs.
- (c) Examine and compare the parental investment strategies and college choice decisions of African American families living in rural college towns versus in other rural areas.
- (d) Compare the parental investment strategies of rural versus urban FGCGs.
- (e) Study the parental investment strategies of rural college-educated African American two-parent and single-parent families.

Based on these recommendations, I suggest that the combination of TGT and parental investment strategies created a desired behavior or return on investment (college success). However, the parents in this study were more successful than K-12 schools in their investment strategies because they did not allow their child to feel unsupported at any time. Unfortunately, this means that the schools in the rural communities failed to support the preparedness of the students. Therefore, it is necessary to address ways in which colleges and schools can collaborate with parents and their children to ensure college success.

Although this study centered on parental investment, the fact that K-12 schools were less supportive in fostering a college-going culture could not be ignored. The participants rejected their counselors' advice and went on to earn degrees, because their parents overcompensated for the lack of school support. It is necessary for middle and high schools to service students individually and lend support to experienced parents and lead inexperienced parents. In addition, colleges can alter prospective student programming to cater to the offspring of college graduates. Tweaking the programming and conversations for prospective students with varying levels of support might affect persistence and completion greatly. The results of this study suggest the obligation to support college students involves a balance of parental and institutional support.

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