

# Black Males' Perceptions of the Work–College Balance: The Impact of Employment on Academic Success in the Community College

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## Abstract

This study discusses the impact of employment on academic success among Black male students in the community college, from students' perspectives. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 28 participants from a southwestern community college. Findings from this study illustrated that students, in general, discussed employment as a barrier to their academic success. In particular, students noted the difficulty in adjusting to new working schedules, being too tired to fully apply themselves to their studies, and tenuous relationships with supervisors/employers. Recommendations for preparing students for and facilitating a successful work–college balance are extended.

## Keywords

college, Black men, education, masculinity

The rising costs of a college education, the growing socioeconomic diversity of the student population, students' escalating lifestyle expectations, and perhaps shifting attitudes among parents about paying for their children's education have resulted in students . . . working more than ever before.

—King (1999, p. 17).

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As adeptly stated by King a decade ago, numerous factors affect whether students work while attending college. In an era marked by economic downturn (the great recession), increasing costs for financing a college education, it seems that her comments still have applicability. Today, it is almost a foregone conclusion that the vast majority of collegians will work while attending college (Choy & Berker, 2003; McMillion, 2005). For students attending the community college, this circumstance is no different, where they must strive to balance their academic lives with other commitments while acculturating to the campus environment (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). This process is the focus of this manuscript, examining how students negotiate what scholars refer to as the work/life/study balance (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). The work/life/study balance deals with the ways in which students' work/employment, personal lives, and collegiate experiences intersect in ways which affect each other area. In particular, this manuscript is interested in the intersection of work and study habits in among Black male students in a community college.

The authors' focus on this intersection is a result of extant research that suggests that employment can have a positive effect on Black male persistence in the community college (Shannon, 2006; Wood, 2012); this notion is somewhat of a divergence from other research that implies a negative relationship between employment and student success (Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2006). Further research indicates that Black males' perceptions of employment may be the determining factor in how it affects their collegiate success. For example, Wood, Hilton, and Lewis (2011) using data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) examined students Black male community college students perceptions on the relationship between employment and their academic success. They found that employment was perceived by Black males as a positive contributor to their achievement when their work correlated with what they were learning in the classroom, provided them with relevant work experience, and did not affect the courses they could take. However, they found that employment was perceived as negative factor on their academics when students had to work to pay for their educational expenses. These findings connote a more nuanced relationship between employment and work may be largely driven by students' perceptions. With this in mind, the following section will describe the purpose and rationale for this study as it relates to Black males in 2-year community colleges.

## Study Purpose

The article discusses select findings from a larger study of Black<sup>1</sup> male achievement<sup>2</sup> in the community college. In the larger study, students described factors which they perceived as affecting their academic success. These factors were grouped into several primary constructs (e.g., personal factors, institutional factors, academic factors, and psychological factors) with multiple themes identified within each construct. For example, situated within personal factors were themes relevant to the personal lives of students which were external to the institution, similar to what previous scholars have termed *background*, *defining*, and *environmental variables* (e.g., Bean & Metzner,

1985; Mason, 1994, 1998). Located within this construct were themes including transportation concerns, life stability, familial support, students' finances, spirituality and religiosity, and external peer support. Also, situated within this construct was employment. Many students in the larger study discussed the role of employment, particularly jobs which were external to the institution, in affecting their academic success. This manuscript reports on findings specific to this theme. As such, the purpose of this study is to delineate Black males' responses and perceptions regarding the affect of employment on academic success at one southwestern community college. To provide context to this discussion of employment, the next section discusses previous research on Black males, employment, and the collegiate experience.

## **Relevant Literature**

In recent years, scholars have become increasingly focused on Black males (Harper, 2004, 2005; Harper & Gasman, 2008; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer & Davis, 2012; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010) and masculine identity (Harris, 2008, 2010) in postsecondary education. This study is situated within this base, with particular focus given to the distinctive educational realities of Black male students in community colleges.

Given the dearth of literature specific to employment among Black male collegians, this study's findings and recommendations provide needed insight on the work-college balance. Whereas more is known about how the number of hours worked per week affects students' achievement, persistence, and graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993), less is known about the intricacies of "how" work affects college, particularly among Black male students. Moreover, this study is especially relevant given that the vast majority of Black males work while attending college. In fact, even excluding students on work study or with assistantships, 71.3% of Black males work while attending college. Moreover, 13.6% and 17.9% of Black males at associate's-granting institutions work between 1 and 15 and 16 and 25 hr per week, while 68.5% work 26 or more hours per week (NPSAS, 2008).

Most students will work while attending college (Choy & Berker, 2003; McMillion, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Research from Perna, Cooper, and Li (2006) supports this notion. Their research indicated that the average public 2-year collegian works extensively (27.7 hr for dependents and 34.9 hr for independents). The majority of students work to pay their tuition, fees, and living expenses (55.7% for dependents and 77.4% for independents) during college as opposed to being employed for relevant job experience or spending money.

Although some scholars have suggested that there is no relationship between time spent working on academic performance (Noni & Hudson, 2006), the vast majority of literature proffers contrary assertions. In general, there is evidence to suggest that the greater number of hours that students work, the more likely they are to reduce their course loads (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005) and the less likely they are to persist (Sorey & Duggan, 2008). Perna et al.'s (2006) research connotes that the more hours worked per week, the greater the likelihood that students will perceive employment as

having a negative effect on their grades. Prior research has suggested that this negative effect is a by-product of decreased time available to spend on campus or studying (Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Dundes & Marx, 2006). Likewise, Tinto (1993) noted that external obligations (such as employment) serve to limit students ability to fully integrate into the campus setting by reducing time needed or studying, using academic resources, meeting with faculty, and establishing bonds with other students. Correspondingly, Bean and Metzner (1985), in their foundational attrition model for non-traditional college students, also emphasized the importance of employment on persistence. They noted that students who work more hours per week are less likely to persist than students who do not. Dundes and Marx (2006) found that work leads to higher levels of stress among students. At less than 10 hr per week, only 19% of working students believed that work increased their stress. However, at 10 to 19 hr and 20 or more hours, work was reported by students as leading to increased stress at 70% and 80%.

However, although much research suggests that long work hours can lead to achievement and stress concerns, working part-time during college may be beneficial. In fact, some studies have found that certain levels of employment can lead to greater student outcomes (King, 2002). For instance, Dundes and Marx (2006) examined performance rates among students who work 10 to 19 hr per week off campus at a small liberal arts college. They found that these students studied more and enjoyed higher grades than students who worked less hours, more hours, and did not work at all. Similarly, King (2002) found that students who worked more than 15 hr a week experienced lower graduation rates. However, King found that students who worked fewer than 15 hr per week had higher graduation rates than students who were not employed. These findings suggest that there may be an optimal balance between work and college where *some* employment is more beneficial than too much or none.

An even more nuanced view of employment is extended by Orszag, Orszag, and Whitmore (2001). Their research focuses on the nature of the job held as well as the time spent balancing employment and college. They noted that working during college has differential affects on students. For instance, they note that on-campus employment, especially in positions which can serve to foster students' interest in future academic endeavors and provide relevant work experiences, is beneficial. However, they note that on-campus employment opportunities are more limited, as the vast majority of students must work off campus. Similarly, Tinto's (1993) research suggests that working on campus can actually serve as a benefit to the students, facilitating their integration into a colleges' academic and social setting by fostering bonds with institutional agents (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators), other students, and have great access to learn about campus policies, procedures, and services. Literature on Black males indicates that they often experience high levels of unemployment, both in college and in wider society (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2002; Jordan, 2008; Waddell, 2004; Wilkins, 2005), a circumstance amplified by the current recession (Cawthorne, 2009). Black males with lower levels of educational attainment are more likely to have limited work options and earn lower wages (Harvey, 2008; Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007). Thus, the type of employment that Black males

who are also college students have *may* be differential to that of their peers. There is very little research on Black male students in the community college (Bush & Bush, 2005, 2010; Wood, 2010; Wood & Turner, 2011). Even fewer studies have examined the intersection of work and college. Although Mason (1994, 1998) did not find employment to have a significant relationship on student success, Shannon (2006) indicated that work was a barrier to persistence, especially when students had work schedules which they did not perceive to be flexible. The next section will discuss the methods used in this study.

## **Method**

The majority of studies which have examined employment and achievement have used quantitative methods (e.g., King, 1999; Lowe & Gayle, 2007; Noni & Hudson, 2006; Perna et al., 2006; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003; Wood et al., 2011). Although these studies provide important insight to the nexus of work and achievement, providing context to the findings is the focus of this qualitative research. This study sought to serve as a platform to examine the voices and socio-cultural realities of marginalized populations (Flick, 2006).

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using pre-planned probes with 28 African American male students. In this research, the semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of predetermined questions that allowed the researchers to account for unplanned conversational directions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Each interview was conducted on campus at Star Valley Community College (SVCC; a pseudonym). The interviews lasted about an hour long and were audio recorded. Prior to each interview, participants were given a blank sheet of paper. On this paper, they were asked to depict, in any way they desired, factors which they believe affected their success in college. This process of encouraging participants to depict the relationship between factors and a given phenomenon is referred to as unstructured concept mapping (Zanting, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2003). This approach provided participants with additional time to reflect upon the study topic before the interview. These data also served as supplemental data to provide enhanced validity in the analytical and write-up processes.

To participate in the study, participants must (a) be attending or formerly attended (within 2 years) the community college where data collection took place, and (b) be at least 18 years of age. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling via direct contact on campus. Data were also collected via snowball sampling. Using this technique, participants referred other potential interviewees to the project (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Potential participants were contacted and recruited for an interview. All interviews took place at the research site, SVCC. SVCC is a mid-to-large size community college with 13,000 students. The research site had a high concentration of students of color, 45%. The remaining percentage representation of students was

White 39% and Other 16%. Although there were more than 1,000 African American students on this campus, only 148 were African American males. Therefore, the interviews conducted in this study represent nearly 20% of the entire Black male population enrolled at the research site. SVCC is a minority serving institution (MSI), a federal designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) as Latina/o students represent more than 25% of the college population (O'Brien & Zudak, 1998).

### *Data Analysis and Validity*

Interview audios were transcribed verbatim and coded using the systematic data analysis (SDA) technique (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1984). SDA allows for researchers to generate predetermined research questions, hypotheses, and goals. Data are then guided by a strong theoretical or conceptual base. In the larger study, Harold Mason's (1994, 1998) conceptual model of urban Black male persistence served as a guiding framework for initial fields for investigation. Using SDA, data were coded in two phases. In the first phase, basic codes are identified through a reading and analysis of the transcripts. In the second phase, a more advanced coding process occurs where connections are drawn between emergent themes. In advanced analytic stages, visual displays are used to confirm and negotiate findings using a process where postulation of concepts and confirming of conclusions occur. To enhance the validity of this study's findings, member checking was used. In this process, preliminary findings were presented to a focus group comprised of study participants. Participants discussed the findings and provided additional insight on points of interest with a general goal of verifying and/or challenging conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Findings**

Employment emerged as an important theme in the larger study of factors affecting academic success among Black males in the community college. Many participants spoke about the relationship between employment and academic success. Although a handful discussed employment as a positive factor to academic success, the vast majority described employment as a negative factor. In general, students were cognizant of the difficulty of having a work/school balance, recognizing that meeting the demands and responsibilities of both was sometimes troublesome. Responses from students who spoke about employment as a negative factor affecting their achievement had strikingly similar comments in three general areas, referred to as sub-themes.

First, students noted that transitioning into new employment required an adjustment period, during which their work schedules negatively affected their ability to fully dedicate themselves to their studies. Second, many students noted that they worked multiple part-time jobs, late night schedules, and physically demanding jobs (e.g., moving boxes, stocking shelves, and club security). As a result, students were often "drained" by the end of their shifts, which negatively affected the time needed to sleep, study and complete homework. Third, students discussed poor relations with

supervisors; these tenuous relationships were usually a by-product of students' school commitments as they conflicted with workplace expectations and demands. Inevitably, these three factors negatively affected students' performance in individual courses. What follows is an in-depth description of each, with selected comments to substantiate each sub-theme. After these sub-themes are presented, perspectives from students who perceived work as a positive factor to their success are presented. Within each of these sub-themes, we interweave research literature that can help in contextualizing student comments.

### *Adjusting to a New Schedule*

Regardless of whether participants perceived work as a positive or negative force on their academics, students who spoke about employment noted that beginning a new job was difficult. In particular, students stated that getting into a routine which provided adequate balance between work and school commitments was challenging. This was exacerbated by learning new processes, workplace micro-cultures, personalities, and procedures. For example, Michael noted that he had "a full plate," referring to the fact that he worked full-time and attended school full-time. Although not specific about the nature of his employment, he stated that he worked in various business-related positions. He noted that work affected his academic success, when asked how this occurred, he answered,

I think, I think for me, it's been more of a reality, then trying to say that it's a bad concept, you know, I think I should be doing something for awhile. The toughest part is the beginning. Then once you realize that that is just how it is, then you kind of get to the concept. It is what it is, and you just have to go.

Referring to his job as a nursing assistant, Micah echoed Michael's comments, stating, "I mean when you try something new, it's always gonna be hard in the beginning, but if you keep pullin' through it like I am . . . you pull through it, it's gonna eventually come through real well." These comments illustrate students understanding the transition challenge into a new work environment will curb. There remarks also reflect their cognizance of the energy that it takes to do so. This is reflected in their comments "'you just have to go' and 'you keep pullin' through."

Mark also described the difficulty in transitioning to a new job. Mark worked as a maintenance technician for a housing complex and as a bouncer at local clubs. In his interview, he discussed the intricacies of his work and school schedule, noting that starting a new job was stressful. Emphasizing his role as a maintenance technician, he connected this stress to his performance in the classroom. After noting that starting a new job was difficult on school, he stated,

It is hard at first, cause your readjusting, you have to learn directions, you're on edge, you might think you know what you're doing, but every time you change your job you have to learn. Like, when you first get a job, I still had to impress the managers, everyone wants everything done in a certain way, to make sure that all managers are all happy,

everybody wants it done their way, you have to master those things that they want, if you do it wrong, it creates problems. It creates stress, to do everything right. [You're] worried about being fired, and that stress comes out in school, sometimes I'll be going to school, I can't concentrate, I'm thinking about the job, something I did wrong or forgot . . . but after your done trying to figure it out and how to adjust and how people want it, then you're doing the same thing over and over again, so it's easy.

Mark went on to note that he had three managers at his job. He stated that their attitudes and expectations varied greatly, some desiring certain work processes to be conducted differently than others. He said that part of his stress was not simply keeping one manager content, but realizing that he had to understand the dispositions of three managers, all of which had control over his employment. As illustrated in his remarks, Mark noted that the pressure associated with transitioning into a new job subsides after an adjustment period. When this occurred, less stress was associated with work and added attentiveness to his studies could occur. In all, students in the study noted that becoming acclimated to a new work schedule is more difficult in the beginning. However, as students become more comfortable with the personalities and processes at work, their jobs can become easier, reducing the negative impact that work can have on school. Unfortunately, given the often transient nature of the employment opportunities available to Black males (especially during an economic recession) adjusting to new work settings occurred often.

As evidenced by students' discussions around work, the nature of students' descriptions of work–college balance revealed important patterns. Findings from this study illustrated that when students enter a new job, a transitional period takes place in which they begin the process of negotiating their work/school balance. During these periods, working may pose a greater challenge to collegiate success as students attempt to learn the intricacies (e.g., micro-cultures, personalities, policies) in their work environment. Literature from the fields of occupational studies and business are replete with discussions of workplace adjustment and socialization (Anakwe & Greenhaus, 1999; Anderson & Thomas, 1996; Ashford & Taylor, 1990; Coffey & Atkinson, 1994; Griffin, Colella, & Goparaju, 2000; Ng, Sorensen, Eby, & Feldman, 2007; Riordan, Weatherly, Vandenberg, & Self, 2001; Versloot, de Jong, & Thijssen, 2001). Descriptions of the “process” of organizational socialization feature discussions of the initial employment period (usually 3 months), where employees engage in data acquisition regarding organizational policies and structures, gauge and strive to meet job expectations, and integrate into the work setting (Pearson, 1982).

Ashforth, Sluss, and Harrison (2006) remarked that the organizational socialization literature has fostered many stage process models, which are typified by four primary stages: (a) anticipation, where expectations of organizational structure and culture are preconceived through social contacts and media; (b) encounter, employee entrance into the workplace and initial assessment of the accuracy of their preconceptions; (c) adjustment, where employees begin to resolve workplace realities versus preconceptions, learning workplace demands, and integration into organizational structure and social climate; and (d) stabilization, where the employee becomes a legitimate member of the



organization, its sub-culture, and nuances. Key to this process is the notion that stress can occur as roles are negotiated (Hart & Miller, 2005; Nelson, 1987; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). In particular, students' comments around workplace transitions during college seem to emphasize how the first three stages of organizational socialization (e.g., anticipation, encounter, adjustment) can foster angst until stabilization occurs.

### *Too Tired for Homework*

A number of students noted that aggressive work and school schedules were detrimental to their academic success. They remarked that they were too tired after work to dedicate the time and energy needed to study and complete homework. For some, this was a by-product of working multiple part-time jobs. For instance, Jacob had two jobs in a previous semester while he attended college full-time. One job was at Radio Shack and the other was working on campus in the tutoring center. Jacob detailed an elaborate schedule, which he used to balance two part-time jobs and college. When asked how work affected his academic success, he replied,

I was tired, um, let's see, I didn't really study as much as I should have, I was taking a calculus class and the class started at 7:25 in the morning, and like when I wouldn't get out until like 9, when the store closed at like 9:00 and I wouldn't get out until like 9:15, then I would probably just go home, maybe check my e-mail, maybe do an assignment, and then just knock out, pass out and just go to sleep. And so, it kind of bummed me out. I didn't study or anything.

Whereas Jacob's comments focus on the impact of multiple jobs, Jeremiah expressed that late night work hours negatively affected his studies. As a bus boy at a local restaurant, Jeremiah noted that little time was left after work to complete his assignments and sleep:

But I do work a lot, and it's kind of hard to work and try to pass all your classes and stuff. As of right now, my schedule of working is kind of messing with me when it comes to school 'cause of like some days I kind of work a little late. I close, you know. I close, and I may get off work at like 1:45 at night, and I have to be at school at 7:00. So, that means I gotta wake up at 6:00, you know, and I'm kind of tired, and it's kind of hard. You know, I really don't have too much time to do my homework, and I really don't have too much time to just work and study and just do things, you know, 'cause it's just work and school, work and school. It's not no work, school, study, you know, study, work and then school, nothing like that. It's just work and school. If I want to stay up when I get off work until like 2:30 in the morning and do some homework, I could do something like that. But then again, that's gonna draw me to being tired at school, and I'm gonna want to go home and go to sleep 'cause, you know, I've been up all night studying and working.

The challenge of balancing late work hours and complex work schedules proved difficult for some students. Ezekiel spoke in a similar fashion about the physical effects of working and attending college. However, he noted that this balance was exacerbated

by the physically demanding nature of the work that he did. Per the prodding of his father, Ezekiel obtained a job at Walmart, stocking shelves at night time. He noted that it caused him to drop classes, as he explained,

That is the biggest factor right now, because this was like, I worked 4:00 to 1:00, so 1:00 a.m. and I started working um, I was doing, I was taking morning classes. So that was my biggest reason, one biggest reason why I started getting lazy. Because I'm getting off from work, and I was an unloader, so that's hard labor kind of work, so it was like, "Oh I don't want to do this. I don't want to do more." I wake up some days, and that's how I dropped my science class because I didn't even show up to class sometimes.

This notion extended by Ezekiel was also expressed by other students who discussed how manual labor employment wore down their bodies, making it difficult to focus on school. Mostly, students who discussed the physically draining nature of employment and its affect on school worked stocking shelves and moving boxes for large distribution centers (e.g., Walmart, Target, military bases). In general, when deleterious effects were recognized, students tried securing employment in other positions.

Many students in this study also noted that exhaustion from work negatively affected their achievement. In particular, this exhaustion was tied to working multiple part-time jobs, late night schedules, and jobs which were physically demanding in nature. With respect to working multiple part-time jobs, it seems logical that this employment set-up would lead to lower levels of success. Especially considering Perna's et al. (2006) findings which suggest that greater work hours led to lower levels of success. It is important to note during the time frame in which data were collected for this study, unemployment in the nation and the state was exorbitantly high. For example, at the time of this study, the national African American male unemployment rates from individuals aged 20 and older hovered around 16% and 17% (Cawthorne, 2009; Corley, 2009). Many students interviewed discussed the difficulty in finding employment, some even noting that jobs at fast food chains were even hard to come by. Given this context, finding employment which was conducive to Black males' school schedules proved difficult for some time. As noted earlier, literature on Black males has noted that they are challenged by limited employment options (Harvey, 2008; Levin et al., 2007; Wood, 2010). From a historical perspective, Blacks have fueled the nation's economic engine as "slaves, sharecroppers, tenant-farmers, maids, Pullman porters, factory workers and others at the base of bourgeois society" (Ferguson, 2011, p. 69). Contemporarily, these limited employment options resulted in Black male collegians working night shifts and hard labor jobs; positions which they perceived as challenging their ability to succeed in college.

### *Poor Relations With Supervisor/Employer*

Although some students discussed how multiple jobs, late night hours, and physically demanding work affected their schedules, these circumstances were, at times, exacerbated by poor supervisor–employee relations. For example, Matthew talked extensively

about being discouraged by his supervisor to take courses. He stated that one of the reasons he began working for his employer (Target) was that they had a college reimbursement plan. However, after he became eligible to receive benefits from the plan, he found that there was a clause that necessitated the reimbursed coursework to relate to his employment. In his interview, he exclaimed, "Classes that pertain to my job? I throw boxes; I ride a forklift. What do you want me to take that pertains to that?"

When Matthew inquired with the human resources staff as to whether they would help him pay for his English 101 class, he was told that they would not pay for English or any other general education coursework unless he received approval to attend college from his manager. During his study interview, Matthew was clearly agitated with this policy, explaining that he did not understand a system in which his manager had the ability to advise him on what courses he could or could not take. When he approached his supervisor about being reimbursed for the course, his request was denied. Matthew was told that he would not approve the reimbursement as Matthew was not a manager in training, a position which he stated that Black and Latino's employees were usually passed over on.

Moses also discussed receiving little support for college from his employer. Moses worked at a local movie theater; he noted his supervisor was initially supportive of him attending college when he first began working at the theater. The theater management provided him with a flexible schedule that worked with his school schedule. However, he noted that his relationship with his employer had turned for the worse. Apparently, Moses had been asked on several occasions to go beyond the requirements of his schedule and work extra hours. Oftentimes, the hours he was asked to work directly conflicted with his class schedule. He described how his boss had become displeased with him for declining additional hours due to school. Moses noted that his boss acts "like I'm telling a fib or something like that." A few days before his interview, the movie theater where Moses worked had school district special feature showing for a large group of children. The theater was understaffed and was going to have more than 375 children in attendance. Although Moses was already scheduled to work that day, his boss asked him if he could come in early. Moses discussed his conversation with his boss:

And so, he asked me if I could come in to work early on Friday and I was like, "I can't; I have class." And so he's been asking me like, "Well can you get out of class," and "can you see if your teacher will let you." And I mean, I could ask, but especially with my English class, I don't want to miss class. You know what I mean? Like when we have scheduled class days and I know he's going to be teaching a new lesson or something, I don't want to miss it.

Moses was angered by his boss's suggestion that he miss class for work. He noted that he would never do so. He also stated that this conversation has caused great tension at work. Moses feared that this tension would not subside. Although not all students discussed poor employer-employee relations, the ones that did connected their comments to a lack of support for college. These tenuous relationships were usually a by-product

of students' school commitments as they conflicted with workplace expectations and demands.

Extant literature on working and college categorizes students into two primary groups based on the students' self-perception. The first, *students who work*, is comprised of collegians who characterize themselves as students first and see employment as secondary to their identity. The second, *employees/workers who study*, is composed of those who envision themselves primarily as workers (King, 1999; Orszag et al., 2001). This distinction is important, as the data suggest differences in the achievement outcomes of each group. In general, *students who work* experience lower achievement outcomes (e.g., GPAs) the more hours they work. However, *employees who study* decrease in achievement from 15 to 34 hr per week and then increase from thereafter (King, 1999).

Students noted that some employers did not provide them support for their academic endeavors. In general, students who discussed this circumstance, noted that employers outright questioned the validity of their academic pursuits. As noted earlier, literature on working collegians divides them into two general categories, *student's who work* and *employees who study*. Most of the students interviewed discussed work as a tool to obtain their academic goals and did not see their jobs as long-term careers. In essence, they could best be classified as *students who work*, as their primary identities seemed more connected to their academic pursuits as opposed to their jobs. Possibly, this outlook was perceived by employers, reducing the likelihood of them placing a long-term investment in their employees. Or, possibly the use of school to counter employer requests or asking their employers to support their academic endeavors through reimbursements served to mitigate the balance of power in the workplace, thereby resulting in push-back. Regardless of the rationale, when students' academic goals were not supported, they felt tension in the workplace, and reported work as negatively affecting their achievement.

### *Facilitating a Positive Work/College Balance*

Although a number of students spoke about a negative relationship between employment and achievement, a few students noted a different relationship. They stated that their employment positively affected their academic success. They attributed this positive influence to employers who were supportive of their academic endeavors and/or worked with them to establish a flexible work schedule. Joel spoke extensively about the flexibility he enjoyed at work. Joel worked at the food store at the local Air Force Base. He stocked the shelves at night time and bagged groceries during the day. He noted that his only problem with his work is that employees were paid from tips rather than from a stable paycheck. However, he said that he could make good money working on weekends, noting that he earned around US\$1,600 to US\$1,800 dollars a month; money he uses for bills—car insurance, cell phone, and rent. When asked how he was balancing work and school, he stated,

I mean, like the job at the commissary, they're really lenient on attendance, like they let us choose our own schedules. If you need to, you can come in the morning and work. As

long as you put in your days, which is only like four days a week. As long as you put in your days, they have no problem. It doesn't really matter what time you come in as long as like your shift, like morning or evening. As long as you come in on your shift and do your minimal four days a week deal, they don't have a problem with you at all. And then coming to school never gets in the way 'cause all my classes are either morning or midafternoon, like around noon, so I don't have problem going to work and school.

Although flexibility was key for Joel, Micah noted that he benefitted from a very supportive supervisor. Micah worked in health care and was studying to be a certified nursing assistant (CNA). He explained that his supervisor supported his academic endeavors, even to the extent of allowing him to work on homework during downtime at work. When asked if work affects school, he explained,

I mean really work don't affect school 'cause the lady that I, my supervisor, she sees what I'm doin' here and she sees that I'm studying CNA, so sometimes, you know what I'm saying, she lets me sit there and late at night she lets me read by book and do my work and stuff but when it comes to like, you know what I'm saying, somebody coming in there for an emergency, I gotta get to work 'cause that's my job. But you know what I'm saying, she seen me doin' the CNA program and all that type of stuff, and she givin' me a lot of help, I mean 'cause she's an elderly lady and she knows more about this, so she gives me help with some questions and all that type of stuff, so it's really not affecting me. But I just don't get enough rest sometimes.

While rest has already been mentioned as a factor affecting students working night shift, the negative aspects of Micah's job seemed to outweigh drawbacks. Not all supervisors/employers will support school to the extent of letting their employers complete homework on the job; however, being supportive of collegiate ambition and providing encouragement can facilitate students' success in college.

Findings from this study indicate that flexible employment was key to positive student perspectives on a work/school balance. Although Shannon's (2006) work touches on this notion, stating that students were in need of flexible work schedules, more information is needed to better understand what can improve outcomes for students who work. Generally, extant literature on student success and persistence addresses employment in two ways: (a) determining whether a student is employed or not employed, and (b) gauging the number of hours students work per week. An apparent flaw exists in the literature on this topic, as student employment studies often use a quantitative approach. Although this approach does provide some insight to the extent of students' work schedules, it does not address the nature of student jobs (e.g., employer's support of student's academic pursuit, blue collar vs. white collar, flexibility of work schedule). Research must advance beyond these questions, using qualitative research to explore the nature of the work/school balance, in essence attending to "how" employment affects student achievement. Such approaches can better gauge work/school balance intricacies, such as those discussed in this manuscript. Given the intricacies examined, this article concludes with recommendations for practitioners which may aid in curbing *some* of the issues presented.

## Recommendations for Practice

Although many students must work while attending college, selecting the right job is just as critical as having one. Students should be provided practical information on employment during their initial counseling appointment with college personnel. Verbal information should be reinforced with an informative handout and sub-page on a career center and/or academic advising website. Students should be informed that transitioning into a new job while in school can be difficult, but that their stress may decrease after they have adjusted to their new schedule. Academic advising officers should inquire about whether the student is beginning a new job that may coincide with the start of a new semester. If so, advisors should work with students to plan schedules that may be more flexible. In particular, they can assign coursework which is more reasonable given the impending employment transition. In many cases, job transition may occur mid-semester. This may serve to overwhelm or stress the student. Balancing work–college conflict is part of the challenge that working students must bear. However, having outlets to discuss this stress is important. Thus, counselor contact information should be included in any handouts and web information given to students, and they should be encouraged to contact counseling services if they are feeling overwhelmed or stressed, especially if this is affecting their achievement. Furthermore, students should be directed to communicate with their faculty when transitions are taking place. Although faculty may not be able to modify timelines and assignments, they *may* be more understanding of students' circumstances and work with students on a case by case basis.

Students should be encouraged to find employment with flexible hours. Suggestions for possible jobs that they can pursue could also be discussed. Ambitious campuses may create a directory of student-friendly employers, which could be hosted on a website sub-page. Employers who had student-friendly policies (e.g., flexible work schedules, tuition reimbursement) with a platform for reviews from students who have worked for these companies would be beneficial. Moreover, students should be encouraged to avoid employment opportunities in organizations where supervisors do not support employee students' academic endeavors. Unfortunately, knowing this information beforehand may be difficult. But once recognized, students could use a student-friendly employer directory to make a quick transition.

The recommendations extended offer some options among many potential resolutions to the challenges faced by Black male students with respect to employment. Given the limited treatment of this topic in extant literature, this study should serve as a starting point in fostering further discussion, research, and practical solutions for ebbing the difficulties in work/school balance among Black men. Clearly, the late night hours, temporary job opportunities, and physical labor associated with the employment realities of Black men accentuate the importance of additional research on work/college/life balance among this populous.

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## Notes

1. The terms Black and African American are used interchangeably.
2. The terms *achievement* and *academic success* are used interchangeably to refer to students' grade point averages.

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