BLACK MEN IN THE ACADEMY

NARRATIVES OF RESILIENCY, ACHIEVEMENT, AND SUCCESS

Edited by Brian L. McGowan, Robert T. Palmer, J. Luke Wood, and David F. Hibbler, Jr.

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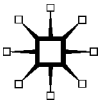

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Contents

Foreword

A Nation Divided: Mixed Messages about African American Males

The past two years have potentially constituted the most critical period for African American males in the United States in many decades. A flurry of research, activism, policy, and funding activities has created a unique opportunity to establish a national agenda focused on males of color, especially African American males. The cadre of researchers who have committed their careers to studying African American males has expanded over the last two decades, with significant growth during the past several years. In turn, the body of research has similarly multiplied both inside and outside the academy, as evidenced by the reference lists of the chapters in this book. Most importantly, however, this work has matured and now regularly appears in top-tier refereed journals, offering important contributions to the frameworks in different fields (i.e., theories, concepts, and models) and employing state-of-the-art research techniques in the best traditions of those fields. In parallel to these research developments, activist organizations that lobby on behalf of African American males have become better positioned in the current social climate. Examples include the Institute for Black Male Achievement and the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color. The White House initiative "My Brother's Keeper" (MBK) has challenged cities, towns, counties, and tribes to address critical concerns in their communities focused on males of color. While foundations have previously funded research and outreach programs on African American males, MBK sparked the establishment of the Executives' Alliance to Expand Opportunities for Boys and Men of Color. The Executives' Alliance is a national philanthropic effort committed to improving life outcomes for boys and men of color.

This confluence of momentum across key social domains presents what seems like tangible "hope" for a brighter future for African American males. What more could be asked for while addressing a major social challenge? Policymakers have access to substantial quality research and evidence to guide their work, and also an array of experts to call upon for

research and praxis leadership. A consortium of groups has been formed guided by leaders and members who have organized with the expressed mission of supporting African American males in various social domains. The president of the United States has established a White House initiative focused on mobilizing communities across the nation to address the concerns of boys and men of color, and a group of foundation executives has established an alliance to commit resources to fund these efforts. Such seemingly perfect alignment of various efforts has generated a great deal of "hope" among all these groups, establishing a "new social promise" to reverse the circumstances that have situated Black males at the bottom of all metrics assessing life performance.

However, when you read newspapers, listen to the radio, or watch TV, you receive a rather different message. This message is not filled with "hope" but "fear." It comes in the form of a question: do African American male lives matter? A Google search of stories focused on African American males paints a picture of beatings and killings by police officers on a daily basis. For various reasons, some of these beatings and killings receive national attention, such as the police beating of Rodney King in 1991 in Los Angeles (potentially the most televised of all police beatings), the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the death of Eric Garner in New York City in 2014. Another "eye opening" event occurred in Madison, Wisconsin, this year, capturing national attention: the police shooting of teenager Tony Robinson. To many, it signaled that if it could happen in a place like Madison, it could happen anywhere. Within a month of my writing this foreword, Martese Johnson—a student at the University of Virginia, member of the University Honor Committee Executive Board, member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated, and an activist in other student groups on campus—was beaten bloody by the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control agents. The message received too often, time and again, overshadows any "hope;" it is a message that underscores the harsh reality of surviving as an African American male in the United States today.

At this critical juncture in history, how might an observer make sense of these seemingly conflicting, mixed messages the United States and its citizens are presenting about the value of African American male lives? On one hand, an observer would see that structures and infrastructures are being put into place signaling that African American males, along with other males of color, are a national priority. All of the energy, efforts, and initiatives generated by the momentum of MBK offer real, invaluable "hope." But whose voice do these efforts represent? Do the voices of researchers and diversity practitioners, White House staffers, and foundation executives represent the voices of the US citizens? Observers would also

see volumes after volumes of news transcripts recounting violence against African American males by police officers, treating them as "dangerous to society." Such social positioning leads to disproportionately appalling policing outcomes for African American males—beatings, incarcerations, and deaths at rates higher than for any of their counterparts. That said, do acts by police officers—who often live in communities that they police—represent the voices of all citizens? Which of these two perspectives reflects the true values of the citizens of the United States?

Now more than any other time, the African American community needs "Black Academics" to reclaim their roles as community leaders. It is our duty to bridge knowledge gaps with best practices to help solve community challenges. Likewise, our national and international networks should be used to convene, both in person and virtually, individuals who can serve as resources for our communities. In sum, it is our responsibility to narrow the distance between the "ivory towers" that we work in and the people in our communities who need us the most. It is a bold move to step out of the shadows of the academy and to assume responsibility for the challenges facing our respective communities. I was fortunate enough to be part of a group of African American male scholars who made such a move in 2000 with the publication of *Brothers of the Academy: Up and Coming Black Scholars Earning Our Way*. Subsequently, the authors established the Brothers of the Academy Institute as an organization for African American male scholars to use their collaborative scholarship to directly impact the African American community through the work of the Center for African American Research and Policy and the Think Tank for African American Progress.

The editors of *Black Men in the Academy*, along with the chapter authors, have given new life to this work by assuming leadership roles for Brothers of the Academy Institute and the Center for African American Research and Policy. The energy, vision, and leadership they have provided to these important efforts have advanced the work in important ways. It is clear that *Black Men in the Academy* will spark the next generation of African American male scholars to take the work of this volume and put it into action.

Jerlando F. L. Jackson, PhD
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Director & Chief Research Scientist, Wisconsin's Equity and Inclusion Laboratory
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Preface

Anchored in Shaun Harper's anti-deficit model, this book helps to recast the notion of Black male success in education. More specifically, this book delineates stories of achievement, resiliency, and success for Black men in various aspects of the academy, such as PhD students, professors, and mid to senior level administrators. Critical to this book are stories of how the contributors have overcome personal and educational challenges in their lives as well as emphases on the factors that have helped them succeed. This book consists of 14 chapters. In the first chapter, "Reframing Black Male Success in Education: Narratives of Resiliency, Inspiration, and Success," Brian L. McGowan, Robert T. Palmer, J. Luke Wood, and David F. Hibbler, Jr. explain how Harper's anti-deficit model emphasizes the importance of focusing on aspects that are working to *encourage* Black male success compared to aspects that are *limiting* their advancement. With this theoretical lens, the authors provide a narrative of their experiences throughout the educational pipeline and delineate factors that have helped them to overcome various challenges that threatened to impede their success. The authors conclude their chapter impelling others to practice the lessons learnt.

In chapter 2, "The College Graduate: My Life Translated by Kanye West," J. T. Snipes blends elements of Kanye West's debut album *The College Dropout* with his own story to discuss how Black middle class navigates the racial politics of predominantly White educational environments. Specifically, he shares three narratives that span from elementary school through undergrad and his first professional job. His chapter not only critiques institutional racism embedded in predominantly White schooling environments but also seeks to deconstruct hegemonic constructions of Blackness that elide the social categories of race and class. Snipes's chapter concludes with a collective call to action for educators to fight against the social injustices within oppressive schooling environments. Ferlin G. McGaskey focuses on his journey to earn a PhD after two failed attempts in chapter 3, "The Experience of a Black Male Doctoral Reentry Student after Attrition: A Self Reflective Study." In particular, using Schlossberg's Transition Theory, McGaskey reflects upon experiences and lessons learned

while pursuing a PhD for the third time in a different field and discusses the factors that contributed to his success. In chapter 4, "Pursuit of Happiness: Reflections of a Young Man," Jameel Scott recalls some of his early childhood experiences as well as his experiences through various stages of higher education. Integral to these experiences are stories about the importance of role models, mentors, self-confidence, perseverance, and determination.

Using social cognitive theory and Bandura's work on self-efficacy, Michael Steven Williams presents a vivid description of the varied challenges faced along the way of joining the faculty ranks in chapter 5, "Family First: Exploring the Connection between Supportive Relationships and Self-Efficacy." In his chapter, Williams places particular attention on the important role that formal and informal mentoring has played in his experiences. The chapter concludes with implications for practice. In chapter 6, "Building on Our Mathematical Legacy of Brilliance: A Critical Race Reflective Narrative," Christopher C. Jett shares some of his experiences and lessons learned as a Black male faculty member in mathematics education. In doing so, he foregrounds issues of race with respect to being resilient and attaining success in the education field. He aims, by writing this chapter, to encourage or inspire more Black men and students of color to persevere in reaching their goals in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in particular, and in the academy more broadly.

Willis Jones chronicles his journey to a tenure-track faculty position at a state flagship institution in chapter 7, "He Became a WHAT?!? Memoirs of a Somewhat Unlikely Journey into Academia." Specifically, using Harper's anti-deficit model as a guide, Jones discusses how the support of others, personal stubbornness, and a little help aided him in achieving his professional goals. In chapter 8, "Am I Special? Rethinking Notions of Exceptionality in Black Male Success Narratives," Keon M. McGuire attempts to make clear that his narrative is one that demonstrates the tremendous benefits socioeconomic and educational structures offer a few while simultaneously disadvantaging most. In addition, woven throughout his narrative are intergenerational stories that make clear the real barriers of segregation, deindustrialization, and anti-Black racism, as well as tracking-policies in school systems.

In chapter 9, "An Inspirational and Onerous Journey from the Great Migration to the Academy," Christopher B. Newman critically examines his educational pathway through an auto-ethnographic approach by providing a sociological analysis of his personal and familial outcomes. Newman explores the ways in which his education has affected his development by reflecting on how his identity, life circumstances, family resources, schools attended, and other forms of capital are relevant for understanding his trajectory and relative successes. Newman's chapter concludes with insights

for practitioners looking to support Black boys and men. Don C. Sawyer uses Harper's anti-deficit framework to show the educational possibilities of Black males when placed in supportive environments and not viewed through a deficit lens, in chapter 10, "Projects to PhD: Falling through the Cracks and Finding Success." His chapter serves as a counter-story to paint a picture of the ways in which we can create spaces where Black males can be empowered to work toward their educational and social successes.

In chapter 11, "The Black Male Body and the (Post?)Colonial University: Identity Politics and the Tyranny of Meritocracy," T. Elon Dancy shares his successful navigation as a Black male critical higher education scholar in a historically White research institution. Grounded in postcolonial theory, impostorship theory, and self-authorship theory, the chapter's aim is to illustrate how colleges function as colonized institutions and thus police the scholarly identities of the faculty. Dancy concludes his chapter with a discussion and implications for equity and social justice in higher education. In chapter 12, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen in the Academy," John Michael Lee explores his educational journey from pre-12 to higher education. His chapter is divided into several sections. Each section explores his motivations, catalysts, and experiences in his journey toward the PhD.

Eric Love chronicles the trials and triumphs of a diversity educator and social justice advocate inspiring, activating, and effecting change at a predominantly White institution in chapter 13, "Integrating Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice as a Practitioner in Higher Education." Love creatively juxtaposes the successes of a rewarding career with issues facing many Black males, including microaggressions, lack of funding and support, "crabs in a barrel syndrome," and depression. Love shares how he managed to stay grounded in core values of diversity from an undergraduate student leader to a professional staff member in spite of diversity's toughest critics. Finally, in chapter 14, "Exploring the Resiliency, Achievement, and Academic Success of a Direct Descendant of the Prince Edward County, Virginia (1959–1964) School Lockout," Terence Hicks provides an in-depth understanding of why and how he overcame challenges and developed academic resilience despite the adversity of having parents who were denied a complete public school education in the county of Prince Edward, Virginia. Hicks' chapter draws upon the Systems Theory of Family Resilience to understand and explore stories of resiliency, academic success, and achievement within the academy. The data generated and analyzed explains the nature of his resilience, success, and achievements, and how it was developed during his childhood, within the family, and throughout the academy.

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Acknowledgments

Brian L. McGowan: I am grateful to all the teachers, mentors, and positive role models who believed in my overall potential. I am grateful to be a part of this book alongside brothers who shared their stories of resiliency and succeeded at various levels of schooling and in their respective careers.

Robert T. Palmer: I would like to thank the contributors for sharing their experiences and stories in this volume. I am extremely proud of this book and hope that it will inspire and motivate students of color to do their very best.

J. Luke Wood: I would like to acknowledge my wife and our three children for their support of this work.

David F. Hibbler, Jr.: I dedicate this book to my parents, David Sr. and Gail. I thank them for believing in me before I learned how to believe in myself. I am also grateful to my elementary school tutor Alison, fifth grade teacher Ms. Brown, and dear friend Asiah, who have all encouraged me through my educational journey.

Chapter One

Reframing Black Male Success in Education: Narratives of Resiliency, Inspiration, and Success

Brian L. McGowan, Robert T. Palmer, J. Luke Wood, and David F. Hibbler, Jr.

In the book *Young, Black, and Gifted*, Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) explore the affinity that Blacks possessed for education. In particular, they examined Frederick Douglass's efforts to become literate while enslaved, because he realized that education was equated with liberation and empowerment. They also focused on Malcolm X's quest for education, which led him to proclaim that "education is the passport to your future." Similarly, they also delineated how an affinity for education was a catalyst for helping Ben Carson become the director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Interestingly, in his autobiography, *Gifted Hands*, Carson explained that as a young boy he initially lacked interest in education, which led to subpar achievement outcomes in school (Carson & Murphy, 1996). This attitude changed when his mother insisted that he and his brother limit their television time and spend time in the library reading at least one book a week. The change manifested in improved academic outcomes in school, which led him to develop a greater appreciation for education.

The theme of how education could be used as a linchpin to help facilitate the success of Black men is also prevalent in another book—*The Pact*. In this book, three Black men describe how they pressured one another to stay focused on doing well academically (Davis, Jenkins, Hunt, & Page, 2002). They formed the pact during middle school, and it played a role in two of them becoming doctors and one a dentist. While the aforementioned books and stories are inspirational and empowering, these days, such books and stories are a rarity. Instead, in recent years, another

discourse has emerged about Black men in education. For the most part, this discourse tends to focus on the lack of advancement among Black males throughout the educational pipeline and the problems contributing to this dilemma. For example, when discussing the experiences of Black boys and men in pre-K–12 and postsecondary education, many academic articles, policy reports, book chapters, and popular media highlight these features:

1. Black boys are more likely to be overrepresented in special education in pre-K–12 (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Davis, 2012; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Reynolds, Howard, & Jones, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008) and underrepresented in gifted programs and advanced placement (AP) courses (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008).
2. Black boys are more likely to be suspended and expelled from pre-K–12 compared to White boys (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Davis, 2012; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Reynolds et al., 2013; Wood & Palmer, 2015).
3. Black boys in pre-K–12 are more likely to be stereotyped as low achievers by educators and administrators (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006, 2012; Harper & Davis, 2012; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2013).
4. The percentage of Black men enrolled in postsecondary education has not shown significant improvement over the years. In fact, many reports and scholars claim that the percentage of Black men enrolled in higher education in 2002 was exactly the same as the percentage in 1976 (Harper, 2006, 2012; Palmer et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2010).
5. The persistence rate among Black men in postsecondary education is the lowest among all racial and ethnic groups (Harper, 2012; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2008, 2010).

Discussing this information is critical because it could lead to the implementation of policies and other initiatives to help address some issues that hinder the success of Black boys and men in pre-K–12 and higher education. However, instead of merely pointing out the aspects that constrict the success of Black males in school, greater focus needs to be placed on policies, initiatives, and factors that work to facilitate the success of Black boys and men as they progress through the educational pipeline. With this in mind, the aim of the present book is to refocus the discourse on Black

men in education. Specifically, while most research on Black boys and men have examined their experiences in pre-K–12 and higher education through a deficit lens, this book employs an anti-deficit approach to help advance the educational success of Black males (Harper, 2012; Howard, 2013; Wood & Palmer, 2015).

Reframing the Narrative on Black Males in Education

The anti-deficit framework emerged from Harper's National Black Male College Achievement Study (2012) and repudiates deficit approaches to examining Black male achievements (Wood & Palmer, 2015). Unlike a deficit model, an anti-deficit approach seeks to understand environments, conditions, programs, initiatives, policies, and resources that facilitate Black male success. Harper posits, for example, that instead of trying to understand *why* the campus engagement of Black males is so low, attention should be placed on understanding *what* compels Black men to be actively engaged inside as well as outside the classroom. Moreover, Harper recommends supplanting questions about why Black men's relationships with faculty and administrators are so weak and why Black male students' grade point averages (GPAs) often are the lowest among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups on many campuses with questions asking how Black men go about cultivating meaningful value-added relationships with institutional agents and what resources are most effective in helping Black male achievers earn GPAs above 3.0 in a variety of majors, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). As can be discerned from the latter questions, the essence of the anti-deficit framework is an understanding of salient factors that empower, drive, inspire, and promote success among Black men in education.

Guided by Harper's anti-deficit approach and in line with the aim of his framework, this book attempts to reframe the discourse on Black boys and men in education. Similar to the stories of Frederick Douglass, among others, the book explores narratives of Black men at various levels of the academy (e.g., professors, administrators, and graduate students) who have used education as their gateway to success. Specifically, the narratives in this book explore stories of resiliency, success, and educational achievement of the contributors to this volume. Consistent with the aim of the anti-deficit framework, the narratives can play a role in encouraging and inspiring success among Black boys and men in education by highlighting factors, programs, and resources that have helped the contributors overcome significant challenges in their lives to get to where they are currently. To this end, the chapters provide role models, lessons of success, support, mentorship, and hope and guidance for all Black boys and men as they

embark on the pathway to academic success. In keeping with the purpose of this book, the rest of this chapter presents our narratives. The chapter concludes by discussing aspects from our narratives that have played an important role in helping to facilitate our own academic success.

Stories of Resiliency, Success, and Achievement

Brian L. McGowan's Narrative: Going from the Projects to PhD—Negotiating Colliding Socioeconomic Identities

Despite growing up in a low-income, disadvantaged area where I was faced with many harsh sociocultural realities, I remember my first-grade teacher, Ms. Hunter, constantly saying, "You are going to make it. You are the one." I did not understand the significance of these sentences as a little boy. I also recall church elders, role models, teachers, principals, coaches, and family members sharing similar sentiments. I attribute my persistence and success to these constant messages of affirmation from individuals who believed in me and saw my potential even when I did not see it myself. I was aware at an early age that many individuals from impoverished communities such as my own were not afforded similar support systems. I was also aware at an early age that my family members faced economic disadvantages that many of my classmates did not. In this section, I will reflect on my experiences progressing from a low social class background to a tenure-track university professorship while considering my colliding socioeconomic identities.

After initially attending for three years an elementary school that had predominantly Black students, I was bused to a newer school in a White-dominated, affluent area of the city. I did not truly understand how to meaningfully interact with my White male counterparts and was forced to develop connections with them for the first time. They made fun of me, which led to many physical altercations. I often wondered if I was teased because of my commitment to academic success, not having the newest clothes, and/or the color of my skin. Nonetheless, I had to be thick-skinned to succeed in this new environment.

Although I engaged in several fights with my White male counterparts in elementary school, my principal, Ms. Barbara Goldstein, believed in me and signed me up for An Achievable Dream (AAD) program instead of sending me to an alternative school, a place where many of my hometown friends learned firsthand what it was like to be tracked for misbehavior. Her decision ultimately changed my life trajectory. I am deeply grateful to AAD for providing me with opportunities to succeed in school and in life. It was this program that taught me how to be resilient, treat others with

kindness, be strong and confident, and play tennis. AAD provided a safe haven from my immediate harsh surroundings. I read too many obituaries of middle school and high school friends, and about classmates being arrested for selling drugs and murdered in gang violence. These incidents were commonplace and I wanted to escape poverty and relied on many teachings from AAD to survive. As instilled in me by AAD, we had to recite banner slogans every morning during the summer program. Some of the slogans included the following:

- Be cool, stay in school.
- Nothing was ever achieved without enthusiasm.
- It's nice to be important but it's more important to be nice.
- Decisions are up to me.
- I can go to college if I work hard.
- I am someone special.

Despite sharing a bedroom with my two older brothers, I jotted these banner slogans down on note cards and posted them throughout my bedroom. These statements became a living document that guided many of my actions and behaviors.

Since graduating from high school almost 15 years ago, I have encountered numerous situations that have caused me to reflect on the collision of my socioeconomic identities. As a first-generation college student, I recall experiencing culture shock. Despite having high grade point averages and strong support networks at each postsecondary institution, I had to learn how to negotiate becoming a member of the emerging middle class while constantly interacting with my hometown community, one that was in severe poverty. I had to learn how to navigate the university environment while retaining my own sense of hometown loyalty. I had to be adept at navigating between these different cultures, which caused significant internal conflict at times. Oftentimes, I felt guilty for leaving home to better myself. I saw firsthand how poverty affected my immediate family. I did not want to forget where I came from, to forget those who helped me achieve so much, and to leave my family and friends behind. I often questioned whether I deserved to be burdened with the emotional toll of negotiating such complex socioeconomic tension. Although many of my family members and hometown friends did not understand the college-going process, I knew they were proud of me. Their smiles and encouraging messages were greatly appreciated and I found myself missing them dearly. I often questioned whether attending college was the right decision.

I always knew that going to college was bigger than myself. I was getting these degrees for my family, hometown friends, and local community as well. I was determined to succeed. While attending college, I often found myself giving back to my hometown community through mentoring sessions, delivering keynote addresses, and financing family members to help cover basic living expenses. I had to pay it forward. Thanks to close friends and mentors, I learned early on that being a member of the university culture, which prepares one for an emerging middle-class membership, was not a rejection of my hometown upbringing or a signal that I was not being my true self. Grappling with these socioeconomic tensions can at times pose a challenge when interacting with colleagues and students as many of them come from middle-class backgrounds and have not personally experienced what it truly means to live in poverty. It is one thing to theorize on social justice issues and antipoverty efforts from ivory towers and another to have lived it and continue to interact with it on a regular basis.

Despite experiencing several hardships along the way, I always believed that pursuing my education was the primary means of improving my life circumstances. My social mobility was positively influenced because of educational attainment. Two of the most defining moments in my life were walking across the stage and receiving my PhD in 2013 from Indiana University and signing the contract for my first tenure-track faculty appointment at Indiana State University (ISU). I later learned from several colleagues at ISU that I was the first African American male to be granted a tenure-track faculty position in their College of Education. As a faculty member, I have the freedom to conduct research about anything within the larger scope of education, teach courses to college students while nurturing their intellectual curiosity, and mentor students in their quest for success. I am grateful for this platform and do not take it for granted.

I now understand why folks were calling me "the one" at such an early age. I recently delivered a speech to approximately 1,000 school administrators and community members in the Hampton Roads area and reflected on how profoundly indebted I am to the numerous good influences that positively shaped my life and worldview. This experience was humbling given that many of my mentors and role models were in the audience. Several individuals recognized my potential and subsequently invested in my future. I found ways to overcome hardships by having strong faith, adhering to many of the lessons learned from AAD, creating positive and supportive social networks, being kind to others, learning how to meaningfully interact across differences, and developing strategies to negotiate my colliding socioeconomic identities. It is critically important that

educators design precollege programs such as AAD to expose students from disadvantaged backgrounds to opportunities beyond their borders and imagination. It is my hope that this section will help other Black men who are grappling with colliding socioeconomic identities in their efforts to be successful.

Robert T. Palmer's Narrative: The Hidden Curriculum[1]

I often tell myself that I am not supposed to be a tenured professor at a university that many consider to be the "public ivy" of the Northeast. I remind myself that, unlike some of my academic colleagues, I did not come from a middle-class household or a nuclear family. When I was born, my parents were still married, but they separated shortly after my birth. They did not get a divorce until the 1990s when my father remarried. I never had a close relationship with either of my parents. I was told that my mother put me in foster care because she was not able to attend to the needs of a newborn. I do not know how long I was there, but my father got me out and took me to live with his new girlfriend (my stepmother) in New Jersey.

Their relationship started out well, but by the time I was enrolled in elementary school, it became strained. I am not sure what contributed to this tension in their relationship, but I know that periodically they would have these arguments, which often resulted in intense physical encounters. When this happened, my stepmother would kick my father out of her house and he, in turn, would take me back to Philadelphia, where I was born, to stay with my grandmother. After a couple of days or weeks of being at my grandmother's house, my father and stepmother would reconcile, and we would go back to New Jersey. Because of the frequency of this occurrence, I missed so many days in third grade and my teacher failed me.

My grandmother, who wanted a more stable environment for me, recommended that my father allow her to raise me while he worked on his relationship with my stepmother. As a result, my dad brought me to Philadelphia to live with my grandmother while he went back to New Jersey. When I started school in Philadelphia, despite the fact that I failed third grade in New Jersey, I was socially promoted to the fourth grade. Although I had stability in my living environment with grandmother, I rarely attended school; and when I did, I failed every test given. In addition, my fourth grade teacher was not concerned with my spotty attendance. Because of my poor performance in school, I developed a disinterest in education. Quite frankly, I did not believe that school was for me. In spite of my lack of attendance, I was somehow promoted to the fifth grade on the condition that I enroll in summer school and be placed in special education for the rest of my tenure in pre-K–12.

The summer before I was scheduled to enroll in summer school, my mother reappeared. She bought a house in South Philadelphia and got custody of me. While I was happy to be living with my mom, it was analogous to living with a stranger because I barely knew her. She did come around intermittently when I lived with my grandmother to take me to the movies or give me money, but I never got the opportunity to bond with her. Nevertheless, I was excited to have at least one of my parents in my life. At that time in my life, my dad had become addicted to drugs and I rarely had any contact with him. Living with my mother marked a turning point in my education. With her, sitting at home was not an option; I had to go to school whether I liked it or not. Thus, I begrudgingly attended summer school every day.

When school resumed that fall, though I was in fifth grade, I was in special education. My time in special education was transitory because my teachers noticed that I did not belong there. Despite this, due to the mere fact of being placed there, I developed a deep insecurity in my learning ability. One of the factors that helped to mitigate this and ultimately led to an affinity for learning was inspirational messages about the importance of education that were posted around the school that I attended. These messages, such as "Knowledge is Power" and "Education is the Key to Success," caused me to realize the importance of education. Another factor that had an even more profound impact on my disposition toward education was Janet Jackson's Rhythm Nation album. Her album was replete with social consciousness songs that discussed the current state of society. Frequent themes on Rhythm Nation were racism, discrimination, drug abuse, and the salience of education. Her lyrics resonated in my mind and helped to understand that knowledge is not only tantamount to a sense of empowerment but also a thing that no one can take away from you.

As my penchant for education grew, I became hungrier for knowledge. For example, during seventh and eighth grades, while most of my peers were likely playing basketball, football, or video games after school, my after-school activity consisted of visiting the neighborhood library. I developed an insatiable desire for reading. I was particularly transfixed by books that discussed the historical and modern day society of Japan. What amazed me about Japan was its ability to emerge as a global economic power after nearly being destroyed in World War II. Later in my life, I came to understand that what captivated me most about Japan was its resiliency. This was the same reason I fell in love with Tina Turner. I developed an appreciation for stories about resiliency because they represented my life.

I also read many books on historical Black figures. Reading about noble leaders such as Carter G. Woodson, Malcolm X, W. E. B. Dubois,

Booker T. Washington, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Frederick Douglass, and Thurgood Marshall inspired me. It was refreshing to read about these individuals because they all had a predilection for education. Growing up, essentially without a father, I never had any positive male role models in my life. Moreover, in school, while we were taught about slavery, we never discussed the importance that many historical Black leaders attached to education. Nor did we focus on the positive contributions that Blacks made to this country. The Black leaders that I read about became my intangible role models. Their stories helped to reaffirm the message that I earned while in the fifth grade: knowledge is power.

As I grew older, another aspect that played a role in my fondness for education was racism. Believe it or not, growing up, I actually thought that racism was something of the past. My grandmother was a Jehovah Witness and the sect focused on love for all mankind. So, early on in my life, I was taught to love and embrace human differences because they helped to make life beautiful. All the schools that I attended and the neighborhoods where I grew up were diverse racially and socioeconomically. While I may have experienced racism in subtle ways growing up, I was not subjected to its full force until I got to college. In college, White students acted as if they never saw a Black person before, because they stared at me like I was some type of creature. Moreover, some of my White professors also seemed to expect less of me intellectually and did not think I was equally invested in the learning process as many of my White peers. Though those experiences may be characterized as imperceptible, I have also experienced blatant acts of racism on the campus of my undergraduate institution. Being exposed to racism caused me to be more enthralled with education because, similar to Frederick Douglass, I learned that education was the linchpin to empowerment. As a Black man in America, I have accepted the fact that I may continue to experience racism until I am no more. However, I feel that knowledge will act as my bulwark to help combat racism. Therefore, the more knowledge I accumulate, the more effective I will be in fighting racism.

In the spring of 1997, I graduated from high school. Prior to graduation, I applied to a number of colleges, only because my peers were doing the same thing. Honestly, although I had done well in high school, attending a four-year higher education institution was something that was not high on my priority list, because I did not think that I was prepared for college-level work. As such, I pondered attending a community college where I would have the opportunity to strengthen my preparedness before transferring into a four-year college or university. Nevertheless, a friend of the family told me about a summer bridge program called ACT 101 at the institution that I would attend for my undergraduate studies—Shippensburg