# JCAPS

# Emerging Scholars: Empowered to Engage: Black College Men's Leadership Experience in Campus Activities

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*Black college men's participation in campus leadership is often restricted by systemic barriers, deficit-based narratives, and limited access to culturally affirming leadership development opportunities. However, when Black men are given space to explore leadership learning opportunities by connecting with campus activities, they unlock critical possibilities that support their leadership learning journey and promote community engagement. This article outlines the intersections of leader, follower, and context in shaping Black college men's higher education experiences, highlighting the importance of culturally relevant and affirming campus environments, and identifying examples of pathways to increasing Black college men's engagement with campus activities from a leadership perspective. Ultimately, we argue that Black men's leadership engagement must be reimagined through relational, identity-affirming, and context-specific approaches that cultivate not just participation but empower Black men to engage in leadership learning and campus activities.*

## Introduction

Higher education institutions have served as environments for shaping student experiences, particularly enhancing students' personal development, problem-solving skills, critical consciousness and awareness, and leadership learning experiences. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) highlights the changing trend of undergraduate students enrolling in higher education from Fall 2010 to Fall 2021, which faced a 15% decline; however, enrollment in higher education from Fall 2021 to Fall 2031 is expected to encounter a 9% increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Black undergraduate students in higher education from Fall 2010 to Fall 2021 experienced a 27% decline in enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023); as researchers have outlined, attending to Black men's structural and personal needs is imperative to their enrollment, persistence, retention, graduation, success and engagement in higher education (Druery & Brooms, 2019; Palmer et al., 2014). To reach the projected enrollment increase of undergraduate students in higher education institutions by 2031, there must be intentional efforts to support students, especially minoritized students, in this case, Black college men. One pathway that has been identified as a supportive path for supporting students during their undergraduate experience is engagement in leadership learning opportunities, particularly engagement with and participation in campus activities. In higher

education environments, college students are afforded opportunities to participate in campus activities to increase their engagement on campus, promote a sense of belonging, and offer developmental leadership opportunities; these outcomes are a few benefits to engaging in campus activities beyond the traditional classroom experience in higher education. Although research has provided insight into how college students who participate in campus activities increase their leadership skills and sense of belonging, it is important to note that not all students navigate higher education environments through a one size fits all approach and or experience, especially students who do not make up the dominant identity of their respective institution. This article highlights the importance of culturally relevant and affirming campus environments, explores Black men's leadership through various context outlying the intersections of leader, follower, and context in shaping Black college men's leadership learning experiences, and identifying examples of pathways to increasing Black college men's engagement with campus activities from a leadership perspective.

## Culturally Relevant and Affirming Campus Environments

It is not an unrelated concept that much of leadership development comes from planning and participating in major university-sponsored events, often with a leadership learning focus. The lack of involvement in co-curricular activities from Black men can often lead people to view Black men in a deficit lens, assuming that they do not care about gaining leadership developmental experiences. However, you could argue that having a deficit perspective does a disservice to young Black men on college campuses. Palmer and colleagues (2014) stated, "Black male students experience a chilly campus climate at HWIs and perceive the campus as hostile and unwelcoming." (p.63). We should lean into possibility thinking to create spaces where Black men can feel welcomed and a sense of belonging, while engaging in leadership development opportunities that come with participating in campus activities. To create those spaces, it must be an environment that is culturally relevant and affirming of Black men's identities, cultural backgrounds, and ability to thrive, contribute, and grow in collegiate settings.

The central question becomes what are the characteristics of a culturally relevant and affirming environment for Black college men to increase their engagement with campus activities and leadership learning experiences? Brooms (2018) states, "At predominately white institutions (PWIs), Black Students often face hostile campus climates, a lack of critical mass, a small number of faculty of color, and few opportunities to engage meaningfully with faculty and the majority student population." (p.107) This lack of community and mentorship possibilities further exacerbate Black men's negative campus experiences, particularly their struggle to find a sense of belonging on a campus. Developing an environment where Black men feel seen and supported begins with creating a culturally affirming and engaging campus community that better serves their needs throughout their leadership and campus activity journey.

## Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE model)

Understanding the leadership development of Black men in higher education requires a deeper examination of the environments that shape their engagement. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model provides a helpful theoretical framework for identifying the institutional conditions that support the success of racially and ethnically diverse students. When

applied to campus activities and student organizations, four of the model's indicators offer insight into how institutions can cultivate spaces that affirm identity, foster belonging, and promote authentic leadership development (Strange & Banning, 2015). These indicators include meaningful cross-cultural engagement, cultural validation, collectivist cultural orientations, and humanized educational environments (Strange & Banning, 2015).

For many Black men, participation in student organizations comes with the pressure to conform to dominant (white) cultural norms. This often leads to environments where their contributions are undervalued or misunderstood. Cultural validation challenges this dynamic by affirming the identities, knowledge systems, and lived experiences that Black men bring into these spaces (Yosso, 2005). When organizations create room for cultural expression and acknowledgment, leadership becomes an act of authenticity rather than assimilation. Black men are more likely to lead with confidence when they do not feel the need to disassociate with parts of themselves to belong.

Leadership is also shaped by cultural values that emphasize collective responsibility. Many Black men approach leadership with a sense of duty to uplift others rather than focusing solely on personal advancement. This aligns with the CECE indicator of collectivist cultural orientations, which highlights the importance of shared goals and mutual success (Strange & Banning, 2015). Organizations that center collaboration, mentorship, and community care provide structures that resonate with how Black men often experience and enact leadership. These environments support a leadership identity that is deeply relational and grounded in community.

In addition to cultural validation and collectivist values, meaningful cross-cultural engagement plays a key role in expanding leadership opportunities. When Black men are invited into conversations and collaborations that are rooted in shared problem-solving and mutual respect, they gain access to broader networks and are positioned to influence change. These experiences are most impactful when they move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and instead create opportunities for honest dialogue, coalition building, and collective action.

Finally, humanized educational environments serve as a foundation for leadership development. Black men benefit from relationships with faculty, staff, and advisors who demonstrate genuine care and investment in their success. Involvement in student organizations that are supported by engaged and culturally aware professionals allow Black men to build trust and feel seen in their full humanity. These relationships are not transactional. They are essential to helping students feel grounded, encouraged, and capable of stepping into positional leadership roles with purpose and clarity.

Together, these four indicators reflect the kinds of environments where Black men are most likely to engage, lead, and thrive. The CECE indicators remind us that leadership is not only about developing individual skills. It is also about creating conditions where identity is affirmed, relationships are nurtured, and collective growth is possible. For institutions committed to the success of Black men, the CECE Model provides not only a framework but also a call to action.

To understand the leadership experiences of Black college men, this article applies a relational leadership lens grounded in the interplay of leader, follower, and context. Leadership is not a solitary act but a dynamic, relational process that relies on the interplay of leader, follower, and context (Guthrie & Devies, 2024). While leadership is often framed as an individual endeavor, followership is just as essential. As Guthrie et al. (2021) explain, followership is an intentional practice that enhances the relationship between leader and follower. Riggio (2020) further argues that followers are often more important than leaders, as leadership cannot exist without them.

This relational dynamic takes on even greater significance when considering the context of Black men in higher education, whose leadership is forged not in isolation but through collective navigation of systemic and historical oppression. Within institutions built on exclusion and racialized barriers, Black men have long been required to create their own support systems and communal pathways to success. In such contexts, leadership is not solely about individual initiative. As Guthrie and Devies (2024) describe, it becomes a collective process shaped by the interplay of leader, follower, and context. It is an intentional and communal act of resisting oppression, transforming systems, and celebrating Black identity and achievement. Followership is not secondary but central, as leadership often shifts fluidly between individuals who uplift and rely on one another. Unlike traditional models that celebrate personal achievement, Black male leadership is deeply rooted in collective uplift, where success is measured not by individual advancement alone but by the empowerment and well-being of the broader Black community.

Understanding leadership as a context-driven and collective process has important implications for student affairs professionals and leadership educators. Campus activities, for example, are more than just opportunities for leadership development. They function as support systems that counteract isolation and marginalization, providing Black men with the tools to build networks of solidarity, mentorship, and resilience. Whether through leadership courses, mentorship programs, student government, or Black student organizations (e.g., Black student union, historically Black fraternities, National Society of Black Engineers, etc.), Black men should cultivate a leadership identity that prioritizes the collective over the individual. This is especially crucial within predominantly white institutions, where they often find themselves in environments that overlook or undervalue their contributions. Campus activities, therefore, become more than sites of engagement. They serve as intergenerational networks of empowerment, resistance, and communal uplift that sustain Black student communities in the face of systemic barriers.

For example, Black men engaging in historically Black fraternities and student government will vary, as there are specific points to consider such as racialized, gendered, and environmental factors when supporting them, as each context is guided by a vision or goal specific to the context in which the leadership experience occurs. We provide the following bulleted list for leadership educators and practitioners to consider when supporting Black men through leadership learning:

- Balance support and empowerment: Both student affairs professionals (leadership educators) and student leaders contribute to student organization conditions, however, students drive cultural norms for their organization.

- Identity-affirming practices: Engage with Black men within their specific organizations to holistically understand their racial experiences on campus and their lived experiences, as these intentional affirming practices contribute to their sense of belonging and community.
- Coalition building: Establish networks and opportunities for Black men in identity-based organizations to collaborate with broader community partners to increase their network and perspectives
- Mentorship and leadership development: Provide training focused on leadership identity, capacity, and efficacy where this training increases leadership education and development opportunities. In addition to fostering leadership trainings, create and establish mentoring relationships with Black men and connect them with other Black men to grow and develop.

In addition to campus activities, leadership development programs also must move beyond individualistic models and intentionally create spaces where Black men can engage in both leadership and followership in ways that reflect their cultural traditions and lived experiences. Campus leadership programs that recognize and support collective, community-driven leadership approaches will not only better serve Black college men but also help create institutions that are truly inclusive of diverse leadership perspectives. When Black men are provided with spaces to lead in ways that reflect their values, experiences, and cultural traditions, they are not just developing as leaders for today. They are ensuring the longevity and strength of Black leadership for generations to come. The outlined bulleted list can be relevant across student organizations, but in this case particularly identity-based organizations that uplift Black men's experiences.

## Building Affirming Campus Activity Engagement Opportunities for Black Men

Research and practice focused on the experiences of Black college men often highlight their engagement in college, in addition to the value of their relationships and participation in campus activities. Brooms (2018) research study describes the importance of Black male initiatives in relation to Black men's engagement on college campuses, included in the findings section are key insights for researchers, practitioners, and Black men navigating college based upon the following four key themes a) sense of belonging, b) access to resources, c) academic motivation, and d) collective identity development. Building upon the findings in Brooms (2018), we want to offer examples and recommendations for developing and creating affirming leadership pathways that increase Black men's engagement with campus activities. We center our examples and suggestions on culturally affirming and asset-based approaches that follow the themes of identity, context, and follower that can be adopted for practitioners and leadership educators, who work with and support Black college men. Particularly highlighting examples through campus activities like Black student union (identity), student government (context), and historically Black fraternities (follower).

### Identity- Black Men Leadership Courses and Initiatives

Black men's leadership courses and initiatives are spaces where Black men can increase their cultural, racial, and gender identity development centered in a communal and uplifting space as a

necessary component to their development and growth in college (Robinson et al., 2023). Engaging in identity-specific environments in a curricular and co-curricular sense assists Black men in building and developing their leadership identity, which prepares them adequately for engagement with campus activities. Within these Black men-specific spaces, Black college men are positioned to learn more about themselves and other Black men as an opportunity to increase identity development and challenge socially constructed deficit perceptions of Black men. Engaging in Black men's leadership courses and initiatives offers them opportunities to be mentored in formal and informal contexts, which can contribute to how they begin navigating campus activities on the college campus (Robinson et al., 2023; Spencer Jr et al., 2024).

## Context- Developing Affirming (Cultural) Environments for Black Men Leaders

Developing culturally affirming environments is essential for cultivating Black men's leadership capacities in ways that honor their lived experiences and sociocultural knowledge and values. Whether through campus centers and departments, identity-based leadership programs, and relationships with Black faculty, staff, and peers, culturally affirming environments offer intentional spaces for belonging and creativity, which are often missing in historically white institutions (Harper, 2015). Leadership development for Black men requires institutions to intentionally challenge dominant narratives and create and sustain culturally affirming environments that validate Black men to discover their leadership identity through engagement with campus activities. Establishing affirming contexts gives Black men the necessary resources to center care and increase their leadership capacity and efficacy (Guthrie & Devies, 2024). For example, a culturally affirming environment prioritizes relationality and community-building over individualistic leadership paradigms and models, allowing Black men to develop as leaders in ways that promote collective leadership frameworks, institutions that invest in culturally affirming environments, acknowledge the importance of place and space for Black men's leadership journeys in campus activity engagement.

## Follower- Generativity of Black Men Leaders

Black men's leadership engagement in campus activities can foster generative norms and support for the next generation of Black men's leaders on campus. Black men's leadership engagement is not only transformational for the individual Black men involved but also generative in nature, rooted in collectivist leadership ideals. When Black men are supported and empowered in their leadership journeys, they often take on the role of mentoring and supporting their peers, cultivating a culture of reciprocity and support (Brooms, 2018; Harper, 2015). Generativity amongst followers emerges through storytelling, peer mentorship, and modeling. In co-curricular, or campus activities, Black men can influence campus culture by showing others what culturally relevant, critical consciousness, and awareness leadership practices look like. As followers and future leaders witness these examples from their Black men peers, they are more likely to engage in leadership themselves, contributing to developing a pipeline of Black men's leadership on campus, particularly through engagement with campus activities.

## Conclusion

Black college men with increased leadership learning, knowledge, and experiences lead with vision, care, and resilience, especially when institutions center their identity, create and sustain culturally affirming environments (contexts), and recognize their leadership's generativity (follower). Committing to an asset-based approach rooted in cultural affirmation, higher education institutions can move beyond deficit narratives and instead cultivate environments that nurture Black men's holistic leadership development. As leadership educators, practitioners, and learners, we must recognize and reimagine campus activity engagement that promotes Black men's participation, not just solely as participants, but also as critical to transforming campus cultural norms. Black men's leadership development thrives when they are empowered to lead as their whole selves, within communities that reflect and uplift their lived experiences. Empowering Black men to be change agents at their institution through a collectivist leadership model. Campus activities that support the development of Black college men do so through creating structures that value their identity as Black men in addition to fostering a sense of belonging and community that uplifts Black men. Contrary to this notion, leadership programs or organizations who choose to reimagine their current practices to better serve Black college men, we offer readers the following reflection questions to reflect on regarding how to support Black men's engagement in campus activities:

1. What potential structural and systematic barriers are deeply rooted in the institution's cultural norms and practices that limit Black men's engagement in campus activities?
2. Is it possible that this campus activity is asking Black men to assimilate to achieve social acceptance from their peers and institution?
3. What are the needs of the Black men in your specific community and have you catered this experience around addressing them?
4. How are your leadership development practices moving beyond the "Talented Tenth" fallacy of uplifting only a small group of exceptional leaders to instead cultivate leaders who are committed to collective uplift?
5. How do you gently but intentionally challenge cultural or gender norms within campus activities, such as hypermasculinity or individualism, that may limit or harm the broader Black student community while still affirming identity and fostering belonging?

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