

Successful Survival Strategies for African-American Graduate Students

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Many African American graduate students are faced with their willingness to stay in graduate school and obtain a degree. The question is no longer “Can they get into graduate school?” but rather “Can they stay in once they are admitted?” There is research that addresses causes for students to withdraw from school, but very few focus on factors that allow students to stay in school. African-Americans have made great strides in furthering their education process as result of the 1954 landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The purpose of this article is to offer some suggestions as to how African-American students can cope with the trials and tribulations of graduate school.

Today, there are many social, political, and economic issues confronting the African-American community; however, the issue of African-American students not graduating from graduate school is a very critical one and should be at the top of the agenda. As a graduate faculty member, this is an issue I see far too often. Possessing a graduate degree gives students a better chance to compete in the market place. Often, African-Americans are the “last to be hired and the first to be fired.” The market place can be a hostile environment to work regardless of your race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disabilities. It is no secret that minorities experience more discrimination and often leaving them at the mercy of institutions which continue to marginalize and dehumanize their efforts. So, having a graduate degree will give African-American graduate students a better opportunity to compete in a global society. It has been said that “it takes a village to raise a child” and it is going to take the whole nation to assist African-American graduate students with obtaining a graduate degree.

African-American graduate students should remain motivated while they are in graduate school. It is essential that graduate students be patient, persevere, and develop a “stick-to-it” attitude. They should constantly remind themselves, “If I was bright enough to get accepted, then I am certainly bright enough to graduate.” Often, many African-Americans who attend predominantly white universities versus historically black universities are faced with the challenge of feeling isolated and alienated. It is extremely important that students are integrated into the university, as well as, the university becoming integrated with the students. The feeling of isolation or not belonging is a result of minority students on a majority campus and often made to feel like their culture is not relevant. Tinto (1993) spoke about the importance of social integration and its positive impact on college persistence. African-American students are more likely to encounter various forms of discrimination, stereotyping, and racism whether it be intentional or unintentional, which leaves the student feeling devastated. In turn, many of these students simply give up prematurely and leave prior to graduating.

This list of 15 successful techniques and strategies serve as a guide for African-American students matriculating through graduate school.

1. Develop a network among other African-American students on campus. This might be a bit challenging because most graduate students are departmentalized. It can be accomplished by organizing a graduate African-American student organization. This or-

ganization will allow students to develop a support system. Do not forget the network of people you knew prior to entering graduate school. Stay in touch with them, as they will serve as a good reach back of people to call on. Additionally, seek out organizations outside the university because they can provide you a sense of community i.e. churches, NACCP, Alumni, Greek organizations, and Non-Profit Organizations [1,2].

2. Be open to a diverse pool of mentors. Often times African-Americans seek only African-American professors for mentoring, which seems reasonable since they share many of the same interests; however, for those students on predominantly white campuses this might present an issue due to the gross underrepresentation of African-American professors. Nevertheless, do not hesitate to select a mentor from another racial/ethnic background. There are many professors who are committed to minority students. Look at it from this viewpoint; if they accepted you into the program, then hold them to their commitment in assisting you with matriculating toward completion of the program. It is very important that African-American students have an advocate to assist them through the process. Many are first generation students. Check to see if your university has a Cultural Diversity Center as this is a sure way to get connected within the university. This as a positive way to develop relationships and have a grasp of what's going on inside and around the campus [3,4].
3. Keep a positive attitude during your graduate studies. Graduate school can be very intimidating on many levels. You are now entering into a more specialized area of your studies. You are taking classes with people who are as bright as you are and your professors expect you to have certain level of knowledge being a graduate student. There will be a tremendous amount of reading to do and several papers to write. Be aware of both your strengths and weaknesses. Do not be afraid to seek help if you need a better understanding on how to identify your deficiencies. Let your professors know when you do not fully understand something. Stay positive and remember to have fun along the way and loosen up! Go to the movies, take walks, ride your bike, go to dinner with a friend, or take a trip. Be sure you are doing something positive that allows you to enjoy life and relieve stress.
4. When selecting your graduate committee members for thesis or dissertation, please make every effort to ensure that the people on your committee are genuinely concerned about your welfare and success. You also want people on your committee who can work together cohesively; otherwise, this might greatly prolong the process of completing your graduate training.
5. African-American graduate students should work together both inside and outside the classroom. Create a safe place to share and have open discussions concerning your graduate experiences. You will more than likely have others to communicate with, but if they have never been through the rigor of graduate school, they might not be able to fully comprehend what you are experiencing. You could easily leave those situations feeling somewhat disenchanted. During any point in time you feel overwhelmed, please do not hesitate to seek professional assistance. Your university should have highly trained counselors on staff who will be more than willing to assist you. I know this might be new for you but just as you go to the doctor to treat you when you are in physical pain, it is just as necessary to find a therapist to treat you when you are in emotional pain.
6. Do not be afraid to ask your classmates if you can join their study groups. You will find out that they will be more than happy to make you a part of their groups. Ensure these sessions are positive and productive and not social hangouts. See to it that they remain focused on getting the school work accomplished.
7. A graduate education is a very expensive commodity. African-Americans must be very resourceful when it comes to seeking financial assistance for graduate school. Ask your Department Head, Major Advisor, and the Graduate Dean about fellowships, assistantships, and graduate work study programs offered by the university. These types of financial assistance usually will pay your tuition and provide you a monthly stipend. Assistantships generally will require graduate students to work halftime, which can greatly enhance your professional development. Not only are you working for financial gains, but you also are receiving an opportunity to gain professional work experience. Fellowships, on the other hand, will provide a monthly stipend without work requirements.

They usually pay more and allow you to attend professional conference(s) and conduct research in your field of study. Knowing how you are going to pay for your graduate education relieves a great deal of stress and gives you more time and energy to focus on your school work.

8. Speak with graduate students who have completed the program you are entering. This will give you the opportunity to obtain an understanding of what you can expect from the program. Additionally, they can share with you some words of wisdom on how to best navigate the process of graduate school.
9. Develop a positive relationship with your peers, professors, and administrative personnel in your department. They can be very helpful in assisting you throughout your graduate studies and with future employment. Remember, you will need them to write positive letters of recommendation for you in the future.
10. Should you have to participate in an internship during your graduate studies, make sure you do a thorough investigation of the agencies you are interesting in conducting your internship. You want this experience to be rewarding, refreshing, and something which could enhance your chances of employment. Remember, as agencies are checking you out, you do likewise. You want this to be as much of a match as possible.
11. Try and develop your thesis or dissertation topic early on in your program of study so that you can work on it gradually throughout your studies. This will save you a lot of time and headache in the end. Having your topic defined early on in your program allows you to study the topic in each of your classes, so whenever you have a paper to research, you can do it on the topic you are interested in conducting your research. As you are nearing the end of your program, you will have completed a huge portion of your work in advance. This allows you to have an extensive review of literature, as well as, being very well acquainted with your subject area.
12. Familiarize yourself with the Graduate School Handbook, as well as, the department policies, procedures, and guidelines. Being aware of the universities rules and regulations will allow you to stay abreast of what is expected of you to graduate. Do not leave it up to your advisor to tell you everything you will need to know. This is your career and no one will look out for you better than you.
13. Do not be afraid to seek help if you are having academic difficulty; it will save you a lot of headaches and heartaches in the future. Seeking additional support outside of class does not mean that you are not good enough. So, get over yourself and get the help you need before it is too late! Whether it is assistance with writing your papers, understanding statistics or research, always make sure to get the help you need. These are classes that will be extremely valuable to you when it comes to conducting your research and composing it into either a thesis or a dissertation.
14. Develop your own personal work out program. Graduate School can be very stressful at times and this will serve as good stress reliever. Having a work- out plan tailored for your own needs is a good idea to not only keep you physically fit, but emotional healthy as well. Be mindful to get the proper amount of sleep and rest your body needs so you can work at your optimal performance level. Additionally, maintain a healthy eating life style is beneficial. These are the first two things people tend to neglect. Maintaining your health and eating healthy will enhance your ability to endure a heavy graduate school work load.
15. Lastly, you must study hard. Being a graduate student is not a party! In order to succeed in graduate school, you will have to study more than you did during undergraduate studies. Having a thorough grasp of the material increases your chances of successfully completing your graduate program.

These 15 points mentioned in this article are by no means all the techniques and strategies for coping successfully with graduate school, but they are important for the successful completion of graduate school. You might read over them and want to personalize the list by adding many of your own techniques and strategies you have discovered that works for you. I challenge you to do that, but whatever

you do, I do recommend deleting items from the list. When things seem tough, hang in there, keep your head up, and know you have come too far; do not quit and make sure complete what you have started. You will feel much better knowing you did not give up. I will be the first to acknowledge that it can get difficult. When you are feeling like throwing in the towel and you are wondering if it is all worth what you are currently experiencing, please know that in today’s economy you will be much better off in the long run with a graduate degree. Having your degree will give you the flexibility you need in the market place as an African – American. Remember “if your mind can believe it, then know you can surely achieve it”.

After we have completed the introductions and gone over course instructions on the first day of my graduate classes, I provide my students with copies of my class creed that I have created for that course. I have my students to stand and in unison repeat the class creed. I provide them all a copy. I have found that this is good way to get and keep my students motivated throughout the semester. Many of them have reported to me how helpful they have found the creeds to be not only for my classes but graduate school overall and life in general. Below are examples of a few of the creeds, I have created for my classes.

Class Creed

I am bold, bright and brilliant; however, in all my brilliance, I have to forgive myself for the times I falter and fall. Thus, when I do fall, I fall forward, so I can move forward. In my moving forward, I serve myself the best of what life has to offer me by reading, studying, learning, and growing, which in turn allows me to not only grow to become the amazing person I have been created to be, but so that those around me can also grow to reach their full potential. I am committed that peoples’ lives will not be the same because I have crossed their path. Therefore, I will always do and give my best to all my assignments because I am bold, bright, and brilliant.

Name Date

Career Counseling

Class Proclamation

I have been put here on earth for a Divine Assignment to be the best me that I can be.

I am Great, Brilliant, and a Radical Changer! Therefore, I will always strive do my best. I am here to make this a better place. I am a world changer. I will not allow the world to change me, so that I forget my born divine destiny.

Hence, from this day and forward, I will walk in my greatness. I will no longer dim my light. I will let my light shine so brightly that when I walk into a room, others will have to put on their sunglasses because my light will shine so bright.

So, with that being said, I will read, study hard, and complete all my assignments on time. I will not just do just enough, to get by, but I will do more than enough. I will be excellent and unforgettable. My goal is not to impress my classmates, nor my professor, but that I will leave an impression on me. I will be my own “a-ha”.

Ready, Set, Go. Look out this semester for my most Exceptional, Awesome, Amazing Self has just arrived so the old me has got to step aside!

Name: _____ Date _____

Note: My Class Commitment to Me!

I (Student's Name), am a servant leader who will serve out of my overflow not from a cup half full or empty. I forgive myself if it at times, I find myself desperately desiring, by my own design, wanting and serving out of a cup half full, or an empty cup.

I admit first and foremost, I am not perfect, I live in an imperfect world, and I am okay with serving imperfect people. But in my imperfections, I will continue to move forward.

Though I might make some mistakes, I do not allow my mistakes to make me. I learn from them. That is what Great People do!

If my greatness bothers you, I unapologetically say move out of my space. I do not, and will not, minimize my greatness due to your lack of understanding of who I am, and the greatness I am designed to give, and share with the entire world.

I will always walk in, and serve humanity with my greatness. I was put here as a servant leader of greatness. Look out world here I am!

Today is the best day of my life forever!

Once the students have said the class creed out loud and signed them, immediately I am able to witness a change in their enthusiasm and commitment to graduate school. It helps that students will have something tangible to hold on and guide them throughout the process.

Conflict of Interest

It does not constitute a conflict of interest for the authors.

Recommended Reading

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