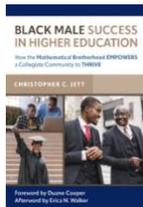


# Black Male Success in Higher Education: How the Mathematical Brotherhood Empowers a Collegiate Community to Thrive

Reviewed by William N. Thomas IV and Dylan Ravdin



**Black Male Success in Higher Education: How the Mathematical Brotherhood Empowers a Collegiate Community to Thrive**

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## Introduction

The social and cultural treatment of mathematics in both school and society have commonly been misrepresented and misinterpreted. The unique insights gained on approaches toward mathematics education for Black men is thoroughly explored in Christopher Jett's *Black Male Success in Higher Education: How the Mathematical Brotherhood EMPOWERS a Collegiate Community to THRIVE*. Jett thoughtfully investigates the experience of 16 Black men majoring in mathematics at Morehouse College and shows how critical it is to nurture and nourish the relationship between Black male students and mathematics. We come to this book as former STEM educators in K-12 public schools, with one currently serving as an instructional coach in New York City and the other as a university faculty member who has done research on the college and is also an alumnus of the school where the research took place.

Jett offers an intimate ethnographic view of how Black male students in higher education persist amidst the backdrop of social tensions surrounding justice, diversity, equity, and racial hostility that oftentimes is politicized and minimized to sweeping generalizations and perceptions based

on stereotypes. This book pushes beyond the common stereotypes of *Black exceptionalism* that the school is commonly associated with, and anchors the study using Black masculinity and Critical Race Theory to unpack the complex nature of mathematics and the racial contexts of Black male students in higher education. This framing and approach to the research revealed important sociocultural environmental characteristics for fostering mathematics in Black male students as well as the interplay between autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their cohort experience at Morehouse College.

### **Organization of Book and Key Features**

Jett organizes the survey thematically, but always grounded within Morehouse Mathematics specifically. While similar projects often begin by looking at the wider mathematics discipline, emphasizing disproportionalities and barriers before homing in on the community of interest, Jett centers his entire analysis only on the Morehouse Math Department, and any discussion of those external conditions are included as tangents and inserts. After an overview of Morehouse itself and the mathematics program's history in particular, Jett examines the participants in his study in terms of their background, their road to mathematical prowess, and what carried them to Morehouse. What he finds is that much like Black men as a whole, Black math majors at Morehouse are not monolithic and exhibit a full range of experiences and perspectives, with only mathematics tying all of them together.

This book couches the analysis of the culture within the Math Department in the language of Black Greek-Letter Organizations (BGLOs). Having sensed the fraternal nature among the professors and student cohorts, he analogizes various elements of the department's culture to those found within Black fraternity traditions. As the book moves through the responsive culture of the department to the stalwart faculty and upperclassmen and the competence that different buildings symbolize, Jett enriches the tenor of his analysis with the structures found in BGLOs. He concludes by contrasting the math majors' racialized experiences in school and everyday life with Morehouse's affirming space. Finally, Jett provides implications of his research to be considered by policymakers, educators, researchers, and families.

What is remarkable about the work is not the magical nature of Morehouse *per se*, but the authentic way that a responsive culture has been built within the Mathematics Department. While culturally responsive education is a hot buzzword at conferences and in literature, more often what they are describing are culturally prescriptive practices based on assumptions about students. What Morehouse has built, on the other hand, is a flexible and responsive culture centered around math that allows the students to build and strengthen their notions of identity, masculinity, competence, and Blackness in an individualized and authentic way.

### **Sociocultural Implications of Recruitment and Retention of Black Math Majors**

One of the most crucial foundations of Jett's analysis is the high rates of Black males represented in the Morehouse mathematics program who see the program through to completion. His data speaks to both the strong recruitment of Black males interested in math and the culture that those majors enter to pursue their studies. There is something built into the math program at Morehouse that mitigates the disproportionate representation and attrition seen in all other programs for Black males.

Sociocultural theory is a branch of cognitive sciences that allows researchers to examine the influence of a person's context or setting on their individual development. The theory divides the examination of a person's surroundings into three broad categories: culture, language, and

thought. In all three of these aspects, Jett chronicles a mathematics department at Morehouse that is reflexive to and reflective of its students' and faculty's interests and needs.

In terms of cultural and community-mindedness, Jett shows how Morehouse has carefully threaded the needle to support the unique, secluded nature of mathematics majors' work without building the sequestered ivory tower seen in other university math departments. From the beginning, "the Math Lab provides these African American male students with mathematically accomplished images from those who look like them, sends a strong message that Black men are exemplars in mathematics research, and sets the expectation that they, too, will make significant contributions to the field." (p. 85) This ethos continues through Homecoming, where the mathematics majors tent is a major attraction for all attendees, community-based service initiatives, and alumni professional conferences. From the moment students enter the Morehouse math program, they are entering not only a cohort and discipline, but a wider community built by—and for—Black mathematicians.

Much of this community esprit de corps is built through the language and thought encouraged in the department. Students view gatekeeping courses like "Real Analysis" as hurdles, not barriers, and encourage, cajole, and support each other in getting over them. The only gatekeeping described by Jett revolves around work ethic, and the competition described is contentious without animosity—each student wants to be the best but also wants to build the best for the department. Part of this work necessarily requires an examination of masculinity and manhood, but even there, the majors have repurposed their language to emphasize the manliness of math work: "'Real man' has been critiqued for being exclusionary to Black men who defy Black masculine norms; however, Darius [one of the students studied] used the 'real man' discourse as motivation to succeed in his community" (p. 48). Best summed up by Jett, "The mathematical brotherhood [at Morehouse] consisted of Black men who did not resemble stereotypical notions associated with being a nerd--such as being socially inept, having an awkward sense of humor, and talking about math ad nauseam--thereby sending a message that the Black masculine culture belongs in math" (p. 50).

### **Implications on Motivation of Black Male Students**

The sociocultural responsive environment built and maintained in Morehouse's mathematics learning community has a strong impact on the motivation of the students. Using a self-determination theoretical frame (Ryan & Deci, 2017), the Morehouse mathematics community that is detailed in Chapter 5 integrates student levers that profoundly influence student motivation through multilayered communal and autonomous activities that appeal to the students growing math competence. The three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are also key aspects that manifest themselves in Morehouse's sociocultural learning environment. The eight elements of the community highlight the importance of designing strategically inclusive social environments for Black boys and men that foster *autonomous support* instead of controlling and *effectance support* instead of discouragement or inconsistency, and build *relational support* instead of impersonal, marginalizing assimilation. The Mathematics Colloquium Series gives students an opportunity to explore topics of their interest in rigorous yet practical ways that expose them to concepts they will likely encounter later in the field. In addition, most of the speakers included Black male math-oriented professionals as well as other Black male math faculty members, allowing students to engage in rich dialogue that could lead them to various math-intensive research pathways. This is only one of several elements of this unique math community that embed the basic psychological needs of students in the programming that took place in the classroom and within the greater math community. The research pushes those who are leading mathematics experiences for Black boys and men to

integrate these needs into program design to promote the continuation of empowered, resilient, and ethically sound Black mathematicians as a result of their highly motivating, sociocultural learning environment.

## **References**

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## **Author Biographies**

**William N. Thomas, IV, EdD**, has been an educational leader for 20 years in urban public and public charter schools. He is on the faculty at American University as a Professorial Lecturer in their Policy and Leadership Educational Doctoral program, where he teaches courses centered around antiracism in education, humanizing methodologies for practitioner action research, and the influence of popular culture on educators. In addition, he is a former middle school science teacher, elementary school principal, director of science and high school director for an international studies program.

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