

# **The Ford Female Achievement Model for Excellence (F2AME): Empowering Black Females for Success**

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## **Abstract**

The educational realities for Black female students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are experiences too often omitted or sub-grouped with Black male student experiences. The academic resiliency of this dual minority group, who continue to outpace their racial counterparts in postsecondary degree completion, has received increased attention. Black females are double “minorities” who contend with racism and sexism by virtue of being Black and female. Therefore, the psychological and emotional costs of navigating such unfavorable environments warrant a deeper conversation. This article reviews the academic climate, and socioemotional and psychological factors faced by Black females enrolled in two PWI contexts—gifted and talented education and higher education—with strategies for support and success framed in Ford’s female achievement model for excellence.

*Keywords:* Black females, higher education, gifted and talented education, achievement, cultural and racial pride

## **Introduction**

Black females of all ages and educational levels—P-12 and higher education—face a myriad of challenges and roadblocks that hinder their educational potential and socioemotional and psychological well-being. As explained later, demographically, such educational settings are predominately White institutions (PWIs). Further, Black girls’ experiences in gifted and talented education (GATE) have important and noteworthy implications for higher education. We refer to this as the “GATE to higher education pipeline.” Additionally, it is important to note that Black females are often more represented in GATE and higher education than Black males. However, in contrast, Black females are less represented in both PWIs and GATE than White females. Combined, Black females are “blackened out” and “whited out” with respect to race and gender, respectively.

## Positionality

Given our status as Black female academicians at PWIs and having mutual interest in supporting Black females in both developmental stages and settings, we came together to write this article. We both experienced challenges in GATE in P-12, and attended PWIs for postsecondary education, thus we could not ignore our own lived experiences. We have used safe spaces to process our own struggles with intersectionality and are confident through processing that the story we share is one that encompasses the unique trajectory for Black females while also remaining hopeful about the specific strategies to improve conditions for Black females in all settings.

## Overview

In the upcoming pages, being mindful of intersectionality, we disaggregate race and gender to attend to the specific and unique academic, socioemotional, and psychological experiences of students who are Black *and* female. We explore historical challenges in GATE, herein identified as a PWI, while also providing context for the educational realities in higher education.

### P-12 PWIs in the Form of Gifted and Talented Education

Ford's (2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) work is extensive and captures the experiences of Black girls in P-12 settings, exploring how the lack of inclusion in GATE can ultimately impact academic preparedness and socioemotional and psychological wellness in higher education. The literature details perseverance for Black female students, who face more risk than their White peers but manage to shield this hardship and endure academically (Evans-Winters, 2014). Ford (2013b), Epstein et al. (2017), and Robinson and Clinkenbeard (1998) highlighted the distinct barriers faced by Black adolescent girls in GATE in formal school settings.

According to the most recent *Civil Rights Data Collection* by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2018), Black females are underrepresented in GATE by approximately 36%. Black males are underrepresented by 52%. Conversely, White females are overrepresented. These findings reinforce the importance of avoiding homogenizing students by race and by gender. The experiences of Black females are similar to and different from those of Black males, and likewise when it comes to the experiences of White females.

Ford (2013b, 2013c) has long theorized academic achievement while recognizing the emotional and psychological toll on Black girls navigating through inequitable, deficit-oriented climates, such as GATE, in which their underrepresentation is first and foremost due to under-referrals by their White teachers, who are mostly female (Grissom & Redding, 2016). Created almost a decade ago, Ford's female achievement model for excellence (F<sup>2</sup>AME) encompasses strategies for academic success for Black females who are high achievers and/or gifted and talented (Ford, 2013b, 2013c). Discussed in more detail later and worth noting here is that the model builds upon the scholar identity model for Black males by Whiting (2006a, 2006b) and proposes that Black girls who make social sacrifices, are independent, and are goal- and future-oriented are more likely to be academically successful than their counterparts. Evans-Winters

(2014) and Collins et al. (2020) recognized how F<sup>2</sup>AME applies to the success of Black girls, with its emphasis on the psychological, socioemotional, academic, and cultural characteristics necessary for self-love, and academic and professional excellence. We now turn to Black females in colleges and universities.

### **Higher Education PWIs and Black Females**

The attainment of postsecondary educational degrees is attributable to many factors, including but not limited to demographic characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and academic preparedness (Chingos, 2018). For Black students, most of whom receive their degrees from PWIs, known for cultivating discriminatory environments that are isolating and emotionally exhausting (Griffith et al., 2019), the task and desire to reach their full academic and professional potential are even more challenging and arduous.

There is a substantial amount of literature speaking to racial and discriminatory practices encountered by Black students in GATE that is also mirrored in higher education, with much lending itself to the experiences of Black males or Black students as a whole (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019; Ford, 2013a, 2013b; Griffith et al., 2019; Mills, 2020). Black females are often treated as an afterthought. What may be ironic for some readers to comprehend is that, despite this omission, Black females currently earn more postsecondary degrees than Black males. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), Black females comprised 9% of the total 15% Black student population enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States and earned 70% of master's and 66% of doctoral degrees awarded to Black students. Black females outpace their racial counterparts in graduate degree attainment, and the disparity in scholarship in higher education discourse compared to Black males is disheartening. As the academic demographic landscape evolves, it is essential that research and scholarships also remain reflective of this process, with more works dedicated to Black females and their unique gender and racial needs.

Literature focused on the experiences of Black female students in higher education notes the challenges of those majoring in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), experiences at historically Black colleges and universities, and undergraduate experiences at PWIs (Farmer et al., 2019; Leath & Chavous, 2017; Shahid et al., 2018). Prior studies have identified the psychological and social adjustments for this dually marginalized group at PWIs, who continue to perform at high levels despite added layers of intersectionality of gender and race (Chavous et al., 2004; Domingue, 2015). To summarize, these studies found that Black females often feel unsupported, undervalued, and incapable while attending these institutions. These externally imposed barriers contribute to presumptions of incompetence described extensively by Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. (2012).

There is a theme of resilience for Black females that is attributable to their high graduation rates despite unsupportive environments. However, it is necessary to remain cognizant of the socioemotional and psychological costs and impacts on well-being associated with resilience. While the need to identify negative symptoms and the potential psychological

impact of matriculating through such harsh environments is meaningful, a clear direction of how institutions can support this group at PWIs is lacking.

Black females who are successful and transcend into higher educational settings, particularly PWIs, will require support, mentoring, and encouragement. PWIs are environments known to exacerbate mental health issues due to racial stressors and gendered challenges (Baldwin, 2021; Barmore, 2021). Therefore, implementing specific strategies and protective factors for academic success, and psychological and socioemotional wellness is crucial for this unique group that remains diligent in pursuing advanced educational opportunities.

Higher education experiences and degree attainment contribute to higher incomes, gainful employment, and overall quality of life, for example, better physical health and improved mental health, both socioemotional and psychological (Chingos, 2018). While the benefit of higher education is celebrated, studies have recognized the challenging path students of color must endure in environments such as PWIs. Black students have long faced inclusion and equity barriers, and instances of prejudice and discrimination, for example, racial microaggressions when enrolled (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019; Mills, 2020; Smith, 2014; Strunk et al., 2018). Chao et al. (2012) found negative associations with perceived discrimination and academic performance in their work exploring the experiences of Black students in college settings. Smith et al. (2007) examined the experiences of Black males attending PWIs, and results illuminated psychosocial stress responses (e.g., exhaustion, frustration, anxiety, and somatic symptoms) congruent with “racial battle fatigue,” a term coined by Dr. William A. Smith (2014) to describe the cumulative effects of frequent exposure to racism, such as racial microaggressions. The distinct journey for Black students has been inclusive of race-related stressors, with recent attention focused on psychological well-being and social adjustment, factors known to impede academic success (Mills, 2020; Proctor et al., 2018). While identifying such factors is integral to the academic success of this marginalized population, the discussion remains incomplete as most has focused on Black males or Black students.

Black females’ dual minority status further complicates their matriculation, compared with Black males and White females. Studies have indicated that Black females enrolled in PWIs are faced with more instances of targeted stereotypes than their racial and gendered counterparts (Fontaine, 2011; Stephens & Few, 2007). Banks (2009), through qualitative work, found that these negative depictions, for example, of Black women being loud and aggressive, directly impacted functioning in college classrooms. Black females were less likely to speak up out of fear of being ostracized, receiving poor grades, or being labeled “angry Black woman.” In another study, Banks and Landau (2021) investigated if live exposure to racial microaggressions directly impacted cognitive functioning, and results were conclusive that hostile environments, such as PWIs, can have detrimental consequences on this facet. Corbin et al. (2018) recognized how negative stereotypes depicted in mass media had become salient in classroom settings, being perpetuated by White faculty and students. The misogynistic microaggressions were damming to their self-esteem, thus activating tropes such as “STRONGBLACKWOMAN” in defense of “angry Black woman” accusations. Corbin et al. (2018) noted the origin of

STRONGBLACKWOMAN through Higginbotham's (1993) work, citing a faith-based lineage, in which the Black middle-class women in the church mentored and encouraged other Black women to push back against the racist narratives, counteracting claims of them being lazy, unkept, immoral, and promiscuous. Both Corbin et al. (2018) and Higginbotham (1993) noted how the activation of defense mechanisms was exhausting for Black females, with symptoms reported being congruent with what is now known as racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2007). Smith et al. (2020) purported that long-term effects of racial battle fatigue have the propensity to jeopardize the ability of Black females to live healthy lives, as the racial misogyny justifies and reinforces subordination and oppression evident in society.

These and other studies reiterate how the intersectionality of race and gender must not be ignored or discounted, as explained herein and cogently explained by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Donna Y. Ford, Patricia Hill Collins, and Venus Evans-Winters, to name a few. Crenshaw (1989, 1993) introduced the term intersectionality to depict how structural, political, and representational constructs serve to shape the daily experiences of Black women through erasure in subgrouping or exclusion. Higher education, since its inception, has remained a landscape where structural, political, and representational agendas are at the forefront. Therefore, discussion on Black females' paths through these landscapes (i.e., higher education) must encompass a lens of intersectionality that adequately accounts for their layered identity and particular needs. Haynes et al. (2020) found quite the opposite through a synthesis of peer-reviewed journals spanning the last 30 years despite the essentiality. The authors explored the use of intersectionality as a methodology in the scholarship of Black females in higher education, with the study's results aligning with the positionality of Black females in society. Intersectionality was gravely underplayed in much of the reviewed work, leading to more evidence of scholarly neglect for this population. Shavers and Moore (2014) contended that Black women enrolled in higher education settings are often faced with a dichotomy of academic success or deleterious effects on their overall well-being. While scholarship has recognized differences in the educational trajectories of Black males and females enrolled in PWIs (Chavous et al., 2004; Keels, 2013), there remains a gap in the literature examining not only the differential path that is inclusive of the socioemotional and psychological costs, but also specific strategies to best ensure academic and psychological stability, as offered by F<sup>2</sup>AME.

### **Ford's Female Achievement Model for Excellence**

Ford et al. (2017) argued that the distinctiveness of educational experiences endured by Black females warrants review through a growth model lens that can be used to promote culturally relevant practices and interventions by educators. Too often blacked out due to being included in studies where Black males are the focal point, or whited out due to the same positionality as footnotes with White females, Black females remain underrepresented in literature, to the benefit of their counterparts. As mentioned in her work, Ford has lamented increased representation in gifted education for Black females. Through this plight, Ford (2013a) created F<sup>2</sup>AME, which focuses on the psychological, social-emotional, academic, and cultural components necessary for positive mental health and academic excellence and achievement for

Black females. This model extends Whiting's (2006a, 2006b) scholar identity model for culturally diverse males that hinges on the notion that success within academia is attainable by establishing and maintaining a solid scholar identity. Whiting contended that the self-concept and racial identity of Black males are constructed in relation to how they view themselves as students and in subsequent interactions, and his work centered on the underrepresentation of culturally diverse males in gifted education. Whiting defined a scholar identity as how culturally diverse males view themselves academically, demonstrating studiousness, self-efficacy and agency, competence and capability, and intelligence in academic settings. Further, Whiting identified nine characteristics that comprise the scholar identity of the Black male, including masculinity, racial identity, academic self-confidence, need for achievement, need for affiliation, self-awareness, internal locus of control, willingness to make sacrifices, future orientation, and self-efficacy. In this work, he noted how each characteristic is framed around support within the family, community, mentoring, and school, and, therefore, used to ward off negative experiences such as racism, sexism, and discrimination.

Building on this strength-based approach of Whiting, Ford (2013a, 2013b, 2013c) created an asset-based model highlighting positive traits for Black females, grounded in identity development and racial pride, and aimed to defend against social and racial oppression. Collins et al. (2018) commended the importance of this model as it conceptualizes racial and gender identity for Black females in the absence of dominant group influences. The multidimensional and nonlinear facets of this model have been applicable for increasing the participation of Black females in STEM, not to mention identity development for Black females in GATE, as mentioned (Collins, 2018; Ford et al., 2017). The conceptualization of Black females through F<sup>2</sup>AME provides a much-needed perspective on the psychological, socioemotional, academic, and cultural factors necessary for academic success. Therefore, implementing this model for Black females navigating harsh climates, such as PWIs, during distinct developmental periods of higher education is appropriate given the proven strategies and protective factors outlined. Figure 1 provides a summary of variable descriptions included in the model. This is followed by recommendations for institutional support for this group framed in the four major achievement components suggested by Ford (2013a, 2013c).

**Figure 1***F<sup>2</sup>AME with Attention to Black Girls and Women*

Variable description	Sub-variables
Psychological variables affect and are composed of self-beliefs, racial and gender identity, and pride.	Resilience, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, goal-orientation, racial/gender pride
Socioemotional variables pertain to views of self as influenced by others, along with the confidence that contributes to independence and self-sufficiency.	Social sacrifices, introversion, independence, self-sufficiency
Academic factors relate to educational performance and views of self in academic settings.	Work ethic, identity, self-confidence, field-independence, flexibility/adaptability, learning style
Cultural factors pertain to views and performance of self as a cultural being who is similar to and different from Whites. It includes affiliation with primary culture and skills in mainstream settings.	Cultural pride, cultural competence, biculturalism, bilingualism

### Recommendations

We now turn to recommendations for utilizing or implementing Ford's model, with attention to the major variables just described.

#### Psychological Variables

Resiliency for Black students is a protective factor that is not fixed but is rather the persistent and active engagement in managing internal and external stressors that interfere with completing a goal or task (Ford, 2010). Suggestions for nurturing an academic identity have included but are not limited to a sense of agency that can strengthen positive self-beliefs, and gender and racial pride when faced with negative external factors, such as peers, educators, curricula, literature, and social media (Evans-Winters, 2014). As mentioned, PWIs are saturated with gender and racial messages that are counterproductive and deleterious to self-efficacy and a sense of worth for non-Whites. Counternarratives are essential for defending against the constant barrage of attacks and improving racial and gender pride. This support can occur in university-supported small groups consisting of Black professionals from the community and students. Grant and Simmons (2008) identified that it is not simply mentorship that is effective, but specific components of the mentorship model that are more beneficial, for example, same sex, same race, university supported, and Black faculty organizations in combination with non-Black faculty mentors. In this fashion, representation or racial matching comes into play; that is,

exposure to other Black and successful women can increase intrinsic motivation and aid in maintaining the path toward academic success. The use of formal mentoring practices to implement goal-oriented work and efforts to enhance self-efficacy through exposure to academic opportunities (e.g., research, writing, presentations) will provide instant and future benefits for academic and career endeavors.

### **Socioemotional Variables**

The socioemotional and psychological health of Black females enrolled in higher education remains a point of contention, while identified suggestions for improvement are scarce. Per the National Health Interview Survey, Black women are more likely than any other group to meet the criteria of depression and anxiety (Villarroel & Terlizzi, 2020), due in part to the intersectionality of identities and associated stressors. Consequently, this group remains one of the least likely to engage in supportive efforts and mental health treatment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). This underutilization of services could be attributable to the abovementioned STRONGBLACKWOMAN trope and fear of admitting emotional concerns due to stereotyping and negative feedback from White faculty and colleagues. Owing to the tireless implications that they are unprepared, lazy, and incapable, Black females too often exert energy to overcome doubt.

Ford (2013a, 2013c) identified characteristics consistent with academic success, including social sacrifice, introversion, independence, and self-sufficiency. As Black females strive towards excellence, they are often scrutinized, unlike their counterparts, with life choices and sacrifices made in relationships and time commitments. The notion of remaining connected socially or being academically successful is taxing to their overall socioemotional well-being (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Black females can benefit from normalization and validation of these sacrifices rather than being ridiculed or guilted for prioritizing academic needs. Support in this area can again be generated by exposure to groups and individuals of the same racial/ethnic/gender makeup.

Along with the same premise as social sacrifices, introversion has been identified as a characteristic of academic success. Given the time commitment and organizational stressors explored, institutions can support informal cohort connections for Black female students. Individuals of the same racial/ethnic makeup and gender can work together on various school-related projects while also creating smaller social circles of support. In this manner, they are socially connected and less isolated, but not sacrificing independence and self-sufficiency.

Suggestions for improving the mental wellness of college students often involve referrals to college counseling services. Unfortunately, this service is often underutilized owing to various concerns (Ibrahim et al., 2013; Marsh & Wilcoxon, 2015). Black students, in particular, have often spoken to a lack of culturally appropriate treatment providers and modalities when they do engage (Ford, 2010). Given the underutilization of counseling services, institutions may offer culturally specific wellness opportunities aligned with the needs of Black females. Hiring Black counselors or counselors of color could improve engagement and attrition rates. Advanced



training in multicultural or feminist orientation for practitioners may also assist with affirming self-concept and improving decision-making skills.

### **Academic Factors**

Black females differ from Black males as they present with high motivation in higher educational settings (Cokley et al., 2013). Ford et al. (2017) recognized that to enhance learning and motivation, Black females would benefit from demonstrating a connection between hard work and success. While Black females remain resilient through their efforts, negative images and perceptions may cause them to begin to doubt life choices. Messages facilitated through the academic environment, for example, Black females being selected last for group work, or contributions in class discussions being minimized or ignored (Shavers and Moore, 2014), can be damaging to academic self-confidence and identity. Grantham and Ford (2003) have long argued the need to implement multicultural education in the current curriculum to affirm and promote racial pride and positive orientations for Black students. For Black females, who need to *see* and *believe*, a redesign of curriculum, with collaboration from administrators, instructors, and counselors in efforts to improve the image of Black females as learners, would be beneficial in counteracting the stereotypical images prevalent in education. Learning styles are culturally influenced. Ford (2010) recognized that success in the classroom depends highly on the connection between the culturally responsive curriculum and individual learning styles. One suggestion is scaffolding, whereby instructors incorporate the individual learner's cultural knowledge, prior experience, and learning style to improve the effectiveness and appropriateness of the curriculum (Gay, 2002).

An additional recommendation is for institutions to implement strategies to highlight discrepancies between those who exert little effort, prioritizing other aspects of life (sports, entertainment, social life), and those who endured through the rigors of academia, secured a positive academic identity, and are thriving in their chosen field. Ford et al. (2017) noted that culturally responsive supports are necessary, suggesting that relationships with other Black females (e.g., faculty and administrators, professionals), families, and opportunities (e.g., summer programs facilitated by institutions) promote a scholar identity that can be nurtured throughout. This nurturing works to enhance another characteristic Ford mentioned: field-independence. Such individuals learn not to rely on the classroom environment or climate for belonging or affirmation, but rather their passion for this work is fueled in environments that are welcoming of creativity and cultural responsiveness. Black females thrive with creativity and environments that are culturally responsive. They can also adapt and modify responses to unwelcoming or hostile environments by finding the proverbial "silver lining" to cope and achieve desired goals.

### **Cultural Variables**

Cultural pride consists of not just self-concept and self-esteem; it includes racial pride. Cross and Vandiver's (2001) Nigrescence theory explicates three stages of Black identity: pre-encounter; emersion-immersion; and internalization. Internalization depicts healthy, positive

pride and affiliation as a Black individual and cultural being. Institutions can assist Black female students with more education and insight into stages of Black identity. This method can be implemented through specific group counseling or continued focus groups offered throughout degree programs to educate Black females and instill collectivism and racial pride. Cultural competence is self-knowledge and awareness about one's culture while also gaining appreciation for the culture, beliefs, and values. Black females have knowledge, dispositions, and skills about the dominant culture and, thus, can develop a healthy sense of self while recognizing differences from and similarities with other groups from participation in these groups. Mentorship and connections with other Black females will also facilitate a level of biculturalism that consists of their ability to draw from their own culture (e.g., values, beliefs, and customs) and American norms to adapt and survive and thrive within both. Biculturalism embraces facets such as language (African American vernacular English/Black English), style, and collectivist approach, much of which has been erased in White hegemonic structures existing in PWIs.

### Summary

Given the complexity of domains introduced (psychological, socioemotional, academic, and cultural), not to mention the intersectionality of identities (gender/race/culture) shared for this population, it is appropriate to apply Ford's model of academic excellence to Black females enrolled both in GATE and postsecondary education, specifically at PWIs. This article reviewed environmental realities, and associated stressors for Black females at all grade levels (from preschool through higher education), followed by an introduction to F<sup>2</sup>AME and its development. Implementation of this model for Black females in these settings was discussed, along with strategies for continued success.

Few models of achievement focus on and address the socioemotional, psychological, and academic needs and development of Black females specific to their educational trajectory in PWIs. Conversely, there is greater attention given to White females and Black males. Some of this work is applicable to Black females, but this piecemeal approach of borrowing from the work on Black males and/or White females is incomplete and insufficient for understanding and supporting those who are Black *and* female. F<sup>2</sup>AME fills these shortcomings by being tailored to the dual identities of this demographic group. Black females are, thus, neither invisible nor an afterthought in efforts to promote and support their achievement. They are front and center, which increases the probability of Black females being mentally, academically, and professionally successful. Importantly, it is not age-bound; females at all ages and developmental stages can benefit.

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