

# One factor that can help determine black men's college success

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Beyond good test scores and high school grades, a new study finds one key factor that helps predict if a young black man will succeed at a predominantly white university.

That factor is "grit" – a dedication to pursuing and achieving a goal, whatever the obstacles and failures along the way.

Grit is so important that it was found to affect [college](#) grades for black men almost as much as high school GPA and ACT scores, said Terrell Strayhorn, author of the study and associate professor of educational studies at The Ohio State University.

"For many black men, talent and high school success are not the only things they need to succeed when they attend a predominantly white university."

"Despite where they begin in terms of college readiness, [black males](#) who show more grit than their peers earn better grades in college."

The study appears online in the *Journal of African American Studies* and will be published in a future print edition.

These findings are important, Strayhorn said, because they identify a way that educators and parents can make a real difference in improving college graduation rates for black men - especially since graduation from college depends, in part, on earning high enough grades to meet

university academic standards.

Today, about two-thirds of black men who enter college leave before completing their degree – the highest attrition rate among all races and both sexes.

"You can't change where a student grows up, or the quality of the high school he attended. But grit is something that can be taught and instilled in young men and it will have a real effect on their success," Strayhorn said.

The study involved 140 black [male students](#) who were enrolled full time at a large, predominantly white public university. Most were first-generation college [students](#), reflecting the fact that ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented among those who are first in their family to attend college.

The students took an eight-question measure of grit that has been successfully used in many settings, including with cadets at West Point.

Participants rated how much they agreed with statements like "I have overcome setbacks" and "I finish whatever I begin."

Strayhorn compared the students' responses on these questions to their grades in college, which were provided by university officials.

Strayhorn also had a wide range of demographic information on the students, including [high school](#) grades and scores on the standardized ACT test that is used as a college entrance exam.

Results showed that grittier black males earned higher grades in college than their less-gritty peers – even after taking into account a variety of factors that may affect grades, such as prior achievement, age, year in

school, transfer status, how engaged they are in university activities and their degree aspirations.

"Even if they are talented and have shown past academic success, some black men may not succeed in college, and those are often the ones who show less grit," Strayhorn said.

"The ability to persevere in the face of obstacles is a key to college success for [black men](#)."

Strayhorn said he believes grit can also help students from other groups succeed, including whites and women, and those who attend other kinds of institutions, such as historically black colleges.

But grit may be more important for black males at predominantly white universities than it is for other groups.

"The environment at predominantly white institutions can be very different from the cultural backgrounds from which some black males come," he said.

"So these students not only have to deal with the academic demands, but work around the social differences that are dramatically different from where they grew up."

Strayhorn said he hopes that colleges and universities will develop programs that specifically work to develop grit in students, like black males, who are at-risk for academic failure.

"You can teach grit. I can imagine intense summer programs, almost like academic boot camps, that teach young people how to manage stress, balance demanding tasks over time, and how to cope with academic failure," Strayhorn said.

"These students need to learn resilience, how to maintain focus on their goals even when they fail a test or have some other setback academically or personally. I think that can make a real difference, especially for those who may experience challenges or setbacks."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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