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Michigan's black/white male education gap is worst in nation

ANN ARBOR, Mich.—African-American males in Michigan have the lowest high school graduation rate in the country—33 percent, compared to 74 percent for white males in the state, according to University of Michigan research. Moreover, African-American female college students nationwide now outnumber black men in college, 2-1. While a number of studies have examined Michigan's college attainment and high school graduation rates, the numbers from U-M's Black Male Project show the disparities are "alarming" when progress is measured comparing males with females, said Larry Rowley, U-M assistant professor of higher education and Afroamerican and African Studies. "Researchers, policymakers and educators increasingly acknowledge that low K-12 academic performance, high school completion and higher education participation levels for African- American males represent a national crisis," Rowley said. "National data reveal that African- American male students are underperforming at alarming rates across the K-12 educational pipeline as well as in their college attendance and completion rates." Rowley is based at U-M's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education and holds a joint appointment at the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies. "This is not an intellectual exercise for me. This is personal," said Rowley, who was orphaned as a child and worries regularly about opportunities and challenges that will face his own young son now attending Ypsilanti Public Schools, one of the districts examined in the research. Nationally, the percentage of African-American males ages 18-24 enrolled in college declined slightly between 1996 and 2000, from 25.1 percent to 24.9 percent, while the percentage of African-American women in college grew from 28.4 percent to 35.1 percent during that time. At the same time, 73 percent of African-American male college students completed their degree programs while African-American women's completion rates were closer to 80 percent. These trends have continued in recent years unabated, Rowley said. Even more startling, he added, is that only a third of all African Americans in college are male. "The goal of the Black Male Project is to examine the factors that have contributed to the 'crisis' of black males in the educational pipeline," Rowley said. "We plan to highlight the variation in black-male background characteristics and attitudes that affect their overall achievement and college aspirations. We also strive to highlight strategies and interventions to mediate these factors." Rowley believes in a two-pronged strategy: • Recognize that educational attainment is closely related to how someone sees their own identity, particularly whether they have a positive or negative view of their own identity, race and academic efficacy. • Put role models and mentors in front of them. To offset the number of single-parent homes, at-risk males need more positive male role models. Rowley has encouraged school districts to work closely with U-M and other universities to match educated male mentors with K-12 students. Often, school districts have feared that the gains will disappear quickly if college mentors come and go, but Rowley argues that any help is much better than none. He notes how brief encounters with role models and mentors, including a principal who put him in the highest-level academic classroom in elementary school, gave him the type of encouragement that he says continues to motivate him during his career as a scholar and mentor. "If I could only give one piece of advice to parents, teachers and educational leaders about how best to help young people, especially African-American boys, it would be to believe that all students have the potential to learn and grow academically despite their situation or background, and then to do everything they can to help the students believe it, too," Rowley said.