

# The Educational Status of African American Males in the Twenty-first Century

*Adapted from an article published in the December 2007 issue of The Journal of Negro Education.*



*By Archon Antoine M. Garibaldi, Epsilon Boulé  
President, Gannon University*

This article assesses the educational attainment of African American males between the 1990's and the early 2000's. Beginning with a summary of a 1987–88 study conducted by the author on African American males in the New Orleans public schools, national data are provided on the high-school graduation rates of African American males and females, as well as trends in their enrollment and degree completion at the undergraduate, graduate and first-professional levels. The data show a growing educational disparity between African American women and men in all higher-education institutions, but also in public and private historically black colleges and universities. The author offers recommendations to improve the performance, enrollment and graduation rates of African American males in order to close the current college gender gap.

Since the mid-1980's the educational performance and progression of African American boys and men have received extensive local and national attention. This group was singled out primarily because, on most local and national measures of academic achievement, African American boys on the whole were underachieving significantly. In the majority of the more than 16,000 school districts across the country, strongly correlated with those low performance scores were the *highest* rates of suspensions, expulsions, non-promotions, dropouts and special-education placements, and the *lowest* rates of secondary-school graduation and gifted-and-talented assignments.

Unfortunately, the situation has not changed considerably in the first decade of the twenty-first century, even though black males have made modest educational progress over the last two decades. This article focuses on several of the major issues that have been raised by this author with respect to the educational progress of black males over the last twenty-five years, and it will include a review of the most recent and available college enrollment and graduation data of African American males and females. A steadily growing gender gap exists among males and females of all races, but it has widened and become extraordinarily large for African American males and females.

## The 1987–88 New Orleans Black-Male Study

Twenty years ago, in 1987, I was invited by the board of the New Orleans public schools to serve as chairperson of a task force of New Orleans educators and community leaders who would meet to review the status of African American males in the local school system. After taking on this major pro bono project, I decided to model the task force's work on similar procedures that were used by the 1981–83 National Commission on Excellence in Education, where I was a staff member while working at the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute of Education. As chair of the Department of Education at Xavier University of Louisiana at that time, and as a former director-principal of the St. Paul Urban League Street Academy during my graduate-school years at the University of Minnesota in the mid-1970's, I decided that the only way to bring about realistic solutions and remedies to the poor academic performance, progression and behavioral issues of African

American boys would be to analyze the most available data and obtain input from school personnel. Additionally, four public hearings were held, and the local community was given the opportunity to provide perspectives and comments on the issue through an informational survey that was included in several thousand copies of the local newspaper, *The Times-Picayune*, in the winter of 1988.

“Educating Black Male Youth: A Moral and Civic Imperative” (Garibaldi, 1988) was the title of the 1988 final report, and a summary of the task force’s findings and recommendations was published exclusively in *The Journal of Negro Education* (Garibaldi, 1992). Because it was my intent that all of the public- and private-school systems in the country would have access to the data and analyses, as well as to the surveys developed for the students, teachers, parents and local citizens, several school districts – particularly Milwaukee and Prince Georges County, Maryland – replicated the study and arrived at the same results with respect to the below-average performance of African American males within their respective geographical areas. A summary of a few of the more notable findings is presented in the next section.

## Survey Results of Students, Teachers and Parents

During the 1986–87 school year, African American males in the New Orleans public-school system accounted for 65 percent of total suspensions, 80 percent of all expulsions, 58 percent of nonpromotions and 45 percent of dropouts. Black males, however, accounted for only 43 percent of the student population, and black females made up 44 percent. Although there is a widespread belief that black males have low educational aspirations, the New Orleans Black Males study showed just the opposite. In the survey of more than 2,250 African American males in the New Orleans school district, 95 percent reported that they expected to graduate from high school. But 40 percent responded that they believed their teachers did not set high enough goals for them, and 60 percent suggested that their

teachers should push them harder. (It is important to note that a comparably sized sample of black females also surveyed responded similarly to the boys on those items.) Adding strength to the belief that self-fulfilling low expectations by educators may strongly affect how boys are taught and treated in schools, the results of a random survey of 500 teachers (318 of whom responded) indicated that almost six out of every ten of those teachers did not believe their black male students would go to college. That finding became even more important and disconcerting when the analyses revealed that 60 percent of the teachers sampled taught in elementary schools, 70 percent had ten or more years of experience, and 65 percent were black. This response provided added support to the teacher-expectancy literature and confirmed for this author that no teachers are immune from making negative, self-fulfilling prophecies about the children whom they teach, even when the pupils are of the same race.

When parents were surveyed, their beliefs coincided with those of their children. More specifically, 80 percent of the 3,523 parents surveyed indicated that they believed their sons expected to go to college, a response that was twice as large as the teachers’ expectations. But despite those high aspirations expressed by parents, one fourth of the parents responded that they had never gone to their child’s school for parental conferences. Those apparently countervailing results provided an opportunity for the school system to adjust the time when parental conferences were held, to make it possible for more parents to attend. The parents’ positive expectations of their boys and girls sent a different message to teachers who previously believed that parents’ absences from teacher conferences indicated a lack of interest in their children’s education. Rather, the parents’ responses indicated that they were concerned about and interested in their children’s school performance.

Overall, the New Orleans black male study’s findings were revealing and instructive, and they helped clarify many misperceptions and erroneous beliefs. At the end of this article, some of the recommendations that evolved from the task force’s study will be

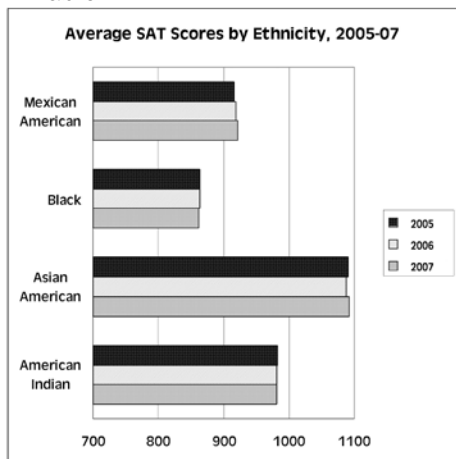
mentioned, for they are just as relevant today as they were twenty years ago.

## Males Outperform Females on SATs and ACTs

Across all racial groups, the number of females enrolled in and graduating from college is significantly higher than the number of males. However, despite the smaller number of males in colleges and universities, 2005–7 SAT and ACT data demonstrate that males performed better than females on these tests and achieved higher average scores. Additionally, African American males obtained higher scores than African American females in those same years. Table 1 provides the average SAT scores for all racial-ethnic groups in the years 2005 to 2007. Asian American students had the highest scores, whites were a close second and blacks had the lowest scores on both tests.

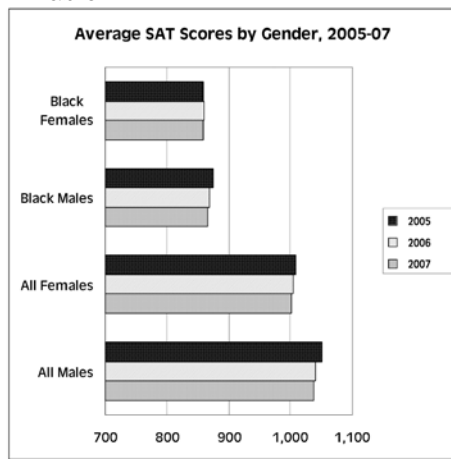
Even though the widespread perception and reality are that African American males underachieve in elementary and secondary schools, it is pleasantly surprising to learn that the average SAT scores for males overall, and black males in particular, were higher than both females overall and black females, respectively, in those years. As Table 2 shows, the average SAT score in 2007 for all males was 1,037, compared with a national average of 1,017 for all students. The average SAT score for all females was 1,001. The black males’ average score was 866 on the SAT compared with an average score of 859 for black females. On the ACT, which is also taken by many students across the country, particularly in the Midwest, the South and the West, the average 2005–7 ACT scores for African Americans were also the lowest among all racial and ethnic groups. While the national average on the ACT in 2007 was 21.2, African Americans’ average score was 17, more than four points lower than the national average. Performance data by gender and within particular racial groups are not available from ACT, but it would be interesting to find out whether male scores on this national test are consistent with their scores on the SAT.

Table 1



Source: The College Board (2007). SAT national and state summary reports for 2005, 2006 and 2007. Retrieved September 18, 2007, from collegeboard.com.

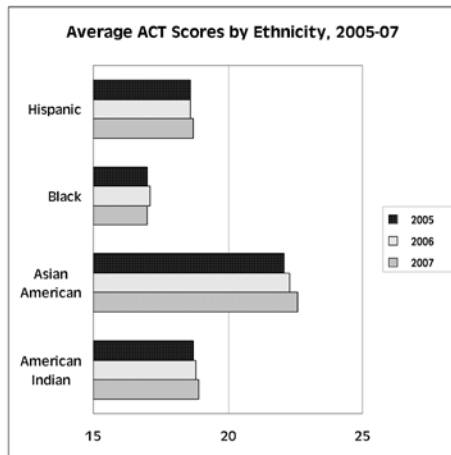
Table 2



Source: The College Board (2007). SAT national and state summary reports for 2005, 2006 and 2007. Retrieved September 18, 2007, from collegeboard.com.

As was the case with the SAT, Table 3 shows that the highest-performing group was Asian American students, with an average ACT score of 22.6; followed by white students at 22.1; American Indian students at 18.9; and 18.7 for Hispanic students. It is worth noting that American Indian students' scores are very competitive for college admission, even though many American Indian students do not go to college at the same rate as other students. While males have performed slightly better on the ACT in recent years, Table 4 shows that the average ACT score for all male test takers in 2007 was 21.2, compared with females' average score of 21.0. That average difference of two tenths of a percentage point between males and females was also consistent with scores in 2005 and 2006.

Table 3



Source: American College Testing Program (2007). ACT national and state scores for 2005, 2006 and 2007. Retrieved September 18, 2007, from act.org.

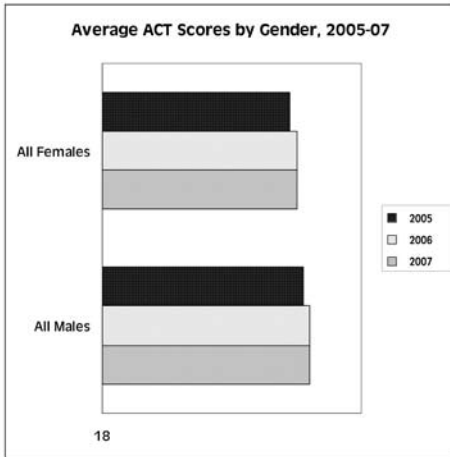
## High-school Graduation Rates of African American Ages 25 to 29

Even though much of the attention on black high-school graduation rates is usually focused on 18-to-24-year-old groups, where black males lagged behind black females by more than 357,000 diplomas (*Education Week*, 2007), it is also important to look at the educational attainment percentages for 25-to-29-year-old African American men and women: These percentages show a higher graduation rate for black men in 2004. As Table 5 indicates, 91.3 percent of 25-to-29-year-old African American men completed four or more years of high school compared with 86.6 percent of African American women in 2004. In addition to the difference being only 4.7 percent between the two groups, the educational-attainment percentage is actually higher for males compared with females. The latter is an interesting statistic for 25-to-29-year-old black males and black females because the percentage of 18-to-24-year-old African American males and females who graduated from high school was an average of ten points or lower. Thus Table 5 suggests that it is very possible that African American males and females who do not graduate from high school with their 18-to-24-year-old peer groups may in fact be graduating from high school either with an equivalency degree (that is, GED) or by returning to high school to get the required credits for graduation. If either assumption is correct, this latter group of black high-school graduates is another untapped pool of individuals, particularly males, who are eligible to enroll in college but may be overlooked by colleges and universities because of their age. More intensive research is needed over the next few years on this surprising high-school graduation data result for 25-to-29-year-old African Americans.

*“What people want in the world is not ideology; they want goods and services.”*

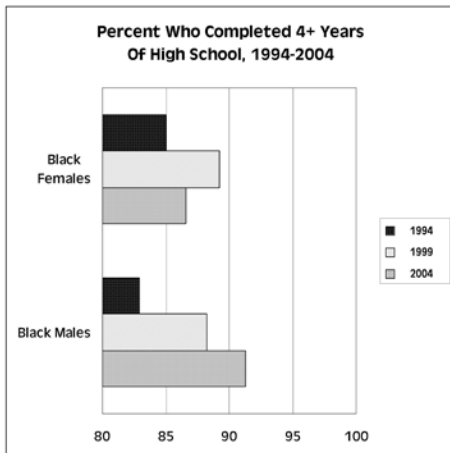
*—Archon Andrew Young*

Table 4



Source: American College Testing Program (2007). ACT national and state scores for 2005, 2006 and 2007. Retrieved September 18, 2007, from act.org.

Table 5

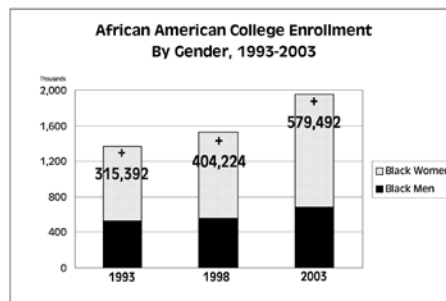


Source: Minorities in higher education annual status report: 2006. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

### More African American Women Than Men Continue to Be Enrolled in College

As I have expressed in several articles in *The Journal of Negro Education* and other periodicals, as well as chapters in books, over the last twenty years (Garibaldi, 1986, 1991, 1992, 1997, 2000), more black women than men have been enrolling in and graduating from college for almost half a century. Analyses of recent data bring this issue into sharper focus. Table 6, for example, shows that a much higher number of African American women were enrolled in college in 1993, 1998 and 2003. The cumulative effect of each of those ten years has meant that there has been a significant increase in the number of college-enrolled African American females. In 2003 a total of 1,266,107 African American women were enrolled in college, compared with 686,615 African American men. That difference of 579,492 is 54 percent higher than the gap of 315,392 more African American women than men who were enrolled in college in 1993.

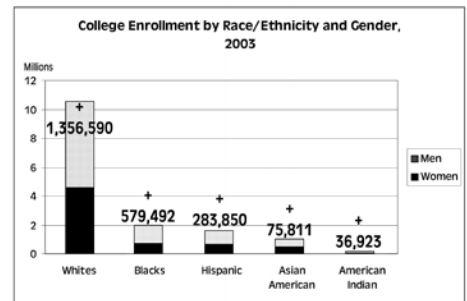
Table 6



Source: Minorities in higher education annual status report: 2006. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

Table 7 demonstrates that blacks are not the only group with a postsecondary gender-gap crisis; each racial-ethnic group's college enrollment gap is quite large. The gender gap for whites was more than 1.3 million in 2003; Hispanics had a gap of 283,850; for Asian Americans it was 75,811; and for American Indians the difference was 36,923. Thus, the gap is large for every one of these racial ethnic groups, based on the latest data available from the U.S. Department of Education.

Table 7



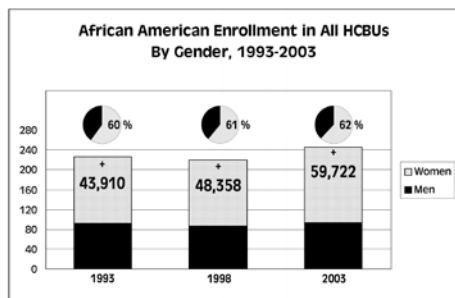
Source: Minorities in higher education annual status report: 2006. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

### African American Enrollment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

The African American college-attendance gender gap also shows that at two-year colleges and universities there are a much larger number of African American males and females, many of whom do not transfer to four-year institutions. In 2003 there were 842,817 African Americans enrolled in two-year institutions. That accounts for 43 percent of all 1,952,722 African Americans enrolled in college that year. Table 8 also demonstrates that 59,722 more African American females attended historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in 2003 or a 62/38 percent ratio of females to males. And a larger number of African American females attended both public and independent HBCUs than males. One positive observation from Table 8 is that the number of African American males enrolled in HBCUs in 2003 was slightly higher than in 1993, after a decline of 6,115 in 1998. However, black women increased their share in 2003 by more than 18,000.

*“All life is interrelated...  
Whatever affects one directly  
affects all indirectly.”  
—Archon Martin Luther King, Jr.*

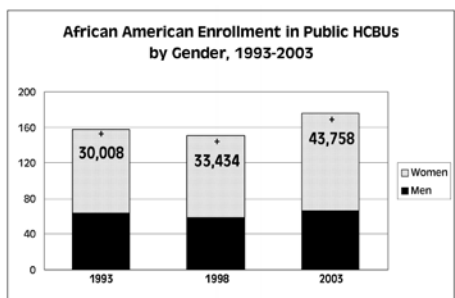
Table 8



Source: Minorities in higher education annual status report: 2006. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

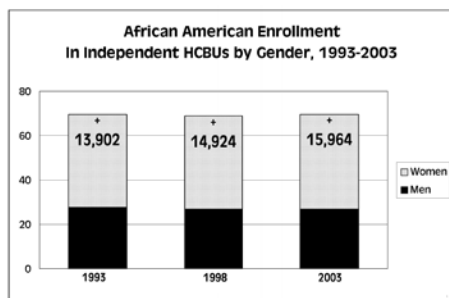
In 2003 there were 43,758 more African American females than men attending public HCBUs (see Table 9). At independent (private) HCBUs in 2003, there were almost 16,000 more African American women than African American men enrolled on those campuses (see Table 10). Moreover, Tables 9 and 10 show that the number of African American females at both public and independent HCBUs increased at greater rates in 1998 and 2003, compared with the declining numbers of African American males.

Table 9



Source: Minorities in higher education annual status report: 2006. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

Table 10



Source: Minorities in higher education annual status report: 2006. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

### Black Men Graduate From Undergraduate and Graduate Programs in Lower Numbers Than Black Women

As a forthcoming chapter by this author will outline in greater detail (Garibaldi, in press) women of all races receive more undergraduate, graduate and first-professional degrees than men. And in the case of black men and women, the graduation gap between these two groups continues to grow larger each year. Black women, for example, earned a larger number of bachelor's degrees between 1993 and 1994 and 2003 and 2004 than did black men. Blacks overall had a 54.6 percent increase in bachelor's degrees between 1993 and 1994 and 2003 and 2004 (from 82,007 to 126,768), but when the focus is placed on the gender disparity of those degrees, African American women's share increased sharply by 62.7 percent (from 51,985 in 1993 and 1994 to 84,559 in 2003 and 2004). African American men, however, increased their share of bachelor's degrees by only 40.6 percent (from 30,022 to 42,209).

Black women also earned more than twice the number of master's degrees earned by black men in 2003 and 2004—32,453 master's degrees for black females compared with 13,017 for black males. With respect to doctoral degrees, black women earned 1,780 doctorates in those years, compared with 946 doctorates for black men. Although the figure for men is close to half of the number of doctorates for black women, black men actually

increased their share of doctorates by almost 60 percent compared with the data for 1993. Lastly, despite some gains by black men in obtaining first-professional degrees, black women received 3,508 degrees, compared with 2,127 for black men in 2003 and 2004. The previous data convincingly show that the African American gender gaps in education are becoming larger each year at the elementary, secondary and postsecondary levels, and only a collaborative effort among schools, colleges and universities, local community agencies and the homes of these youth will reduce the size of these growing distinctions between black men and women.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The preceding data clearly show that African American boys and men continue to fall behind their female counterparts on most educational performance measures and also on graduation rates from high school and undergraduate and graduate programs. But even more significantly, these young men are losing educational and economic ground to just about all other racial and gender groups. Therefore, a few recommendations that may have a meaningful impact on this critical situation are offered here.

First, the academic achievement of African American males must be reinforced at every level of the academic continuum so that these young men are not only motivated "to do well in school" but also to pursue a college education. In today's society, an inadequate amount of time is devoted to recognizing students' academic achievement, while the celebration of athletic success is usually given more attention in schools. With a stronger emphasis on college preparation, more black boys and young men will internalize the importance of attending college and its linkage to their long-term economic security. This emphasis must begin in the elementary grades, and the responsibility for assuring that this happens must be shared by teachers, counselors and other school personnel. Parents must play an even more pivotal role in ensuring that their

sons will attend college. Too many African American males do not think that they can go to college, because they do not believe they can afford a college education. As the ACT and SAT average scores indicated, males continue to score higher than females on these tests. Therefore, we must convey that message to them so they will improve their classroom performance and secondary-school grade-point averages, and also will learn to ignore the negative effects of peer pressure from their male classmates in particular.

Colleges and universities must also develop more precollege programs to increase the number of students enrolled in America's more than 4,000 colleges and universities. During the 1960's and 1970's, colleges and universities significantly increased the amount of African American students with several successful federally funded summer and weekend precollege programs. Programs such as Upward Bound, Talent Search and other similar enrichment programs, funded through the U.S. Department of Education, began on many campuses over the last forty years, and they have had a significant impact on the number of students who enrolled in college, especially those from low-income families. The impact of those programs was very noticeable around 1976, the peak year for African American students who attended college. More than 1.3 million African American students attended college in 1976, and the comparable number today is about 2.2 million. With more nonwhite students graduating from high school today, though not as many as should be graduating, their numbers in college should also be significantly higher. Upward Bound and Talent Search, which unfortunately have had to plead their cases for survival to the Congress and the executive branch of the federal government over the last few years, as they have been threatened for elimination, are two essential college-preparation programs that deserve to be continued because of their success in promoting the benefits of higher education.

College students are also effective mentors to prospective applicants. Those students who are already enrolled in college help promote the many benefits and advantages of pursuing a bachelor's degree, and they

also tell students about the excitement of college life and the many leadership skills they can obtain during that experience. In the 1980's, two popular TV programs targeted to blacks had a noticeable impact on the numbers of African American students who enrolled in college. The program *A Different World*, which had a historically black college setting and which explored college's varied social and academic life, influenced the decisions of many African American students to attend college. Additionally, a regular theme of *The Cosby Show*, another popular program in the 1980's, advanced the benefits of higher education. And the show's star, Bill Cosby, playing the role of a successful physician, conveyed the importance of college by wearing the sweatshirts of many colleges and universities. Promoting the advantages of a college education is extremely important, but we must also strongly tell students that college is affordable and that they are eligible for and entitled to numerous federal and state grants and scholarships. Colleges and universities, therefore, can help parents and students obtain this information by offering financial-aid workshops for the parents of high-school students, as well as bring students of all grades and ages to visit college campuses.

I strongly encourage school personnel and educational researchers to review the more than fifty recommendations developed as a result of the New Orleans public schools Study on Black Males of 1987. Some of those recommendations, published in *The Journal of Negro Education* (Garibaldi, 1992), are very relevant today as many segments of society strive to improve the educational performance of African American males. If those recommendations are implemented successfully across this country, we will be able to write about more of the educational accomplishments of African American males when *The Journal of Negro Education* celebrates its centennial anniversary in 2032.

## References

- American Council on Education (2006). *Minorities in higher education annual status report: 2006*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.
- American College Testing Program (2007). ACT national and state scores for 2005, 2006 and 2007. Retrieved September 18, 2007, from act.org.
- The College Board (2007). SAT national and state summary reports for 2005, 2006 and 2007. Retrieved September 18, 2007, from collegeboard.com.
- "Community opinion survey for the Committee to Study the Status of Black Males in the New Orleans Public Schools." *The Times Picayune* (February 5, 1988).
- "Diplomas Count: The Graduation Project 2007." *Education Week*, 42 (June 12, 2007).
- Garibaldi, A.M. (1986). "Sustaining Black educational progress: Challenges for the 1990s." *The Journal of Negro Education*, 55, pp. 386-96.
- Garibaldi, A.M. (1988). *Educating black male youth: A moral and civic imperative*. New Orleans: New Orleans Public Schools Committee to Study the Status of the Black Male Student.
- Garibaldi, A.M. (1991). "The role of historically Black colleges in facilitating resilience among African-American students." *Education and Urban Society*, pp. 24, 103-12.
- Garibaldi, A.M. (1992). "Educating and motivating African-American males to succeed." *The Journal of Negro Education*, 61, pp. 4-11.
- Garibaldi, A.M. (1997). "Four decades of progress . . . and decline: An assessment of African American educational attainment." *The Journal of Negro Education*, pp. 66, 105-20.
- Garibaldi, A.M. (2000). "Postsecondary access and degree attainment of African Americans 1976-1996: A dream fulfilled or a dream still deferred?" In C. Camp Yeakey (Ed.), *Edmund W. Gordon: Producing Knowledge, Pursuing Understanding* (pp. 143-55). Stamford, CT: JAI Press, Inc.
- Garibaldi, A.M. (in press). "The expanding gender and racial gap in American higher education." In *The History of Race and Higher Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Ω