

# Developments

## Contributors

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**Dr. Cindi Love, Ed. D.**  
**Cameron C. Beatty**, Iowa State University  
**Cristobal Salinas Jr.**, Florida Atlantic University  
**Deborah Anderson**, Ivy Tech Community College Southwest/Wabash Valley Region  
**Kimberly M. Florence**  
 University of Nevada Las Vegas  
**Christopher Giroir & Christine Austin**  
 Arkansas Tech University  
**Krista M. Soria, Brooke Arnold, Katy Hinz**  
 University of Minnesota  
**Jeremy Williams**, University of St. Thomas  
**Jonathan O'Brien**  
 California State University Long Beach  
**Tadd Kruse**, American University of Kuwait  
**Marisa Vernon**, Cuyahoga Community College

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## Providing Spaces on College Campuses and through Social Media for Men of Color to Offer Counterstories

Cameron C. Beatty  
Iowa State University

Cristobal Salinas Jr.  
Florida Atlantic University

*In recognition of the recent 30th anniversary of the Standing Committee on Men & Masculinities (SCMM), the SCMM has launched a series exploring the concept of intersectionality as it relates to collegiate men. Contributing authors will explore how dimensions of race, religion, gender, and other social identities converge and shape the experiences of college men and how higher education professionals can best assist these students.*

Counterstorytelling and history can be useful to understand the historical and political context of power, privilege and the oppression of historically marginalized communities in the United States (Zinn, 1994). Similar to counterstorytelling and history, social media has become an important source of news that influences the examination of society and culture, and its interaction of race, law, power and privilege. If one was born yesterday, with no knowledge of the past, one might simply accept anything and everything that social media tells us. “Knowing a bit of history—while it would not absolutely prove the government [and media] were lying in a given instance—might make you skeptical, lead you to ask questions, make it more likely that you would find out the truth” (Zinn, 1994, p. 174). This truth is very much rooted in the lived experiences of our daily lives.

Through this essay we intend to shed light on how men of color have been some of the primary victims of negative social imagery and how the fragments of these constructions continue to have contemporary influences on our college campuses. This is particularly true when it comes to the fearing of men of color, and specifically, Black and Brown bodies in our society. It is the hope that this essay disrupts the current discourse and allows for student affairs professionals to provide a unique counterstorytelling space on their campuses for men of color to disrupt this current dominant discourse in society. Furthermore, it is vital for us as educators to play an important role in creating useful research, theory, and practices in order to work towards emancipation. By doing this we will help to improve the higher education experiences and educational outcomes for men of color, who consistently find themselves reported at the bottom of most academic indicators (Howard, 2008; Howard & Flenbaugh, 2011; Hutchison, 1994; McGuire, Berhanu, Davis III, & Harper, 2014).

We operate from the position that large numbers of men of color experience education in a manner unlike other students in the United States and that these experiences are rooted in a historical construction of what it means to be Black/Brown and gender identify as men. These experiences, we assert, are often guided by an account/illusion that is a less than flattering account of the academic potential, intellectual disposition, and social and cultural capital possessed by Black and Brown males (Hutchison, 1994; McGuire, Berhanu, Davis III, & Harper, 2014). Moreover, our contention is that not only do these notions of men of color shape their schooling experiences, but may severely influence their life chances at a time where educational access is vital to competing in an increasingly global society. This consequence is most disturbing given the manner in which disproportionate numbers of men of color continue to find themselves socially, economically, and politically marginalized from the American majority (Hutchison, 1994; McGuire et al., 2014; Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2011).

## Media

The Opportunity Agenda (2011) and the National Hispanic Media Coalition (Barreto, Manzano, & Segura, 2012) report that media messages and images have a greater impact on negative perceptions and stereotypes when individuals have real-world knowledge and understanding in topics of power, privilege and oppression. For example, individuals who are subject to positive information about men of color are more likely to report fewer negative stereotypical beliefs; individuals exposed to negative information about these men hold negative stereotypes no matter the focus; and exposure to only one negative prompt predicts higher rates of negative Black and stereotyping in terms of criminal activity, unemployment, poverty, lack of education, and impressions of Brown men being undocumented.

Noguera (2008) shared that Black and Brown men “are anything but invisible or unseen” (p. xii). Media such as TV shows, magazine advertising, the Internet, video games, and news broadcasts constantly represent Black and Brown men negatively and—at limited times—positively. While Black and Brown men are often represented as criminals (“thugs” and “*cholos*”), unemployed, and poor, they are also constantly idolized and represented in the media as gifted athletes, good dancers, and instantly “cool” (Patterson, Lane, Stephens, McElderry, & Alleyne, 2014; The Opportunity Agenda, 2011; Noguera, 2008). The reality is that the majority of Black and Brown men are not athletes or performers; neither are they criminals or gangsters.

Most recently, since the Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis cases, scholars and policymakers have focused on a national debate and given attention to the number of issues and challenges faced by Black and Brown men. For example, as a result of Martin’s and Davis’s deaths, there have been several media outlets that engage in dialogue surrounding the discrimination of clothing and music as a sign of deviance (Patterson, Lane, Stephens, McElderry, & Alleyne, 2014). President Obama and his administration launched the *My Brother’s Keeper* initiative (2014) to create and build opportunities for boys and young men of color. Yet, institutions and policy-makers have not figured out a way to approach the challenges that men of color face. Every year, men of color make the news, mainly because they continue to be victims of racial profiling and hate crimes; they also are negatively stereotyped, oppressed, and marginalized. On the other hand men who hold these identities are idolized by society and the media as sports heroes or gods in the entertainment industry. We engage in this analysis of men of color’s representation in schools and society with a full recognition that regardless of the mass of obstacles and challenges that have confronted men of color in the United States historically and contemporarily, there are instances of exceptional men of color who have overcome these obstacles and thrived on college campuses. In addition, there are a large number of men of color who occupy prominent professional positions in their respective communities.

### Fearing of Men of Color

The overall representation of men of color in the media is incomplete, misleading, and irresponsible in various ways. Black and Brown males are portrayed by the media as criminals, violent, uneducated, and unkempt (Wilson, 2014; Mazyck, 2014). Even though Black and Brown men have visible roles that can be considered positive, such as athletes and performers (dancers, singers, composers, and comedians), they tend to be absent from some critical types of roles, such as parenting portrayals (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011).

Media promote how men of color are negatively perceived and stereotyped, however, this does not reflect the lived experiences of a majority of these men. Our call for counterstorytelling aims to raise the critical consciousness regarding social and racial injustices that men of color experience. Counterstorytelling serves as an analytical tool for examining stories and is prevalent in research using critical race theory. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), counterstorytelling “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (p. 144). Counterstories function to:

1. build community among marginalized individuals and groups;
2. challenge claims of knowledge and wisdom of dominant groups;
3. illuminate alternative realities of those at the margins of society; and
4. provide context in an effort to transform current systems of belief and value (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000).

Through use of counterstorytelling, dominant understandings around the lived experiences of men of color can be addressed through the voices of those Black and Brown men.

As the media continues to negatively stereotype, oppress, and marginalize men of color, we (as educators) must acknowledge that our college campuses are not immune to being oppressive spaces. Recently students who identify as men of color from across the nation are challenging the media by telling their counterstories via those media. In 2013, a group of African-American students at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), sent out a powerful message discussing the lack of diversity, in particular the lack of African-American students on campus (Park, 2013). The video explains the lack of African-Americans at UCLA and highlights African-Americans make up 3.8 percent of the student population. Stokes points out that “black males make up 3.3 percent of the male student population, and that 65 percent of those black males are undergraduate athletes. Of the incoming men in the freshmen class, only 1.9 percent of them were black” (Stokes, 2014).

In 2013, Black male students at Illinois Central High School created a video contradicting the negative image of young African-American males in the media. They affirmed and highlighted that the successes of young Black males are often ignored and their stories untold; they stated: “We are not gangsters and thugs, we are employees and volunteers, we are scholars, and we are athletes” (Gholson, 2013).

Scholars have used counterstorytelling to highlight the ways men of color make sense of barriers they faced in their quest for academic achievement. Counterstorytelling subsequently highlights the importance of tapping into students’ narratives to understand the internal processes that some men of color go through in order to excel in school. These videos by UCLA and Illinois Central High School men of color positions student voice and agency as immensely important to the way identities are constructed and understood (Hoshmand, 2005). As these videos have demonstrated, developing a social platform that makes use of men of color voices has the potential to advance informed practices that disrupt the status quo when developing programs and resources for men of color on college campuses.

We propose that using social media more intentionally on college campuses to incorporate the voices of marginalized men of color on campus can also help to dismantle the dominant oppressive discourses surrounding race, class, and gender groups. These counterstories represent a challenge to dominant narratives that can represent other truths and lived experiences that directly refute hegemony (Terry, 2011). “Stories told by those on the bottom, told from the ‘subversive-subaltern’ perspective, challenge and expose the hierarchical and patriarchal order that exists within the legal academy [any institution] and pervades the larger society” (Montoya, 1995, p. 537). These stories are critical and allow the anger and pain of the oppressed storyteller to emerge. Hearing people’s own stories is a powerful way of getting oftentimes reluctant teachers, researchers, or policy makers in training to understand that the theories they are learning about have a material effect on individuals. The intersectionality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997) of race, class, and gender are fundamentally critical in research, policies, and practices concerning people of color. Each identity in its own way profoundly influences identity construction, social imagery, and meaning-making for men of color. As mentioned earlier, men of color possess multiple identities that are profoundly shaped by race, socioeconomic status, and gender (to name a few) in all of their complex manifestations.

The goal of empowering men of color and recreating their social image through a raised consciousness is not an easy one. Removing the layers of hegemony engraved in the minds is not a simple task. Attempting to shift paradigms is real

and there can be a major stumbling block to achieving critical consciousness (Bell, Washington, Weinstein, & Love, 2003). Part of this paradigm shift must incorporate the views, ideas, and perspectives of men of color themselves in recreating their own image.

### **Role of Student Affairs Professionals**

Men of color have been some of the primary victims of negative social imagery. They are often represented as negative stereotype no matter the focus, they are seen as criminals, unemployed, poor, and being “anti-intellectual” (Harper, 2012). It is important to remember that the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. For this reason, we believe that counterstorytelling for men of color on college campuses and through social media should be used as a tool to disrupt the dominant discourse of the negative stereotyping in terms of criminal activity, unemployment, poverty, lack of education, and impressions of Brown men being undocumented.

We believe that it is necessary to work with different communities to understand their various layers of privilege and oppression (Salinas & Beatty, 2013). To do this, we recommend educators and student affairs professions to:

- Educate themselves about their feelings, beliefs, and attitudes around Black and Brown bodies;
- Create a safe space to discuss beliefs and experiences in order to be challenged and to challenge peers and colleagues about their feelings, beliefs, and attitudes;
- Engage in reflection, active learning and developing critical thinking about social identities and the intersection of identities;
- Empower ourselves and other individuals to understand and use cultural values to develop more optimal learning environments for the oppressed communities and recognize where their privilege is constantly at play (p. 28).

Additional recommendations include: creating your own social media video to highlight the experiences of men of color on your campus, providing a #hashtag for students to share their realities with discrimination and disenfranchisement on campus, and finally having a physical space for men of color to discuss their realities with not only their peers, but with key administrators so they feel their voices are being heard, acknowledged, and affirmed.

These recommendations should aid to promote reflection, collaboration, and organizational learning to better serve students and support all communities, but specifically the success of men of color on your campus.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Do I know what men of color are experiencing on my campus? Do they find the campus to be welcoming and supportive?
2. How do we create spaces on campus for men of color to make meaning of their experiences on campus and to discuss with administrators and peers?
3. What role does social media use have on men of color and their identity development in college?

### **About the Authors**

*Cameron C. Beatty, Ph.D., is a lecturer in leadership education and program coordinator for the leadership studies program with the Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics at Iowa State University. He graduated in summer 2014 from Iowa State University with a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration and a Graduate Certificate in Social Justice Education. He earned a master’s degree in Higher Education Student Affairs and a bachelor’s degree in Sociology and African American and African Diaspora Studies, both from Indiana University. His doctoral dissertation focused on exploring the leadership identity development of students of color at a liberal arts college. Beatty’s particular*



areas of interest include such topics as definitions of masculinity, leadership development for students of color, and racial justice in higher education.

*Cristobal Salinas Jr., Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Educational Leadership and Research Methodology Department at Florida Atlantic University's College of Education. Cristobal previously served as the College of Design's Multicultural Liaison Officer at Iowa State University, where he provided assistance and guidance in understanding issues of diversity in the college and beyond. He holds a B.A. in Spanish Education and ESL from the University of Nebraska at Kearney, a M.Ed. in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, and a Ph.D. in Higher Education from Iowa State University. His dissertation explored how Latino male faculty members make meaning of their socialization into the academy and how socialization impacts their decisions to pursue full-time and tenure-track positions in the field of education. His research promotes access and quality in higher education, and explores the social, political, and economic context of education opportunity for historically marginalized communities.*

### **Disclaimer**

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