Foreword

These presentations from the Conference on African American Male Achievement are more than welcome. So much of the attention given to this issue has been directed at documenting the failures and describing the endangered status of this species. In general, this literature is severely limited in its conceptualization of the issues and in its coverage of the range of adaptations, behaviors, characteristics, and conditions manifested in the lives of African American males. It is primarily a literature of Black male failures and dysfunctional behaviors and is most charitably described as a response to oppression and disadvantage. It is a literature of life in depressed inner cities where African Americans are overrepresented. Because this picture appropriately applies to a minority of the Black males in the United States, these foci suggest that the majority of members of the targeted group are being overlooked (Gordon, 1997). These foci also mean that issues such as age, class, gender, and geographic differences are neglected. That the full range of adaptive and maladaptive behaviors and conditions is largely undocumented and has not been subjected to analysis is of even greater significance. Given the remarkable achievements of this group, just a century removed from enslavement and continuing to experience racism, this truncated picture provides a distorted popular view and an inadequate knowledge base for both public policy and the continued production of knowledge. Gordon (1996) has referred to the "African American male Problematique" to reflect the view that this generalized distortion of the conditions and status of Black males in the United States is an artificial or at best manufactured problem. Some African American males are in trouble, but the African American male condition is not one of universal failure.

The research literature specifically concerning African American males is a product of the latter half of the 20th century. This emerging literature tends to focus on questions having to do with dysfunctional males and their contribution to what was considered to be the

problems with Black families, the legacies of slavery, and their impact on Black males to exercise responsibility for themselves and their families. Toward the mid-20th century, attention turned to studies of urbanization, poverty, and single-parent families. Since the early 1980s, the focus of much of this work has been on political/economic and social/psychological issues. Much of the emphasis has shifted to unemployment, lack of opportunity for meaningful participation in the political economy of the nation, institutionalized racism, and the impacts of these structural phenomena on the attitudes and behavior of African American males.

The general causes of the crisis for African American males addressed in the literature are often incorrectly addressed as separate issues in the psychosocial, economic, and educational domains. In the psychosocial literature, emphasis is given to how African American males behave and react to societal conditions, particularly to discrimination, poverty, and marginalization. Some attention has been given to Black male coping strategies or the lack thereof. Several studies address African American males' relationships with their families, their underground economies, and alternative lifestyles. A growing number of studies provide cultural analyses as well as psychological assessments. Indeed, among the strongest recent developments in this literature is the emergence of ethnographic analyses of African American males' life experiences and the recognition of subcultural norms unique to segments of this population.

The conference presentations presented in this volume build on the extant literature on Black males. Our concerns focus on academic achievement issues, schooling, and the social contexts in which such achievement must be developed. The first chapter looks at the relationships between cultural identity and many efforts at school reform. Other chapters address several interventions that Gordon (2000) has referred to as "supplementary education." These chapters reference a variety of interventions, deliberate and incidental, that some of us think are not simply supplemental but that may better enable schools to do their work. Another chapter addresses the relationship between teacher expectations and student achievement. We hope that these deliberations contribute to our understanding of and our capacity to address some problems identified.

—Edmund W. Gordon

Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Yale University and Richard March Hoe Professor of Psychology and Education Emeritus at Teachers College