“Keep Seeing the Options…. Don’t Give Up”: How Males of Color in a College and Career Readiness Intervention Portray their High School-to-College Transition Experiences

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Introduction

After decades of steady increase, the educational attainment rate in the United States has slowed considerably (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). Between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of 25-29 year olds who report having completed at least one year of postsecondary education increased 14 percent, from 45 percent of the population to 59 percent. In 2009, this percentage stood at 60 percent, just a one percent increase over the last decade. This stagnant growth reflects continued disparities in educational outcomes related to race/ethnicity. Among the 25-29 year old population, the percentage of Whites who report having attended college is almost double the percentage among African Americans and almost three times the percentage among Latinos.

In addressing inequality in educational outcomes, researchers have become increasingly aware of gender gaps among African American and Latino students. African American and Latino males have the lowest bachelor degree attainment rate among 25-29 year olds, 15 and 11 percent respectively (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010b). Additionally, in 2008, African American males comprised 36 percent of the total African American undergraduate population while Latino males comprised 42 percent of the total Latino undergraduate population. Unfortunately, similar educational disparity is evident in the state of Illinois. While almost half of White adults in Illinois report having an Associate degree or higher, just 28 percent of African Americans and 17 percent of Latinos report similar levels of postsecondary attainment (NCHEMS, 2010). Approximately 37 percent of African American degree recipients at Illinois colleges and universities were male, while 41% of Latino degree recipients were male (IBHE, 2010). The gender gap among African American and Latino students is evident across all postsecondary sectors in - public community colleges (38% of African American students and 45% of Latino students are male); public four-year institutions (36% of African American students and 44% of Latino students); and private four-year institutions (35% of African American students and 37% of Latino students).

These documented disparities have potential economic and social consequences for the state of Illinois, particularly given predicted demographic changes that suggest large increases in the Latino population, moderate increases in the African American population, and moderate decreases in the White population. In their comprehensive review of research on college students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) summarize evidence on the positive economic benefits of postsecondary education for individuals. A postsecondary degree (associates or bachelors) appears to provide a net advantage over a high school degree in earnings, stability of employment, and career mobility. From a socio-cultural perspective, college graduates are more likely to engage in the civic events; they are less likely to become a part of the judicial system; they are more active in the lives of their children; and they are less likely to participate in risky health behaviors. The economic and socio-cultural value of a college degree, combined with the low attainment rates among African American and Latino males provides a strong catalyst for investigating the school experiences of this student population.
Background

In their most recent state evaluation of higher education, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2008) reports that while Illinois performs well in preparing young people for college, large gaps by race/ethnicity limits the overall success of secondary system schools in preparing students for education and training beyond high school. Additionally, the National Center reports that despite modest gains, Illinois is no longer a leader in providing postsecondary opportunities for residents. The opportunity for state residents to enroll in education is also influenced by disparities based on race/ethnicity.

In December 2009, the Illinois State Board of Higher Education (ISBE, 2009) released a report to the Governor and General Assembly on Underrepresented Groups in Illinois Higher Education. The report supports evidence from the National Center, stating that racial/ethnic minority students “remain underrepresented in Illinois colleges and universities, with significant gaps in educational attainment” (p.1). The ISBE report indicated a particular concern in the decline in proportion of males among minority student enrollment. Despite these concerns, recommendations from ISBE did not directly address the decline of minority male participation.

The decline in male participation in Illinois, particularly among African American and Latino men, has received considerable attention. In 2006, the Schott Foundation for Public Education published a report, Public Education and Black Male Students: A State Report Card. They found that the high school graduation rate in Illinois for African American males was 40 percent, half of the percentage for White males in Illinois (82 percent) and well below the national average for African American males (47 percent). In a status report, Keeping Illinois Competitive (2006), Northern Illinois University’s P-20 Task Force reports the Illinois’ Latinos graduation rate to be 49 percent, well below the graduation rate for Latinas (60 percent) and White males (83 percent).

In addition to decline in postsecondary participation as a result of low high school completion rates, there is evidence of low attainment among African American and Latino males in Illinois. In an examination of six-year graduation rates at 55 four-year institutions in the state, the Education Trust (2006) found just two schools with graduation rates for African American and/or Latino males that equaled or exceeded overall graduation rates – Lake Forest College (overall graduation rate - 70 percent, African American male graduation rate - 85 percent) and Lewis University (overall graduation rate – 52 percent; Latino male graduation rate 53 percent). In 2008, African American males and Latino males received just a third of all associate degrees awarded to African Americans and Latino students at Illinois Community Colleges (IBHE, 2010).

Despite mounting evidence from state policymakers and researchers, there is little information about specific challenges and barriers African American and Latino male students in Illinois face as they persist through the secondary system and consider transition to college. As the state continues to address educational disparities based on race/ethnicity, it is valuable to consider the experiences of African American and Latino males. In particular, details from African American and Latino males who are preparing for transition could provide key insight to what they view as the most critical sources of support during this period.
Research Project

As part of an evaluation of the College and Career Readiness (CCR) of Illinois, researchers from the Office of Community College Research and Leadership undertook a sub-study on the educational experiences of African American and Latino males participating in CCR initiatives. The CCR Act seeks to aid student transition from secondary to postsecondary education by reducing the need for remedial coursework upon entry into college. The CCR Act supports intervention strategies at seven community colleges in the state of Illinois. During our initial assessment of programs, we found very few African American and Latino males participating in CCR-sponsored initiatives. Concerned with this observation, particularly in light of national and state inequities described above, we began to develop a secondary study focused on examining the experiences of those African American and Latino males participating in program interventions. Through this examination, we hope to uncover some of the unique social, cultural, and academic challenges that those students face and identify various sources of support that guide as they transition to the postsecondary system.

Three sites agreed to participate in this project – Moraine Valley Community College Shawnee Community College, and Southwestern Illinois College. Coordinators identified African American and Latino male students who were participating (or had participated) in CCR intervention programs. Researchers developed a semi-structured interview protocol, based on several developmental frameworks, to guide conversations with students. Each interview, lasting from 20 minutes to an hour, was conducted at a schools site. All interviews were transcribed verbatim with each transcript receiving multiple reads by researchers.

A total of 14 students were interviewed – 11 African American male students and 3 Latino male students. Students ranged from rising seniors in high school to first-year community college students. Both students already enrolled in the postsecondary system are first-generation college students, while 10 of the 11 high school students are first-generation college students. All of the high school students indicated plans to attend a postsecondary institution, and both community college students indicated plans to transfer to a 4-year institution. Finally, students were evenly divided between living in rural communities and urban communities.

Findings

Discussions with African American male and Latino students on successful pursuit of college can be categorized into three main areas of support – encouraging postsecondary aspirations; navigating multiple pathways to access; persisting through stereotypes and perceived barriers. Collectively, these areas appeared to provide male students with academic and social resiliency to persevere through difficult circumstances and events. Additionally, information from students suggests that these areas are interconnected - the absence of even one area of support may postpone postsecondary pursuits.

1 For further information on College and Career Readiness Evaluation, see http://occr.illinois.edu/biblio

2 For details about program intervention development at these pilot sites, see Year One and Year Two Evaluation Reports at http://occr.illinois.edu/biblio
Encouraging postsecondary aspirations

Most students reported hearing consistently the promotion of postsecondary pursuits, particularly from older adults in their lives. Students mentioned parents, grandparents, teachers, guidance counselors, and older friends as sources of support who pushed them to achieve academically. It appeared that each source of support - family, academic, and peers – developed a different type of motivation. As an example of family support, a first-generation college student describes the inspiration from his mother:

[S]ince she was not able to finish high school on time and go to college, she always told me that education is the number one thing – go to college. I’m the first one on my mother’s side of the family to go directly straight to college after graduating from high school so she was proud of that, she always had it for me to go to school…

The awareness from the student that he would be the first in his mother’s family to go directly to college indicates that he received a consistent, motivational message from his family. Rather than dismiss or feel overpressure from the importance of this goal for his family, this student appeared to embrace his responsibility and considered it a key motivator for postsecondary attendance. Indeed, there was consistent evidence from young men interviewed that educational pursuit beyond high school, regardless of whether their parent(s) attended college themselves, was a core family value. The family source of support was often cited by students as the earliest form of promoting postsecondary attendance.

For students participating in this project, promotion of college aspirations from family was often supplemented by support from a school teacher or administrator. This academic source of support was particularly valuable for students who discovered early passion for a particular skill or subject. As one student reflects:

[Another] person that really did make me also feel like that college was no choice was my teacher Mr. Jones. He was my IT Teacher and he really did influence me a lot saying that I have the knowledge of a basic technician but in order for me to become like really good at what I do, I have to continue on and go to college. So he really did influence me a lot so that’s why I think that…because of him I think I am here.

Another student remarked how his teacher would spend extra time after class to help him with his essays for college. For students, having a teacher who demonstrates a strong belief in them as potential college students – through words or actions – is an important part of their aspiration development. Additionally, students remarked how teachers or guidance counselors assumed that there would be a college path in their future. It was not a matter of if they would go to college, but when they would go. The last valuable source of aspirations consistently discussed among students was peer support, specifically older peer support. Students discussed how older friends offered unfiltered advice on navigating the postsecondary system. One student mentioned a friend from high school who helped during his first weeks at the community college:

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3 Pseudonym
I had talked to him when I was in high school and then when I got [to the community college], I met him… I went to him with my schedule and he helped me out a little bit. He told me that I could take this class instead of that class [be]cause it corresponds with this class…nobody showed me that, you know, so I got a lot of help on that from him…

The student continued by saying he learned from his mother the value of surrounding himself with a ‘certain crowd’ who were ‘moving him in the right direction.’ He appeared to view his acquaintance from high school as such a person, confirmed when the older friend gave him advice that he had not heard from anyone else. This reflects a constant theme among the males of color about the particular value in getting ‘insider’ advice from older peers, particularly males.

In another example, a student who is currently participating in a College and Career Readiness (CCR) class, mentioned that he continuously resisted enrolling in the intervention program (despite advice from older adults) until his older cousin, who had participated in the program during the previous year, talked positively about the experience.

From the brief examples above, the value of support for student aspirations is apparent. These students appeared to benefit from consistent messages from multiple sources – family, schools and peers. Particularly evident for the male students is that these sources counteract other alternative influences that may stress short-term plans – particularly employment directly out of high school. Many students indicated that they felt strong pressure to secure a job as quickly as possible after high school, even at the sacrifice of long-term planning. This desire was anchored in a particular perspective of masculinity that emphasizes immediate (and often short-term) financial gains as a marker for manhood.

As one student observed:

[I]n order for financial stability….in order for [women] to live on their own and stuff they have to get their education whereas in a male type of thinking…I can always get a job anywhere, so it really doesn’t matter if I get my education or not…

At a quick glance, the quote might suggest that this student feels confident about options after graduating from high school. However, what he is really articulating is false promise of immediate employment - the ‘male type of thinking’ which eschews specialized training or long-term education plans ultimately contributes to a low social and economic ‘ceiling.’ Quickly, opportunities are maximized and students quickly move from being employed recent graduates to poorly educated, unskilled workers. Disproportionately high unemployment rates among young African American and Latino men suggest that this transition is quicker from some than others.

The same sources that promote educational aspirations may instead stress immediate employment. Among family, it may come from a need for immediate income or a concern (particularly for those unfamiliar with postsecondary system) about the cost/benefit balance of postsecondary pursuits. Among peers, it may come as part of competition for the instant gratification associated with full-time employment. Regardless, students are aware that these stresses are connected to their male identity and are assumed to be less felt, in general, by their female peers. Student experiences suggest that these pressures intensify as students get older. It
appears that the low participation rates for male students are due, at least in part, to inconsistent (or nonexistent) access to key sources who affirm postsecondary aspirations.

*Navigating pathways to postsecondary access*

While students stressed the importance of multiple sources of aspirational support, there was also consistent mention of another type of support – assistance with navigating the postsecondary system. Specifically, students discussed value in receiving information about issues they considered to be major obstacles in their pathway to postsecondary access. Major concerns included academic preparation, cost of education and social transition. Many students discussed openly about having academic struggles in their high school career which placed them ‘a little behind’ some of their peers. Other students remarked that, while they had some success in high school, they felt under-prepared for college. The knowledge of current academic status and what is needed for postsecondary success appeared to be stimulated by participation in CCR courses. Specifically, the opportunity to take a college placement exam (the ACT COMPASS, for example) provided students with knowledge for critical self-assessment of their readiness to engage in college level course work in math and English (reading and writing). One student remarked:

Yeah, [the COMPASS test] was pretty fair, it just showed me where I was…kind of [where I was] missing knowledge at… and where I was forgetting things. [I]t just put me back to the place where I am supposed to be at…just refreshing my memory so I’m glad I got to take a step down first…

It seemed critical for students to be provided both the knowledge of their current skill set and an opportunity to talk with administrators/instructors about the path they needed to take to move beyond developmental courses. In particular, students we talked with understood the ‘non-credit’ nature of developmental courses and the opportunity the CCR program provided them to enroll while in high school (or shortly after high school graduation). As a result, students had a clear vision of their academic path, including recognizing that they would be pursuing a slightly longer pathway to postsecondary access.

It is not surprising that students possessed elevated concerns for financial costs as most of them grew up in economically underserved communities and families. It was unclear where initial information about tuition costs came from, but it was clear that the estimated costs was a significant burden, even to those with high aspirational support. As one students states:

[I]f you come from [a low-income community]…and you have no money…the kids or even teenagers think that it’s too much money, so [they] might as well not even think about going to college. [They] won’t have the support. [There was] a point where I did not want to go to college for that reason, actually, I took some time, and I went to the financial aid and stuff to make sure that I could take the classes.

The conclusion that its ‘too much money’ suggests that students need more information about the price of attendance, including access to federal and state grants, as well as assistance with calculating a cost/benefit analysis of a postsecondary education. This particular student self-
directed himself to the financial aid office, however most students stated that they accessed proper information through participation in a (CCR intervention at their local community college. For students who are unable to participate or choose not to participate in CCR, there may be limited opportunity to gain factual information about financial aid.

The CCR intervention also appeared to promote postsecondary access by providing students with an opportunity to feel comfortable on a college campus. Often understated is the academic and social difficulties young students face as they move from a comfortable high school environment where they are the ‘seniors’ to unfamiliar setting on a college campus where they are ‘new’. It was evident through our conversations with CCR students that through information provided by their participation in CCR, students felt at ease on their postsecondary path. As one student states:

[M]ost people I was going to school with…they just went straight to a university. I said ‘why go straight to a university and put a lot of stress on yourself, why not just go to a community college and be relaxed and then head to a university so you know what to expect’’”

This student had a sense that the academic expectations at the community college would be reasonable for him, stimulated by his experience in the CCR program. As important were students social expectations of college and information about opportunities that provided them with “…knowledgeable about the campus, what things I could get into and just everything around me…”

**Persisting through stereotypes and perceived barriers**

Students interviewed for this study discussed their awareness of stereotypes associated with African American and Latino males. This awareness was rooted in direct experiences that portrayed their ethnicity and/or gender in a negative light; separating them from less academically motivated peers; and perceptions of unfair institutional practices that treated male students differently than other students.

Many students recalled experiences with negative comments in the classroom based on their ethnicity, specifically from classmates who promoted negative stereotypes. One student provides a poignant example:

[In] my class with Mr. Smith, I was the top student and a lot students…would say ‘how can a Hispanic like you be at the top’… cause you know they basically…those types of students I was in class with, they saw all Hispanics as low class people who really don’t care about their education…I know I do”.

It is not difficult to imagine how students might internalize the stereotype that Latino students are less interested in academics. The student quoted above stressed that the strong support he received from his teacher and his family counteracted the negative comments directed at him by his fellow students. Additionally, this student discussed how he was able to connect with other
students in his school who were academically motivated and supported each other as they faced judgment from other peers.

However, for other students, the decision to persist was more difficult, particularly as their friends observed male friends moving in a “negative direction.” As one student states, “…the friends I use to hang out with they [were] not doing the [academic work]. I would [do my academic work], so I just stopped hanging with them. I don’t really try to stay to myself…I just try to stay from negative things, just trying to move forward.” For this student, the apparent absence of support or an alternative network to connect with meant isolation as he moved toward academics, which he associated with a positive direction.

Perceived structural observations were also a barrier faced by students as they persisted through high school. A student describes his attitudes towards school after he felt he was being unfairly bounced between the traditional and ‘alternative’ school track.

[T]he way I see it…this school, they [had] just been waiting for me to slip up a little bit so they can just throw me right back in [alternative school]. That’s the way I feel about it. I told them (that) since I’ve been put back in [alternative school], I been real frustrated and resorting back to (getting) mad all the time and things like that. I try and blow it off, but the teachers… the way they talk to men and stuff I…got tired of holding my tongue.

While it is unclear whether these comments reflect the entire story, the student’s perception that he is being unfairly treated by teachers and the school continued to produce an emotional reaction that should not be dismissed. Particularly interesting is his identification of gender as a dimension of difference in communication between teachers and students, noting with frustrating “the way they [teachers] talk to men and stuff”. In contrast, when this student compared his experience with in the CCR course, he stated “If [the teacher] see you doing something [wrong], she will get on you. But, it’s not like in a negative tone or manner. She’ll pull you to the side and say you know you [are] doing this…calm yourself down…get control of yourself…and stop.”

Respect was a key concept implied by many of the male students when they discussed communication with administrators and teachers. It is unclear what that specifically means, but one could connect this growing desire for ‘respect’ with emerging notions of adulthood. Specifically, for males of color, this is too often connected with overstated perceptions of masculinity – hyper-masculinity (Edwards & Jones, 2009). In particular, resisting authoritative structures that males of color deem unfair provides an opportunity to act out notions of hyper-masculinity. Yet, in the example provided by this particular student, the communicative tone of the CCR instructor (a White female, it should be pointed out) was less threatening and demeaning. Perhaps the instructor’s support for this student’s educational aspirations and willingness to assist the student with navigation towards postsecondary access created a comfort level that was non-threatening when the instructor asserted a level of authority in the classroom. We also don’t fully understand how much the college setting affects this scenario. Would a college teacher saying the same thing as the high school teacher mean the same thing to the student? Do the high school teachers’ words carry as much weight as the college teachers”? We do not know the answer to these questions, but they are fundamentally important to understanding the college transition experiences of males of color.
Persisting through stereotypes based on ethnicity and/or gender, appears to foster a heightened sense of resiliency among students. As a result, many students discussed how they view themselves as a role model to others. In particular, students who reported having younger siblings stressed that part of their motivation to persist through the CCR intervention was because they wanted to be a positive influence on their brother or sister. As one student stated, “I would have hated for me to go down the wrong road and [my sister] say, ‘oh, it’s ok, I can do [that] to.’” For this student, this meant encouraging his mother to let him transfer from one high school to another so that he could move away from negative social circles and attend a school with a supportive academic environment. Being a role model meant making difficult decisions regarding peer relationships, resisting negative reactions to actual or perceived slights and taking advantage of opportunities such as the CCR intervention, even if it meant extending his school day. When asked what advice he would give other male students of color, one student stated:

Just don’t look straight… always keep on seeing the options that you have because that’s also a lot of trouble that kids have, they only see in one direction. If they only see in one direction, they are going to always follow that [one] way of going…I (would say) see your options…if you cannot do this [way], find another way to do it. Don’t give up…I (would say) see your options…if you [do not] complete something and give up, you are really not going to be successful

**Implications**

In investigating the transitional experiences of African American and Latino males, our findings provide valuable insight for teachers, administrators, researchers, and policymakers. Foremost, it is important to support practices and policies that contribute to the early development of educational aspirations for African American and Latino male students. By working with families (and communities), a consistent message to these students could counter cultural norms and structural influences that emphasize short-term gains over long-term planning. Particular attention should be paid to addressing the ‘sticker-price’ cost of college which appears to influence postsecondary aspirations as students are resistant to work towards a goal they feel is unaffordable. What is often described as lack of ‘motivation’ or ‘desire’ among African American and Latino males may be the result of declining aspirations stimulated by unchallenged assumptions about financial burden of postsecondary attendance. This may be particularly troubling as males view employment as a more viable economic option after high school graduation, or for some even before high school concludes.

Second, developing accessible information to help students navigate the postsecondary system is critical. While families and communities take the lead on developing educational aspirations, institutions should be proactive in providing transparent information about pathways to postsecondary access. Information should begin early, prior to students entering high school, so that there is an explicit understanding of the sequence of courses required for college admissions. There should be an emphasis on academic planning for postsecondary opportunity, rather than just high school graduation. Additionally, acknowledging that students mature academically at different rates, alternative pathways should be continuously introduced to students; they should never feel that it is ‘too late’ to plan for college. At the same time, these students should be given a realistic vision of what it will take to get to and be successful in a postsecondary institution.
This is particularly important for male students of color who may develop a higher level of distrust than other students, but welcome connections based on honesty and respect.

Finally, understanding the persistent stereotyping influences in the lives of young African American and Latino males, we must pay attention to the institutional and social influences that shape (or misshape) postsecondary aspirations and success. There is little control over the portrayal of African American and Latino males in popular culture and media that reinforces long-standing stereotypes. Minimizing internalization of these destructive images and characterizations among all students is particularly important. Connecting students with role models from the community, through a mentoring program for example, is a valuable strategy for counteracting negative perceptions. Utilizing successful older peers as role models appears to be particularly useful as students better relate to individuals who are close to their age. Successful peers are able to communicate effectively postsecondary pathway experiences – positive and challenging. Additionally, African American and Latino male role models appear to offer younger students with higher level of credibility.

While the task of reducing achievement gaps among African American and Latino male students is daunting, there is a current program that students, families, and institutional administrators can utilize to promote aspirations, navigation, and peer networking. Illinois is one of several states targeted for the KnowHow2Go campaign (http://www.knowhow2goillinois.org/). Launched in 2007 by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Lumina Foundation, the program has various advertising – web, television, radio and print – aimed at providing information about postsecondary access to middle school and high school students. At the website, students are able to create personal profiles as early as the seventh grade and develop an academic plan with postsecondary attendance in mind. The website also offers various links to local, state and federal sources of financial aid. Finally, students are able to connect with peer mentors for additional advice and information about the transition from high school to college.

The KnowHow2Go program not only fosters educational aspiration (do we have empirical evidence of this or your speculation?), but also provides information about pathways to postsecondary access and networking opportunities with successful peers. Increasing the visibility of this established program to students and families should assist with their developing postsecondary aspirations, particularly among students with declining college dreams. Accessibility through the web provides continuous information to students and families as they move from middle school to high school and, hopefully, to college. The mentoring component provides a personal connection for students and parents. Ultimately, increasing familiarity with the KnowHow2Go program could generate a strong college-going culture in communities as current participants become future mentors.

As it is currently formatted, the KnowHow2Go campaign is directed at a general audience. Therefore, it is important to supplement this potentially valuable resource with specific information for African American and Latino males. As results of this project demonstrate, acknowledging the impact of ethnicity and gender on student perceptions and experiences is important. Merging the information provided by students in this study with the general college access framework provided by KnowHow2Go should challenge educational outcome disparities.
Conclusion

In his first address to a Joint Session of Congress, President Barack Obama set an ambitious goal to restore the United States to being first in the world in the percentage of young adults with postsecondary degrees by 2020 (U.S. currently ranks twelfth). Underlying this goal is the significant influence of a knowledgeable citizenry on continued economic and social development. As the president notes, “In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a pre-requisite.” If we are to meet the president’s challenge, educational disparities among African American and Latino males must be addressed. The lack of opportunity for these young men has perpetuated a cycle of disadvantage resulting in disproportionate unemployment rates, imprisonment, and poverty. Demographic trends assurance that results from this condition will not be isolated in communities of color, but will influence the economic and social viability of states and the nation. The ongoing loss of human capital and intellectual talent affects us all.

The goal of this study was to capture the experiences of African American and Latino male students as they began the transition from high school to college. Each student offered a unique perspective and valuable insight on the past and present challenges. As educators and policymakers move forward, incorporating the experiences of the young men interviewed for this project may contribute to the reduction of barriers and allow for more male students of color to maintain their place on the pathway to postsecondary access, achievement and success.
References


