



# ASPIRATIONS TO ACHIEVEMENT

## Men of Color and Community Colleges



A SPECIAL REPORT from the  
Center for Community College Student Engagement



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## Acknowledgments

This report focuses on a significant challenge for the nation's community colleges: a set of conditions that affect large numbers of students—and that must be addressed if these institutions are to realize their founding vision of serving as the open doors to genuine opportunity and equity for *all* Americans. The Center for Community College Student Engagement launched a special initiative—Improving Outcomes for Men of Color in Community Colleges—because better serving men of color is the only way community colleges can effectively realize this vision.

Throughout this initiative's work, the Center has listened intensively, and we thank everyone who shared their insights with us. For expert and candid contributions that shaped the work from the beginning, the Center expresses sincere gratitude to the National Advisory Committee members, whose names are listed on page 32 of this report. For diligence in work to ensure that we listened actively and accurately to students, we thank the advisors who served on our focus group findings review team. For partnership in that extensive focus group work, we offer thanks to the colleges that hosted Center staff and consultants as they conducted student focus groups—and to their faculty, staff, and CEOs who participated in interviews and structured group discussions: Austin Community College (TX), Jackson College (MI), Lansing Community College (MI), Los Angeles Southwest College (CA), Los Angeles Trade Technical College (CA), and Tarrant County College (TX). These are knowledgeable, diverse, and passionate professionals who were willing to give their time and speak their truths to build shared understanding of complicated issues.

Beyond gratitude, we confess our genuine awe for the students whose experiences and voices are so central to the Center's initiative and this report. To the students who strive and those who struggle, to students who recognize the odds and then beat them, to those whose strength lifts up our hearts, and to those whose willing candor opens our eyes to experiences that many of us can understand only through them, thank you.

*Kay M. McClenney*  
*Director*  
*Center for Community College Student Engagement*

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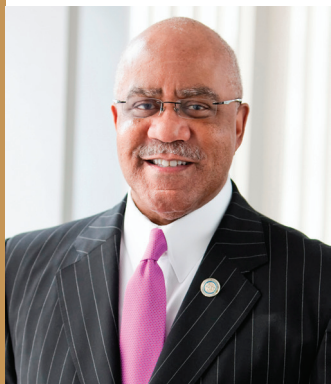
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“Ultimately, a commitment to the success of male students of color must be woven into the very fabric of the institution. It must be reflected in all student success initiatives, all interventions, and all strategic planning conversations.”

— VICTOR SÁENZ  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PROJECT MALES AND THE TEXAS EDUCATION CONSORTIUM FOR  
MALE STUDENTS OF COLOR  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

# Foreword

## Reclaiming the American Dream *for Everyone*



Are we in danger of losing the American Dream? The 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges recently concluded that we are. Incomes are stagnating, the middle class is shrinking, and the promise that every child has opportunity—the promise of upward mobility—is fading.

These downturns are associated with declining educational attainment rates in the United States relative to other developed countries—and with the fact that our nation’s distribution of education is as polarized as its distribution of wealth.

America needs a highly educated population to strengthen our place in the world market, grow our economy, and engage in our democracy. But we cannot have an educated workforce and citizenry if our current reality persists. Today, White students are earning college degrees at substantially higher rates than are both Black students and Latino students. We are also seeing a growing gender gap. Women have been outpacing men in undergraduate degree attainment since the mid-1990s. In 2011, U.S. women surpassed men in the number of advanced degrees earned as well.

These trends combine to create a significant achievement gap between men of color and other student groups. Given our nation’s changing demographics—groups traditionally classified as *minorities* are growing more quickly than the White population—this gap not only affects individuals and their families; it threatens our country’s ability to thrive.

How will we close achievement gaps between men of color and other student groups? It has to happen at community colleges, which educate more Black males and Latinos than any other type of higher education institution.

Improving graduation rates among men of color will not be easy. Achievement gaps are among the most intractable problems in higher education. And issues of race and ethnicity are deeply personal, often sensitive, and always politically charged. Addressing these issues calls for difficult conversations about what we value and, most important, how we put our values into action. Closing achievement gaps may require reimagining the entire community college experience.

Although this work is difficult, nothing could be more important. Community colleges are grounded in equity, and we cannot achieve equity until we identify *and actively address* inequity.

The Center for Community College Student Engagement is well positioned to contribute substantively to this work. In presenting this report, the Center is addressing reality head-on, just as it is asking colleges to do. It is giving colleges the data they need to understand achievement gaps and asking the tough questions that will help us all find more effective solutions.

“I didn’t think to ask why there were no faculty members who looked like me. But I’m glad that today’s students do. And I’m especially glad that the Center is asking that question, along with many others.”

I recently thought back to my undergraduate experience at Murray State University in Kentucky. I did not have a single professor of color at Murray State, not one. I also didn’t give that fact any thought. I didn’t think to ask why there were no faculty members who looked like me. But I’m glad that today’s students do. And I’m especially glad that the Center is asking that question, along with many others.

With this initiative, we hope to identify strategies to help close both cultural and achievement gaps. In the end, however, this report may best serve community colleges by raising the kinds of questions that each college must address if the longstanding value we place on equity is finally to be realized.

Asking the questions is difficult. Finding the answers is even harder. But if we take this step together, this action can lead to dramatically improved outcomes at our community colleges—and can help colleges meet their promise of providing a quality education to every student who walks through their doors.

*Walter G. Bumphus*

*President and CEO, American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)*

*Member, National Advisory Board, Center for Community College Student Engagement*

# Race Matters

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Consistently and unmistakably, data show a persistent gap separating Latinos and Black males from other student groups on measures of academic progress and college completion. These gaps exist across higher education. They are undeniable and unacceptable.

Men of color have high aspirations when they begin higher education. Why are these aspirations not matched by similarly high outcomes? Until higher education institutions fully embrace the charge of eliminating this disparity, we cannot effectively serve our students, our communities, our national economy, or our democracy.

There are two reasons that community colleges can—and should—take the lead in this work. First, community colleges open their doors to all students, and they are the higher education institutions most likely to serve men of color. Second, open access is just the first step toward attaining the equity ingrained in the mission of community colleges. The more significant work is ensuring that every student has the support he or she needs to succeed. If community colleges can make this experience the norm for every student, the gaps will close.

The Center for Community College Student Engagement has spent the past two years exploring data related to men of color in community colleges. Center staff members have worked with experts in the field, listened systematically to students, and conducted new analyses of Center data. The result is actionable, practical information that colleges can use to create the conditions for success.

The issues discussed in this report can be deeply personal and emotionally difficult. Moreover, they play out against the backdrop of both the nation's history and the continuing reality of inequity across American social systems, including health, child welfare, employment, criminal justice, and education at all levels.

These larger societal issues provide important context, but this report has a narrower focus. Directed to community college educators, it adds to a body of work by respected scholars and practitioners. It seeks to build understanding of the experiences of Latinos and Black males in community colleges—and offers strategies colleges should consider as they work to strengthen those experiences so they lead to better outcomes.

“Collecting data is the first step toward wisdom, but sharing data is the first step toward community.”

— HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.,  
ALPHONSE FLETCHER UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR AND DIRECTOR,  
W.E.B. DU BOIS INSTITUTE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN RESEARCH  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

# Improving Outcomes for Men of Color in Community Colleges

## Why Focus on Men of Color?

The Center helps community colleges use data to improve practice for all students. It launched Improving Outcomes for Men of Color in Community Colleges because men of color are students whom colleges clearly need to serve more effectively.

While men of color are underrepresented in higher education overall, those who enroll in college are more likely to attend a community college than a baccalaureate institution.

Once they enroll, men of color are placed in developmental education at disproportionately high rates. While this placement typically is considered the result of lower rates of college readiness, it also may reflect, at least in part, shortcomings with the placement practices themselves.

“Black and Latino males are among the least understood community college students. Most educators are aware that, overall, women are doing better than men . . . but few understand the reasons behind these gender inequities and, most important, what to do about this perplexing issue.”

— LAURA RENDÓN  
PROFESSOR, EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES DEPARTMENT  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT SAN ANTONIO

Then, on multiple measures of academic progress, a persistent, intolerable gap separates Latinos and Black males from other student groups. Finally, relative to all other student groups—including women of color—men of color complete community college degrees and certificates at disproportionately low rates.

Given these gaps that persist throughout the educational experience, it is essential for community colleges to better understand and meet the needs of Latinos and Black men—to make sure all students establish clear goals, can see the path to their goals, receive appropriate supports along the educational pathway, and gain the skills they need to attain their goals.

## Why Community Colleges?

While there have been many reports on the subject of men of color in higher education, studies typically focus on baccalaureate college and university students. However, the issues they address—the real challenges facing men of color in higher education—are playing out right now, every day, on community college campuses across the country. These

colleges are committed to serving every student who walks through their doors, and they cannot do so effectively without addressing the pervasive gaps in student achievement across racial and ethnic groups—and the particularly disturbing consequences these gaps have for men of color.

## Finding Solutions to Match the Challenges

Race and ethnicity intersect in complicated ways with gender, socioeconomic status, college readiness, and other factors. For example, regardless of SAT and ACT scores, White students earn certificates as well as associate, bachelor's, and graduate degrees at higher rates than equally qualified African Americans and Hispanics (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Moreover, low-income White students are more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree (23%) than low-income African Americans (12%) and Hispanics (13%) (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

In a hard-hitting recent study, Carnevale and Strohl note that “African-American and Hispanic students with above average SAT/ACT scores graduate at a rate of 73% from the top colleges, compared with a graduation rate of 40% at the open-access schools” (2013, p. 27). The authors conclude, “There are significant differences in outcomes among equally qualified whites, African Americans, and Hispanics that derive from the increasing relegation of African-American and Hispanic students to the crowded, underfunded, open-access, two- and four-year colleges” (2013, p. 24).

Recognition of severe underfunding is welcomed by community college leaders, but limited resources too often serve as the fig leaf that covers the need for substantial change—in institutional climate, structure, staffing diversity, and educational policy and practice—and the imperative to use available resources more effectively. The many leaders committed to achieving equity at community colleges will maintain unwavering focus on the mission of serving the students—*all students*—who walk through the door.

With regard to better serving men of color at community colleges, three facts are clear:

1. Current solutions are not adequate to address the nature and scale of the challenges that colleges must rise to meet.
2. Everyone benefits if community colleges better serve men of color.
3. Colleges can better serve men of color by implementing effective educational practice for all students, while also emphasizing campus diversity, cultural competence, and other strategies for reducing stereotype threat.

Many campuses have tried to serve men of color more effectively by introducing highly personal, engaging—but very small—boutique programs. While these programs may have positive effects on participating students, they typically serve far too few students, and they are neither readily nor often brought to scale.

Rather than hanging their hopes primarily on boutique programs, colleges can implement—at scale—high-impact practices that are likely to enhance the success of all students. When done well, these practices offer the promise of disproportionately benefiting students of color, low-income students, first-generation students, and students who are academically underprepared for college, thus serving the majority of students in many colleges. (High-impact practices and participation in them are addressed in an ongoing series of Center reports, available online at <http://www.cccse.org>.)

Once high-impact practices are in place, colleges can consider ways to tailor or enrich those practices in ways that will affirm cultural differences, racial and gender identity, and other characteristics unique to different groups of students.

## A Complex Conversation

Of course, to effectively serve men of color, colleges must be comfortable with—and celebrate—their students' cultures. They also must address issues including diversity and cultural competence among faculty and staff.

The conversation is complex, and everyone has a contribution to make to it. The Center's role is to provide practical advice and strategies for community college action. In its special projects, the Center raises a challenge, effectively saying, *Here is a serious problem. What should colleges do about it?* Then, with an emphasis on evidence-based practice, the Center provides data and guidance to help colleges address the challenge and help more students succeed in and complete college.

Like all Center reports, this one elevates student voices and focuses on how community colleges can redesign students' educational experiences. The colleges' challenge is to create the conditions within which an important segment of their student population—men of color—will soar.

**“It is important that disaggregated data be collected at every institution so the officials know the performance of the young men. And it is critical to understand that they bring real skills that need to be harnessed and guided.”**

— RONALD WILLIAMS  
PRESIDENT EMERITUS  
PRINCE GEORGE'S COMMUNITY COLLEGE

## CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND THE LANGUAGE OF ASSETS

Language, always a powerful tool, takes on added potency when the topic is race.

Victor Sáenz, Associate Professor in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin, critiques *deficit narratives*—negative terms college educators use to describe men of color, such as *male crisis*, *culturally damaged*, *missing or vanishing males*, *need to be saved*, *deviant behavior*, and *the pathology of Black and Latino males*. Individually, these terms are disturbing; collectively, they are alarming, in part because they divert institutional focus from factors that are clearly within the realm of institutional responsibility and control.

Instead of looking at students primarily in terms of deficits, colleges should consistently be asking what key assets Latinos and Black males bring to college that could help them

succeed, according to Laura Rendón, Professor in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department at The University of Texas at San Antonio.

“When educators think of men of color, they often associate these students with ‘bad news,’ perhaps even a ‘lost cause,’” Rendón continues. “In

these cases, deficits are emphasized, as opposed to a focus on assets—such as family, language, resilience, and faith—that could be harnessed to help men of color succeed.”

In the end, to better serve all student populations, institutions need to better foster individual students' strengths and more effectively address the educational challenges they bring with them to the community college. An important additional ingredient is a conscious college focus on building cultural competence so all faculty, staff, and administrators intentionally welcome all types of students as contributing members of a diverse campus community.

The National Education Association (n.d.) defines cultural competence as “having an awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families. It is the ability to understand the within-group differences that make each student unique, while celebrating the between-group variations that make our country a tapestry. This understanding informs and expands teaching practices in the culturally competent educator's classroom” (para. 3).

At a community college, acting with cultural competence means honoring the cultures of the students the college serves, especially incorporating understanding of cultural difference into one's own attitudes and behaviors. It requires being aware of biases in oneself and others, of ways that some are privileged over others, and of the legitimacy of varying values and perspectives.

The United States is a diverse nation, but in most parts of the country, the dominant culture—and the culture behind most seats of power—continues to be Western European. How does that reality affect the dynamics of the classroom, interactions between students and their instructors, racial and ethnic composition of faculty and staff, students' use of college services, and communication among students? Acting with cultural competence begins with asking these questions and honestly answering them.

**“Perhaps we all need some education ourselves. We've been talking about educating [students] about the culture here. . . . Maybe there are a number of us who need to understand our students better rather than putting the focus on the student to understand our environment better.”**

— COMMUNITY COLLEGE STAFF MEMBER

# Just the Facts

## Men of Color and Higher Education



“Many minority groups, including traditionally disadvantaged groups, are participating in school and college in record numbers. However, **the fastest-growing populations in the United States are those minority groups with the lowest levels of educational attainment.**” (College Board, 2010, p. 18)

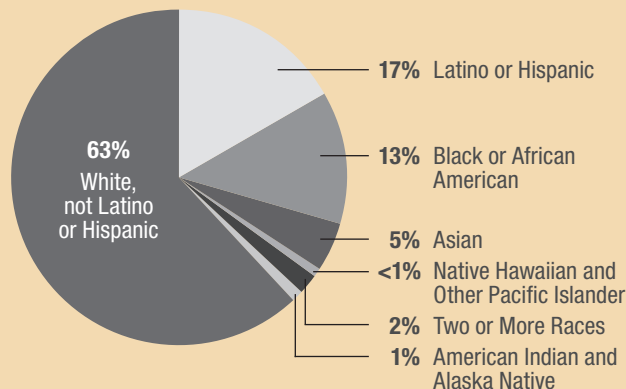
“As of 2008, only 42% of 25- to 34-year-olds in the United States had attained an associate degree or higher. **Only 30% of African Americans and 20% of Latinos ages 25 to 34 had attained an associate degree or higher in the United States**, compared to 49% for White Americans and 71% for Asian Americans.” (Lee & Ransom, 2011, p. 9)



“**Latinos are more likely to enroll in community colleges** [than] both whites and African Americans.” (Kurlaender, 2006, p. 10)

**In fall 2012, students enrolled at community colleges represented 45% of all U.S. undergraduates, 49% of all Black undergraduates, and 56% of all Hispanic undergraduates.** (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013)

### U.S. POPULATION BY RACE/ETHNICITY



Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts, June 2013. Available at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>





“Nationally, **50% of Hispanic students start at a community college, along with 31% of African American students.** In comparison, 28% of white students begin at community colleges.” (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011, p. 3)



“Nationally, **68% of black men who start college do not graduate within six years,** which is the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups.” (Harper, 2006, p. vii)



### RACE AND ETHNICITY OF STUDENTS AT TWO- AND FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

	Two-year public institutions (N=7,147,084)	Four-year public institutions (N=6,686,539)	Four-year private institutions (N=4,071,337)
All White students	59%	60%	55%
White males	25%	27%	25%
White females	34%	33%	30%
All Latino students	12%	11%	11%
Latinos	5%	5%	5%
Latinas	7%	6%	6%
All Black students	14%	13%	17%
Black males	5%	5%	7%
Black females	9%	8%	10%

Source: IPEDS, 2011

“**Black men in community colleges are more likely** to be older, be classified as low-income, have dependents (e.g., children), be married, and **to have delayed their enrollment in higher education.**” (Wood & Williams, 2013, p. 3)



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# What Students Say

## Relationships, Expectations, Instructor Qualities, and Engagement Are Key to Success

In launching an initiative aimed at building understanding of the experiences of men of color, the Center committed to listening to those students as a central aspect of the work. This report therefore draws on information from student focus groups, as well as from focus groups conducted with faculty and staff.

The Center conducted more than 30 student focus groups with Black men, Latinos, and White men at community colleges and the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society national convention, as well as six focus groups with faculty and staff. While there are limits to the generalizability of focus group responses, they provide powerful and authentic insights into students' experiences and thus into colleges' work to ensure student progress, success, and equity.

Students expressed a range of views, both within groups and across them. Even with these varying views, clear themes emerged. Despite different backgrounds, different experiences, different needs, and different world views, students generally agree on four key points:

- **Personal connections matter.** As the Center has heard in countless student focus groups over the past decade, relationships with faculty, staff, and fellow students are essential. Students value having a sense of belonging and *someone who believes in me*.
- **High expectations matter.** Students report that being held to high expectations can drive them to excel—and they want to know that college faculty and staff believe the students can reach those expectations.
- **Instructor qualities matter.** Students know whether instructors are engaged or going through the motions. They highly value faculty members who show interest in their students as well as the subject matter and who demonstrate a commitment to helping students learn.
- **Engagement matters.** The Center hears loudly and consistently that students believe engagement is important—and they know how colleges can help them become more engaged. Moreover, the actions that students recommend align well with findings from current research.

Across all groups—Black males, Latinos, and White males—students frequently talk about the **value of diversity on campus**, observing that having more faculty and staff who are people of color would be a good thing. Some students, moreover, affirm the general importance of diversity campus-wide, even while insisting that in any particular class, the most important characteristic of the instructor is not race, but whether that person holds high expectations, believes the students can achieve them, and knows how to teach so they will do so.

Students have differing thoughts about the **impact of their race or ethnicity** on their college experiences. Some students say that race, ethnicity, and culture are central to the college experience; others say these factors are peripheral.

Although student views differ, students who say that race matters make powerful statements that are impossible to sidestep—and that should be part of the ongoing conversation about helping more men of color succeed.

“[Having this teacher] was the first time, in all of my life, in all of my schooling, that I ran into an individual teacher that not only was Hispanic, but was like me.

There was a time where he had pulled me aside and said, ‘You remind me a lot of me.’ He was like, ‘You can do this.’”

— STUDENT

## ABOUT LANGUAGE AND DATA

For the purposes of this report, *men of color* refers specifically to Black males and Latinos. These student groups represent the largest groups of men of color in the majority of community colleges.

*Latinos* include males of Latin American origin and students of different national origins. *Black males* include African American males and students of different national origins.

Students who participated in special programs for men of color, such as TRIO and mentoring programs, were overrepresented in focus groups conducted through the Center's initiative Improving Outcomes for Men of Color, a factor that should be considered in discussions of what may constitute the typical experience of the broader population of men of color.

## Personal Connections Matter

Students consistently refer to the power of having strong relationships—a formal or informal network on campus that includes peers, instructors, advisors, and/or mentors. One recurring theme is the value of *someone who believes in me*—someone the student respects and who makes time when the student needs help.

Students highlight the value of relationships when they discuss the advice they would give to someone like them who is about to start college. A student says, for example, “Get under

someone's wing to help [you] through the process, and stick with them through thick and thin."

Focus group participants also note that the incoming student himself has to take responsibility for motivation and connections. One student advises, "Have goals, be self-motivated, don't be scared, seek help, and find a mentor or somebody you know." Another says, "Develop a relationship with your instructors whenever you can. If you want somebody to hold your hand through something and the college tells you there's nobody to hold your hand, they're lying. There are people out there."

Students consistently underscore the value of having a mentor, a reliable source of information and support. For example, one student says, "Get peer mentorship, and if you're aware of the services that are offered, you can find that. And if they don't have it, start it."

Another points to a peer who made the difference for him, recalling, "I had a friend that had graduated from high school a year or two before me, and he'd started at this college. It was kind of a matter of him saying, 'I could walk you through some of these steps, and I can help make that transition from high school to college a little bit easier.' So my buddy was an influential figure in that."

Many students cite faculty or staff members, often people of color, who use every contact they have with students to identify and address obstacles to success. One student focuses on the fact that his mentor's open door provides support that goes far beyond academics: "He's always saying, 'If you guys need anything, come to my office.' I go to his office for help with something minor, and he'll give me help with more than what I need. . . . He doesn't let the stresses of the outside world affect him in any way. He's a role model . . . someone to look up to."

## High Expectations Matter

Focus group participants had widely varying experiences—some never had been held to high expectations, others had, and students in all groups both struggled and succeeded. They all agree, however, that high expectations are a critical component of success.

Students whose teachers had low expectations, or no expectations at all, tell stories that lay bare all that is lost when large groups of young people are essentially written off. Asked about expectations in his high school, one student says, "I'll be honest with you: none. They just wanted to get you out of there. If you have one point, they'll pass you, even though that's not passing."

## LOW EXPECTATIONS

"Once I got to high school," says another student, "we were [in an] assembly line. We weren't given the proper tools to be able to prepare for [our] future as far as math. I'm struggling with math right now . . . because they didn't make sure we knew that stuff before we got out of there."

Several students point to different expectations for women and men. For example, "The expectations for grades and things in my [high] school were really put on the women. The girls were really pressured to do better. . . . A lot of the instructors catered to the ladies a little bit more academically than they did the men." Or, "They looked at us like we were going to fail, like we wouldn't make it. Even with the females, they are looking at them more [as if] they'll be more focused than we were because they say we're the clowns."



## HIGH EXPECTATIONS

In contrast, students' descriptions of high expectations emphasize the value of being pushed to excel. One student explains, "There have been times when [my instructor] will push me to what feels like my limit, and then when I feel like I've reached it, he'll push it even more. And then I'm like, 'You've got to be kidding me.' Then . . . after I feel like I've been pushed to the limit, I see what he's been trying to do all along, and I see the advancements that I've made."

Students' comments make it clear that they want to get good grades because they do strong work—and that teachers who give passing grades for substandard work are not doing their students favors: "When teachers fail me sometimes, I actually learn more in their classes because of the way they teach than I would learn from teachers that are friendly and pass you just to be cool."

## RACE AND EXPECTATIONS

When asked about race or ethnicity and expectations, students share a range of views, both within and across racial and ethnic groups.

Importantly, for some students, the effect of race is pervasive in life and therefore also in their school and college experiences. For example, as one student reflects, "I struggled a great deal because I thought, 'Well, you're not gonna get anything, so you're just gonna have to work a lot harder.' . . . The theme throughout my life is, 'You have to work harder than the White guy does just to get close.'"

At the same time, some students believe that race is not—or should not be—a factor in terms of a college's expectations for its students. For example, as one student says, "I'm going to say, for Black people coming on campus, first and foremost come in with a clean slate and a mindset that the expectations are the same, and work your tail off."

## SUCCESSFUL MEN OF COLOR IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The Center initiative Improving Outcomes for Men of Color in Community Colleges included four focus groups with members of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society (PTK)—two with Black males and two with Latinos. These students are highly engaged and highly successful. Would their focus groups reveal an X factor—an identifiable variable that set their experiences apart?

PTK focus group participants had backgrounds similar to those of other focus group participants. They came from similar neighborhoods, had comparable K–12 experiences, had similar levels of interaction with the criminal justice system, and so on. What helped them succeed in college? PTK focus group participants cite the exact same things that other students indicate are critical to academic success: relationships, networks, emphasis on student assets and potential, and overcoming experiences with the racial and cultural stereotyping that is sometimes encountered on predominantly White campuses.

A network of *people who look like me* is powerful, both as a motivator and support system. "Just with LULAC [League of United Latin American Citizens], they kind of taught me to just be proud of who I am as a Mexican and helped me a lot with networking as well," explains one student. "I went to Orlando last June for a conference and met a lot of powerful Latinos who have made it big that want to help young Latinos like myself. . . . [Also], Brother to Brother is an organization . . . with a lot of Hispanics and African Americans. It's kind of like a fraternity, I guess you would say, and they hold me up to a standard of being the best that I can be, and just because I am Latino, don't stop. I just keep going, and they know—they push me because they think I can make it. I just find that very powerful."

Reflecting on the challenge of overcoming racial and cultural stereotyping, students describe their effort to make a statement with their success. "I think it's the fact that we're Latinos and that we're just proving people wrong," says one student. "We're not just another statistic or a stereotype,

that 'Oh, he's just a gangbanger. He's just gonna end up in jail or he's gonna end up six feet under.' It's just the fact that we're proving them wrong. We're here and we're here to stay."

Another student says, "For myself, the reason I'm at this point and successful . . . is because I broke the stereotype. I proved to everyone that—you know what?—the color of my skin had nothing to do with it. At one point in time maybe it did, but now it doesn't. We're all actually equal."

The research of Shaun Harper, Associate Professor and Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania, supports this point of view:

Ways in which Black and Latino male teens, especially those who reside in America's largest cities, are persistently portrayed in media and elsewhere negatively affect society's expectations of them and, at times, their expectations of themselves. Visions of them in urban high schools are almost universally negative—they are expected to be the perpetrators of school violence and at the bottom of every statistical metric of educational excellence. (2014, p. 1)

PTK students, like many focus group participants, point to strong relationships with people on campus or in the local community who push them to do better than they thought they could. "When I didn't get it, when I wasn't on the right path, I had older men that never let me go," says one student. "They stayed in my ear. . . . If I didn't have people that held on to me so tight, [while I was] kicking and screaming, [during] times where I just didn't know what to do, I don't know where I would be at this moment. I feel like what sets me apart—what sets Black men apart—is Black men that don't have any guidance . . . just go all around and . . . they're kind of lost. Black men who have guidance . . . have people there that just hold on to them so tight."

## ASPIRATIONS AND OUTCOMES

Men of color have higher aspirations than White males, but they are less likely to attain their goals.

### Students' aspirations by gender and race/ethnicity

	Earn a certificate	Earn an associate degree	Transfer to a four-year institution
Black men	59% (N=18,861)	87% (N=19,092)	82% (N=19,121)
Black women	53% (N=32,627)	89% (N=33,144)	77% (N=32,937)
Latinos	60% (N=23,713)	87% (N=23,892)	84% (N=23,927)
Latinas	56% (N=34,421)	88% (N=34,701)	83% (N=34,649)
White men	50% (N=107,415)	80% (N=108,192)	72% (N=108,105)
White women	48% (N=153,579)	83% (N=154,567)	68% (N=154,176)

Responses include students who listed each goal as a primary or secondary goal.

Source: 2012 CCSSE Cohort data

### Community college students earning certificates or degrees within three years by gender and race/ethnicity (N=157,581)

Black men	5%
Black women	6%
Latinos	5%
Latinas	6%
White men	32%
White women	34%

Source: IPEDS, 2011

And, “There may be Whites, Hispanics, or any form of race in college. College is college. . . . Your race shouldn’t be a liability. Just because you are a Black male on campus doesn’t mean you should be treated differently from a White male on campus.”

## Instructor Qualities Matter

Male students of color agree that the characteristics and specific behaviors of their instructors are critical factors in their success. In their view, instructor excellence is grounded in caring about students, communicating clearly with students, and being prepared.

“One factor is [whether] a teacher [is] willing to go the extra mile and help out,” says one student. Another describes an instructor who “worked with each one of us as students on a personal basis to make sure everyone understood the content. I mean he cared about us as students. . . . He wanted us to succeed.”

Other students emphasize communication and organization. One says, “My favorite classes were [those with] effective communication between the instructor and the student and also the instructor getting the students to communicate with each other. [Getting] everybody introducing themselves quickly—that’s all fine and dandy, but you need to go beyond that.”



“When I graduated from middle school, the principal said, ‘Half of you guys will graduate from high school, and half of you guys will not even make it or graduate.’ And I was thinking, sitting down in the ceremony, ‘I have to make it, and I have to pass beyond that point. I have to go to college and prove her wrong.’ . . . I [told myself], ‘No, that’s not gonna be me.’”

— STUDENT

Another says, “I feel like an organized teacher is the prepared teacher, and they have their mind set on the proper direction. I remember there was a teacher that came unorganized . . . he looked like he made the lesson plan last night, after going to the bar.”

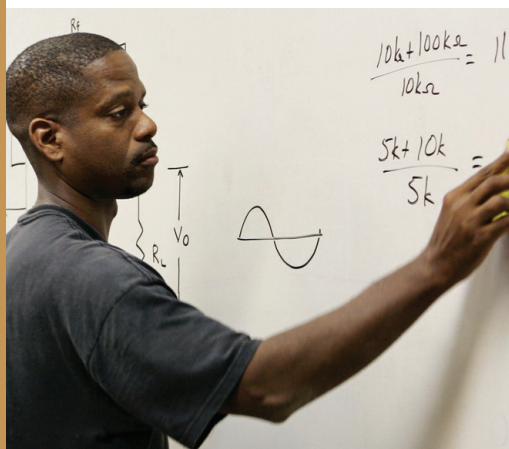
Students consistently return to the themes of instructors connecting with students on the students’ terms: “Instructors [should] make the students feel at home because [if they don’t] it intimidates the student [from going] back. I’ve seen students go to class for two classes, and they don’t go no more. I see them outside, and I say, ‘Hey, what happened?’ [And they respond,] ‘No, [the instructor] scares me.’”

Another student concludes, “As far as what the teachers can do to help the young Black male—spend a little bit more time [with them]. Show them that you’re there for them and help them on their assignments. If they have questions and you’re not too sure, elaborate on it. Tell them, ‘I’m always here, my door is always open,’ you know? Tell them there are learning centers and other projects [and put them] in certain projects and groups where you can have study lessons and group sessions. Just make yourself more available.”

## Engagement Matters

Focus group participants consistently talk about the importance of engaged, contextualized learning—hands-on learning that is collaborative and tied to students’ interests.

Students appreciate classes where they can put what they learn into action. An example comes from a student who says, “The best class [was] where I was able to come to class one week, [and then] go out and apply it in the field the next week, and vice versa.”



And, “When you go in the classroom, they have an hour-long lecture, and then from the lecture you go right into the lab, the actual shop where diesel trucks and diesel engines and everything [are]. Then [you] go apply it in the classroom, so it really connects. They [also] offer internships . . . to reinforce the skills they taught me inside the classroom, and that was very helpful.”

Faculty members earn students’ attention and appreciation when they

“Teachers are posing a question like, ‘How dare you not finish college?’ It’s like a challenge. . . . [It] brings a weight of responsibility. . . . ‘How dare you not finish?’ It just kicked it up another notch, right?”

— STUDENT

create avenues for students to connect the class material to their own experiences, including those experiences that may be unique to a particular racial, ethnic, or cultural background. One faculty member explains, “In the science department, we . . . create opportunities for people to feel comfortable expressing themselves and where they come from. We have learning communities in bioethics that talk about . . . situations that affect minorities, whether it’s from a health perspective or from a scientific perspective.”

Sometimes, the engagement comes from a faculty member’s connection to the student, and that can begin with the faculty member sharing some of his or her own experience. One student uses his math instructor as an example of good teaching: “[He is] from the area; he was born here. He basically told us his story, his struggles, and he wants us to strive for better. He makes sure we get the material, and he’s always asking us questions.”

“What I expect . . . is a helpful teacher, a teacher that’s not just going in there to lecture, like, ‘Open your book up to this page,’” says another student. “I [expect] a teacher that goes in there and shares their experiences. . . . I’ve had a couple of teachers that, after class, stay and chit-chat with the students. Or, before class, [they] ask, ‘Hey, how’s the class going? . . . Do you think I should change something?’ I have some teachers saying, ‘Hey, let’s try not doing a PowerPoint today. Let’s . . . just talk.’ And I’ve had other teachers that come in five minutes late, sit down, turn on the computer, do their PowerPoint, and as soon as they’re done, [it’s] ‘All right, we’re done.’ They’re the first one to go out the door.”

## GROUP INVOLVEMENT: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR ENGAGEMENT

Whether they participate in cohorts within their program of study, college-run student support programs, or clubs that provide camaraderie and informal encouragement, students report that involvement in groups is critical to their success. Further, Black males and Latinos in focus groups often reference programs that are tailored for them and that provide academic and cultural support. Whatever form it takes, group involvement provides an essential type of connection.

“Yeah, I’m involved in [a support] program,” says one student. “Say, for instance, you’re running a marathon and you are almost [at the finish line], but you aren’t there yet. You need some water, and somebody’s over there like, ‘Here!’ They give

“I think what makes a good classroom is the teacher’s interaction with the students.”

— STUDENT

“For me, the turning point was eighth grade. I wasn’t doing very well academically. I think I finally got my lifeboat, life jacket, or whatever you call it, when my teacher recommended me for [a college transition program]. Once I became part of that, it [filled] the void that my family couldn’t provide, which was the academic support and the know-how of the process, because I had no idea.”

— PHI THETA KAPPA STUDENT

you that extra boost. I don’t think I can make it without the program, flat out.” Another asserts, “That’s how you [become] successful, being African American. You need to get in [a support] program.”

When asked what advice he would give to incoming students, a current student says, “There’s a direct correlation with students that get involved in extracurricular activities and staying long in school, as opposed to students who don’t get involved at all and drop out or don’t finish school.” And, “I would say, as far as coming here, to do your best as a student, join a program or get into anything that you feel is going to help you.”

Another student adds, “You might not see the immediate [results] right away, but, this is [important]. Go out and get involved in the process and find out about all of the various programs. Search it out like it’s gold.”

The Center’s research on high-impact practices underscores the importance of students’ interactions with others both in and out of class. It may be that the most beneficial element in a number of high-impact practices (e.g., *orientation*, *student success course*, and *learning community*) is that students are intentionally placed in organized groups.

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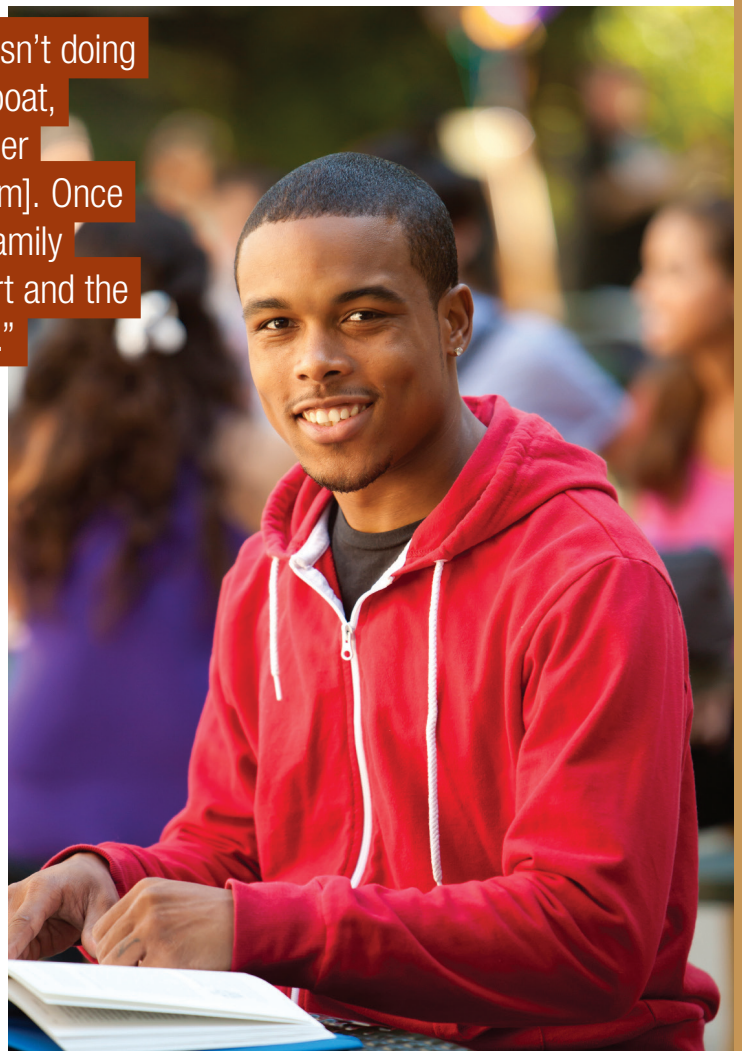
## Diversity and Cultural Competence

While students’ comments about engagement are strikingly similar, their views about the importance and impact of diversity on campus are mixed.

### DIVERSITY

Many students talk about the importance of seeing faculty members who are people of color. “Now and then, when you look in your community, they think the only successful person is the dope dealer, the gangbanger, that rapper, or football player,” says one student. “But there are educated people, real educated Black people, Black men, that are successful, but, who really gets to see that? Then, when you come to college, [you realize] they’re here.”

“I see [Latinos] in academic circles, [but] not as many as I’d like to,” another student notes. A third says, “I’d say they need more Spanish tutors and some Latino teachers and tutors.



“[Programs] shouldn’t necessarily be [for] just a small little group, it should just be what [the college does for all] anyway.”

— STUDENT

There’s a lack of that. . . . I would personally click [better] with a Latino teacher than another teacher.”

Another student asserts, “If [an instructor] can give me the work and teach it in a way that I understand, then, by all means, teach me. But if personal-wise, yeah, I would like Black because then you got someone you can relate to. You just feel more comfortable . . . like you’re not really alone.”

Despite these strongly held views from some Black male and Latino students, others say the race or ethnicity of their instructors is not important. “Well, [one of my instructors is] White and she loves all her students, and she wants to see you make it. . . . It [isn’t] about color, it’s about the teacher that cares about the student,” one student says. Another observes, “I had an instructor [of] foreign descent. She was Caucasian. She was the best instructor—one of the best I ever had. She just had

so much knowledge, personal knowledge of African American, Hispanic, and Native American history.”

Some White male students note that college was their first opportunity to learn about different cultures. “I think growing up in my high school, and the way I grew up, being White, I was ignorant of a lot of the issues that a lot of people faced,” one student explains. “I went to a pretty much White school, and until I came to college and until I got into like the real world, I never knew that there was—you know, I heard about it all the time, but I’d never seen—discrimination. I was just ignorant of it.”

## CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Beyond the desire for greater diversity on campus, some students express concern about faculty members’ cultural competence. One student says, “Some teachers don’t respect us [since we’re] Black, and expectations are very low.”

“You’re talking about my freshman year, I guess, in college, before I even met another Hispanic that was in academia.”

— STUDENT



Another asserts, “Instructors should know a little bit more about the backgrounds of different cultures because, sometimes, if the instructor is not as familiar, they kind of get a shock. Because they don’t know their [students’] religion or their culture, they kind of get confused sometimes.”

Other students raise the college’s responsibility to better serve students whose first language is not English. “[The college should have] more bilingual resources and be a little bit more open to students so [students won’t] be like ‘Oh, I’m not going to go [to support services] because my accent is bad or I’m really nervous, and I can’t really speak to somebody.’”

## RACE AND ETHNICITY OF STUDENTS AND FACULTY AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Because community college faculty are disproportionately White, students of color are less likely to have the opportunity to engage with faculty members of their own race and ethnicity.

	Percentage of student population*	Percentage of faculty population**	Percentage point difference
Black	14%	7%	-7
Black males	5%	3%	-2
Black females	9%	4%	-5
Latino	13%	4%	-9
Latinos	5%	2%	-3
Latinas	7%	2%	-5
White	59%	78%	+19
White males	25%	36%	+11
White females	34%	42%	+8

\*All undergraduate students at two-year public community colleges (N=7,082,140)

\*\*Full-time and part-time faculty whose primary appointment is in instruction/research/public service (N=378,685)

Source: IPEDS, 2011

“I never had a Black professor. I definitely want to see more Black professors.”

— STUDENT



# Data Show Unsettling Patterns of Engagement and Achievement

The student voices reported on the preceding pages provide important insights about students' actions, motivations, and interpretations of their own experiences. Quantitative data show what percentages of students are engaging with their instructors, peers, coursework, and college. Looking at these data by race, ethnicity, and gender is critical for colleges that want to better serve men of color.

Since the first administration of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), results have consistently shown that women are more engaged than men. Black females are the most engaged of all student groups on all but one benchmark (*support for learners*), and White males are the least engaged of all student groups on all benchmarks.

These differences across groups aside, ***within all student groups, higher levels of engagement are associated with higher outcomes***, as measured by self-reported GPAs. These findings remain consistent over time. However, a close look at data for men only reveals unexpected relationships between engagement and achievement.

Among male students, Black males are the most engaged, followed by Latinos. White males are the least engaged of the three groups. The pattern is consistent across benchmarks and across the more than 10 years of CCSSE data.

Student success—measured by credits earned or self-reported GPA—also follows a consistent pattern, but it is reversed: White men consistently report the strongest outcomes, followed by Latinos, with Black men reporting the lowest outcomes.

## Men of Color: More Engagement But Lower Outcomes?

Putting these data points together shows that among male students, Black males report higher overall engagement but also report the lowest outcomes. Latinos are in the middle, and White males are the least engaged but report the best outcomes.



For example, consider the *CCSSE* benchmark *active and collaborative learning*. (See chart at right.) All groups earn higher grades when they are more engaged. However, at almost every level of GPA, the White males are the least engaged, the Black males are the most engaged, and the Latinos are in the middle. White males reporting a GPA of A, for example, have an average benchmark score of 52, compared to an average benchmark score of 55 for Latinos reporting a GPA of A and 62 for Black males reporting a GPA of A.

In other words, when Black males, Latinos, and White males are engaged at the same level, the Black males have the lowest outcomes, the Latinos are in the middle, and the White males have the highest outcomes. On the *active and collaborative learning* benchmark, for example, Black men with a benchmark score of 53 report that they are earning, on average, a C+ to B-, but White men with a benchmark score of 52 say they are earning an A on average. Latinos' reported grades fall in the middle, in the B+ to A- range, when they have benchmark scores of 53.

This pattern is consistent across all *CCSSE* benchmarks. On the *student effort* benchmark, for example, Black men with a benchmark score of 44, on average, report earning a C- or lower. Latino men with a benchmark score of 43 report earning, on average, a C. White men with a benchmark score of 44 say they earn, on average, a B.

The findings are most dramatic on the *support for learners* benchmark. White males who report that they are earning an A, on average, have lower benchmark scores than Black males who report that they are earning a C- or lower, on average (45 versus 50, respectively). Consistent with the pattern, when benchmark scores are held constant, the reported grades of Latinos fall between those of Black and White men.

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## Experiences and Behaviors Fit the Pattern

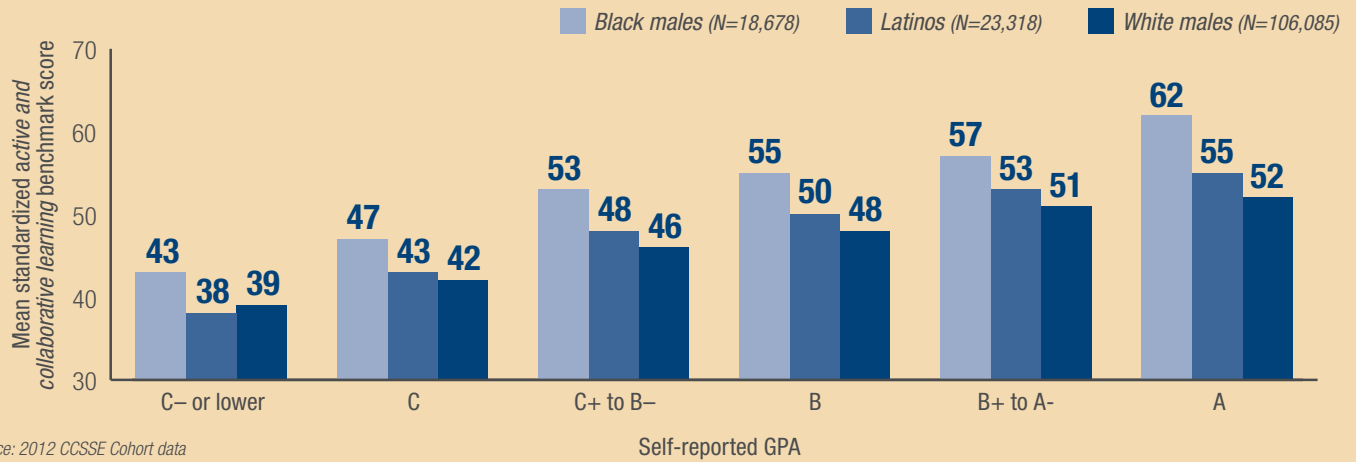
Students' reported behaviors and experiences are consistent with the findings just described. For example, among Black male students who report a C- GPA, 39% say they never skip class. Among Latino students with the same self-reported GPA, 31% say they never skip class, and among White students who report the same GPA, only 24% say they never skip class. The Black men are more engaged, but getting the same outcome.

Black men at all levels of self-reported GPA also are most likely to use skill labs and to participate in high-impact practices, followed by Latinos, and then White men.

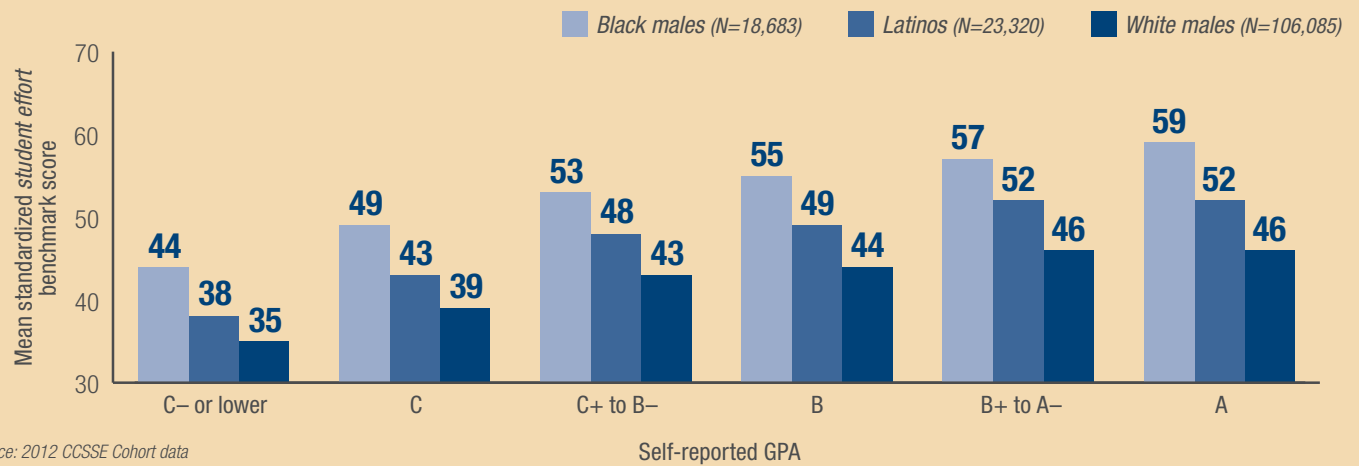


## MEN OF COLOR: MORE ENGAGEMENT BUT LOWER OUTCOMES

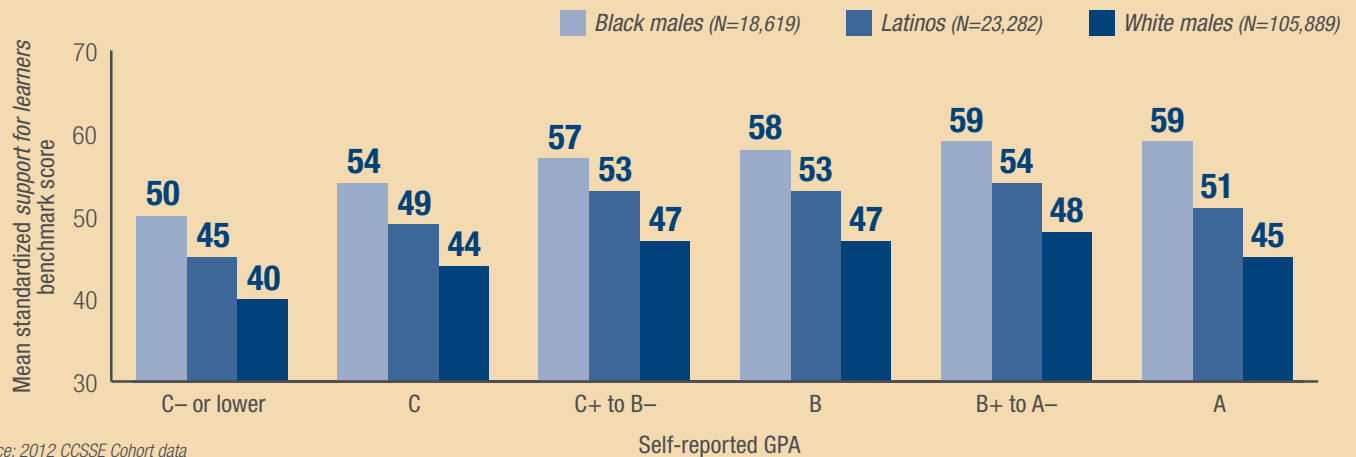
Active and collaborative learning benchmark and self-reported GPA



Student effort benchmark and self-reported GPA

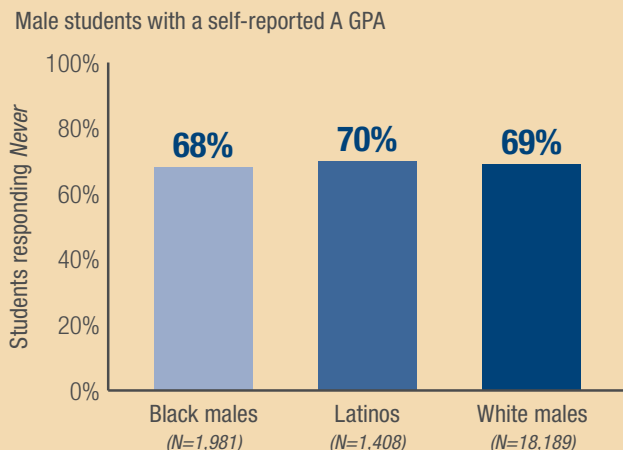


Support for learners benchmark and self-reported GPA

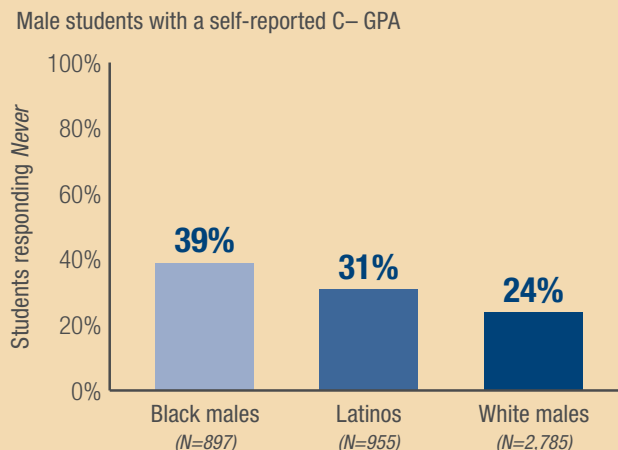


## MEN OF COLOR: EXPERIENCES AND BEHAVIORS FIT THE PATTERN

In your experiences at this college during the current school year, about how often have you skipped class?

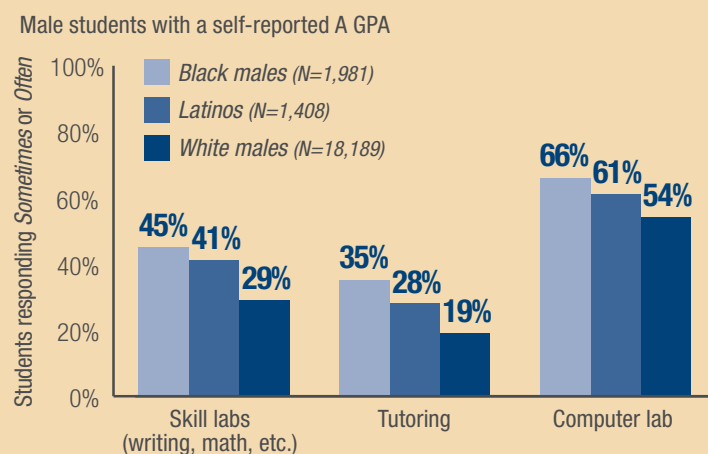


Source: 2012 CCSSE Cohort data

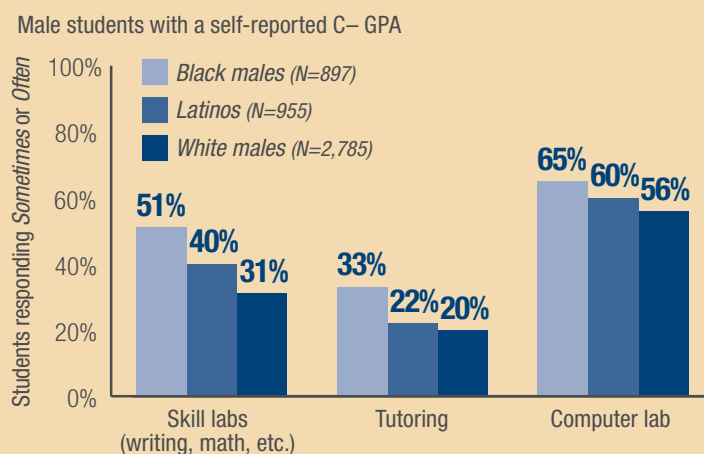


Source: 2012 CCSSE Cohort data

How often do you use the following services?

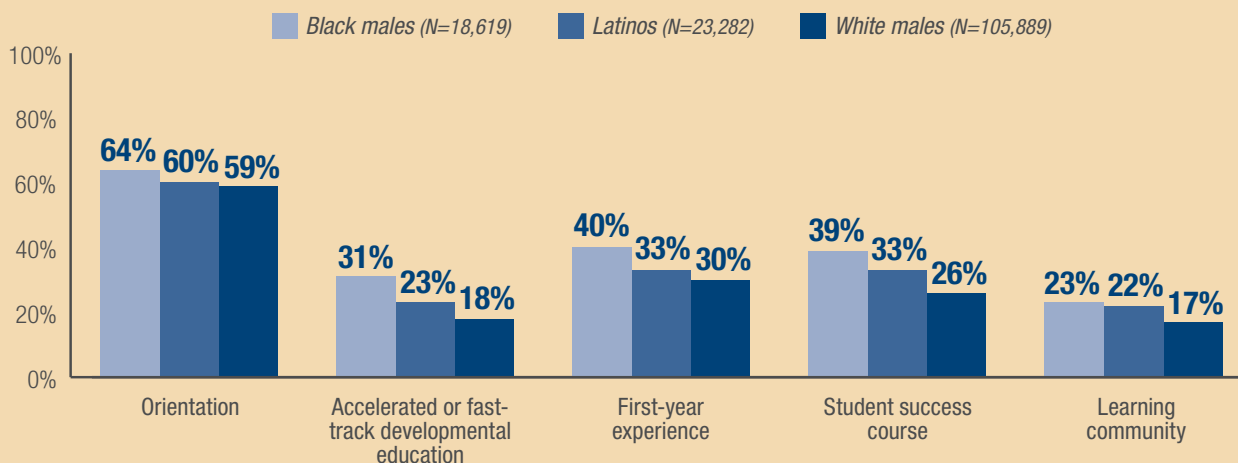


Source: 2012 CCSSE Cohort data



Source: 2012 CCSSE Cohort data

Students participating in high-impact practices by race and ethnicity



Source: 2012 CCSSE Cohort data

# Understanding the Unexpected

Some of the findings presented here are unexpected and deserve to be summarized once again: Even though *within all student groups, higher levels of engagement are associated with higher outcomes*, self-reporting among male students indicates that men of color are more engaged but have lower outcomes. Engagement clearly matters. However, Black males report the highest overall engagement, but also the lowest outcomes. Latinos are in the middle, and White males are the least engaged but report the best outcomes.

Understanding this phenomenon requires attention to particularly challenging issues, including **college readiness** and **stereotype threat**, both of which are discussed below.

In addition, colleges must rethink their traditional inclination to rely on special programs to address achievement gaps. By using these programmatic approaches, colleges risk having an emphasis on “fixing” students. Instead, the focus should be on addressing institutional culture, policy, and practice in ways that counter the persistent effects of structural racism—and that create conditions for success for *all* students.

## College Readiness

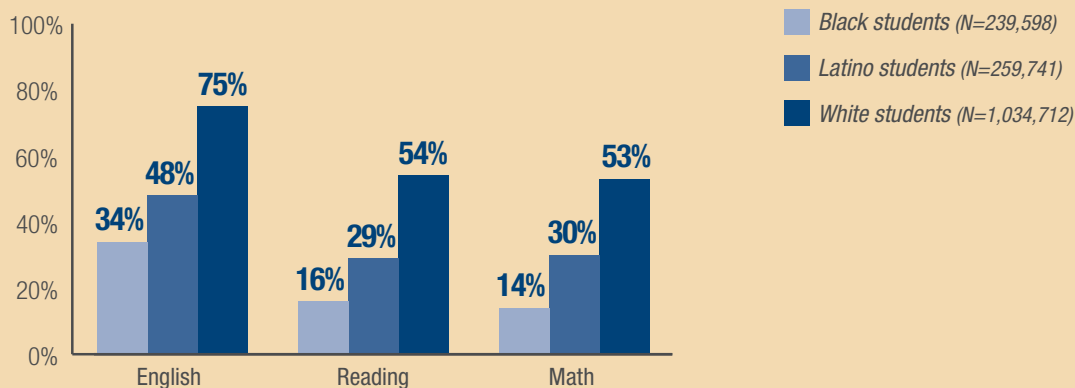
The issue of **college readiness** is impossible to ignore. National data indicate that college readiness is a key factor in understanding the relationship between engagement and outcomes by race and ethnicity. Black and Latino students are likely to arrive at colleges with greater needs for academic skill development. ACT data show, for example, that students of color are dramatically less likely to meet ACT college-readiness benchmarks—the scores that indicate about a 50% chance of earning a B or higher, or about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher, in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses. For example, 16% of Black students meet the



## ACT SCORES: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO MEET ACT COLLEGE-READINESS BENCHMARKS

Defining college readiness is a national challenge. While there are shortcomings associated with using ACT scores, the data serve for now as a reasonable tool for examining differences across racial and ethnic groups.

Students who meet the ACT benchmarks for college readiness have about a 50% chance of earning a B or higher, or about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher, in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses.



Source: ACT, *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2013*. Available at <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr13/>

benchmark in reading, compared to 29% of Latino students and 54% of White students. Similarly, 14% of Black students meet the benchmark in math, compared to 30% of Latino students and 53% of White students.

Center data suggest that even the typically higher levels of engagement of students of color do not compensate for the effects of beginning their college experiences farther behind the starting gate than their peers.

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## Stereotype Threat

In his 2010 book, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*, social psychologist Claude M. Steele describes the compelling research on the phenomenon of **stereotype threat**.

People experience stereotype threat when they fear “confirming, or being seen to confirm, society’s darker suspicions” (p. 178) of how well someone with their social identity (someone of their own race, ethnicity, religion, age, or gender, for example) will perform in a particular situation.

Steele explains that social identity comes with built-in expectations or conditions, which he calls *identity contingencies*. These conditions, which can be positive or negative, exist for all people in all kinds of situations. They include, for example, the differences in admission to selective colleges among equally qualified students of different race/ethnicity, the lowered expectation for mental alertness many older people experience, or the social avoidance a Southerner might detect as his accent is heard at a New England cocktail party (p. 269).

Identity contingencies are a product of stereotyping and a societal history of discrimination, and they affect individual behavior in dramatic ways. Based on research across the country and across a variety of groups and tasks, Steele concluded that the *situational pressure not to confirm a negative stereotype* can cause people to significantly underperform.

Steele calls this pressure stereotype threat. Significantly, he argues, situational cues that trigger stereotype threat do not require the presence or influence of a prejudiced person or any ill intent. In fact, stereotype threat often prevails in situations where people of good will are trying to do good work.

Relevant findings include the following:

- Stereotype threat is part of everyone’s life. It can occur—and impede high performance—in any situation where an individual performs in the shadow of a stereotype, even when that stereotype is neither intended nor noticed. For example, two groups of women with similarly high math abilities are given the same test. One group is told that the math test typically reveals gender differences. The other group is told that despite common thinking that men outperform women on difficult standardized math tests, on this *particular* test, women always do as well as men. The first group underperforms relative to equally skilled men and the latter group performs at the same high level as equally skilled men. The same phenomenon has been observed among talented White athletes in sports dominated by Blacks and in the academic performance of students of color.
- Whatever the skill levels individuals possess, situational differences in stereotype threat alone can substantially



affect intellectual performance. That is, the dampening effect occurs with highly motivated and high-ability individuals (Stanford University students, for example), as well as with those at other points on the spectrum.

- The impact of stereotype threat can be most detrimental for people who care a great deal about their performance and for individuals who are working at the edge of their abilities, reaching toward the next higher level of achievement.
- At times, as illustrated above, the cues prompting stereotype threat can be overt, even if subtle. However, the more likely scenario may be that the stereotype is unseen—but the threat is equally powerful when there are no negative intentions or active prejudice. Even very subtle cues can trigger both the threat and the consequent underperformance. For example, two groups of students with similar skill levels are given the same extraordinarily difficult verbal reasoning test. Both groups include White and Black students. The first group is told that they are taking a verbal reasoning test. The second group is told that the test is a task for studying problem solving and does not measure intellectual ability. In the first group, the White students outperform the Black students. In the second group, Black and White students perform at the same level.

Steele summarizes the implications of the research for higher education:

Stereotype threat, then, does affect the academic performance of minority students in real colleges. . . . [While there is much yet to learn about moderating factors,] the results that are in make it clear that identity threat is a significant cause of minority underachievement in American higher education, and is clearly worth fixing. (p. 376)

Regarding the issue of college readiness, Steele addresses a critical question head-on:

Reducing identity threat is not sufficient to overcome real skill and knowledge deficits. . . . To do that, students have to have the opportunity to acquire . . . relevant skills and knowledge. But it's equally true that for ability-stereotyped students, reducing identity threat is just as important as skill and knowledge instruction. It may not be sufficient, but it is necessary. That is, no amount of instruction, no matter how good it is, can reduce these deficits if it doesn't also keep identity threat low. (pp. 671–673)

The good news? Research also indicates that removing the threat of stereotype confirmation dramatically improves performance.

Turning to practical questions about what can be done to reduce stereotype threat, Steele observes, “If you want to change the behaviors and outcomes associated with social identity . . . don't focus on changing the internal manifestations of the identity, such as values and attitudes. Focus instead on changing the contingencies to which all of



that internal stuff is an adaptation” (p. 328). Examples of ways to change the contingencies include the following:

- Design teacher practices and classroom features that serve to reduce threat: positive relationships with students, use of diversity as a classroom resource rather than striving to be “colorblind,” and instructors who are warm and available.
- Establish trust through “demanding but supportive relationships, fostering hopeful narratives about belonging in the setting, arranging informal cross-group conversations to reveal that one’s identity is not the sole cause of one’s negative experiences in the setting, [and] representing critical abilities as learnable” (pp. 670–671).
- Remind students of their multiple social identities—for example, as a college student; as a person capable of mastering computer programming or nursing; as a valued friend and strong role model for others.
- Avoid the kinds of diagnostic assessments, advising messages, and instructions for academic tasks that may serve as unintentional cues for stereotypes. For example, many aspects of the typical college intake process, although designed to identify and eliminate potential stumbling blocks for students, unintentionally provide immediate and direct messages about students’ financial, academic, or personal deficits.

Steele’s conclusions are well aligned with the Center’s focus groups findings: Personal connections matter. High expectations matter. Instructors matter. Engagement matters.

# College Action for Equity

## Cultural and Academic Support for Latinos Improves Retention

**Lansing Community College (MI)** has seen a significant increase in the number of Latino students succeeding—enrolling, persisting, graduating, and transferring to baccalaureate institutions—since the introduction of the Latinos Unidos Con Energia Respeto y Orgullo (LUCERO) program in 2003. The program, which had an initial cohort of 30 Latino students, has now served more than 360 students, including 163 males. The only program of its kind in the state of Michigan, LUCERO focuses on assisting students in the development of academic, leadership, and professional skills while celebrating and exploring diversity and culture.

In July 2008, the program grew from a social support group to an intentionally engaging intervention that includes case management, more focused retention strategies, targeted recruitment strategies, and institution-wide cultural initiatives. Participants also have access to student-centered and developmental advising; career counseling; mentoring; academic workshops on study skills and critical thinking; weekly tutoring sessions in math, science, and writing; and networking opportunities both within and outside of the Lansing community.

To foster community building outside the classroom, LUCERO also organizes activities that recognize Latino culture and positive identity development, such as the Heritage 5K Run/Walk and celebrations for César E. Chávez Day, Hispanic Heritage Month, Día de la Mujer, and Cinco de Mayo. The annual LUCERO Gala/Recognition, as well as the opportunity to join program committees and attend conferences and workshops outside the institution, helps students cultivate their leadership skills.

Since the inception of the program at Lansing, LUCERO male participants have excelled on a number of outcome measures, as compared to other Latinos not in LUCERO and to all White males at the college. From fall 2010 to fall 2011, the retention rate for male LUCERO participants was 68% ( $n=26/38$ ), as compared to 50% ( $n=133/267$ ) for Latinos not in the program and 46% ( $n=3,034/6,538$ ) for all White males.

From fall 2011 to fall 2012, the retention rate for male LUCERO participants was 67% ( $n=38/57$ ), compared to 48% ( $n=107/225$ ) for Latinos not in LUCERO and 47% ( $n=2,870/6,169$ ) for all White males. During the past five years, LUCERO has also helped 25 Latino students successfully transfer to the following baccalaureate institutions: University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Central Michigan University, Ferris State University, Grand Valley State University, Eastern Michigan University, The Ohio State University, Siena Heights University, Davenport University, and Northwood University.

## A Successful Exit From Developmental Math

To address low completion rates of its developmental math sequence, the math department at **Austin Community College (TX)** created a new course: Developing Mathematical Thinking. This exit-level developmental course prepares students for College Mathematics or Elementary Statistics. It is designed for students who do not need the intensive algebra skills taught in Intermediate Algebra (the traditional exit-level course, which prepares students for college-level algebra).

Developing Mathematical Thinking uses collaborative learning to engage students, enhance their skills, and help them comprehend new concepts. It emphasizes math skills that students will use in the future and increases their confidence in mathematics.

The math department designed Developing Mathematical Thinking with two goals: (1) students who take Developing Mathematical Thinking will have an overall success rate equal to the success rate in Intermediate Algebra; and (2) students who take Developing Mathematical Thinking and then enroll in College Mathematics will have a success rate at least the same as the overall success rate in College Mathematics. In both cases, the results surpassed the goals. However, the





number of students accommodated by this new approach is still small, a challenge that is under discussion at the college.

In fall 2009, the college offered two pilot sections of Developing Mathematical Thinking, with a total enrollment of 45 students. That semester, Developing Mathematical Thinking had a success rate of 69% ( $n=31/45$ ), compared to a 48% success rate ( $n=966/2,022$ ) for Intermediate Algebra students.

Students who took Developing Mathematical Thinking in fall 2009 followed by College Mathematics in spring 2010 had a course progression success rate of 68% ( $n=13/19$ ), versus a 64% success rate ( $n=787/1,229$ ) for all other students enrolled in College Mathematics.

More recent data show a consistent pattern of higher successful completion among Developing Mathematical Thinking students, as compared to students who take the traditional algebra-based course, Intermediate Algebra.

In fall 2011, 77% of Black males ( $n=10/13$ ), 77% of Hispanic males ( $n=17/22$ ), and 78% of White males ( $n=35/45$ ) successfully completed Developing Mathematical Thinking. This compares to 38% of Black males ( $n=33/87$ ), 49% of Hispanic males ( $n=142/288$ ), and 52% of White males ( $n=222/427$ ) who successfully completed Intermediate Algebra.

In fall 2012, 79% of Black males ( $n=11/14$ ), 84% of Hispanic males ( $n=26/31$ ), and 93% of White males ( $n=27/29$ ) successfully completed Developing Mathematical Thinking. This compares to 43% of Black males ( $n=37/86$ ), 52% of Hispanic males ( $n=165/320$ ), and 55% of White males ( $n=200/366$ ) who successfully completed Intermediate Algebra. Results from other semesters show similar patterns.

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## Men of Merit: Having Mentors and Being Mentors

In 2008, in response to increasing Black male enrollment, **Jackson College (MI)** created an Office of Multicultural Relations (OMR) founded on three principles: fostering caring relationships, a commitment to closing the achievement gaps, and the design and implementation of creative and high-impact educational practices. The OMR is home to a number of diversity and equity initiatives, including the Men of Merit Initiative (MoM). MoM, an academic support and mentoring program for male students of color, is an important part of the holistic approach to addressing the needs of Black male students at Jackson College.

MoM increases academic success for Black males through various campus and community engagement strategies. Academic and career advising support is provided throughout the semester and at biweekly meetings led by MoM staff and by community leaders who are highly successful men of color serving as mentors. At these meetings, students report academic progress and receive tutoring and academic support. Further, they are connected to on-campus academic department resources, early and ongoing academic advising and planning, financial literacy and career support, training

for effective communication and public speaking, and business management skills development.

The OMR developed this initiative through strong partnerships between the college and local communities. In addition to the biweekly meetings with staff and community mentors, MoM participants are required to do community service work with elementary and middle school students, including school visits and presentations, as well as food drives for local homeless shelters and a variety of fundraisers. The activities give MoM participants the opportunity to be mentors, which serves the young students they support and helps develop strong leadership skills.

MoM is improving student retention for participants. For the fall 2009 cohort, MoM students had a fall-to-winter retention rate of 95% ( $n=18/19$ ), compared to a 64% retention rate for all Black males ( $n=140/219$ ) and a 75% retention rate for all credit students ( $n=5,797/7,729$ ). The fall-to-fall retention rate for MoM participants was 63% ( $n=12/19$ ), compared to 36% for all Black males ( $n=79/219$ ) and 52% for all credit students ( $n=4,019/7,729$ ). More recently, for the fall 2011 cohort, MoM students had a fall-to-winter retention rate of 81% ( $n=22/27$ ), compared to a 61% retention rate for all Black males ( $n=160/262$ ) and a 73% retention rate for all credit students ( $n=5,110/7,000$ ). The 2011–2012 fall-to-fall retention rate for MoM was 48% ( $n=13/27$ ), compared to 25% for all Black males ( $n=66/262$ ) and 42% for all credit students ( $n=2,940/7,000$ ).

A concern for the college is the decline in the retention rate from the fall 2009 cohort to the fall 2011 cohort, but results of MoM participants are still better than results for non-participants. Thus, while the number of participants is small, the program shows promise, and plans are under way to expand its reach.

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## Coaching to Improve Outcomes for Men of Color

In 2003, the **North Carolina Community College System (NC)** piloted the Minority Male Mentoring Program (3M). The program aims to increase minority male students' persistence, graduation, and transfer rates by helping them navigate the educational system and develop leadership, critical-thinking, goal-setting, time management, and study skills. Today, 46 of the state's 58 community colleges are operating 3M programs.

3M programs serve both part-time and full-time students. They provide academic and career advising, service learning opportunities, a required study skills course, and transfer workshops to a cohort of minority male students. In fall 2012, 3M participants at the 46 colleges were 82% Black, 5% Latino, 2% American Indian, 4% White, 2% Multiple, and 4% Unknown; participation of Asian and Hawaiian males was less than 1%. The number of participants increased from 844 in fall 2011 to 1,547 in fall 2012. More than 75% ( $n=1,160$ ) of fall 2011 participants were still enrolled in spring 2013, and 67% ( $n=1,036$ ) persisted to fall 2013.



Participating students are encouraged to enroll in at least 12 credit hours per semester (with a focus on core courses) and develop a written academic plan in collaboration with an academic coach provided by the program. Members meet weekly with successful, diverse community college professionals who speak with the students, share their stories, and offer support and intrusive guidance. The program's coordinator ensures that students have opportunities for structured relationships with other students and members of the campus community. All of these components aim to establish an academic and social support system for participants.

From fall 2011 to fall 2012, minority males persisted at 49% ( $n=709$ ), as compared to 57% ( $n=23,006$ ) of White males. Preliminary analysis, however, demonstrates improvement in 3M minority males' persistence rates. The fall 2011 to spring 2012 retention rate for 3M participants was 78% ( $n=1,186$ ), compared to 68% ( $n=30,453$ ) for men of color not in the program, 71% ( $n=63,590$ ) of non-minority/White males, and 71% for all students ( $N=245,187$ ). From fall 2011 to fall 2012, the persistence rate of 3M students was 51% ( $n=430$ ), compared to 49% ( $n=19,697$ ) for non-participating male students of color.

The North Carolina Community College System seeks to expand minority male student coaching programs to all 58 community colleges and to use program data to strengthen the understanding of minority male students and identify policies and practices that help them persist. The system also aims to improve the programs by providing professional development for coordinators and coaches.

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## Relentless Focus Closes Gaps

For well over a decade, **Valencia College (FL)** has focused its work on improving student learning, progress, and completion. The college aspires not only to increase college completion rates but also to eliminate the achievement gaps that long have separated White students from students of color.

Making substantial progress requires relentless focus over a sustained period of time, strong leadership, and the broad commitment and involvement of all college groups—in short, changes in both college culture and educational practices.

Multiple strategies contribute to increasingly better student outcomes at Valencia. Four of these strategies are (1) the college's Start Right initiative for entering students, which gives students earlier advising and orientation; (2) LifeMap, a technology-supported tool for each student to create a personal itinerary for the journey to achievement of academic and career goals; (3) the student success course, which introduces students to college resources, organizational skills, educational planning and goal setting, study skills, and the creation of a personalized education plan; and (4) Learning in Community (LinC) courses that link two classes, often a student success course and a developmental class, with a supplemental instruction component.

The college's focus is paying off. For example, the comparison of entering student cohorts from fall 2002 and fall 2008 shows that Valencia improved its four-year graduation rates for all college-ready, first-time-in-college (FTIC), degree-seeking students from 35% to 47%. Over the same period, the comparable rates for college-prep (developmental education) students increased from 16% to 23%.

Valencia has produced positive results for students of color as well. For the fall 2002 entering cohort of first-time, degree-seeking, college-ready students, four-year graduation rates were 22% for Black students, 23% for Latino students, and 39% for White students, while the rate for all students was 35%. Showing significant improvement, results for the comparable fall 2008 cohort were 48% for Black students, 51% for Latino students, 44% for White students, and 47% for all students.

For college-ready, degree-seeking FTIC Black males and Latinos, graduation rates also increased dramatically between the fall 2002 and fall 2008 cohorts. For the fall 2002 entering cohort of first-time, degree-seeking, college-ready students, four-year graduation rates were 28% ( $n=25$ ) for Black males, 26% ( $n=92$ ) for Latinos, and 42% ( $n=298$ ) for White males. By contrast, results for the comparable fall 2008 cohort were 40% ( $n=78$ ) for Black males, 58% ( $n=245$ ) for Latinos, and 44% ( $n=429$ ) for White males.

For Black males and Latinos who began in developmental education, increases in graduation rates were more modest during this same period. For example, for the fall 2002 cohort of male students who needed work in one developmental area, four-year graduation rates were 17% ( $n=64$ ) for Black males, 28% ( $n=116$ ) for Latinos, and 22% ( $n=286$ ) for White males. By contrast, results for the comparable 2008 cohort were 28% ( $n=76$ ) for Black males, 32% ( $n=174$ ) for Latinos, and 27% ( $n=232$ ) for White males.

Thus, while increasing graduation rates for all students, Valencia College closed gaps between college-ready Black, Latino, and White students generally and between Black males and Latinos as compared with White male students. For men of color in developmental education, graduation rates increased for all male racial/ethnic groups, while the gaps separating groups were narrowed substantially. Still, improvements in outcomes—especially for students beginning in the lowest level of developmental education—remain an acknowledged challenge for the college.

# What Do We Do Now?

## What Can Colleges Do?

- 1. Do what works for all students—inescapable engagement in evidence-based educational practices—and do it at scale.** Focus on the strategies that students—particularly men of color—tell us are most effective: fostering personal connections, setting high expectations, and providing high-quality instruction from engaged faculty. If colleges are more intentional about building these types of engagement into every student’s everyday experience, outcomes for all students will improve and achievement gaps will narrow.
- 2. Disaggregate data.** Monitor engagement and outcomes for different student groups, making this practice a routine part of institutional work.
- 3. Listen systematically and well to students, and ensure that their voices are heard across the college.** There are no people more qualified to inform institutional policy and action.
- 4. Create venues for regular discussion of participation and achievement gaps, as well as their possible causes.** Insist on honest conversations about inequities and disparities related to race and ethnicity, about cultural differences and cultural competence, and about the ways that well-intentioned institutions and people may unintentionally perpetuate patterns of past discrimination. Use data, both quantitative and qualitative, to prompt discussions, understand problems, and evaluate solutions.
- 5. Stop tinkering and invest in big changes.** Some specially targeted programs may be effective, but they typically reach only small groups of students. Colleges must determine whether they can bring a boutique program to scale—or whether they should identify what makes that program successful and incorporate its most effective features into every student’s experience. Most successful programs have similar features: “someone I can go to,” “a person who identifies with my background,” “someone who pushes me to do my best,” “a student success course,” and so on. Intrusive advising and academic support are key.
- 6. Redesign developmental education.** Findings suggest that a student’s level of academic preparedness is a powerful determinant of academic progress and attainment.

This reality suggests that colleges cannot effectively close gaps in outcomes for men of color unless and until they confront the central

issue of improving developmental education—or wholly redesign it to achieve far better results, with greater equity in outcomes, far more quickly.

The issue is not that students are incapable of doing college-level work. It is that, for a variety of reasons, they have not had the opportunity to develop critical skills . . . yet. As one student says, “For the most part, my appearance affected it. Because of the fact that I wasn’t [given] the tools and stuff to be successful at that time. [You could] pass through the [K–12] school system, so you could go ahead and graduate, but you hadn’t learned all of the tools to actually accomplish your goal.”

- 7. Build on students’ personal and cultural assets and strengthen their college success skills.** Be aware of the cues that trigger stereotype threat and actively seek to counter or eliminate them.
- 8. Improve faculty and staff diversity as well as their cultural competence.** Review employee recruitment and hiring practices, including internal development programs—for part-time as well as full-time faculty—that will produce diverse pools of qualified applicants. Conduct cultural competence training—not just once, but regularly. Bring faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds together to discuss effective strategies for working with colleagues and students from varying ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. Faculty members echo the need for professional development to build cultural competence. As one faculty member says, “There’s been a lot of, *a lot of* conversation from [the] community to faculty and staff [asking], ‘What do we do? How do we approach this thing?’ The college has not gotten to the point of seeing diversity and inclusion as a strategic initiative for innovation.” Another faculty member notes, “[We need] more faculty training on instruction and culturally relevant pedagogy because a lot of faculty are subject matter experts, but they’re not necessarily trained teachers.”

“What keeps a community college from achieving equity? Will. The will to fix the problem. What else could it really be? There have been task forces and inquiries, programs and initiatives, commissions and affinity groups, and still, graduation rates for men of color are stagnant. People must not believe that there really can be anything different or want to do things differently. I do believe there are many well-intentioned people at all levels. But in the end, no change is no change. We need to really ask ourselves why and then deal with that.”

— ALISSA GARDENHIRE  
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, MDRC

# Conducting Courageous Conversations

The most fundamental steps colleges can take involve creating the venues for courageous conversations and giving faculty, staff, administrators, and students the time and support they need to discuss difficult issues—and find solutions, together.

## Where to Start

The starting point for conversations is data that accurately describe students' educational experiences within the college. Longitudinal cohort data, student engagement survey data, and data from other sources must routinely be disaggregated to reveal commonalities and significant disparities in the experiences of different groups of students. Inevitably, data will often lead to more questions than answers, so a process of inquiry will require commitment of effort over time.

## Norms for Dialogue That Matters

The necessary discussions must be open but without threat, honest but without attempts to place blame, rigorous in attention to data and evidence but informed by differing perspectives, and inclusive of all voices and dismissive of none. Most important, talk must lead eventually to meaningful change, and that commitment should be evident from the outset.

## SHAUN HARPER'S EIGHT STANDARDS FOR IMPROVING SUCCESS OF MEN OF COLOR IN COLLEGE

Shaun Harper, Associate Professor and Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania, argues that many current efforts to improve outcomes for Black males are insufficient. Moreover, exemplary programs cannot necessarily be replicated—and programs are more likely to be successful if they are tailored to individual campuses.

To help colleges develop meaningful, effective interventions, Harper developed a set of standards (paraphrased below) for institutional work designed to improve Black male student success in college. The Center believes they also can be applied in work to support Latinos.

### **1. Inequities are transparent, and data are used to guide institutional activities.**

Data concerning racial disparities are usually so problematic that campus leaders and professionals in offices of institutional research often choose not to disclose them publicly. They fear that doing so would embarrass the institution and potentially dissuade future students of color from enrolling. Consequently, other professionals on campus create initiatives to improve Black male student success without a full understanding of how pervasive the challenge is or in which areas institutional action is most urgently needed.

The status of Black undergraduate men must be publicly disclosed. Widely disseminated annual status reports, for example, would help raise institutional consciousness. More informed choices could then be made about the investment of institutional resources.

### **2. Black undergraduate men are meaningfully engaged as collaborators and viewed as experts in designing, implementing, and assessing campus initiatives.**

Well-intentioned professionals sometimes create Black male initiatives without much input from undergraduates. For instance, Black male summits

hosted on college campuses commonly include workshops presented by "experts." Rarely are students among the presenters. In other instances, the onus is placed entirely on students to do all the planning, fundraising, and marketing.

Best is when Black male undergraduates are engaged as equally powerful collaborators with administrators and the expertise these men possess regarding their individual and collective experiences on campus is highly valued. Some version of this already occurs on many campuses, but usually the only Black men invited to participate are well-known student leaders. Lower-performing undergraduates also should be actively sought, as this opportunity could be a turning point in their college trajectories. Plus, they are likely to know much about what the majority of their same-race male peers need, experience, and would find appealing.

### **3. Actions are guided by a written strategy document that is collaboratively developed by various institutional stakeholders, ranging from undergraduate students to the college president.**

On many campuses, programs and activities aimed at improving Black male student achievement are unconnected to comprehensive written plans that include well-defined goals, anticipated outcomes, details concerning cross-campus collaboration and coordination, and assessment strategies. If sustainable institutional progress is to be made, the chief diversity officer cannot be the only person who has a plan for improving the status of Black male students.

Administrators and faculty at all levels (including the president, provost, and tenured White professors) and Black undergraduate men must work together in fashioning a document in which strategies for addressing institutional barriers that impede student achievement are outlined. The document should clearly convey that the institution, not just its Black culture center or employees of color, assumes responsibility for employing a coordinated set of strategies to improve Black male student success.

## Lifting Up Student Voices

There are no more qualified informants regarding student experiences than the students themselves. Through focus groups, structured interviews, and surveys, each college can benefit from students' powerful and often poignant descriptions of what helps them and what holds them back as they seek to reach aspirational goals in postsecondary education, work, and life.

## Questions to Guide Discussion: A Beginning

- What are the key insights we together can derive from review of disaggregated data depicting experiences of diverse student groups at our college? Where are there clear commonalities and where are there significant disparities?
- Have we listened to diverse groups of students systematically, frequently, and well? What are the major themes heard, including those that are consistent across student groups and those that diverge? What are the

“The single most important issue is the understanding that this is incredibly hard work, which cannot be accomplished through boutique programs and services. . . . Anything short of a solid commitment to this work, at all levels, is barely more than window dressing.”

— DANIEL J. PHELAN  
PRESIDENT, JACKSON COLLEGE

differences heard within groups, and how do we seek insight regarding those differences? Are questions about experiences related to race, ethnicity, gender, and diversity raised directly in discussions with students—but without supplying answers? How does listening to students help build understanding of disparities in quantitative measures of student progress and attainment?

- What additional questions do the data raise, and how will we pursue the inquiry process?

### 4. Learning, academic achievement, student development, and improved degree attainment rates are prioritized over social programming.

Some campus initiatives focus almost entirely on providing entertainment and opportunities for social interaction among Black students. While they produce few academic outcomes, social support activities are undoubtedly critical on campuses at which Black undergraduates are severely underrepresented. If properly structured, they can also improve students' communication skills.

However, architects of the strategy document and subsequent initiatives should prioritize programs and services that will help Black male students adjust smoothly to the academic demands of college, learn how to effectively study and manage their time, resolve identity conflicts that undermine academic achievement, respond productively to racist stereotypes, and learn how to ask for help well before they find themselves on the brink of failing a course or—even worse—dropping out.

### 5. Initiatives are grounded in published research on college men and masculinities in general and on Black male undergraduates in particular.

Programs, activities, and institutional efforts to improve Black male student success are sometimes creative but often based on no empirical research. In addition to relying on data collected by the institution, architects of these programs should make good use of the books, journal articles, and reports that have been published on this topic over the past 15 years.

### 6. Efforts are enhanced by insights from Black male student achievers.

Black male initiatives are typically created because some person or unit on campus recognizes racial and gender differences in academic performance, student engagement, resource utilization, and degree attainment rates. Emphasis is therefore placed on trying to understand why the majority of Black undergraduate men perform so poorly in college. This emphasis on failure must be counterbalanced with insights from Black men who earn good grades and are actively engaged inside and outside the classroom, or who have graduated.

### 7. Institutional agents engage in honest conversations about racism and its harmful effects on Black male student outcomes.

Racist stereotypes and encounters with other forms of racism on predominantly White campuses pose serious threats to Black male student achievement. Initiatives that ignore these issues are likely to experience limited success.

### 8. At every level, institutional agents are held accountable for improving Black male student retention, academic success, engagement, and graduation rates.

The trustees must hold the president accountable, the president must hold senior-level administrators accountable, deans and other institutional leaders must hold the units that report to them accountable, and individual educators must hold themselves accountable for doing all that is necessary to actualize every goal articulated in the institution's strategic document concerning Black male student success. Such accountability demands individual and collective reflection, the sharing of assessment data, evidence of educational effectiveness, and an appropriate remediation of professional practices that cyclically remanufacture inequity.

Excerpted from Harper, S. R., & Kuykendall, J. A. (2012, March/April). Institutional efforts to improve Black male student achievement: A standards-based approach. *Change*, 23–29.



- What difficulties arise when issues involving race, ethnicity, and gender emerge in campus discussions? Are there truths on our campus that are understood to be undiscussable? Or assertions generally accepted as true that may actually be false? How can we establish new norms and venues for these discussions while also including new voices?
- In what ways has this institution demonstrated a commitment to equity in educational outcomes for all students? Are there explicit and publicly stated goals for achieving equity? Is there a commonly understood strategy for attaining those goals? Is progress regularly assessed and publicly reported?

- How do our individual and collective perceptions and assumptions—about socioeconomic class, about reasons for poverty, about geography or national origin, about cultural norms, about students’ strengths or deficits— affect institutional climate and educational practice?
- Have we systematically reviewed institutional policies and administrative practices to identify and change or remove those that may perpetuate structural inequities?
- Does institutional staffing reflect a commitment to diversity? Does staffing reflect the race/ethnicity and gender demographics of the emerging student population?
- What mechanisms are in place for understanding whether the institution provides a welcoming climate for diverse students and their families? What strategies could build or strengthen that climate?
- To what extent have we examined and redesigned curriculum and instructional strategies based on evidence-based practices that work for diverse student populations? What are the next steps most likely to produce significant positive impact?
- To what extent have we integrated appropriate student and academic supports, including opportunities to learn and practice college success strategies, as inescapable features of students’ experiences? What are the next steps?
- What strategies do we—or should we—have in place for continuing professional development to build cultural competence among faculty, staff, and administrators?
- How might we more fully involve external stakeholders (e.g., community members, organizational leaders, policy makers, etc.) in developing strategies for enhancing student success and equity?
- What is holding us back? What could propel us forward?

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## Additional Resources

The resources listed below, along with others available at <http://www.ccsse.org/center/initiatives/moc>, and the Eight Standards for Improving Success of Men of Color in College on pages 26–27 provide additional support for these conversations.

- *Aspirations to Achievement: Men of Color and Community Colleges* video capturing student voices (also on the DVD included with print copies of this report)
- Tools for conducting focus groups with men of color
- Fact sheets with national data on men of color in higher education
- Achieving the Dream’s Inventory on Diversity and Equity

# Reflections: Listening to Learn

This report began with examples of data describing an alarming national reality in higher education: the persistent participation and attainment gaps that characterize the experiences of Black male and Latino students in American higher education—and in community colleges in particular. Numerous scholars and practitioners have long sought to understand and address these complex issues.

In a 2013 article in the Association of American Colleges and Universities' *Liberal Education* journal, Johnella Butler describes diversity in higher education as a “wicked problem,” referring to the Wikipedia definition of that term:

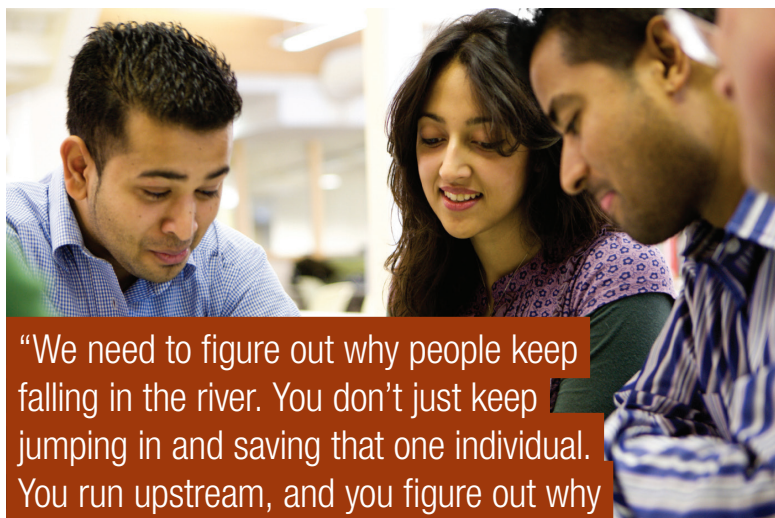
We find from the entry for “wicked problem” that “wicked” does not connote “evil” in this instance, but refers to problems that resist resolution. “Moreover, because of complex interdependencies, the effort to solve one aspect of a wicked problem may reveal or create other problems.” Defining a wicked problem is itself a wicked problem. “Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.” (p. 1)

Center staff agrees. The Center committed, through a focused initiative, to listen systematically and well to Black males and Latinos in community colleges. Those voices, heard throughout this report and its companion video, confirm several truths. These statements will be obvious to many people and not so obvious to others, but they should, in any case, be made explicit.

- Discussions with Black male and Latino students about their educational experiences reveal common elements; but the cultures, experiences, languages, assets, and challenges of these two student groups are different, as are their experiences with social systems, including education. Those distinctions deserve to be recognized.
- Within each group, there is a wide range of experiences, perceptions, and opinions. Whether the group was Latino, Black male, or White male, each included some students who said they had experienced high academic expectations, while others said expectations were consistently low or nonexistent—or that expectations were high and the student himself did not live up to them. Every group included students who took side trips through the military or the criminal justice system or had dreams of big-time college athletics or struggles with low-paying jobs on their way to the community college—and some who came directly from high school. Some students say that race matters greatly in their community college experience; others insist that race matters not at all. Most observe that diversity on campus is both important and inadequate.
- Often, in this work, it was easier for Center analysts to find common themes across groups than to identify differences. Groups of every kind, for example, described the

importance of these factors: strong personal connections; high expectations; a mentor or other individual on campus “who believes in me”; and faculty members who engage their students in active, relevant learning.

- In addition to the fact that the Center heard common themes across these diverse groups of male students, it is important to affirm that these are themes heard repeatedly from community college students of all descriptions—every race, ethnicity, gender, and age—in almost 200 Center focus groups conducted since 2002. These students are the students community colleges serve.
- The students themselves say that engagement matters, and they describe various dimensions of engagement that are important to them: interaction with peers, faculty, advisors, and mentors; active learning; high expectations; and integrated support. The quantitative analysis of engagement survey data, examining effects within Latino, Black, and White male groups, documents the consistent reality that higher levels of engagement are related to better outcomes, as defined by self-reported GPAs.



“We need to figure out why people keep falling in the river. You don’t just keep jumping in and saving that one individual. You run upstream, and you figure out why they are falling in.”

— STUDENT

- At the same time, a synthesis of findings indicates that the level of academic preparedness for college is a powerful determinant of postsecondary progress and attainment. Thus, even Black males and Latinos who are highly engaged relative to other groups may experience lower outcomes. That result brings community colleges directly back to another wicked problem: the obvious need for more-effective strategies for strengthening college readiness—both through partnerships with high schools and through redesign of developmental education. Emphatically stated, the issue is not that these students are not capable of doing college-level work; it is that too

many of them have not, for myriad reasons, had the kinds of educational experiences that would effectively maximize those capabilities.

In the end, there remains the necessary and unequivocal recognition that in this society, race matters. There are experiences of stereotype threat and active stereotyping, of judgments based solely on physical appearance, of racism both unrecognized and intentional, that make the lived realities of these men of color different from those of other groups.

No community college can fully address achievement gaps across racial and ethnic groups without first acknowledging that systematic disparities in opportunity and privilege characterize the lives—and educational experiences—of people of color in American society.

Having learned—and now restated—all of these things, the Center can report no easy answers, no prescriptive approaches. There are, to be sure, promising strategies under way. But thus far in the community college field, as is the case more broadly

in higher education, the scale of our solutions is too small for the magnitude of the inequities we seek to redress. The larger solutions, it is clear, will not be found in placing blame on individuals, either educators or students, nor in placing faith in small-scale efforts, but only in redesigning systems and institutions to more effectively serve the students whose talent and contributions this society critically needs.

As one student says, “You can’t keep putting a band-aid on a big wound. We need to figure out why people keep falling in the river. You don’t just keep jumping in and saving that one individual. You run upstream, and you figure out why they are falling in.”

Achieving equity in educational outcomes is not just an educational challenge; it is a moral and societal imperative. Every community college, working with its faculty and staff, students, educational partners, and community, must be willing to build understanding of the issues and then build new systems to address them.



“It always seems impossible  
until it is done.”

— NELSON MANDELA



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