

“You can go to college”: Employing a Developmental Perspective to Examine How Young Men of Color Construct a College-Going Identity

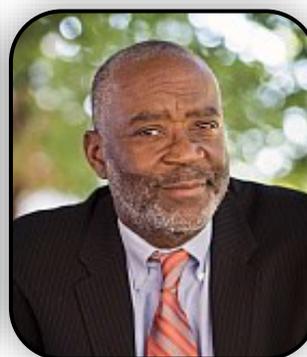
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Nationally, the high school graduation rates for Black and Latino males is estimated to be between 48 to 51%, and the actual numbers may be lower depending on the measures used by local school districts to calculate completion rates (Schott Foundation for Public Education 2015). For Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodians, Laotians and Pacific Islanders, the high school completion rate is near or below 50% (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE] 2011; Teranishi 2010; Teranishi et al. 2004). These unsettling high school graduation numbers contribute to the heightened sense of urgency for educators, policymakers, and philanthropies to continue to form strategic collaborations to examine the tensions and factors that contribute to individual student successes that can impact young men of color to transition from high school to college. Perez Huber et al. (2015) report that only 1 of 11 Latino males, 17 of 100 African American males, and 52 of 100 AAPI males will earn Bachelor’s degrees, respectively (pg. 3). Perez Huber and others shared that AAPI males hold a larger share of those earning a Bachelor’s degree, and this number is deceiving because of the low academic achievement of some ethnic sub-groups previously mentioned. Given these educational conditions in high school graduation and college enrollment numbers, often times what is missing from this complicated story are the voices of young men of color to discuss their trajectories and hopes for their future.

The purpose of the study highlighted in this brief is to share the qualitative experiences of Black, Latino, and Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI) high school males who are on their pathway to higher education. This research is unique as it includes the voices of AAPI male youth as previous literature on young men of color often omit their voices (Anderson and Larson 2009; Harper 2015; Harper and Associates 2014; Howard et al., in press; Torres 2015; Watson et al. 2016). By focusing on the three largest racial and ethnic groups, this research allows the opportunity to document the convergence of experiences and challenges for students who share similar concerns and decisions about how to access information about higher education. Also, this research highlights the tensions that emerge as males of color plan for their futures after high school. The findings highlighted in this brief come from 153 young men of color enrolled in 10 suburban and urban high schools who are on their pathway to enroll into higher education. This scholarship seeks to answer to the following research question: In what ways, if any, do young men of color discuss the sources of motivation or interference that contribute to their development of a college-going identity?

Findings

Achieving Social Status

As students shared the messages they have internalized from family members and other trusted individuals is the importance of thinking critically and challenge the narrative of how to avoid negative behaviors, be mindful about how educators may attempt to reinforce the notions that young men of color have “failed” by either becoming teenage-parents, involved in gangs, or dropped out of high school to seek employment. The students repeated the pressure to “be someone” in society and related this earned status through their professional or vocation decisions.

Multiple Options and Pathways to Achieve

Adolescents in high school are exploring multiple options and unable to make a commitment to a pathway as they are living moment to moment, and gaining new information daily from peers and other adults. For example, students mentioned the military as a last resort among both low and high achieving students. The strong consideration of the military is influenced by various trusted individuals in their life including counselors, teachers, sometimes parents, and the aggressive presence of military recruiters in their schools. The options and pathways create another level of stress for adolescents as they are easily influenced into a specific career or vocation.

Getting Serious About School

As students moved through high school, they began to slowly understand their achievement is tied to their investment and effort in school. Whether the student decided to identify with college-going, military track, or vocational goal is influenced by the internal and external influences in their social circles. The students demonstrate the shift in behaviors that align with the achievement status. The financial pressure may play an influence in “how” and “when” students are able to reach the achievement status as well. Students openly shared their concern about *how* to pay for their postsecondary education. Although, they were aware of scholarships and financial aid, they were unaware of how expensive their costs would be to pay for college.

Conclusion

As the young men of color in this study consider the different factors to foster their college-going identity, the stark reality of the potential challenges related to college costs is a serious issue for them to consider (Anderson and Larson 2009). As the role of college costs influenced some of the young men’s decisions to strongly consider the military as a possible option, but it requires trying to understand their own identities at times, in uncertain environments because of the potentially mixed messages about which life and career path is best suited for the individual student. The findings highlighted in this brief align with what Anderson and Larson (2009) discusses is the need for young men of color to understand that preparing for higher education requires a real commitment from educators and schools to become successful. However, the students may or may not have the necessary support systems in school to become “serious” or accountable to increasing their academic profiles to prepare for 4-year colleges, but may mean they begin their higher education in 2-year colleges (Huerta and Fishman 2014; Sanchez et al. 2012).

Most educators would assume an increased school failure rate for young men of color, but we show that the young men in these ten urban and suburban schools are aware of their possibilities based on their school resources and the presence of the military on school grounds. When presenting information about college or vocational options to consider, these are young adults, who may not be cognitively capable of making adult decisions or understand the implications of poor school behavior or missing important deadlines for college entrance examines, and may be easily influenced by military recruiters who are able to promise multiple benefits through enlistment. This example of cycling through possible career trajectories is a typical experience for young adults as they are trying to make sense of their world and are influenced by various peers, family members, college counselors, and military personnel.

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