

Transformative Praxis: Lessons Learned from the Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color

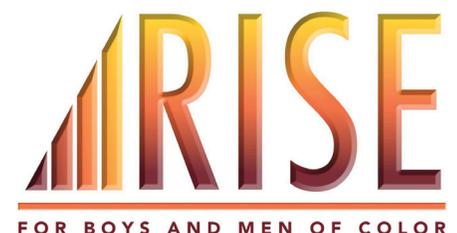


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Abstract

This RISE issue brief will highlight key lessons learned from a unique and innovative cross-sector statewide partnership, the Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color (the Consortium). The Consortium represents a strategic partnership between two state flagship institutions—the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin) and Texas A&M University, College Station (TAMU)—along with independent school districts, community colleges, and four-year institutions across the state. This network represents a state-level response to the urgent challenges facing boys and young men of color (BMOCs) as they navigate their educational pathways across sectors of education. This statewide initiative is a unique and ambitious venture because of the inherent challenges in forging cross-sector partnerships, especially with partners that have vastly different institutional cultures and employ varying strategies to serve BMOCs.

The Consortium has worked to bridge institutional differences through determining common success metrics, sharing support strategies, and identifying myriad points of alignment in professional development and capacity-building activities. This RISE brief will serve as a key platform to share valuable lessons we have learned in our work on behalf of boys and young men of color focusing on Latino and African American males in Texas, lessons that can be extended to other states, regions, and institutions across sectors of education.

1 The Impetus for a Statewide Consortium

In the last two decades, educational stakeholders have become more aware of the persistent educational attainment gaps for male students of color, gaps that are evident through sobering disparities in educational outcomes when compared with their female and White male peers. These gaps have fueled deficit narratives by some policymakers and educational leaders who often fail to address the systemic and structural inequities that work in concert to divert boys and young men of color (BMOCs) away from schools and from attaining educational success. We define systemic and structural inequities as those social determinants that lead to differential treatment for our BMOC's, in education for educational tracking, lower K-12 graduation rates, access to higher education, etc. Some suggest the education pipeline analogy is helpful to illustrate the ideal interconnected and temporal nature of our educational systems, signifying a smooth matriculation of students across sectors (i.e., independent school districts, community colleges, and four-year institutions). However, the pipeline analogy does not fully account for the vastly different reality that too often defines the experiences of BMOCs. Instead, the deficit-based narratives that are sometimes used (e.g., “vanishing boys” that “need to be fixed”, etc.) can perpetuate the complex structural and systemic challenges that persist to describe the experiences of male students of color.

We believe that persistent educational disparities for BMOCs have their origin in fragmented educational pathways and entrenched structural and systemic inequities. For example, institutions across sectors often inhabit incompatible policy and schooling environments, creating obstacles for effective cross-sector collaboration that can encumber the successful transitions for some students. This situation makes coordination and transition from one sector to another a challenging educational issue, especially for BMOC who often meet structural obstacles at critical junctures along their pathways. In our research work over the last ten years on BMOCs, we have learned that navigating from one sector to another can present a unique set of challenges at key stages in their educational trajectories. Hence, we encourage a careful examination of how these cross-sector pathways can be better aligned, supported, and expanded for BMOCs and for all students. But how can we do that in light of the scale of these challenges?

In Texas, Latino and African American students are driving population growth, and the booming and changing demographic landscape has given great urgency to the persistent educational disparities for BMOCs. In our work with the Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color, we realized that such conditions have provided the impetus for a statewide strategy that could respond to this priority “at scale.” For instance, in a state as large as Texas with a rapidly growing population, the capacity or “scale” needed to address the educational disparities for BMOCs requires deliberate collaboration across educational sectors. This strategic effort is vital to provide adequate outreach and support to further develop cross sector policies, programs, and practices for male students of color across this vast state.

Underscoring this urgency is the growing gender gap in educational attainment between Texas male students of color and their peers. In examining the educational pathways of Texas 8th graders from 1996–1998 through 2010 (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2016), we tracked matriculation, college enrollment, and credential or degree attainment rates over an eleven-year period. Among the overall cohort, only 52.4 percent had enrolled in some form of postsecondary education a decade later, and only about 20 percent had attained a higher education credential. Even more concerning, only 36.5 percent of Latino males within this eighth-grade cohort had enrolled in a higher-education institution ten years later, and just fewer than 9 percent had finished a credential. For African American males, 40.9 percent had enrolled in higher education, but only 7.7 percent had earned a credential. These significant disparities in educational outcomes portend a challenging reality that affects families, communities, and labor force opportunities.



Our efforts through our statewide Consortium aim to improve the educational outcomes for Latino and African American male students through what we term “transformative praxis.” This Freirean concept describes changes in the educational system through a systematic process. That is, we work hand in hand with institutional partners across Texas educational sectors to document strategies and approaches that focus on BMOCs, build a culture of evidence around these efforts, and then deploy our lessons learned through capacity-building tools and activities (CBTAs) that we co-develop with our Consortium partners. Through this “praxis”, our Consortium is taking on the challenge of cross-sector coordination by regularly convening our partners in professional development activities and advancing a transformational change agenda. Our Consortium’s cross-sector partnerships have developed into a statewide learning community, led by our two flagship institutions and our Consortium Advisory Council, where we convene bi-annually in spring and fall institutes and during our annual Leadership Summit. From those convenings with multiple partners, we have learned valuable lessons to help advance equitable outcomes for BMOCs in Texas.

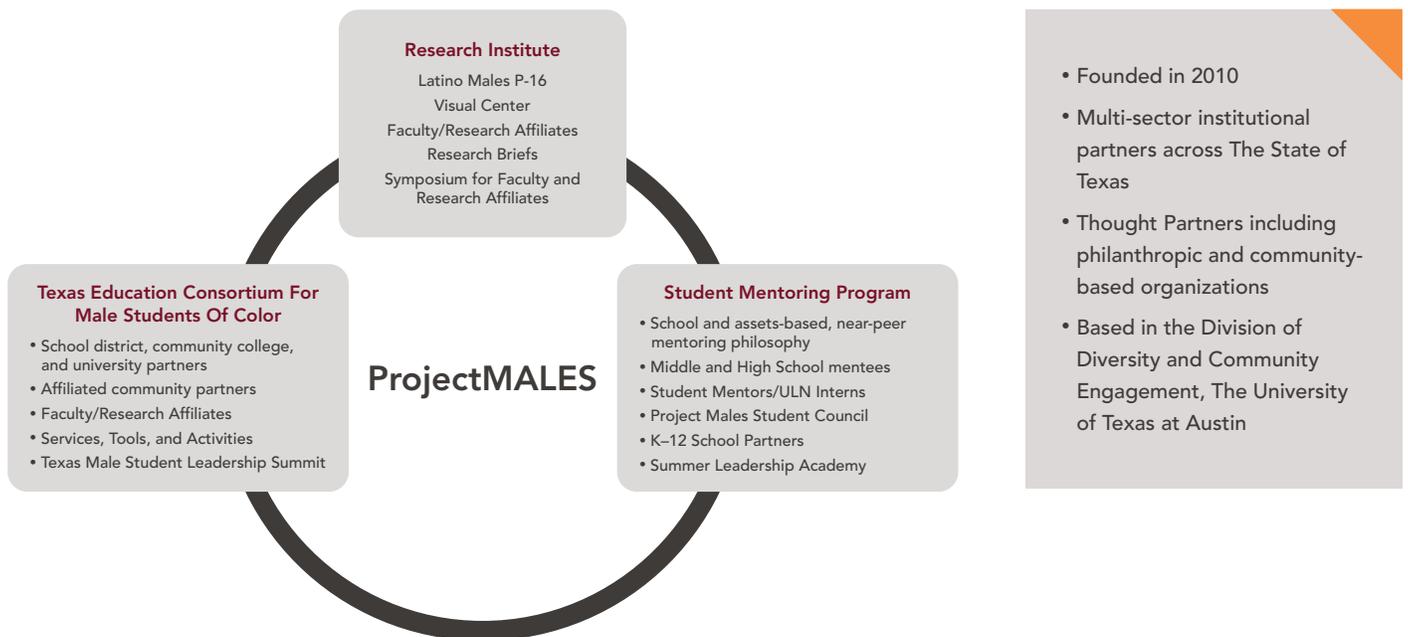
In an effort to share our Consortium’s “transformative praxis” approach, the purpose of this RISE issue brief is to:

- describe our Consortium’s goals and objectives and how they are aligned with RISE principles;
- share lessons learned after five years of Consortium work, including selected research findings, the development of CBTAs, and the development of our learning community and signature events; and
- highlight the challenges and opportunities of a statewide Consortium through our own long-term strategic planning experience.

2 The Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color

In 2013, the Consortium was launched at the University of Texas at Austin in partnership with Texas A&M University and sixteen other charter member institutions across the state (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2016). We also received grant support and thought partnership from the Greater Texas Foundation, TG (now Trellis Foundation), the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) and institutional support from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at UT Austin. As of spring 2018, this statewide Consortium is composed of forty-seven partners across educational sectors (i.e., independent school districts, two-year colleges, and four-year institutions) that together seek to identify, implement, and sustain effective policies, programs, and practices focused on increasing individual success and postsecondary completion for male students of color. The vision of our Consortium is to advance equitable educational outcomes for male students of color at the local, state, and national levels. To enact this vision, we employ various interrelated initiatives, including: an evidence-based mentoring program in partnership with local school districts that is structured as a “near-peer” mentoring program that utilizes critical mentoring strategies; a statewide Consortium of educational institutions across sectors; and, a research institute that connects academics across the country focused on Latino and African American males in K-12 and higher education.

Figure 1. Project MALES Organizational Overview



In concert with research teams from the two flagship institutions, the Consortium Advisory Council, and our institutional partners, the following represent the Consortium’s goal

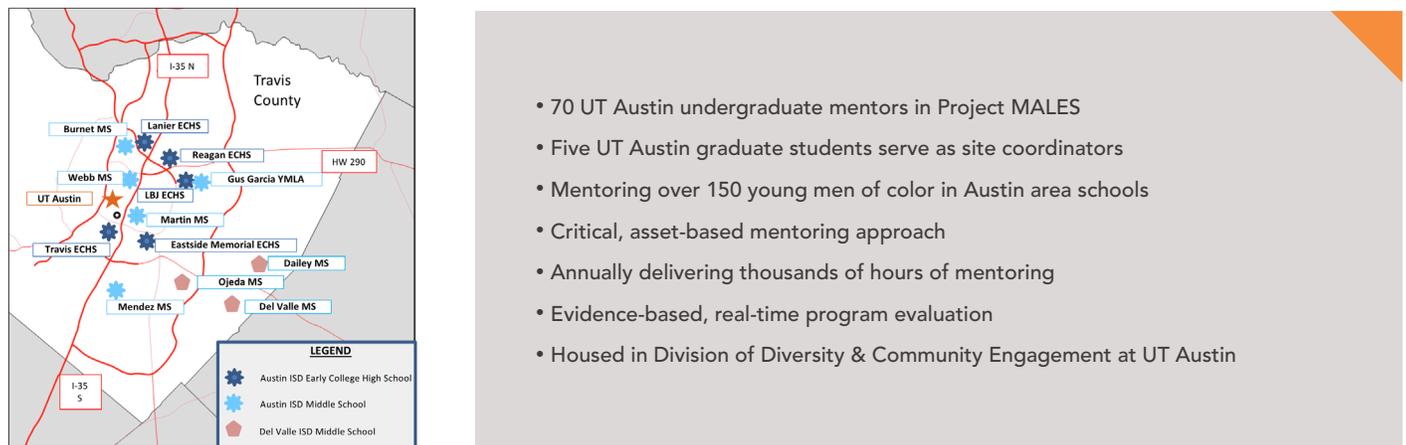
1. We cultivate and sustain a statewide P-16 educational professional learning community focused on male students of color across educational sectors (i.e., independent school districts, two-year colleges, and four-year institutions).
2. We assist Consortium institutions by developing and implementing CBTA in their efforts to improve educational outcomes for BMOOC.
3. We strengthen our premier research center that focuses on BMOOC by disseminating research findings and best practices at the local, state, and national levels. These goals are advanced through: cultivating and expanding our Consortium membership across Texas; sustaining Consortium institutes, focused on providing resources and professional development opportunities to educators and administrators working with BMOOCs; and sustaining a national research center focused on Latino males (and other male students of color) to effectively disseminate research findings and best practices at the local, state, and national levels.

Link Between RISE Principles and the Consortium’s Goals/Objectives

The Consortium is closely aligned with the RISE principles focused on reframing the narratives about male students of color through asset-based strategies. The following describes the impact of the Consortium’s work and outreach at the local, state, and national levels:

1. LOCAL: We acknowledge the issues of educational inequity that continue to persist with BMOOCs, and we believe we are responding to this pressing issue through critical mentoring practices, as highlighted by Weiston-Serdan and Sanchez (2017). The basic structure of our Project MALES 1Student Mentoring Program entails a “near-peer” mentoring philosophy (Saenz, Ponjuán, Segovia, & Del Real Viramontes, 2015), with college freshmen being paired with high school freshmen to allow for longer-term bonds to develop. Figure 2 displays the mentoring sites that UT Austin has created across the Austin Independent School District for the 2018–2019 academic year.

Figure 2. Project MALES Mentoring Sites in Austin ISD (2017-2018)



¹Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success) is the umbrella term we use to describe our various initiatives at the local, state, and national level. Project MALES is housed within the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE) at the University of Texas at Austin, and the Consortium is one of the three initiatives that is a part of this effort. For more information, visit: <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/>.

Figure 3. Map of the Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color

AUSTIN

University of Texas at Austin (*Consortium Headquarters*)
 Austin Community College
 Austin ISD
 Huston-Tillotson University

COLLEGE STATION

Texas A&M University

COMMERCE

Texas A&M University Commerce

CORPUS CHRISTI

Del Mar College

DALLAS

Cedar Valley College
 Eastfield College
 El Centro College
 Mountain View College
 North Lake College
 Richland College

DENTON

Denton ISD
 North Central Texas College
 University of North Texas

EL PASO

El Paso Community College
 El Paso ISD
 University of Texas El Paso

FORTH WORTH

Fort Worth ISD
 Tarrant County College District

HOUSTON

Houston Baptist University
 Houston Community College Lone Star College-CyFair
 Lone Star College-North Harris
 Prairie View A&M University



★ Consortium Headquarters
 ● Consortium Partner

San Jacinto College
 University of Houston-Downtown

HUNTSVILLE

Sam Houston State University

LAREDO

Laredo Community College

LUBBOCK

Texas Tech University

RIO GRANDE VALLEY

La Joya ISD

South Texas College
 Texas Southmost College
 University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

SAN ANTONIO

San Antonio College
 Northeast Lakeview College
 Palo Alto College
 St. Phillip's College
 University of Texas as San Antonio

SAN MARCOS

Texas State University

SEGUIN

Seguin ISD

TEXAS CITY

College of the Mainland

WACO

Baylor University
 McLennan Community College

2. STATE: The Consortium is currently composed of forty-seven institutional partners across the state of Texas, with members in the six largest metropolitan areas in the state: El Paso, Dallas–Fort Worth, the Rio Grande Valley, San Antonio, San Marcos–Austin, and Houston (see Figure 3). Together, we seek to reframe the narratives about BMOC from deficit based to asset based to develop a more integrated, systemic, and coordinated proactive statewide plan to improve those students’ educational outcomes.

3. NATIONAL: Through the Project MALES Faculty and Research Affiliates Program, the Consortium is able to raise the visibility of research on BMOC by amplifying the program’s work as a growing national network of P-16 researchers, practitioners and administrators.

3 Lessons Learned Through Five Years of Cross-Sector Work

During the first three years of the Consortium, we conducted a multi-institutional research study focused on the educational experiences of male students of color in the charter member institutions across the state of Texas. Our research teams conducted seventeen site visits to perform individual interviews and focus groups with educational leaders (e.g. community college presidents, superintendents, high school and middle school principals) educators (e.g. faculty members, high school teachers), administrators (e.g. student affairs practitioners, high school counselors), and male students of color (e.g. traditional age, adult learners, Veterans) to explore their educational experiences. We focused on the key educational milestones these students experience in their educational pathways: transitions to college, academic experiences in the classroom, campus engagement, and degree completion, among other key indicators. In this section, we focus on what we have learned through selected findings from our research findings, the development of a statewide learning community, onboarding of new Consortium members and engaging them through professional development activities, and the development of CBTAs.

Selected Findings from Our Research

As highlighted under our “culture of evidence” core value, the Consortium is highly sensitive to the importance of narrating the experiences of male students of color through an asset-based approach. As adapted by Harper’s anti-deficit framework (2010), we avoid using deficit language to articulate the experiences, perceptions, and realities of male students of color (e.g., vanishing or missing males, school-to-prison, endangered species, or male crisis). For example, our research focused on the institutional level of awareness about the educational experiences of BMOC. An asset-based approach requires institutions to look at how their policies, programs, and practices meet the needs of these students instead of looking at what these students are lacking.

Some of our key findings from our multi-institutional research study revealed that faculty and administrators often cannot overcome deficit thinking when working with male students of color. For example, at the postsecondary level, administrators and faculty members acknowledged they often lacked the cultural competency to understand the academic needs of their male students of color. At the secondary level, some high school principals raised concerns that teachers’ biases resulted in deficit-oriented rather than asset-based perceptions of students. Often, staff members and teacher’s biases, backgrounds, and interpretations played out when it comes to supporting—or deterring—male students from being successful in school. For example, these administrators discussed how they have to evaluate their disciplinary infraction patterns across the school district for BMOC. As a result, students are faced with the challenges imposed by these deficit narratives, negative stereotypes, and disciplinary policies which could cause self-doubts about their own identities and culture.

A major component of the Consortium’s work is to be able to effectively support and inform culturally relevant policies, programs, and practices. By listening to the authentic voices of male students of color and examining the unique challenges and opportunities faced by school administrators and educators, college administrators, staff, and faculty members, we are able to assess and bolster our efforts to nurture a vibrant community of Consortium institutions seeking knowledge and resources to strengthen their own initiatives for male students of color. Through “transformative praxis”, our research efforts and complementary mentoring programs work to achieve the implementation of sound policies and practices that ultimately benefit the lives of male students of color across the state of Texas.



DEVELOPING A STATEWIDE LEARNING COMMUNITY

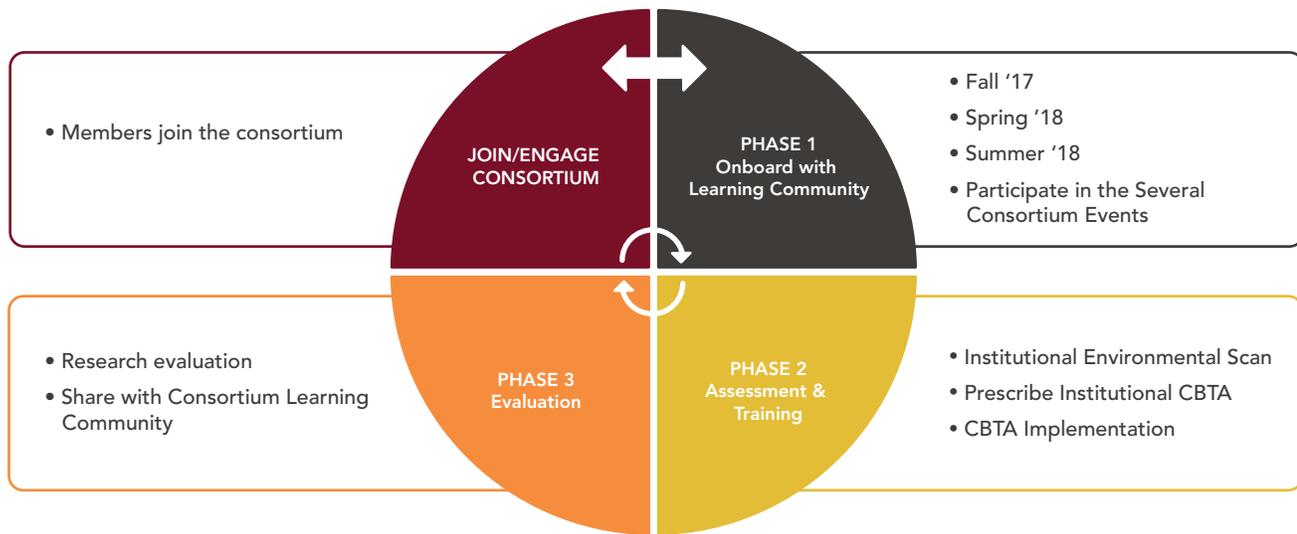
One of our most effective strategies for the Consortium thus far is the establishment of a state-wide learning community for educational leaders and practitioners that actualizes our collective impact approaches and strategies. The learning community concept relies on the fundamental belief that collaborative learning between educational sectors enhances the ability for Consortium member institutions to work with each other by addressing the unique educational issues for male students of color. For example, the partnership with UT Austin, the Austin Independent School District, the Manor Independent School Districts, and KIPP Austin Brave High School has helped expand the Project MALES Student Mentoring Program to twelve schools, where we employ multiple educational intervention strategies, including our school-based, near-peer mentoring and other critical, social justice informed practices such as restorative practice circles. Restorative Practice utilizes “Talking Circles” to help build a framework to address conflict in a community by creating safe spaces where students, teachers, mentors, and community members work collectively to “restore” relationships and build connections.

Another outcome of this learning community approach has been the development of local partnerships. For example, the Consortium has developed strong partnerships with the Greater Austin Area My Brother’s Keeper initiative as well as other My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) initiatives centered in San Antonio, Houston, and Dallas–Fort Worth. Other key local partnerships include Life Anew and Dove Springs Proud; the Race and Equity, Cultural Proficiency and Inclusiveness Office at the Austin Independent School District; and the Office of Equity and Inclusion at Austin Community College.

Our Consortium clearly benefited from the national momentum built by President Barack Obama’s MBK initiative. The proactive and collaborative efforts to address the unique needs of BMOC furthered our efforts to assemble a network of institutions committed to bolstering their own men-of-color initiatives. Through the MBK national movement and the generous support from our thought partners, the Consortium has continued its steady growth over the last five years.

To help grow the Consortium over the past five years, we designed an onboarding process for building this statewide learning community. Figure 3 shows the onboarding process for institutions joining the Consortium and how they are able to engage in our learning communities and Consortium activities throughout the various stages of their membership life cycle. As we move into the next phase of our work, we will be using our charter member institutions to support this process and take a lead role in supporting new partners who join our Consortium.

Figure 4. Consortium Membership Lifecycle



SIGNATURE EVENTS: ESTABLISHING OUR COMMUNITY THOUGHT INSTITUTES, SUMMITS, AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

In contrast to the organic and informal process of the Consortium learning communities, we co-host biannual Consortium Institutes to provide regular engagement within and between sectors of education. The primary goal of these Institutes is to develop a formal mechanism for leaders and educators across educational sectors to discuss key issues and share strategies for improving outcomes for BMOCs. Institutes are held biannually throughout the six largest metropolitan areas of the state in order to reach as many institutions as possible. For example, at one of our recent Institutes, the Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL) led a professional development session using the “equity root cause analysis” tool to better understand the structural and institutional factors that affect our male students of color. In another Institute, we introduced an after action review approach to identify key challenges in the sustainability of male-focused initiatives. The after action review is another tool we introduced at one of our Institutes to create an intentional space for participants to assess their own programs initiatives through guided, multi-stage exercises.

In addition, the Consortium hosts an annual Texas Male Student Leadership Summit that invites Consortium institutions to bring their BMOC to the UT-Austin campus and engage with peers, interact with motivational speakers, and connect with other role models in an academic setting. The Summit focuses on five key themes that shape the curriculum for the concurrent sessions: brotherhood, leadership, college and career readiness, health wellness, and identity. We believe that the annual Summit and the Consortium Institutes both provide critical spaces for institutions across educational sectors to network and share strategies and resources and build institutional capacity to serve their BMOCs.

Finally, through our RISE BMOC partnership, we were able to support our first Symposium for Faculty and Research Affiliates, which was held in January 2018 at UT-Austin. The symposium provided a collaborative space to convene over thirty of our Affiliates, as well as UT Austin and TAMU research teams to expand the research agenda focused on male students of color. National partnerships like with CCEAL and RISE BMOC provided invaluable resources to help our Consortium build our learning community of researchers and practitioners whose efforts are focused on advancing educational outcomes for male students of color.

CAPACITY-BUILDING TOOLS AND ACTIVITIES (CBTAs)

What is a CBTA?

In the next phase of the Consortium work, we are collaborating with institutional members to create CBTAs. The Texas A&M Consortium team is leading the way in co-designing institutional initiatives to enhance the institutions’ capacity to improve educational outcomes for male students of color. We have developed two types of initiatives: *capacity-building tools* and *capacity-building activities*. Capacity-building tools collect quantitative or qualitative data from students, faculty, and administrators to understand the educational experiences of male students of color. Similarly, capacity-building activities are products to provide information or best practices related to improving the educational experiences of male students of color to administrators, staff, teachers, faculty members, students, and families.

How Can Institutions Use CBTAs?

Consortium institutions can request a CBTA to address their unique needs for their male students of color. As part of the initial implementation process, we are working with the original charter Consortium institutions to develop different types of CBTAs focused on different educational domains and different categories. Traditionally, the first CBTA we recommend is the institutional site visit, which provides the educational institution with an environmental scan of the educational experiences of male students of color as well as the reach and impact of any existing efforts intended to serve these students. Institutional site visits are conducted by the Consortium’s research team members and they involve interviews and focus groups with students, teachers/faculty, administrators, and counselors, depending on the institution type (e.g., ISD, community college, 4-year institution). Once an institution has completed an institutional site visit, we offer recommendations for potential CBTAs to address the unique needs of their campus.

Selection of the CBTA

To understand the educational experiences of male students of color, we developed CBTAs based on four educational domains: transitions to college, academic experiences, campus engagement, and degree completion. Across these four areas, we developed different categories of tools and activities. *Research and assessment* allows institutions to collect empirical data on individual programs or at the institutional level to gain an understanding of the experience of male students of color at their institutions. *Workshops and trainings* allow institutions to target different members of the campus community (e.g., faculty, professional staff, administrators, and students) to create an awareness of the academic and social needs of male students of color on their campus and provide skills to better assist these students. *Outreach* focuses on providing information and resources based on the needs of the institution to educate students, families, faculty, professional staff, and other community members. See Table 1 for examples of the types of CBTAs arranged in a matrix by educational domain and category.

TABLE 1: CBTA Matrix: Matrix of potential Capacity-Building Tools and Activities (CBTAs)

| EDUCATIONAL DOMAINS | RESEARCH/ASSESSMENT | WORKSHOPS/TRAININGS | OUTREACH |
|----------------------|--|---|---|
| TRANSITIONS | Male students of color survey (tool) | Online modules (tool) | Male leadership summits (activity) |
| ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES | Faculty survey (tool) | Male students of color workshops (activity) | Family resource handouts (tool) |
| CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT | Professional staff survey or male students of color campus climate survey (tool) | Professional staff workshop (activity) | Community and family outreach (activity) |
| DEGREE COMPLETION | Institutional site visit (activity) | Faculty trainings (activity) | Male students of color resource handouts (tool) |

4 Looking Ahead: Challenges and Opportunities

Our Consortium work has provided us with valuable lessons learned, empirical evidence, and a renewed awareness of promising practices focused on supporting BMOC across sectors of education. Our commitment to “transformative praxis” has provided opportunities to take what we are learning and translate it for direct impact on BMOC. Nonetheless, gender gaps in educational attainment persist for males of color and females of color, and between males of color and white males, so more work needs to be done to encourage institutions across the educational spectrum to address the complex needs of this population of students. This mandate directly informs the ongoing and future goals and objectives of our Consortium.

Over the course of five years, we better understand the factors that influence the educational pathways for BMOC across educational sectors and across the state of Texas. We have learned that the true vibrancy of our Consortium model lies in our member institutions and in the cross-sector partnerships they are forging through this state-wide learning community. Through this community of scholars, leaders, and practitioners, our Consortium institutions have faced and overcome challenges that can serve as valuable lessons to inform the work of others. We understand that institutions need to take stock of their often deficit-minded approaches and instead be more critically aware of the experiences of male students of color on their campuses. They need to make a significant commitment to hiring more faculty members and administrators of color and to documenting and improving the experiences of male students of color on their campuses. We also encourage institutions to develop or re-purpose programs and policies that are more aligned with the needs of BMOC with this reframing concept of “male students of color in mind”. Finally, our ongoing partnership with Consortium charter institutions has provided opportunities to take those lessons learned and co-develop tools and activities that can jump-start efforts aimed at improving educational outcomes for BMOCs.

Given the scale and depth of challenges facing young males of color, many institutional stakeholders are left wondering what hard questions should be asked, what actionable next steps should be taken, and what research exists that can inform the modeling of new practices across the country. If we are to make significant progress toward the ambitious college completion goals that continue to shape higher-education policy discussions at the local, state, and national levels, these questions must be answered and their attendant challenges addressed. Our Consortium partners have begun answering these questions together, through a process of “transformative praxis”, and in so doing we are leveraging a collective knowledge base and resources that has remained otherwise underutilized.

Our Consortium is ultimately committed to being a local, state, and national model to improve educational outcomes for BMOC, and we offer our example in the service of other institutions and states that seek to embrace this state and national imperative. We have seen our work resonate across the state of Texas, and we know we are in clear alignment with several of the RISE principles that are nationally recognized as models of best practice. With a new set of institutional partners having recently joined our Consortium, our future looks bright in Texas and beyond as this work is beginning to spread nationally. This issue brief adds to the growing chorus of scholars, educational leaders, and national policy organizations that believe we must not ignore the unique challenges facing today’s male students of color, and we must act decisively with partners across the educational spectrum.



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RISE is a joint initiative co-led by Equal Measure and the University of Southern California Race and Equity Center.

RISE for Boys and Men of Color

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USC Race and
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EQUAL
MEASURE

FINDING
PROMISE
FUELING
CHANGE