

TERMS OF
ENGAGEMENT
Men of Color Discuss
Their Experiences in
Community College



Alissa Gardenhire-Crooks
Herbert Collado
Kasey Martin
Alma Castro

March 2010



Achieving
the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

**Terms of Engagement:
Men of Color Discuss Their Experiences in
Community College**

**Alissa Gardenhire-Crooks
Herbert Collado
Kasey Martin
Alma Castro**

With

**Thomas Brock
Genevieve Orr**

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Overview

Community colleges provide access to higher education for millions of Americans who might not otherwise be able to pursue it. However, despite the pivotal role these institutions play in promoting social equity, they continue to struggle with low student persistence and completion rates, particularly among male students of color. It is this dilemma that spurred Lumina Foundation to launch the Achieving the Dream initiative in 2003 as a bold national effort to improve student outcomes and reduce achievement gaps at community colleges.

This study draws on the experiences of 87 African-American, Hispanic, and Native American men who were enrolled in developmental math courses at four Achieving the Dream institutions to find out more about what affects the success of men of color in community college. The fieldwork explored how students' experiences in their high schools and communities, as well as their identities as men of color, influenced their decisions to go to college and their engagement in school. The students offered their perspectives in their own words in three rounds of focus groups and interviews during the 2007-08 academic year. Key findings include:

- **Motivations for going to college.** There was no “average upbringing” among the men in this sample; their family situations and economic backgrounds were diverse, and the time that had elapsed between high school and college ranged from one year to 10 or more. Nevertheless, the men shared common motivations for enrolling in college. Those most frequently cited were to increase their earning power and to be a role model for their children.
- **Encounters with prejudice.** These men identified low expectations and negative stereotypes based on their race, ethnicity, and gender as salient elements of their experiences in their high schools, communities, and sometimes on their college campuses. While the nature and intensity of these experiences varied across racial and ethnic groups, men in all groups recounted that they had been unfairly judged by their appearance.
- **Identities as men of color.** Though most of the men initially found their community college to be more welcoming than their high school, they reported negative encounters over time with some faculty and staff. The men explicitly rejected stereotypes based on their race or ethnicity and said that such attitudes did not affect their self-image or behavior. By contrast, norms related to their identity as men — characterized principally by self-reliance — exerted a powerful influence on their ability to engage in college. Whether placing a priority on paid work over school, avoiding making friends on campus, or failing to seek out academic or financial help, these men frequently acted in ways that reinforced their masculine identities, while at times hindering their chances of academic success.

By reporting how these men perceive their college environment and its challenges, this study hopes to take an important step toward understanding what community colleges can do to better meet the needs of their male students of color. The report concludes with some recommendations for how community colleges can ensure that these students receive the benefits of supports that can help them succeed and outlines a number of strategies that have already shown promise in improving the outcomes of underprepared community college students.

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Preface

The nation's nearly 1,200 community colleges enroll nearly half of all undergraduates. The accessibility and relatively low cost of these colleges make them especially important for low-income, minority, and first-generation students. Yet nearly half of all students enrolled in community colleges fail to complete their education. Academic outcomes are particularly low for students who must take developmental, or remedial, courses and for African-American, Hispanic, and Native American men, who are overrepresented in such courses relative to their proportion of college enrollment.

As part of Lumina Foundation for Education's Achieving the Dream initiative, a research team led by MDRC conducted interviews and focus groups with 87 male students of color who had placed into developmental math courses at four community colleges. The goal of our study was to find out more about how their experiences in their high schools and communities, as well as their identities as men of color, affected their decisions to attend college and their engagement in school.

The students' responses were thoughtful, frank, and enlightening and offer insights into the kinds of programs and policies that might help community colleges better meet the needs of men of color and raise their chances of success.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

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The Achieving the Dream evaluation is made possible by the support of Lumina Foundation for Education. We are grateful for Lumina's generous, steadfast, and patient support of this evaluation, as one component of the Achieving the Dream initiative's effort to improve the academic outcomes of community college students.

MDRC appreciates the cooperation of the administration and staff from the four colleges who participated in this study. In particular, we would like to thank the Achieving the Dream liaisons and other key developmental faculty who offered enormous assistance in recruiting students to participate in the study and scheduling the focus groups on which this report is based. Though we cannot list these colleges or individuals by name because of our pledge of confidentiality, we want to acknowledge that this study could not have been conducted without their extraordinary support. Special thanks are due to the advisers, counselors, and faculty who took time to participate in focus groups and granted permission for our researchers to conduct classroom observations. We are also grateful to the college staff that provided MDRC with student transcript data for this study.

We would like to express our appreciation to the multitude of community college faculty, staff, and administrators who have shared their knowledge about issues related to the engagement of men of color; presentations by these individuals at various conferences on postsecondary education have helped to inform this report. We are also thankful to Dr. Pedro Noguera of New York University, who provided us with suggestions for literature about men of color and education that helped us to develop our themes for this work.

Many MDRC staff members have contributed to this report. We are particularly grateful to the individuals who reviewed earlier drafts of this report and provided helpful comments: Fred Doolittle, Robert Ivry, Thomas Brock, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Elizabeth Zachry, and Margaret Bald. Dan Cullinan and Sarah Spell analyzed the transcript data. Genevieve Orr coordinated the report preparation process and conducted fact-checking and editing. Galina Farberova, Shirley James, and her staff monitored the baseline data collection process. Thanks are also due to John Hutchins and to Margaret Bald, who edited the report, and to David Sobel, who prepared it for publication.

Finally, we would like to thank all of the students who participated in this study. We hope that the findings from this and other studies in the Achieving the Dream evaluation will be used to improve programs and services for these men and other community college students in the future.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Community colleges play a crucial role in American higher education. Their open access and relatively low cost provide opportunities for millions of students to acquire the skills they need to obtain a good job or enter a four-year college or university. Unfortunately, far too many students who begin community college with the intention of earning a degree or transferring never complete their goal. Community college leaders are particularly concerned about the especially low rates of college completion among African-American, Hispanic, and Native American male students.

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national initiative launched by Lumina Foundation for Education to increase the academic success of all community college students, with a particular emphasis on low-income students and students of color. The initiative seeks to accomplish this goal by helping community colleges make better use of data on students' outcomes as they develop, implement, and evaluate strategies to improve students' success. Since its inception in 2003, the initiative has expanded to 102 participating colleges in 22 states.

This report takes an in-depth look at the perceptions and experiences of male students of color at four Achieving the Dream colleges located in the southeastern and southwestern United States. Over the course of the 2007-08 academic year, a research team led by MDRC conducted qualitative interviews and focus groups with 87 African-American, Hispanic, and Native American male students who were enrolled in developmental math classes at these colleges. Most of the data were collected during three rounds of student focus groups and interviews, which were supplemented by interviews with selected faculty and counselors/advisers and classroom observations. The men received modest incentive payments to participate in both the focus groups and individual interviews.

The fieldwork for this study was designed to elicit the perspectives of the students regarding three main research questions:

- What were the factors that motivated the students to enroll in community college?
- How were the students' backgrounds — academic, social, and cultural — relevant to their postsecondary experiences and behaviors?
- What cultural or identity-related factors aided or impeded the students' ability to engage socially and academically on their campuses?

In order to provide context for the experiences of the men in this sample, much of the inquiry focused on learning more about their backgrounds in their communities. Researchers asked the men about their educational and work histories, their relationships with family and friends, the factors that influenced their decisions to attend college, and their experiences on their respective campuses. The students' responses illustrate how their life experiences have shaped their identities, behaviors, and choices as individuals and as college students. Furthermore, they offer insight into promising recommendations for programs and policies that might help community colleges better meet the needs of male students of color.

Students' Backgrounds and Motivations for Attending College

There was no "average experience" in the upbringing of these men. They came from a variety of economic backgrounds and family situations; some of the younger participants still lived at home with their parents, while many of the older participants had families of their own. Even though there were differences among the men, a few common themes emerged in how they described their personal histories and reasons for pursuing a college education:

- **Most of the men encountered low expectations and stereotypes based on their race or ethnicity during high school.** Men from all racial and ethnic groups reported that they were discouraged by some of their high school teachers, were not aware of college preparatory activities, or received little or no guidance counseling. Whether it was intended or not, they got a message that they were not "college material."
- **The majority of men in the study spent time in the work force after completing high school or a General Educational Development certificate (GED), and nearly all were working while attending college.** Fewer than half of the sample members entered college immediately after high school. Most worked for several years, often in more than one job. Many also reported positive experiences with work and indicated that it held meaning for them beyond simply earning a wage. Work helped them gain life experience and discipline; it also contributed to their self-image as men and as providers for their families.
- **Many of the men were motivated to pursue postsecondary education in order to better provide for their families and be role models for their children.** The men were primarily drawn to college as a way to gain access to higher-paying employment that would allow themselves and their families to enjoy a better way of life. Some of the men expressed ambitions to open

their own businesses, while others went to college as a way to escape “the hood” or move beyond their difficult pasts.

Racial and Ethnic Identity

The men in this study identified themselves as African-American, Hispanic, or Native American. During focus groups and interviews, they were asked to talk about this identity and how it influenced their lives in their communities and on campus.

- **Across the sample, men encountered prejudice or conflict based on race or ethnicity, though members of each group described their experiences in different ways.** The African-American men in the sample felt that being black and male put them at an immediate disadvantage in various walks of life; they reported that teachers, police, and other people in positions of authority presumed that they were more likely to fail based on their race and gender. Several Hispanic men reported experiencing stereotypes related not only to their ethnicity, but also to their socioeconomic status and material possessions; sometimes these negative judgments came from within their own communities. The Native American men described the challenges of moving between tribal and mainstream American cultures, as they felt torn between different traditions and expectations.
- **Across racial and ethnic groups, the men reported that they did not let low societal expectations affect their self-image or influence their behavior.** The men were frustrated or angered by people who judged them based on their race or ethnicity and gender. At the same time, they did not allow the negative attitudes and racial stereotypes they encountered to hinder their pursuit of higher education and career goals.
- **While the men reported feeling judged negatively and unfairly based on their appearance, they were not willing to change their clothing or hairstyles in order to gain wider acceptance.** Men of diverse appearances described instances when they were made to feel suspect or unwelcome in their communities. Some men reported that they were routinely stereotyped or even wrongly identified as gang members based on particular styles they chose to wear, such as baggy jeans, white T-shirts, braided hairstyles, tattoos, or gold jewelry. Nevertheless, these men chose not to change their appearance and, instead, pushed others to accept them as they are. They felt that their dress was a personal expression that had nothing to do with their motivation or ability.

Engagement on Campus

Research suggests that students who find ways of engaging with faculty, staff, and other students are more likely to persist and attain their academic goals. As the men in this study spoke about their college experiences, it became clear that such engagement was not always easy or automatic, owing to factors both within and outside the men's control.

- **In contrast with how they described their experiences in their communities and high schools, most of the men reported feeling welcomed when they first arrived at community college.** A number of students spoke about positive encounters with counselors and advisers when they initially enrolled in college and considered their college to be more “color blind” than their high school.
- **In many cases, initially positive experiences on campus were followed by negative encounters with faculty or staff.** After being on their campuses for a while, the men started to perceive that some college faculty and personnel made negative judgments about them based on how they looked. The men deeply resented being stereotyped. They felt that their seriousness as students should not be called into question because of their race, gender, or choices of clothing and hairstyle, and they were unwilling to change their appearance to “fit in.”
- **Few of the men reported having close relationships with college faculty or staff. Nevertheless, they were sensitive to how they were treated by college personnel and wanted to be shown respect.** These men generally did not look to faculty or staff as friends or mentors, nor did they think it was important for faculty or staff to try to “relate” to them. They were appreciative, however, when instructors and staff displayed a caring attitude. For example, the men valued faculty who made an effort to describe difficult concepts in layperson's terms or to make sure that everyone in the class understood the topic before moving on. However, the men were particularly sensitive to any signs of disrespect. A single negative encounter could be enough to keep them from seeking further assistance from a particular faculty or staff member.
- **Most of the men reported that they did not make friends with other students on campus. Rather than seeing friends as an asset, many expressed concern that friends could distract them from reaching their goals.** Their experiences led them to believe that friends could be untrustworthy; in order to illustrate the risk of being pulled off course, some pointed to

former friends who had become involved in drugs or criminal activity. During the focus groups, the men said that they were not in school to make friends. Given research showing that friendship is a valuable contributor to students' success, especially when it involves networking and studying together, this outlook could present an additional challenge for these men.

- **Even though they reported a lack of interest in making friends, some men called for more opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities.** The men in this study complained about the lack of gymnasiums, basketball courts, and even support groups designed specifically for men on their campuses. Some felt that sports teams would help them to get more involved and take more pride in their college.

Money, Work, and Seeking Help from Others

As previously noted, the men in this study adhered to traditional notions of manhood, including a strong belief in independence and self-reliance. This gender-based attitude came through forcefully when they were asked to talk about their perspectives on employment and on seeking help from others.

- **By and large, the men were strongly influenced by notions of manhood that held that they should work and take care of their families. At the same time, work often interfered with their ability to commit sufficient time to their studies.** These students viewed work not only as a means to provide for material needs, but also as an essential element of their identities as men. Unfortunately, there were also indications that work impeded their engagement in school. The faculty interviewed for this study believed that the large number of hours these men committed to work interfered with their passing classes. Many of the men confirmed that their work encroached on school and said that they did not “have time” for school once they left campus.
- **The men generally preferred to support themselves rather than receive assistance from other sources, including government financial aid.** Many of the men talked about the difficulty they faced staying in school while also supporting a family. At the same time, they seemed to take pride in “going it alone” and did not like to ask for help from either family members or government agencies. In the final focus group, some of the men indicated a lack of familiarity with financial aid processes and expressed an interest in learning more. It is noteworthy that very few of the students in the study had filled

out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is required to receive federal Pell grants and most other financial aid.

- **Many of the men experienced a conflict between their masculine identities and the need to ask for help in college.** Asking for support of any kind — financial, academic, or personal — seemed to violate these students’ notions of what it meant to be a man: strong, independent, and self-reliant. Encouragingly, there was some evidence that those who had been in school longer were more likely to ask for help, suggesting that an initial resistance to help-seeking can be overcome with time.

Possible Strategies to Reach and Better Serve Men of Color

For the most part, the men in this study have the same needs for financial, academic, and social support as other students. Where they may differ is in the experiences they bring with them to college — in particular, the low expectations and racial stereotypes they encountered in high school and in their communities — and in their strongly held views about appropriate masculine behavior. On the one hand, their tendencies toward independence and self-reliance may have helped them overcome many of the obstacles placed in their paths, including racist attitudes in their high schools and communities. On the other hand, these attributes may be maladaptive in a college environment, where students are encouraged to seek help to solve increasingly difficult problems and take on new responsibilities. The findings from this study suggest that colleges may need to make special efforts to intervene with men of color. While the evidence on effective interventions is limited, a number of ideas have been implemented or proposed. The following are some options for colleges to consider:

- **Develop strategies to ease the challenging transition to college.** Most students find college to be an intimidating place at first; even the best prepared need to learn the rules of their new environment. Some community colleges have developed summer “bridge” programs to help recent high school graduates become acquainted with their campus, learn basic college “survival skills” (such as how to manage time and study for exams), and prepare for the assessment tests that will be used to place them into appropriate English and math courses. Less intensive than “bridge” programs, orientations can help to introduce students to counselors and other key faculty or staff; explain college policies and procedures on critical topics such as adding or dropping classes and applying for financial aid; and take students on tours of tutoring centers, libraries, and other facilities. Colleges that are already offering such programs might focus on how to enhance and extend them to reach more male students of color. For example, because this population may be

particularly resistant to seeking help, colleges might consider mandating orientation or “bridge” programs for new students. A number of community colleges have already begun to require attendance at an orientation for all new students.

- **Create tailored opportunities for men of color to build social connections with other students, faculty, and staff.** While the literature on academic engagement suggests that strong social connections are a key factor contributing to student success, the men in this study indicated that they did not come to school to make friends, and many encountered negative stereotypes in their interactions on campus. Given this dilemma, colleges might consider creating more focused opportunities to help men of color meet people and feel more comfortable on campus. One strategy that a number of community colleges have adopted is “learning communities,” in which students are placed into small groups that move together through two or more classes with integrated curricula. A rigorous evaluation by MDRC of one learning communities program, at Kingsborough Community College in New York, found positive effects on course completion and other outcomes. Furthermore, a subgroup analysis suggested that men derived particular benefit from the intervention. Mentoring programs, sports facilities, and extracurricular athletic competitions can also provide venues for men of color to get to know other people like themselves and build relationships outside of class.
- **Use intrusive forms of counseling and advising to reach students who might not seek help on their own.** Most community colleges are under-resourced in the area of counseling and advising. As a result, many students receive only limited assistance in selecting a major, identifying which courses they need to take in what sequence, and getting referrals to campus or community resources that can help them to reach their goals. Such limitations can be a particular problem for men of color, who might be less likely than other students to seek out assistance, even as they face additional challenges related to poor academic preparation and the negative stereotypes they encounter. In response, colleges may want to consider taking a more active role to bring counseling and advising services to at-risk students, rather than waiting for students to take the initiative. One increasingly popular strategy is the “student success” course, in which counselors or other instructors help students set goals, learn study skills, explore stress reduction techniques, and tour campus tutoring centers and other facilities. Evaluations of student success courses at community colleges in Florida and California suggest positive results, though proper targeting is key. (More capable students may resent

such courses and feel held back, since the credits do not generally count toward a degree.)

Another creative solution, developed by South Texas College, is the Beacon Mentoring program, in which trained college personnel make visits to lower-level and developmental math classes to remind students that tutoring and other help is available and to act as a “go to” person for students who have questions or need someone to talk to. An MDRC evaluation of the Beacon Mentoring program found that it got students to use more campus services and led to modest increases in the number of part-time students and developmental math students who passed the math course. Finally, some colleges have taken steps to assign students to counselors or advisers and to require at least one visit per semester. A primary goal is to encourage students to form an ongoing relationship with a campus professional who can help them stay on a path toward completion.

- **Provide financial opportunities that will help men of color balance work and school obligations.** The men in this study felt a strong need to earn their own money — not just to meet basic material needs, but also to reinforce their core beliefs about manhood. Unfortunately, their job commitments led them to reduce the time they spent on campus and on their studies. One option that policymakers and college administrators might consider is to create more work-study positions and market these opportunities to men of color. Another option, currently being evaluated by MDRC in several states around the country, is to create performance-based scholarships that allow students to “earn” money for school as they demonstrate their ability to remain enrolled with a grade point average of “C” or better. This type of program produced large positive effects for a group of mostly African-American women at two Louisiana community colleges; an ongoing evaluation will determine whether it also works for other target groups, including men of color. Finally, given the lack of information about financial aid opportunities conveyed by many of the men in this study, colleges might consider creating workshops to inform students about the array of resources available to help them cover school and living expenses, including Pell grants, state aid, and subsidized loans. Such workshops may be incorporated into the student success courses described above.
- **Foster open dialogue about race, gender, and differences in appearance.** Many of the men in this study encountered negative stereotypes based on their appearance. Some felt that they were disrespected by college faculty or

staff. In fairness, it is possible that some faculty and staff felt intimidated by the students' style of dress. Colleges may be able to improve campus relations for male students of color by creating forums in which students, faculty, and staff come together to discuss their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences regarding topics of race and gender discrimination. Such forums work best when they are managed by a trained facilitator. The Equity Scorecard at the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education also offers tools to assist college administrators and faculty identify gaps in achievement between racial and ethnic groups and initiate steps to promote equity.

* * * * *

Increasing the engagement and success of men of color in community college is central to the Achieving the Dream initiative and to the world of postsecondary education. This report marks one step toward understanding and addressing the challenges of this population of students. However, more research needs to be done in order to identify effective strategies to improve the college persistence and completion rates of male students of color. Among the strategies listed above, only a few have been evaluated using a control group, and even these are limited to a single college. Finding proven solutions is critical not only for the future of students like those in this study, but also for our well-being as a nation. As President Barack Obama said during his 2008 presidential campaign: "If you feel good about me, there's a whole lot of young men out there who could be me, if given the chance."

Chapter 1

Introduction

Community colleges are important institutions of higher learning for a wide variety of students. They enroll almost half of all undergraduates in the United States and play a crucial role in preparing individuals for trades, careers, and baccalaureate programs.¹ Their open access policies provide opportunities to pursue higher education for millions of students who might not otherwise be able to. Their accessibility and relatively low cost make them especially important for low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college students. Unfortunately, research shows that far too few of these students succeed. Among those who enrolled for the first time at a two-year college in the 2003-04 academic year, only 18 percent attained a certificate or degree within three years. The large majority remained enrolled without a degree (37 percent) or were no longer enrolled at any institution (45 percent) by June 2006.² Among students of color, the rate of certificate or degree attainment is even lower, with only 14 percent of African-American students and 15 percent of Hispanic and Native American students earning a certificate or degree within three years. Overall for all groups, men fare worse than women.³

There are many reasons for these low rates of success, but paramount among them is that too few students entering community college are prepared to perform college-level work. Some studies suggest that 60 percent of new students require at least one developmental (or remedial) course.⁴ Unfortunately, once students are placed into these courses, many make slow academic progress or drop out. Students who are academically underprepared are also likely to be socially underprepared for college. Many high school students do not know about taking college preparatory classes or filling out financial aid and college admission applications. Once they are in college, they may not be aware of the elements of academic and social engagement that can support their success — including talking to faculty and staff, making friends on campus, studying with others, and participating in on-campus activities. The literature confirms that such engagement is important for students' success in college,⁵ but it is often missing, particularly among men.⁶ Students' engagement may also be affected by factors related to their

¹Dowd (2003).

²Berkner and Choy (2008).

³U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2006).

⁴Collins (2009).

⁵Kuh et al. (2006); Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2008).

⁶Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2008).

identity — such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, educational background, and region — that influence choices and behavior in meaningful ways.

This report presents findings from a qualitative study of 87 male students of color taking developmental math classes at four community colleges. Each of the colleges was involved in a national initiative called Achieving the Dream, which aims to improve the academic success of community college students by helping colleges become more skilled at gathering and using data to understand students' needs and progress and evaluating the effectiveness of strategies designed to improve students' outcomes. Through focus groups and individual interviews, researchers sought to answer three main questions:

- What were the factors that motivated these students to enroll in community college?
- How are students' backgrounds — academic, social, and cultural — relevant to their postsecondary experiences and behaviors?
- What cultural or identity-related factors aided or impeded the students' ability to engage socially and academically on their campuses?

The ultimate aim of this study is to gain insight into how policymakers and educators can help improve the success rates of men of color by developing programs and adopting practices that support their educational and personal goals, based on an understanding of the factors that help or hinder their success. The remainder of this chapter provides more detail on the Achieving the Dream initiative, the decision to focus this study on men of color in developmental math, the research methodology, and the colleges where the research interviews took place.

What Is Achieving the Dream?

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a multiyear, national initiative designed to improve students' success at the nation's community colleges, with a special focus on students of color and low-income students."⁷ Achieving the Dream's partner organizations, MDRC among them, work on multiple fronts to support the use of data to drive institutional improvement. The initiative's efforts include changes in institutional practices and policies at participating colleges, research into effective practices at community colleges, public policy work, and outreach to communities, businesses, and the public. Starting with 27 community colleges in five states that joined Achieving the Dream in 2004,⁸ the initiative has expanded to

⁷MDC, Inc. (2008).

⁸Brock et al. (2007).

102 colleges in 22 states. These colleges entered the initiative during multiple years and are identified by the “round” in which they joined. This study focuses on several “Round 1” schools, which received their demonstration grants in 2004. All of these campuses were located in either the southeastern or southwestern United States.

Why Did This Study Look at Men of Color in Developmental Math?

Improving developmental education is an area of high interest within Achieving the Dream and across the nation. According to an early Achieving the Dream report, less than a third of students at Round 1 colleges who were referred to developmental coursework were able to pass their highest-level developmental math class within a three-year period; pass rates in developmental English and reading were only marginally better.⁹ While all types of students are enrolled in developmental courses, and the majority of them are white, students of color are overrepresented in these courses relative to their proportion of college enrollment.¹⁰ Furthermore, outcomes for male students of color — such as rates of passing courses, grade point averages, semester-to-semester retention, and graduation rates — were lower than those of students overall and lower than those of either white students or women in their own racial or ethnic groups.¹¹

There is also a wide body of research documenting the poor life chances of men of color, from low educational attainment to high rates of unemployment and involvement with the criminal justice system. Research suggests that people who obtain postsecondary education are much less likely to experience these undesirable outcomes.¹²

Low levels of engagement in college and lack of academic success among male students of color are persistent concerns among community college administrators, faculty, and staff. At Achieving the Dream conferences and other meetings, such professionals frequently discuss the difficulties they experience “reaching” and retaining male students from these backgrounds. These concerns underscore the importance of focusing on this group to understand their perspectives and to learn how to help them achieve greater success in college and in life.

⁹Brock et al. (2007).

¹⁰Lee, Muraskin, Price, and Whitson (2005).

¹¹According to the January/February 2008 *Achieving the Dream Data Notes*, men generally (and men of color specifically) were more likely than women to be referred to a developmental course, but less likely than women to persist to the following semester and to accumulate credits.

¹²Baum and Payea (2005); Harper (2006); Clayton, Hewett, and Gaffney (2004).

Research Methodology

Intensive qualitative methods are frequently used in an exploratory manner to learn about a group of people or a phenomenon. Using individual and group interviews, among other methods of observation, the qualitative researcher seeks to attain a detailed understanding of the circumstances experienced by his or her subjects. Although these findings usually cannot be generalized due to sample size and selection limitations, they can yield a depth and detail of understanding that quantitative approaches cannot, often revealing the “why” behind an observable dimension.

In three rounds of fieldwork conducted over one year, the qualitative inquiry for this report explored the following themes: academic preparedness, motivation for going to college, cultural identity, college expectations, student engagement, social connectedness and support, developmental and other classroom experiences, relationships with faculty and staff, and external pressures, including work, family, peers, and finances. Although the sample was drawn from developmental class rolls at the four campuses, this report does not explicitly consider developmental math instruction or curricula. Instead, it uses placement into developmental math as an indicator of lack of academic preparation for the participating students.

In order to provide context for the experiences of the men in this sample, much of the inquiry focused on learning more about their backgrounds: their educational and work histories, their relationships with family and friends, their experiences in their respective communities, and how these influenced their decisions to go to college. This research shows that the backgrounds of these men shaped their identity, behavior, and choices as individuals and as college students. Understanding how these students reacted to typical college-related experiences is important if colleges are to respond effectively to their needs through programs, support, and systems.¹³

Three field visits took place over the course of the 2007-08 academic year; three to five focus groups were held during each visit. The size of each focus group ranged from three to 12 men, with a total sample of 87 students. The study was designed to target the same set of students over the course of the entire school year in order to capture the array of issues they faced during this time.¹⁴ During the final round of focus groups, students answered questions about their challenges as college students and proposed their own solutions. In addition, 29 of the 87 students were interviewed individually during the field visits to gather more detailed information about their personal experiences.

¹³Steele and Aronson (1995); Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, and Smith (1998).

¹⁴However, not every student who participated in the focus groups offered during the first field visit to their campus participated in the follow-up focus groups conducted during the subsequent field visits.

Students were recruited for the first round of fieldwork primarily through campus contacts. Each campus provided the site researcher with support in identifying and recruiting students. The team produced standard letters, flyers, and scripts with which the campus staff and faculty could assist with recruitment. The researchers experienced a variety of challenges “reaching” the subgroup, mirroring the concerns expressed by administrators, faculty, and staff in the design phase. Some campus contacts reported experiencing similar difficulties in their previous efforts to get male students of color to participate in college events. In every case, once on site, each of the field researchers had to use additional methods, such as classroom visits and phone calls to potential participants, to fill the groups. Additional recruitment took place during the second round of fieldwork to make up for attrition from focus groups in the first round.

Students were compensated for their participation in both focus groups and individual interviews; those who participated in all of the focus groups received a total of \$200 by the end of the study.¹⁵ Focus groups were also held with developmental math faculty, as well as with counselors and advisers at the four campuses, to gain their perspectives on the issues faced by underprepared male students of color. All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes. The research team also visited classrooms and tutoring centers at all campuses and minority male support groups or other such programs at the campuses that had them. Finally, demographic and transcript data on student participants were collected (transcript data are presented in a text box in Chapter 4).

Community Colleges Selected for This Study

This study was conducted at four nonresidential community college campuses in the southeast and southwest.¹⁶ Each of these campuses met the following criteria: (1) joined Achieving the Dream as a Round 1 college in 2004, (2) had a substantial population of students of color, (3) expressed an interest in participating in this study, and (4) had an institutional interest in this student subgroup, as well as in improving developmental education. Table 1.1 provides more detail about selected characteristics of these colleges. The names and locations of the colleges are not revealed in the interest of protecting the confidentiality of the students who participated. The analysis in this report aggregates findings across the four campuses but disaggregates by certain demographic characteristics.

¹⁵The subset of students who participated in all of the focus groups and personal interviews received a total of \$280. Compensation levels were increased during following field visits to encourage students to continue participating.

¹⁶The distribution of colleges across the southeast and southwest reflects the locations of Round 1 Achieving the Dream colleges.

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Table 1.1
Selected Characteristics of Colleges in the Study

Characteristic	College A	College B	College C	College D
Region	Southwest	Southeast	Southwest	Southeast
Total enrollment ^a	10,000-25,000	Under 10,000	10,000-25,000	Over 25,000
Enrollment, by race/ethnicity ^a (%)				
White, non-Hispanic	36	35	3	43
Black, non-Hispanic	3	39	0	15
Hispanic	41	5	94	24
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	4	1	5
American Indian/Alaskan Native	7	0	0	0
Nonresident alien	1	6	1	3
Students receiving financial aid ^b (%)	70	52	85	64
First-time student retention rate ^c (%)				
Full-time students	55	46	57	71
Part-time students	34	34	44	51
Graduation rate ^d (%)	8	14	15	35
Transfer-out rate ^d (%)	12	n/a	9	13

SOURCE: These data are from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Science's 2008 College Navigator reports.

NOTES: ^a Enrollment data are reported for the fall 2007 term. Distributions by race/ethnicity may not add to 100 percent due to the exclusion of the "race/ethnicity unknown" and "two or more races" categories from this table.

^b Financial aid data are reported for full-time, first-time, degree- or certificate-seeking students in 2006-2007.

^c Retention rates measure the percentage of students entering in fall 2006 who continue their studies into the following fall.

^d Graduation and transfer-out rates are calculated for full-time, first-time undergraduates who began their programs in 2004. Graduation rates measure the percentage of entering, certificate- or degree-seeking students who complete their programs within 150 percent of the normal time to program completion. Transfer-out rates measure the percentage of entering students who transfer to another institution within that time.

College A is located in the southwest. Its multiple campuses serve two cities and their surrounding areas. Reflecting the larger community, this college has a significant number of Native American students, many more than the other three colleges in this study.

College B, the smallest college in the study, has about one quarter the number of students that attend College A. It is located in the southeast and serves two counties and a city. Similar to the population of the city and one of these counties, about 40 percent of students at this college identify themselves as African-American.

College C is located in the southwest. Its student population is closer in size to that of College A, though not as large. This college has multiple campuses and serves two counties where the majority of people are of Hispanic origin. Both these counties and College C have the lowest percentage of whites among the sites in this study.

College D has the largest student population in the study. Its campuses serve two cities and two counties in the southeast. While the racial make-up of the service area varies from city to county, on average there are about twice as many Hispanics as African-Americans. This disparity decreases when student populations are averaged across the campuses, but Hispanics still outnumber African-Americans.¹⁷

Typical of many community colleges, these colleges had few extracurricular activities or organizations for students. None of these campuses had more than modest athletic facilities or sports teams, and some had none. One of the campuses, serving mostly African-American students, had a minority male mentoring program. Another had a “bridge” program that helped low-income and minority students prepare for college during the summer between finishing high school and starting college and continuing into the school year. Very few of the students in the sample were aware of or participated in any extracurricular activities on their campuses.

Organization of This Report

This report is organized as follows. Chapter 2 presents information on the precollege backgrounds and experiences of these students, examining why they decided to come to college and the routes they took to get there. Chapter 3 focuses on the students’ racial and ethnic identities. Chapter 4 explores their social engagement (or lack thereof) on their college campuses. Chapter 5 addresses the topics of money, work, and seeking help from others. Throughout these chapters, students share their perspectives on themes of identity and engagement in their own words; readers should be warned that their language is sometimes graphic. Three student profiles are also interspersed in these chapters to exemplify the diversity of experiences and perspectives these men represent. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes by examining the implications of these students’ experiences on policy and programmatic offerings for consideration by key decision-makers at community colleges.

¹⁷Demographic information about these four colleges is drawn from the College Navigator reports of the U.S. Department of Education (2008a).

Chapter 2

Students' Backgrounds and Motivations for Going to College

This chapter explores the backgrounds of the men interviewed for this study and considers their demographic characteristics, educational experiences, motivation for and pathways to pursuing higher education, and the personal and professional goals they hope to achieve in college. This study held as open questions whether and how educational, racial, ethnic, or social backgrounds influenced the reported engagement of these students in college.

Though some issues are unique to students from African-American, Hispanic, or Native American backgrounds, our analysis of the qualitative data reveals several important themes that hold across racial or ethnic subgroups. For example, the men in this study shared similar thoughts about how society perceives them, particularly based on appearance, and similar reactions to these perceptions. They reported a strong adherence to their own cultural and aesthetic preferences in terms of their appearance and were not willing to change in order to “fit in” or be accepted, either in their communities or on their campuses. Conceivably, this choice could influence their success as students if their appearance stimulated stereotypical thoughts in the minds of instructors or staff and interfered with their ability to be treated as other students are.

Another important theme identified in the analysis relates to manhood, or what it means to be a man. This theme, which seemed to be more salient to the men than race or ethnicity, is explored in later chapters.

As the following sections show, although the men in the sample were subject to stereotypes based on their race, ethnicity, or appearance, they cannot be typecast. They come from a variety of backgrounds and have diverse educational and employment histories, family circumstances, and life experiences. In focus groups and interviews, the men were thoughtful, funny, open, and helpful. The focus groups provided them with a safe space to talk to the researchers and to one another in strict confidentiality about their experiences and perspectives on life, work, and school. They freely shared insightful stories, some painful or disturbing, of their experiences as men of color, both in and outside of college. Before discussing the major themes of these stories, this chapter opens with a review of the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Characteristics of the Sample

Table 2.1 shows the demographic characteristics of the 87 men who participated in the study at all four community colleges. The data are drawn from a brief baseline information questionnaire filled out by the participants at the beginning of their first focus group. The table reports on the participants' race/ethnicity, and age, on their highest grade completed, diplomas or degrees earned (prior to entering the study), time elapsed since their receipt of a high school diploma or General Educational Development certificate (GED), and student status. Because the sample was small, the data have not been disaggregated by site, and many of the categories have been collapsed.

As only students enrolled in a developmental math course were eligible to participate in this study, all the participants were to some degree underprepared for college-level course work. In fact, a majority (68 percent) of the students placed into a developmental reading or English course as well. This is a common pattern at community colleges nationwide.

The average age of the participants was 24. As shown in Table 1, 55 percent of the men were between the ages of 17 and 20, while the remaining 45 percent were 21 or older. This table also shows that a plurality of participants identified themselves as Hispanic (47 percent), followed by African-American (43 percent), and Native American (8 percent). The racial/ethnic groups were not evenly distributed among the four colleges. The campuses had either predominantly African-American participants or Hispanic participants, and all of the Native American students were clustered at one institution.

Analysis of the interview data shows that these men were raised in a variety of settings. Most came either from traditional nuclear families or single-parent households; a few were raised by other relatives. Some had many siblings, while others had none. When talking about their childhoods, many of the men recounted stories of stable family circumstances in which they felt safe and loved. They talked about traveling to visit relatives or taking trips for church and school functions. However, at the other extreme were striking cases of neglect and abuse. A few of the men interviewed reported being abandoned by their parents, as well as suffering physical and emotional abuse. For the men in this study, there was no "average experience" in terms of upbringing; they came from the middle class, the working class, the reservation, and the ghetto.

Some of the younger participants between the ages of 17 and 20 still lived at home, were not financially independent, and received help from family members to pay for college. Most of the older participants were more established and were generally living independently of their parents. The older men were often married and were parents. Whether young and still living with their parents or older with families of their own, most of the men in this sample held family to be of primary importance. They emphasized the centrality of family in their lives,

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Table 2.1

Characteristics of Sample Members at Baseline: Fall 2007

	All Campuses
Race/ethnicity ^a (%)	
Hispanic	47.1
Black	42.5
American Indian or Alaskan Native	8.0
White or multiracial	2.3
Age (%)	
17-20 years old	55.3
21 years and older	44.7
Average age (years)	23.8
Highest grade completed (%)	
11th grade or lower	7.1
12th grade	92.9
Diplomas/degrees earned ^b (%)	
High school diploma	86.0
GED	16.3
Occupational/technical certificate	4.7
Time elapsed since high school graduation/GED receipt (%)	
Less than one year	35.7
Between one and five years	38.6
More than five years	25.7
Student status (%)	
Incoming freshman	66.3
Returning student	27.9
Transfer student	5.8
Sample size (n=87)	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using Baseline Information Form (BIF) data.

NOTES: Calculations for this table use all available data for the 87 sample members. Missing values are not included in individual variable distributions. Distributions may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

^aRespondents who said they are Hispanic and chose a race are included only in the Hispanic category.

Respondents who said they are not Hispanic and chose more than one race are only in the multiracial category.

^bDistributions may not add to 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.

whether being responsible for the care and financial support of loved ones or receiving social and emotional support from their relatives.

Most of the participants (66 percent) were entering freshmen at their campuses. Across all age groups, the majority of the men in this study balanced full-time employment with school, and most had also worked before they entered college. Because of these work responsibilities, the majority of students in the sample were not attending college full time.

A handful of the men (5 percent) had received occupational or technical certificates before participating in the study, but none had attained a college degree. Eighty-six percent had earned a high school diploma, and 16 percent had received a GED. These figures are higher than the national average for men of color,¹ suggesting that this sample is higher performing than a random sample, though all the participants are still in need of academic remediation. As the following sections show, these men are remarkably resilient in light of the challenges and obstacles they have faced. Low expectations and past negative experiences in their communities and schools, while troubling, did not prevent them from wanting to attend college or persevering once they got there. These men report in the focus groups and interviews that they regularly buck the stereotypes associated with their racial and ethnic groups.

The majority of the study's participants (64 percent) did not immediately go to college after graduating from high school or completing a GED. The intervals between high school and college ranged from one year to 10 years or more. During these intervals, the men worked in fields ranging from hospitality to entertainment, the military to barbering, and retail to illegal drug sales. Some had worked in particular fields for many years and decided to return to school in order to advance from worker to boss. The motivations of the men for going to college will be explored later in this chapter.

Past Educational Experiences

Research shows that race, ethnicity, social class, and gender play a large role in school success or failure.² According to a number of studies, gaps in achievement across each of these characteristics result from “cumulative disadvantages associated with substandard precollege educational preparation.”³ The literature identifies men of color as the subgroup with the most persistent lag;⁴ education statistics consistently reveal that males of color cluster at the top of the

¹According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2008b), the national rates of high school completion (including both diplomas and GED certificates) among black and Hispanic males ages 25 and older are only 82.1 and 60.9 percent, respectively.

²Ogbu (1988).

³Kuh et al. (2006), p. 45.

⁴Gibbs (1988); Irvine (1991); Polite and Davis (1999).

distribution for virtually every indicator of school failure, including dropout rates, absenteeism, suspension and expulsion, and low standardized test scores.⁵

Researchers have also noted that men of color are frequently the targets of negative attitudes and lowered expectations from teachers, counselors, and administrators.⁶ For instance, Strayhorn (2008) reports that:

Black male youth often do not have access to or are discouraged from participating in college preparatory curricula and activities...Black men are often viewed as an at-risk population in education...and tend to be described with words that have negative connotations such as uneducable, endangered, dysfunctional, dangerous, and lazy....⁷

Unfortunately, such low expectations and stereotypes may turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy for many men of color in secondary school classrooms nationwide.⁸ While the literature has focused predominantly on the challenges faced by African-American men, this study shows that similar stereotypes and expectations extend to other groups of men of color as well.

A number of the men in the sample reported negative experiences in high school that illustrate the phenomenon that Strayhorn describes. For example, Farris⁹ said:

[Teachers] don't pay attention to you as much, and there was a lot of prejudice going on at that time, also. And we were always sat in the back, you know. Instead of like wanting to learn, we were...deterred away from that.

Although the stereotype is that men of color sit in the back by choice, Farris's perception was that he and his friends of color were *placed* in the back by their teachers. His comment offers a very different interpretation of the classroom seating arrangement and the roots of disengagement. Ed described a similar aspect of his high school experience:

[When I] think back into high school, and it wasn't really they were blocking you, but the teachers, some of 'em, didn't really believe in you or didn't give you that extra push, even though they did it for [white students].

Ed identified lack of attention from secondary school teachers as a factor that led to his own academic disengagement.

⁵Garibaldi (1992).

⁶Harvey (2002); Johnson, Duffett, and Ott (2005); Strayhorn (2008).

⁷Strayhorn (2008), p. 27.

⁸Washington and Lee (1982).

⁹As noted, the students' names have been changed to protect the identities of the participants in this study.

Luis attributed a discouraging comment from a teacher to her judgment of his potential for advancement based on his ethnicity:

I had a teacher tell me, "I'll help you drop out as soon as you turn 16." I was like, "What? No, I'm going to stay in school!" She's just [thinking] "Oh, that's one of them Spanish kids, they don't care about school, they're going to go flip burgers. I'll help you go flip burgers."

Another student, Douglas, talked about running into teachers from high school now that he is in college; he felt that these teachers were surprised that he was in college instead of in jail.

In sum, these men reported low expectations and stereotypes based on race or ethnicity as significant elements of their secondary school experiences. Regardless of race, ethnicity, age, or location, these men described negative experiences in which high school teachers communicated low expectations for their academic and life trajectories. Both older and younger men recounted these stories of discouragement and disengagement in their high schools, thus indicating that such stereotyping cannot simply be attributed to an earlier era.

With alarming consistency, the students talked about their lack of preparation for college, less in terms of *academic* preparation (although that may be evident from their placement in developmental course work) than in terms of *directional* guidance and advice about going to college. From understanding the importance of grades in high school to taking necessary tests and filling out applications, these students did not feel that they were groomed by their high schools to be "college material." Timothy explained: "I was invisible in high school; I believe high school failed me...in the sense that...the whole four years I went...I didn't know what a guidance counselor was for. I thought you go to guidance counseling if you get in trouble." James had a similar comment:

I didn't know anything about filling out college applications...GPAs...any of that. You know, the teachers just, I was invisible. I went to school, did my class work, I did good in school, but no one approached me and said, "Hey about college, how about scholarships?" or anything like that. So it was pretty much you're a young black male going to school, and you're invisible. They don't take the time with you that they should, that they take with the...white students.

The students in focus groups were not asked to examine how their own behavior may have contributed to their lack of preparation for college. It is quite possible that there was some interaction between the attributes and behaviors the young men displayed and the attitudes and behavior of their teachers. Nevertheless, it seems that a pattern of low expectations leading to poor preparation began well before they stepped onto a college campus.

Motivations for Going to College

Even though many of the men in the sample had negative educational experiences, a large majority graduated from high school, and all decided to go to college. This suggests that the men were more motivated than some of their high school teachers and counselors gave them credit for. Research indicates that motivation is one of the most important factors associated with students' success.¹⁰ When asked what made them decide to go to college, the responses of the men clustered around several main sources of motivation:

- **To increase their earnings or to pursue an entrepreneurial dream.**

The men in this study made an explicit connection between educational attainment and the potential for increased earnings. Those interested in owning their own businesses said that they believed a college education and business-related course work would help to ensure their success. For example, when asked why he was in college, Labron responded: "Just to make money. Because nowadays in society a college degree is the equivalent to what the high school degree was in the '60s and '70s; you need it now to make money and do something big in your life." Similarly, Max said: "I want to open up my own businesses and be my own man...like spas and barbershops...I just want something I can call my own."

- **To earn respect or to be "in charge."**

As noted, stereotypes and low expectations for these men permeated many of their life experiences. Some felt that by earning a certificate or degree, they would be inoculated against such false judgments. For instance, when asked about his reasons for attending college, Peter answered:

Respect. When you don't have a college degree they look at you as a low life. And from what I've learned, it's like if I get a college degree, they're not going to look at me as a low life...a street kid, you know, they're going to give me the respect that I deserve because I worked for it.

In a similar vein, Giovante said: "I'm 40 years old and I'd like to make a change and be the boss instead of the worker. I want to pursue an associate's [degree] here, and hopefully get my contractor's license." The theme of respect emerged strongly in the interviews and will be explored further in Chapter 4.

- **To be a role model and provide for their children.**

¹⁰Rendon and Mathews (1989); Cross (1991).

Almost all of the fathers in the sample reported that their children were critical influences on their decision to go to college. Dwayne, who had “hustled” on the street selling drugs, explained: “Like I didn’t really care about college or nothing until I had my daughter, and then that’s when I realized I better go to college and make a future for her.”

- **To learn and earn a credential.**

The desire to be educated, aside from any career-related or financial incentives, was an important motivator for a few of the men in the study. Jevon said: “Because I think everyone has this fundamental, like, urge to learn. I think money is probably like a secondary reason, but...you have to make that initial decision to go to school, which says...that you want to learn.” Timothy said: “I came back to school to achieve a dream and be the first in my family to graduate college.”

- **To escape “the ’hood,” stay out of trouble, or overcome a criminal record.**

As noted at the outset of the chapter, the men grew up in a variety of environments. For those from poor neighborhoods or ghettos, leaving these areas and the way of life there was a common reason for attending college. For instance, Jorge discussed pursuing education to escape from the cholo¹¹ way of life: “It’s really hard to get from there [the ’hood] to come up here [to college].” Similarly, Timothy stated: “An education keeps you away from the hustling, from playing the game. That’s how I see it.” Patrice said:

School kind of balances out the job and the record...so when I get an application or fill out a résumé, it’s going to have more credentials and accolades, when I go for a job...before they look at my record. So, I plan on being a regular person with my degree.

In sum, these men saw college as a way to leave their difficult pasts behind.

Some of the motivations for attending college were more common than others. Across all racial or ethnic groups and locations, the most frequently cited motivations were the desire to increase earning power by improving skills or becoming an entrepreneur and the desire to be a role model for their children. Not surprisingly, some men reported multiple, interrelated factors that propelled them to pursue a college education.

¹¹In Mexico and in the United States, “cholo” refers to a person of Mexican background who belongs to a street gang.

Routes to College

Just as the motivations of the men for attending college varied, so too did their paths to get there. While most of the younger students went to college right after high school, many of the older men (over the age of 22) took detours. This section focuses on how and why these detours eventually led to college.

A few of the older men had attempted college previously but had stopped out in order to pursue job opportunities. For instance, Matais had gone to a four-year college after high school, taken many credits, and earned a high grade point average during his first year. However, because of his talent as a singer, he left college to perform in the casinos of Las Vegas and tour the nation with his singing group. He appeared on television many times, but eventually his career ran its course. He came back home to care for his parents and return to school to pursue a career in the hospitality industry.

Other students reported similar, albeit less glamorous, opportunities for work after high school, including positions in the military, mechanic and construction trades, and retail and service employment. While most of the students worked in legal, “on the books” employment, a few moved into illicit activities, and some had been incarcerated. Regardless of the work they performed, most of the men reported that their previous and current jobs were satisfactory but not satisfying. As they grew older and gained more life experience and responsibilities, including becoming fathers and breadwinners, they decided to pursue higher education in order to better themselves and expand their opportunities.

Interestingly, these older students reported that the entreaties of loved ones to go back to school were not a factor in their decisions. External motivation and pressure from family seemed to have had little effect on them. Man after man described mothers, wives, fathers, and siblings who pressured them to go back to school and said that they ignored this pressure until some internal trigger was activated. Grant described the switch that took place for him:

Mostly it was nagging to go there, and me being me, you know, rebelling...for six years. And when it was time for my thought to go to college, I jumped into it myself. But that peer pressure was telling you... “You’ve got to go to college!” “I’ll go when I’m ready.” You know? There’s more things I needed to learn out there besides...going to school: people, work, and stuff. I think waiting them six years to go to college helped me out a lot to be prepared [for the demands of college].

Once the older men in the sample had decided to attend college, most indicated that they felt supported by their loved ones. A few who had resisted the push to college previously reported the pleasant “shock” their families felt once they announced their plans to enroll. Examples of support include parents providing a place for the student to live, wives working

full time to support the household, families uprooting themselves to move to the city in which the college was located, and sisters, brothers, and cousins offering rides to and from school.

While a large majority of the students said that their loved ones encouraged them to go to college, a few students said that family members discouraged them. The expectation was that they should work and not “waste time” on college; more than one student commented that his family members thought he was being foolish for going to college instead of getting a job. Kevin described his family’s reaction to his decision to go to community college:

My family wasn’t supportive, because they grew up in an era where a man, if he just worked hard enough and he got the right income, no matter how he got it, he could open up a business, and it came from hard work, so most of my family looks at me like I’m crazy.

Keifer’s family had a similar reaction, but he ignored this discouragement:

But I don’t really care what they really think. I know what I’m trying to get with the plan, you know. But none of my family was supportive. They were just like, “Boy, you need to get a job! Is you crazy?!”

Among the men interviewed, however, this unsupportive family environment was rare.

Like family members, friends also varied in their reactions to the decisions of these men to go to college. A few men in the sample said that their friends discouraged them. This issue arose mainly among younger students whose friends were neither going to school nor working. For instance, one student who had graduated from high school the previous year was discouraged by his friends (none of whom were enrolled in school or working a steady job) because they felt that school would take away from his time to practice and perform as the lead dancer in their troupe. Nevertheless, like several of the other men in this study, he ignored their discouragement to pursue his interests in business through college, while continuing his work as a dancer.

On the other hand, there was one case of an older student who had been a drug dealer and yet was encouraged to perform academically by his friends who were still in “the life.” Douglas said:

My friends are real supportive...because we all kicked it on the block. You know what I’m saying? We all hustled...They see that I’m doing things and they’re like, “Yeah, that’s what’s up!” Like they get mad. They’ll come visit me and I’m like, “Yeah, I’m supposed to be doing homework.” They’ll tell me, “Do your homework! What are you doing sitting here playing Madden? Do your homework!”

Box 2.1

Student Profile: Jonathan

Jonathan is an 18-year-old African-American student who enrolled in college directly after high school. Jonathan's family strongly supports his decision to make postsecondary education a priority. He grew up in a household with two parents who attended college but did not complete their degrees. He credits his parents for keeping him on the right path despite the "tough" neighborhood he was raised in and ensuring that he would get a good education that would lead him toward college.

His extended family has also helped tremendously with information about scholarships and educational programs he could take advantage of. His uncle, who works at his college, encouraged him to apply to the Stepping Stone¹² program that pays for tuition and books and gives students extra help and resources to successfully navigate college. Jonathan has also been able to participate in a "learning community," in which he is taking a student success course and a developmental math course together with the same group of students. He says that he wishes he had known what he learned in his student success course before he came to college, as it has been extremely helpful in developing his time management and test-taking skills. Jonathan also enjoys the personal attention he receives from faculty and staff in the learning community, with its smaller class sizes and more accommodating environment.

Jonathan plans to transfer to a four-year university like his sister before him who also attended this community college. He is working hard to maintain a good grade point average so that he can be eligible for another scholarship that will pay his way through the university. Jonathan has been able to do what many of his fellow study participants have not: He has identified the resources that are going to help him reach his goals.

Once he enrolled in college, Douglas's friends were pushing him to avoid slipping back into the lifestyle in which they were still participating.

Overall, these men reported that their families — and to a lesser degree their friends — were supportive of their decisions to attend college. This support extended across racial, ethnic, and local lines, and included both emotional and material assistance. Interestingly, most of the men reported that they were not significantly influenced by their family members or friends, either positively or negatively, in their decisions to attend college. However, they reported being grateful for the support they received once they had made that decision.

¹²The name of the actual program was altered for purposes of confidentiality.

Chapter 3

Racial and Ethnic Identity

Existing research in psychology suggests that identity helps individuals develop both a sense of uniqueness and a sense of belonging to a group, as they “define themselves in the eyes of both others and themselves.”¹ In focus groups and interviews on all four campuses, the men in this study discussed how they understood themselves and how they felt others perceived them in relation to their race or ethnicity, culture, and gender. Each of the participants in this study identified their race or ethnicity on a Baseline Information Form (BIF) filled out during their first focus group and in their interviews. The participants’ perceptions differed across racial or ethnic subgroups. For example, the African-American men frequently emphasized their experiences of racial bias, the Hispanic men living in largely homogeneous communities discussed intra-cultural biases related to social class, and the smaller number of Native American men discussed the challenges they faced as they moved between tribal life and life in the larger community. Other themes held across the sample. Issues of manhood were a powerful current throughout all of the narratives. (A more in-depth discussion of manhood will be reserved for Chapters 4 and 5.)

The following section considers the men in the sample by racial or ethnic subgroup. It explores issues of racial or ethnic identity and reports how the men felt they were perceived or judged based on racial or ethnic stereotypes.

Race and African-American Men

The literature on race and racism in the United States indicates that concepts of race contain societal assumptions about the traits and abilities of members of racial groups.² Stereotypes commonly associated with black men include criminality, violence, and sexual promiscuity. Although racial concepts and their effects were discussed by African-American, Hispanic, and Native American participants in the study, they stood out as particularly salient for the African-American men. They reported that they routinely experienced stereotypical attitudes that linked them to thuggery and violence, among many other negative associations. According to these men, race remains central to their experiences, and their reality is distant from that of a “postracial” society.³ Many reported that their very existence made them suspect in the eyes of some. As Timothy noted: “Just being a black man, shoot, like, you never know, you might fit

¹Strickland (2001).

²Cross (1991); Azibo (1989); Steele and Aronson (1995); Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, and Smith (1998).

³Miles (2008).

the description for murder, and like ‘It’s a black man, slim build with long hair, it was brown.’ ” In focus groups, these men talked about the challenge of simply living as a black man in America. As James put it, “Our life is completely different. Nobody has a life like a black man. Nobody lives like a black man. Nobody. It seems like it’s just so hard. It’s like everything’s designed for us to fail.”

Sample members reported a high level of awareness of the negative associations contained in stereotypes about black men. They felt that stigma and racism are built into American society and are virtually inescapable. As Ed stated:

I’ve been told growing up that you have two strikes against you: one because you’re a young, black male and another because you’re a young, black male. It’s like you have to work 10 times harder [than others] to not get that third strike against you, because the third strike is downtown [going to jail], usually.

These men hoped that attaining higher education would help them escape this fate. For most of their lives, however, they have felt under suspicion simply for being African-American and male. Racial stereotypes linger, and negative associations regarding black males affect many of their interactions with the world. The men felt that anyone not subject to this intense negative scrutiny might have difficulty understanding the pervasiveness of the prejudice they encounter regularly. Many of them felt that the social system in which they live is “designed” for them to fail. Their words illustrate how having “two strikes against you” simply for being a young, black male makes “normal” existence difficult.

While most of the African-American men in the sample experienced the negative associations and expectations described above, they seemed not to internalize them when making choices about their futures, enrolling in college, and pursuing their personal and professional goals. At the same time, they may have been wary of connecting with others for fear of experiencing unfair judgments based on their race and gender. The following two chapters explore the behavior of these students related to their engagement in college and highlight the difficulties they experienced in asking for help from college administrators, faculty, and staff. These challenges may have been reinforced by the many negative race-based experiences they had before arriving at college.

Class and Hispanic Men

Like the African-American men, many of the Hispanic students in this study were aware of stereotypes based on their ethnicity and gender. They reported that stereotypes associated with Hispanic men are compounded by negative associations of class or socioeconomic status within and beyond their own communities. These students discussed feeling judged in their communities based on what they wore or drove and where they came from, as described in the following exchange:

Abelardo: I think here has the worst kind of racism because we discriminate against each other.

Chris: Yeah, but you're all Hispanics. It goes back to the — it's an economical status...

Abelardo: You got money, and you dress "bad ass" and you look like this, and you're so and so...it's just one big ego trip here.

Class hierarchies within the Hispanic community play a significant role in societal perceptions, according to these students. Another student, Heriberto, also discussed being made to feel lower class based on his possessions: "Yeah, the lower-class citizen. I guess you could say that. That will bring down anybody. [I have experienced] racist things, but not towards like race or anything, just more towards of what you have and what you don't." He began by referring to this phenomenon as race-based but then corrected himself by identifying class as the most salient element of the discrimination he experiences. This awareness may push these students to acquire material possessions for their own social comfort and position. Chapter 5 explores in more detail the importance of work and factors of materialism that influence the behavior of these men in college.

The Hispanic men were attuned to class divisions outside of their communities as well. For example, they described being seen as "low lifes" for participating in certain pastimes, such as lowriding.⁴ This activity has spread across the nation and was popular in the communities surrounding two of the colleges in this study. However, the men were keenly aware that lowriding was seen as "low class" by many. One faculty member spoke about this issue as well, describing how mainstream society erroneously conflates a pastime with social value:

...a lot of white folks view [lowriding] as kind of a lower-class thing. The lowrider stuff of course is prominent [here]. And it's been seen as a negative thing instead of just kind of fun and what it is. It's a hobby...the way hot rods were back in the '50's. But there's a cultural bias against lowriders.

The Hispanic men felt that being judged and devalued on the social hierarchy on the basis of their possessions and pastimes was unfair. As noted above, the pressure to acquire possessions may have influenced their need to work, which in turn may have affected their engagement as students. Sensitivity to class issues may also have negatively affected their willingness to seek financial assistance for college.

⁴Lowriding originated in the Chicano culture of southern California and entails driving "Bajito y Suavecito" (low and slow) in a car with a modified (dropped) suspension.

Box 3.1

Student Profile: Carlos

Carlos, who is Hispanic, is a returning student. He graduated from high school more than 10 years ago. He grew up in a severely impoverished area, where he lived with his aunt and uncle in an economically distressed neighborhood without adequate water and sewer systems or paved roads.

For the past eight years, Carlos has been working as a server at a restaurant. He lives with his wife, her 15-year-old daughter, and their 6-year-old son. Like many men in this study, Carlos was motivated by his son to go to college after a lengthy hiatus from school. He does not want his son “growing up thinking that his old man was a bartender, server, catering guy his whole life.”

Carlos, like many in this sample, works full time and is a part-time student. For him, this means taking classes primarily at night. One way that Carlos suggests the school can do more to support students like him is to extend the hours of key offices and resources into the evening. When he comes to school, he finds that the cafeteria, student lounge areas, and bookstore are often closed. Because he works during the day, he cannot easily access these resources at other times, and because there is little available to him when he is at school, he does not spend much time on campus outside of class time.

While Carlos generally approves of his instructors, his interactions with nonfaculty employees at the college vary widely. Carlos and some other students in this study feel more comfortable interacting with employees such as student workers and janitors than with higher-level staff. In his interactions with counseling and advising staff, Carlos described feeling rushed through his appointments and being treated like he was just another number being served.

Native Americans: Moving Between Two Cultures

While most of the Native American men in the sample were largely assimilated, some discussed the challenge they faced in moving from life within their tribes to life in mainstream society. Moving from majority to minority status and back again was psychologically difficult. Ed described his own experience with this transition: “When I was in grade school I was doing fine. It’s a predominately Indian school. And when I reached the high school age, it was like a culture shock, you know, ’cause we were...a minority.” The Native American men faced challenges that were in some ways similar to and in other ways different from those of the African-American and Hispanic men in the sample. Men from all groups felt their “difference” relative to mainstream culture. However, unlike the African-American and Hispanic men, the

Box 3.2

Student Profile: Douglas

Douglas, a young Native American student whose parents separated when he was quite young, understood his role as a provider for his family from an early age. He does not know his father, and his mother moved in with a boyfriend and virtually abandoned her children to her extended family. By and large, Douglas raised himself and his sister.

To support his family, he sold drugs as an adolescent and went “into that whole ‘drug family’ type deal.” He was arrested and spent an extended period of his late adolescence in detention. After leaving juvenile detention at 18, he attended Job Corps, where he earned a facilities maintenance certification and his GED. Nevertheless, he was unable to find work and drifted back into “hustling.” The birth of his daughter led him to enroll in community college to pursue his aspiration of being a chef.

When Douglas first arrived at community college, his attitude about the faculty and the staff was, “If they don’t care about how I do, neither do I.” He would withdraw from classes rather than seek help, especially if his instructors did not specifically encourage his participation.

Over time, though, Douglas has gained maturity as a student and come to understand what he has to do in order to receive the support he needs to be successful. After two years of college, he has overcome an initial hesitation to ask for help in order to achieve his goals.

Native American men sometimes felt that they were entering unfamiliar territory when they left their homes on the reservation.⁵

Some Native American students also felt conflicts within their own communities. One biracial student said that his community did not accept him because his father was African-American, “even though I speak the language better than most of them.”

The Native American men also talked about how their backgrounds shaped their identities and behavior. Adam explained, “Being Native, you don’t really express your feelings to anybody. You kind of hold everything in.” This “quiet” orientation may be in conflict with the need to ask for academic or financial help in college. Many Native American communities, with either gaming or federal revenues, offer assistance to young people pursuing higher education; however, with one exception, the Native American participants in this sample sought no financial assistance from their tribes. They were either unaware of available assistance or felt

⁵While these men may have experienced culture shock when moving from homogenous to multicultural environments as boys or young men, as adults they appeared to be quite assimilated at the time of the interviews — some had enlisted in the military, worked in entertainment, and lived in cities around the country away from their tribal homes.

that scholarships were intended for younger students. The attitudes of the men about money and seeking help from the financial aid office are explored further in Chapter 5.

Stereotypes and Surface Judgments

Across race and ethnicity, the men of color in this study discussed being judged on the basis of their appearance — their choices of hairstyle, car, jewelry, and clothing — in addition to their gender, race, or ethnicity. They reported being targeted as gang members (whether they were or not) as well as being victims of police harassment because of how they looked. It is noteworthy, however, that the men in the sample were quite varied in their appearances. Some dressed in “street” attire (baggy jeans, white T-shirts, braided or loc’ed hair, or goatees). Others wore more traditional or mainstream clothing to college (jeans or khakis, polo shirts or graphic T-shirts, and short haircuts), and a few even dressed formally in dress shirts and suits. While much of the following discussion centers on the experiences of the men who dressed in “street” clothing, men of diverse appearances described instances when they were made to feel suspect or unwelcome in their communities.

The students provided many examples of unfair treatment while they were engaged in everyday activities. For example, Sam, a Hispanic student, explained why he became discouraged from shopping at the local mall:

I’ll be wanting to go into [store name]...but I’ll be like I’m not going to go in there because as soon as I go in there, they’re going to follow me. Even if I have money in my pocket, I wouldn’t go in the mall, period. You have to think about every little thing all the time. It’s crazy.

In a focus group at a different college, Keith, an African-American student, talked about how his friend’s choice of hair style and body art raised the suspicions of the managers at his job:

My homeboy at [store name] I had to go to get him a job when he had dreads⁶ and he got tattoos. So the first day the managers they were like, “What is he? Is he a thug or something?” And I was just like “No. The man’s got tattoos and he’s got dreads. Why he got to be a thug? I got tattoos. Am I a thug too?” They stereotype.

Matais reported his own experience feeling judged based on his appearance:

Yeah, I believe it plays a big part ’cause when people see me they don’t see a college student. That’s just fact. They see gold mouth [teeth], cornrows [braids],

⁶Referring to the hairstyle known as locs, dreadlocks, or dreads.

baggy clothes, chains, and jewelry. They don't even know me. I got better manners and I speak better English than half these people.

Like my family will tell me, "Why don't you dress nice? Why don't you do something else with your hair?" [But] that's being somebody I'm not. I'm not about to go out of my way just to put a suit and tie on just to please somebody else. So like my teachers, take the first day of the classes, for instance, they'll just like look at me, like, "What's going on with this guy? What's he doing in this class?" Like after the first day once they get to talking to me and knowing me, they're like, "OK, you're a pretty smart person, like you should be in the next class. What are you doing in this class?" Everybody tends to judge people, and some people get judged a little more and just the fact that I'm African-American — I don't know, that's the way I see it. I'm not being racist, but if I was Caucasian, wearing a Polo shirt and some short cut and some [flip-flops], I'm pretty sure they'd think I was a college student. So I think that's a big deal, to me at least.

Faustino, a Hispanic student from another college, described a frightening experience in a store:

As soon as I walked into the convenience store just so I could go use the bathroom, I swear to God, I just saw the clerk grab a gun because she thought I was going to steal from the place because, you know, they're not that used to seeing Mexicans there or anybody of different color.

Ramon, another Hispanic student, described a situation in which he was targeted in a store because he looked "Mexican," thus fitting a profile of a shoplifter:

Sometimes my attire and something to do with the fact that I looked really "Mexican," and if I choose to wear a skull shirt and my shoes and my hair slicked back, they are thinking, "He's a bad kid. He's going to break something. He's going to steal something." And it's happened many times.

Both Hispanic and African-American students discussed being targeted as gang members because of the way they looked. For example, Esteban said that many assume he is a gang member (he is not) because of his goatee: "It's because they just came up with like absurd conclusions, like if you grow a little patch here you're considered part of a gang." Reported gang affiliation among the men in the sample was rare; however, several of the participants did report being perceived as gang members or suspects by law enforcement authorities and others. Clothing choices — in one case, wearing a white T-shirt and sagging pants — were at times considered sufficient license for police officers to question and even frisk these men. According to Juve, an African-American student:

They couldn't point out certain people and say, "OK, you were involved in this," so they banned white tees from [local community], period. They had a rule around [local community] that if they saw more than four people with white tees

on, they were in a gang, and the police would come over and ask you questions and stop you and whatnot.

Two other African-American students shared this experience of being targeted by police, right near their college campus:

David: Because really, I could leave [college campus], right now. I usually keep my [parking tag] on the car....

Jamie: Yeah, because it's a drug area, so they can pull me over and be like, "Well, you in a high-crime area; we wanted to check you out." "I'm coming from school, sir." "I don't care. Let me see what you got in your book bag."

David: It's easy. I can just be leaving school, having a good day, go back down the street and [simulates police siren].

These men of color consistently reported being on the receiving end of harmful, stereotypical judgments based on their appearance (race, ethnicity, gender, and clothing). At the same time — despite negative, discouraging, and discriminatory experiences in high school and in their communities before college — they are highly motivated to pursue their academic and personal goals. They reported a deep awareness of the low expectations and stereotypes associated with their racial or ethnic group, but they do not appear to have internalized these messages as they set personal goals and made the choice to go to college.

Chapter 4

Engagement on Campus

Academic and social engagement have been identified in the literature as key elements of student success.¹ According to a report released by the Community College Survey of Student Engagement:

Research shows that the more actively engaged students are — with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with the subject matter they study — the more likely they are to learn, to stick with their studies, and to attain their academic goals. Student engagement, therefore, is a valuable yardstick for assessing the quality of colleges' educational practices and identifying ways they can produce more successful results — across all subgroups of students.²

Engagement is influenced by many factors, from institutional environment to individual student readiness,³ all of which interact with the identity factors discussed in the preceding chapter. For example, as Kuh et al. explain:

Cultural perspectives suggest that many historically underrepresented students encounter challenges when they get to college that make it difficult for them to take advantage of their school's resources for learning and personal development. Student perceptions of the institutional environment and dominant norms and values influence how students think and spend their time. Taken together, these properties influence student satisfaction and the extent to which students take part in educationally purposeful activities.⁴

Existing research has identified culturally based barriers to engagement, particularly for students who are historically underrepresented on college campuses, but it has rarely given voice to these students themselves.

The following two chapters will build upon past research by exploring engagement from the perspective of male students of color, using their own words to report on how they perceive their college environment, the people in it, and its importance relative to the other demands they face. This analysis reveals that identity plays a large role in the engagement of

¹Astin (1977, 1993); Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005); Kuh et al. (1991); Kuh and Whitt (1988); Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 1995).

²Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2008), p. 7.

³“Taken together, the weight of evidence suggests that noncognitive factors (such as attachment to college, personal and emotional adjustment, social adjustment, and a strong support person) play an important role in promoting black males' success in college” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 29).

⁴Kuh et al. (2006), p. 14.

these men, but self-identification is not always driven by race or ethnicity. In fact, the men in our study did not tie their racial or ethnic identities to their behavior as college students; none said that he would choose to engage or disengage in school based on these factors. Instead, the students in the sample reported that their identity as *men* greatly influenced their behavior. This chapter will begin with a discussion of the concept of “manhood” as it relates to student engagement. The remainder of the chapter will build upon the themes of race and gender to explore how students’ identities relate to their experiences on campus, including their relationships with other students, faculty, and staff.

Manhood

The literature indicates that gender identity often serves as a dominant frame for how individuals engage with society at large. Notions of manhood strongly influence behavior, and “violations of gender stereotypes are met with various forms of punishment and devaluation.”⁵ For example, some studies suggest that society prescribes male behavior in accordance with traits that are deemed gender-appropriate, including ambition, breadwinning, aggression, individualism, independence, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and leadership.⁶ Men are taught from childhood to act in ways that reinforce these traits,⁷ and stereotypes based on gender tend to translate directly into societal expectations for behavior.

As introduced in the previous chapter, for these men, gender as a facet of identity appears to be different from either race or ethnicity. While the men in this study did not accept low expectations and stereotypes based on their race or ethnicity, they did seem to accept the expectations and traits of manhood. Furthermore, they viewed stereotypically feminine traits, especially any indication of dependence, as unacceptable.⁸

For the men in this study, living up to the expectations of manhood sometimes stood in the way of engagement. This finding is consistent with the literature, as in the following statement: “If the male socialization process indeed shapes or restricts the emotional skills and development of boys and men, then it seems likely that the demands of the college environment will create challenges for men related to their relationships and experiences on the college campus.”⁹ Expected behavior for successful college students — including exploring campus activities, making meaningful friendships, seeking help when needed, and placing a priority on

⁵Prentice and Carranza (2002), p. 269.

⁶Kimmel and Messner (2007); Harris and Harper (2008).

⁷Kimmel and Messner (2007).

⁸Harris and Harper (2008).

⁹Ludeman (2004), as cited in Harris and Harper (2008), p. 28.

school responsibilities over employment — conflicts with the lessons men learn and the messages they internalize about how men are supposed to behave.

The majority of the African-American, Hispanic, and Native American men who participated in this study reported challenges engaging in “normal” behavior, such as making friends on campus and seeking help from college staff. Despite differences in their racial, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds, the men tended to share a concept of “proper” male behavior that led them to resist such activities. When these men discussed the strengths, weaknesses, successes, and failures in their lives and in college, they continually related their actions to their need to feel that they are independent and strong. Manhood emerged as a lens through which to view the experiences of the men who participated in this study and the engagement behavior that affected their lives as students.

Early Experiences on Campus: Positive and Negative

Overwhelmingly, and in contrast to what they reported experiencing in their high schools and local communities, these students described feeling welcomed at their respective campuses when they first arrived. Jimmy, an African-American student, talked about an encouraging experience with his first adviser:

There’s this one lady she helped me ’cause once I told her I didn’t want to go to those classes, she was the first counselor that I talked to. She pretty much took care of all the paperwork...She helped me choose classes...I remember her. When I last saw her I remember thinking, man that’s a good adviser. I’m glad I went to her.

Other students reported feeling comfortable on their college campuses because they felt that they were judged more on the basis of their individual performance rather than their race or ethnicity and gender. These men seemed to believe that their colleges were more “color blind” than their high schools. In the words of Steve-O, an African American student:

...the college doesn’t see a color, just sees a body, maybe male or female. They see a student. I see it myself that there’s no favoritism. You have to go to class; you’ve got to pass your tests; you’ve got to pass the quiz, and you got to pass your finals. That’s anyone, any race, any age.

Bookman, an African-American student attending another college, responded to a question about discrimination on campus: “I don’t experience any negativity because of my race here. I feel I get treated the same as everyone else.” Samuel, from the same college, said: “It doesn’t matter what color...you are. Say I’m Spanish and I do my work and stay in class, they’re not going to look at me different. It’s not what you are. It’s what you do.” Overall, the

men felt welcomed and accepted by their colleges when they first arrived and did not report limitations in the college environment based on their race or ethnicity.

Unfortunately, these feelings of welcome did not always persist beyond the initial enrollment period. Instead, some of the men began to feel that college faculty and staff made judgments about them based on their appearance, race, ethnicity, and gender. They felt they were seen as outsiders and not as accepted members of their college communities. In an interview, Barrington spoke about how this affected his comfort level on campus:

It depends. Some days, I feel like I ain't supposed to be here just because of the way people look at me, but some days I just don't care. You know, some days I just look at it like this is where I go to school. It's either you're going to like it or you don't have to say anything to me. If I pay my money to come to school, I'm going to come. What people have to say about me doesn't really matter because I'm still going to be who I am.

Barrington's choice of words is noteworthy; rather than saying that he feels he does not belong, he says that he does not "care" about whether or not he belongs. Not caring about belonging is certainly different from feeling a sense of belonging. In Barrington's case, not caring still leaves him feeling excluded. Barrington indicates that he will continue with school regardless, but the literature suggests that the chances of persistence for someone in his situation are slim.

Many of these reports of discomfort on campus mirror the findings from the previous chapter, in which the men reported feeling judged based on appearance. Their "street" look appeared to stimulate a negative response on their college campuses. At one campus in particular, some students — namely the African-American men — reported feeling discriminated against based on their hairstyles and choices of clothing. Burt expressed his frustration with this perception of unfair judgment:

Man, like the f*** staff! They look at me like I'm crazy because I've got dreads. They look at me like, "What are you doing here on this f*** campus?" I'm like, "Damn b***, I paid [tuition]. Don't be looking at me and always judging me."

Stan, a student from the same college, talked about assumptions people on campus made about an African-American man he knows who attends his college:

...the guy who does my tattoos, he goes here and he's black with dreads and got tattoos everywhere and he got a grill [gold teeth] in his mouth, and people see him as like, "what is he doing here?" But he's a tutor at the [math] center and he got straight A's!

Olusanya reports that he has been judged negatively as well, but that teachers' judgments can quickly be reversed:

Yeah, when I come in they're already looking at me like, "This guy ain't going to do nothing." [The teacher is] like that till I open my mouth and I start speaking to him. "Oh, well, maybe this guy is smarter than I thought he was. I underestimated this guy. I thought this, I thought that." I feel that, because a lot of my teachers really perceive me in a certain way until I start speaking. Yeah, and go back to the culture. It's because of the things I like to wear, the clothes I like to wear, the way I like to talk, all that is perceived as negative, black. To other black men, it's just how we wear our clothes. It's how we talk. It's how we do.

The men frequently reported that they viewed negative judgments based on their appearances as undeserved and wrong. They wondered why they should be judged and made to feel different or unwelcome because of how they look or who they are. In their minds, looking a certain way does not detract from their seriousness as students or their ability to succeed in college; tattoos, locs, and even gold teeth do not interfere with their ability to study.

As they rejected the notion that their value as community college students could be tied to their clothes or hair styles, these men consistently reported that they were unwilling to change their appearance in order to mollify those who sit in judgment of them. In a focus group discussion, Steve-O — another African-American student with long locs — affirmed, "I don't give a f***. I'm not cutting my hair. You can look at me crazy all day. It took too long." This statement reverberates with notions of manhood — independence, strength, individuality, and self-reliance. Nevertheless, the choice to stay "strong" as men and members of their racial or ethnic group could have negative repercussions for these students, should they be treated differently in college by those who see them as interlopers because of their appearance. (This study did not collect evidence to support or reject this supposition.)

Relationships with Others on Campus

Establishing relationships with other students, faculty, advisers, and other staff is fundamental to success in college. Some researchers posit that opportunities to relate to other students, faculty, and staff in purposeful ways can contribute to self-esteem and confidence.¹⁰ In theory, establishing relationships with others on campus should be natural and easy; however, this is frequently not the case with men in the community college setting. The following sections examine the relationships these men had (or did not have) with other students and faculty on their campuses.

¹⁰Kuh et al. (2006).

Friendships with Fellow Students

Making friends can help college students feel more engaged and comfortable about spending time on campus. It can also help them do better in their classes, especially when friendships incorporate opportunities to network and help each other study. While a few students in this sample talked about having made friends on campus, most did not. A more common attitude was that they were not in school to make friends. For example, Barrington said, "I don't need no friends. I didn't come here [to college] looking for friends, you know?...I don't have a problem not talking to anybody...I came here to get my lesson, you know?" Similarly, Manuel said, "I don't mind making friends, but it's like, that's not really the purpose of why I'm here." In this same focus group, Jimmy responded, "I'm the same way. I came to get an education and that's it."

One possible reason for the reluctance of these men to make friends on campus is their negative experiences with friendships. As James explained:

Friends are just temporary, but if they're gonna pull you away from something you want, you say, "You know what? I won't talk to you anymore. Continue what you're doing." Don't forget about what you're doing and then go with your compadres because they're gonna end up becoming two faces....every friend in this world is two-faced.

This student reveals the crux of many students' opposition to friendship: a sense of the untrustworthiness of others and the potential for being pulled off course. Several other students made similar choices to avoid getting involved with so-called friends who were engaged in negative activities such as drugs or crime. As Stan said:

Those are friends that I need to cut off...to let go...my life would be so much better if I just never talked to some of them...but the...so-called friends, they're not really my friends. They are users...manipulators...pimps...they sell stuff on the streets and on the corners.

Similarly, Jorge said:

Most of my friends I have met since I was young...are gone, not because they broke up with me...It's just that I decided not to speak with them because...they went some way that I don't follow...like if you're going to be doing drugs...or something like that, I don't want to be involved because...I'm not a tag-along...

Thus Jorge expressed his independence in his choice not to follow in the footsteps of his childhood friends. Other participants, like Pablo below, linked their careful choice of friends to their level of maturity:

Growing up...I was that kid that sat on the corner, but I wasn't the one dealing...I would just be there because of my "boys." Then, as you get older, you

start realizing...[Who are] my true boys?...I always chose my friends as people who are gonna keep you up there, not bring you down.

These students' experiences could have influenced their reported lack of interest in developing friendships in college. If they see former friends headed down the wrong track, and if they are working to build a positive future for themselves, then they might not see how establishing friendships in college — even with other people who share their interest in getting an education — could be helpful to them. Indeed, based on their experiences, friends seem to pose more of a risk than a support to education.

This perceived conflict between making friends and pursuing an academic purpose may not be unique to the minority male collegians interviewed for this study. An earlier MDRC report, based on interviews with male and female community college students of different races in New York and Ohio, found that peer group attachment was only marginally important to most of the students interviewed. The students at one of these colleges preferred to “keep to themselves” and focus on academics rather than on the social aspects of school.¹¹

Like the students in the New York and Ohio report described above, the men interviewed for this study revealed that, by and large, they were unaware of the possible academic and social benefits of establishing friendships in college. Interestingly, within the focus groups, they may have begun to experience some of the positive elements of friendship for the first time as college students. There were instances in which the men made efforts to connect with one another during the focus groups, including offering to lend or sell a needed book, dispensing advice about where to go on campus or in the community for financial and other assistance, or supporting a controversial opinion or difficult experience shared by a fellow student.

For example, in one focus group held during the second round of interviews, a new participant revealed that he had served in a particular branch of the military. Upon hearing this, another man who had also served in that branch reached out to him, welcoming him to the group and identifying his own past affiliation. The second man subsequently spoke out emphatically in support of this newcomer as he talked about a difficult situation he faced related to an extended deployment. Another instance of sharing within the focus group occurred in a small group that by chance was populated exclusively by gay men. The men were able to talk about challenges they faced in relation to a variety of issues, from their sexuality to their difficult computer course.

These focus groups also seemed to break down barriers of race and ethnicity. In a racially mixed group, one man revealed that he probably would never have spoken to men of a different race at his campus had he not gotten to know some of them in the group. In his

¹¹Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, and Ray (2006), p. 38.

community, people of different races or ethnicities do not socialize. Although there were no reports of deep friendships being generated from these groups — which is not surprising, given that the focus groups met only for an hour or so every three months over the course of a school year — some of the men did report that they continued talking to one another on campus.

Relationships with Faculty and Staff

The literature establishes the importance of students' having a strong support person in their lives to facilitate their transition to college and increase their satisfaction as students.¹² Most of the students in this study, however, were not attuned to the benefits of these sorts of relationships. As with their friendships with fellow students, these men did not, by and large, report having significant relationships with college personnel. Most did not interact with faculty or staff outside of class and mandatory advisory meetings, and only a handful of men reported that they had a faculty or staff person whom they would approach with questions or problems. George was the only man in the sample to describe a close, significant relationship with a faculty member:

As of now, the best teacher I have, the closest is [instructor's name]. The first day we got in there and he was explaining to us how to read an essay. He said you should read it the first time through, write down phrases or words you don't understand, and look them up. Check it out and read it again so you understand. He was like, "For example, [band name], does anybody know this?" I was like, "Isn't that a Norwegian death metal band?" He was like, "Close, they're from Sweden." I was like, "Right on!" We've been talking back and forth for weeks about music. I guess he's writing these articles for a Polish newspaper on metal in Sweden. I've been helping him out with research for his article on that. We've gotten really close, to the point where we're more like friends than him an instructor and me a student. It helps out a lot in learning.

A few other students talked about teachers they liked, but none had developed relationships as strong as George's.

The Demand for Respect

Students were asked whether feeling that they could relate to faculty and staff, and vice versa, was important to them. Across the board, students rejected this notion. They did not expect to relate to faculty and staff and generally did not do so. *Relating* was not their issue; *respect* was. Again and again, the men indicated how critical being respected was to their feeling comfortable and engaged on campus. Pietro said:

¹²Strayhorn (2008).

The staff has a stank ass attitude. Like, they don't treat you with the proper respect. This [coming to college] is one choice of what we had to do. We made it our option....We didn't have to come out here to get no education. We're trying to do better for ourselves, and they still don't see that. They still look at me like another way and shit don't work like that. They don't show enough respect.

In the relationships and interactions these men had with others, respect appears to be a lynchpin and a central component of their notions of manhood. Many students said that they would stop making attempts to interact with advisers, college staff, or instructors if they felt disrespected. Any internal inclination to trust or engage could easily be turned off, and once turned off, it was difficult to re-ignite. According to the interview data, even a single negative experience in which the men felt disrespected — for who they were and what they were doing by attending college — could make them decide never to return for assistance.

On the other hand, some students shared positive experiences with faculty or staff members who seemed to care. *Caring* is a trait the students appeared to value highly in faculty and staff. An exchange between two of the men in a focus group regarding a particularly attentive instructor illustrates this point:

Stanley: She helps you understand because she puts it in layman's terms. That way it's real simple. Like if I was just having a discussion with somebody and just talking to them about it. And we all help each other in there.

Miles: It's like watching Barney every day.

Stanley: She keeps it really simple.

Douglas: That's how my math teacher is. That's why I like her. She's good. She'll find something for you to relate to. She'll go dig in the trash or take a coke bottle out. She'll find something. If I don't get it, she'll stand there for 15, 20, or 30 minutes until I get it. She's good about helping you understand. She's a good teacher.

While most of the men did not have stories like these, quite a few expressed enthusiasm about particular instructors. One continuing student reported that he had taken every class in his favorite instructor's math sequence, only moving on to another faculty member when he reached a level that his favorite instructor did not teach. Those instructors who made an effort to make sure their students understood what they were teaching seemed to reach the men in this study. When the men sensed caring from their instructors, they appeared to be able to better engage with both the material and the faculty person. They were more willing to ask questions of the instructor and each other and to get the help they needed.

Some of the faculty interviewed for this study seemed to recognize the importance these men placed on personal attention, caring, and respect. For example, one faculty member

reported that he shares his own math experiences with his students in order to let them know that he understands their position. He wants them to feel that he is on their side, wants them to succeed, and can help them if they choose to trust him and his intentions toward them:

I'm pretty blunt with my math students...I am not a math whiz. I know what they don't get. I know how they struggle. I know how embarrassing it is. I know how to cheat, and that's stressful, and I'm pretty honest with them. I try to get that over in the first week of class. "I know who you are. I know what you're not getting, so you need to trust me. If you go with me on this, you're going to pass. You just have to come to class, and you will pass and you will get this."

Sharing with students in this way may be the ultimate sign of respect. The students who took classes from this instructor, who happens to be white, confirmed his caring attitude. They also appreciated the presence of a classroom aide, who is Hispanic. Importantly, the men did not explicitly focus on the ethnicity of these individuals, but rather on their talent in creating a classroom environment that made it "safe" for them to get help and learn.

The faculty who made sure students learned what they needed to learn, by whatever means necessary, were the most highly rated and valued by these men. One faculty person reflected on the reviews she gets from her students: "I get feedback. They view me as funny. They like my sense of humor, and I often get comments that they know that I care; and that's nice...." These men appear to be able to easily distinguish between the faculty who are genuinely interested in them as individuals and those who see them as just another group to teach. While one opinionated faculty person said that "You either have [this sense of caring] or you don't," colleges may be able to take action to encourage interaction and connections between faculty and students. Possible approaches for colleges will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Extracurricular Activities

Even though they made statements about not wanting to make friends, the men on all four campuses called for more opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities. Many expressed an interest in venues for socializing with other men, especially athletics. They complained about the lack of gymnasiums, basketball courts, and even support groups specifically for men on their campuses. Jamie said: "There's like no fields to go like kick it on, like at [a university close by]. There's nothing to just go hang out at." Students at another campus reported that they had participated in sports in high school and middle school. They said that if the college provided an athletic program with teams, they would feel more involved and would take more pride in attending their college. As Davis explained:

I just really think that this college needs something for the students to be involved in besides just going to class, and lab, and stuff like that. Something after

school to go to...a place that all the students could hang out and have fun...like a sports team or something...’cause I don’t really feel no school spirit here. It’s like you go to school, and that’s it, just to learn. You’ve got to learn, but you want to have something else to do with school, like, something to be proud of going to [this college]. Like if we had a basketball team or something like that.

Students at the other three colleges made similar comments. A faculty member cited the lack of sports facilities as an issue for all students:

I wish this college provided more of a community experience so that the students could go out and play on a basketball court at noon. We don’t even have a basketball court here. We have no physical things; you know...something that brings students into a more community feel. They come to class and they leave, that’s it. We don’t have anything else.

Faculty at a different college talked about how their involvement in sports on campus strengthened their classroom relationships with male Hispanic students. According to one faculty member:

Accessibility to students outside of class — I know that some of us have participated in intramural sports, and so we’re out there, and we’re meeting and talking, and other students get to see us, and we’re participating as well, and we’re actually human beings as well right outside the classroom, and they see us in the classroom, and they want to, or they feel like they can talk to us like a friend, so they see us out there, and a lot of us do that stuff and make ourselves accessible to our students.

As this faculty member indicates, sports and recreational activities have the potential to increase students’ engagement on campus by helping them connect to other students and instructors in informal settings.

Chapter 5

Money, Work, and Seeking Help from Others

Chapter 4 explored the importance of identity — and particularly notions of manhood — in shaping students' relationships with others on campus. It revealed that traditional concepts of male independence and strength act powerfully on these students, affecting both their perceptions of their college environment and their own behavior on campus. This chapter will build upon that discussion to examine how the identities of these men affected two other aspects of their college experiences: their desire to work for money outside of school and their comfort asking for help when they need it. As in Chapter 4, strong themes of manhood emerge through students' reflections on the competing demands of work and school life.

The men in this study reported consistently that making ends meet as college students was a major concern for them. They worried about paying college expenses, as well as living expenses, and many needed to support themselves and their families. While their desire for self-reliance is in many ways laudable, it may also impede their ability to engage fully in school, thus making it harder for them to accomplish their educational goals. Notably, the literature identifies being financially independent as a risk factor that can threaten engagement, persistence in school, and graduation from college.¹ The following section explores the issue of financial independence as it relates to the college experiences of the men in the sample.

Combining Work and School

As noted earlier, a majority of the sample worked full time and attended college part time. Most of the men explained that they worked in order to support their families. As noted in Chapter 2, these men were generally family men; even some of the younger ones who did not have families of their own felt responsibility to support their parents, grandparents, and extended families. Whether they still lived at home or not, few men in our sample reported that they looked to parents or family members for help with college costs or living expenses; the vast majority were completely financially independent.

Masculine as well as racial and ethnic cultural values reinforce the expectation that these men should work. For example, Miguel, a Hispanic student who was working a full-time job while enrolled part time in college, explained that he felt the need to work to support his wife, who lives out of state with her parents. Furthermore, he related these feelings to his identity as a man:

¹Kuh et al. (2006); Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2008).

It's like, as a man, I still got to support...She's not working at the moment. She goes to school. So, I still have to come up with money to help my father pay the rent, pay my car insurance, pay my gas, fix my car and still send money to [her] so I can at least help her out with her cell phone bills, clothes and stuff like that. Even though she lives with her parents, but still, me, as a man, like, [I can't say] "Yeah, live off your father." That's not me, you know what I mean?

Miguel's identity as a breadwinner is apparent when he uses phrases like, "that's not me" and "as a man." His view of manhood holds that he is responsible for providing financially for his wife, so he works to support himself and his family while going to school.

As noted earlier in the report, most of the men had only a high school diploma or a GED. As a result, their employment options were largely limited, and their earnings tended to be low. Some men had worked in better-paying, traditionally male jobs in the past — for example, in construction or on oil rigs — but they were unable to combine those sorts of employment with school. Jaime pointed to such better-paying jobs as the reason his friends were not going to college: "...I had a whole bunch of my friends go work in the [oil rigs], and they come back home with a whole bunch of money." Faced with such opportunity, a college education — which requires a financial sacrifice in the short term — can look less appealing.

Because earning money was so important to these men, the amount of time they needed to devote to employment was a major problem for them. Working full time and attending college part time are two risk factors the literature associates with preventing students from persisting in school.² An important measure of student engagement is the "amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities."³ Since many of these students were working many hours, they reported only being able to spend the required amounts of time on campus to attend classes and minimal amounts of time on homework and studying outside of class. Douglas said:

Once I leave campus I'm done with school. I haven't got time for school...Like if I've got homework I'll go to the library and do it before I leave [campus] because I know once I leave there's zero chance that I'm going to do it. That's just it. I'm not going to find time. It's just not a priority then, so I try to get everything done while I'm here.

Many of these students talked about their struggles to balance full-time jobs with school. Some even reported that increases in hours or promotions at work led directly to their grades going down or deciding to drop courses. Balancing work and school was the greatest challenge of college for many of these men.

²Kuh et al. (2006).

³Kuh et al. (2006), p. 31.

Box 5.1

Academic Performance of Men in the Study

How did the men in this study perform in math? How many persisted to the next semester? To answer these questions, transcript data were collected for this small sample of students over the two semesters during which they were interviewed. On average, 62 percent of the sample passed the developmental math course they were taking during the first semester of the study. This rate of course completion is more than twice as high as the pass rate for the highest-level developmental math course (one level above the course studied here) by African-American, Hispanic, and Native American males in Round 1 Achieving the Dream colleges, as cited in MDRC's baseline report.⁴ With regard to persistence, 75 percent of the students in the sample who were enrolled during the fall 2007 semester returned for the spring 2008 semester. This persistence rate is also somewhat higher than described in the aforementioned report.

These findings suggest that the men in this study may be somewhat higher performing than men of color generally. At one college in particular, 86 percent of the participants passed the developmental math course they were taking during the first semester they were interviewed. This college may have had higher success rates than others because it enforced mandatory participation in the school's math tutoring center. While many of these students complained about the requirement, saying that it conflicted with their work schedules, it may have improved their pass rates relative to students with similar racial, ethnic, gender, and neighborhood characteristics at other community colleges.

The choice these men made to work more hours and spend less time studying runs counter to what is required to be successful in school, particularly in math. The instructors who were interviewed said that passing developmental math requires even more study time and practice than other subject areas. Many faculty members stressed the need for all students to devote extra time outside of class to be successful in math. In the words of one instructor, "Math is one of the subjects you don't get just by looking at a book. You have to do the homework. You got to practice with it. But we do live in an instant gratification society, and Internet, computers, cell phone and 'I want everything now.'"

Faculty members also observed that this population of students tended to place a priority on work. As one said, "They don't prioritize college as a part of their life, college is something they do on the side. They have 40-hour work or [time] with their family...their mentality is somewhere else." Another faculty member at a different campus said, "A lot of them have plates full because they're working too many hours, and they don't realize they...need to cut down on work time if they're going to be a college student."

⁴Brock et al. (2007).

Students at all of the colleges also discussed their struggles with the priority of jobs over school. Students at one college in particular, located in an area with a very tight and racially stratified local employment environment, were proud that they could even secure employment in such an environment. One student expressed his conflicting values about work and college:

Bookman: Right now I think I'm more dedicated to my job than I am to school. I just need to get my priorities in check and change a couple of things.

Interviewer: What's most important to you?

Bookman: Between school and work? Right now it's school...or school should be but I think work is more important because I'm getting a check for it...school should be way more important because that's how I'm going to get to a better life and get a bigger check once I get that degree. So I need to put school first. In the long run school is way more important.

Some of the men saw education as important but also as somewhat of an inconvenience. Danilo explained how he and other older male students would leave school if need be to protect their jobs:

I guess the older [men, those] past 25, they already have issues like family...and work, you know? Because you might think that their education is more important and everything, but in reality if they're going to lose their job they're not going to come back to school. You think they're going to say, "Oh, it's going to help me out in the long run?" I don't think so. The truth is...you know what? School's going to have to wait. I'll just come back. Maybe things will turn out better later on.

When these men do well in the work world, they receive raises and promotions, which are rewards that directly and immediately benefit themselves and their families, unlike the longer-term rewards of education.

Working and the Culture of Materialism: Faculty and Student Perspectives

Beyond providing for the basic expenses of living, family support, and school, a few students also expressed a desire to work for money to buy items like cell phones, electronic accessories, and cars. Messages from popular culture and the media likely reinforce these students' feelings about spending. Materialism seemed particularly important for the younger men in the sample. They wanted certain things and, as established earlier, would work to get them. Unfortunately, this took time away from their studies.

The data reveal a cultural, or perhaps a generational, divide between younger students and faculty regarding consumption of material goods. The younger men tended to view the

pursuit of expensive possessions as normal and did not dwell on it during interviews and focus groups. By contrast, faculty and staff across campuses spoke extensively on this topic and frequently referred to their students' focus on material things as excessive or inappropriate. For example, one faculty member commented on the widespread material desires of American youth:

Society has kind of graduated to this. Well, yeah, "Check out my new phone," or "Check out my new car." "Be cool." If you have an iPhone, you're cool. If you're not on an iPhone, then you're not cool. And priorities are placed on being cool — image.

Another faculty member talked about the interruptions she saw that interfered with time at school and engagement among Hispanic male students, which ties in to their own criticism of an overly class-based or materialistic focus within their communities:

That I see the most of with Hispanic men...very tuned in to the cell phones and the music...so it's kind of a lot of extended high school kind of behavior...some real orientation towards consumer stuff...very much into their cars...; but they really make an effort to make sure they have the money for the nicer cars and the nicer things, and sometimes that interrupts focus. "Where is it that you are and where do you need to be, other than to get more money to buy another car?" We have those talks.

Some of the faculty addressed what they viewed as skewed priorities among their male students. For example, one faculty member described a desire for the finer things in life among the African-American men she teaches:

Of course, they like fine clothes; they want all the bells and whistles with phones and cars, and all that costs money. They get themselves in debt, and they have to work all these hours, so they can't devote the time to their education they need to....

This faculty person was not alone in her view. A number of faculty interviewed for this study decried the materialism they perceived among men of all racial and ethnic groups and throughout American culture. The focus on work over school, whether to provide for basic needs or to make exceptional purchases, emerged as a significant obstacle to the engagement of these men. In short, time spent at work is time not spent in school or on studies.

Self-Reliance and Discomfort Asking for Help

Seeking out assistance from fellow students, staff, and faculty is important for student success. These men reported, however, that they were not interested in making friends or connecting with faculty on campus. Many were working full time off campus and, according to faculty, spending fewer hours on their studies than necessary to be successful. To further

compound the problem, many of the men in the sample reported difficulty asking for help. Many stated that they felt they must and would succeed on their own. Phrases such as “I can do it myself” or “it’s on me [to succeed]” were repeated frequently in focus groups on all four campuses.

The men in the study felt that asking for help from others was in direct conflict with their notions of being their “own man” — independent, self-reliant, and breadwinning for themselves and their families. Bookman said:

I’m the type of person, I like buying my stuff with my own money. The clothes I wear, I paid for. That apartment I stay at, I pay for that. My water, I pay for all of that. My parents didn’t pay for that...so it does make me feel better about myself, when I earn it myself and pay for it myself.

Most of the students in this study were much more likely to be giving financial support to their families than asking for it. The breadwinner role was one they were quite comfortable playing. They saw asking for money as “freeloading” and reported they would rather struggle to make ends meet than ask for financial help. Lovell linked how he saw himself as a man to his aversion to asking for financial assistance from the state:

Because I see, I’m not the kind of person that says, “Oh, yeah, you know...Medicare or Medicaid” or nothing like that. Me, never have I ever asked for help from the government, like food stamps or nothing. I mean, I’ll eat soups...I’ll find means that I can.

In this way, Lovell emphasizes his preference for struggling to make ends meet or cutting back on his own consumption rather than accepting assistance from the government.

Some students took pride in paying for school with their own funds without asking for assistance. Bill says, “I paid for school, out of my pocket. I pay for my books...I ain’t ask nobody to help me, you know, I ain’t need no help, that’s the type of person I am.” Like the other students above, Bill’s preference for supporting himself is tied to his sense of self-sufficiency and independence — traits that are also emblematic of traditional notions of manhood.

The students consistently reported a strong preference for money earned over money given and placed a priority on work over other sources of financial support. This is particularly important to note, given that many were only able to work for low or moderate wages in jobs that required many hours to generate enough money to support themselves, their school costs, and their families. Unfortunately, these long hours of employment kept them away from campus and may have decreased their engagement in school.

Getting Help from the Financial Aid Office

A few of the men reported that they received financial aid from their respective colleges. Those who did indicated that it was indispensable. Christopher said, “Yeah, if I didn’t have financial aid, I wouldn’t be in school right now,” to which Jay replied, “Me neither.” The students who got financial aid used it for basic needs — school expenses, child care, food, housing, and transportation. Some of those who had experience with the federal financial aid process complained about policies that assumed parental support was available, when in reality it was not an option.⁵

During the final focus group, the men expressed a desire for more information about financial aid, as they reported that financial concerns were their biggest worry as college students. Many of the men were relatively uninformed about available financial aid processes, such as filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) — a process well documented in the literature to be complicated and intimidating for those unfamiliar with it.⁶ In one focus group, the men learned directly from one another about processes for applying for aid and opportunities for additional aid on and off campus. Those with more knowledge offered support to others by sharing what they knew and giving out contact information and phone numbers to call for further assistance.

Difficulty Asking Other Students for Help

As noted earlier, the men found it challenging to make friends at all and often had particular difficulty connecting with other men on campus. Some said that they did not feel comfortable asking male students for help. Bookman, an African-American student, described his reluctance in this way: “It might take me a while to actually become friends with you or hang out with you just because [of] that whole trust factor.” This student and others noted that it was normal in their families and communities to be wary of other men, as conflict or violence could arise easily. An exchange in one focus group highlighted how this likelihood affected these men in their communities and on campus:

Interviewer: Do you guys get that man-to-man conflict?

Sam: Hell, yeah.

⁵Under federal statute, college students may be considered independent for financial aid purposes only if they meet at least one of the following criteria: over 24 years of age; married; have a child or other dependents for whom they provide more than half their support; enrolled as a graduate or professional student; qualified veteran of the U.S. military or on active duty in the U.S. military; or an orphan (parents deceased) or ward of the court. Students who do not meet any of these criteria are considered dependent and must provide their parents’ information on their financial aid application or it will be rejected (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

⁶College Board (2008).

Interviewer: Does that come up here at school?

Sam: Hell, yeah.

Davis: Yeah.

Ernie: First day of school [in the parking lot].

Davis: I'm working on a buddy that has a big problem with that. One slight word will set him off. I've been working on him to bring that devil down and bring out something else. But...there's a lot of that around here.

Sam: But that's just the thing, we're guys —

Ernie: [Interposing] It's part of growing up....

These students talked about physical conflicts with other men as part of “being guys” and “growing up” in their neighborhoods. If they see these behaviors as part of masculine identities that are acceptable in their neighborhoods, it is understandable that they might hesitate to approach other male students for help at their colleges. This may be especially true for men who grew up in similarly “tough” neighborhoods, where contact between men can easily lead to violent conflict.

On the other hand, the participants did not feel the same reluctance to approach female classmates for help. It seems that women were less threatening. Of course, they were also more numerous; during classroom observations, women tended to outnumber men in general, and especially male students of color. With some variation, the observations also revealed that the small number of minority men in these classes tended to sit with women rather than with other men.

For some students, the reluctance to ask for help decreased as they gained more college experience. As noted in the student profile in Box 3.2, Douglas was one of the few students who learned to ask for help from faculty. He explained how his perception of his instructors improved over two years of college:

I'm not shy to let you know my background or the problems I've had, so like the teachers, they're straight up with me because I'm straight up with them...they're real understanding of where I'm coming from and how I present myself....

Some students also said that they had learned the value of having study partners. When asked what he learned about being a college student over time, Pablo replied:

Basically you have to partner off with somebody. It might not be immediately, but eventually, you're gonna find that one person — “You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.” Somebody, not to depend on, but it would be great if you could partner up with somebody that if worst comes to worst they could say, “Listen,

we learned this, and he said he's not going to teach it again, so, here you go." Somebody that can help you still remain up there if you had to miss a couple of days.

Such statements, however, were rarely heard in the focus groups. Community colleges may need to play a more active role in connecting men of color to other students and faculty and getting them engaged in campus life. The following chapter offers some recommendations on how this might be achieved.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Policy Recommendations and Communication Strategies

As reflected by the low overall rates of college completion presented in Chapter 1, community college students across the board face many challenges in their pursuit of certificates and degrees. These difficulties stem from a variety of sources, starting with inadequate academic preparation before and in high school, which frequently leads to placement into developmental course work in college. Many community college students also struggle to balance the demands of school with work and family obligations. In these regards, the men of color interviewed for this study are typical college students. Where they may differ from many of their peers is in the experiences they bring with them to college — in particular, the low expectations and stereotypes they have encountered based on their race, ethnicity, gender, and appearance and their attitudes about appropriate masculine behavior — which may inhibit them from getting the help they need.

Given that the fundamental challenges for male students of color are shared by many community college students, completely new programs and policies may not be needed to improve their chances of success. Most community colleges already offer an array of supports — including orientation programs, learning communities, and student success courses — that show promise of helping students succeed. However, these colleges face an additional challenge in promoting awareness and use of available services for this population, especially when the use of such supports is adversely affected by students' negative experiences or by their notions of male independence. This chapter begins by presenting an array of strategies that are already in place at many community colleges and that might be better leveraged to meet the needs of male students of color. With these precedents in mind, it concludes with general guidelines for how community college faculty and staff may be able to communicate more effectively with men of color to ensure that they receive the benefits of these supports.

Precedents for Promising Strategies to Improve Student Success

The following section outlines a number of strategies that have already shown promise of improving community college students' success. While evidence of effectiveness is still limited for some of these interventions, others have been evaluated through rigorous random assignment studies designed to measure their impact on student outcomes.

Easing the Transition to College Life

Between locating key services, deciding what courses to take, and adapting to the new expectations of their college environments, even the best-prepared students can struggle with the transition to college life. One strategy that many community colleges have implemented to help students adapt is the summer “bridge” course, targeted to students who have recently finished high school but have not yet begun their freshman year of college. For example, the state of Texas operates a summer bridge program aimed at recent high school graduates who are underprepared for college-level English and math. Over the course of four to eight weeks, these students attend summer courses at their local community college or university to improve their mastery of the basic skills they need to be prepared for college. The Texas program is currently undergoing a rigorous evaluation to determine whether it reduces the need for developmental education in college, improves persistence, and improves academic performance; preliminary results will be available in late 2010.¹

Pasadena City College in California offers a variation of this same idea with its “Math Jam” program for incoming freshmen who place into developmental math courses. Math Jam operates for a two-week period before the start of the fall semester. Students learn basic math concepts through activities designed to build camaraderie and confidence (for example, one assignment required students to design a ball that has the same circumference-to-hand ratio as a standard basketball has to Michael Jordan’s hand). The Math Jam program also includes a “lifelines” component, in which students continue to meet with a program counselor and tutor after they begin the regular semester. Results from an evaluation of this program, which compared outcomes for Math Jam students with those of other entering freshmen placed into developmental math, were mixed. However, students participating in the program might have begun with greater remedial needs than their peers in the comparison group, thus suggesting that this model merits further consideration and study.²

While summer program models have shown promise for helping students prepare for community college, they can also be expensive and logistically difficult to implement on a large scale. A less intensive approach is to provide resources — such as printed or online practice tests, or formalized workshops taught by faculty or tutors — for students to review key concepts before they take the tests that determine their placement into developmental or college-level course work. These interventions can help students reinforce any knowledge they may have forgotten, particularly if they have been out of high school for several years, thus reducing the chances that they will place into courses below the appropriate level. They can also be used to

¹Barnett (2009).

²Weissman et al. (2009).

communicate the importance of these placement exams to students who may not realize their implications for course work. The majority of the men in this study reported that they knew nothing about placement tests before they took them, and some appear to have been assigned to developmental courses that were beneath their true ability level. Too often, the result of such misplacement is boredom, discouragement, and even dropping out.

A fourth popular strategy to help men of color and other students make the transition to college is the new-student orientation program. Several Achieving the Dream colleges have focused on orientations as a low-cost means of welcoming students to campus, presenting critical information such as deadlines for adding or dropping classes, and introducing key personnel, including college counselors and financial aid staff. Some orientations include walking tours of classroom buildings, tutoring centers, and libraries. Because many students tend to opt out of orientations if they are voluntary, some Achieving the Dream colleges have taken the step of mandating orientation attendance for all first-time, degree-seeking students.

Bringing Advising and Counseling Services Directly to Students

As noted earlier, the men of color who were interviewed for this study tended to resist seeking help on their own, but they are likely to benefit from the same advising and counseling services that help other community college students stay on track. One strategy that is growing in popularity among community colleges is the “student success course.” While models for success courses differ across institutions, they generally create a formalized process for students to set personal goals, improve their study habits and test-taking skills, learn to cope with stress, and become more comfortable using campus resources such as libraries and tutoring centers. These courses are frequently taught by college counselors, thus exposing students to the counseling department in a nonthreatening way while covering a wider range of topics than can be addressed in individual counseling meetings. Many Achieving the Dream colleges have already begun to implement and encourage student success courses, and a few have even mandated them for all incoming students or for students who place into developmental education.

A growing body of evidence suggests that student success courses can help to improve student success. One quasi-experimental study — using administrative data from Florida — found that attendance at a success course had a positive effect on student outcomes, including college persistence and the rate of transfer to a state university.³ In another study, as part of the Opening Doors Demonstration, MDRC examined the efficacy of a college success course for students who were on academic probation at Chaffey College in California. The success course was taught by a college counselor and encouraged students to make use of college success

³Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno (2007).

centers, which offered individualized tutoring in reading, writing, and math. During its first year of operation, the program was voluntary, and students did not participate at rates high enough to make an impact. In the second year, however, probationary students were told that they would not be able to register for other courses unless they signed up for the success course. This resulted in much higher participation rates. The required version of the program produced large, positive effects in helping students to raise their grade point averages and get off probationary status.⁴

Another proactive approach to advising students emerged at South Texas College in McAllen, Texas, an Achieving the Dream college. South Texas's Beacon Mentoring program sent trained college personnel into lower-level and developmental math classrooms several times during a semester to inform students about available campus-based supports designed to help them succeed. These "mentors" delivered information about academic support services, advising and counseling services, financial aid, and early registration procedures for the following semester. They also acted as a "go to" person whom students could approach with questions or concerns, and they communicated with math instructors to identify struggling students before they failed or dropped out. It is important to note that Beacon mentors were rarely professional counselors; instead they held a variety of administrative and instructional positions on campus.

MDRC conducted a rigorous evaluation of the Beacon Mentoring program by randomly assigning lower-level college math classes and developmental math classes to either receive or not receive a Beacon mentor. A comparison of outcomes for students enrolled in classes with and without the intervention found modest, positive effects for the Beacon Mentoring group. While the program did not increase math pass rates for the full sample, there was a positive effect for subgroups of part-time students and students in developmental math classes. The program also increased student use of campus services and reduced withdrawals from math classes.⁵

Finally, some colleges have taken steps to modify existing advising models to better reach those students who are unlikely to seek help on their own. Some have developed more formalized processes for assigning students to counselors or faculty advisers, while others are encouraging or requiring at least one advisory meeting per semester. The objective of these interventions is to encourage an ongoing relationship between a student and his or her designated counselor or adviser, who can get to know the student personally, offer advice on course enrollment and other matters, and help the student stay on a path toward completion. These more intrusive approaches stand in contrast to status quo practices on many campuses, which generally depend on students taking the initiative to meet with a counselor or adviser who is

⁴Scrivener, Sommo, and Collado (2009).

⁵Visher, Butcher, and Cerna (2010).

available at a given time. This often means that student-counselor interactions are abbreviated at best; very few of the men in this study reported having significant relationships with staff at their colleges.

Fostering Social Connections with Other Students, Faculty, and Staff

While the men in this study indicated that they did not come to college to make friends, research on student engagement suggests that establishing meaningful social contacts on campus is a critical element that supports persistence and academic success.⁶ One means of fostering such connections is to create “learning communities,” in which a small group of students moves together through two or more linked courses with integrated syllabi. Many community colleges have implemented an increasingly popular learning community model, in which a developmental English or math course is paired with a student success course. Other institutions have created links between developmental education and college-level courses, such as introductory psychology or health. Instructors who teach in these linked courses are encouraged to create assignments that allow students to work in teams and make connections across courses and subject matter. For example, one learning communities program at Hillsborough Community College in Florida focused on the themes of poverty and homelessness and incorporated a student-organized food drive. Proponents of learning communities believe that they help students to form beneficial relationships with other students, intensify personal connections to faculty, and develop a deeper understanding of course content.⁷

MDRC conducted a rigorous evaluation of a learning communities program at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, as part of its Opening Doors Demonstration. This study used random assignment to place participating incoming freshmen into either a learning community group — which enrolled together in an English course (usually at the developmental level), a student success course, and a standard college course — or a control group, which enrolled in regular, unlinked classes. The evaluation found that students in the learning community moved more quickly through developmental English requirements, took and passed more courses, and earned more credits during their first semester. These students were also somewhat more likely to remain enrolled in college two years later. Notably, the results suggested that the benefits of this program were particularly high for the young men in the sample, most of whom were men of color.⁸ MDRC is following up on these promising

⁶Tinto (1987).

⁷Visher, Schneider, Wathington, and Collado (Forthcoming 2010).

⁸Scrivener et al. (2008).

findings in a new national demonstration that is testing different models of learning communities at six community colleges across the country.⁹

Like learning communities, mentoring programs have been used at some colleges to help men of color make meaningful social connections on campus. These programs connect students with their peers as well as with other men, often of the same race or ethnicity, who are further along in their academic and professional careers. An effective mentoring relationship allows a protégé to develop better social and cognitive skills through interaction with a more experienced mentor, who can serve as both a role model and an advocate. Colleges can help to ensure that these mentoring relationships are positive and beneficial by providing training for mentors to better understand their appropriate roles and boundaries, as well as additional supports — including information about other campus and community resources for students who need more professional counseling.¹⁰ Two of the four colleges in this study developed mentoring programs that specifically targeted minority students. At the time when this fieldwork was conducted, these programs operated on a small scale and had not yet been rigorously evaluated. Despite the lack of empirical evidence to date, mentoring offers a promising approach for men of color and other students to connect with people who have faced challenges similar to their own and successfully surmounted them.

Community colleges might also consider more informal channels for social interaction. For example, the men in this study expressed an interest in getting to know other students through extracurricular activities, particularly athletics. They called for better facilities — basketball courts, fitness centers, and athletic fields — where they could come together and socialize with other men. They also wanted to have college sports teams around which they could gather and rally. These suggestions reflect their desire to have spaces and activities on campus that feel comfortable for men, thus reinforcing the importance of the gender-based attitudes and interests that came up throughout the interviews. It was striking that the colleges in this study either lacked such spaces and activities or had discontinued them because of budget constraints.

Helping Students to Balance Their Work and School Responsibilities

One of the most consistent priorities for the men in this study was to work and earn the money they needed to support themselves and their families. These men felt that earning their own living was an important aspect of their male identity, and they tended to avoid asking for financial help from their families or even from government agencies. While their reluctance to seek financial aid was based in part on their desire for self-reliance, it appears also to stem from

⁹Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, and Schneider (2008).

¹⁰Rhodes (2002).

their lack of knowledge about available funding. Many of the men revealed in focus groups and interviews that they had not completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and did not understand what kind of help was available to them.

One possible response for colleges is to offer financial aid workshops that inform students about federal programs — Pell grants, student loans, and work-study — and state or college-administered aid programs. These workshops could also assist students with their FAFSA paperwork, which tends to be extensive and intimidating for those who are not familiar with it. One prominent example of such an intervention is the “Cash for College” program in California, which sponsors workshops throughout the state using trained volunteers to help students fill out the FAFSA. As an added incentive, workshop participants are offered the chance to win a \$1,000 scholarship if they complete the FAFSA and submit it before the deadline for state-funded financial aid programs.¹¹

For students who submit the FAFSA and qualify for federal aid, work-study may be another option that should receive greater attention. Work-study positions do not always pay as well as off-campus jobs, but they generally make it easier for students to coordinate work and class schedules, as well as to spend time meeting people on campus. The men interviewed for this study requested more opportunities to work on campus, and they wanted these opportunities to extend beyond clerical or administrative work. For example, one student who was studying culinary arts wondered why there were no student workers in the campus cafeteria.

A third strategy, currently being evaluated in several states across the country, is to create performance-based scholarships as a supplement to existing financial aid programs. The appeal of such scholarships — particularly for students like the men in this study, who prefer to work for their money rather than receive monetary “gifts” — is that they are structured such that students must “earn” their scholarship money by meeting certain academic standards. For example, a performance-based scholarship program at two Louisiana community colleges offered students \$1,000 on top of regular financial aid if they maintained at least half-time enrollment and earned a “C” or better grade point average. These scholarships were paid in installments that reflected students’ midterm and final grades. An evaluation by MDRC of the Louisiana program showed large, positive effects on persistence, credits earned, and other academic measures for those students who were randomly selected for the opportunity to earn performance-based scholarships. These positive effects continued even after students were no longer receiving the scholarships.¹² While the Louisiana program served primarily African-American women, all of whom were low-income parents, a new national demonstration is

¹¹California Student Aid Commission (2008).

¹²Richburg-Hayes et al. (2009).

being conducted by MDRC to examine whether performance-based scholarships produce similar results in other states and with other target groups, including men of color.

Encouraging Open Dialogue about Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

The men in this study reported frequent encounters with prejudice based on their appearance in their communities and high schools and to some extent on their college campuses. While these men said that they were determined not to let other people's prejudices interfere with their education or life goals, they also indicated that such attitudes bothered them and that they would go to great lengths to avoid being treated with disrespect. In fairness, some faculty and staff may have felt that they were the ones who were being treated disrespectfully.

To improve mutual understanding, some colleges have created open forums in which students, faculty, and staff can come together to talk about racial and gender discrimination on campus. Because these forums are likely to be emotional, colleges might consider ground rules or facilitation tactics to steer conversations in a positive direction. While campus conversations are unlikely to eliminate deep-seated prejudices, they can begin to raise awareness of hurtful practices while eliciting solutions to make all of their students feel more welcome and respected.

Faculty and staff do not need to wait for campus forums to talk about weighty issues concerning race and gender; they can investigate and discuss these topics in smaller groups as well. For example, the Equity Scorecard at the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education offers tools that college administrators and faculty can use to identify gaps in achievement between students of color and other groups, ask questions about the factors responsible for those gaps, and undertake activities to promote equity.¹³

Improving Communication with Male Students of Color

The previous section reveals a number of strategies that community colleges are already implementing to improve student success. However, these supports are frequently underused among male students of color, due in large part to misalignment between the ways in which colleges provide services and the ways in which these students are most likely to take advantage of them. The following section suggests approaches that colleges might take to better reach male students of color.

¹³See http://cue.usc.edu/equity_model/scorecard.html (Rossier School of Education, 2009).

Use Mandates to Bring Services to More Students

As discussed in the preceding chapters, the men in this study reported that they were unlikely to seek assistance with their schoolwork or invest in personal relationships on campus, owing in large part to their work responsibilities and their beliefs about appropriate male behavior. Colleges might increase the use of beneficial services and supports by requiring participation for all students. Mandatory approaches can also be used to increase the likelihood that students will form meaningful connections on campus. By mandating participation in learning communities or study groups or by requiring conferences with instructors or advisers, colleges can promote beneficial relationships that students might not seek out on their own.

It is important that such mandatory participation should not be applied differentially on the basis of demographic characteristics. The men in this study resisted being judged by their appearance; singling them out could appear punitive or question their ability to succeed. Instead, colleges can use selection criteria that allow them to appropriately match students to interventions without targeting anyone on the basis of race, ethnicity, or gender. For example, a college might mandate a student success course for all incoming students, for students placing into developmental courses, or for those on probationary status.

Communicate Clearly the Benefits of Available Services

The men in this study were serious about their commitment to higher education, but their work and family responsibilities limited the time they could spend taking advantage of the services their campuses had to offer. Furthermore, their desire to be independent made them less likely to broach any misunderstandings they might have about these supports. As such, it is important for colleges to bring information about the programs and services they offer directly to the students they want to serve. Furthermore, they should be as explicit as possible about the practical value of using such supports in light of the competing demands on students' time. For example, instructors might invite counselors to their classes to talk about the logistical details of tutoring services, as well as about the benefits students can expect from using these services. Such clear, targeted communication is likely to benefit those students who need help but have difficulty seeking it out on their own.

Clarify Expectations for Student Behavior

Many of the men in this study completed high school without mastering the academic concepts or behavior that would help them succeed in college. Because of this widespread lack of preparation in high school, community colleges may need to provide clear guidance to students about norms and expectations for student behavior. While this information is relevant to all students, men of color might benefit particularly from clear communication about norms associated with seeking help, working with other students, and establishing relationships with

key faculty and staff. If faculty and staff can effectively communicate the benefits of such behavior in the context of students' academic and personal goals, then these men might more quickly overcome their reluctance to engage. Furthermore, setting clear guidelines for all students might help to counteract the low expectations that some of these men have experienced in their previous educational environments.

Provide Students with Privacy

The norms of manhood espoused by many of the students in this study require men to appear competent, able, independent, and self-sufficient, regardless of the challenges presented by their environments. However, all of these men were underprepared in some ways for college, as demonstrated by their placement into developmental math. While their male identities made them less willing to reveal their vulnerabilities or to ask for help, it did not make them less needy of academic and social support in college. One possible strategy to better reach these men is to provide private spaces where they can receive help in a way that does not threaten their concepts of manhood. The focus groups and interviews conducted for this study were an initial step toward providing such "safe spaces," in which students can make sensitive revelations they might not make in front of larger groups of fellow students. Colleges can replicate these circumstances by encouraging the use of small groups or one-to-one meetings with faculty, advisers, or counselors in locations that allow some privacy. These types of private and secure environments are much more likely to set the stage for honest exchanges between these students and college staff.

Use a Variety of Modes of Communication

Keeping students informed about registration dates, midterms, and other key events on campus is important to increase their potential for engagement and success in college. Given the wide variety of low-cost modes of communication available today, colleges should pay close attention to which methods are most effective. In some focus groups, the students complained that their colleges contacted them by e-mail alone, but some of them did not have time to check their e-mail frequently or did not have access to the Internet in their homes. Most of the men did appear to have cell phones, however, and some suggested that their schools send them text messages to notify them about important dates. Using a variety of modes of communication to reach these students will likely increase the effectiveness of colleges' communication efforts. For example, the recruitment efforts for this study drew on a combination of postal mail, follow-up phone calls, and in-class announcements.

Concluding Thoughts

The men in this study did not need to be convinced of the value of a college education. In addition to the long-term benefits they hoped to attain with respect to their lives and careers, they talked about the immediate benefits of increased self-esteem and personal growth. For example, Jay said that his feelings of self-worth increased with each passing day in college:

I think your self-esteem goes up a lot more with every day that we do it. It's like drinking a power drink. You just want to do it more and more and more. That's how it feels. And when I started I didn't have...when I got out of high school, I dropped out, right away, and I said, "I don't want to do this." And then I got back into it was like I liked it. It's fun.

However, while other students expressed similar attitudes about the personal rewards of college, it is important to remember that the men in this study were the survivors. Many other men like them, at these four colleges and across the nation, dropped out well before achieving their goals.

This report marks one step toward understanding and addressing the challenges that male students of color face in community college, but more research needs to be done in order to identify effective strategies to improve their persistence and completion rates. The academic success of these men is critical not only for their own futures, but also for our well-being as a nation. As President Barack Obama said during his 2008 presidential campaign, "If you feel good about me, there's a whole lot of young men out there who could be me, if given the chance."¹⁴

¹⁴Klein (2006).

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About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.

