Creating Pathways to Success: Strengthening College Persistence for Young Men of Color

A youth participatory action research project

SOCIAL JUSTICE LEARNING INSTITUTE

A product of the Postsecondary Success for Men of Color Project

Spring 2019

Introduction

Working with historically marginalized populations to understand and reverse the social forces that produce the inequities they face is the purpose of participatory action research and grounds the work in Los Angeles, California led by the Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI). Over the last 10 years, SJLI has used this methodology to engage and inform youth in projects related to their neighborhood and life circumstances. Youth have engaged in projects ranging from urban gardens to school climate, the marginalization of students attending continuation high schools, and the deterioration of school facilities. The Postsecondary Success Project for Boys and Men of Color, outlined in this document, engaged ten young men of color in a participatory action research project focusing on policies and systems which foster persistence and completion in higher education. SJLI worked with more than 60 nonprofit leaders and more than 15 postsecondary institutions, and public sector offices to ground this emerging work.

This brief community report outlines SJLI's efforts in the fall and winter of 2018. Moving forward, SJLI will use the tools and research results from this project to inform the policy and systems change work for male students of color. Although the racial/ethnic and family income disparities among high school graduates have fallen, barriers persist. Students of color and students from poor families lag on some measures of academic achievement when compared with non-Hispanic White and nonpoor students. In general, males have lower levels of academic achievement in high schools than females. This does not bode well for postsecondary success for male students of color.

Higher education must address the systemic and structural inequities which hamper men of color. Too frequently, higher education has been complacent about low rates of persistence and completion among male students of color due to the confluence of multiple deficit narratives intertwining capacity and race, ethnicity, poverty, gender, and traditionally marginalized identities. It is often the case that male students of color do not understand the roots of systemic barriers and structural marginalization, which have been major forces perpetuating poor academic performance. The youth participatory action approach provides an essential hands-on learning experience where youth learn, lead, grow, and coach others who are in similar situations.

What is Participatory Action Research?

McIntyre (2000) identifies three principles that guide most participatory action research projects:

1. The collective investigation of a problem.

2. The reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem.

3. The desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem.

Organizational Background

Established in 2008, the Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI) is a community-based organization located in Inglewood, California dedicated to improving the education, health, and wellbeing of youth and communities of color by empowering them to enact social change through research, training, and community mobilization. SJLI grew out of the vision and success of the Black Male Youth Academy, which was founded to provide access to educational opportunities and improved academic success for boys and men of color. This model is based on mentoring youth, engaging civil institutions, and providing a critical lens to analyze race, class, and gender. SJLI's programs work to improve the everyday material conditions of communities of color while empowering them to effect long-term systemic change. The organizational theory of change encompasses three levels of impact: (1) empowering individuals through education; (2) creating thriving communities; and (3) changing systems.

Project Overview

Firmly believing that the work must be driven by those directly affected by the issues, SJLI centered its project around a social justice development framework that included youth-led research and advocacy. Specific components included: identifying systemic barriers between men of color and postsecondary success; convening focus groups with men of color and local nonprofit service providers; strengthening networks; and fostering collaborations among educational institutions, community-based institutions, and foundations. The youth of color produced, presented, and facilitated dialogues with stakeholders on policy and systems change recommendations. Ultimately, this project will increase the capacity of SJLI to undertake postsecondary work and also build the capacity of an important partner the Southern California College Access Network, a regional group of nonprofits and educators focused on the transition to and completion of college. Members of the Southern California Access Network (SoCalCAN) are listed below to recognize their invaluable contribution to this work. SJLI partnered with SoCalCAN to lay the groundwork for system and policy change in the greater LA region.

Southern California College Access Network

Access College Foundation	College Match	Neighborhood Youth Association
Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center	College Spring	One Voice
Alliance College-Ready Public Schools	College Track	Operation Jump Start
Ascending Lights iGraduate	Community Coalition	Partnership Scholars Program
Better Angels	Constitutional Rights Foundation	The Posse Foundation
Boys and Girls Clubs of the LA Harbor	CSULB Cal-SOAP	Project GRAD Los Angeles
Bresee Foundation	Determined to Succeed	Promise Scholars
Bright Prospect	Educate California	Pullias Center for Higher Education
Bright Star Schools	Environmental Charter Schools	Ready to Succeed
C5YF	Families in Schools	The Riordan Programs
California College Guidance Initiative	Fulfillment Fund	Scholar Match
Camino Nuevo Charter Academy	GEAR UP 4 LA	Scripps College Academy
Campaign for College Opportunity	Heart of Los Angeles	South Central Scholars
Cash for College/UNITE LA	Inner City Struggle	Step Up Network
Children Youth and Family Collaborative	Kid City Hope Place	Study Smart Tutors
Coachella Valley Economic Partnership	KIPP LA Schools	The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS)
College Access Plan	Los Angeles Education Partnership	UCLA VIP Scholars Program
College Bound Today	Mar Vista Family Center	Uncommon Good
College Bridge	META Foundation	United Friends of the Children
	Minds Matter LA	USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative
	Motivating Our Students Through Experience (MOSTE)	YouTHINK

Additionally, to inform system change and advocacy efforts, the youth-led research component of the project created opportunities for SJLI's alumni researchers to interview college-aged men of color who are currently enrolled. Once all data are collected and analyzed, policy and system change recommendations will be compiled in a report that will be presented at a College Persistence and Success Research and Action Convening in late November or early December of 2019.

Methodology

Project staff administered surveys, individual interviews, and focus groups for students and service providers. Youth researchers collected 46 surveys from students at various campuses and plan to continue until a total of 100 surveys have been collected from students.

The collection of quantitative and qualitative data was completed in late February 2019. Quantitative survey data was collected on 15 college and university campuses by young men of color who are currently enrolled in Southern California postsecondary schools. Participants were selected through convenience sampling at each institution. Each survey was created to ask specific questions regarding students' experiences surrounding the issues of equitable school day practices, academic support, and finances. In addition, youth researchers conducted qualitative interviews and focus groups at several colleges, as well as two convenings with college access and persistence service providers.

The key questions addressed the ways in which multi-system stakeholders:

- understand, perpetuate, and/or eliminate the barriers men of color face in higher education.

- address his/her role in creating, perpetuating, or eliminating those barriers.

- engage in policies or practices to eliminate those barriers.

- engage in opportunities to strengthen their practices and eliminate barriers to students of color.

Research Question:

What are the barriers (systemic, institutional, individual, etc.) boys and men of color face when attempting to persist through postsecondary education?

Strategies to Engage Stakeholders

The greater Los Angeles area is vast - home to about 230 colleges and universities, 88 municipalities, and hundreds of community-based nonprofits. For this project, stakeholder partners included 61 nonprofit, funders, and college access and persistence service organizations from throughout Los Angeles County. These entities (listed on page 3) serve young people of color, are actively engaged in advocacy, and promote the interests of underserved youth. In the interest of developing a full understanding of the issues that influence the challenges and successes of male college students of color, SJLI gathered additional information, participated in dialogues, attended campus meetings, and leveraged relationships to bolster partnerships with organizations that specialize in college retention and completion.

SJLI's Alumni Council was responsible for key aspects of the project's research elements, including developing questions, conducting interviews, and facilitating focus groups. The Alumni Council, comprised of six Black men ages 20-27 who have participated in SJLI's Urban Scholars Program, was formed prior to the launch of this project in order to provide continued peer support beyond high school graduation. In February 2019, the Alumni Council, now named Urban Leaders Alumni Council, expanded to nine young men.

As the research project advances, stakeholders will continue to deepen their understanding of the unique strengths of men of color and develop strategies to prepare their organizations to align with the strengths of these young men. Potential cross-cutting system and policy change is being explored, and the final report will be presented to key stakeholders and decision makers, community organizations policymakers, academic institutions, and system-influencing organizations in the winter of 2019.

INSIGHTS AND TAKEAWAYS FROM SJLI POSTSECONDARY PROJECT

I. Emerging Asset Narratives

SJLI has learned that students require a variety of supports from their communities, including financial resources, guidance and counseling, and related supports to assist in the development and implementation of educational plans beyond classroom instruction to bolster the postsecondary success of young men of color. Additional insights emerging from the interviews include:
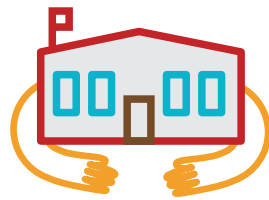
University departments vary in their supports to students to facilitate timely graduation, including direct one-on-one academic support in various subjects to robust tutoring options, mentoring, personal wellness checks, and wrap-around services. Some academic staff feel the universities do not prioritize students' best interests.

Postsecondary schools present new - sometimes confusing - experiences for many first-generation male students of color. Students do not always feel that postsecondary institutions are committed to helping them make wise choices and spend their money wisely to efficiently move toward degree completion.

The traditional but narrow set of postsecondary benchmarks such as grades, graduation rates, and retention rates do not always measure students' personal growth, which is part of the mission of most colleges and universities. Higher education institutions should develop additional metrics relevant to the overall development of students.

Some professors maintain that institutions are "best suited" to serve certain learning styles, perspectives, and types of experiences. This signals that the postsecondary institution is ill-prepared to recognize and educate the diverse assets and learning styles male students of color bring to the classroom.
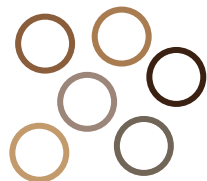
It is important for male students of color to see people who look like them in positions throughout the ranks of academia, including professors, mentors, and high-ranking college administrators.

II. Systems and Policies Impacted by SJLI Postsecondary Success Work

The specific systems and policies needing enhancements include: (1) college financial aid policies; (2) college academic support services; and (3) college registration (course/major trajectory) processes. Preliminary survey data reveal that 60 percent of nonprofit service providers see cost as a primary concern in the persistence and completion dynamic for young men of color attending college. In addition, 80 percent of providers reported recognizing and affirming student intersectionality; differences in ethnic, racial, income, and family backgrounds are a significant factor in the college decision and continuation process. Requisite supports include enhancements of teaching styles, curriculum, attention to campus spaces, support for affinity groups, and other strategies which facilitate transition to and between academic institutions and support of postsecondary completion.

A majority (60 percent) of respondents strongly agree that discrimination against students of color in higher education is palpable. Examples include the lack of diversity among faculty and administrative leaders, limited evening and weekend classes, inadequate meal options, and a dearth of academic advisors to provide strategic guidance on financial aid, graduation and completion trajectories, and referrals to needed supports.

III. Intersection of Postsecondary Education and Public Sector Systems

Several student participants reported involvement with the criminal justice system through parole programs, and many are currently or formerly involved in the foster care system. SJLI currently operates a program to improve academic outcomes and college persistence for system-involved youth. SJLI is among several community-based nonprofits partnering with the Liberty Hill and California Community Foundations, the recently created Los Angeles County Youth Diversion and Development Department, the Los Angeles County Probation Department, Probation Change Coalition, and the Probation Reform Implementation Coalition to dismantle youth incarceration as it presently exists.

Another barrier mentioned was the lack of affordable housing for students. In October 2018, alumni student researchers presented a proposal on the barriers posed by lack of affordable housing to the Los Angeles Neighborhood Trust organization. In May 2019, SJLI will be presenting a Community Housing Forum with housing rights advocates. The Forum will include the intersection of affordable housing needs for boys and men of color as a college persistence barrier.

Future Efforts

This Postsecondary College Persistence research project is one of the ways the Social Justice Learning Institute is developing a deeper understanding of the conditions facing young men of color as they seek to gain access to and persist through postsecondary degree completion. The research project findings and subsequent recommendations will enable SJLI and others committed to improving educational outcomes for young men of color with a way forward to identify policies that will promote persistence at postsecondary institutions. This report is part of efforts to create a robust culture of evidence that includes the perspectives of students, faculty, staff, public systems, and community-based nonprofit partners. Specifically:

• SJLI is building organizational capacity to continue postsecondary success(PSS)future efforts.

SJLI will continue to analyze research findings and compile interview and focus group responses into a final report. The final report and its recommendations will be presented to numerous communities, including students, academic institutions, and nonprofit partners; public sector staff; local, regional, and state policymakers; and foundations. SJLI's project objectives and intended outcomes include strengthening the Alumni Council to provide a supportive structure for young men of color that have graduated from high school and are pursuing careers and degrees at postsecondary institutions. This added alumni capacity creates opportunities for SJLI to remain engaged with young men throughout the application and transition period and their postsecondary years, thereby assisting staff in the ability to continue providing supportive services that mitigate pauses in study.

Educational Equity staff will coordinate the final postsecondary project report presentations, including recommendations on how to support postsecondary college persistence for men of color. A convening will be held in late 2019.

• SJLI is developing shared organizational commitments to collaborate among stakeholders.

- SJLI has a robust relationship with the Southern California Access Network (SoCal CAN), which consists of more than 60 partners. They will continue to collaborate on sharing results among the membership and formal presentations during the Spring 2019 convening.

- SJLI has a commitment from California Community Foundation and the Los Angeles Scholars Investment Fund (LASIF) to share PSS project results and recommendations in the interest of furthering understanding of the unique population.

• Further developments will advance future actions.

1. The final PSS research report and its recommendations on supports for postsecondary persistence among men of color will be published in November/December 2019.

2. Stronger relationships are developing between SJLI and the Southern California College Access Network (SoCal CAN). These relationships will assist SJLI in sharing the final PSS report and its recommendations more broadly and assist in program, policy, and systems change to improve persistence and completion among men of color.

3. Increased capacity among SJLI's Alumni Council on research methods will ground stronger data collection efforts and yield more robust insights.

• SJLI will continue this catalytic work after the grant period end date in the following ways:

During the third and fourth quarter of fiscal year 2018-2019 SJLI will:

- Complete interviews and surveys with college access service providers, college administrators, and probation department officials.

- Conduct analysis on last batch of interviews and surveys.

- Complete analysis of the PSS project research findings.

- Complete and print of the final PSS report.

- Plan logistics for presentations of the PSS project and make recommendations to policy and systems leaders during 2019.

Recommended Citation:

Scorza, D; Johnson Peters, A; Robinson, C.; Mincy, R.; Ponjuan, L. (April 2019). Creating Pathways to Success: Strengthening College Persistence for Young Men of Color. Executives' Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, Washington DC.

Acknowledgements

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Literature Review

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