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Ensuring Our Future: Postsecondary Success for Young Men of Color in Detroit

A product of the Postsecondary
Success for Men of Color Project

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EXECUTIVES' ALLIANCE FOR BOYS AND MEN OF COLOR

About the Executives' Alliance

The Executives' Alliance for Boys and Men of Color (EA) is a network of national, regional, and community foundations driven by a bold vision that all boys and men of color will enjoy full opportunity and inclusion in the economic, educational, leadership, and wellness opportunities that America has to offer. EA's mission is to grow the breadth, depth, and coordination of philanthropy's commitment to an investment in the safety, wellness, and success of boys and men of color. Learn more at www.funders4bmoc.org.

About the Advancing Postsecondary Success for Men of Color Project

Through generous support from the Lumina Foundation, the Executives' Alliance provided grants to six nonprofit organizations to support demonstration projects designed to build the capacity of nonprofits, networks, and advocacy efforts to improve postsecondary outcomes for boys and men of color. The grantees were pre-selected organizations in six cities where EA member foundations and allies have supported place-based efforts to improve outcomes for boys and men of color: Detroit, Newark, Buffalo, Los Angeles, Little Rock, and Oakland.

Together, these six projects represent a diverse range of strategies to promote postsecondary success. Their innovative endeavors included building the capacity of individual postsecondary education institutions; establishing or strengthening collaborations among institutions; and forging alliances between and among postsecondary institutions, nonprofits, the public sector, data experts, and local advocacy efforts.

Amidst increased national attention to disparities in college admissions, persistent gaps in college completion compelled the grantees and their partners to examine patterns and seek solutions based on a shared conviction: that systems must be aligned and policies retooled to ensure that male students of color graduate. The underlying assumption of the project is that higher education institutions must reframe the narrative about male students of color to appreciate their talents and critically examine how institutional systems and policies may adversely affect these students. A greater awareness of the positive traits that help these students overcome and address difficult institutional systems and policies will help to improve opportunity for all students.

Each grantee organization received grant funding and extensive customized technical assistance throughout the duration of the grant period from a team of national experts:

Christine Robinson – Project Director

Ronald B. Mincy – Maurice V. Russell Professor of Social Policy and Social Work Practice
Columbia University School of Social Work

Luis Ponjuan – Associate Professor, Higher Education Administration; Department of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development; Research Director, IDEAL (Investing in Diversity, Equity, Access, and Learning) Research Project; College of Education and Human Development; Texas A & M University

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Introduction

Detroit, Michigan has experienced a long sequence of events that have negatively affected the prospects of men of color and is unique in its recent experience of more than a year under Chapter 9 bankruptcy and state-imposed emergency management. The fiscal difficulties that led to the largest filing of its kind in U.S. history indelibly affected public services – not least the school system, which had operated for nearly two decades under the control of the state of Michigan. Yet, Detroit community activists and nonprofit stakeholders have organized around the crisis in education with exemplary dedication.

While K-12 public schools have been a primary focus of organizing efforts in recent years, community stakeholders also recognize the importance of improving postsecondary outcomes for students of color in the city. In addition to the ongoing crisis in K-12 education, multiple reports recently revealed that Detroit has one of the nation's highest college completion rate gaps between Black and White students. Given this context, it is critical to shift the frame of analysis away from blaming men of color and their families for the gap in college completion rates and focus on an analysis of the systems and policies that inform the educational outcomes of these students. By identifying and analyzing the systemic factors influencing postsecondary persistence and success for men of color in Detroit, this project seeks to improve popular understandings of educational inequalities in Southeast Michigan and develop strategies for improving college completion rates.

The Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation (DHDC) designed this project to analyze the unique barriers to postsecondary success faced by male students of color in Detroit, while prioritizing the cultural identities of individual groups (African American, Latino, Native American, Arab/Muslim, LGBTQ, immigrant, first-generation college students). The goal is to identify successful models for improving postsecondary success locally or nationally, to determine what core components make them successful, and to work with postsecondary institutions to develop a cross-system strategic framework that can strengthen completion rates for men of color in Detroit.

To address these critical issues, community-based organizations are engaging high school students and forging partnerships with employers and community colleges to align education, labor force, and life skills needs. After helping its home city survive the virtual destruction of its public school system, DHDC is connecting with other local stakeholders and intentionally discussing workforce development, postsecondary credentials, and the realities of men of color. Of primary concern is the trajectory from Detroit high schools to completion of degrees at local colleges. Because of the leadership of DHDC and ongoing collaboration with nine community-based nonprofits,¹ local colleges and universities are poised to engage in ongoing dialogue on ways to build upon the developing insights.

The dedication with which Detroit nonprofits and philanthropic stakeholders organized around the crisis in education is extraordinary. Based on that sustained effort, in fall 2016 a cohort of public interest and private attorneys sued in federal court on behalf of the city's children. "Decades of state disinvestment and deliberate indifference

Detroit has one of the nation's highest college completion rate gaps between Black and White students.

¹ American Indian Health and Family Services, Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), Black Family Development (BFDI), Detroit Justice Center (DJC), D-LIVE (Detroit Life Is Valuable Everyday), Ruth Ellis Center, Neighborhood Service Organization (NSO), and Midnight Golf.



to Detroit schools,” the lawsuit stated in part, “have denied Plaintiff schoolchildren access to the most basic building block of education: literacy.” In a legal action that argued for the plaintiffs’ constitutional right to literacy, the attorneys further claimed that “by its actions and inactions, the State of Michigan’s systemic, persistent, and deliberate failure to deliver instruction and tools essential for access to literacy in Plaintiffs’ schools, which serve almost exclusively low-income children of color, deprives students of even a fighting chance.”

A federal judge’s summer 2018 ruling in the case determined that children have *no fundamental right* to learn how to read and write. This decision set the stage for national discussions and a renewed commitment to assess how to improve educational opportunities and outcomes in Detroit. Much of the work there has expanded to address statewide education policies, including school finance reform, school performance and accountability, postsecondary education, high-demand jobs, and issues of equity related to race, poverty, special education needs, and English language learners.

In order to improve college graduation rates and narrow the achievement gap between males of color and White males, it is essential for colleges and universities in Southeast Michigan to understand these systemic barriers and identify strategies, programs, and resources that promote postsecondary persistence and completion. This type of analysis is imperative to improve the life outcomes of male students of color, empower and expand a highly skilled workforce, and, more generally, improve the economic and social vitality of the city of Detroit and the Southeast Michigan region.

Moving toward an Inclusive and Responsive Postsecondary System

Although multiple higher education institutions have begun working to address these issues, Wayne State University has played an important role with men of color in Detroit. The president and provost of this four-year public institution based in the city have launched their own efforts to improve outcomes for their students and reduce the gaps in education equity. Additionally, newly elected Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer has set education as a priority, resulting in renewed energy and hope for statewide systemic change.

Wayne State’s attention to racial disparities was piqued in part by a 2017 Education Trust study that showed that Wayne State University had one of the nation’s highest completion rate gaps between Black and White students. At 33.2 percentage points, the gap at Wayne State is more than twice the national average of 13.5 points for students who attend the same university. This is particularly troubling at Wayne State, where evidence of systemic factors is clear considering that White students account for 58 percent of enrollment in a city with a population that is over 80 percent Black. This study indicates that Wayne State also had the largest gap between White and Latino students. The university’s six-year graduation rate for Latinos was 26.5 percent, compared to Michigan State University, where the graduation rate for Latino students was 64.2 percent.

This troubling gap in graduation rates is hardly unique to Wayne State. The six-year graduation rate at four-year institutions for White students in Michigan is 65 percent, as compared to 40 percent for Native American students, 40.6 percent for Black students, 43 percent for Arab American students and 59 percent for Latino students. The rates are even lower for two-year colleges across the state, where students of color graduate at rates well below the national average.

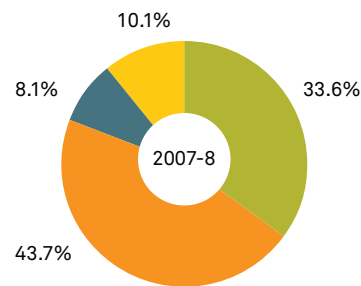
These racial/ethnic disparities in postsecondary success are even more pronounced for men of color from Detroit. At Wayne State, the six-year graduation rate for White male students is 60.3 percent, as compared to 33.3 percent for Native American males, 26.5 percent for Latino males, and 17.2 percent for Black males. This project endeavored to analyze and address the systemic factors influencing these troubling statistics.

Table 1: College Completion Rates in Michigan

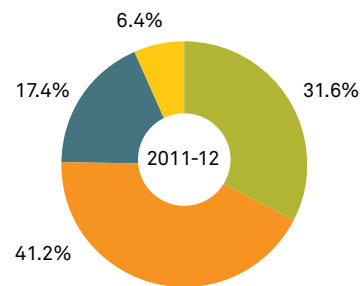
Race/Ethnicity	Males - Michigan	All Students- Michigan	Males - WSU	Males - National
Black/African American	31.2 %	40.6 %	17.2 %	34.6 %
Latino/Hispanic	59 %	59.2 %	26.5 %	46 %
Native American	33.6 %	40 %	33.3 %	35.6 %
Arab American	No data	43 %	No data	No data
Whites	63.1 %	65.4 %	60.3 %	57.5 %

College Enrollment, Matriculation, and Completion of DPSCD students.

Within eight years of graduating high school, the class of 2007-08:



Within eight years of graduating high school, the class of 2011-12:



- no record of college enrollment
- no longer enrolled in college and did not receive an award
- continuing in college
- received a 4-year degree

A History of Disparities

Quantitative data analysis for this report was conducted by Data Driven Detroit (D3), a local research collective that specializes in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to drive informed decision-making and increase data-driven outcomes. To track the postsecondary outcomes of male high school graduates of color from Detroit, D3 accessed datasets from Michigan School Data on college enrollment and remedial coursework since 2011 and on college progression since 2007 for male students of color from the Detroit Public School Community District (DPSCD).

Quantitative data is undergoing further analysis and will be published at a future date. To conduct qualitative analysis, the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School collaborated with partner organizations to recruit focus group participants who represented a range of postsecondary institutions and experiences. These male students of color offered information about what factors contribute to persistence, completion, and decisions to leave higher education. The Keith Center helped to analyze and interpret those insights. Due to the small sample size and to interest in protecting confidentiality, the qualitative data will not be released but provided crucial insights.

The quantitative data analysis illuminates the following in this regard:

- From 2011-16, fewer than half of all male DPSCD graduates enrolled in higher education within 6 months of graduating. Less than one-quarter of these students completed 24 credits within twelve months, and only about one-third completed 24 credits within twenty-four months.
- From 2011-16, roughly half of all Black and Hispanic DPSCD graduates who enrolled in higher education also enrolled in developmental (remedial) coursework. Over one-third of those graduates in postsecondary education enrolled in developmental math courses.
- Over the past decade, most male graduates of the DPSCD have not earned a college degree or certificate. Within eight years of graduating high school, 33.6 percent of males in the class of 2007-08 have no record of college enrollment, 43.7 percent were no longer enrolled in college and did not receive an award, 8.1 percent were continuing in college, and 10.1 percent received a 4-year degree. By comparison, the class of 2011-12 fared little better. Within five years of graduating high school, 31.6 percent of males had no record of college enrollment, 41.2 percent were no longer enrolled in college, 17.4 percent were continuing in college, and 6.37 percent received a 4-year degree.

Changing the Narrative about Disparities in Educational Outcomes



For too long, disparities in postsecondary completion for students of color have been attributed to socio-economic deficiencies within their home communities or individual factors. Such analyses minimize the ways in which the priorities, policies, and programs of colleges and universities underserve and/or adversely affect the enrollment, persistence, and completion of students of color. For example, many students deplete their financial aid on developmental courses to compensate for lapses in their K-12 education, leaving them without the resources to continue their studies toward postsecondary certificates and degrees. Analyses that do not account for such obstacles limit policymakers' abilities to think critically about how colleges and universities can better serve students of color to improve educational outcomes and enrich local communities, opportunities, and economies. Moreover, they let higher education leadership avoid accountability. "Far too often," the Education Trust concluded in its 2017 report, "institutional leaders attempt to justify low completion rates by highlighting what they perceive to be inadequacies of the very students they choose to enroll and have a responsibility to support."

Many students deplete their financial aid on developmental courses to compensate for lapses in their K-12 education, leaving them without the resources to continue their studies toward postsecondary certificates and degrees.

Overcoming Barriers to Completion



While this quantitative data provides important information about college preparation, enrollment, progression, and completion for male students of color from the Detroit Public School Community District, the qualitative data collected through focus group interviews provides insights that might help explain why men of color do or do not persist in postsecondary education. These barriers fell into four major categories:

1. Navigating college structures, systems, and expectations, and adjusting to campus life.
2. Preparation for coursework, academic support services, classroom instruction, and classroom representation.
3. Underrepresentation among faculty, staff, and students, cultural competencies, and social/personal support.
4. Personal challenges around finances, employment, mental health, self-esteem, family, and (foster care, criminal justice, immigration) systems involvement.

Focus Group Highlights

Male students of color also shared their views on the most significant factors affecting college completion and offered advice for students and colleges about improving postsecondary outcomes.

- Students who receive individualized support through campus, community, or familial resources report more success in overcoming challenges associated with the transition to college.
- Male students of color report struggling academically when they feel underprepared for the coursework, when course instruction is not attuned to a variety of learning styles, and when they feel underrepresented in the classroom.
- The first exam in any course was identified as the point at which many students first realize they are struggling.
- Students report greater academic success when they seek out and receive academic support, work closely with peers in a collaborative/supportive manner, and have instructors who are engaged and enthusiastic, demonstrating a personal interest in the student's success.
 - Most helpful were maintaining a personal interest in their academic and personal wellbeing, belonging to social networks that promote community and foster motivation, and having dedicated spaces on campus where they can feel safe and at ease.
- Socio-economic conditions beyond the classroom adversely affect the academic performances and college experiences of male students of color. These men do not feel as though their colleges or universities offer adequate support for their academic or personal challenges.
 - Friends/family and community organizations are critical for providing guidance, motivation, and emotional/psychological support for male students of color to persist and succeed in college.

Recommendations and Next Steps

These data document numerous and complex factors behind the college completion rate gap. Furthermore, this research has revealed the systemic nature of many of these factors and how they may affect academic success for men of color, as well as the ways in which students, community organizations, and campus services are working to address such challenges.

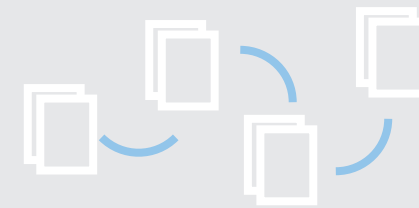
The experiences and insights shared by students in the focus groups, coupled with quantitative data analysis, demonstrate the need for colleges and universities to undertake a holistic approach to student support if they are to improve graduation rates for men of color. That approach must include proactive support for the academic, career, personal, social, and financial concerns of male students of color. Next steps include conducting a more thorough inventory and analysis of existing programs, policies, and services at target institutions in order to identify priorities for policy/program advocacy.

As illustrated on the following page, students, researchers, and community partners suggest these additional steps: mandatory college introduction courses, expanded university outreach programs and financial aid, tuition-free summer remedial courses, special consideration for working students, and implementation of tutoring, mentoring, and learning communities to support diverse learning styles. In addition, cultural competency training for faculty and staff, commitments to hire more faculty and staff of color, and the integration of community organizations in student services would be helpful. Also, colleges should consider offering legal assistance for students with involvement in the foster care, criminal justice, and/or immigration systems. These outlined system and policy supports are vital components of many initiatives across the country that have proven effective in improving postsecondary outcomes for men of color.

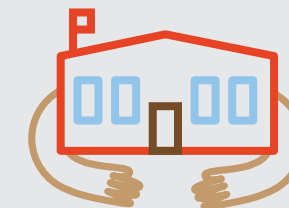
Over the next several months, the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation and the nine nonprofit partners will continue the work begun during this initial phase of the project through continued research, analysis, and the development of a strategic framework for designing and implementing programmatic or policy changes and discussion with local colleges and universities. Under the leadership of its president and provost, Wayne State University has formed a high-level team committed to improving their graduation rates and reducing the completion gap for students of color. This WSU senior administrative team has begun meeting with the coalition of community partners to further strengthen the working relationship between these two sectors and have an even greater impact on the success of men of color at their university.

The findings from this report will help inform data-driven policy and program recommendations. The Detroit effort highlights the power of collaboration, listening, engagement, and mutual respect, acknowledging the salience of culture and identity in policy formation. The emerging partnership between nonprofit leaders, postsecondary schools, philanthropy, and local stakeholders lifts up the promise of recognizing the dignity and potential of all people.

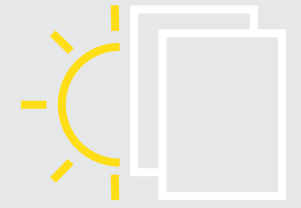
Students, researchers, and community partners suggest these additional steps:



Mandatory college introduction courses



Expanded university outreach programs and financial aid



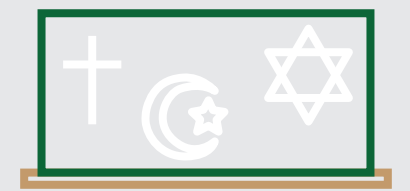
Tuition-free summer remedial courses



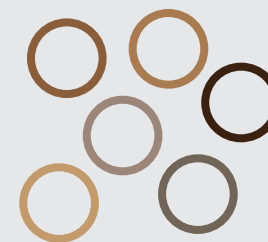
Special consideration for working students



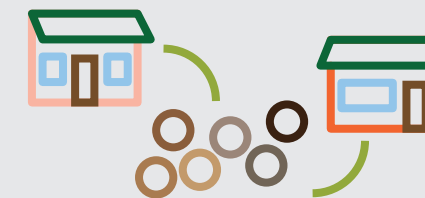
Implementation of tutoring, mentoring, and learning communities



Cultural competency training for faculty and staff



Commitments to hire more faculty and staff of color



Integration of community organizations in student services



Legal assistance for students with involvement in the foster care, criminal justice, and/or immigration systems

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