

# TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Men of Color Discuss  
Their Experiences in  
Community College



Alissa Gardenhire-Crooks  
Herbert Collado  
Kasey Martin  
Alma Castro

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Achieving  
the Dream™

Community Colleges Count

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## 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.

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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."



## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social 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 Child Development
- Improving Public Education
- Promoting Successful Transitions to Adulthood
- 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.