The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color

Capturing the Student Voice

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Contents

In September 2010, the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center and the Business Innovation Factory (BIF) began to look at the higher education experiences of young men of color.

As a component of the College Board's The Educational Crisis Facing Young Men of Color Initiative, the experiences of 92 African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino and Native American students from 39 institutions across the country were explored to learn how they get ready, get in and get through college.

The ambitious goal of the College Completion Agenda — a national goal to increase the number of 25- to 34-year-olds who hold an associate degree or higher to 55 percent by the year 2025 — makes this a critical time to understand what factors affect these young men, a group who struggles more than any other in the nation to persist and achieve successful college outcomes.

To understand and address the factors behind this completion gap, the College Board has spent the last year meeting with researchers, advocates, educators and community leaders who serve these students. Additionally, an extensive data and literature review was conducted to find out what is known to date on the situation facing young men of color.

Through its Student Experience Lab, these young men were engaged directly to understand how they view their experiences and to add their voice to the discussion of how to better meet their needs.

Capturing the experiences of young men of color

"You're going to hear all these different stories from all these different types of students with different backgrounds and unique experiences. And as sad as some of the things might seem that we come up against, it's what really builds strong characters and a strong nation. It's why minorities are able to make their way up the ladder today.

I love sharing my story. It's all been worth it and made me the father and the student I am. And [the] fact that you're able to share these stories is great. People need to learn from us."

Tyson O.
Native American, 30, nearing graduation, nontraditional college

Storytelling is a powerful tool and a good story — one that captures the human condition and enlightens the listener — has the power to change the world. Working with the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, the Business Innovation Factory (BIF) captured the stories of 92 young men of color (Asian American/Pacific Islander, African American, Hispanic/Latino and Native American) in America's higher education system to learn firsthand about their college experiences and how they interact with the system. The critical insight we hoped to reveal:

How can we help these young men reach their true potential?

Each student has a unique story, a compelling history and myriad motivations for wanting to earn a college degree. This report supplements the statistics and findings portrayed through the College Board's report *The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color: A Review of Research, Pathways and Progress*, a significant landscape and literature review about minority male postsecondary outcomes. The student stories documented in this research move beyond the numbers to provide a rich set of insights about who these young men of color are, why they choose the higher education pathway and how they move along their journey.

As you read through this report, it becomes clear that we found significant similarity of experiences across the four different population groups. This surprised us, as much of the literature tends to silo each group. While we in no way dismiss the unique cultural factors and circumstances for the young men of each population group, the commonalities of experiences they shared with us far outweigh the differences. Consequently, the themes and insights revealed in this report reflect all ethnic groups studied.

For example, Native American men often have to physically leave their rural communities and travel far away to school. While this is an extremely pronounced experience for this group, men from Hispanic/Latino, African American and Asian American/Pacific Islander communities who travel short distances to attend school often describe the same feelings of homesickness and culture sickness as their Native American peers.

We use the term *culture sickness* to describe the distress and anxiety many students experience when they find themselves separated from their cultural norms and practices, and faced with a campus community that does not dress, speak, practice similar traditions or know the same things as they do.

Overall, most of the students we interviewed don't have an easy time. Our findings suggest that the current educational pipeline is simply not designed to support an increased number of minority males earning college degrees.

Yet, most of the young men we interviewed are succeeding despite the odds. They are innovative in how they adapt the system to their needs. They frequently face major roadblocks but also demonstrate an amazing resilience to the challenges they face. They fight, they persevere and they use a variety of catalysts to propel themselves forward. Whatever the method, nearly every student we interviewed is driving toward success, not failure. But the extent to which the system supports them varies widely.

Who are these students and how are they participating in higher education? What value do they place on a college degree? How do they make choices to get into school and stay in school? What are the roadblocks that impede their way? What catalysts have they discovered that propel them forward?

This is their story.

Student Experience Lab: Previous Work
Business Innovation Factory embarked on a similar undertaking in 2009 that focused on the overall college student experience and sought to identify opportunities to enhance the experience and improve the effectiveness of the higher education system. While every student experience is unique, the Lab identified nine themes that span demographics, geography, school and student type. What did we find? Students make decisions with tragically little information about their options or the long-term consequences of their choices. Students are maxing out on debt and uncertain how to turn their dreams into fulfilling careers. And schools are struggling to deliver affordable services that meet the demand.

Outputs from this phase of work can be viewed at http://www.businessinnovationfactory.com/sxl

Research methodology

Over the course of six months, we talked with 92 students from a mix of 39 institutions in five regions throughout the country

The goal of this study was straightforward: Bring the experiences of minority male students to life in a way that makes their voice central to our conversation about transforming the education system to improve their college experience and completion rates.

Using a qualitative research approach enables stakeholders to see the experience through the lens of the student, to better appreciate the dynamics of the educational system through the student's eyes, and to more readily identify opportunities for intervention and innovation.

To capture the student's voice, we conducted an interlocking set of research activities, including individual, group and peer-to-peer interviews (in person and remote); on-site observations; and self-documentation exercises.

A semi-structured interview protocol used themes discovered during the first round of the Student Experience Lab work, including previous academic experiences and cultural and/or community frameworks; the dynamics between personal aspirations and planning a college career; navigating the system; relationships with faculty, staff and peers; and experiences outside of academics.

Interviews were audio or video recorded. Notes and/or transcriptions were analyzed for themes. Several students were selected as peer interviewers. They were given cameras, interview guides and note sheets and invited to interview peers about their experiences. The peer interviewers decided which questions were important to address.

Some students participated in a photo journal activity. They submitted self-documented photos and captions via text messages in response to prompts. These images were also clustered and analyzed for themes.

To look at the day-to-day challenges of persistence, a roughly even mix of first-year to fifth-year matriculated students made up the majority of study participants. To span the full cycle of postsecondary education, the remaining student population was split between high school seniors (to focus on special issues they face as they prepare for postsecondary education) and students who have left college as a graduate, stop out or dropout (to look at the issues that prevented or propelled them to completion).[1]

Consequently, this is not a study that defines the behaviors of students who have elected not to go to college. Rather, it's a reflection of the factors that have the most significant impact on student success when students are already engaged (or intend to engage) with higher education.

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1. During the study, we also came across a few students who fit profiles outside of the mix we defined including: high school dropouts engaged in community support programs, high school graduates who are currently unemployed, and a high school senior opting for a military career instead of college. These student experiences also informed our research.

Regional distribution

STUDENT	REGION	STATE	
39	Northeast	MA, CT, RI, ME, NY	
25	West	CA, WA, NV, UT	
17	Southwest	NM, AR, TX	
6	Midwest	IL	
5	South	VA, MD	

Race/ethnicity

18 Native American

19 Asian American/ Pacific Islander

25 African American

30 Hispanic/Latino

Educational experience

14% **OUT OF COLLEGE**
Dropouts, Stop Outs and Graduates

18% **HIGH SCHOOL**
High School Seniors

68% **ENROLLED IN COLLEGE**
College Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors, Seniors and Fifth Years

Institution type

HIGH SCHOOL

4	Magnet or Charter
5	Public

COLLEGE

11	Four-Year Public
9	Four-Year Private
7	Two-Year Public
2	Nontraditional
1	For-Profit
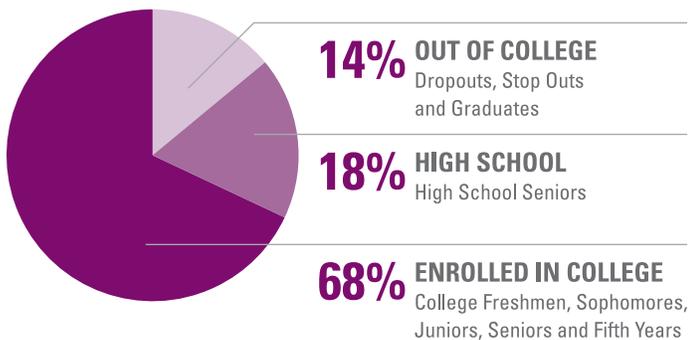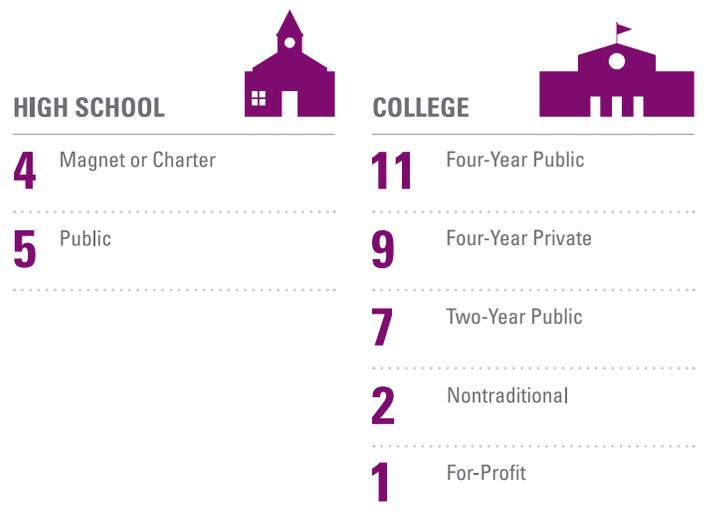
Organization of findings

The key findings are grouped into three broad themes:

1.
Pressures of life

It's easy to view young men of color through the lens of the average student. Doing so often results in a failure to notice the additional burdens and stressors that are part of their experience. Academics, while extremely important, are just a portion of the students' total experience. Many of these students are heads of households, breadwinners, parents and caregivers. Most have to work to pay for school. Many experience racial prejudice or are stereotyped along narrow definitions of color. Understanding the complete picture of these students' lives suggests ways to improve the educational system so it is more inclusive and contemplative of all their needs.

2.
Paths to completion

For young men of color, it's a pathway to degree attainment, not a pipeline.[2] These pathways can include dropping out of high school but later achieving a GED (General Educational Development) credential, delaying college entry, initially enrolling part time in college, transferring from one college to another, stopping out of college and returning several years later, managing probation terms, and/or working while attending college. Yet, the educational pipeline or K–16 policy initiatives that many states are currently considering do not take these factors into account when assessing student progress or developing policies and interventions to increase educational attainment.

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2. Around the nation, many states are now adopting "K–16" policy initiatives designed to create an effective "pipeline" for educational attainment. The goal is to develop an integrated system of schools and higher education institutions within each state where the continuum of student progress can be tracked and measured along four transition points: high school graduation within four years; high school graduates immediately entering college; college starters returning for a second year; and college entrants completing an associate degree in three years and a bachelor's degree in six years.

Source: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

3.
Webs of support

There is no doubt that it's difficult for many young men of color to ask for help. But there is also an underestimation of how difficult it is for these students to locate, access and successfully utilize existing support resources — especially those that are nonacademic. It's rare for one person to represent all the support young men of color need as they navigate the system, so it's important to develop skills to build a network of resources that include many types of support.

Within each broad theme, we've broken out two subsections:

Roadblocks
What are the issues, problems and behaviors and who are the people who stall or hinder student success?

Catalysts
What are the behaviors, motivations and programs and who are the people who support, propel or accelerate student success?

Where student stories and quotes are highlighted, captions are organized as follows:
- Student first name
- Ethnicity
- Age
- School status (high school, first year, middle, nearing graduation, graduate, not in school),
- Type of institution
- Region

The report concludes with a discussion of the implications of the students' experiences and avenues of opportunity.

Pressures of Life

An expanded view of male students of color is critical. Without it, racial stereotypes and the chronic stressors these young men face are overlooked or left unaddressed. Current labels do little to tell a student's story.

Academics, while very important, are just a portion of the students' total experience. Students are shouldering the burdens of family, work and school.

Who is the young minority male attending (or planning to attend) college? It turns out he is much more than a student … he is also a parent, the breadwinner, the head of a household, a caregiver, a role model, and a supportive family and community member.

The students in our study were frequently and simultaneously overwhelmed by:

- Having the sole or dominant responsibility to support their families

- Making ends meet financially

- Negotiating a social life

- Overcoming difficult home or community situations

- Trying to work in extracurricular activities

- Exploring their culture

- Avoiding alcohol and drug problems

- Dealing with stereotypes

- Raising children

- Experiencing periods of incarceration or managing probation

- Integrating religious or cultural traditions

- Holding down jobs

In addition to managing these challenges, students are also working to succeed in their classes.

Beyond academics

It is widely understood that there are significant academic deficits for many students who enter college. What we were surprised to find was that students were very adept at catching up by accessing tutoring, remedial classes and help from professors. While programs designed to support the students in the classroom and help them academically can ease stress, we also found that supporting a student's emotional, financial, social, family, schedule and extracurricular needs can have a great impact on success. The other roles and burdens a student faces, such as parenting, probation, recovery from addiction and full-time employment, can all overwhelm a young man's ability to thrive as a student.

Learning outside the classroom

It is important not only to understand the burdens and obligations students face, but also to recognize that they enrich themselves in a myriad of ways outside the classroom. Clubs, sports, religion, culture, social life and work can all enrich and expand their academic experience. Students who found time to participate in activities, get involved in activism, and participate in internships supplemented their classroom learning with invaluable real-world experience. Exploring culture and identity kept students from experiencing overwhelming culture sickness and provided opportunities for them to connect to others and explore and cope with marginalization. Extracurricular learning is as essential to student success as learning that takes place in lectures halls and libraries.

What box to check?

Multiracial/multiethnic Americans are one of the country's fastest-growing demographic groups. The students we interviewed reflect this national trend. Many identify as being mixed race and don't adhere to or apply single-race labels to themselves.

Each young man experiences race differently. For some students, acknowledging all aspects of their race and practicing their culture are important. Others are just beginning to explore racial identities and cultural traditions with which they've had little exposure. Still others experience race as both disenfranchising and something to value.

The level of diversity with which young men of color identify does not mesh with current labels of race and ethnicity. Students draw their identities from multiple sources, including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, political affiliation and a variety of other experiences.

As fourth- and-fifth-generation students come of age, many do not speak their native languages, know little about cultural traditions and are disconnected from a racial identity, yet they're often stereotyped along racial lines. For some students, exploration of racial or cultural identity is seen as an opportunity. For others, the separation from family and cultural traditions can create culture sickness (similar to homesickness) and a sense of isolation.

As more young people of mixed backgrounds begin to define themselves differently from previous generations, a challenging yet important opportunity emerges for colleges and universities.

Roadblocks

Adult burdens

Students aren't just students. They're also parents, heads of households, caregivers and family members.

- Stress at home and in a community is a heavy burden that can drown out day-to-day school issues.

- Many students are actively supporting their families, financially or in other ways.

- Some students have to travel far from their homes to get an education or have trouble bridging home and college communities.

"You really have to see how much weight a lot of these people carry with them when they leave home the way we're expected to now."

Jerry

Native American, 21, senior,
four-year private school, Northeast

The needs of others first

Students experience or perceive pressure to make educational choices that reflect the needs of others over their own.

- High-achieving students from struggling communities can be under intense pressure to succeed.

- First-generation minority college students often cite an obligation to share the benefits that they obtained through college with their extended family or community.

"What made me decide to stay was how other people would think of me. Because I graduated at the top of my class and everyone knew me as that smart kid. I guess it was that pressure, of how people would think of me just saying 'oh man he dropped out of college,' and people would think of me differently. I just decided to stick it through, hurry up and find something to do even if you don't like it that much. As long as you're studying something."

Aaron C.

Native American, 21, middle,
four-year public school, Southwest

Money worries

School is too expensive. The burden of paying for it is a heavy one.

- Money can "mess" with students' heads. Sometimes what they believe/preconceive about money and resources matters more than the cost itself.

- Students are working, and often have to put making money ahead of attending class, doing schoolwork or participating on campus.

"Money is a huge issue. Money is actually the only issue. I have a place to live, I have the basic necessities, it's just that I have to keep up with bills. That's about it … everything's expensive nowadays."

Sammy

Asian American/Pacific Islander, 21,
first year, two-year public school, Northeast

Feeling like an outsider

Minority students come into most colleges as outsiders and have to work to find communities that make them feel connected. Students who don't feel like they "fit in" or who bar themselves from social activities can face isolating college experiences.

- Some students feel they are the only one in their situation, or at college because of affirmative action.

- Some students develop resentment or frustration that so few people from their background attend their school.

"Being at this institution is at times challenging dealing with my various identities. Trying to make sense of it all while you're in this space. This space is not a space for everyone. There are so many students of color who look to come to schools like this, but when they get here they leave, because they realize 'I just can't fit in here. I just can't function at all.' I don't think it's due to not being smart enough. It's due to the social interactions that occur when you go to an institution that's white, elite and affluent. When you come from a historically marginalized [group], you don't know the codes of social interaction."

Shawneil

African American, 20, middle,
four-year private school, Northeast

Social life tightrope

For some students, their social and emotional life becomes the most difficult part of their college experience — one that's hard to balance.

- Taking a social life too far can have severe financial and enrollment consequences.

- Seeing a social life as a luxury or risk can leave students with few ways to relieve stress, to find people with shared experiences or to have friends who understand.

"I don't take risks like partying that could damage me or damage my family."

Jethro

African American, 18, first year,
four-year public school, Northeast

Catalysts

Becoming resource savvy

Some students find ways to pay for school that cause less stress.

- Some students discover that resources to make school affordable are out there, which opens up a greater array of choices for them.

- Jobs on campus, jobs in support offices and jobs where students can do their homework make a big difference.

"When I was in high school I didn't want to apply to expensive schools, since I was on my own, and I wasn't gonna be able to afford it. People told me to not worry about the price tag of the school, just apply. There is a lot of money out there, there are scholarships out there, there is financial aid."

Rafi
Hispanic/Latino, 20, middle, four-year private school, Northeast

Experiencing one's own culture

Exploring new opportunities and experimenting with race, identity and culture can be a significant source of engagement and incredibly rewarding for students.

- Finding ways to stay connected to culture, tradition, faith and home help students keep from feeling they have to sacrifice their identity to succeed in college (i.e., avoiding or dealing with homesickness or culture sickness).

- For many students, being a minority is positive, a way to stand out, a way to connect with others.

"It's kind of like having a relative who you know their name but nothing else. I just wanted to know more about what it means to be a Native American. That journey was basically learning about the community, then taking those identities upon myself, then coming full circle and realizing that your identity doesn't matter. It's about who you are."

Chris N.
Native American, 21, nearing graduation, four-year public school, Southwest

Filling voids

Learning also happens out of the classroom. Extracurricular activities and sports fill voids for students and provide challenges, structure and positive influence.

- Several students cited sports as the main reason for getting through high school.

- Examples of clubs that students join include culture clubs (Native American groups, etc.), GEEK, Brothers on a New Direction, outdoor clubs, etc.

- Students participate in clubs, internships, volunteering, activism, arts and sports to supplement their education.

"Through college I've had some big organization [tell me], 'Here's all these options you can do. Go make what you want to make. Here's all the building blocks, go build the building.'"

Miguel
Hispanic/Latino, 20, middle,
four-year private school, Northeast

Never too late to learn

Students are incredibly resilient when it comes to catching up on academics.

- Very few men we talked to felt that their poor academic preparation was an insurmountable barrier to graduation or was a determinant for dropping out, but learning to cope with the study workload is a daily challenge.

- Students who realize they need to catch up look for extra support.

- Time management is an essential skill that helps students catch up and succeed.

"My [test scores] were horrible. That was an unfair representation of who I am as a student. I'm so much more, I'm so gifted and so talented. These scores you get reinforce inferiority and reinforce simplicity in a person of color. Even here there's a lot of discussion of 'what did you get on?' I'm like, 'I'm still getting amazing grades in this course that you're struggling in, so what I got doesn't matter.'"

Shawneil
African American, 20, middle,
four-year private school, Northeast

Shawneil is African American and grew up in a very poor urban area. In part because he was gay, he couldn't see a future in his home community. He applied to 30 colleges, believing that if he told enough people his story someone would be willing to pay for his education. Today he attends a liberal arts college and finds it very difficult to connect to others in the affluent, white environment.

Steven got into two state universities and at the last minute chose to attend the one closest to his home to remain close to his mother. His first encounter with his roommate's Latino family was a "culture shock." Since Steven doesn't speak Spanish or practice the same traditions as his roommate, he found the situation overwhelming. Exploring in the first weeks of school, he's begun to really love campus life — attending games and parties, joining the band, and finding friends.

Jethro is African American and in his first year at a public university. He is still struggling to decide if college is right for him. He remembers that all through school people told him to get good grades so he could succeed and go to college, but senior year he realized it was all about money and affordability.

Paths to Completion

Nearly all of the students see the current system as difficult to navigate and complicated to manage on an ongoing basis. The problem is compounded by a lack of choice, alternative pathways that don't immediately lead to college, and a maturation process that doesn't always align with the college pipeline approach.

Traditional college timelines do not apply to this group. Many will take longer than the expected three- or six-year period to earn a degree, and many accessed the higher education system years after graduating high school. Yet gaining real-world experience gives many young men an edge by helping them refine their expectations and goals.

Many don't understand how to make their college experience meaningful or helpful to them in the short or the long term. Others are cultivating a sense of purpose that allows them to identify their strengths and interests.

Students are frequently unable (whether for lack of knowledge or inadequate support) to make their education fit their academic and personal needs.

After looking at who these young men of color are as students, we now turn to how they move through the higher education system. From the students, we learned that:

- The route to a college degree is often complex and indirect.

- Students are on a complex, sometimes convoluted pathway with many diversions, dropout routes, pit stops and exits.

- Frequently the path takes them far outside the capabilities of the existing pipeline.

**Current paths aren't accounted
for in the educational pipeline**

As more students shared their experiences, it became obvious that many are dealing with dramatically different social experiences than the broader population of students — issues not considered in the current pipeline model of students progressing into the higher education system. Regardless of the actual capabilities of the education pipeline today, the students we interviewed have trouble understanding their options and navigating the system while concurrently managing the circumstances of their lives.

The students in this study may be on probation, employed full time and enrolled in college at night. They may have been incarcerated previously, unemployed currently and trying to access higher education to change their lives. All this points to the reality that young men of color have to be unusually creative and resilient when it comes to earning a degree.

According to our research findings, the pathways they take are not accurately contemplated or actively supported in the current pipeline model. This creates a disconnect between their ambition to attend college and a system that focuses on getting recent high school graduates into a pipeline that thrives on "typical" student scenarios and "college-going behavior."

Until we meet the real needs of young men of color, those seeking a college degree will continue to pursue whatever pathways they can find or construct to reach their education goal. (This statement suggests an opportunity for innovating the current pipeline approach into more personalized pathways for degree attainment.)

## Findings that impact engagement and persistence

Each of the students had different drivers and chose different paths to higher education. But there is a common thread: something or someone sparked their interest, spurred their engagement and instilled in them a desire to achieve. This has an impact on persistence.

For instance, our research shows that engagement and persistence increase when students are encouraged to be goal-oriented, long-term planners. Students who have a simplified view of college as an end goal have more difficulty managing the various roadblocks they encounter along the path and are at higher risk of dropping out.

The diagram on the following page demonstrates the spectrum of thinking among our respondents. Some students tend to fall on the left side of the scale — those who see college as a "golden ticket" to higher pay and better jobs. Others seem to view college differently — as a milestone to accelerating the aspirations of adult life, not an end in and of itself.

Chasing the myth versus planning the future
There's a big difference in engagement and persistence between students encouraged to "engage in college-going behavior" and those encouraged to become decision makers and long-term planners.

CHASING   PLANNING

"I will get a job"   "I want to be   "I need to learn
                             a pilot"   so I can …"

Goal

"Ticket"   "Piece of paper"   "My degree is   "Getting a
                                     a credential"   degree will help
                                                            me because …"

Degree

"School is a   "College is an   "I will form
good time"   opportunity   lasting
                          to grow"   relationships"

Experience
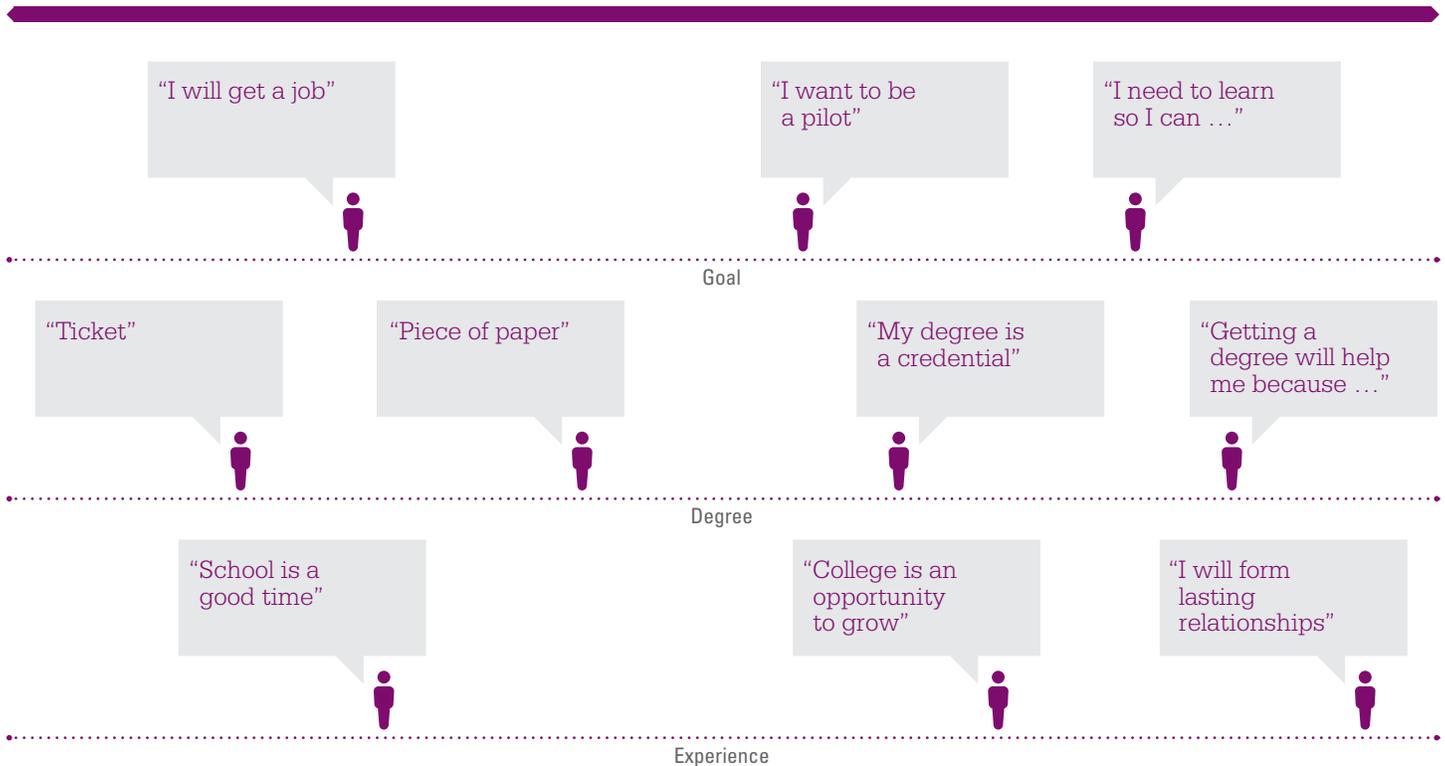
Roadblocks

Chasing the golden ticket

Students who see the degree as an end in and of itself express less motivation and more uncertainty about the choices they made and their plans for their future.

- Some students see the degree as an automatic ticket to higher pay.

- Some students are focused on getting the degree to prove something — for instance, that others are wrong about them.

- Some students have to travel far from their homes to get an education or have trouble bridging home and college communities.

Ready? (Or not?)

Maturation is an irregular process at best, and many young men need additional time or resources to succeed after high school.

- Some students need time to grow and mature.

- Some students experience a tipping point that leads to a future-oriented mindset, and that doesn't always happen in high school.

"If I would've found a job, I probably wouldn't go to college. But since I can't find a job, if I go to school it'll be easier, it'll help me get a job."

Chris G.

African American, 20, not in school, Northeast

"I understand now, just kind of growing up a little and seeing a little of the real world, that if I don't take myself seriously, I'm not going to be setting myself up to be successful."

Joseph H.

Asian American/Pacific Islander, 22, first year, four-year public, West

Stepping off the pipeline

Students who choose alternative paths that don't immediately lead to college or those who make a misstep often find themselves outside the pipeline continuum. Once outside, it's much harder to get back onto the college path.

- Incarceration, employment and the military are often seen as paths distinct from college, but for many students they are an integral (and sometimes simultaneous) part of the journey.

- Other pathways often provide valuable experiences that inspire students to get a college degree and prepare them for the work required in college.

When choice is not a choice

When choosing a school, few students are able to conceive of, or to place personal considerations ahead of other factors.

- Cost and location are two of the most common reasons students cite when choosing a school. But for many students, there is no choice about where to go. This is not just due to financial status. For some students, it's difficult to conceptually understand that there is a choice.

- Some specify that they want a small school or community. For many this would be ideal, but it is often out of reach.

- Expensive tuition looms as a major deterrent, yet few are aware that more expensive schools have significant financial resources, networks and/or career services.

- Stigma and anxiety about community college prevent many from considering it, or feeling good about it as a valid choice.

....

"I see the kids I did graduate with, and they are happy, they're going to college, they're doing all this crazy stuff. I'm like, dang, that could've been me, too. If I'd played my cards right, I could've been in college too … It looked like I was missing a huge part of life."

Sammy

Asian American/Pacific Islander, 21,
first year, two-year public school, Northeast

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"It was fortunately or unfortunately simple. Money was the only factor."

Oscar

Hispanic/Latino, 22, nearing graduation,
four-year public school, West

Settling for less

Some students make educational choices that sideline or dismiss their goals or aspirations.

- Many students are predisposed to make safe choices or to feel that certain options are not obtainable because of their precollege experiences where they're not expected to succeed.

- Others choose majors that will serve their family or community instead of considering their personal interests.

- Some students have no one to encourage them along a more challenging path or to help them overcome feelings of inadequacy.

"I thought being a dentist was totally out of my league, so I thought maybe I could do dental assisting."

Andy
Hispanic/Latino, 27, middle,
four-year public school, West

Catalysts

Cultivating a sense of self

Students who are goal oriented exhibit healthier levels of engagement, decision-making and planning behaviors, but many need help in learning how to find their own voice and to identify their own strengths and interests.

- Having a specific interest or passion can create high levels of engagement and help students make mindful choices.

- Understanding the value of the experience of being in college can provide rich opportunities for personal enrichment, growth and learning.

- Some students understand that a degree is a useful credential in a larger package that needs to convey their skills, experiences and unique qualifications.

"[I'm] going for what I want and not letting others influence me. It's always good to have a goal for yourself … short-term goal or long term. Just put it on a Post-it note and look at it every day. Say, this is what I want to do and I want to accomplish it by … "

Rafi

Hispanic/Latino, 20, middle, four-year private school, Northeast

Real-world trials

Real-world trials or experiences give young men an edge when it comes to getting through an actual experience. As students learn from experiences, they refine their expectations and goals.

- Students who stopped out and do return are better prepared because they have applied the things they learned from trial and error.

- Bridge programs and summer programs allow students to try the college experience without risking a failing GPA or loss of funds.

- Some students go through an application process for high school that provides them with a sense of how to deal with the college admission processes.

- Some students begin by taking only one class or by starting with a simpler program so they can see how it goes before making a bigger investment.

- Students who have opportunities to use college-level life skills, critical thinking and independent planning in high school are much more prepared for college.

"You go to class from 8:30 in the morning to 5:00 in the afternoon. Get a lunch break, get dinner, then go to study hall. [It] broke [me] into an atmosphere of always being busy, always running around, always needing to make time to do homework. That program transitioned me to freshman year."

Miguel

Hispanic/Latino, 20, middle, four-year private school, Northeast

Standing out in the crowd

When students experience a conflict of identity or are different from the people around them, it can be an opportunity to develop a unique sense of self.

- Older students, and students who come to school via unusual or difficult paths, have a great deal to offer and are often more ready to make the most of their time as students.

- Feeling different from peers can make students search for their own ways to be recognized, or it can be an indication that these students have developed a sense of themselves as unique individuals.

Closing the engagement gap

Students are incredibly resilient when it comes to catching up on academics.

- K–12 school is culturally irrelevant, but students who study ethnic, cultural or political studies in college are often engaged and excited for the first time.

- Students find using their education for social change can be powerfully motivating.

- Entrepreneurial activities, attitudes and course work offer a sense of doing, of ownership and of creating one's own path.

"Sophomore year [of high school] was a really big growing point for me. I came out to my school and to my family, and I just really came into my own. After I was able to admit who I was, able to become more myself, and able to have that side of me that could defend myself … I went from being a bullied kid with few friends to being one of the more popular social butterflies."

George

Native American, 22, graduate,
four-year private school, Northeast

"Whatever I've invested I've gotten 10 times more out of it. I wasn't dedicated in high school … Once I realized I could study something I care about everything changed. I was willing to put everything into it."

Kellen

Native American, 28,
four-year public, West

Roberto, a "queer, Native American Latino," left his hometown in Mexico and crossed the border to Texas when he was a freshman in high school. It was lonely and difficult for him to live alone in his grandpa's empty trailer home, and he was often in trouble for talking back and acting out in class. Because he identifies as queer, "there was nothing for me in my home town or in [my new town in Texas]." It is important to Roberto to get an education and find his way to a new life. When he was offered a chance to visit the university he attends now, he fell in love and "became obsessed" with attending.

Clyde is a Native American who studies engineering at a public school in the West. He was incarcerated a few years ago, and prison was a wake-up call for him. "I did everything possible to keep myself from rescinding." He participated in every program he could, including getting an associate degree while in prison. When Clyde returned to school he was worried he'd have a hard time catching up with younger students who had been in school more recently. He's been very successful in his engineering program, in part because his mom shared the strong support network she built at the multicultural center when she attended the same school a few years prior.

Sammy is an Asian American/Pacific Islander currently in his first semester of community college. During high school, he went to prison where a cellmate's admiration of his neighborhood status turned him onto a new path. His request for a GED was denied, but upon release he continued his quest to get a GED and go to college. Today, Sammy is loving his sociology classes, but isn't sure if he can stay in school because he is under tremendous financial pressure.

George is a Native American who went to a private four-year university to study theater and Spanish. His mom sent him to a boarding school for high school because she felt he'd get a better education there than at his reservation school. George struggled with drug use in college, and was concerned at times he might not graduate. He recently graduated and decided to go home and work to support young people in his community.

Dino is a middle child of seven siblings. He was born in Jamaica and moved to the United States when he was six. The most important thing to Dino is to stand out in the crowd so he took his high school selection process and high school achievement very seriously. He knew his neighborhood school wasn't good enough so he applied to 10 public high schools and got into a charter school geared toward college admission. Dino attends a public university, where he is studying to become a forensic scientist.

Webs of Support

How effectively or ineffectively students build a web of support impacts multiple facets of their success. Support webs are innovative, highly personal mechanisms that allow students to navigate a seemingly impossible pipeline. Existing resources are often adapted to suit the needs, desires or specific goals of the student.

In the previous sections (Pressures of life and Paths to completion), students shared the "who" and "why" part of their higher education journey. This section examines the "how." When the odds are stacked against you or the challenges are great, how do you succeed?

We asked many students to tell us about the differences between role models, support and help. We also asked what they do when they have academic, financial, and logistical process-related and personal issues. From the students, we learned that:

- There is no doubt that it's difficult for many young men of color to ask for help. But there is also an underestimation of how difficult it is for young men of color to locate, access and successfully utilize existing support resources — especially those that are nonacademic.

- Students hold varied and individual concepts of mentoring, role models and support.

- Resources come from unlikely places, and contemporary role models are at least as important as aspirational/older role models (e.g., a student who has excelled and recently graduated versus an uncle who "made it" after college decades ago).

- Encouraging shared experiences with a community or like-minded groups of students creates a potential source of ongoing support for those involved.

Challenges are perceived and real

For minority males, the higher education system can be nearly impossible to navigate alone. Lack of guidance counseling and the absence of role models who've gone to college are significant roadblocks to success.

Even when support programs are available, the interviews demonstrate that not all students are able to ask for help, are well informed about resource availability or believe in the promise of support that is given.

Make the most of what is available

For those who have learned to ask — how they build the support networks, who plays a role and how frequently they should access them — there is an incredible degree of variability. Across the board, the students we interviewed need emotional support, encouragement, logistical and financial help, advice, and examples to follow.

Demonstrating resilience and resourcefulness, many of the students in this study capitalize on what adults, peers, family and community members are able to offer.

The importance of density

Educational opportunity programs, intensive mentoring and intrusive services had a tremendous impact for many of the students we interviewed. The availability of these services varies greatly from state to state and from community to community. Some of the students were succeeding in college because of a level of support they would never have received if they'd lived someplace else. Others clearly could have benefited from the same level of support, but it simply wasn't available in their areas. Where support resources are dense, students are much more likely to find opportunities; whereas where resources are scarce, students must learn to become active seekers.

Roadblocks

The struggle to ask

It can be difficult to know why, when or how to ask for support and help.

- Unless students live in areas that are dense with support, they must become extremely active seekers of help.

- Students struggle to ask for help for many reasons:
  - They feel responsible for taking care of things themselves.
  - They don't know what help is available.
  - They don't know what to ask.
  - They didn't realize they could get additional assistance.
  - They prefer to go to friends or family who may not be able to help.
  - They perceive that the available help won't actually be helpful.

"If you want to succeed, you have to ask for it."

Jeremy

Native American, 30, middle,
two-year public school, Northeast

The support deficit

Resources are limited, so students have to do a lot of work to connect with support or find help outside of the public school system.

- Programs at colleges to provide academic advice, culturally sensitive counseling, emotional support, and advice on how to address financial and family obligations are in short supply. Not all students who can benefit from these types of services receive them.

- Some matriculated students return to high school advisers for help with college issues.

- Some students receive discipline (singling out, suspension, expulsion, loss of scholarships) when what they need is support.

"People here talk about guidance counselors. I never had one so I don't know what they have to offer. But I'd like a guidance counselor — someone to talk to on an educational level. If you're that ignorant in the subject, you don't know if the choices you're making are the best choices you could make or, is there a better way?"

Sammy

Asian American/Pacific Islander, 21,
first year, two-year public school, Northeast
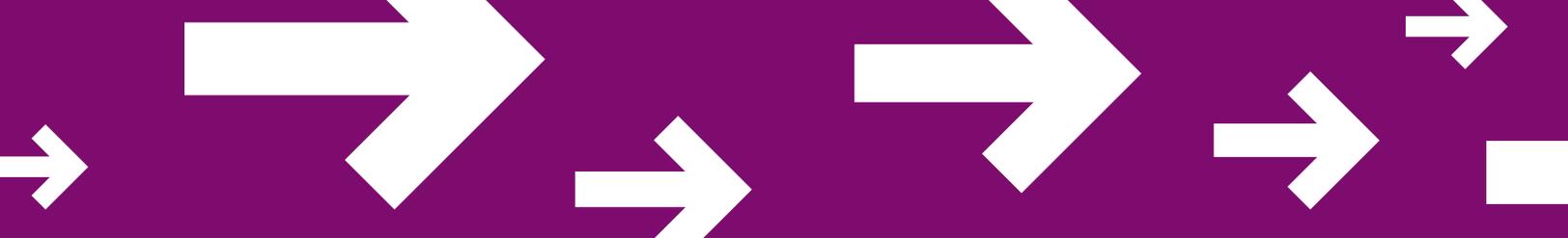
Catalysts

Different types of resources

Students have varied and individual concepts of mentoring, role models, and emotional and logistical support; and many realize they need (and seek out) all of these types of resources.

- It's rare for a single person to provide all types of support, so many students actively build their own unique support networks.

- Some students are fortunate to become involved in programs that help because they are recruited, required or automatically eligible to participate.

A family of support

Students need emotional support and encouragement to succeed. Family members and people in institutional roles who become "family" fill this essential role, even when they are unable to offer help with the college process.

- Mothers, and women in general, play critical roles.

- Families offer a tremendous amount of emotional support, even if they can't offer help or guidance about the college process.

- Outsiders who offer support and help to students can become "extended family."

"Well, with help it's being informative, having information, this is what you do for financial aid, this is what you do to apply. But supportive is being just a base, a foundation to be like, 'you can do it. You can go forward with it. I'll try to help you as much as I can.'"

Miguel
Hispanic/Latino, 20, middle,
four-year private school, Northeast

"I didn't know what it meant to be a man because my father wasn't around … I didn't have someone there to show me what it is to be a man. But I had my mother and my grandmother to show me what it was to be a strong woman."

George
Native American, 22, graduate,
four-year private school, Northeast

Exposure to good and bad examples

Seeing examples of people who have succeeded or people who are struggling can help students avoid trial-and-error situations and offer them a chance to learn without making the same mistakes.

- Parents who go to college when their kids are older play a unique role in motivating and guiding their kids.

- Some students are motivated and guided by seeing examples of people living in ways they do not want to emulate (reverse role models).

The power of peers: paying it forward

Students who have already been through an experience are a rich source of support and value working to support others.

- Students become mentors in the programs in which they formerly participated.

- Students work to bring more students of color to college.

- Students organize and create organizations to promote change and reform, and to create safe spaces for future students.

- Students give talks and work in their communities to "be examples" that younger men can follow.

- Students strive to give back by making their families and communities proud.

"I looked at my family's past and everybody close to me. [I] wanted to see if I make the decision not to go, [would it] hurt my family? My brother went to college for only a semester; he's gonna go back, but he didn't finish. My sister dropped out of high school a week before she was supposed to [graduate], and that destroyed my mom too. I used my family's defaults to push me. I used that as my determination."

Xavier C.
Hispanic/Latino, 18,
high school senior, Northeast

"I want to feel empowered and see people do greater things. That's where my mindset of pulling people up the ladder as I climb plays a part, because I see what the struggles and differences are, and how hard it is for somebody to try to step up."

Freddy
Hispanic/Latino, 19, first year,
nontraditional college, Northeast

The power of peers: sharing experiences

It's incredibly powerful to share experiences with others. Friends give and receive huge amounts of support.

- Cultural organizations bring people of similar backgrounds together to hang out and connect.

- Having friends to relax with, or to confer with on personal dilemmas, can make a major difference.

- A group of friends who go through a process together tend to pool knowledge and share information to make the process easier for the whole group.

"When I joined [the Asian student group] I felt comfortable. You could say acceptance. I think acceptance is important. It gets you involved in a lot of things. You've got to be accepted and reach out to others so they can join in and you can meet each other."

Zeb

Asian American/Pacific Islander, 18, first year, four-year public school, Northeast

Freddy is Hispanic/Latino and was admitted into a selective business school with a great financial aid package. He chose a nontraditional college instead. He didn't think he'd survive in the business school and preferred a small school with a strong sense of community and support. He creates his own educational experience — a mixture of classes and internships that enable him to develop his skills as an entrepreneur.

Xavier C. is Hispanic/Latino and a senior at a college-preparatory high school. He wants to study psychology but applied to schools undecided so he can explore a bit. He also wants to go far away and distance himself from his high school friends, but tells his mother "I'm gonna go do me, but I'll come back. I won't forget."

Dat is the son of Vietnamese refugees and is very close with his family. He chose to attend a university near home and family, and was fortunate to live in a state dense with high-performing public schools. Dat believes it's important not to just take classes, but to apply his education by working in the community. He has done countless internships and volunteer opportunities in his four years of college. If he could change one thing about his experience, Dat would "tone it down a notch and a half. There are a lot of things colleges and universities have to offer. It's important to realize you only have so much time, enthusiasm and hours."

Jeremy is a Native American who left community college 10 years ago, struggling with drugs and relationship troubles. Since then he has gotten involved in traditional basket making, and has been supporting his family, including two children, doing the art he loves. The materials he needs to keep making baskets are endangered, so he's chosen to go back to school to get an associate degree as a safety net.

Andy didn't go to college after high school because he felt college wasn't for him. After enrolling and dropping out of community college for several semesters, Andy got a steady job that helped him have the structure he needed to succeed in community college. Andy was inspired by a man his mom worked for to become a dentist, but "I thought being a dentist was out of my league, so I thought maybe I could do dental assisting." When Andy started doing well he considered becoming a dentist, yet his counselor discouraged him. He's still not sure what he's going to pursue.

Zeb is an Asian American/Pacific Islander and is in his first year at a public university. He first thought about college when a student from the school he attends now visited his middle school class. He remained focused on attending college throughout high school and was the only kid in his neighborhood who wasn't involved in gang activities. He expected college to be all work, and has been pleasantly surprised by opportunities to have fun and meet new people.

Moving from research to solutions

Potential opportunity areas for improving the higher education experiences of young men of color

The findings from this study reveal that although young men of color face several issues that the general higher education population grapple with — things like school choice and fit, affordability, navigating the system, and preparedness — they remain truly underserved because of a host of additional issues that hinder their success. These issues must be addressed if we are to reach young men of color in greater numbers and change the fabric and results of their educational experiences.

The College Board's report *The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color: A Review of Research, Pathways and Progress* includes a comprehensive list of solution approaches meant to address the educational problems that minority males face. These solutions are multi-faceted and include policy, research, institutional and community approaches. The areas of opportunity that we outline here bring the perspective of male students of color to the discussion.

1.

Minimize the experience of "feeling like an outsider"
Diversity and multicultural initiatives are present on most college campuses, but many young men of color frequently experience racial prejudice and intolerance, or the realities of being part of an underrepresented community. Creating and assessing culturally inclusive structures can address the alienation young men of color experience as they try to become part of a campus community and culture. These structures might include:

- Promoting informal time with friends

- Increasing opportunities for social connection that are not costly

- Considering recruitment strategies that increase diversity within the student body

- Expanding racial definitions to reflect the changing demographic

2.

Elevate the importance of aid that addresses life issues to the same level as academic and financial aid
Although the students we interviewed did not believe they were adequately prepared for college academically, they did not identify this as an influencing factor. What does hold them back more often than not was balancing real-life burdens and obligations with school obligations. Rethinking the "aid" packages that these students receive so that they include help with work and life obligations can ease the stress to which many students succumb as they try to balance education and the circumstances of their lives.

3.

Increase access and support for students who step off the pipeline

The findings contained in this report make it quite clear that the current educational pipeline is simply not conceived with minority males in mind. Including a wider range of pipeline transition and access points that reflect the needs of young men of color will be critical as states adopt new policies, as will consideration of new support resources within a broader, more inclusive educational pipeline.

4.

Close the engagement gap for better outcomes

Engagement in education is not automatic. For young men of color, curriculum is often culturally irrelevant. Students also carry the baggage of low expectations set throughout their K–12 years. Our research shows that engagement and persistence increase when students are encouraged to find their own voice, and learn to be goal-oriented, future-oriented planners.

Simply encouraging college-going behavior is not enough. Students who have a simplified view of college as a means to an end have more difficulty managing the various roadblocks they encounter along the path and are at higher risk of dropping out. Every student will take a different path. Engaging students in the process and empowering personal choice about whether to go to college, when to go, where to go, what to study and how to get through are essential. Each student should be able to finish the statement "College is right for me because ... " in order to be able to make appropriate choices through their education that help them meet their individual goals.

5.

Increase the chances of getting help

Young men of color face a trifecta of issues when it comes to accessing help: a deficit of support resources, difficulties in asking for help, and little knowledge of what resources are available and how to access them. Density of resources matters. The amount of effort it takes for students to successfully access and make use of support varies widely from state to state and from community to community. Increasing the variety and density of programs, funding and resources that are available will allow many more students to identify new support structures — a significant opportunity and challenge given the national trend in scaling back available resources.

6.

Create a support culture of community, connection and relationship building

Institutional support resources can often be structured in a disparate, transactional way. Families who have little experience with college are often seen as deficits to young men of color trying to attain a college degree. Our research reveals that women, family and peers play a central role in providing emotional support and encouragement, and that the concept of "family" can be extended to outside people and support resources in ways that have a positive influence on these students. Rethinking support services to promote relationship-based structures and to create communities of support among institutions, peers and families creates the web of help necessary to support these young men.

Acknowledgments

This report is made possible with the support and hard work of many individuals and organizations. The anonymity of the young men precludes us from calling out specific names; however, we would like to acknowledge all of them by saying:

To the supporters of students who helped us

We cannot thank you enough for taking the time from your busy schedules to introduce, e-mail, call, track down, check-in and, in some cases, hold the hands of the many young men who participated in this project. It took a tremendous amount of trust to expose your students to research by strangers, no matter how noble the cause. We are indebted to your service. Thanks especially to those who spent additional time with us sharing your observations, experiences and expertise. We hope when you recognize your students' voices and hear their stories again, you will find continued inspiration in the work you do. We certainly did.

And to the students

Thank you for speaking candidly and sharing your experiences. It was a privilege to meet and learn from each of you. We know you didn't have an hour to spare to sit with us, but you did it because you hoped sharing your story would make a difference. What was intended as an undertaking to study your experience was humbling and transformative for us, as we reconsidered our own experiences, tested our assumptions and opened our eyes to your individual ways of seeing the world. We cannot thank you enough for the lessons you taught, including many that are not reflected in this report. With your voices as our guide, we take a step forward to understand and address the challenges you face and the resiliency you demonstrate.

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