

Assessing the Effectiveness of Pre-College Outreach Programs for Black Men



Dr. Jame'l R. Hodges, staff associate in the Office for Access and the Advancement of Public Black Universities at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and Dr.

Terrell L. Strayhorn, associate professor in the School of Educational Policy and Leadership at Ohio State University, offer the results of their study on the effectiveness of Pre-College Outreach Programs for Black Men.



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A recent report from the Council of the Great City Schools states, “The nation’s young Black males are in a state of crisis.” Newspaper headlines, books and online sources affirm that this is the current state of affairs for Black male youth in education. And despite some claims that the “crisis” is exaggerated or imagined a bit, national data demonstrate that there’s indeed cause for alarm. For instance, Black men are twice as likely to be unemployed, compared to White men. Black men, on average, earn 75 percent of what White men earn for comparable work. Black men are seven times more likely than Whites to be incarcerated and they tend to receive jail sentences that are about 10 months longer than their White male counterparts. Shockingly, only 43 percent of Black men who enter ninth grade leave with a regular diploma within four years, the lowest high school graduation rate among both sexes and all races. Even those Black men who complete high school are significantly less likely than their non-Black peers to enroll in college and, ultimately, earn a college degree (Strayhorn, 2008b).

Two reasons why Black men might struggle academically, thereby dropping out of high school or failing to pursue higher education, are inadequate academic preparation — what some refer to as college [un]readiness — and lack of supportive relationships, which research has shown to be critically important for students, especially Black men (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008a). In response to these concerns, colleges and universities have established pre-college outreach

programs (PCOPs) to provide compensatory education to students at risk for academic failure or those with limited opportunities to learn.

While the weight of evidence suggests that PCOPs are certainly useful and believed to be effective, very little empirical evidence exists to guide programs in the adoption of specific components that prove helpful to students. And we know relatively little about the influence of PCOPs on the academic readiness of Black males and the ways in which PCOPs promote parental involvement in the lives of Black male participants. This is the gap upon which our study was based.

In 2010, a qualitative dissertation study was conducted of the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI), which is sponsored by the University of Southern California (USC). The NAI is a rigorous, six-year precollege enrichment program, established in 1989, that is designed to prepare low-income neighborhood students for admission to USC. The NAI program provides multiple educational opportunities for “scholars” and their parents (or families) to gain an understanding of self, others, leadership, and skills that are necessary for success in college. The program represents an espoused commitment by the university to youth in the local community through a fully funded academic scholarship to USC.

The study consisted of in depth interviews with African American male participants, a recent alumni, who was a current full time student at USC, NAI program staff, parents and teachers in an effort to identify the components of NAI that prepared the African American male participants for college enrollment and the ways in which NAI affected them. Interview data were collected using a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions divided into four major categories. Sample questions included: (a) Describe your academic experiences prior to NAI or (b) What components of NAI have in your opinion better prepared you for college?

Data were analyzed using Creswell’s (2003) six steps for analysis which lead to three major findings:

- (a) NAI was critically important to Black males’ preparation for and subsequent enrollment in college;
- (b) Parental involvement in the program is essential; and (c) Program staff and curriculum also play a role in nurturing Black males’ aspirations, increasing their college readiness, and supporting them to college.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of this study, we offer the following recommendations for college student educators generally and those who work with PCOPs specifically. First, continue to advocate for and support precollege outreach programs like NAI. They play a major role in expanding the college readiness opportunities of students who might not otherwise have a chance to “get ready” for

college. Second, consider ways to engage parents (and families) in precollege programs such as NAI. Parent workshops, sessions, and activities are ways to involve them meaningfully in the program and to share information (e.g., financial aid) with them that might be helpful to their student. Third, realize that just as students are different, so too are their needs. Directors might create liaison positions to offer targeted assistance to program participants who are first-generation to college, low-income, international, or come to college with other responsibilities (e.g., work, dependents).

Findings from the study also suggest recommendations for future research. For instance, Hodges found that having high expectations for African American males; the presence of an African American mother figure (family involvement); and self-efficacy or resilience were positive contributors to the success the African American males preparation for college, but it's unclear whether this holds for a larger sample of African American men who participate in other PCOPs. Future researchers might design quantitative surveys that tap this issue directly and administer it to larger samples of students. Other studies might pay closer attention to the role that program staff play in Black male participants' success. Interviews or surveys might be appropriate tools for such as study, depending on the sample size and study's purpose.

References

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