

For men of color, high academic motivation does not bring academic success

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Despite higher levels of engagement in the community college experience—from rarely skipping classes to accessing tutoring services more frequently—male students of color have lower academic outcomes than White male students who are significantly less engaged, according to a recent University of Texas at Austin report.

"Aspirations to Achievement: Men of Color and Community Colleges" was produced by the College of Education's Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE). It is based on responses from more than 453,000 students nationwide to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement.

"Despite Black and Hispanic males reporting higher aspirations to earn a community college certificate or degree than their White peers, only 5 percent of those who attend [community colleges](#) earn certificates or degrees in three years, as opposed to 32 percent of White males," said Kay McClenney, CCCSE director. "Realities like this prompted us to look at what contributes to the achievement gaps and suggest ways community colleges can better support Black and Hispanic males' success."

Research consistently shows that in undergraduate education there is a positive correlation between students' levels of engagement—with [faculty members](#), other students and the subject matter—and their academic success, said McClenney. An engaged student tends to do things like meet with advisers to discuss career plans, work on projects

with other students outside of class, spend hours rewriting and perfecting a research paper, and ask questions in class.

Among [male students](#), Black males are the most engaged, followed by Hispanics, and White males are the least engaged of the three groups. This pattern is consistent across benchmarks and more than 10 years of CCCSE data. When it comes to achievement, the results are reversed—White males consistently have the highest grades and college completion rates, followed by Hispanics. Black males report the lowest outcomes.

"The findings don't mean engagement isn't beneficial for Black and Hispanic male students," said McClenney. "They just signify there are additional factors contributing to these groups' academic success or failure, and we really need to understand what those are."

Using the center's survey data and past scientific research, the report offers two major reasons for the lower academic outcomes: [stereotype threat](#) and college readiness.

Stereotype threat refers to what people experience when they are afraid of confirming society's negative expectations of someone with their social identity (that identity could be based on race, ethnicity, gender, age or religion, for example).

"Even when the stereotyping is subtle and there are no bad intentions or active prejudice intended, stereotype threat can be triggered and have negative results," said McClenney. "Research indicates this threat is a significant cause of minority underachievement in U.S. higher education."

Regarding college readiness, the report states that Black and Hispanic students tend to start college needing significant help with academic

skills development in multiple areas.

ACT data show, for example, that students of color are much less likely to meet ACT college readiness benchmarks. Around 16 percent of Black students meet the benchmark in reading, compared with 29 percent of Hispanic students and 54 percent of White students. About 14 percent of Black students meet the benchmark in math, compared with 30 percent of Hispanic students and 54 percent of White students.

"CCCSE data reveal that even higher levels of engagement of students of color can't compensate for the effects of beginning college already well behind the starting gate in terms of academic readiness," said McClenney.

To address these achievement gaps, the report recommends that community colleges must first acknowledge the reality that "systematic disparities in opportunity and privilege characterize the lives—and educational experiences—of people of color in American society." It suggests colleges implement high-impact practices that will benefit all students, such as fostering personal connections, setting high expectations and offering high-quality instruction from very engaged faculty members.

Colleges also are encouraged to:

- regularly solicit student feedback.
- gather and disaggregate data that accurately describe [students'](#) educational experiences.
- redesign developmental education.
- boost cultural awareness and competence.
- improve faculty and staff diversity.

In addition to examining student responses from the Community College

Survey of Student Engagement, the report also used data from more than 30 student focus groups with Black, Hispanic and White males at community colleges and the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society national convention, as well as six focus groups with community college faculty members and staffers.

More information: "Aspirations to Achievement: Men of Color and Community Colleges" and a companion DVD of student focus groups can be downloaded at www.cccse.org.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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