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Shaun R. Harper, Ph.D., *University of Pennsylvania*

Collin D. Williams Jr., *University of Pennsylvania*

David Pérez II, Ph.D.

Demetri L. Morgan, *University of Pennsylvania*



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His Experience: Toward a Phenomenological Understanding of Academic Capital Formation Among Black and Latino Male Students

SHAUN R. HARPER, COLLIN D. WILLIAMS JR., DAVID PÉREZ II, AND
DEMETRI L. MORGAN

The following passage from the back cover description of Noguera, Hurtado, and Fergus's (2012) book *Invisible No More: Understanding the Disenfranchisement of Latino Men and Boys*, succinctly captures what social scientists, education researchers, journalists, and others typically report about this population:

Latino men and boys in the United States are confronted with a wide variety of hardships that are not easily explained or understood. They

are populating prisons, dropping out of high school, and becoming overrepresented in the service industry at alarming degrees. Young Latino men, especially, have among the lowest wages earned in the country, a rapidly growing rate of HIV/AIDS, and one of the highest mortality rates due to homicide.

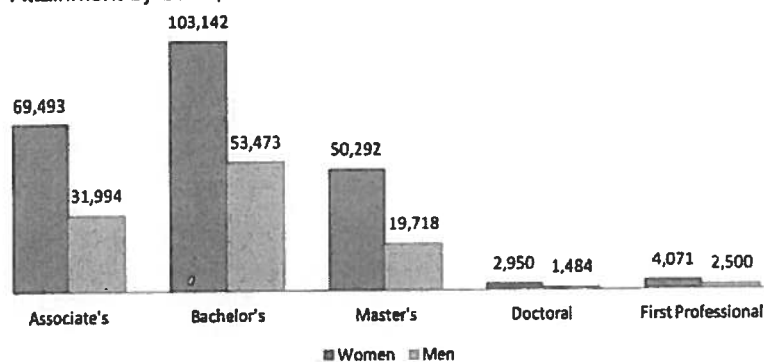
A similar narrative of hopelessness and horror about young Black men has been constructed and is cyclically reinforced in research, media, and society (Brown, 2011; Harper, 2009; Jackson & Moore, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). As such, low expectations for achievement, educational attainment, and wealth accumulation follow Black and Latino boys from birth through adulthood. Put differently, a pervasive culture of low expectation concerning the American man of color constantly poses a threat to his social, political, and economic advancement. Perhaps nowhere is this culture more commonplace than in schools.

Much has been written about troubling educational outcomes among Black and Latino male students. For example, Saenz and Ponjuan (2011) note that nearly 60% of Latino boys under the age of five are not enrolled in formal schooling or structured early childhood education programs; among Latino third graders, boys are on average a year to 1.5 years behind girls in reading and writing; and Latino boys in Grades 4 through 8 are twice as likely as their same-race female peers to be held back a grade. Furthermore, Harris, Bensimon, and Bishop (2010) report a wider than average gender gap in college enrollments among Latino students. Subsequently, Latinas outnumber their same-race male counterparts in degree attainment across all levels (Figure 3.1). High school dropout rates and low levels of postsecondary education attainment help explain, at least in part, the overrepresentation of Latino men in low-wage jobs (e.g., agriculture, retail, and manufacturing) and their underrepresentation in higher status careers (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010).

Likewise, Black male students experience U.S. education in problematic ways. They are disproportionately retained in Grades 1 through 12, unfairly disciplined by teachers and school administrators, and routinely misplaced in special education programs (Howard, 2008; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Toldson, 2008); only 47% graduated from high school in 2008 with peers in their entering cohorts, compared to 78% of their White male students (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010); they often find themselves grossly underprepared for the rigors of college-level work (Harris et al., 2010; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009); more than two thirds of those who

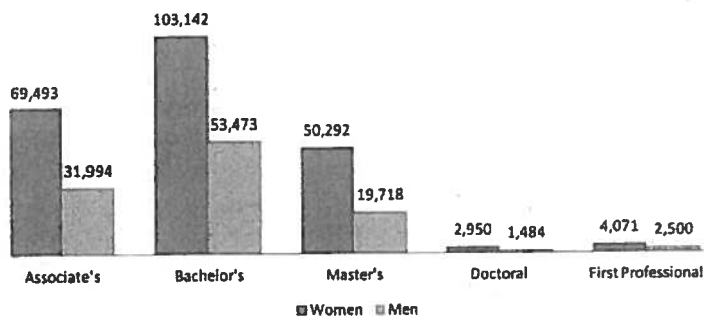
start college do not graduate within six years (Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010); and across all levels of postsecondary education, Black women's degree attainment rates across all levels far exceed theirs (Figure 3.2). Given this, Harper and Davis (2012) observe that "While many of these issues are indeed quantifiable and much has been written about them, they work together to convey a dominant message in academic and public discourse

Figure 3.1 Sex Differences in Latino Student Postsecondary Degree Attainment by Level, 2009



Source: U.S. Department of Education (2010).

Figure 3.2 Sex Differences in Black Student Postsecondary Degree Attainment by Level, 2009



Source: U.S. Department of Education (2010).

pertaining to Black male students: they don't care about education" (p. 104). The same can surely be said for Latino male students in schools and colleges.

Educators, administrators, and policy makers often make judgments about college students' needs, challenges, opinions, and experiential realities without soliciting students' voices (Harper, 2007; Kuh, 1993). Rarely are young men of color afforded opportunities to speak for themselves regarding their aspirations and school experiences. Instead, deficit-oriented narratives written about them almost always suggest they are unmotivated and disinterested in anything that leads to educational success. Yosso (2005, 2006) notes how these one-sided portrayals are racist and short-sighted, as they fail to acknowledge unique forms of capital (familial, aspirational, linguistic, resistant, and navigational) that enable students of color to progress successfully along educational pathways. Despite what is often reported about these students, Yosso argues that communities of color are sites of cultural assets and wealth. Hence, she calls for deeper qualitative understandings of how students of color acquire and activate particular forms of capital, as opposed to repeatedly focusing on what could be characterized as educational poverty.

St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2010) define Academic Capital Formation (ACF) as "social processes that build family knowledge of educational and career options and support navigation through educational systems and professional organizations" (p. 1). Like other forms of capital, they maintain that academic capital is transmitted across generations, and therefore is not often available to students whose parents did not attend college or those from families that cannot afford to pay for higher education. St. John, Hu, and Fisher suggest that particular interventions, programs, and services can equip these students and their families with knowledge and membership in networks that ultimately help them access postsecondary education, persist through baccalaureate degree attainment, and transition into the middle class.

This chapter focuses on ACF among Black and Latino male students, with a particular emphasis on giving voice to their navigational experiences along the various dimensions of St. John, Hu, and Fisher's (2010) framework. Justification for this emphasis is offered in the next section, followed by an explanation of how phenomenology (a qualitative research approach) and one particular method (trajectory analysis) can be used to better understand how Black and Latino male students acquire and activate academic capital. Narrative accounts from Black and Latino male students who participated in three structured programs that include various

dimensions of St. John, Hu, and Fisher's (2010) framework are presented. Finally, implications drawn from the three men's stories are offered in the conclusion section.

Voicing Academic Capital Formation

Four social processes that engage students and their families in overcoming barriers to college access emerged in St. John, Hu, and Fisher's (2010) reconstructed theory of ACF: (1) easing concerns about costs, (2) supportive networks in schools and communities, (3) navigation of systems, and (4) trustworthy information. In many ways, Yosso's (2006) book provides illustrative examples of how Chicana/o students engaged these processes as they progressed along various junctures of the educational pipeline. Similarly, Harper and Griffin (2011) describe how Black undergraduate men from low-income families benefitted from initiatives and social policies that ultimately eased the cost of attending elite private colleges and universities. More broadly, Harper (2012) summarizes how these social processes enabled participants in the National Black Male College Achievement Study to successfully navigate their ways to and through college. Studies like these and qualitative insights such as those provided in St. John, Hu, and Fisher's book are important because they highlight aspects of policies and programs that help expand college opportunity.

"The focus of K-16 policy on promoting access and academic success is appropriate, but should also be broadened to include an emphasis on [ACF], focusing on the social processes that make educational attainment possible" (St. John et al., 2010, p. 231). While this recommendation is both sound and sensible, its implementation could be easily misdirected. In their search for replicable strategies to remedy pressing problems in U.S. education, policy makers and accountability agents often rely on aggregate information and assessment data (Harper & Kuh, 2007; Kuh, 2005). Emphasis is often placed on quantifying the number of students served and how many ultimately achieved the desired program or policy goals (e.g., college matriculation and completion). St. John, Hu, and Fisher move beyond headcounts to offer a more comprehensive explanation of social processes, philosophies, and practices embedded in Twenty-first Century

Scholars, Washington State Achievers, and the Gates Millennium Scholars Program that ultimately led to ACF. Quantitative understandings of programs such as these are necessary and valuable, but so too are nuanced accounts of how individual students experience them.

Our argument is that some uniquely powerful features of programs and policies intended to expand college opportunity are lost when students are treated in the aggregate or when basic data (e.g., statistics and qualitative summaries) about college access initiatives overshadow potentially instructive stories of those who benefit from them. Although policy makers tend to care more about statistics, knowing more qualitative information could illuminate in greater detail what about these initiatives leads to ACF. The texture and substance of individual accounts are sometimes lost in thematic and categorical analyses such as those employed by Harper and Griffin (2011) and in case studies of programs and policies. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Black and Latino male students are rarely afforded opportunities to speak for themselves or give voice to their own educational aspirations, experiential realities, and trajectories. As evidenced by the 145,513 who earned bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and professional degrees in 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), there are some men from these two populations who acquire and activate academic capital. But unfortunately, voices concerning their individual journeys to and through higher education are often drowned out by deficit-oriented discourse and lost amid comprehensive program evaluations that aggregate these two groups with other participants.

Phenomenological Modes of Understanding

Researchers who subscribe to the belief that qualitative methods cannot be used to determine effects are in essence arguing that students are incapable of reflecting sensibly and honestly on what they have experienced firsthand . . . college students are arguably best positioned to offer personalized data and perspectives that help shed light on the magnitude of how they were affected by something in

their learning environment, participation in a program or activity, or interactions with faculty and student affairs educators. But again, such lived experiences are lost in institutional fetishes with aggregate analyses. (Harper, 2007, p. 58)

Edmund H. Husserl, a German philosopher, introduced phenomenology in the early 1900s as “the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses” (Patton, 2002, p. 105). This is a qualitative mode of inquiry that focuses on understanding a phenomenon people have experienced through their descriptions of it (Creswell, 2007); it is useful for making sense of how they are affected by a unique set of practices and conditions (Harper, 2007). Through phenomenology, individuals are deeply interrogated about their experiences and particularities of the situation and context, how the person experienced it, and her or his sensemaking regarding various outcomes relative to the phenomenon are unmasked (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The individual’s experience and voice are prioritized and viewed as legitimate ways of developing an understanding of the process. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that readers of a phenomenological account should be able to say, “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (p. 46). In light of this goal, Van Manen (1990) and Yin (2011) advise against attempting to generalize from phenomenological studies, as doing so weakens the power of individual storytelling and the uniqueness of a person’s experience. We similarly argue that much can be learned about interventions that lead to ACF from standalone phenomenological narratives.

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological methods of analysis necessarily entail the construction of a rich textural summary (*what* each participant experienced) and a detailed structural summary (*how* each person experienced the context, program, or phenomenon). Harper (2007) introduces trajectory analysis as a method for chronologically capturing the textural and structural choreography of one’s lived experience. Concerning college students, he asserts that trajectory analysis could be useful in more deeply understanding:

How their college-going aspirations were developed, the methodologies they used to search for and select an institution from among available choices, the facilitators of or barriers to smooth adjustments in the first year, the role of significant others (for example, peers, par-

ents, or educators) in their success, experiences in residence halls and classrooms, explanatory factors for active or passive engagement, environmental conditions that have fostered changes in their attitudes and behaviors, and gains and outcomes accrued through participation in enriching educational experiences. (p. 58)

The method is also a powerful means through which to identify key turning points and vulnerabilities along students' pathways to and through college. Harper (2012) used this qualitative method as a way to understand which persons, programs, policies, and institutional practices enabled 219 Black male achievers to successfully navigate their ways to and through the 42 colleges and universities in his National Black Male College Achievement Study. In a similar fashion, trajectory analysis can be used to give voice to the chronological and cumulative processes through which individual students accrue academic capital.

Phenomenological Accounts of Academic Capital Formation

Presented in this section are accounts from three Black or Latino male students who participated in structured programs that included various dimensions of St. John, Hu, and Fisher's (2010) framework. Each narrative chronologically details how these programs ultimately enabled the students—Chris, Gabriel, and Russell—to attain their degrees, make longer-term educational and career choices, and use the knowledge and resources they gained to help uplift their families and communities (which St. John, Hu, and Fisher refer to as “social give back”). All three men ultimately ended up completing college and pursuing graduate degrees in the same field; two were the first in their families to earn bachelor's degrees. Their stories reveal how three different programs helped these men form the academic capital necessary to transcend poverty, inequitable schooling, hopelessness, career confusion, and other threats that typically undermine academic success for Black and Latino male students in urban schools and on predominantly White college campuses. While pseudonyms are used in lieu of the men's actual names, the narrative accounts that follow are truly reflective of their lived experiences.

Chris: Prep for Prep

Within a five-year period, Chris transferred in and out of Brooklyn schools three times as his mom constantly searched for the best education available in a community where lackluster performance, low standardized test scores, and overcrowded classrooms were the norm. At the last of these schools, a White male teacher handed the fifth-grader information about one of the city's best middle schools, as well as an application for Prep for Prep, a program that would eventually land him in one of the best private preparatory schools in the nation. As noted on its website (www.prepforprep.org), "Prep for Prep serves to prepare low-income students of color for admission into the elite private schools. It is a highly selective leadership development program that incorporates a rigorous 14-month academic component to prepare students for placement in leading independent schools and continues to work closely with the students through high school graduation and beyond."

Over the course of several months, Chris and his mother took days off from school and work to travel to various test sites throughout New York City. After numerous rounds of academic assessment activities, Chris was selected as one of 150 students out of the 2,500 who applied to participate in Prep for Prep that year. The experience began a few months prior to the start of his sixth-grade year. Each summer morning, buses were deployed throughout the city to transport students to sites where they took daylong classes. On the first day, in his very first class, Chris was handed a book, *Light in the Forest*. The instructor expected students to read and summarize the first 60 pages by the next morning; this was one of eight classes they had that day. Their course load included History, Literature, English, Math, Writing Skills, Spanish or French, Latin, Physical Education, Research Skills, Science, and a course titled "Invictus." Exhausted by the afternoon, Chris would use his lunch period, the commute home, and any other "free time" to catch up on homework. Most mornings he boarded the bus sleep deprived.

The school year was similarly strenuous. As a sixth-grader, Chris had to balance course work at his public middle school in Brooklyn with after-school Prep for Prep activities on Wednesdays and all day Saturdays. For Chris, this meant on Wednesdays he had two backpacks as he commuted an hour to school in the morning, an hour to Prep in the afternoon, and then another hour back home in the evening. Not surprisingly, the 12-year-old was exhausted and wanted desperately to discontinue the program. But

due to his mother's unrelenting commitment to education, he persisted, successfully completed the preparatory component, and ultimately gained admission to The Collegiate School for Boys.

Chris encountered a host of new challenges as he transitioned from a large, low-income, co-educational, public school to a small, affluent, predominantly White, single-sex school. In anticipation of these issues, Prep offered a range of services to help students adjust academically and socially to their new schools. For example, the program's staff planned weekly social events for its recent graduates to come together and cultivate relationships with new students who had come from backgrounds similar to their own. The Leadership Development Component (LDC) developed a mandatory series of retreats known as *Aspects of Leadership*, which were modules on ethics, community roles and responsibilities, and leadership. Optional activities include prized internships, study abroad programs, and domestic cultural opportunities, as well as career panels, resume writing seminars, and interviewing workshops. Chris's mom somehow interpreted *optional* as *mandatory*; hence, he participated in almost everything. In tenth grade, he engaged in an extensive learning experience about the Civil Rights Movement through a Prep opportunity called "Sojourn to the Past" that included a trip to the South. Additionally, in the summer before his junior year, Chris spent five weeks touring Spain (Grenada, Gaudix, Toledo, Madrid, and Barcelona) with the "Experiment in International Living" component of Prep. In the summers after his 11th- and 12th-grade years, through the program's Summer Jobs Bank, Chris procured two highly competitive business internships at Deutsche Bank and Alpine Capital. All these opportunities were afforded to him through the Prep for Prep LDC.

In the college preparatory component, the program assisted Chris with his college search, application, and choice processes. He and other participants were afforded private sessions where they learned about schools; took trips to college campuses and met one-on-one with admissions officers; and spent time with advisors who assisted them with identifying need-based scholarships, filling out financial aid forms, and perfecting their college applications. In Chris's case, this component was critical. If he had taken the advice given by the college counselor at his high school, he would not have applied to any Ivy League schools. "Even UNC Chapel Hill may be a reach for you," the counselor told Chris. But with encouragement and support from his Prep for Prep counselor, Chris applied to the University of Pennsylvania. On December 17th of his senior year, his dream of attending Penn was actualized when he received early admission and a full financial aid package.

Once they enroll in college, Prep students remain connected through college counselors, the College Summer Jobs Bank, and other professional and social networking opportunities. Prep college counselors, much like the postplacement counselors in middle and high school, travel to students' colleges and universities to ensure their first-year transitions are smooth and that they are well acquainted with campus resources.

As an undergraduate student, Chris regularly hosted Prep for Prep high school participants who were interested in Penn. He also served as a facilitator for college transition retreats sponsored by Prep. Chris graduated from Penn in five years after having served on executive boards for multiple student organizations, pledging Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, working with a faculty member on research through the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, being inducted into a prestigious academic honor society, and winning numerous awards and honors for his college achievements. Chris often thinks about his childhood friends from Brooklyn and Queens. He has determined that little differentiates him from them—they too are smart, ambitious, low-income, hardworking students, but they lacked access to certain forms of academic, economic, and social capital. Too often, this results in unmet potential, he maintains. Chris doubts that his life would have been substantially different from many of theirs were it not for his participation in Prep for Prep. As such, Chris chose to remain at the University of Pennsylvania to pursue a Ph.D. in higher education. He hopes to do research that helps extend the reach of programs like Prep for Prep to more students from backgrounds similar to his.

Gabriel: Posse Scholars Program

“Dime con quién andas, y te diré quién eres” [Tell me who you hang around with and I will tell you who you are]. Like many Latino children, Gabriel vividly recalls moments when elders, especially women in his family, shared words of advice in the form of *dichos* (Spanish proverbs) to convey different messages about the importance of education. His elementary and middle school teachers usually characterized him as an above-average student. He rarely missed school, always turned in assignments on time, participated actively in class, and earned good grades. But things changed once he entered high school.

Most of Gabriel's neighborhood friends attended Eastern District, a defunct high school in a pre-gentrified section of Brooklyn. He instead was enrolled at New Hope Christian Academy (NHCA), a faith-based high school for low-income families, located approximately one hour from his home. His mother hoped this different educational environment would sustain his interest in school and reinforce their Christian values; neither goal was achieved. Ultimately, Gabriel's mom withdrew him from NHCA after he was detained by truant officers for skipping school. Despite the school's poor reputation, she enrolled Gabriel at Eastern District; she could keep a closer eye on him because the school was less than a quarter mile from their home. It was during this time that Gabriel became increasingly disengaged from school and started participating in a series of self-destructive activities.

Gabriel routinely skipped school for several days at a time, began drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana, and joined a gang called "The Southsiders." He never sold drugs, but spent a considerable amount of time with neighborhood friends who did. These out-of-school experiences negatively affected his grades, which resulted in Gabriel being held back during his first year at Eastern District. As a sophomore, Gabriel gained stature in his gang through a series of physical altercations; he developed the reputation of being a good fighter. But after hearing that a young man from a rival gang was attacked with a box-cutter across his face and back, Gabriel disaffiliated with the Southsiders and was targeted for nearly two years by gang members. Although school was somewhat of a safe haven, Gabriel feared he would become the next victim of the Southsiders. To protect himself, he would cut classes, arrive late, and leave early from school. On two occasions, Gabriel was suspended from high school for carrying a box cutter.

After his second suspension, administrators at Eastern District sought to have Gabriel expelled indefinitely from the public school system, but his mother was able to arrange a safety transfer to Abraham Lincoln, a more selective high school located in a different part of the city. Gabriel was now two years behind in high school and coming to the realization he had limited college options. He attended Abraham Lincoln for one year, but his motivation to make the nearly two-hour commute via train was diminished by feelings of inadequacy, fear, and apathy. Frustrated with his academic performance, Gabriel's mom demanded that he pursue a GED, enlist in the military, and move out of her home. The cumulative sum of his poor performance in school, his diminished sense of academic self-efficacy, and his mother's declining patience compelled Gabriel to lose all hope.

With his mother's permission, he enlisted in the military at age 17 and completed Basic Training in Columbia, South Carolina, the summer before what would become his senior year in high school. Around this same time his mother was informed about Pacific Alternative High School, which served students who performed poorly in other school environments. Gabriel was suddenly afforded one last opportunity to earn a traditional high school diploma. In a short time, he distinguished himself from many of his peers at the alternative high school—he took a full course load, completed two to three independent studies each quarter, and enrolled in night classes to make up a year of high school. He also served as president of the school's leadership council, joined the yearbook committee, and worked closely with teachers on several school activities (i.e., graduation and the senior trip). On one particular occasion, the career advisor at Pacific offered to assist Gabriel with completing college applications in exchange for organizing college-related materials in the school library. Unlike other New York City public high schools, the library at PAHS was not staffed, well resourced, or organized. Unbeknownst to Gabriel, his efforts to reorganize the library's college section garnered the attention of three teachers whom the Posse Foundation had invited to nominate students who possessed academic potential. One teacher asked him, "How would you like \$100,000 to attend Vanderbilt University?" Gabriel had never heard of Vanderbilt, but the prospect of securing a college scholarship was quite appealing. He knew this was an ideal escape from an otherwise bleak future.

During his senior year in high school, Gabriel became acquainted with Deborah Bial, Founder of the Posse Foundation, during the Dynamic Assessment Process, a unique evaluation method designed to identify students often missed by traditional admissions criteria, who possess the potential to excel at selective postsecondary institutions. Although he was competing against 150 students from Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and other higher caliber New York City high schools, the nominations Gabriel received from his teachers boosted his self-concept. Suddenly, this former gang member believed he had a good chance of being selected as a Posse Scholar and attending an expensive, elite university.

Over a three-month period, Gabriel participated in a series of individual and group interviews with the Posse Foundation. It was during this time he heard about Miguelina, a member of Vanderbilt's first Posse. Miguelina was a first-generation, Dominican college student who exemplified the values espoused by the Foundation. She had earned numerous academic accolades, co-founded the Vanderbilt Association of Hispanic Students, and

started a date rape survivor's group in collaboration with the Vanderbilt Women's Center. Gabriel drew inspiration from Miguelina's curricular and co-curricular accomplishments and commented on this in his college essay. He wanted to make similar contributions as an undergraduate student leader, but acknowledged that doing so would not be possible without the Posse scholarship and support system. That January, Gabriel's life changed when he was selected as a Posse Scholar for Vanderbilt University.

In preparation for college, Posse Scholars participated in the Foundation's Pre-Collegiate Training Program, a weekly two-hour workshop that addressed a variety of topics, such as group dynamics, academic excellence, social justice, and leadership development. In addition to honing Gabriel's skills as a student-leader, the program helped him and other scholars forge strong bonds with members of their respective Posse. In addition, the Foundation invited previous scholars, senior-level administrators, and faculty to connect with students periodically during the Pre-Collegiate Training Program. It should be noted that this was the first time Gabriel interacted with Black and Latino students who excelled in school.

To provide scholars with support during their transitions to college, Posse offered a mentor who held individual meetings and weekly group sessions. The relationships Gabriel established with group members, his Posse Mentor, as well as older scholars, administrators, and faculty at Vanderbilt played a critical role in his college transition. Despite having such an extensive network of supporters, Gabriel was not immune to myriad challenges commonly faced by low-income, first-generation college students of color (culture shock, money problems, sense of belonging issues, and low academic self-efficacy, to name a few). Gabriel was often the only student of color in his classes, and was only one of two non-White students in his residence hall. At various points during the first two months on campus, he considered leaving Vanderbilt. In fact, he had not unpacked any of his belongings. A member of his Posse noticed Gabriel was living out of his luggage and insisted he unpack and settle into his room. The simple, but important, act of unpacking his things signaled Gabriel's decision to remain at the institution.

Beyond his social adjustment issues, Gabriel was also placed on academic probation after he earned a 1.48 grade point average his first semester. He was flooded with support from the Posse Foundation's staff, other Posse scholars on campus, and faculty members who were involved with Posse. Gabriel connected with other Posse Scholars to exchange notes, study for exams, and discuss course topics beyond the classroom. His mom also consistently offered him words of encouragement and affirmation. By the

end of his first year of college, Gabriel's cumulative GPA increased to 2.35 and he was no longer on academic probation. In fact, he was not placed on academic probation again during his tenure at Vanderbilt. Gabriel's GPA increased incrementally each semester for the remainder of his academic career. Although he was initially ill prepared to meet the University's academic expectations, Gabriel made use of Posse's networks to attain the skills needed to make a successful academic transition and engage in other educationally purposeful activities.

Following the legacy of previous Posse Scholars, Gabriel elected to join several student organizations on campus including Vanderbilt's Association of Hispanic Students and the Black Student Alliance. He also became a resident assistant. In each of these capacities, he worked closely with administrators to enhance the campus climate for students of color. In particular, Gabriel collaborated with the Office of Admissions to sponsor Minority Student Weekend, an initiative intended to recruit students to Vanderbilt. As a Human and Organizational Development major, he was required to complete a practicum as part of his program of studies. Although students typically fulfilled this requirement in the Nashville community, he elected to pursue a position abroad. Interestingly, Gabriel did not quite meet the minimum cumulative GPA requirement, but his affiliation with Posse compensated for this shortcoming. A professor and coordinator of practicum experiences encouraged him to submit an application and advocated on his behalf. Two faculty members affiliated with Posse submitted letters of support to include with his application. A policy exception was made, and this first-generation student from Brooklyn was afforded the opportunity to spend 15 weeks in England.

Gabriel graduated from Vanderbilt with a 3.1 GPA and accepted a full-time job as a social worker. Two years later, he returned to Vanderbilt to pursue a master's degree and serve as a Posse mentor. Each of his mentees excelled academically and graduated within four years; several went on to pursue advanced degrees immediately after graduation. Gabriel also used what he learned from Posse to help his younger sister prepare for college. In addition, at age 50, his mother enrolled in a bachelor's degree program; with Gabriel's guidance and support, she graduated with honors. A few years later, he also shared helpful navigational insights with his younger brother and brother-in-law as they transitioned to college. After working five years in student affairs at Syracuse University and New York University, Gabriel decided to pursue a Ph.D. in higher education at Penn State University. His research focuses primarily on college access and opportunity, transitions, and success for students of color, especially those

from lower income backgrounds. These interests were shaped by his personal background and participation in the Posse Scholars Program.

Russell: Penn GSE Grad Prep Academy

Russell's mother did all she could to convey the importance of education to him and his older sister. As a high school guidance counselor, it is unsurprising that she established college as the only permissible post-high school option for her two children. Throughout high school, Russell did just enough to ensure he was not jeopardizing his chances of attending college. But he did not take the college process seriously: He made no college visits, only applied to two universities, and was completely undecided about a potential major. This is in stark contrast to his sister, who had known what she wanted to do since elementary school and had a much more structured college choice process. Fortunately, he was offered admission to the public flagship university in his home state.

As he entered the University of Florida, Russell's aspirations were still unclear; he at least knew he wanted to use his future career to make a positive impact on the lives of others. Russell was a two-sport athlete in high school, he greatly admired his high school basketball coach, and his mother and sister were passionate educators; thus, he tentatively decided to become a teacher and high school basketball coach. But there was just one problem: The university did not offer a bachelor's degree in secondary education. With a burgeoning interest in politics and government, he decided on a whim to major in political science.

Russell had taken several Advanced Placement courses in high school, which allowed him to skip many general education courses and enroll in upper level courses during his freshman year of college. He was initially caught off guard by his poor academic habits—he thought he was far better prepared for the rigors of college-level work. Russell also found surprising how certain most upperclassmen were about their postcollege plans. As his first year progressed, Russell became increasingly frustrated and directionless. He ended that school year with many questions. His mother and sister were supportive and willing to help, but Russell felt compelled to figure out a career destination on his own.

During his sophomore year, Russell devoted little attention to clarifying his postcollege goals. He instead focused more on building social relationships and exploring various aspects of his identity. He intentionally stayed away from career fairs, academic advising sessions, and other experiences that would push him to think about his future. Russell also began to withdraw intellectually from school. The poor grades he earned during his second year were evidence of how draining the process of picking a career had become. The situation got to the point where Russell had to meet with an academic advisor after receiving notification that he was not on track to graduate in four years because of his low GPA in political science courses. Furthermore, he nearly lost a scholarship because he fell below the minimum GPA requirement. Russell was embarrassed by how poorly he was doing and therefore chose not to share his struggles with anyone except his girlfriend. He also became overinvolved in campus activities and student organizations as a means to garner the validation he was not receiving in the classroom or through an evolving career path.

Although his sophomore year was a time of tremendous academic hardship, Russell became more connected with other Black students on campus by joining a fraternity. This experience helped him make noticeable gains in his racial identity development. As a result of this and other meaningful peer interactions via ethnic student organizations, Russell began to think about career options that would enable him to positively affect the advancement of communities of color. This new realization was not enough to spur any definitive future plans, but it at least brought concerns about his future back to the forefront of Russell's consciousness. Other campus leadership experiences also compelled him to reengage questions about his postcollege plans.

While serving as an orientation leader, Russell experienced dissonance when he was asked to help first-year students in his group decide what they wanted to do with their lives; up to this point, he had not made any concrete plans about what to do with his own. He felt like a hypocrite and therefore began aggressively exploring career options that would marry his interests in education and politics. He stumbled on information about education policy graduate programs and started thinking about becoming a lobbyist or education policy analyst, not really knowing what either of those careers entailed or common pathways toward them. It was at least clear that graduate school would be a necessary first step. Russell was already at the end of his second year of college; his grades had improved, but he had established no substantive relationships with faculty and had no clue how to engage in the graduate school search process. To make matters

worse, because of his lack of foresight, Russell had not given any thought to paying for graduate school. Again, for fear of disappointing his family, he did not talk much about these anxieties. He finally knew what he wanted to do, but did not know how to do it.

One day, Russell received an announcement over his fraternity electronic mail list about the University of Pennsylvania's Grad Prep Academy, a new initiative for Black male juniors who were interested in earning a Ph.D. in education. Russell thought this was too good to be true. Selection into the Academy included a four-day, all-expenses-paid trip to Philadelphia to meet with faculty, graduate students, and alumni in the Penn Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE). Ten academy scholars would be matched with Black male doctoral student mentors who would coach them through the graduate school search, application, and choice processes. And Penn GSE would pay for each participant to enroll in a GRE prep course valued at \$1,400. Russell viewed the Academy as a much-needed opportunity to bring direction to his academic goals and career path. Despite his excitement, Russell was reluctant to apply because he did not think his 3.07 grade point average was competitive enough. With the encouragement of his girlfriend, he ended up applying the night before applications were due.

A few weeks later, Russell received an e-mail informing him that 320 college juniors had applied for participation in the Academy's inaugural cohort, and he had emerged as one of 18 finalists. He was shocked! In preparation for his telephone interview with members of the selection committee, he read several publications written by the academy's founder, a Black male professor at Penn GSE. Russell was astonished to find that someone was writing so honestly and academically about realities he had experienced as a Black student at a predominantly White university. The publications included what Russell felt were forward-thinking and incredibly practical recommendations for policy makers, college faculty, and higher education administrators. He understood for the first time, at least vaguely, how research could help positively affect change and improve campus environments for students of color. Russell was intrigued as he started envisioning the good he could do with a Ph.D. in education. The phone interview went well, and he was one of 10 Black male juniors ultimately selected to participate in the Grad Prep Academy.

The trip to Penn was life-changing for a few reasons. First, Russell was able to meet other like-minded scholars. He and nine other Black men from colleges and universities across the country spent four days getting to know

each other, validating each others' ideas, and speaking in futuristic terms about how they would use their careers and research to advance Black communities. The trip also served as a confidence booster for Russell. Being around others who believed in his intellectual capacity to attain a Ph.D. was not only affirming, but also liberating. For the first time ever, Russell began to actually envision himself becoming a professor and education researcher. He was also inspired by the unique concept of the Academy. The foundational idea for the initiative was to create cohorts of prospective Black male doctoral degree earners with interests in various areas of study in education (educational psychology, higher education, education policy, sociology of education, etc.) and create among them a durable network of intellectuals who would individually and collaboratively produce research addressing the most pressing equity issues in education.

This experience cemented Russell's commitment to earning a Ph.D. in higher education. His deep passion for teaching and research became even clearer over time as he stayed in contact with his fellow cohort members and the Academy's co-director. During the remainder of his junior year, Russell developed a clearer set of research interests and immersed himself in readings that connected education with other disciplines, including political science. He also vowed to never again receive grades that could put his Ph.D. aspirations in jeopardy. He was further inspired by his Academy cohort mates when they shared their research ideas, academic achievements, and doctoral application plans with each other via a virtual social networking resource. The 10 scholars held impromptu conference calls and kept each other updated on their campus visits, application processes, and graduate program acceptances. Earning a 3.75 GPA at the end of his junior year is but one example of how the Grad Prep Academy brought focus and purpose to Russell's college trajectory. Because of the extra test preparation the academy provided, Russell excelled on the GRE, which is often a major access barrier for Black male doctoral applicants. He also received incredibly detailed feedback on his personal statement from graduate student mentors with whom he was matched via the Academy.

During his senior year while applying to graduate schools, Russell volunteered to help interview and select the second cohort of academy scholars. He also returned to Philadelphia to mentor the new cohort members during their visit to Penn GSE. A residual effect of the Grad Prep Academy is that Russell began to involve his family and friends in more conversations concerning his future. He also started helping other

students at the University of Florida by reading their resumes and providing advice about careers and graduate school. Russell was admitted to the University of Pennsylvania and each of the four other higher education and student affairs graduate degree programs to which he applied. He ultimately chose to attend Indiana University. Russell remains committed to earning a Ph.D., becoming a professor, and doing important equity-minded research that will advance higher education policy and practice. Foremost, his aspirations continue to be driven by a desire to make a significant difference in people's lives and produce timely research that helps eradicate educational inequities.

Conclusion

The powerful narratives presented in the previous section say as much about Prep for Prep, the Posse Scholars Program, and the Grad Prep Academy as they do about the three Black or Latino male students who accrued academic capital through them. As previously mentioned, the effectiveness of such programs is usually determined via headcounts, satisfaction surveys, and other quantitative attempts to measure impact (Harper, 2007; Harper & Kuh, 2007; Kuh, 2005). Rarely do researchers and others afford students like Chris, Gabriel, and Russell with the opportunity to reflectively articulate the ways in which they have been affected by a policy or programmatic intervention. When qualitative modes of assessment are employed, findings are typically reported in a categorical or thematic fashion; in some instances, researchers choose to quantify qualitative data. Consequently, the richness of an *individual's experience* is almost always lost amid summative reporting of what *they* (the aggregate or particular subgroup within the population) experienced.

Those who wish to responsibly achieve all that is advocated in St. John, Hu, and Fisher's (2010) book must counterbalance more general program assessment activities with deeply phenomenological explorations of how individual students accrue and expend their academic capital. Sophisticated understandings of interventions intended to increase college opportunity require researchers, program administrators, policymakers, and concerned others move beyond typical questions like *if*,

when, and how many. Analyzing individual students' trajectories and inviting them to give voice to their experiences provides more complex insights into *how, who, why, and under what conditions* these programs helped them access college, persist through degree attainment, pursue ambitious postbaccalaureate educational and career endeavors, and firmly commit themselves to social give back.

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