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With the use of a narrative approach to inquiry, this chapter seeks to reframe deficit-oriented research on men of color, which often focuses on patterns of failure and underachievement, by exploring the pathways of community college men of color who successfully transferred to 4-year institutions.

Narratives of Success: A Retrospective Trajectory Analysis of Men of Color Who Successfully Transferred from the Community College

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Across the nation, community college leaders have become increasingly concerned about student success outcomes for men who have been historically underrepresented and underserved in education, particularly men of color. However, student success research on the experiences and outcomes of this population in postsecondary education is often conducted from a deficit perspective, which underscores their underrepresentation, disengagement, and underachievement (also see Laanan & Jain, Chapter 1). For example, much has been written on the unequal rates of higher education enrollment, persistence, and completion of men of color in comparison to their White and female peers (Bush & Bush, 2010; Fry, 2002; Glenn, 2003–2004; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Wood, 2012). Thus, rather than adding to the deficit-oriented literature and discourse on men of color, insights for this study were derived from men who successfully navigated the community college system. Specifically, the researchers explored the experiences and trajectories of men of color who began their postsecondary education careers in community college and successfully transferred to a 4-year institution.

Although scholars have recently begun exploring outcomes and experiences among men of color in community colleges (Harris & Wood, 2013; Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2015; Wood & Harris, 2015; Wood, Newman, & Harris, 2015), their posttransfer experiences remain understudied. Thus, this inquiry addresses two gaps

in the published research on men of color in community colleges. First, as noted previously, it challenges and reframes approaches to studying men of color that are informed by deficit-oriented perspectives by focusing on their academic achievement. Second, the qualitative research design employed in this study brings much-needed narratives of success from students who have transferred to 4-year universities (and beyond) to the published literature and research. At the institutional level, qualitative inquiry can be used to triangulate quantitative findings that help uncover contextualized and nuanced insights regarding student experiences (Harper & Museus, 2007). Such perspectives may produce rich data that can inform institutional decision making and practices.

As a result, providing space for students whose voices and experiences are often muted in educational practice and policy making can be a powerful opportunity for them to engage in critical reflection and sensemaking about their educational experiences before, during, and after the transfer process. The following sections of this chapter will review relevant literature on men of color in 2-year colleges and students of color who have transferred from community colleges.

Conceptual Framework

Guided by Harper's (2007) antideficit achievement framework, the present study sought to challenge approaches to studying male students of color, particularly community college transfer students, by prioritizing patterns of engagement and achievement. As a result, the conceptual framework for this study was informed by Wood and Harris's (2014) "Five Domains: A Conceptual Model of Black Male Success in Community College." This framework, which identifies salient factors influencing African American men's achievement and success in community college, is comprised of the following five domains:

1. Academic Domain, which includes variables directly related to students' academic experiences that shape academic outcomes (e.g., faculty–student interaction, students' academic engagement, and committing to a course of study).
2. Noncognitive Domain, which refers to students' affective and emotional responses to social contexts (e.g., validation and sense of belonging) and psychosocial factors that influence students' identities, self-efficacy, locus of control, intrinsic interests, and the meanings they derive from their experiences.
3. Social Domain, which consists of indicators of students' connectedness to the campus outside of classroom settings, and the extent to which they have meaningful interpersonal interactions with peers and partake in student activities (e.g., clubs, organizations, cultural programs, and social events).

4. Institutional Domain, which includes structures, policies, programs, campus resources, and practices that shape the way students experience and succeed in community college. This domain also underscores the role of institutional responsibility and equity mindedness among institutional agents (Bensimon, 2007) in ensuring student success for students of color.
5. Environmental Domain, which contains factors situated outside of the institution that direct students' time and attention away from their college endeavors, such as family responsibilities, employment, and stressful life events.

Although designed specifically for Black men in the community college, we hypothesized that the Wood and Harris model would also provide insight into similar factors facilitating outcomes for transfer men of color. As such, the framework served as an analytical lens for this study. Accordingly, the student narratives from this study provided insight into the ways men of color successfully navigated the transfer pathway from community college to 4-year institutions and beyond.

Relevant Literature

Although many studies have been published on males of color in education, only a handful focus on the community college context (Wood & Hilton, 2012). More disconcerting is the paucity of research that has addressed the transfer experiences of students of color in higher education (Pérez & Ceja, 2009). We built on an antideficit perspective, and drew from literature that viewed transfer students as a value to higher education. Specifically, we considered literature that centered on the role of institutions in supporting the success of transfer students. Two primary frameworks guiding our inquiry included the Wood and Moore (2014) Engagement Strategies and the Pérez and Ceja (2009) Transfer Culture.

Engagement Strategies. Wood and Moore (2014) provided nine engagement strategies that campus leaders can implement in order to take an institutionally responsible approach toward fostering the success of transfer students: (a) educational goals, (b) intensive orientation, (c) transfer equivalency websites, (d) predictive modeling, (e) early alert systems, (f) transfer seminars, (g) student involvement, (h) campus or academic buddy systems, and (i) academic planning. The nine engagement strategies were informed by an extensive review of the literature on transfer students. Most of the literature focused on the challenges that transfer students experience in higher education. As a result, the Wood and Moore engagement strategies were informed through an antideficit, institutional responsibility approach to the development of transfer students in higher education.

Transfer Culture. Furthering the notion of institutional responsibility were Pérez and Ceja (2009), who advocated for policies and matriculation processes that supported a Transfer Culture for Latino community

college students. Pérez and Ceja agreed that, although institutional agents play a significant role in facilitating Latino student transfer success, greater institutional practices were needed to increase overall completion and transfer rates. Such practices included reforming traditional methods of assessment, intrusive advising, mandatory orientation, establishing partnerships with local feeder high schools to promote college enrollment, and implementing policies that deterred late registration, dropping courses, and stopping out among Latino and other historically underserved students of color. The Pérez and Ceja study set a foundation for the understanding of the experiences of transfer students of color. However, scholarship on the experiences of male transfer students of color has yet to be further developed.

Methodology

The primary research question that guided the design and execution of this study was: What meanings do men of color who successfully navigated pathways from community college to 4-year institutions ascribe to their experiences and success? In line with both the study's purpose and research question, the methods employed in this study followed the tenets of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research is primarily aimed toward understanding participants' lived experiences and meaning making after experiencing a particular phenomenon or set of conditions (for additional insight into phenomenology, see Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Grbich, 2013; Harper, 2007; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña 2014). The phenomenon of focus in this study included students who identified as being a male of color (African American, Latino, Native American, or Southeast Asian) who successfully navigated the rigors of community college and transferred to a 4-year institution.

This study also employed a trajectory analysis (Harper, 2007) to gain insights into the way in which participants transcended low expectations of their ability to successfully transfer to a 4-year institution. The primary aim of trajectory analysis is to capture the experiences, strategies, resources, relationships, supports, and other critical factors that enable students to overcome systemic barriers and achieve important educational milestones and outcomes. Also, as noted by Harper (2007), data that are derived from trajectory analysis can "inform policy and practice in new, instructive ways" (p. 58) and enable educators to solve some of the most complex and vexing educational dilemmas, such as closing the achievement gap between men of color and men from more advantaged backgrounds.

Participants

To identify participants for this study, we utilized purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Specifically, we reached out to men of color who

successfully transferred from a community college to a 4-year institution. Fifteen current and former college students who identified as men of color participated in this study. Although all 15 of the participants were men of color who began their postsecondary educational careers at a community college and eventually transferred to a 4-year institution, they represented a range of backgrounds and experiences. Nine of the participants identified as Mexican, four were Black, one was Hmong, and one was Pacific Islander. Six of the participants were currently enrolled at or had graduated from a University of California (UC) institution, seven attended or graduated from a California State University (CSU) institution, and two attended or graduated from private institutions. At the time of data collection, only 5 of the 15 students were pursuing a bachelor's degree. The remaining 10 had already earned a bachelor's degree, of which 9 were pursuing or had already earned a graduate degree.

Data Collection

Each of the 15 participants was asked to construct a trajectory analysis statement (Harper, 2007), by writing a narrative that focused deeply on how they navigated community college, critical moments in their educational journeys, and strategies they regularly employed to overcome challenges and ensure their success in community college and once they transferred. Participants were also asked to identify validating agents (Rendón, 1994) (e.g., family members, faculty, counselors, student services professionals, and peers) in their pathways and offer concrete examples of how these individuals contributed to their success. Although we primarily focused on the participants' lived experiences in community college, we invited them to recall and share key moments in their K–12, baccalaureate, and post-baccalaureate schooling that helped us understand their experiences.

Analysis

Data collected for this study were analyzed with the use of a three-phase coding process that was proposed by Charmaz (2006): initial, focused, and theoretical coding. The initial coding phase began with a critical, line-by-line reading of the participants' narratives. Throughout this process, we assigned keywords and phrases to capture significant concepts and incidents emerging from the data. To the extent possible, we used *in vivo* descriptors to “preserve participants' meanings of their views and actions in the coding” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55). Toward the latter stages of initial coding, concepts and incidents began to cluster into categories based on their shared properties, which we treated as emerging thematic categories. It was at this point where we shifted from initial to focused coding. During focused coding, we sorted through larger segments of data that were contained in each emerging category, paying close attention to the most salient and recurring codes.

Our goal during focused coding was to reduce the data to a set of conceptually rich categories that explained how the participants successfully transitioned from community colleges to 4-year institutions.

Finally, we used theoretical coding to explore relationships and interactions among the emerging categories. Here we sought to determine which of the categories captured conditions, factors, and influences that enabled the participants to be successful in their postsecondary educational journeys despite the challenges and barriers they faced. We viewed each category as “emerging” until it had been constantly compared across the data and saturation was evident. We organized and kept track of the data using Dedoose, a web-based application that allows researchers to work collaboratively in analyzing qualitative data.

Findings

Three thematic categories emerged from our data analysis. These categories captured participants’ experiences as men of color who successfully navigated community college and transferred to a 4-year institution. In this section of the chapter, each category is presented and supported with representative quotes and reflections from the 15 participants.

People, Not Programs, Make the Difference. The participants shared their experiences in various academic support and retention programs that played a role in their success. However, what was made evident throughout these discussions was that the people with whom the participants connected and the relationships that were established were what made these programs special. “Although the programs and student organizations were very important in my journey through the community college and university, the people and mentors that have supported me along the way have been the difference in my persistence,” noted one participant. Another student discussed the relationship he established with one of his community college professors, from whom he continued to receive support even after he transferred from the community college to the university.

I developed a close relationship with Dr. B that led me to join her program in my community college in biotechnology. In this program Dr. B kept close tabs on her students enrolled in her program where she would provide counseling, tutoring, and internship opportunities to her students. Even before transferring to [university] Dr. B had found an internship for me at this school.

Community college counselors, mentors, and advisors were also critical agents of success for the participants. Stories of the “college knowledge” that was imparted by these individuals and instances in which they went above and beyond to support the participants were salient across the 15 narratives. For example, one participant shared the following powerful

reflection about the relationship he had established with his community college counselor and the critical support he offered him along the way.

A big challenge I had to overcome was my low self-esteem and sense of inadequacy. I had to overcome these feelings and genuinely believe in myself. The UMOJA program, and James [the counselor] in particular, guided me through this process. There were many times throughout my college education that I felt I couldn't move on. When I felt I couldn't stand anymore, James was the crutch that held me up. I remember just feeling depressed and not being able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I thought about quitting school and just working full time like most of my friends. Whenever I felt this way, I would go see James, and he would breathe new life into me. It was his constant validation and belief in me that propelled me forward. Whenever I would sell myself short, he would call me on it. His consistent mentorship has been a godsend.

Furthering the importance of faculty as validating agents, one participant recounted his experience with a highly influential professor who became stricken with cancer and took it upon himself to role model tenacity and perseverance for his students.

He said, "If I can come on-time to every class with cancer, then you should be able to make it on-time to every class as well." ... We could tell he was in pain, but he would tell us he was committed to us learning and being successful. He died a few months later. He inspired and amazed me through his dedication to me as a student.

The reflections of these participants about their relationships with faculty and counselors underscore the significance of personalized validation, support, and encouragement in supporting men of color through their transition from community college to the 4-year university.

I Am My Brother's Keeper. Peers, particularly male peers, played a key role in the participants' educational journeys. Some participants discussed the ways in which overcoming negative influences and expectations from male peers was a critical hurdle they needed to overcome in order to maximize their educational success as community college transfer students. As one participant recalled,

My friends were definitely a hindrance to my community college experience. They'd involve themselves in dangerous activities that could have impacted my safety. Slowly, I learned how to distance myself from them and began to hang out with like-minded people.

Others shared stories of positive influences from male peers who were also on the path to transfer to a 4-year institution or earn a bachelor's degree.

Relationships with male peers that I developed were my new source of support. It was easier to talk about my goals and aspirations with them than with my high school friends; my old friends never cared about their futures.

Having positive male peers was important for the participants' success, particularly posttransfer. Having some shared goal commitment enabled them to establish relationships with male peers that could prove useful and complimentary to their academic goals. Regarding this, one of the men in the study had this to say:

While at [university] I was part of a male support group called *Hermanos Unidos*. When I entered the university I knew I needed to find like-minded individuals that were supportive of each other. I found *Hermanos Unidos* while walking on the main student path and immediately I knew this was a group for me . . . This group was one of the main reasons I was able to be successful in the university and some the members are some my best friends today.

Life at the Big U. Although all of the participants successfully transferred to a university, adjusting to a new institutional context did not come without challenges. In the narratives, the participants reflected and wrote about having to overcome transfer shock and a host of other issues that made life at the university difficult and, at times, overwhelming. Transfer shock is an outcome of social and psychological stress that is due to adjusting to a new and markedly different collegiate environment and culture (Laanan, 2004). For some participants, staying disciplined, focused, and committed to their goals was tough given the newfound freedoms that accompanied university life.

What I had not learned at the community college was how to deal with the new freedom and extra time that I had. In the last two quarters of my first year at [university] I became very socially involved and therefore I lost sight of what my academic goals were upon entering the university.

Another participant had to adjust to the competitive ethos of the university environment and recognized that establishing a community of supportive peers would be difficult. He shared, "Throughout my university years I have not found a reliable group of individuals who would want to study with me due to this competitive environment where everyone is striving to be the best." Adjusting to a new social environment coupled with the increased academic rigor made it challenging for some participants to gain a sense of belonging at their 4-year institution. Yet, many also found ways to overcome this initial shock. One participant reflected:

My transition to the academic rigor was rough my first semester, and that's when I learned that I could not be as stubbornly independent as I once was. Study groups became my way to survive courses that were challenging. I chose to live in the residence halls, because I wanted that experience, and really enjoyed my time there.

Like many of his peers, this participant struggled to adjust to the new academic and social milieu of the university campus. Despite their challenges, the men in this study continuously found resources, peers, faculty, and programs that supported their success as transfer students.

Discussion and Implications

Findings from this study provide critical insight into the experiences of community college transfer students, specifically men of color. The participants' narratives illustrated their resiliency in the face of various academic, social, and institutional challenges, which influenced their affective and emotional responses within the social context of the 4-year university. Such experiences validated the relevancy of the Wood and Harris (2014) conceptual model in the experiences of male transfer students of color. For example, some men discussed their difficulty with adjusting to the new academic rigor (academic domain) and the strategies used to overcome this change. Other men shared the significance of developing personal relationships with peers (social domain) and other institutional agents (academic and institutional domains) that fostered and supported their success. Finally, others expressed their difficulty in finding a sense of community (social domain) and belonging (noncognitive domain) at their highly competitive 4-year campus.

In addition to illuminating the experiences of male transfer students of color, this study's findings also present opportunities for institution researchers. For example, the theme "people, not programs, make a difference," illustrated that faculty, counselors, and peers played a critical role in the success of transfer students. As a result, the strategies and practices that institutional agents implement to foster the success of male transfer students of color must be further examined at both community colleges and 4-year universities. Moreover, the theme, "I am my brother's keeper," revealed a need for institutional researchers to explore masculinity and the influence of peer-to-peer interactions on the transitional experiences of transfer students. Institutional researchers may also collect qualitative data to understand better how transfer students, particularly men of color, create their own physical and conceptual spaces on 4-year campuses to initiate policies, programs, and research centers dedicated to supporting their success.

This chapter highlighted the experiences of successful transfer students as a way of challenging deficit-oriented perspectives and research on men of color. Institutional researchers play a critical role in helping campus

leaders understand the nuanced experiences of transfer students of color. Although it is important to collect disaggregated data that illustrate disparities in academic achievement, it is equally important to gather and utilize qualitative research that reframes narratives on male transfer students of color in an antideficit framework.

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