



October 2016

*Supporting the College and Career Readiness of African American Males:
Policy Implications for School Counselors*

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The Issue

An evolving global economy has generated an immense demand for highly skilled workers in the United States and other parts of the world. By 2020, nearly two-thirds of jobs will require postsecondary education or training, with 30 percent requiring a bachelor's degree and 36 percent requiring at least the equivalent of an associate's degree (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2013). Accordingly, a high school diploma no longer guarantees access to stable employment and a living wage; a college degree is increasingly necessary to secure career opportunities that promote financial security (Donohue & Heckman, 1991).

African American males struggle more than other groups to reach this goal (Ford & Moore, 2013; Jackson & Moore, 2008; Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). High school drop out rates are highest for African American males (Lee & Ransom, 2011). Of those who do enroll in four-year colleges and universities,¹ the most recent data show that only 35.3% earned a degree, compared to 48.9% of Hispanic males and 60.1% of white males; in two-year colleges, only 19.8% earned a degree, compared to 28.6% of Hispanic and 30.4% of white males (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Multiple out-of-school factors influence these low rates of college completion. Research suggests that many African American males experience difficulty in formulating their academic and social identities in the context of complex and ambiguous psychosocial interactions with their families, schools, communities, and society (Moore & Lewis, 2014; Noguera, 2003). The communities in which African American males live are characterized by some of the highest concentrations of poverty and family instability in the country, and African American males face media

¹ Specifically, those that grant bachelor's or equivalent degrees.

characterizations that reinforce racial stereotypes (Bryant, 2015; Tsoi-A-Fatt, 2010). They are the group least likely to be hired and most likely to be unemployed (Noguera, 2003). Such difficult experiences with the world transfer to African American males' experiences with schools and other domains of society (Moore, 2006).

School factors can also work against success. In schools with a high concentration of African American males, teachers are more likely to be under-qualified and under-prepared for the challenges of urban districts (Ford & Moore, 2013). White teachers, who comprise the vast majority of America's teaching workforce, have lower expectations for African American students than do African American teachers, which negatively impact these students' educational outcomes (Flowers, Milner, & Moore, 2003; Hansen & Quintero, 2016; Papageorge & Gershenson, 2016). American schools' instructional programs influence student motivation and learning, but the curricula seldom address issues of race and gender or challenge students academically, which renders the formation of academic and scholastic identity tenuous (Ford & Moore 2013; Irving & Hudley, 2005; Moore & Lewis, 2014; Noguera, 2003).

The good news is that positive academic and social experiences can make a difference in African American males' educational and life outcomes (Coca, et al., 2012; Irving & Hudley, 2005). Many proven programs and policies can enhance the educational and life trajectories of African American males. Forming a strong academic or scholastic identity, for instance, is more likely to happen within challenging academic programs, as Chicago Public Schools found when it placed the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program into several of its struggling high schools (Berner & Steiner, 2015; Coca, et al., 2012). Educational programs that develop self-efficacy and a "growth mindset" can also contribute to academic success (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003). Equally as important, the educational personnel within a school can positively influence the educational aspirations of African American students (Flowers et al., 2003; Moore, 2006).

A vital resource, often overlooked in policy discussions around school success, is school counselors. School counselors may be especially essential for African American males (Moore, et al., 2008; Owens, Simmons, Bryant, & Henfield, 2011).

The Role of School Counselors

James Coleman's groundbreaking *Equality of Educational Opportunity Report* (1966) includes data collected from teachers, principals, superintendents, and students in 4,000 schools and the results of academic assessments from 645,000 students. The experience, attainment, and purview of guidance counselors are among the report's many measures of school quality. In 1965, Coleman's team found no meaningful difference in the qualifications and experience of those counselors serving majority-white and majority-African American schools at the national level, although there were small regional differences. Coleman further found no meaningful difference in the hours that counselors spent with students, in the number of students in each counselor's care, or in the

allocation of hours between college, vocational, and socio-emotional counseling, although again, small regional differences pertained (Coleman, 1966).

Unfortunately, the disparities in access to counselors have become more pronounced since Coleman's report, an issue that necessitates attention from policymakers and practitioners. School counselors are uniquely positioned to assist young African American males with academic, emotional, and social issues (Moore, Sanders, Bryan, Gallant, & Owens, 2009; Washington, 2010). Several factors work in favor of this relationship:

- African American males are highly likely to seek out counseling for academic or professional guidance. Data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 indicate that approximately 79% of African American twelfth-grade males reported that they had met with a school counselor for information related to college enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). This is in contrast to their hesitance to meet with counselors for social or emotional challenges (Moore et al., 2009).
- African American males' educational aspirations are as high as those of their Hispanic, white, and Asian peers - even though they often relinquish these aspirations over time (Moore & Owens, 2009; Noguera, 2003).

Several factors, however, can mitigate counselors' impact upon African American males.

- *Insufficient numbers of school counselors.* Although some experts recommend no more than 250 students per counselor, the national average is 450:1, and in many large urban districts, one counselor can serve as many as 1,000 students (Schulzke, 2015). Some 20 percent of the high schools in the United States do not have a school counselor at all (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). A recent study of the nation's 10 largest public school systems, many of which serve predominantly students of color, found more security officers than school counselors (Barnum, 2016). Besides draining resources that could be deployed for academic supports, the ubiquity of security guards may result in students' increased involvement with the justice system (Balfanz, Spiridakis, Neild, & Legters, 2003; Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010; Moore & Lewis, 2012; Wald & Losen, 2003).
- *Insufficient training of school counselors.* Research suggests that student-counselor interactions are more likely to achieve positive results when school counselors integrate the knowledge, skills, and sensibilities that are particularly effective in creating rapport with African American males (Moore & Owens, 2009; Moore et al., 2009; Washington, 2010). Culturally relevant or multicultural competency emphasizes the capacity to recognize structural racism and to understand the challenges specific to African American students. This competency also includes the willingness to meet with students outside of normal school hours, to use a strength-based approach to addressing educational issues for students and communities, and to connect students to external sources of support such as social services and workforce development (Moore & Owen, 2009; Washington, 2010).

- *Undermatching.* First-generation and low-income students are less likely than their more advantaged peers to apply to the nation’s top colleges and universities and more likely to apply to colleges with low graduation rates (Roderick, Coca, & Nagoka, 2011). The problem of undermatching has been documented at the local, state, and federal levels and is so entrenched that MDRC, one of the nation’s leading social policy research groups, published an evidence-based guide that aims to help counselors address the problem (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Schulzke, 2015).

School counselors are uniquely positioned to support strong educational and occupational outcomes for African American males (Washington, 2010). Furthermore, it is clear that, although the underlying function of schools is to prepare all students for future educational pursuits and workforce participation, African American males are less likely to achieve their potential than other racial groups (Lee & Ransom, 2011). School counselors are a critical lever in changing this equation.

Policy Implications

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) includes provisions that highlight the potential impact of school counselors in supporting African American male students. More specifically, the legislation includes a mandate to "provide mentoring and school counseling to all students, including children who are at risk of academic failure, dropping out of school, involvement in criminal or delinquent activities, or drug use and abuse" (S. 1177–179). Given this mandate, and the well-established need, what actions should policymakers consider as they survey the landscape in their own districts and states?

First, they could support professional development that enables counselors to be culturally responsive to the needs of African American males. Cultivating this capacity includes at least the following: high academic expectations, a curriculum that draws upon students’ cultural experiences, and providing students with a “critical consciousness” about structural inequality (Laing & Villavicencio, 2016). According to the American Counseling Association, ESSA provides funding for districts to better equip school counselors with the resources and information they need to advise students (American Counseling Association, 2015).

Second, they could enable a better ratio of students-to-counselors in urban districts (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009; Bryant, 2015). Merely sufficient numbers, however, doesn’t go far enough; a recent survey by the National Association for College Admission Counseling found “that while counselors at private schools spend 55 percent of their time on college counseling, public-school counselors can devote only 22 percent of their time to doing so” (Murphy, 2016). Re-allocating resources is difficult but possible. “Colorado is leading the way among the states with its School Counselor Corps Grant Program, which provided \$16 million to 59 schools between 2010 and 2015 to add 220 school counselors, cutting the student-to-counselor ratio down from 363:1 to 216:1” (Murphy, 2016). Another possibility is recruiting volunteers through non-profits that aim for “near-peer mentors” (Murphy, 2016). The College Advising Corps and College Possible are but two examples of organizations that “hire recent graduates, many of them low-income and

first-generation applicants themselves” to walk through the process with high school seniors (Murphy, 2016). [Thread](#) in Baltimore, [TeenSharp](#) in New Jersey and Delaware, and [Uncommon Good](#) in the Pomona Valley, are locally-focused examples.

Third, they could encourage a culture of aiming high to remedy the chronic undermatching that often occurs. This is not uncharted territory; MDRC’s recent research-based guidebook for counselors, entitled “*In Search of a Match: A Guide for Helping Students Make Informed College Choices*” for instance, documents strategies that create a high school culture of “fit and match” with college and career in mind (Byndloss, Coven, Kusayeva, Johnston, & Sherwin, 2015). Policymakers could also take a lesson from the country’s successful urban charter schools that promote achievement, college placement, and college completion, as the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) model attempts to do by establishing high expectations during K-12 education and social capital and academic support throughout the collegiate experience (Rose, Maranto, & Ritter, 2015).

Fourth, they could help counselors become aware of the panoply of sub-baccalaureate certificates that advance workforce participation. Research that confirms the ubiquity and viability of sub-baccalaureate programs also finds that few educational personnel are aware of them (Rosenbaum & Ahearn, 2016). When asked whether their school counselors helped them to select possible jobs, only 17% of African American males from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 reported that their school counselors had assisted them in facilitating this occupational outcome (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Fifth, they could duplicate programs such as the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI) in New York City, which provides exemplary academic and social resources to enhance academic outcomes. The Research Alliance for New York City Schools recently produced reports on best practices in ESI schools that highlight the length these schools go to promote a college-going culture in every grade. The student body at ACORN Community High School, for instance, is 83% African American. All students visit Historically Black Colleges and Universities; all students meet with a guidance counselor in every grade; all students set interim and long-term academic goals and receive information about options other than college (Laing & Villavicencio, 2016).

Once stronger programs and adequate numbers of school counselors are in place, policymakers could support data collection and evaluation research to probe the effectiveness of various intervention strategies. This type of empirical, transformative model could contribute to the scholarly literature about best practices for counseling African American males and lead to duplication around the country.

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