BRIDGES & BARRIERS: A SURVEY OF MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS PROGRAMS

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Preface

This report is based on a study organized and prepared under the auspices of the Aspire Institute at Wheelock College in Boston, Massachusetts. The project was funded through the federal College Access Challenge Grant Program administered by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE).

The former Executive Director of the Aspire Institute, Jacob Murray, and Dr. James Jennings, Professor Emeritus at Tufts University, served as principal investigators. As senior co-author, Dr. Jennings provided overall coordination of the project, including the study’s implementation and completion of the final report. Margaret Sprague, Interim Director for the Aspire Institute, also helped in the development and completion of the study and report. Ashley E. Harding provided editorial assistance and conducted some library searches relevant to bibliographic citations.

As part of the project, interviews were conducted by Eric Burkes, Program Coordinator of the Aspire Institute; Kerry Fleming, a former AmeriCorps New Sector Resident at the Aspire Institute; and Rachel Bernard, an attorney and former Director of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) Project at Massachusetts Bay Community College. Additionally, Mr. Burkes provided initial research of the state’s college access and success programs and assisted in the editing process of the final survey, and Ms. Bernard investigated major themes in academic and programmatic literature germane to access and success programs in public higher education in Massachusetts.

Dr. Emily Mann, Associate Teaching Professor in Human Services and Senior Research Associate at the Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University, spearheaded the design and completion of the case studies and is the author of this section of the report. She was assisted by Sarah Faude, a doctoral candidate in Sociology at Northeastern University.

Cynthia Orellana, former Assistant Commissioner for Access and Success Strategies, her colleagues at DHE, and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), were very supportive and worked closely to ensure that information and data needed for the study would be
readily available. Appreciation is extended to the other members of this group, especially Robert Dais, Dr. Jonathan Keller, Elena Quiroz-Livanis, Nyal Fuentes, and Kathryn Sandel.

The research team also expresses its appreciation to both the former President of Wheelock College, Jackie Jenkins-Scott, and to Marta T. Rosa, Wheelock College’s former Senior Executive Director, Department of Government & External Affairs and Community Impact/Chief Diversity Office, for their leadership and support of this study. We also thank them for their commitment to expanding access and success in higher education for all students.
Executive Summary

Introduction

Commissioned by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE), *Bridges and Barriers: A Survey of Massachusetts College Access & Success Programs*, has two objectives: to identify the current landscape of access and success programs in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and to explore the views that local stakeholders of access and success programs hold regarding the challenges facing underrepresented groups, especially Black and Latino male students.

By developing a taxonomy of hundreds of access and success programs and initiatives in Massachusetts and interviewing stakeholders across the state, this report lays a foundation for increasing the possibility of collaborative initiatives aimed at enhancing opportunities for underrepresented groups in public higher education.

The report’s second objective was actualized through interviews with educators and representatives of nonprofits and community-based organizations across Massachusetts who are involved directly or indirectly with college access and success programs. The report’s objectives were also informed by the case studies of four municipalities (Holyoke, Southbridge, Brockton, and Fitchburg) used to describe how access and success programs in public higher education are working closely, or not, with community partners. While the statewide interviews focused on the perceptions of key informants regarding the experiences of Black and Latino males, the case studies placed this issue within a broader context of how public higher education and community-based organizations and nonprofits might work more closely together in responding to the needs of underrepresented groups.

The attention that this report designates regarding the experiences of Black and Latino male students in public higher education is based on academic data showing that these two groups stand out in terms of academic experiences when compared to White students, both in Massachusetts and throughout the nation.¹

Generally speaking, Black and Latino high school students are not doing as well as White or Asian high school students in the areas of academic achievement or graduation. This pattern continues into public higher education where gaps persist, especially among Black and Latino males. This pattern led the College Participation Advisory Group (CPAG), an advisory group established by DHE and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), “to make increasing college access, enrollment, retention, and success for low-income males, and particularly young, low-income Latino and African American men, an explicit priority for the Commonwealth.”

According to a recent report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, and based on data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, the 2012 high school graduation gap between Black and White male students in Massachusetts was 16.3%, and the gap between Latino and White male students was 23.1%. While a 91.6% graduation rate was reported for White students in 2015 and a rate of 92.4% for Asian students, the figure for Black students was 87.3% and for Latino students, 72.2%. The graduation rate for low-income students was 78.2% and for ELL students, 64%.

In Massachusetts, 79% of Latino undergraduates and 72% of African American undergraduates attend a public college or university. Yet, six years after beginning their studies, less than one-third of these students earn college credentials.

Gaps in dropout rates also exist between White high school students and underrepresented groups. For example, the 2013-14 Student Dropout Rate Report published by the DESE showed that the proportion of dropouts for all grades was 1.2% for White high school students but 3.6% for low-income students, 3.5% for Black students, and 4.9% for Latino students.

Data reported by DESE for the 2012-13 period showed that 84.2% of Asian high school graduates were attending a college or university. For White students that figure was 78.3%; for Black students, 74.1%; for Latino students, 65.1%; and for all low-income students, 65.5%. Only 19.1% of all Asian high school graduates attending any college or university were found at a public community college; this figure rose to 23.2% for White high school graduates. Among Latino and Black high school graduates, however, the percentage of those attending public

3 http://profiles.doe.mass.edu
4 The Degree Gap, Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, National Student Clearinghouse.
5 http://profiles.doe.mass.edu
community college was considerably higher: 56% and 44.6%, respectively. And close to half of all low-income high school graduates – 49.3% – who were attending a college or university during this period were enrolled at a public community college.°

Gaps that began in earlier years carry forward into the future and thus endanger the state’s social and economic well-being. Today, Black and Latino adult males (aged 25 years and older) have lower levels of educational attainment compared with other groups. For instance, 17% of all Black males in this age group do not have a high school diploma; the figure for Latino males is 34.3%. By comparison, 14.4% of Asian males and 7.6% of White males (not including Latinos) do not have a high school diploma."°

Such data raise obvious concerns about equity. But beyond the loss of access and opportunity for individual students, the gaps in attainment levels should concern every citizen of the Commonwealth. At a time when baby boomer retirements and declining high school enrollments are creating shortages in the state’s high-skilled talent pool, Massachusetts’ economic expansion depends squarely on a robust, steadily increasing supply of college graduates. Such growth cannot occur if students of color from low-income, first-generation to college families are denied the chance to earn credentials because they lack the preparation, support, and financial awareness to succeed in college.

It is within a context of continuing academic gaps by race, ethnicity, and economic inequality that the study team considered the following guiding questions: How many and what types of college access and success programs exist across Massachusetts? Where are these services and programs located? How do these programs work independently or collaboratively to ensure that the challenges facing Black and Latino males are being addressed? How do access and success programs in public higher education interact with other community-based or nonprofit sectors? These guiding questions provide a framework for continued research and evaluation of existing programs and initiatives in terms of best practices.

° http://profiles.doe.mass.edu
° U.S. Census, American Community Survey 2010-2014 5 Year Estimates.
Methodology

The access and success programs identified and discussed in this report include those with the aim of reducing or eliminating social and economic inequality and increasing access into higher education for students from underrepresented groups. Access and success programs are defined as those that either:

- Involve transition from high school to college specifically as it relates to low-income, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups in higher education (e.g., first-generation students who are the first in their families to attend college)

- Improve access and success in higher education for these students and particularly Black and Latino males

These include initiatives and programs across Massachusetts such as Upward Bound, GEAR UP, Commonwealth Dual Enrollment Partnership, College Access Challenge Grant Partnerships, Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) initiatives, Education Opportunity Centers, Gateway to College National Network sites, Early College High School initiatives, Bridge to College programs, and Student Support Services (SSS).

This report includes a series of maps that show the location and concentration of college access and success programs throughout Massachusetts. Utilizing GIS, the maps indicate how various programs are distributed relative to the proportion of Black and Latino students in local high schools. The maps also acted as a tool for the selection of potential interviewees for this report.

The research team contacted and interviewed 49 educators involved with access and success programs in public schools, public colleges and universities, or nonprofit organizations that provide services related to access and success in public higher education. Four case studies (Holyoke, Southbridge, Brockton, and Fitchburg) were developed and used to understand how representatives of these educational institutions and non-profits are interacting in the interest of expanding post-secondary opportunities for students.

The criteria for selecting interviewees included a review of relevant literature, public documents, and institutional websites in order to identify individuals involved with leading or working with access and success programs, as well as a review of demographic data. The interviewees included individuals involved
with college access and success programming in public higher education as well as those who work with nonprofits and community-based organizations. Interviewees also included representatives of nonprofits operating outside of public higher education but involved with mentorship services and a range of supportive services related to schooling.

Educators were asked whether or not the issue of increasing and enhancing access for young Black and Latino males has emerged as they implement programs, and if so, then in what context. They were asked about their perceptions of the opportunities and challenges faced by students as they move from high school into higher education, and what factors might explain low levels of college persistence and graduation. The study inquired about best practices and innovative programs that are perceived to impact access and success programs for Black and Latino students. Additionally, educators and nonprofit representatives were asked about how they see potential collaboration between public higher education and community-based sectors for the purpose of expanding opportunities for underrepresented groups.

There are two limitations to this report. First, the report does not represent a systematic evaluation of access and success programs in public higher education or the nonprofits involved with access and success. A second limitation is that the report does not include the voices of students or parents. Future research should include ecological examination of the academic trajectory that includes both student and family experiences.

**Voices in the Field: Themes**

Ten themes emerged from the interviews and case studies. The themes are discussed in greater detail in the report and include the following:

**Collaboration**

1) **Collaboration across sectors is of the utmost importance if the Commonwealth is to expand access and success opportunities for underrepresented students and more effectively target the needs of Black and Latino males.**

**Consistency: Institutionalization of Black and Latino male initiatives**

2) **Programs and initiatives with a focus on meeting the needs of Black and Latino males are not consistent across Massachusetts in terms of prioritizing the needs of this group. And even where there is an institutional decision to focus on these groups, the initiatives are often dependent on external funding.**
Cultural competence and resonance
3) Cultural competency and cultural resonance between institutional and program representatives and underrepresented students in high schools and higher education can make a difference in academic persistence. While cultural competency of staff is very important, cultural resonance is especially so for Black and Latino males because it helps to generate a sense of belonging and confidence on the part of students.

Student empowerment
4) Black and Latino male students may not see themselves as “consumers” of educational experiences in some institutions and may feel unable to self-advocate for the help they need. Students need to feel empowered to ask questions about available resources.

Data management and analysis
5) Data collection tends to be bounded by information regarding program participation and program requirements but not necessarily by deep analysis regarding the experiences of underrepresented students.

Wrap-around supportive services in a context of inequality
6) Supportive services and learning resources for students underrepresented in higher education are still lacking. This lack of support particularly hurts Black and Latino males. They are often outliers in terms of successful academic experiences due to extreme economic pressures that may force attention away from academic pursuits.

7) The economic status of students underrepresented in higher education is a significant factor in their educational experiences; this factor is especially pronounced for Black and Latino male students in many urban areas.

Cross-sector communication
8) There is growing awareness and attention regarding the need for greater communication between educational institutions and organizations in non-education sectors such as community-based organizations and nonprofits.

Mentoring to involve students in early stages of learning
9) Mentoring can make a positive and sustained impact on the educational experiences of Black and Latino male students in secondary and higher education.

10) Preparation for college should begin as early as possible; while this idea is now a prevalent one, its adoption and implementation in low-income communities should be expanded with strong higher education partnerships.

These themes reflect the voices of educators and others involved with access and success programs, both in public higher education and in community-based settings. They represent ideas that should be considered by public higher education leadership and community-based partners for incorporation with strategies to enhance the impacts of access and success programs and to increase educational opportunities for underrepresented groups.
Next Steps
The themes touch upon strategies and observations aimed not only at strengthening and expanding access and success programs, but also at breaking through the barriers to college, building stronger bridges among the various sectors involved, and working with underrepresented youth. They point to three general areas for further consideration: improving collaboration and efficiency, striving for greater accountability and program impact, and expanding funding and support. A number of actions can be considered and implemented under these categories. They are presented here in summary but discussed in detail elsewhere in the report.

Improve collaboration and efficiency
- Work to advance and enhance communication and collaboration across public schools, higher education, and nonprofits within local geographic clusters aimed at greater positive impact
- Continue supporting and expanding cross-sector collaboration
- Strengthen and expand efforts at institutionalizing effective strategies to achieve greater positive impact regarding the academic success of Black and Latino males

Strive for greater accountability and program impact
- Support and expand data collection and evaluations of college access and success programs
- Utilize the taxonomy to develop a portal to share information among various sectors involved with access and success initiatives

Expand funding and support to enable collaborative strategies and program models
- Expand the availability of wrap-around services in public higher education, which is especially important due to the economic inequalities among students in Massachusetts
- Expand dual enrollment strategies and early college opportunities for underrepresented groups, with specific targeting of Black and Latino males
- Support and encourage program administrators to pursue innovation and flexibility related to outreach and access
- Expand student access to counselors in part by reducing student-counselor ratios, and increase professional development opportunities for high school and post-secondary counselors and administrators
- Foster service learning and apprenticeship opportunities for high school and college students; post-secondary curricula should be infused with an experiential learning component
Conclusion
This report is the first to identify the landscape of college access and success programs found in Massachusetts across the public higher education and non-education sectors, including nonprofits and community-based organizations. It highlights findings that can strengthen the outreach and impact of access and success programs on underrepresented groups and on Black and Latino male students in particular.