Increasing College Enrollment for Black Students through Meaning-Making Practices

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College enrollment has grown substantially among Black students between 1990 and 2021. However, Black college student enrollment rates in the United States are consistently lower than those of the national population, and they are notably lower than the enrollment rates for white students and Asian students. Recent enrollment trends from the years 2018-2021 show that Black students today do not have equitable access to postsecondary education, compared to many of their non-Black counterparts (Digest of Education Statistics, 2022). For example, in 2020, Black people aged 18-24 were enrolled in college at a rate of 36%. In contrast, 64% of Asian people of the same age group were enrolled in college, followed by white people (41%) and Hispanic people (36%). This ongoing pattern leads many to the question of why Black students continue to have relatively low enrollment rates.

One contributor to this is the low incomes of Black Americans. In 2020, median income for Black Americans was $45,870, which was over $20,000 less than the median income of the general population in the United States (Figure 1). Additionally, poverty rates are higher among Black children compared to all other racial groups (Figure 2). The vastly different income levels reflect a long history of racial discrimination (e.g., in education, employment, housing), which limited the opportunities and resources available to Black Americans whose families continue to be impacted today (Bowdler & Harris, 2022). As a result, many Black students are particularly vulnerable to many different adverse experiences—such as food insecurity, inadequate health care, household instability, and exposure to violence due to living in communities with higher crime rates—that can hinder their ability and desire to enroll in college. In 2015, the homicide rate for Black Americans aged 10-34 was 13 times the rate for white Americans of the same age range (Sheats et al., 2018). It is thus important to consider how economic and social barriers affect the life trajectories of Black students.

A second important factor driving the persistent opportunity gap is the lack of understanding about the cultural motives and values of Black students. Many college-access programs in the United States aim to improve college enrollment across diverse groups of students, including racial minorities and students from low-income backgrounds. Although many of these programs have increased enrollment rates, better outcomes could be achieved by acknowledging the beliefs that shape students' behavior.
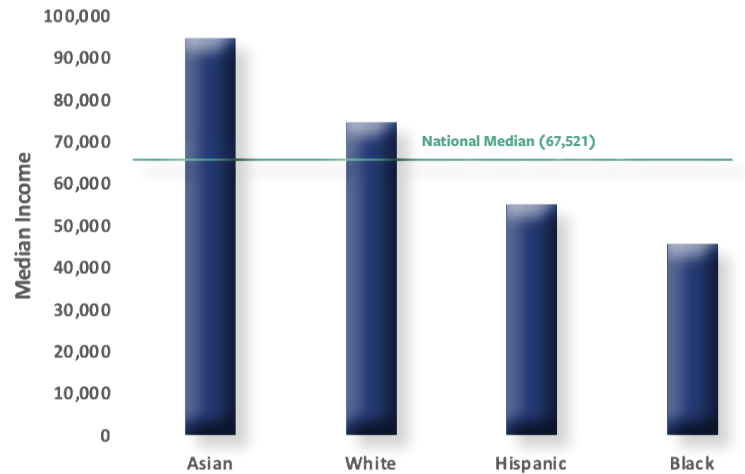

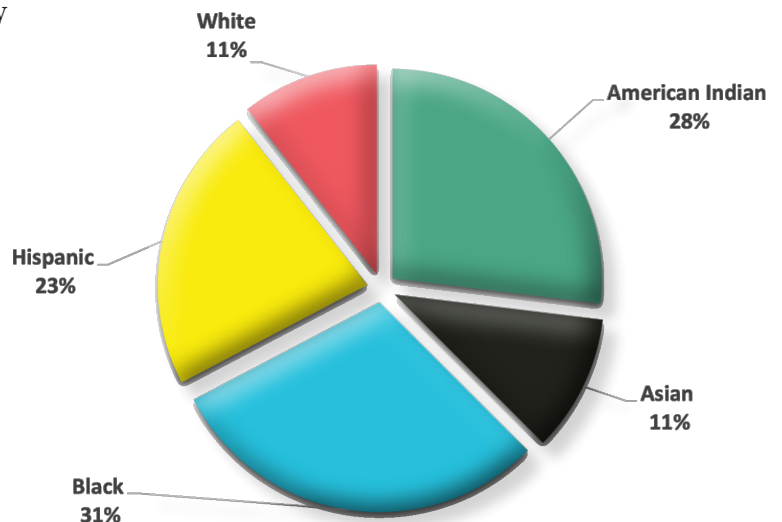Figure 1: 2020 National Median Income by Race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021)

Figure 2: 2021 Child Poverty Rates by Race (Kids Count Data Center, 2023)

Students who are racial minorities and/or come from low-income backgrounds emphasize a culture of interdependence (Stephens et al., 2012), meaning that they see themselves as strongly connected to others and the surrounding context (e.g., school, workplace, neighborhood). As a result, students place great value on fitting in by adapting themselves to situations that are often uncontrollable. In contrast, postsecondary institutions foster a culture of independence, emphasizing the importance of individuality, personal agency, and unique traits that students possess. Although especially prevalent among white and middle-class students, these cultural values are incompatible with the values that Black and low-income students generally have. Rather than utilizing a deficit-based approach—which relies on equipping students with skills and traits that programs believe are necessary for college—programs can have greater success in transitioning Black students to college if they use a strengths-based approach and affirm to students that their background and experiences are valuable assets, enabling Black students to see college as a place where they belong and can readily achieve success.

The remainder of this brief addresses the importance of how students make meaning of various adversities (e.g., academic, economic, social) as well as college-access programs aiming to increase college enrollment among students who are most vulnerable to adversity. The brief concludes with a set of relevant questions and recommendations that policymakers should consider when implementing efforts to support college access.

MEANING-MAKING FOLLOWING ADVERSITY

Although adversity has been shown to negatively impact academic outcomes, students can discover their resilience through meaning-making, which refers to the process of understanding and assigning significance to life experiences (Park, 2010). Meaning-making is influential on how people respond to difficult experiences and can lead to positive life outcomes, including better physical and mental health as well as academic achievement (Blackwell et al., 2007; Helgeson et al., 2006; Park, 2010). The effectiveness of specific meaning-making strategies depends on how well they align with individuals' cultural understanding of themselves and the world. Therefore, it is important to consider the cultural relevance of meanings that students adopt following adverse experiences.

One strategy that is widely used among high-adversity populations is known as benefit-finding, which refers to the acknowledgment of the "silver lining" or positive aspects of a situation. Benefit-finding is a process that reflects and reinforces beliefs that individuals have, to support meaning-making. For example, the religious beliefs prominent among Black people are positively related to benefit-finding (Helgeson et al., 2006).

In addition, benefit-finding comes with a growth mindset— the belief that people can always grow and improve ability (Dweck, 2006). Growth mindset has emerged as an important source of meaning that helps students see academic challenges as opportunities to grow their intelligence. In general, students who have stronger growth mindset beliefs about intelligence tend to show greater persistence and achievement in school (Blackwell et al., 2007). Growth mindsets about intelligence are less prevalent among low-income students compared to their middle-class counterparts (Destin et al., 2019), which could be due to low-income students having fewer resources and opportunities to develop this belief.

Although growth mindset has mostly been studied in academic contexts, an emerging body of literature (e.g., Crum et al., 2013; Yeager et al., 2013) shows that people do indeed have mindsets about domains beyond intelligence (e.g., personality, physical abilities, stress), which are also relevant for students' success. For Black students who experience many life challenges, developing a growth-oriented mindset may indirectly foster an understanding that people can become stronger in the face of adversity. Adopting this mentality, students can begin to see their adversity as a source of strength, rather than a source of weakness.

Another meaning-making strategy that utilizes benefit-finding is known as Shift-and-Persist (Chen et al., 2015), which refers to accepting adversity and adjusting oneself to situations (i.e., shifting) while also maintaining a strong sense of purpose and hope (i.e., persisting). Shifting involves cognitively reframing to find benefits and reduce the perceived threats of uncontrollable stressors. Notably, shift-and-persist strategies are more common among individuals from low-income backgrounds compared to middle-income individuals. Specifically, low-income families who use shift-and-persist strategies have better long-term physical health outcomes. Since Black students are most likely to come from low-income backgrounds, the Shift-and-Persist model provides a promising avenue for educational leaders to help Black students develop culturally relevant meanings about academic and non-academic challenges.

COLLEGE-ACCESS PROGRAM MODELS

College-access programs that offer hands-on support have helped students reach the next stage of their academic and career journeys. The highlighted programs below provide models for increasing college enrollment among students who are historically underrepresented at postsecondary institutions. However, these programs can further close the opportunity gap by incorporating culturally relevant strategies to mitigate the negative effects of adversity for students and aid them in seeing college as a place where they belong.

One program that increases Black student enrollment is Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), which is designed to help students in grades 5-12 prepare for four-year college eligibility. The AVID program seeks to help students who are racial minorities, low-income, and/or aspiring first-generation college students (i.e., first in the family to attend college). The primary aims of the program are to teach effective organizational and study skills, develop critical thinking, and provide academic help from student peers and college tutors. AVID students attending high schools that are predominantly low-income and high racial minority were 17% and 15% more likely, respectively, to enroll in college immediately following the 2020 academic year, compared to the national rates of students attending low-income and high racial minority schools (AVID, 2023).

Another program that offers a model for increasing college enrollment among high-adversity students is GEAR UP: Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. GEAR UP is a six-year grant program designed to increase college enrollment of students attending middle and high schools with predominately low-income families.

Through partnerships between schools, colleges, and community organizations, GEAR UP prepares students for short- and long-term academic milestones. Notable resources and services include academic preparation (tutoring and work sessions), mentorship from college professors, workshops teaching students about the costs of attending college, and college campus visits. Like AVID, GEAR UP helps students develop the skills necessary for college enrollment and success. In 2014, GEAR UP students were 32% more likely to enroll in college immediately after high school graduation compared to students who did not receive college-access program support (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships, 2014).

Upward Bound (UB) provides an additional model for assisting Black students. UB is one of the eight federal TRIO programs that provide outreach and student services via competitive grant funding to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Specifically, UB serves high school and college students who are low-income and/or from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree. School districts who receive UB funding provide additional instruction in subjects such as math, science, and English/literature. Students also benefit from tutoring, counseling, and mentoring designed to improve academic and financial success. National data from 2014 demonstrates the strong effectiveness of UB, as participants were 30% more likely to enroll in college immediately after completing high school, compared to students who did not participate in college-access programs (Cahalan & Goodwin, 2014).

Traits	College-Access Programs		
	AVID	GEAR UP	UB
Target Population			
Middle-school students	✅	✅	✅
High school students	✅	✅	✅
Low-income students	✅	✅	✅
First-generation students	✅	✅	✅
Racial Minorities	✅	✅	✅
Services			
Tutoring Services	✅	✅	✅
College-prep workshops (e.g., financial aid, college visits)	✅	✅	✅
Mentoring	✅	✅	✅
Counseling Services		✅	✅

Despite the promising findings reported for each of the highlighted programs, there remains room for improvement since none see high levels of college enrollment. In the case of AVID, there is a primary focus on academic instruction and developing skills that students lack. While this form of support is beneficial for improving student grades, it does not address the underlying role that students' experiences have on achievement and perceptions of college. Similarly, GEAR UP helps students understand the importance of academic achievement and attending college, but there are no formal requirements for the program to incorporate approaches that are culturally relevant. If programs communicate messages that emphasize culturally independent norms and values, students from interdependent backgrounds may not perceive college as a place where they fit. Within UB mentoring and counseling services, it could be similarly beneficial to focus on meaning-making of student adverse experiences as part of academic achievement.

KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How can college-access program staff design systems of support to aid students in meaning-making following adversity?
- What impact does making meaning of challenges outside of school have on college-enrollment rates?
- How can college-access programs foster culturally responsive learning environments for students coming from interdependent backgrounds?

POLICY AND PRACTICE SUGGESTIONS

- Federally funded programs should explicitly require culturally responsive approaches to help high-adversity students make meaning of their experiences in connection with choices and behaviors around college enrollment and attendance.
- U.S. Department of Education should nationally track annual survey data examining students' exposure to adverse experiences, including the risk and protective factors impacting college enrollment.
- Community organizations, local leaders, and students should inform the design of culturally responsive workshops that address student needs and concerns related to college.

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