



AN ARCHIVAL REPORT FROM ABC

HIGHER EDUCATION: DEMOGRAPHY DOES NOT DEFINE DESTINY



ABC Associated
Black Charities



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A STUDY OF COLLEGE READINESS AND ACCESS IN THE BALTIMORE COMMUNITY

“Demography Should Not Define Destiny”

FOREWORD

This nation is known for having the highest caliber and most accessible systems of public and private postsecondary institutions in the world. Our more than 4,000 two and four year colleges and universities (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009), have facilitated quality higher education and degree-attainment to countless numbers of diverse students from here and abroad for more than half a century. Ironically, African Americans and other persons of color of this country were most notably denied entry (and/or discouraged from applying) to both private institutions and even public college systems supported by the states. The state of Maryland was included among those whose segregationist policies were often cemented by legislation. Among the most well-known successful court challenges against segregation at the postsecondary level was Thurgood Marshall’s landmark suit against the University of Maryland (*Murray v. Pearson*).

Yet even today, while not excluded by legislation, there still remain disturbingly large segments of our population for whom the benefits of a college education are elusive. Significant among these benefits is the enhanced probability for economic stability and financial independence.

Inevitably, students who are low-income, would-be first-generation college attendees, and underrepresented ethnic groups such as African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans are still challenged by the absence of pre-collegiate awareness, preparation, access, and expectation. These are factors that increase the likelihood of entry and success at the postsecondary level. The publication of the significant *One Third of a Nation*, (The Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life, American Council on Education, May 1988) said it best over two decades ago:

“The aptitude and desire for higher education and the ability to succeed in college do not materialize suddenly at age 18; they are developed in every stage of childhood. We lose disproportionate numbers of minority students at each level of schooling, culminating in low participation in higher education. Only through intense, coordinated efforts to increase minority retention and improve student performance at the elementary and secondary levels can we hope to reverse these dismal trends.”

In response to the critical need to provide much-needed services and information to low-income, disadvantaged students about the benefits of postsecondary education, the federal government made provisions under the Higher Education Act (HEA) to establish programs for this purpose more than 30 years ago. The legislation was known as Federal Early Outreach or

TRIO Programs, which authorized such activities under Title IV of HEA. They specifically target potential “first generation college students” (some as low as grade 6 and as young as age 12) and their parents for: college and career awareness, academic counseling, tutoring, personal and family counseling, and information about the availability of financial assistance. This law has been amended throughout the years until its most recent incarnation in 2008 with the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 that also includes “Gaining Early Awareness for Undergraduate Programs,” or GEAR-UP. National evaluations and program performance requirements have demonstrated the advantages of these early intervention strategies. So impressed has the Federal government been with the benefits of these pre-collegiate initiatives that their funding has increased exponentially throughout the years such that President Obama’s FY 2010 budget shows a requested allocation for discretionary grants of \$905.1 million for TRIO and \$313.2 for GEAR-UP (*The Budget of the President for Fiscal Year 2010*, Office of Management and Budget, February, 2009). These amounts, if approved, certainly help ensure their continued implementation. It should be noted, however, that even at this funding level, only 10% of the eligible student population in the U.S. can be served (The U.S. Department of Education). And so it is that across the nation, state and local school systems, private and non-profit organizations, foundations, and individual philanthropists have been encouraged to replicate the basic tenets of these programs that help ensure readiness and equity of access to all who might benefit from college. It is worth noting that both the Maryland Higher Education Commission and Baltimore City Public Schools have such initiatives in place. But, is this enough?

Without a committed and concerted effort by all who have a vested interest in removing the barriers to postsecondary readiness, access, and completion, the very economic vibrancy of the city, state, and the region is imperiled. Impacted will be a prepared and engaged workforce, our leadership pipeline, and our ability to attract, retain, and nurture a solid citizenry who will continue to stimulate the growth and prosperity of our communities. Improving and sustaining quality education is key, not just for African Americans and other students of color, but for all if we are to be credible competitors in this ever demanding global environment.

While we at Associated Black Charities are most pleased and encouraged to know of the proliferation of the programs referenced above, we feel compelled to know to what extent they are accessible to segments of Baltimore’s student population who would benefit most from their offerings. This study is in the spirit of full and meaningful participation in assessing the availability of such preparation for and access to postsecondary education for all young people of the city’s schools.

We are deeply indebted to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for funding this project.

Diane Bell McKoy
CEO
Associated Black Charities

PURPOSE

Under the leadership of CEO Diane Bell-McKoy, Associated Black Charities has embarked on a bold and much lauded “More in the Middle Initiative.” This is a strategic intervention to explore economic opportunities inherent in the demographic make-up of Baltimore City for the benefit of the citizens of this city and of the region as a whole. Clearly, education in general, and higher education in particular, enhance economic opportunity exponentially. (Citations of references in support of this corollary are found throughout this study.)

Associated Black Charities, in determining its five primary areas of focus for “More in the Middle,” highlighted *Higher Education: Readiness and Access*. While it is agreed that the other areas of focus (Workforce and Career Advancement, Business and Economic Development, Asset Building and Wealth Legacy Creation, and Homeownership and Foreclosure Prevention) are critical, this is particularly true for Higher Education with a specific focus on college readiness, access, and completion.

Consistent with its commitment to the belief that *demographics should not define destiny*, particularly when the dynamics of one’s destiny can be influenced and guided by the availability of positive intervention, “A Study of College Readiness and Access in the Baltimore Community” was commissioned by ABC in partnership with the Gates Foundation. (This two-phase initiative was originally entitled, “Baltimore College Readiness and Access Community Study,” but for the purposes of consolidating and expanding the breadth of a final report, the title was revised. The integrity of its findings remains intact.)

Its primary purpose was to observe the impact and contrast of the availability of pre-collegiate preparation activities in certain Baltimore schools with the absence of such activities in other schools. A secondary purpose was to determine what if any correlation there might be between having had the benefit of so-called “college knowledge” and the increased likelihood of improved academic achievement, college aspirations, college readiness, access, and entry.

Further, ABC was greatly motivated by the desire to find answers to certain key questions:

- For whom and how is academic counseling and achievement encouraged at the pre-college levels in Baltimore City schools?
- To what extent are students’ and parents’ economic status a factor in determining exposure to postsecondary awareness activities and information on availability of financial aid for college?
- To what extent are students’ and parents’ economic status a factor in the availability of college readiness and access activities and at what levels?
- Do current college readiness programs include components to help ensure postsecondary retention and degree attainment?

A close examination of these findings should generate substantive recommendations and a call to action, as it were, for the purpose of enhancing the likelihood of college interest, college entry and ultimately, college success among the city’s low-income, thus helping achieve the goal of “More in the Middle.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From October 2007 through July 2009, Associated Black Charities (ABC), in partnership with the Gates Foundation, undertook this ambitious study to explore the linkages between the academic achievement gap and its implications for economic stability in Baltimore's African-American community. This two-phase effort was seen as a natural corollary to ABC's "*More in the Middle Initiative*" that seeks to retain the city's existing African American middle class, to "grow" – through strategic "pipelining" of a larger number of the city's low-income African Americans into middle-class status, and to attract African Americans to the city and the State. Access to higher education, whether it be through traditional colleges or high-quality proprietary institutions, has long been seen as one of the critical keys to unlocking the doors to economic opportunity and subsequent stability.

Consistent with its history as an effective catalyst for change in support of the children and families of Baltimore's most underserved, ABC commissioned this study and this report. The expectation was to identify barriers that hinder college readiness, access, and completion. Further it was seen as a mechanism to explore intervention strategies and public policy pathways that help ensure the proliferation of these elements in structured programs for our children, many of whom are first generation college-bound, and their families.

This report entitled: "A Study of College Readiness and Access in the Baltimore Community," is an expanded work that combines the goals, findings, and conclusions of Phases I and II and subsequent recommendations.

Phase I of the study was conducted during October 2007 through May 2008 in selected Baltimore City high schools without any specific college readiness/awareness program. Study facilitators had established relationships in these schools that provided ease of access. Participants were a limited number of staff, parents, and students that gave invaluable feedback through intensive interviews and focus groups. Broadly stated, its goals were to:

- Generate understandings of African American students' and parents' awareness of the benefits of higher education;
- Generate an understanding of the resources available for K-12 students to prepare for college entry and completion; and
- Identify barriers -- real and perceived -- that interfere with students' pursuing college as an option.

In addition to addressing the goals above, intensive interviews with school personnel (teachers, counselors, and administrators) during Phase I yielded the following as obstructions to students' ability to prepare for and enroll in college:

1. There is a need for more knowledge of community programs and support mechanisms for college readiness and access.

It is not uncommon for schools (and school personnel) in certain poorer areas of the city to not offer information that promotes college awareness, college readiness, or even basic requirements for college entry such as SAT registration/testing, and applying for federal financial assistance to the general student population. Further, within the same schools, often selected students are given this information on a subjective basis.

2. There needs to be a stronger focus on the elimination of family, attitudinal, and community barriers to college access and completion. These include:

- Family attitudes toward need for college
- Financial concerns about cost of higher education
- Child care taking priority over college-related activities
- Dependence on students' work income
- Drug use and drug trafficking issues

3. There is a need for increased access to Out-of-School (After –School) programs and activities.

All school personnel participants agreed on the need for more resources in the community that support school initiatives including academics, college preparation, and parental involvement. Such programs for their students are limited in availability and scope.

The focus groups of students, parents, and care-givers in Phase I identified barriers to students' being fully engaged in the college access process were quite similar to those cited in the intensive interviews with school personnel. They are:

1. There is a need for improved access to information in general, and specifically about the availability of resources.

Parents especially expressed a strong desire for their children to complete high school and enter college, but indicated frustration at the lack of resources to help them “navigate the process” of preparing for their children's future.

2. There are many personal and family challenges faced by students and parents to achieving success in high school and beyond.

The focus groups were quite candid about challenges such as lack of money, substance abuse within the family, and students' responsibility for caring for siblings and other younger relatives. These were common themes in discussions of families being forced to

make choices about immediate needs versus long-range planning for things like college.

3. Financial challenges are barriers to college access and support.

Parents and students agreed, and expressed concern, that the financial demands of their day-to-day lives not only drove the need for “barrier-related” activities such as work schedules and child care, but all but precluded college matriculation. Both were anxious for resources that could be of help with accessing information on financial aid for college.

Phase II of the study took place during the period April 2009 through July 2009 in selected Baltimore City Schools with established college readiness and preparatory programs, that tended to have more stringent entry requirements. Goals of this phase are broadly stated below:

- Gain insight into the perceptions of college-bound youth regarding strategies that have likely contributed to their academic success and be instrumental in college completion;
- Generate an understanding about perceptions of high school faculty at schools with college preparation focus; and
- Gain insight and understanding regarding the experiences of high school faculty in schools without a college-bound focus.

In addition to addressing the goals above, intensive interviews within these schools with a college preparatory component yielded important information around these central and recurring themes that are discussed below:

1. Staff acknowledged that there are significant differences in city schools with a college preparatory component and those without regarding students’ exposure.

Staff with experience in both schools with and without a college readiness focus acknowledged that students often had better opportunities when the idea of a “college going culture” was infused throughout the school, even for low-income students.

2. Attitudes and culture differ among schools in terms of student engagement and the institutionalization of preparation for higher education.

The idea and expectation of college is so embedded in the culture of schools with a college preparatory component, access to information is readily accessible and given to all students.

3. There are substantial variations in financial circumstances and other family and external challenges.

As with Phase I, financial concerns were consistently cited for both college entry and college

completion as being very high on the barrier list restricting or limiting college access. Also cited here was the complexity of the college application and student aid process and concern about exposure of family financial matters for college entry.

Three focus groups of Phase II were held with students and one with a group of counseling specialists who were interested in learning about barriers for their own students. In all groups there were over-arching areas of concern and focus, some of which are identical to issues cited earlier and others of which are self-explanatory. The areas of concern are:

- 1. Fear of failure**
- 2. Financial barriers to college entry and completion**
- 3. Feelings of inadequate academic preparation and concerns about college “survival and completion”**

An interesting point here is that almost all students expressed regret at not having taken studies more seriously, and at the possibility of having inadequate organization and study skills.

- 4. Perceptions others might have of them based on high school attended**

In addition to the data collected in interviews and focus groups, the study afforded an opportunity to survey several out-of-school (after school) programs serving the city, and several college and universities for information on how each group was of service to African American students’ being prepared for and enrolling in college.

With reference to the community organizations that often provide valuable service to young people both before and after school, two major themes surfaced regarding needed improvement:

- 1. There is lack of coordination among the organization which hinders maximum benefit.**

Most organizations surveyed agreed that if there were a mechanism for them to collaborate and leverage their resources, they could potentially have greater impact across the city.

- 2. There are challenges associated with individual organizational capacity.**

Limited organizational capacity and fiscal constraints interfere with community based organizations’ ability to perform outreach activities to attract larger numbers of students.

In telephone surveys to help ascertain the effectiveness of colleges and universities in participating in and maximizing efforts to identify and develop strategies for increasing African American enrollment, the following surfaced in the 31 institutions contacted:

- 1. There is lack of coordination among multiple programs within institutions.**
- 2. There is lack of aggressive outreach to students and parents of the community.**

CONCLUSIONS

To address the disappointing levels of college entry and completion among Baltimore city's high school students, understanding the perceived and real barriers to high school completion and college entry is no less than a mandate for our state and local systems. They are charged with developing the full academic capabilities of each student from K-12. Then, of course, we attempt to address barrier elimination as effectively as possible as a collaboration among schools, students, parents, and the community. More importantly, there must not be any practices within the system that contribute to the problem of not maximizing individual student's potential. This happens when subjective judgment dictates to whom and when information and activities about postsecondary options are made available; or when parents and students are not thoroughly familiar with the strong connections among learning, earning, and economic stability. This small but albeit important study provides some insights into the realities of our present practices that seem to tolerate a system in which, for example, "SAT" is more likely seen as an abbreviation for Saturday to some high-potential and slighted students, and an acronym for a critical test for college entry for others having had a college readiness experience. This can happen by accident of zip code, historical importance of one's high school, or other superficial criteria. To reiterate, identifying some of the barriers and obstacles to making postsecondary entry and success a reality is just a first step. We must construct and utilize pathways that are collaborative and effective in making college readiness and access more than a slogan to the students of our city who need to see it as meaningful force in their lives as early as possible.

We certainly see it as a step in the right direction that Baltimore City Public Schools' plans to expand the College Readiness and College Access initiative available in its Guidance and Counseling office; and that the State of Maryland offers Maryland College Access Challenge Grant Program (MCACGP) for these purposes. More must be done.

There is a more comprehensive section on Conclusions and Recommendations in the body of this report.

METHODOLOGY

In order to study in some meaningful capacity, an understanding of awareness of and perceptions about higher education preparation, access, and associated benefits among disparate groups of African American students, parents, and school personnel, it was critical to utilize qualitative research methods that explore and analyze their opinions and experiences. To that end, the focus of “A Study of College Readiness and Access in the Baltimore Community” was on interviewing, data mining, and surveying that ultimately gleaned feedback/interaction from some 67 sources among the groups named above. There was also input from some 34 community resources that engaged in activities designed to encourage college enrollment. Additionally, 31 local 2 and 4 year colleges and universities (public and private) responded to telephone surveys designed to document any existing formal outreach activities to underserved populations within the city. In order to facilitate the most comprehensive collection of data, the instruments developed were varied and targeted, with a view toward encouraging maximum feedback. Please note that while this research is situated within the context of Baltimore City Public Schools, we believe that our data also have implications for Baltimore City students who attend private and charter schools.

Intensive interviews and focus groups, some resulting in detailed audio-taping, were the primary research methods used during this two-phase study that took place between October 2007 and July 2009. During Phase I (October 2007 through May 2008), interviews were held with school personnel, as well as focus groups of parents and students in Baltimore City Public Schools at the elementary, middle, and high schools levels that ***did not have specific college readiness programs***. These individuals and schools were selected primarily because of previously established relationships that provided ease of access. At this stage of the research, it was important to understand the perceptions of those students, faculty, and staff who participated regarding the importance and impact of college as a life choice as well as an understanding of barriers that prevent or discourage college entry.

Phase II of the research took place between April 2009 and July 2009. This phase incorporated interviews with school personnel at high schools with ***established college readiness programs or foci***. As with Phase I, focus groups were also held with students. But in this setting they were high school seniors who were engaged in a college preparatory program and who had been accepted into a college or university for the upcoming fall 2009 semester. The goal of this additional research was to explore and document attitudinal and aspirational differences, if any, between students at schools with pre-collegiate preparatory components (and who also have imminent plans to attend college) with the students from Phase I who have had no exposure through their high schools to any such preparation. This phase also focused more on the perceptions of college and the expectation of college completion among the participants, hence, the interview tools and questions were tailored accordingly.

To ensure complete anonymity and to encourage candor in responding or volunteering information, names of individuals, schools, and titles/positions were not revealed from either phase. Comprehensive analyses of these data comprise the report.

OVERVIEW AND DATA ANALYSIS

The Overview

This research effort, “A Study of College Readiness and Access in the Baltimore Community,” was conducted in two phases, each of which had distinctive sets of goals. The strategies for data gathering included: intensive interviews, focus groups, and surveying. The goals for each phase are indicated below:

Phase One, was conducted between October 2007 and May 2008 in school settings without specific college readiness programs. The compelling nature of the information from respondents in this part of the study generated further exploration than had been intended, and thus, more questions and probing. This phase had the following goals:

- ✓ To generate an understanding of African American parental and student awareness of and perceptions about higher education and its associated benefits;
- ✓ To generate an understanding among students and parents about the resources available through schools to engage K-12 students in preparing for college entry and for successful completion of postsecondary; and
- ✓ To identify barriers - real and perceived - that interfere with students’ considering and pursuing postsecondary education options.

Phase Two of the study, which was conducted from April 2009 and July 2009, targeted schools with established college readiness programs or some focus pertaining thereto. These schools are traditionally known as college preparatory and tend to have more stringent entry requirements. The goals of this phase are stated below:

- ✓ To gain insight into the perceptions of college-bound youth regarding the strategies that might have contributed to their academic success thus far; what factors they see as likely contributors to success in transitioning to college and ultimate degree attainment; and what help they will likely need to help ensure college completion;
- ✓ To generate an understanding about the perceptions of high school faculty at schools with college preparation focus regarding the strengths and challenges of supporting college bound youth; and
- ✓ To gain insight and understanding of how faculty in these schools contrast any experiences they might have had in non-college track high schools with their present situations.

The Analysis

What follows is a comprehensive analysis of data gathered during “A Study of College Readiness and Access in the Baltimore Community” – Phases I and II. Both phases yielded important, consistent, and complementary insights into barriers that African American students face related to preparation for, access to, and successfully completing college. We found that the three most compelling and consistent discussions focused on the following:

- **Finances** – The ability to be able to finance entry into and completion of college were consistently a factor for Baltimore City youth and their families.
- **Equal Access to Information** - Equal access to information, as well as access to a school and community culture that supports and influences the decision to go to college is also a theme across both phases of the research.
- **Intense Support** - Lastly, intense support in navigating the college and loan application process was critical for both parents and students.

A. Intensive Interviews with School Personnel – Phase One

Intensive interviews with school personnel, such as teachers, counselors and principals, provided insight into perceptions, beliefs, and practices of African American students and parents as well as important insight into institutional practices. The data from the interviews helped generate recommendations to increase African American student and parent participation in higher education in Baltimore.

School personnel, as agents of the school, comprised an important research context in this study. For example, classroom teachers have the greatest amount of contact with individual students during the cycle of a school day. Guidance counselors are charged with the task of support outside of the classroom. At the middle and high school levels, counselors chart students’ life courses by disseminating information about educational and career options. Principals, as school leaders, fulfill a broader vision of school leadership and orchestrate the delivery of resources to entire school populations. There are eleven intensive audio-recorded interviews of school personnel consisting of classroom teachers, guidance counselors and principals at the elementary, middle and high school levels. This design is represented in Table 1-1.

School Personnel Category	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Total Number of Participants
Teachers	1	1	1	3
Counselors	1	1	2	4
Principals	1	1	2	4
Totals	3	3	5	11

Table 1-1. Distribution of teacher, counselor, and principal intensive interviews

Intensive interviews with school personnel provide data that offer insight into the challenges that confront students. These data also support many of the ideas that were expressed during the focus groups. When honing in on questions about existing and needed community resources to support college access and retention, in addition to the various barriers that parents and students face, much of the data points to three critical areas of need:

1. Need for Increased Knowledge of Community Programs and Support;
2. Elimination of Family and Community barriers; and
3. Increased Access to Out-of-School Time (After School) Programs and Activities

Need for Increased Knowledge Among Students of Community Programs and Support

Intensive interviews with school-based staff reveal they possess a varied degree of knowledge about community-based college access programs and services. Some school personnel are well aware of pre-college community resources. Other interviewed staff seemed to have a very minimal connection to the surrounding school community and sometimes knowledge of the availability of college access opportunities in the communities. School personnel agree that students who do not live near the schools they attend would prefer to engage in out-of-school time programming that is closer to their homes. All interviews reveal the critical need for more community programs to support and reinforce the importance of pursuing post-secondary education.

“Educators or counselors are part of the problem because they decide who we give information to. All kids should be allowed access to college information. – If they can breathe, they can come to the workshop or assembly. – Students expect us to know, to be the experts. We have the power, the info, but we turn out to be a problem.”

-Female, African-American Middle School Guidance Counselor

During the interviews, some teachers and counselors admitted that sometimes they unconsciously interfere with students having access to pre-college resources. Teachers and counselors disclosed that more often than not they serve as the primary gateway to college. Consequently, students who do not have a positive relationship with school staff or who do not have a pre-existing relationship with teachers and counselors, or who have a weaker academic record can be overlooked and in some cases purposely denied pertinent information related to college access.

Elimination of Family, Attitudinal and Community Barriers

School personnel perceive there to be several family and community-related factors which serve as barriers for students as prospective college entrants. Several of the most important of these, as gleaned from respondents' information, are discussed below.

School personnel agree that most parents have a strong desire for their children to ultimately have a successful future. Parents are not always fully engaged in college awareness activities; therefore, they do not have the information needed to encourage their children to take advantage of school and/or community resources. Another challenge cited by the interviewees is the expectation that students enter the workforce as soon as they are eligible and begin to support themselves and their families. These additional responsibilities can place limitations on students' schedules making it difficult for them to have time to devote to after-school activities and opportunities. In addition to work-related obligations, many middle school and high school-age students are responsible for providing childcare to younger siblings and other family members.

School personnel cite short-term and long-term financial pressures as a barrier to college entry. They argue that the cost of college is a major concern and source of stress for students and parents. Families display an apprehension about taking on personal loans to finance college tuition. Families who are working poor are often debt-ridden so the thought of spending thousands of dollars on something that is not tangible, something they have not experienced and/or something they do not associate as being for them and their children is extremely intimidating. Often parents who want their children to go to college "feel like failures" when they cannot make this possible financially. There is also the issue of mistrust of financial institutions in many African American communities. This has been exacerbated due to present conditions related to much-publicized bankruptcies, home foreclosures, and difficulty getting loans of any type. Some parents and students also have been exposed to negative media messaging about financial institutions being corrupt. Because of this, parents are skeptical now more than ever about helping college with financing or encouraging their children to seek loans for their college education. Moreover, according to the interviewees, parents often do not clearly understand that a college education can immediately and positively affect individual and family earning power and socioeconomic status.

"Drug abuse is a barrier. Some kids will be out at night looking for a parent that is on drugs and did not come home. Some ask to leave school to do this."

- Female, African American High School Principal

Widespread drug use and distribution is a real distraction that students face when worrying about their own personal safety and their family's well-being. More often than not, drug-related issues interfere with the family's focus on school work, high school graduation, and college preparation and entry. School staff also indicated that when parents are drugs-users, they are not available to have a consistent presence and provide support for their children.

Teachers, counselors and principals all agree that African American males are most at-risk of being lured into and/or choosing illegal activities. As a result of the trappings of drug distribution and addiction, young African American males are profoundly and negatively affected although they do participate in pre-college programming at the same rate as African American females. The information from the focus groups supports this notion as well.

School personnel acknowledge that lack of strong academic preparation coupled with the inability to gain college admittance and to secure financial aid affects students' ability to pursue post-secondary education. Low academic skills are cited throughout all of the interviews as a barrier to high school completion and college entry. Not only are students struggling in school, too often they do not see themselves as "college material." In addition to the fear of failure in higher education, low academic performance is a barrier to college acceptance. In addition, children and parents are not aware of the availability of pre-college and remedial programs that are geared toward preparing and transitioning students with weaker academic skills into college. As stated in the discussion of access to resources, teachers and guidance counselors often do not share information about college access with students who have low academic skills and do not seem serious about their academic work.

Increased Access to Out-of-School Time (After-School) Programs and Activities

Teachers, counselors and administrators all report a need for more resources in the community that support school initiatives including academics, college preparation, and parental involvement. Such programs are limited in availability, in scope, and in reach. Some school personnel suggest that more access to sports and music programs may increase students' motivation to succeed academically. The belief is that the engagement of students with extracurricular activities and their satisfaction with the enjoyment and success at these activities can be directly correlated with the motivation of excelling academically. There is also the belief that when students are committed to sports, music, and other arts, that they have less idle time to engage in troublesome behavior. School staff also supported programs that link job training and stipends as a means of exposing students to the financial benefits of a college education. All school personnel interviewed agree that community programs should include a deliberate and objectives aimed at parental involvement.

B. Intensive Interviews with School Personnel – Phase Two

In the second phase of the research, intensive interviews were conducted with a high school administrator, a high school teacher, and two high school counseling specialists in three additional schools. As indicated, these interviews took place at high schools with a college preparatory component.

The central and recurring themes gleaned from these additional interviews are identified below:

1. The dramatic differences that exists among public schools in Baltimore;

2. How attitude and cultures differ among schools in terms of student engagement and the institutionalization of preparation for higher education;
3. Variations in financial circumstances and other family and external challenges

Differences Among Public Schools in Baltimore

“In other Baltimore City Schools, my friends tell me that there is little support from guidance for students to apply, enter college; adults do not show faith in students. Here at Western, we have support and adults who say we can do it.”

African American Female High School Student

Staff stated that based on their experiences in both schools with a college preparatory focus and without, students often had better opportunities when the idea of a “college going culture” was infused throughout the school. Many of the students currently in schools with a college going focus were from similar socio-economic backgrounds of students in schools without the college focus, yet were fully aware that they were expected to apply to and go to college because of the standard that the school and its faculty set. All felt that if such standards and culture existed at the same level in every school, a shift of perceptions and actions toward college entry and attainment would be evident.

Processes that promote a college-bound culture at these schools include encouragement and support in college research and applications, along with the expectation that it is “mandatory to apply and to get accepted” to college. Students must sign up for scholarship alerts and are encouraged to use mass technology communications such as mass texts and to some extent, social networking sites. These vehicles are used to inform students of opportunities and deadlines on a regular basis.

The Attitude and Culture that Differs among Schools in Terms of Students Engagement and the Institutionalization of Preparation for Higher Education

As in the first phase of this study, school personnel revealed themselves to be the gate keepers of information to college-bound youth. However, because the idea of college is deeply embedded in the culture of these schools and encouraged in the attitudes of the students attending the schools, access to information is more readily accessible and given to all students.

Variations in Financial Circumstances and Other Family and External Challenges

“My father raises me and he has no job; as a minority I hope to get scholarships, but I haven’t gotten any yet. I will need at least \$4,000 in loans. I worry because I have lots of money needs to go to college”

African American Female High School Student

Both school personnel and students who participated in both phases of this study consistently cited financial concerns for both college entry and college completion as very high on the barrier list that restricts college access. Other challenges that were surfaced as barriers to college access included navigating the process, especially for families of first generation college-bound students were:

- Completing complicated financial information forms such as FAFSA;
- Having to expose personal financial information that is viewed as private; and
- Having tax information completed, up to date, and available.

All of the above were identified as barriers and challenges to the process of college access and entry, especially for parents.

Another challenge identified by school personnel was the need for close monitoring of students to ensure that they applied for scholarships and were getting all components of their applications complete. Completing essays and getting recommendation letters proved to be a consistent barrier for students and often leaves them out of the viable applicant pool for scholarships that they have good chances of receiving. The essay is seen as a barrier because: 1) writing, no matter how bright the student is, is often intimidating – both because of the content of the essay and the time it takes to complete a worthwhile piece; and 2) students often do not realize that the same essay can be used for multiple applications with minor adjustments, therefore the idea of writing multiple essays is frightening and students are reluctant to do it.

Getting recommendation letters, especially when two or three or required for one application, can also be a barrier. Students often do not allow sufficient time when requesting letters of reference. Some others lack the solid relationships with different reference sources that increase the likelihood of their getting timely and effective recommendations.

Another challenge that both school personnel and students in the focus groups cited as a barrier for college was the lack of support systems for students once they attended college. The level of care and guidance that is given at schools with a college readiness component often does not exist at the college level in the same capacity. For first generation college-bound students, this critical component can make a difference between college completion or college withdrawal. Furthermore, there is the additional burden of negotiating changing relationships and perhaps the perception of shifting power dynamics which form rifts between the student and family and friends – the very groups and social networks to which students usually turn for support - who have not gone to college or are not planning on going. This was cited by students as a perceived deterrent from going to college once they have gained acceptance, and from completing college once they are actually matriculating.

C. Focus Groups – Phase One

Given that the family is widely understood as the primary socializing agent and that children are agents in educational engagement, family involvement in this type of research effort is almost an essential to ensure credibility. Fifty-two individuals participated in this first phase of focus

groups. Six focus groups with African American parents, caregivers, and students at all the elementary, middle school, and high school levels were conducted with a total of 52 participants. The focus groups were divided by school levels and comprised participants of various backgrounds. Each group was audio-taped using a digital recorder and lasted for approximately 60 minutes. Focus group participants were recruited through networks including school parent teacher associations (PTA), school principals, and community-based organizations. When possible, an effort was made to recruit the parent or caregiver of the students who were focus group participants. The focus group design is represented in Table 1-2.

Focus Group Participants	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Total Number of Participants
Parents/Caregivers	10	8	9	27
Parents/Caregivers	10	8	9	27
Students	12	10	3	25
Total	22	18	12	52

Table 1-2. Distribution of Parent/Caregiver and Student Focus Group Population

As we know, socio-economically vulnerable families are faced with major challenges despite their desire for their children to advance. The information from the focus groups points to three major issues that affect high school completion and college entry. These concerns were identified as real distractions in fully engaging the college access process:

1. Access to information and availability of resources;
2. Personal and family challenges; and
3. Financial challenges as a barrier to college access and support.

Access to Information and Availability of Resources

All of the parents who participated in the focus groups expressed a strong desire for their children to complete high school and enter into college. Parents also shared feelings of intense frustration from not knowing how to navigate the processes of preparing their children for the future. They felt strongly that they do not have equal access to information about various programs and financial support, and discussed the disparities surrounding the availability of information based on the school the child attended.

When asked about their knowledge of community resources, the majority of the participants scoffed at the question, revealing the frustration of not having any of these resources in their communities. Several parents shared stories of not being able to travel outside of the

neighborhood due to limited transportation. Others shared unease about traveling outside of their communities where programs exist because of safety concerns their children face. There are intense boundary issues depending on where one lives and parents indicated that “crossing over onto turf where you aren’t from or don’t belong can be deadly”.

Personal and Family Challenges

The focus groups with parents yielded very personal information and emotions as participants shared their experiences of growing up in Baltimore City. Focus group participants openly admitted to challenges such as lack of money, substance abuse within the family and caring for other siblings. As revealed by the groups, this is a common theme where families are forced to make choices regarding immediate needs versus longer range planning for things like college. This information mirrors the data given in the interviews with school personnel.

“With my son, my oldest, I signed him up for the Big Brother program and they offered him a female. What was the purpose there?”

-African-American Mother

Although a few fathers were present in the focus groups, the majority of participants were single mothers. The mothers agree that the lack of male role models greatly affects children’s lives. Some of the parents had sought mentors for their children, only to be faced with the absence of such resources or that they were placed on waiting lists. Parents felt very strongly that there need to more mentoring programs available, especially for young men. The feeling was expressed that connecting boys with other males who have graduated from college, might make their sons take more interest in college access programs.

Many students also agreed that drug use can affect their ability to complete high school and college entry. They explained that parents and family members who are drug users also hinder their ability to focus on college.

Financial Challenges as a Barrier to College Access and Support

“If I pay for it this month, can I make it next month? Or can I have enough for this year? If I can get through the first year and keep my grades up, sometimes you fail your grades ‘cause you’re worrying about the money for the next year and if you’re smart as they claim and you score good on those tests, why should you have to worry for your money for four years when you already proved that you’re smart and you can learn? And then that burden’s come back onto the parent because the parent would have to take her money out of the household to try and make it – and books was crazy. You pay \$60 or \$40 or much more for a book. I had to go up to school and tell ‘em that they lost their mind with the price of the book. I had no idea that books cost that much. So again, that was another problem to my family and budget.”

–African American Mother and Student

Some parents shared their personal experiences related to trying to attend college and spoke of the intense stress of having to decide between going to school and meeting basic human needs.

“I think college is a place so you can – when you leave from college you get a job and get money so you can move into your home and not be out on the street.”

-Female, African-American Elementary Student

Students at the elementary and middle levels are very excited to have the opportunity to talk about high school and college. All of the students communicate the importance of finishing high school and express an interest in going to college to “get a good job.” The boys associate college with the opportunity to play professional sports. Few students had actually visited a college or university. When asked to name colleges and universities, several students could not. When asked about why some students do not complete high school or go to college, the student participants responded with similar issues raised in the school personnel interviews such as concerns about not having enough money and the pressure to sell drugs.

“Drugs. Gangs. Drugs and gangs on every corner.”

- Male, African-American High School Student

Students at the high school level were also excited to participate in focus groups. Many indicated that they had never experienced sitting and talking about this topic. Some were planning to apply to college while others spoke frankly about the responsibilities associated with addressing immediate needs for themselves and their families. Some participants saw college as a waste of time and had no desire apply to college. Frustration about not having enough money, selling drugs and gang involvement were openly discussed. Students indicated that these pressures are a very real part of their lives, especially for the young men. Both female and male students talked about teenage pregnancy as having an adverse impact on high school completion and college entry. As with the focus groups of elementary and middle school students, the question about naming colleges and universities was asked, and although some knew the names of several institutions, there were three students who struggled with naming local universities. Also, as with the elementary and middle school students, the majority of the high school students equate going to college with access to meaningful employment; however, students across all grade levels are conscious of other ways outside of completing high school and going to college to make money, including illegal activities. In addition to conceptualizing college as a place that helps one attain “a good job” and because of recent movies depicting college life, several of the students expressed the idea of college as being fun and also providing the opportunity to meet other people.

Both students and parents overwhelmingly agree that there is a need for more mentors and greater access to information about pre-college services, college admissions and financial aid. Students wanted to know more about financial aid and how to balance the competing demands of participating in out-of-school time activities and working. They also expressed a need for a stronger connection to the colleges and universities throughout the region. Mentorship

opportunities, increased exposure of colleges and universities, and bridging the information gaps are concerns that both the children and the parents share.

D. Focus Groups - Phase Two

Three focus groups were held with students and one focus group with counseling specialists who were also interested in learning about barriers for their own students in this phase. The focus group with the counseling specialists helped to formulate the kinds of questions to be asked in a focus group, which in turn elevated the discussion of students' perspectives on the barriers. This session also provided insight on key issues from staff who work most closely with students in college preparatory programs. The students in these focus groups were from schools with a college preparatory focus, all of whom have already gained acceptance into college.

The over-arching themes from these focus groups were:

1. Fear of rejection;
2. Financial barriers to college entry and completion;
3. Feelings of inadequate academic preparation and concerns about basic life skills for college "survival" and completion; and
4. Perceptions of students based on high school attended.

Fear of Rejection

There was some indication that students who did not apply for scholarships or to the schools that were their first choice, often did not do so because of fear of rejection. Many were more inclined to only seek opportunities that were certain.

Financial Barriers to College Entry and Completion

Focus group participants identified the lack of or inadequate finances to assist college-bound students as barriers to college access and completion. Parents also cited a fear of applying for loans and the federal student loan process that was seen as complicated, invasive, and the likelihood that it would expose their personal financial circumstances.

Feelings of Inadequate Academic Preparation and Basic Life Skills

Almost all of the students in the focus groups expressed regret for not taking classes more seriously from their freshman year and many felt that they were trying to play catch up in their senior year. The majority of students shared concerns about study and organization skills for college; coursework at the college level; and for those who were going away from home, fear of being away from their families for the first time. Culturally, the notion of being ". . .too proud to ask for help" was identified by some students as reason for likely not wanting to

access campus support or probably doing so only as a last resort rather than as a preventive measure.

Perceptions of Students Based on High School Attended

“When I first told people that I went to ‘School A’ they had negative reactions, but now I am happy to say that go to ‘School B’. Before, I was embarrassed to say I went to ‘School A’. People already say ‘She goes to School A, she’s not smart as smart as people that go to Poly or City.’”

African American Female High School Student

Students especially transfer students, expressed acute awareness of the perception of their status and “worth” based on the school they attended. They identified the difference as one that was stark. Students who had come from schools without a college readiness component stated that they felt “different;” that they did not feel the same level of encouragement to strive for college. They identified caring school personnel – individuals that cared on a personal level – as being critical to their college aspirations. Some noted that even if they were not “totally sold” on the idea of college, their desire to please staff that supported and cared for them encouraged them to work toward college readiness. In doing so, the goal of college completion became a goal that they wanted for themselves.

E. Out-of-School Time (After-School) Programs

The benefits of out-of-school time or after-school programs are widely documented and include improved academic performance decreased teenage pregnancy, and decreased participation in high-risk health behaviors (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). These programs are defined as those activities that engage children and adolescents when they are not in school, whether before or after school during the school week, or on weekends. Telephone surveys with the program staff of selected programs were conducted to determine the population served and activities and resources provided to participants including the availability support services for participants.

As a part of this study, researchers were able to identify 34 community resources by using school staff leads and internet research. Although not exhaustive, this list provides a framework for understanding the reach and impact of community resources in Baltimore. These types of community resources are demonstrated in Table 1-3.

Type of Community Resources	Number of Each
Mentoring with College Preparatory	20
One-Time Initiatives	8
After School with College Preparatory Component	2
Fully Devoted to College Preparatory	3

Other	1
Total	34

Table 1-3 Distribution of Types of Community Resources

The analysis of community resource data in Baltimore yields two major themes:

1. Lack of collaboration among organizations, and
2. Challenges associated with organizational capacity

Lack of Collaboration Among Organizations

There are many one-time, isolated experiences and not enough long-term initiatives such as summer programs. Most organizations surveyed agreed that if there were a mechanism for them to collaborate and leverage their resources, they could potentially have a greater impact across the city. Organizations that sponsor one-time events on an annual basis currently do not refer program participants to longer-term activities. By working together, organizations could create a stronger pipeline of young people and parents participating in college-access activities.

The Challenge of Organizational Capacity

None of the out-of-school time (after-school) programs have a coordinated effort in place to maximize student and parent participation. Limited organizational capacity and fiscal constraints interfere with community-based organizations’ ability to perform outreach activities to attract large numbers of parents and students. Program staff also acknowledge having limited ability to measure the long-term effectiveness of their individual programs. As we see in other research and in our own data with school personnel school, students and parents, mentoring services are a vital component to increasing the number of young people involved in college awareness and access programming. This is especially true for attracting low socio-economic and potentially first-generation college students. Many out-of-school time programs are only offered once annually and do not provide participants with a long-term sustainable experience. Limited funding is a barrier for many organizations. Financial constraints affect how often programs can be offered, the length of the programs, staff capacity, and initiatives to measure influence in the lives of Baltimore youth.

E. Colleges and Universities

Identifying and developing strategies for increasing African American student enrollment in and completion of post-secondary education was a central over-arching goal of phase one of the study. This study documented existing formal outreach activities conducted by Maryland’s two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities by utilizing a telephone survey instrument constructed in Table 1-4.

Institutions of Higher Education	Number of Institutions Surveyed
Two-Year Community Colleges	6
Four- Year Public Colleges and Universities	13
Four-Year Private Colleges and Universities	12
Total	31

Table 1-4 Distribution of Outreach to Institutions of Higher Education

Analysis of the college and university data reveals two major themes:

1. Lack of coordination among multiple programs within individual institutions' colleges/departments; and
2. Lack of aggressive outreach to the community's students and parents.

Lack of Coordination Among Multiple Programs within Institutions

Out of the 31 colleges and universities contacted, six institutions have multiple programs across various departments that are not necessarily working together and coordinating outreach activities. The lack of a coordinated communication effort often leads to decreased impact and confusion on the part of children and parents. Navigating the university system and connecting to individual programs offered by the various academic departments can be overwhelming and intimidating. Several colleges and universities expressed a willingness to initiate a more coordinated communications strategy so that the community can more effectively utilize the resources of higher education institutions.

Lack of Aggressive Outreach to Students and Parents of the Community

Compelling information from this data reinforces the notion that colleges and universities need more aggressive outreach efforts to the community. Although they do regularly partner with the local school system to educate students about admissions and academic programs, they typically expect students and parents to seek out information on their own via the internet and college visits. As the other data sets depict, parents and students need help with accessing and understanding information related to college preparation, college admissions information and options for financing college. The execution of a more intentional community-based outreach strategy would demystify the college access, admissions and financial aid process. Several institutions expressed a desire to partner and make pre-college opportunities more accessible throughout Baltimore City.

STATE OF THE SYSTEM

When one considers the purpose and aims of a project such as “A Study of College Readiness and Access in the Baltimore Community,” it must be done within the context of the “system” that is charged with providing effective and successful academic preparation. For our purposes, the system is defined as those state and local entities whose authority dictates legislation, policy, mandates, practices, standards, and accountability for Baltimore City Public Schools and its charge to educate our children. Ideally, students’ successful academic preparation lasts from pre-kindergarten to grade 12 and culminates in graduation. Ideally, they are also in a state of readiness for and access to the postsecondary experience of their choosing. If, on the other hand, the job world is a student’s immediate choice, they are prepared for the ever challenging and changing demands of non-degreed positions. Overwhelmingly the students within our system are African American, and historically, they have fared worse than other populations served by this “system.” This is evidenced by drop-out rates, test scores, and graduation rates which are routinely reported by our metropolitan dailies, national news media, the Census Bureau, and BCPS’s own performance data. One of the most important and unfortunate impacts of this failure to address this loss of “un-mined diamonds” in the city’s African American community is the resulting economic disparity.

The chart below is one illustration of disparities that exist in Baltimore City as compared to the state of Maryland. *Note that the most recent Census Bureau data of 2008 indicate a 63.6% African American population. Note also the gap in degree holders between the entities, and Baltimore’s median household income which is just some 49% of that of the state.

Economic Indicators	Baltimore City	Maryland
African American Population	64.8%	29.5%
High school graduates	68.4%	83.8%
Bachelor’s degree or higher	19.1%	31.4%
Median household income	\$29,792	\$57,019
Persons Below Poverty	21.5%	9.2%

*Data from the US Census Bureau reports 2000-2006 <http://quickfacts.census.gov>

Educational Indicators	Baltimore City	Maryland
High School Attendance Rate	82.7%	92.3%
Graduation Rate	62.9%	85.24
Drop-out Rate	6.2%	2.8%

* Data from 2009 Maryland Report Card – www.mdreportcard.org

To what extent are the indices above some measure of how well the “system,” which is charged with academic preparation for high school completion and beyond, serves our students? Although there is evidence of recent points of light in what has come to be accepted as the unfortunate darkness regarding our students’ academic achievement in BCPS, we should not be

exhilarated or even comforted. There needs to be and must be more where that came from with reference to momentum. (Please see “*City Schools Momentum Builds*,” Baltimore City Public Schools, July 21, 2009.) African American students, in particular, in this city have been caught in the crosshairs of disastrous “lows”.... in expectation, in accountability, and in the level of commitment to turning things around. The historical timing could not be worse. Today there is more evidence than ever of the correlation between educational attainment and the ability to erase economic disparity.

Consider the College Board’s recent publication: “*Education Pays 2007: The Benefits of Higher Education and Society*” and its findings regarding the significant financial implications for those that earn a college degree which include:

- Higher levels of education lead to higher earnings. Over a working life, the typical full-time, year-round worker with a four-year college degree earns more than 60 percent more than a worker with only a high school diploma.
- Median lifetime earnings for the typical individual with some college but no degree are 19 percent higher than median lifetime earnings for high school graduates with no college experience.
- The typical college graduate who enrolls at age 18 and graduates in four years earns enough in 11 years to not only compensate for borrowing to pay the full tuition at a public college, but also to make up for wages forgone while in college.
- College-educated workers are more likely than others to be offered pension plans. Among those who are afforded pension plans, college degree-holders are more likely to participate.

These findings might well portend a need for our schools to rethink their approach to the following in preparing, and indeed expecting, students and parents to give serious consideration to college as an option:

- Early college awareness - (Are we starting soon enough? What are we waiting for?)
- Exposure to postsecondary opportunity - (Is it broad enough and early enough?)
- Our “leaky educational pipeline” - (When and where do the leaks occur and how can we fix them?)
- The notion of high expectations for a limited few – (How does the system rid itself of subjectivity in deciding who would benefit from “college knowledge” and who will not?)
- Ensure that all students receive academic preparation that helps ensure college access and success and eliminates the need for remediation. (Yes, we can!)

Inadequate academic preparation in high school and the resulting need for academic remediation continue to be an enormous challenge for our students. According to the March

2009 Student Outcome and Achievement Report (SOAR)¹, “Baltimore City, the Lower Shore (Somerset Wicomico and Worcester counties) Prince George’s county and the Susquehanna region (Cecil and Harford counties) had the largest proportion of core students, ranging from 37 percent to 42 percent, who needed to take a developmental math course. These areas also had the highest math remediation rates, of at least 50 percent, among non-core students”. The number of graduates from Baltimore City Public Schools who need remediation in college contributes significantly to low completion rates due to: 1) lack of preparation for academic work at the required level; 2) time expended in remediation that prolongs matriculation and contributes to frustration; and 3) added costs associated with non-credit remedial courses which add to financial burden for students and families and subtracts from funds available to pursue credit coursework in fields of endeavor.

Although there is much work to be done, there is some encouraging news from Baltimore City Schools on strong gains posted in Maryland School Assessment (MSA) scores for the second straight year in 2008-2009, with large increases in numbers of students not just meeting but exceeding state standards. The full report, referenced above, is entitled: “*City Schools Momentum Builds: MSA Gains Continue Across All Grades, Student Groups: Number of Students Scoring ‘Advanced’ Doubles Over Two Years; System Exits ‘Corrective’ Action Status for First Time,*” July 21, 2009. The entire report speaks to long overdue gains in a number of areas and indices, including reading and math and meeting the Adequate Yearly Standard (AYS) for No Child Left Behind. Particularly heartening is the acknowledgement of African American students’ beginning to close the achievement gap. The report reads:

“African American students, who historically have lagged other student subgroups, were on a pace with, or advanced at a pace faster than all other student subgroups in 2008-09. According to this year’s MSA results, the gap between African American students and other student groups continues to narrow in both reading and math.”

Again, while this is an occasion to be encouraged and heartened, this progress for African American students represents narrowing a gap and not closing it. There is advancement noted for low-income students although the ever-stubborn gap is still there also. (It is worth noting that with the impending implementation of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM]² initiatives throughout the curriculum achievement in these areas becomes critical for the pre-collegiate experience.). The governor’s STEM Task Force feels strongly that the rigor of this infusion into the curriculum is needed to prepare students to be competitive in college and to meet future industry and workforce needs. On the other hand, there is the ever-present need to ensure that students master basic core skills, and that this necessity not be overshadowed by the STEM requirements.

¹ For the complete SOAR Report, see <http://mhec.maryland.gov/publications/research/AnnualReports/2008SOAR.pdf>

² For the complete report on Governor O’Malley’s STEM Task Force see <http://www.gov.state.md.us/documents/090806stemReport.pdf>

In summary, let us paraphrase the Southern Regional Education Board's *"Getting Students Ready for College and Careers (2006)*: "Our schools will know when they are making satisfactory progress in college readiness when all high school students complete the essential core courses, when achievement gaps close among divergent groups of students, when significantly more numbers of students enroll in and succeed in bridge-to-college courses and programs, and the number of recent high school graduates needing remedial courses entering college is zero."

We should demand nothing less from Baltimore City Public Schools.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

“If we’re going to make any dent on poverty in America, we have to help more students get a postsecondary degree.” - Melinda French Gates, Co-Chair, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

According to 2008 data released from Baltimore City Schools, initial college enrollment rates for Baltimore’s high schools ranged from a high of 75.13% to a low of 8.14% in some 31 schools with three schools reporting no information. By calculation, this gives an overall average of approximately 44.35% college enrollment rate for city schools, which are 88.4% African America, (*“Fast Facts,”* Baltimore City Public Schools, 2009). This comes during a period when enrollment rates nationally are fluctuating between 64% and 69%, and the average for whites is 69% compared with that of African Americans at 55%. (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2008)

Data gleaned from “A Study of College Readiness and Access in the Baltimore Community” provide a remarkable and candid insight into some ways we are dropping the ball, as it were, when it comes to ensuring access and maximum opportunity for all students to be included in the “grade school to grad school” pipeline. What we understand from this undertaking is that the distribution of information, the level of expectation, and opportunity for college preparation is not equitable. (The same might be said for high school completion, since this goal is so often tied to the anticipation of what lies beyond.)

Knowing the barriers and obstacles, how do we move forward in an effective and collaborative way? Once being exposed to the raw nerve, the candor, and the wealth of information in these interviews and focus groups, how dare we not craft meaningful approaches toward resolution?

Consider the inspiration of the recently appointed Harvard-trained Dr. David Wilson, as President of Baltimore’s Morgan State University in December 2009. Dr. Wilson is the son of sharecroppers and a first-generation college student who tells of being inspired by magazine articles plastered to the walls of the home to keep out the cold. In his words:

“We have to provide opportunities so that every American citizen can achieve his or her greatest potential. We have to make sure no one gets left back.”

It is understood that our financial resources can be limited, but there is no greater resource in this community than the young people who will comprise our work force and our tax base.

“For generations of Americans, a high school diploma provided valuable education and a ticket to the American Dream. A high school graduate had the opportunity to get a steady job that paid enough to support a family and launch a career. But now, a diploma is no longer enough. The median wage for workers with no college is close to the poverty

line for a family of four.” - “Postsecondary Education Overview,” The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2008. www.gatesfoundation.org/postsecondaryeducation

We might add to that the fact that jobs once available with only a high school diploma, now require a college degree. Among these are child care workers, some construction occupations, substance abuse counselors, executive secretaries, and graphic artists. It is also important to note that in this global, knowledge-based economy, a four-year degree is considered a minimum requirement or “entry level” for many occupations and fields such as the biotech, medical, and finance industries that are so prevalent right here in the Baltimore area. Simply put, more and more a baccalaureate degree is essential to get one’s foot in the door. Such realities should and must constitute a “wake-up call” for the urgency of preparing our students. (While it also true that there are some occupations that still provide substantial incomes that do not require a degree, we do advocate that each student have the benefit of information about a college education as an option.)

If this study does nothing else, it gives lie to the myth that parents and students in certain areas and in certain schools of the city are less inclined to desire high school completion and a college education. Read their words. Develop and implement strategies that mandate equal access to information and activities that promote college awareness and college readiness at the earliest possible levels. Understand that present policies (or lack thereof) are limiting ability and opportunity by denying or parceling vital information that makes the difference in informed decision-making or exercising productive options. This study provides invaluable insights about the barriers that children and parents in Baltimore face when navigating the college access process. More importantly, understanding the perceptions and realities of students and their parents surrounding barriers to high school completion and college entry and completion is a critical step in reversing the trends in our city regarding degree attainment. (It would be most interesting to see cities/jurisdictions with demographics similar to that of Baltimore accept a challenge, as it were, to conduct assessments of their efforts to provide college readiness and accessibility on an equitable basis throughout their public schools.)

The data are clear - college awareness, readiness, access, and ultimately retention lead to a much greater opportunity for long-term individual financial security at a time when 45% of African American children from middle-income households plummet to the bottom of the income scale³

In the interest of strengthening the social and economic fabric of the city, the state, and the region, the investment in creating a college bound culture for Baltimore’s youth is essential to sustaining economic viability for us all. Aggressive steps need to be taken now.

³ This information is taken from the Pew Charitable Trust Report. The full report can be found at http://www.economicmobility.org/assets/pdfs/EMP_BlackandWhite_ChapterVI.pdf

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ That there be a lead agency/office with responsibility for developing appropriate guidelines and for coordinating a city-wide college awareness and college access strategy;
- ✓ That the goals, programs, activities and outreach of this office be made public regularly on a school-by-school basis;
- ✓ That school district personnel lead such an agency in collaboration with the state, local colleges and universities, community based organizations, social service agencies, business leaders, elected representatives, and parents and students;
- ✓ That within each school there be a college awareness coordinator;
- ✓ That there be meaningful collaboration with social service agencies in efforts to address social issues and barriers that interfere with academic achievement and persistence;
- ✓ That there be an expansion of the availability of pre-college services inclusive of grades K-12 that is grade appropriate, consistent, and equitable in all schools throughout the school system with some measure of accountability;
- ✓ That there be special outreach efforts for parents of prospective first-generation college students that increase their knowledge of the benefits of college and students' exposure to a "college culture" environment;
- ✓ That there be special and ongoing efforts aimed at having students and parents aware of the availability of financial assistance for college;
- ✓ That we be aware of and actively engaged in efforts to simplify the federal government's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the primary vehicle used by low-income students to apply for financial aid for college;
- ✓ That there be special and ongoing efforts to engage the business community of Baltimore in the college awareness initiative to the extent that there is a "Business/Pre-College Roundtable" formed that encourages meaningful involvement by business leaders;
- ✓ That our historically black colleges and universities (HBCU's), often located in or near low-income neighborhoods, be encouraged to maintain or develop effective "Grow Your Own" programs that actively engage local students in structured and sustained activities designed to encourage them to enroll in their institutions upon high school completion;

- ✓ That we broaden the definition and scope of postsecondary education to include accredited proprietary schools and certified training academies for the benefit of students who are inclined to embrace careers not requiring a degree; and
- ✓ That we engage the entire Baltimore community, especially the media, in a city-wide campaign to promote college awareness, college preparation, college entry, and degree attainment.

Associated Black Charities looks forward to both continued involvement in activities such as its highly successful November 2009 African American College Readiness and Completion Summit - to explore issues related to college readiness , access, and attainment; and interim assessments of progress being made in Baltimore City toward sustained improvement in preparing our students for college entry and completion.

With Appreciation and Thanks

*Associated Black Charities extends its
thanks and appreciation to:*

*The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
for its support*

Associated Black Charities
is a public foundation that facilitates
the creation of measurably healthier and
wealthier communities throughout
the State of Maryland through responsible
leadership and philanthropic investment.



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