The Perceived Family and Parental Influence on African American Men Who Enroll in Community Colleges

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Abstract

Higher education institutions have generally been successful in increasing the number of diverse populations who attend college, especially recruiting and enrolling record numbers of Hispanic and Asian students. African American enrollments continue to lag behind these other diverse groups, with African American men being among the lowest of the multicultural groups to be enrolled in higher education today. Community colleges have been perhaps the most successful in recruiting and enrolling African American men, and the current study sought to describe how the families of these men interact and encourage or discourage enrollment. Using a series of semi-structured interviews, families were found to play a perceived important role in the decision to enroll in a community college. These families mentored the African American men in the study, created expectations for them to have successful life beyond high school, and pushed them to have positive ideas about their future and to plan for that future. These findings were consistent with modeling about college going decision-making, and also reinforced the emerging theory of community expectancy.

Young adults decide to attend postsecondary education for many reasons. Some students pursue degrees with a particular vocation or career in mind, while others see enrolling in a university as a logical extension of their schooling. Some students succumb to peer pressure, some make financial decisions about what they can afford, and some make purely independent decisions about charting a path to a career and future. With such a wide range of actions and decisions for students to take about postsecondary pathways, there have been attempts to categorize these decisions and to attempt to predict or develop predictive models about why some students follow certain pathways, and why others follow different postsecondary routes.

Many of the predictive variables are inconclusive about enrolling in higher education. Although parental wealth, for example, can be correlated positively with college going decisions, the concept of "wealth" can encompass many different elements. These elements might include better academic preparation in high school, access to better tutoring and academic support services, peer groups with similar expectations about going to college, etc. So these variables in and of themselves are not effective at understanding or explaining why a decision is made, simply that a decision can be predicted if certain variables are aligned.

One element that has received significant speculation is the role of the family in making a decision to attend college (Stage & Hossler, 1989). Several college decision

models place the family at the center of deciding where to go to college, and these same models place a great deal of power in the family's ability to influence individual behavior.

The idea of family can play an important role in all aspects of individual development, including identity formation, personal outlook, ego and self-confidence, perspectives on the world around them, and even influence personal drive, motivation, and interests. As the family can play such an instrumental role in personal identity development, the notion of family plays a central role in the model of community expectancy, where the expectations, both formal and informal, interact with and on an individual in determining personal identity.

Family as a conceptualization extends beyond the immediate home-life of an individual, as family habits and exposure can also impact youth identity formation. Familial relationships with extended family, exposure to new ideas and different people, and interactions and relationships with community groups and organizations all influence how an individual's value system is constructed and what elements are ultimately accepted into the individual's identity.

With such a strong influence on the individual, the role of the family can influence attitudes, beliefs, and values around education, including what to do following the completion of compulsory education. This includes whether the parents have attended and completed an undergraduate collegiate degree, and if so, to how that experience is conveyed as an expectation for an individual. The particular issue is whether parental and family expectations are simply handed down to a youth, and if so, how is that cycle of familial habit disengaged for those who have not attended and graduated from college. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to identify and describe how individuals perceive family influence in making college decisions, both from the perspective of the youth or student and the family leaders. From this description of how family can influence perceptions of postsecondary attendance, programs and policies can be better targeted at disengaging processes and cultures that restrict or inhibit a value for education.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Identity development: An important understanding in the college going decision process relates to the maturation and identity development of a young adult. This process has been described in multiple developmental processes, for example, relating facing and dealing with crises (Underwood, 2005) as a significant part of becoming an adult. The process for those in their late-teens and early-twenties is particularly social in nature, and includes the experiences of framing individual identity in relation to others, including peers, casual interactions, and even family and extended family members.

The social interactions framing identity formation have a long history, including the seminal work of Kardiner, Linton, DuBois, and West (1945) who particularly noted that the process is not static, but rather, fluid and constantly changing. These research findings, along with others such as Firth (1951) and Redfield (1960) stressed the interactions, and lack of interactions, between individuals and the communities they experience. Through communications with others, they reported that individuals experienced broader world views, and that this socialization has been both a guarded and restricted, as well as celebrated, process depending upon the community.

Community expectancy: The idea of community expectancy theory is that a community can express values directly and indirectly upon an individual as an identity is formed, and that this expression impacts how a person ultimately sees him or herself, what the individual values, and what the individual decides to pursue for a vocation. Community is a combination of individuals with direct and non-direct communication with an individual. These can be formal and informal groups that demonstrate an impression on an individual. For example, business leaders might lead a 'life of leisure' that is aspired to by individuals from lower-income working classes. Certain religious denominations might have an openness that attracts an individual, or conversely, such a rigid set of faith guidelines that individuals look for other opportunities of religious identification.

Deggs and Miller (2009; 2011a) categorized six primary variables as being associated with the creation of community expectations, including formal education bodies, civic agencies, informal associations, religious affiliations, and home life. Together, these elements interact with an individual, transcending any direct or overt action or experience, to create within the individual a sense of personal identity. The constructs are not equally weighted, nor are they consistent over time, yet research in isolated areas has shown that these do have the power to impact personal development and identity (Deggs & Miller, 2011a).

Perhaps one of the most influential elements of an individual's identity formation is that of the family. The role of the family has been historically documented as critical to how an individual views the world and what and how the individual interacts with other people, how self-image is framed, and what responsibilities an individual has to the broader community. Family structure and behaviors significantly impact attitudes about other people, personal values and habits, and includes how self-improvement is viewed, including the role of formal and informal education.

College going decision making: Parents and families can play an important role in a student's desire, persistence, and ultimately, enrollment and graduation from college. Castleman and Paige (2017) highlighted the importance of parental involvement in postsecondary

education pursuits, however, they noted that existing literature does not suggest effective parent and family intervention strategies to prompt students to enroll in college. Their experimental study using text-message prompts did result in a higher enrollment rate of subjects in higher education.

A significant part of parental and family influence on college going decisions is tied to financial planning. Cheatham and Elliott (2013), for example, identified that certain types of college savings program participation by parents, such as college bonds, are positively correlated with postsecondary attendance. Frempong, Ma, and Mensah (2012) also identified financial ability as critical to a student's decision to enroll in higher education, and added that a family's financial standing also typically has implications for the location of where a student attends secondary school, and that frequently the secondary schools a low-income student enrolls in is of less quality than others. Addo, Houle, and Simon (2016) similarly described the importance of family financial support, finding significantly more higher education attendance debt among Black college students from families with low-income, and that the prospect of this debt can serve as a deterrent to college enrollment.

Research on Family and College-going: Research has suggested that individuals from traditional family structures are more likely to attend college than those from single family homes, non-parent homes, or foster homes. This research, however, does not provide evidence as to why this might happen or that it is predictive of college attendance.

Tolliver and Miller (2017) explored variables perceived to impact African American men's decision to attend college, and an important theme they identified in their qualitative study was the role of mentors. These mentors could be family individuals, but were just as often non-family members. Their finding stressed that the young adults in their study needed a sounding board or person to provide reflection with on the possibility of attending college. Sometimes the person or persons kept a motivation to explore college, and in other instances the individual provided technical assistance in the process.

Maurya, Parasar, and Sharma (2015) found in at least one international setting that youths from traditional, two-parent families reported significantly fewer behavioral problems than those from single parent families. Their implication was that fewer behavioral problems led to better academic work and potentially a greater likelihood of attending postsecondary education.

Engle (2007) identified that those individuals who had a parent attend college had a resource at home who understood the process, and could mentor, answer questions, or even ask questions about an institution. Paulbusa and Gauvin (2017) similarly stressed that parents who had attended college can provide a strong support network as a youth considers the decision to enroll.

Parental involvement has been identified as having two distinct elements: expectations and choice. In the first, parents have been found to be a critical asset in determining the expectation to attend college, and in the later, a critical asset in determining which college to attend (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Stage & Hossler, 1989).

RESEARCH METHODS

To address the purpose for conducting the study, a descriptive, qualitative, phenomenological method of inquiry was identified for use to identify and describe the common experiences of participants' decisions to enroll in college, specifically related to parent and family influence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This type of method provides for the identification of the meaning that individuals and groups give to social issues, such as the involvement of family structures in life decisions about what to do after high school (Creswell, 2013).

A phenomenological research approach was used to examine the issue of the study, that being how African American men make decisions about what to do at the completion of their high school (secondary school) experience. The study utilized a purposeful sample technique, selecting African American men who had successfully graduated with an associate's degree from a community college. All of the participants had been out of college for at least two years, meaning that they both had to rely on their remembered experiences from their decision to enroll in college, but that they also had some longitudinal perspective on this decision.

Interview questions were developed from themes in the broader literature on college going choices and decisions. The interview protocol was then pilot tested for clarity, reliability, and adequacy in providing narrative to address the purpose of the study. Following four pilot interviews, the protocol was adjusted and approved by the researchers Institutional Review Board.

Drawing on Polkinghornek (1989) argument that using a purposeful sample of 5-25 individuals who share common phenomenon is appropriate in this type of descriptive research, a sample of 14 African American men, all aged 22-30 and who had completed an associate's degree at a public community college were identified to participate in the study. All of the men identified for the study resided within 40 miles of the researcher's home university, a statistical metropolitan area of approximately 500,000 residents and a minority resident population that comprises approximately 15% of the geographic area's population. Pilot interviews ran an average of 48 minutes each, and all interviews were held in neutral, off-site locations such as coffee shops, the local public library, and a school classroom.

Each interview was audio-recorded, and the interviewers also made post-interview journal notes and

collected notes on non-verbal response patterns during the interview. Of the 14 who were identified for participation in the study, 11 agreed to face-to-face interviews to be completed within 30 days of the invitation. The remaining three who declined the interview reportedly did so due to convenience.

Following each interview, the audio-recording was transcribed and each participant was provided a copy to check for accuracy and intention. Data were triangulated by using interviewer reflective journals, the narrative transcript data, written in-interview field notes, and multiple comparison of data artifacts by the research team.

FINDINGS

The 11 men identified and who agreed to participate in the study were interviewed in the late-summer of 2018. The interviews lasted, on average, 48 minutes in length, with the shortest lasting 36 minutes and the longest lasting one hour and twelve minutes. As identified in the research procedures, each interview transcript was returned to the interview participant for verification; only one participant made changes to the text of his interview. These narrative transcripts, along with interview field notes and journal entries formed the data set for examination. These data resulted in the identification of four themes: mentoring/role models, expectation, future planning, and siblings.

Mentoring/Role Models: The most common description of why these African American men chose to enroll in a community college was, they perceived, the mentoring they received from one or more of their parents. This mentoring related primarily to the acquisition of skills in high school and the need to do more upon graduation. One interview participant said "my Dad works in HVAC repair, and he saw that I was good at it, have been from an early age, so he started taking me around with him. He then got me in the community college as way to get my license and join him."

Seven of the men who were interviewed specifically mentioned that one of their parents or guardians were also their life mentors. They reportedly "guided" these men through school, relationships, part-time work, and ultimately, "it was my Mom that showed me that continuing my education would make a difference. Mamma told me over and over again that if I want to make something out of myself, I had to go to school. She went with me up to college when I was thinking about enrolling and really helped me through all of it."

In a representative story, one participant relayed the following:

I did not have any idea what I was going to do. I guess I was just thinking I was done with school. I was. I didn't love school, but I didn't not love it. Then my Mom started talking to me about what I was going to do, like, she had in her mind what I should do, but she didn't want to tell me. Then she asked me all kind of questions, and this was

probably a week or two before graduation? Well, then she's just like tells me to go up to [community college] for a recruitment day. She didn't go, but when I got back all she wanted to do was talk to me about it. That's when it came out that she thought I should go there and start college to just see how I would do. She didn't tell me I had to go, but she kept on asking me about it until I did go. And, she split the bill with me. She was so proud of me when I graduated, and then I came over here [local university] and I'm almost ready to graduate.

> *Expectation*: "I didn't have any choice, really," said one of the men participating in the study. He went on to comment "it all started before Christmas. Both of my parents said I was going to college, and that was it." This particular participant went on to note that his father's employer paid a portion of his children's tuition, and that provided "a deal that was just too good to pass up."

The notion of expectation were less subtle for other men in the study, but all of them were related in some way to a parent conveying the importance of continuing education. One participant said "they didn't say I had to go to college, but that I had to do something." He continued, "I know they thought I should go to college, but they didn't come out and say it right away." Another indicated that his father gave a great deal of attention to pieces of mail from colleges and universities, including the local community college, that arrived at their house, and a mother of one participant reportedly looked at the high school's daily announcements and "was always going off about which colleges were visiting my school."

Another participant indicated strong involvement by his mother. "I remember I came home from school one day and my mom said 'we're going for a ride.' She drove me over to [college name] and took me into the admissions area and announced to the girl working there that I wanted to attend here."

Another participant said this:

I think it is hard to say what my parents thought about me going to college. On the one hand, they wanted me to have a job and work, but they also wanted something more for me, but I couldn't say for sure what that is or really was. They both kept talking to me about what I was going to do, saying things like 'what are your plans,' or 'what are you doing after you graduate.' They brought college up a couple of times, but couldn't really say why or what they thought of it. They wanted me to get a job, yea, that was for sure, and I think they thought that coming to [college name] would be a way to do both. They didn't tell me I had to, but I could tell that is what they thought I should do.

Future Planning: The idea expressed in multiple families, as conveyed by the men interviewed in the current study, was that they had to do something with themselves after they finished high school. Comments ranged from "my momma told me I had to do something," to "both my mom and uncle said I had to move out and

pay my own way. They didn't tell me how I was going to do that, but talked a lot about getting a job from early on, maybe like when I was a sophomore in high school."

Not all future planning was relegated to finding a job, as two different men in the study commented on the desire of their parents to have them go to college and earn a bachelor's degree. "My mom didn't say anything about finding a job, really, although she implied it. She implied that it should be a good job, and that I was going to need to graduate from college. We sure couldn't afford it, so she saw me starting at [community college name] as a way to get going. She kept telling me that it was for two years and that I'd have to go on after that."

One student said:

> Man, my mom was all over me my last year in high school. We hadn't planned nothing, and I could tell that she had in her mind that I needed to be doing something making some sort of plans. I had a part-time job, and I wasn't going to be making nearly enough money at six dollars an hour to do anything. She just kept asking me 'what are you going to do?' I didn't have much of an answer for anything she said, but she talked about my dad [who didn't live with us] and how he worked with HVAC repair and that maybe I could do something like that, and learn it up at [the local community college]. I would say she pushed me, but she pushed me to do something, not [enroll at the community college] in specific terms.

Siblings: Another element of responses focused on the role of siblings in making decisions about what to do after high school. These relationships sometimes provided the role model necessary for making decisions, and in other instances, related to a desire to help at home or be cognizant of the financial realities of raising a family. One participant said "my mom wanted me to go to school, find a job, and move out. I had four sisters right behind me, and she couldn't afford any of us!" Representing the spectrum of responses, another participant said "my older brother played baseball [at the community college] and I would go up there and see him play. That kind of opened my eyes to going to school there." Another participant said flatly, "yeah, my sister goes here, so I just came, too."

Another participant offered a more detailed self-analysis of how and why he chose the community college:

I don't think my mom wanted me to go off to some crazy college or anything. I think the only thinking we really had about going to college was by watching the NCAA [basketball] and stuff. My half-brother had a drop-down-drag-out about all of this, and he finally ended up playing ball for them [local community college]. He really made it possible for my mom to think differently about me coming here. I don't think I could have come up here unless he had made her change her mind about still going to school. She wanted me to work, like full-time, and my brother had to argue with her about what his options were. She was just kind of defeated by him, so it made my life easier.

Additional Themes: A number of comments by students who participated in the study represented ideas, barriers, and opportunities that can be considered in understanding an individuals decision to attend a local community college. Several comments were made, for example, about accessibility, both in terms of low-cost and the simple act of being able to access campus. This accessing campus included both an ease of parking and walking into a classroom building as well as the availability of public transportation. A cognitive element suggested by participants had to do with the will-power of deciding to continue their education despite what their peers might be doing with their lives after high school. Current literature suggests that this is "grit," but what might be more accurately described as personal determination to do something more than is expected by an immediate family. This also suggests, as reflected by one of the comments previously identified here, that an individual has to have an ability to disagree with family members in making decisions for personal actions.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The decision of what an individual chooses to do after participating in required education, that is, secondary school, aging out at 18 years of age, is complex and difficult for both the individual living through the experience as well as those who comprise the family structure of the individual. In some cases, the family structure is supportive and fully engaged in making a decision and offering support, both financial and cognitive. In other settings, the family is all but absent from the decision, or might even serve as a barrier to pursuing formal education. Discouraging further education through mocking behavior of going to school, devaluing studying, and refusing or an inability to provide financial support can all be significant barriers to a consideration of college enrollment.

The individuals interviewed for this study all indicated that their family played a critically important role in deciding to enroll in the local community college. There was a definable expectation placed on each individual that continuing education, either as a gateway to the workforce, to further education, or simply to occupy time and give purpose to life, was important. The expectation came from parental figures as well as siblings, and in each case, provided an enabling tool to the individual in getting enrolled. Simply, family members played an important role in the decision to enroll in college.

These findings did not offer a clear differentiation as to why the community college was the school of choice, yet implied in the comments were issues of ease of access and affordability. None of the comments related to advertisements or admissions officers, both interesting observations that might fuel future research into the effectiveness of community college marketing, or even marketing for the entire higher education industry.

With the family playing such a perceived important role in the decision to enroll in community college, a

deeper understanding of this relationship is needed. Further research into how families learn to frame their overall understanding of further education is needed, as is the direct and indirect messaging that might be directed at these families. Ultimately, understanding how families develop their own perceptions of community college education is critical, as this is the mechanism that will provide the encouragement for individuals to plan for their future through education.

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