Pathways to the Top: Scaffolding Success for Black and Latino Students in, and Beyond, Academically Accelerated High School Environments

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Introduction

In 2000, the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement published Reaching the Top, a report highlighting the under-representation of Black and Latino students in the population of highest-achieving students at all levels of schooling, including in accelerated Advanced Placement (AP) courses and in college, regardless of socioeconomic status. This report highlighted a chronic and long-standing problem (Borland, 2004; Gandara, 2004; Miller, 2004). Because the opportunity to experience college-level challenges while in high school confers many long-term benefits to students, ensuring successful participation of all ethnic and racial groups in AP courses is essential to achieving educational equity (see Hertberg-Davis, Callahan, & Kyburg, 2006). Recent efforts by the College Board and the Federal Government to rectify the problem (see, for example, U.S. Department of Education, 2006) have resulted in a dramatic increase in the participation of minority students in AP courses, but this increase has not been echoed in the percentage performing above the generally accepted passing score of “3” on AP exams (College Board, 2005) — a score which has been found to be correlated with later college performance (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2006; Geiser and Santelices, 2004). While, in 2004, 65% of AP exams taken by White students received a score of 3 or higher, only 32% of AP exams taken by Black students received a 3 or higher (College Board, 2005). These findings suggest that AP courses may not provide the same benefits to Black and Latino students as they provide to middle- and upper-middle class White students. Some research indicates that providing Black and Latino students with formal supports during high school (e.g., lunch groups, study groups, and pre-AP courses) contributes to increased participation and success in AP courses (e.g., Beitle, 2004; Guthrie & Guthrie, 2001). However, the long-term impact of these support structures on students’ feelings of preparedness for and performance within college courses has not been researched. Furthermore, no studies have focused on case histories of Black and Latino students who have been high-achievers in AP and college courses to identify common factors contributing to their high achievement.

The Study

In an attempt to fill these gaps in the literature, a one-year study is underway at the University of Virginia through a grant from the University of Iowa’s Belin-Blank Center. The study is exploring the following research questions: To what extent do formal support structures for minority students taking accelerated high school courses impact the success of these students within AP courses and, subsequently, in college? Beyond these support structures, what are common factors in the case histories of high-achieving Black and Latino students that pave the pathways to academic success in AP and college courses?

Methods

Sample and Data Collection: Stage 1. Three high schools with formal structures to support minority participation and success in AP courses (e.g., weekly lunch groups, pre-AP programs, study groups) have been identified (hereafter called “AP Support Schools”), along with three high schools that are similar in student demographics, urbanicity, and school size to the AP Support Schools, but that do not provide formal AP support (hereafter called “No AP Support Schools”).

We are currently in the process of recruiting a sample of 30 Black and Latino students who took AP courses, graduated from the six selected high schools, and who are currently in their second year of college. Five graduates from each AP Support School and each No AP Support School will be selected for further case study. Student selection will be purposeful to ensure equal representation in each group of gender, ethnicity, parent education level, and selectiveness of college attended.

All participants will complete a questionnaire containing short-answer and open-ended questions via SurveyMonkey, an on-line survey tool, probing students’ experiences and performance in AP and college courses and feelings of preparedness for college. Survey questions were constructed based on a review of the literature, and the survey has been field-tested using a sample of 10 Latino and African American former AP students who are now in their second year of college. Revisions have been made to the survey based upon the field test results. After the survey is administered, multiple follow-up telephone interviews will be conducted to clarify questions and obtain complete, rich data.

Sample and Data Collection: Stage 2. A sub-sample of students will be chosen from the larger sample of 30 to develop case histories of high-achieving Black and Latino students. Students from the larger sample with a history of high achievement in AP courses (score of 4 or 5 on at least one AP exam) and college courses (G.P.A. of at least 3.0) will be selected for the sub-sample. Interviews with the sub-sample of high-achieving students will be more in-depth and expansive to allow for development of case histories on each student. Interview data for both the larger sample and sub-sample will be collected until data saturation is reached.
Data Analysis. Qualitative survey and interview data will be analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method as described in Strauss & Corbin (1998) to determine whether — and to what extent — support structures impact Black and Latino students’ experiences in AP courses and subsequent feelings of preparedness for college. Data from each student will first be analyzed separately to build rich, descriptive, independent case studies and to probe the uniqueness of each student’s experience. The case studies of graduates of AP Support Schools will then be examined to determine common patterns and themes. Case studies of graduates of No AP Support Schools will be analyzed similarly. Finally, patterns across groups will be compared for common and unique themes. Case histories of the sub-sample of high-achieving students will be developed and compared to illuminate common and unique factors contributing to these students’ successful participation in AP courses and subsequent college environments.

Conclusion
The gap between Black and Latino students and their White peers at the highest levels of academic achievement is a serious and chronic problem. By delineating the specific supports for and barriers to high-achievement for minority students in our most challenging high school courses and beyond, we can begin to inform policy and practice as schools, state departments, and the federal government develop and fund AP programs for minority students.

References

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and
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Who Share the Honor of Overall Best Submission at the
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