

## Opportunity Beyond Affirmative Action: How Low-Income and Working-Class Black Male Achievers Access Highly Selective, High-Cost Colleges and Universities

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### ABSTRACT:

Published research on college access, particularly at highly selective and high-cost private postsecondary institutions, focuses primarily on barriers for underrepresented student populations. Higher-education scholars and policy makers have been especially concerned in recent years about stagnant (and, in some

instances, declining) rates of enrollment among Black male undergraduates. This article presents findings from two-to-three-hour individual interviews with Black undergraduate men who grew up in low-income and working-class families and later enrolled in one of eighteen predominantly White private postsecondary institutions. We describe the policies and programs that enabled these men to successfully navigate their way to and through these colleges and universities, and we then offer implications for higher-education policy.

### TEXT:

In *Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College*, Arthur Levine and Jana Niddifer (1996) describe the complex lives and educational journeys of twenty-four low-income students who gained admission to a range of postsecondary institutions, including elite universities. Few qualitative studies of undergraduates from similar socioeconomic circumstances have since been published, thus much remains to be known about such students and which programs, policies, and institutional practices enable them to access<sup>1</sup> particular sectors of postsecondary education. Emphasis most often is placed on exploring barriers rather than *facilitators* of college opportunity for lower-income and minoritized<sup>2</sup> populations (St. John et al. 2011). This has been especially prevalent over the past decade in published research and public discourse concerning the participation of Black male students in American higher education.

One of the authors of this article, Shaun R. Harper (2006), found that Black men comprised only 4.3 percent of all students enrolled at institutions of higher education in 2002—the exact same as in 1976.

The most significant gains in degree attainment during this time period were at community colleges. More recently, Harper (2011) reported that between 1994 and 2008, an increase of one Black male undergraduate was accompanied by an increase of five White male students. The overwhelming majority of Black men attend less selective regional state institutions, community and technical colleges, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Myriad socioeconomic factors help explain, at least in part, the low rates at which Black male students enroll in highly selective colleges and universities. For example, in comparison to their White counterparts, fewer Black families can afford to live in neighborhoods with high property values and well-resourced neighborhood schools (Massey and Denton 1993; Massey et al. 2010). The continuation of residential segregation in the United States concentrates Black students in public K-12 schools that have fewer resources, lower per-student expenditures, fewer advanced placement courses, and less experienced teachers than the suburban schools many White students attend (Frankenburg and Lee 2002; McDonough 1998; Orfield 2001). This leads to measurable differences in the quality of Black students' educational experiences, leaving many insufficiently prepared to engage in competitive college admissions processes (Chang 2000; Griffin and Allen 2006; Solórzano and Ornelas 2004; St. John 2003).

One of the authors of this article, Kimberly A. Griffin et al. (2010), found that over a thirty-three-year period, Black male undergraduates increasingly came from affluent families. Comparatively, lower-income students are less likely to apply to college generally (Fitzgerald and

Delaney 2002; McDonough 1997; McDonough 1998) and to enroll at elite colleges specifically (Bowen and Bok 1998; Hurtado et al. 1997). William Bowen et al. (2005, 135) found that while socioeconomic status (SES) had little influence on whether students were admitted to or performed well at highly selective institutions, it shaped the process that prepared them to engage in the application process; thus, they observed, "the odds of getting into this highly competitive pool in the first place depend enormously on who you are and how you grew up."

Parents' levels of educational attainment and financial resources have been closely linked to admissions behaviors and access trends (Bowen et al. 2005; Fitzgerald and Delaney 2002). Black students are less likely than their White and Asian American peers to have college-educated parents (College Board 1999). Parents with higher levels of formal education are often better positioned to provide key information and assistance that improve their children's college preparation and competitiveness, such as hiring private tutors and college counselors, ensuring their children take college preparatory classes, and arranging college visits (McDonough et al. 1997; Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2008). Don Hossler et al. (1999) found that parental education levels also had strong effects on the formation and actualization of college aspirations. Among ninth-graders in their study, 86 percent of students whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher intended to enroll in college after high school; comparatively, 59 percent of students whose parents neither graduated from high school nor attended college had plans to enroll.

Hossler et al. (1999, 106) also found significant relationships between the types of postsecondary institutions students chose (technical schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions) and their parents' income levels. Accordingly, "about 19 percent of the students whose parents' income was below \$15,000 attended a four-year school, whereas more than 58 percent of the students whose parents' income was more than \$45,000 attended a four-year school." Similarly, Hurtado et al. (1997) found that only 25 percent of students from the highest income group in their sample had not applied to college by the end of twelfth grade, compared to more than half of their counterparts whose parents earned less than \$14,999. Specifically concerning Blacks, those in the lowest income category applied to significantly fewer colleges and universities than did their more affluent same-race peers.

The ability to pay and financial aid are major determinants of whether and where students choose to pursue postsecondary education (McPherson and Schapiro 1998; Perna 1998; Perna 2006). A study by Laura W. Perna and Marvin A. Titus (2004) suggests that financial aid awarded by institutions may influence students' choices of particular four-year colleges and universities. In their sample, high school graduates from the lowest socioeconomic quartile who were awarded financial aid were more likely to enroll in private (and presumably higher-cost) institutions than public colleges and universities within their state. Notwithstanding its well-documented role in college access, some scholars (e.g., Breneman and Merisotis 2002; Perna 2000) have argued that financial aid on its own is insufficient in increasing access

and retention rates among lower-income undergraduates. Terrell L. Strayhorn's (2008) study focuses on their retention once enrolled, but there appear to be no published studies that explicitly examine how lower-income Black male students finance or navigate their way to postsecondary institutions, elite or otherwise.

As policy makers, researchers, and the American public continually consider ways to expand college opportunity for low-income and minoritized students, one particular policy issue is recurrently debated. Bowen and Bok (1998, 10) contend that affirmative action has "led to striking gains in the representation of [minoritized persons] in the most lucrative and influential occupations." In spite of this, numerous scholars (e.g., Allen 2005; Fischer and Massey 2007; Harper et al. 2009; Ibarra 2001; Schmidt 2007; St. John et al. 2001; Tierney 1996; Trent 1991; Yosso et al. 2004) have written about the contested use of race-sensitive college admissions practices. Reportedly, opposition is especially pronounced at selective institutions that have garnered reputations for conferring upon their graduates comparatively higher levels of career and financial success (Bowen and Bok 1998; Bowen et al. 2005; Katchadourian and Boli 1994; Massey et al. 2003; Stevens 2007). Hence, in many ways, disagreements over affirmative action are about who deserves access not only to these institutions but to positions amongst our nation's socioeconomic elite as well.

One by-product of resistance to the continuation of affirmative action in higher education is that minoritized students are often presumed to have been otherwise unqualified for admission. That is, many of their White peers and professors maintain that were it not for affirma-

tive action, those students would not have been afforded undue access to an elite institution (Solórzano et al. 2000). Even high-achieving minoritized students are not immune to these stereotypes (Charles et al. 2009; Fries-Britt 1998; Fries-Britt and Griffin 2007; Fries-Britt and Turner 2001; Strayhorn 2009).

Moreover, Sharon L. Fries-Britt (1997) and Harper (2009) posit that this is one of the most widely held misconceptions about Black male collegians, especially those from urban communities and lower-income backgrounds. Ironically, little is known about how Black male students with the fewest financial resources actually get to highly selective four-year colleges and universities. Understanding more about the policies, programs, and institutional practices that enable them to access elite and expensive institutions could be instructive for policy makers and others who endeavor to close racial and gender gaps in postsecondary participation. In this study, we look at the experiences of students who could be perceivably among the least likely to enroll in high-cost colleges and universities. Much of the literature on Black male collegians focuses on their underachievement and what they lack in terms of college preparatory resources, social and cultural capital, and school agents who support their achievement (Brown, forthcoming; Cohen and Nee 2000; Gordon et al. 1994; Harper 2009). Hence, an anti-deficit reframing of Black men's college access—understanding enablers rather than barriers to their matriculation at elite, high-cost, private institutions—was the fundamental aim of this study.

## METHODS

### Data Source and Research Design

This article is based on findings from the National Black Male College Achievement Study (NBMCAS), the largest-ever empirical research study of Black undergraduate men.<sup>3</sup> Data was collected from 219 students at forty-two colleges and universities in twenty states across the country. Six different institution types were represented in the national study: public research universities, highly selective private research universities, historically Black private colleges and universities, historically Black public universities, liberal arts colleges, and comprehensive state universities (see Table 1).

This study was guided by the phenomenology approach to qualitative inquiry, which focuses on understanding and describing the “lived experiences” of people who have encountered a similar phenomenon or been exposed to a common set of conditions (Creswell 2007; Patton 2002). A phenomenological account gets inside the experiences of a person or group of people and describes what participants have experienced, how they have experienced it, and their sense making regarding various effects relative to the phenomenon (Moustakas 1994). The researcher and readers of a phenomenological study should be able to say, “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Polkinghorne 1989, 46). In this study, the phenomenon is being a Black male achiever from a lower-income or working-class background who attended an expensive predominantly White private postsecondary institution. Given the deficit orientation of most research on college access for lower-income students

**Table 1 — National Black Male College Achievement Study Participating Institutions**

<b>Institution Type</b>	<b>College/University</b>
Public Research Universities	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Indiana University University of Michigan Michigan State University The Ohio State University Purdue University
Highly Selective Private Research Universities <sup>1</sup>	Brown University Columbia University Harvard University University of Pennsylvania Princeton University Stanford University
Historically Black Private Colleges and Universities	Clark Atlanta University Fisk University Hampton University Howard University Morehouse College Tuskegee University
Historically Black Public Universities	Albany State University Cheyney University of Pennsylvania Florida A&M University Norfolk State University North Carolina Central University Tennessee State University
Liberal Arts Colleges <sup>1</sup>	Amherst College Claremont McKenna College DePauw University Haverford College Lafayette College Occidental College Pomona College Saint John's University (MN) Swarthmore College Vassar College Wabash College Williams College
Comprehensive State Universities	California State Polytechnic University, Pomona California State University, Long Beach City University of New York, Brooklyn College Lock Haven University Towson University Valdosta State University

<sup>1</sup> Only low-income and working-class participants from these institutions were included in analyses for this article.

and repetitive examinations of stagnant postsecondary participation rates among Black male collegians, a better understanding of how Black males successfully navigated their way to highly selective institutions was one aim of the NBMCAS.

### Sites

This article is based on a subset of participating institutions in the NBMCAS, specifically the eighteen highly selective predominantly White private colleges and universities—twelve elite liberal arts colleges, five Ivy League institutions, and Stanford University. Table 2 presents Black male undergraduate enrollment rates as well as tuition fees of the participating colleges and universities. As shown, with the exception of Claremont McKenna College, the representation of Black males in the undergraduate student population increased at each institution between 1998 and 2008. The liberal arts colleges enrolled, on average, thirty-six Black men in 1998 and fifty-two in 2008. An average of 182 Black men attended the private research universities in 1998, compared to 248 a decade later.

During the 2008-2009 academic school term, the average annual cost of attendance and on-campus residency at the participating institutions was \$48,674. At more than half (61.1 percent), a bachelor's degree for a student who matriculates and lives on campus four or more years exceeds \$200,000. Across the participating colleges and universities, an average of 13.5 percent of all undergraduates received Pell Grants, which are federal financial aid awards given to America's neediest college students. Lastly, it is noteworthy that Saint John's University and Wabash College are both single-sex institutions.

### Sampling and Data Collection

Criterion sampling methods were used in this study (Patton 2002). Administrators (e.g., presidents, provosts, and deans of students) nominated and senior student leaders (e.g., student government association presidents) helped identify who they considered to be the best participants, specifically Black male undergraduates who met the following criteria: earned cumulative grade point averages (GPAs) above 3.0; established lengthy records of leadership and engagement in multiple student organizations; developed meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom; participated in enriching educational experiences (e.g., study abroad programs, internships, service learning, and summer research programs); and earned numerous merit-based scholarships and honors in recognition of their college achievements.

Each Black male achiever participated in a two-to-three-hour face-to-face individual interview on his campus; when necessary, follow-up interviews were conducted via telephone. A semistructured interview technique was used, which simultaneously permitted data collection and participant reflection (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Although standard questions and interview protocol were used, discussions often became conversational, thus allowing participants to reflect on their educational experiences. Some interview questions pertained directly to students' socioeconomic backgrounds and navigational journeys to and through their respective postsecondary institutions. Prior to the interview, each participant completed a demographic questionnaire that included several questions about his academic experiences (before and during college),

**Table 2 — Black Male Undergraduate Enrollments and Tuition/Fees at Participating Institutions**

	Fall 1998 Undergraduates %	Fall 2008 Undergraduates %	Fall 2008 Tuition/Fees <sup>2</sup> \$
Amherst College	3.0	4.4	50,230
Brown University	2.6	2.9	50,560
Claremont McKenna College	2.2	1.9	50,990
Columbia University	2.8	4.0	51,406
DePauw University	2.4	2.6	42,175
Harvard University	3.3	3.6	50,250
Haverford College	1.1	3.8	51,637
Lafayette College	2.3	3.1	49,188
Occidental College	1.9	2.8	50,409
Pomona College	1.6	3.4	49,745
Princeton University	3.0	3.3	49,830
Saint John's University (MN)	0.4	1.4	37,616
Stanford University	3.6	5.0	51,760
Swarthmore College	3.3	3.4	50,381
University of Pennsylvania	1.9	3.0	51,299
Vassar College	1.4	1.5	51,370
Wabash College	5.0	5.9	37,750
Williams College	3.4	3.9	49,530

<sup>2</sup> On-campus residency including room, board, and institutional estimates for books and supplies.

family structure and SES, leadership and out-of-class experiences, and postcollege educational and career aspirations.

### Participants

Across the eighteen sites, forty-two participants reported that they were from low-income and working-class backgrounds. In addition to choosing from among four economic options (low-income, working-class, middle-class, and affluent) on the aforementioned preinterview questionnaire, other proxies for determining SES included mothers' and fathers' educational attainment, family

structure (single parent, two parents, etc.), number of residents in one's household most immediately prior to college enrollment, and parents' current positions of employment. Participant demographics for the subsample are provided in Table 3. As indicated, more than 70 percent were from families in which neither parent had attained a bachelor's degree.

**Table 3 – Participant Demographics**

<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Low-Income	16	38.1
Working-Class	26	61.9
<b>Class Standing</b>		
First-Year Students	2	4.8
Sophomores	16	38.1
Juniors	8	19.0
Seniors	16	38.1
<b>Family Structure</b>		
Single Parent	19	45.2
Two Parents	21	50.0
Caregiver	2	4.8
	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>
<b>Parents' Education Level</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
No College	40.5	50.0
Some College	35.7	21.4
Bachelor's Degree	16.7	16.7
Master's Degree	7.1	11.9

**Data Analysis**

Several techniques prescribed by Clark Moustakas (1994) were used to analyze the data collected from interviews with the men in the subsample. We first bracketed our thoughts and assumptions as we read each line of the participants’ transcripts; the margins of the transcripts were marked with reflective comments regarding our presumptions and initial reactions. After bracketing, the transcripts were sorted and key phases were linearly arranged under tentative headings in the NVivo qualitative data analysis software program. This process resulted in the identification of invariant constituents (Moustakas 1994), which were subthemes that consistently emerged across participant interviews. The invariant constitu-

ents were helpful for identifying programs, policies, and practices that enabled college access; these were later clustered into three thematic categories, which we present below. As an additional step, we used Harper’s (2007) trajectory analysis method to understand what each participant experienced along his navigational journey to and through his respective college or university. Relevant stories from the participants’ trajectory summaries were used to corroborate the three thematic categories.

**FINDINGS**

No participant was knowingly given preferential treatment or awarded points for his race in the college admissions process; however, thirty-nine of the

**Table 4 — Most Common Access Enablers**

Type	Example	Web Site
Specialty high school contexts and independent school access initiatives for urban youth	Prep for Prep	<a href="http://www.prepforprep.org">www.prepforprep.org</a>
Collaborative college access and talent identification programs for urban youth	The Posse Foundation	<a href="http://www.possefoundation.org">www.possefoundation.org</a>
Institution-based no-loans and zero-contribution initiatives	Stanford University	<a href="http://www.stanford.edu/dept/finaid">www.stanford.edu/dept/finaid</a>

forty-two participants reported having been accused by White peers of being unfairly admitted to their respective institution via affirmative action policies and practices. The pervasiveness of this stereotype begs the question: how did these men gain access to elite and expensive private colleges and universities? Table 4 shows the three major programmatic and policy initiatives that participants recurrently reported in the interviews. Although a variety of initiatives were mentioned, these three were discussed most often and described most extensively by participants. In this section, we present illustrative examples from our interviews of how Black male undergraduates in our study were affected by these efforts to increase college access for lower-income students.

### Prepped for the Elite

Participants across all eighteen campuses in the NBMCAS described a range of precollege programs to which they were introduced as middle and high school students. However, the majority of low-income and working-class students at highly selective private institutions, especially those who grew up in urban communities, attributed their college readiness and access to unique K–12 schooling environments. Few attended

“regular” public schools in their home neighborhoods; instead, many were afforded access to magnet schools that emphasized particular academic specialties (science, technology, performing arts, etc.) and promoted a strong college-going culture. In most instances, these K–12 schools had competitive admissions processes. Other achievers like Bali, a senior<sup>4</sup> at Brown University, spoke of initiatives that provided opportunities for lower-income urban youth to attend high-tuition private high schools that enrolled few minoritized students.

Bali grew up in New York and was the first person in his family to attend a four-year postsecondary institution. Unfortunately, the shaping of college-going expectations did not occur at home, in part because his parents were absent for much of his upbringing. Bali was raised primarily by his grandmother. His aunt found out about Prep for Prep, a program whose mission is to identify and nurture students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who would benefit from attending independent schools in New York City and private boarding schools throughout the Northeast. Participation in this program enabled Bali to leave his resource-deprived public school to attend Phillips Academy Andover, the same boarding school from

which the sons of U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy and George H. W. Bush graduated, Bali noted in his interview. Prep for Prep made it possible for a teen with a perceivably bleak future to experience a school with a long-standing legacy of preparing its students for admission to elite postsecondary institutions. In addition to having a guidance counselor at Andover, the program also assigned him a counselor who aided in his college choice process. Bali ultimately applied to Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Cornell, and seventeen other institutions, mostly elite privates. “I never would have even known I could have applied to those schools were it not for Prep for Prep,” he said.

Leslie, another participant who began Prep for Prep when he was thirteen years old, offered the following:

I honestly feel if I had stayed in public school, I wouldn't be at Princeton today. I'd probably be at some unranked college—not that those are bad schools, I just think the opportunity of being able to go to Deerfield Academy and go through Prep for Prep gave me chances I wouldn't have had in public schools.

Prep for Prep counselors helped shape Leslie's postsecondary choice set and paid for his college visits. Penn, Princeton, Georgetown, Harvard, Yale, and Wesleyan were among the eleven universities to which he applied. He felt his guidance counselor at Deerfield was “responsible for getting everyone into college,” whereas his Prep for Prep counselor was “responsible for getting me into the best college” [participant's emphases noted]. Like Leslie and Bali, others from the private research universities and liberal arts colleges believed their access to elite private high schools via initiatives like

Prep for Prep and targeted scholarships for low-income urban youth afforded them exposure to resources and “college knowledge” they otherwise would not have received. Consequently, they were prepared to engage in competitive college admissions processes. Corey, a Swarthmore student, contended: “You don't go to these Ivy League-caliber high schools and then not go to college.”

### Postsecondary Possibilities for My Posse and Me

Although only one-quarter of the liberal arts colleges in the sample had established formal partnerships with the Posse Foundation, the Posse Scholars program was discussed in deeply meaningful ways among several Black male achievers on those campuses. For example, every participant from DePauw University (including Wagner, below) was a Posse Scholar from New York City. Each received a scholarship from the foundation combined with other forms of institutional aid to cover the cost of his attendance. In addition to providing financial assistance, Posse also prepared these and other urban students for successful transitions to postsecondary institutions where they would be minoritized; Posse unmasked and celebrated their talents prior to college entry; and the foundation sent them to institutions in “cohorts” with others from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

Consider the following interview exchange with a student named Wagner:

Wagner: The factor that ultimately made me decide to come to this college was that I won a \$100,000 full-tuition scholarship. So once I got that, I said, “Hey, why not? They provided the money in giving me a chance to get this

so-called wonderful education—why not at least give it a try?”

Interviewer: Are you saying that were it not for Posse [Foundation], you may not have come to DePauw?

Wagner: If it weren't for Posse, I never would have thought about going to a private college. In my family there was no money; I didn't want to pay loans. My parents told me I'd be paying for my own education, so I applied to SUNY [State University of New York] and CUNY [City University of New York] schools. I definitely would not have applied to a place as expensive as DePauw. Never.

Brandon characterized the program as his “savior”; reportedly, it changed his life. He predicted that at least thirty-five of the fifty-two Black undergraduate men enrolled at DePauw during the time of his interview were Posse Scholars. Accordingly, it was the primary point of access for most low-income and working-class Black male students. Despite Posse's role in creating access for diverse populations, Kareem clarified that “Posse by no way is affirmative action for minorities; there is a rigorous and competitive selection process.” Although he maintained a 3.3 GPA and an extensive record of high school leadership experiences, Kareem's guidance counselor attempted to limit his postsecondary options to community colleges. He reflected on the following:

When I went to her [the guidance counselor], she told me to only apply for community colleges. To me, applying to community college would have been a failure after I had worked so hard. One day I told her that I'm not applying. I told her I want to apply to better schools and asked, “How can you

help me?” She persisted and insisted that I apply to community colleges. It got to the point where I had to rip the application up and threw it at her. I'm not going to apply. After that we didn't have any more talks about college. It wasn't until I got the Posse scholarship that she tried calling me in to show me off to other parents. But yet two weeks prior, she couldn't help me out with finding any colleges.

While he was adamant in his refusal to apply to community colleges, Kareem was fairly certain that he would not have ended up at DePauw had it been left to his guidance counselor and if he had not received the assistance from Posse. Jerrell had a different experience with his counselor; she introduced him to the Posse Scholars program and supported his interest in applying. Despite spending the majority of his childhood in the Vanderveer housing projects in Brooklyn, Jerrell always knew he wanted to attend college; however, he never imagined enrolling in an expensive private university in rural Indiana. Like the four from DePauw, other Posse Scholars in the sample spoke similarly about the program's profound effects on their college access experiences.

### **No Money, No Problem**

Two Harvard participants, Bryan and Tariq, shared a variety of common characteristics: both maintained 3.6 cumulative GPAs, were extremely active on campus and held leadership positions in multiple student organizations, and aspired to attend law school upon completion of their bachelor's degrees. Perhaps more interesting are the circumstances from which they emerged. Both attended predominantly Black public schools, one in Detroit and the other in

Baltimore. Although one was raised by two parents and the other in a single-parent home, poverty was a shared reality of their upbringing. Despite these odds, both students were not only offered admission to one of the most highly regarded universities in the world but also were awarded the financial aid that ultimately made their matriculation possible. Were it not for the university's policy that students whose parents earn below a certain income threshold may attend at no cost, both Tariq and Bryan believe extensive student loan debt would have been required to finance their Ivy League education.

A reporter from the *New York Times* wrote a feature story about Anthony Jack one week after his graduation from Amherst College (Rimer 2007). Therein she explained how Tony and other undergraduates from low-income backgrounds were able to access elite private postsecondary institutions with tuition and fees that exceeded \$40,000 annually. In his interview with the NBMCAS, Tony indicated that the financial aid package was the biggest factor in his choosing Amherst over the flagship public research university in his home state of Florida. He also praised the college's president for a perceivably authentic expression of commitment to college opportunity for lower-income students.

Other participants had similar reports and reactions to aid efforts on their respective campuses. For example, four men from low-income and working-class backgrounds at Stanford each talked about the importance of the university's income-threshold aid initiative: students whose parents earn below \$60,000 are not expected to contribute anything toward their educational expenses. A student,

Michael, said, "That is the only way I was able to come here from South Central Los Angeles." Another achiever commended the introduction of his university's no-loans initiative:

I am so thankful for it. If I had to pay over \$200,000 to come to Penn, I would not have been able to come. For real, I would have gone to a public university in Maryland, where I probably still would have had to take out loans, just not as many. The University of Pennsylvania generously made a way for me to afford to be here but not making me take out loans in an amount that is probably quadruple the value of my mom's home.

Across the institutions, initiatives such as these were mentioned most often among participants as the most significant enablers of college access.

## DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In 2003, U.S. Supreme Court justices ruled narrowly in favor of the continued use of particular forms of affirmative action in college admissions (*Gratz v. Bollinger* 2003; *Grutter v. Bollinger* 2003). However, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor said: "We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today" (Schmidt 2007, 223). In other words, she forecasted an end to affirmative action by 2028. If there were no policy or race-sensitive practice to ensure their participation, how would future generations of Black men and other minoritized students access elite institutions of higher education? The findings of this study suggest that some high achievers whose parents earn below particular income levels will make their

way to these colleges and universities via initiatives targeted specifically at lower-income students, including Whites. Participants attributed their college access not to affirmative action but to efforts like Prep for Prep, the Posse Scholars program, and two particular forms of institution-based financial aid. These initiatives influenced access at all levels, from readiness to college choice to financing high tuition costs to persistence from freshman through senior year.

Without at least one of these resources, lower-income students at the eighteen liberal arts colleges and highly selective private research universities in the NBMCAS unanimously reported that they would not have matriculated at those institutions. In some ways, this simultaneously confirms and extends findings offered in Hossler et al.'s (1999) study. These men indicated they would have chosen other perceivably less prestigious institutions based on what they and their parents could afford. They believed several other Black men from their families, high schools, and home communities would have enrolled in college had they too been afforded access to the same preparation, partnership, and financial resources. The present study also makes known how the participants were able to transcend socioeconomic barriers that typically limit enrollment at expensive private institutions. Consistent with Black students in another study (Perna 2000), the Black male achievers were reluctant (in most cases, unwilling) to accrue large amounts of student loan debt. Simply being admitted to Harvard or one of the other seventeen institutions on its own was deemed insufficient—the financial resources were a necessity for them to enroll in college.

Given that Black students and their parents (especially those from lower-income backgrounds) often possess comparatively little understanding of college costs and financial aid options (Perna 2006), it is important that information about college opportunity initiatives such as those identified by participants in this study be made more widely known. It is noteworthy that all the men in Prep for Prep and Posse were from urban areas, which is sensible given the foci of those two programs. Federal grants could help create similar initiatives for low-income and working-class students in rural communities, especially in Southern states where postsecondary participation gaps between Black men and others are most pronounced (Harper 2006; Harper 2011; Perna et al. 2006). Two related shortcomings of programs such as these are cost and capacity; that is, they can only accommodate relatively small cohorts of students given the extensive financial investment and partnership parameters with a limited number of participating institutions. State policy makers should make funds available for partnerships between high schools and public postsecondary institutions that strengthen college readiness in ways similar to the Prep for Prep and Posse models. One aspect of this necessitates increases and improvements in public school guidance counseling resources. Much can be learned from how Prep for Prep counselors aid in students' college search and choice processes. Perhaps these approaches could be incorporated into state licensure and recertification standards for guidance counseling professionals.

Although this study is focused on private colleges and universities with large endowments, much about their

investments in lower-income students could be instructive for federal and state policy makers. For example, income-threshold initiatives could help increase access to elite public institutions (meaning state flagships and research universities). For sure, this proposal is in direct opposition to others currently calling for decreases in federal Pell Grants and reduced state support for public postsecondary institutions. A substantial number of participants in this study were able to attend their respective colleges and universities because their families earned annual incomes below certain amounts. As Peter Schmidt (2007) notes, one major problem with these institution-level aid initiatives is that too few minoritized students are beneficiaries. More should be done in public policy to eliminate the burden of cost and reduce loan debt for lower-income persons and populations that historically have been underrepresented at the most elite and expensive state universities. This study suggests that doing so would be an important policy response to the long-standing stagnation of Black men's postsecondary enrollments.

### LIMITATIONS

This study has at least two limitations. First, because the NBMCAS was not entirely focused on how participants financed their college education, interview data was not corroborated with actual financial aid records; in other words, this article is based on students' self-reports of efforts and initiatives that enabled them to enroll at high-cost institutions. However, without seeing the itemized details of their aid packages, we had no way of determining how Pell Grants, the Federal Work Study Program, and other traditional forms of need-based aid were combined with institutional

investments to make college attendance possible for these students. And second, while a broader set of policy implications was offered in the previous section, the transferability of findings from this study are limited to institutions that host the Posse Scholars program or have enough resources to fund zero-contribution/income-threshold initiatives and enact no-loans policies.

### CONCLUSION

As written in Harper et al. (2009, 405):

Many academic programs and admissions policies that were [supposedly] designed to increase college access for African Americans have received great opposition and been criticized for giving these individuals an unfair advantage over White students. Unsurprisingly, once these programs were halted, there were dramatic decreases in the number of students . . . the programs were originally intended to serve.

Despite the Supreme Court's ruling for continued use of particular forms of affirmative action in the University of Michigan Law School case (*Grutter v. Bollinger* 2003), numerous scholars (e.g., Allen 2005; Fischer and Massey 2007; Schmidt 2007) predict that critics will continually endeavor to permanently dismantle affirmative action policy and race-sensitive college admissions practices. Thus, to increase access to the public good of higher education, policy makers must become more aware of other initiatives that enable underrepresented students to afford college and then must invest in those efforts at levels that permit larger numbers of lower-income persons to enroll and succeed. Like Schmidt (2007), our concern is that too few

students benefit from institution-level aid initiatives presently offered at elite high-cost institutions. More needs to be done to replicate and increase the capacity of efforts such as those that enabled opportunity beyond affirmative action among Black men in our study.

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## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> In this article, “access” refers to college admission as well as the financial assistance necessary to matriculate and persist through baccalaureate degree attainment.

<sup>2</sup> “Minoritized” is used instead of “minority” throughout this article to signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social context (e.g., their families, social fraternities, and churches). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of White persons.

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<sup>4</sup> Each participant in this sample has graduated from his respective college or university. Class years used in this article reflect their status at the time interviews were conducted. With the participants’ permission, their real names are used.