

Examining the Experiences of Men of Color at MiraCosta College



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About the Minority Male Community College Collaborative (M2C3)

Mission

Our mission is to conduct research to inform practice that will enhance access, achievement, and success among underserved students in postsecondary education. Using the Community College Survey of Men (CCSM), we partner with community colleges across the nation to examine factors that influence student success for underserved students in postsecondary education.

Objectives

- To serve as a clearinghouse for federal, state, and institutional data on student outcomes;
- To conduct and disseminate empirical research on the experiences of students of color in the community college; and
- To facilitate institutional capacity to serve historically underserved students by supporting efforts to integrate assessment, evaluation, and sustainability planning into student success efforts

Project Team

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INTRODUCTION

The Minority Male Community College Collaborative (M2C3) at San Diego State University was contracted by MiraCosta College to engage in a comprehensive assessment of the experiences of men of color (e.g., African American, Latino, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American). The assessment entailed collecting quantitative and qualitative data from students, and qualitative data from faculty. This project is a part of MiraCosta College's efforts to redress persistent inequities and outcome disparities in student success that disproportionately affect men of color.

The purpose of this report is to share findings that emerged from the qualitative assessment of men of color's experiences at MiraCosta. In line with the purpose of this project, the four overarching questions below guided the qualitative inquiry with students:

1. What are some salient challenges that are experienced by men of color at MiraCosta College?
2. What factors (e.g., people, programs, campus services, resources, etc.) that are situated within the campus context enable men of color to persist at MiraCosta College despite the challenges they face?
3. What factors (e.g., people, programs, campus services, resources, etc.) that are external to the campus context enable men of color to persist at MiraCosta despite the challenges they face?
4. What advice would men of color offer to campus leaders and administrators regarding how they can best support them?

METHOD

Data Collection: Data collection for this project occurred during the Fall 2015 semester. Students who identified as “men of color” and were currently enrolled in credit-bearing courses were purposefully selected by MiraCosta College administrators to participate in the project. A total of 31 students participated. Twenty-nine students participated in one of five focus groups that were conducted. The remaining two participants were interviewed individually. These two students were originally scheduled for focus groups, but were the only students to attend during the time at which the focus group was scheduled.

All of the participants agreed to have their conversations audio recorded, and were assured that the insights they provided would be treated confidentially by our project team. All of the audio recordings were transcribed for data analysis. During the focus groups, we also completed a “Community College

Insights Protocol" matrix. The matrix included the guiding questions that informed the study, organized in discrete columns. Completing the matrix enabled us to capture the participants' perspectives in real time. The matrix also allowed the participants to see that the insights they shared were captured accurately.

We relied on the audio recordings and completed matrices to construct this report. Prior to the focus groups and interviews, we informed the participants (both verbally and in writing) that their participation was strictly voluntary. Participants were informed that they could opt out of answering questions they did not feel comfortable answering, and could discontinue their involvement in the project at any time without consequences. None of the participants who began the project discontinued their participation. Participants were provided pizza, snacks, and beverages during the focus groups as an incentive for participating. They did not receive monetary compensation.

Participants: The 31 men of color who participated in the project represented a wide range of diversity on the basis of race/ethnicity (Table 1), age (Table 2), enrollment status (Table 3), units completed (Table 4), employment status (Table 5), educational goal (Table 6), and participation in developmental education (Table 7).

Table 1: Race/Ethnicity Composition	
Race/Ethnicity	Number
African American	9
Mexican/Mexican American	6
Hispanic/Latino	3
Asian American	2
Filipino	1
Pacific Islander or Hawaiian	2
Multiracial	4
Other	3
Decline to State	1

Table 2: Participant's Age

Age	Number
18-21	11
22-25	9
26-29	4
30-33	2
40+	5

Table 3: Enrollment Status

Status	Number
Full time (12+ units)	25
Less than full time (less than 12 units)	6

Table 4: Total Units Completed

Units Completed	Number
0	4
1-14	4
15-29	7
30-44	5
45-60	8
60+	3

Table 5: Employment Status

Hours Worked Per Week	Number
Not Working	9
8-15 Hours	4
16-23 Hours	8
24-31 Hours	5
32+ Hours	5

Table 6: Educational Goals

Goals	Number
Transfer	16
Associate Degree	2
Update Job Skills	1
Prepare for a New Career	1
Not Stated	11

Table 7: Development Education

Subject	Number
Math	4
Multiple Subjects (2-3)	7
Not Applicable	9
Not Stated	11

Data Analysis: All of the data that were collected for this project were transcribed for data analysis. Each of the transcripts was uploaded into *Dedoose*—a qualitative data analysis software program that enables multiple researchers to work collaboratively on analyzing a dataset. Data were coded deductively by at least two researchers. Although we took a deductive approach to analyzing the data, we also sought concepts and insights that could not be adequately coded using our previously established codebook.

Limitations: Despite our efforts to conduct this project in the most methodologically rigorous manner possible, we encountered several limitations that are worth noting. First, although the sample was very diverse, we would have liked to have had more students participate. Second, African American students are overrepresented in the project's sample, whereas Latino, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander students are underrepresented. Finally, a critical mass of the participants fit the profile of a "traditional" college student—being between the ages of 18-22 and enrolled fulltime. Published literature and research on men of color in community colleges indicate that these students tend to be in their late 20s and attend less than fulltime.

KEY FINDINGS

Three overarching thematic categories emerged from the focus groups and interviews with men of color at MiraCosta College:

- Challenges Students Experienced
- On-Campus and Off-Campus Support
- Students' Advice to Campus Leaders

These categories were salient across the interviews and focus groups. In this section, we discuss each of the themes and present the thoughts, feelings, and experiences participants shared to support the findings presented.

Challenges Students Experienced

The focus group participants were asked to discuss challenges they believed had a significant impact on their experiences and success in community college. There were several challenges that emerged as salient during these discussions:

- **Returning to school after being out of school for a long period of time -**
Some participants expressed experiencing difficulties coming back to college to further their education and career. Difficulties included being older, married, and having dependents. Students who were returning also shared how it often felt like they did not have a space on campus to interact with other returning students. In the following quote, the student shared his age, past educational experiences, and current life struggles during the focus group. He described himself as a rat roaming among the traditional college students who were younger.

"... on the campus, I'm 47 years old, and I graduated as a medical doctor in China 20 years ago, so I'm basically, I'm ready to do all this course, that is fine, it is needed for life, I mean I do it and for my kids... I need at least talk to... because every time I walk into this campus around I feel that I was really like a rat, and everybody is young and energized, everybody is laughing and healthy, and I'm, I just feel, I just feel I need a hole to crawl in..."

Another returning student shared a positive experience of being older than the majority of his peers in the classroom. He shared that younger students acknowledged his participation in class, and viewed what he contributed to the learning space as insightful.

"I was in a class earlier today and I'm never intimidated because my opinion is my opinion and I'm gonna give it and if you don't like it and I don't say anything to be offensive on purpose, but after class I was standing out

and talking to a group of 18 year olds, we were just talking and I made some comment and immediately 2 of them chimed up and they were like well you're the only one who makes insightful intelligent comments in class."

- **Financial struggles and pressures (i.e., purchase textbooks, transportation, and necessities)** - All participants expressed financial struggles interfering with their academic and personal lives. Financial insecurity was a salient topic throughout all the focus groups. Students shared the hard decision of deciding what to buy for class and how to make ends meet not only for them individually, but also for their siblings or dependents. Some participants expressed working multiple jobs in order to pay full-time tuition and be able to transfer in a timely manner.

"I was going to community college I did plan on transferring and I still do, but in order to transfer I need to save money and there is just this really big pressure that I'm putting on myself to transfer in time so I have to take more than the 12 units required and I'm also taking 2 part-time jobs to pay for that, so that is interfering with my family and my friends and they tell me so constantly."

Often times students shared the difficulty of not being able to purchase the required textbooks for class because the price of the books was too expensive. A student shared how he was able to compensate for not being able to purchase the books by taking photos of the pages required for class at the campus library.

"Yeah. I have like especially this semester because I'm taking business [classes] and those books are like real expensive and yeah my money my brother sent to me I have to pay other things and I didn't buy the books at all, I bought 2 of them and the other one I have to go to the library and take a picture and use it on my computer to do my assignments."

- **Parental and familial obligations** - Many of the participants who identified as parents shared their struggles of being a parent going to school and raising their children. Other participants expressed familial obligations as a challenge to their time spent studying and preparing for class. Such obligations consisted of babysitting younger children or driving parents or siblings to and from work or school. The following quote was from a parent

who is focused on his academics, but feels that he is not spending enough time with his children. In the quote, he expressed this as "neglecting" his children.

"Yeah. I mean it is that, but when you get like so focused and wrapped up in school, everything else is kind of like put in the back, like now I have got a lot I should be home with my kids, I'm kind of like neglecting my kids right now doing school stuff, and then they are growing up like right before my eyes."

Another example of family obligations was being the only one in the family who had a driver's license. Along with his own school schedule, the student was also responsible for making sure his family members got to their destination in a timely manner. With the majority of his family members depending on him, it is hard for the student to engage with faculty members and peers, or utilize student services on campus.

"I mean I come from a really big family and I'm the only one with my driver's license other than my dad who works constantly so sometimes I have to leave school to pick up my sisters or drop my nieces off or take my mom to work, that is like a huge problem."

- **Maintaining a healthy mind and body (i.e., access to food)** - The participants shared the importance of caring for one's health through proper diet, exercise, and mental wellbeing. From the focus groups, the men of color shared the importance of partaking in maintaining a healthy mind and body. However, maintaining good health often costs money. The following comment illustrated the struggle of keeping in shape and having the resources to eat healthy. The student chose to eat healthy, and if he did not have enough resources to purchase food, he depended on free food on campus.

"Yeah. In the semester before I get my Pell grant, yeah it is rough because, I'm kind of, I kind of bring it on myself because I choose to eat healthy and my family doesn't, so I don't really eat at home very often, I usually buy my own food. So if I don't have the money I usually don't eat or I have to salvage around campus. So when A told me there is free food in here [in the focus group], I'm like word."

Another student shared similar concerns. In the following quote, the student shared how he chooses not to eat because of the lack of financial resources available. His priority is making sure his son does not feel hungry, so he disregards his own health.

"I tend to not worry about myself as far as eating, I make sure that my son has enough, more than myself, so at the beginning of the semester money is very tight."

- **Balancing school, work, and family** - Participants shared the challenges of balancing time between school, work, and family. Participants expressed the tiresome battle of balancing the different environments. One student shared that he worked tirelessly, and by the time he got home he did not have the energy to study. In this example, the student is holding himself responsible for his academic performance.

"There has been a couple times where I would work so much I just didn't feel like opening the book, like I would just go straight to bed, like I would have a quiz or something the next day and okay well if I don't know it by now."

Other focus group participants expressed similar sentiments about the challenges of balancing work, family, and other responsibilities. From their perspectives, these demands made it difficult to maximize their academic potential in the absence of support.

- **Student identities (i.e., undocumented status, Veteran and Active Duty, first generation college student, parent)** - The focus groups captured the experiences and intersectionality of salient identities for the men of color who participated. For example, in the following quote, the student discussed being a veteran and a Mexican American student trying to navigate the college system for help. He shares that others' perceptions about his identity as a Mexican American student tend to be negative, whereas perceptions about him as a veteran are positive.

"The veteran stigma is 'okay cool. You did your service. You just don't know. Okay we will help you out.' Right and like I said it took until I could actually identify as a veteran, instead of identify as a Mexican, to finally realize that okay yeah I just don't know anything, I'm sorry I'm a veteran as opposed to being 'Oh I'm sorry I'm Hispanic and I just don't know stuff.' [As a Mexican

American] I feel like there is a lot of 'Man you just come into this country and you don't know this transfer process? Or you don't know how to attend college?'"

A participant whose citizenship status was not documented had this to share:

"But the underlying problem that I have with my life is that I'm undocumented currently, because of several problems, one being that there is an uncertainty in regards to doing really anything. So I mean I really have high hopes for my life. They accept undocumented students but they do not offer financial aid in order to support education, and not many people are fully aware of what it means to be undocumented, because there is, there is another good program called DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and I don't know how many people really know what that program is."

- **Racially Prejudice Stereotypes** – The participants expressed that they felt faculty members and other students held certain expectations and stereotypes about them based on their gender and their race/ethnicity. The first statement illustrates the student's perception about how a faculty member views men of color. In the quote, the student is aware of racial profiling and adds at the end of his statement that men of color do not fall under the racial profiles that faculty members categorize them into.

". . .instructors automatically see you and think 'Oh you're a black guy, you're this, this, this, and this. You're Hispanic and you're this, this, and this. And maybe none of it is true, maybe he likes to ice skate in the park."

Other focus group participants shared these insights regarding their interactions with students who they believed bought into racial stereotypes about men of color.

"In a nut shell, you know people just want to put me in a certain category and some people find out that I'm not in that, and you know some people react well to it, but I have noticed in this arena usually people are like oh stay away from you, which you know that is fine, I mean deal with it, good."

"I'm a fairly dominant black man, and as soon as I start to, you know let's say we are debating something, somebody starts to yell at me and I raise my voice all of a sudden they are like 'Oh don't be so aggressive.' Oh I'm aggressive now because you're yelling at me and I raise my voice or I told you you're not gonna yell at me?"

On-Campus and Off-Campus Support and Services - The following themes illustrate the different strategies and resources students used to overcome the challenges they experienced as men of color at MiraCosta: (a) On-campus resources and strategies, which are the campus-based resources, people, programs, and strategies students utilized to persist at MiraCosta College despite the challenges they experienced. (b) Off-campus resources and strategies, which refer to the academic, emotional, and financial support students received from friends and family, as well as the work and social activities that helped them overcome the challenges they experienced.

On-Campus Support and Services

- **Student services (i.e., Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, library resources)** – The participants expressed positive perspectives of the campus services and resources they used on a regular basis. The Extended Opportunity Program (EOP), educational planning, and the campus library were referenced most often during the focus groups. The positive experiences students had accessing and utilizing these resources and services were attributed primarily to supportive interactions they had with staff in those areas. One student noted:

"EOPS it is the first semester here they are going to meet with peer advisors, to help with students, and they talk to you about things you should and should not be doing, and then also we do meet the counselor at least once a semester as part of a program and they make sure you have an educational plan and that you're on track."

Along with EOP, another resource that students found helpful in their academic experience was the educational plan. Many students commented that it provided a road map of the courses they had to take, which helped them prepare in advance. It was also a user-friendly program that students did not have difficulty understanding.

"And also like on the on campus the way that they organize their whole plans, like plan A, plan B, plan C, it is a really easy to follow format and they literally show it to you like the first time you walk in, here is what you need to follow in order to transfer. It's the education plans. The education plans and it is super easy to follow, pick 2 of these 2, all right cool. And so then right away like I already had in mind, I already planned out before I came to the counselors because I already came to their website."

- **Academic support and campus allies (i.e., instructors, administrators, staff)**

- Students mentioned that having academic support from faculty members also contributed to their persistent in pursuing their educational goal. Several mentioned professors from the sociology and psychology departments along with a few counselors. Students expressed that their mentors would encourage them to pursue scholarships and leadership roles, and also provide constant reminders about upcoming deadlines to help them stay on top of their work.

"My biggest mentor is a sociology professor and the other is a counselor so they make sure that I have like, I know I'm a busy person this semester when I was in a student leadership position I had a lot of stuff on my schedule and they would constantly remind me this is on your schedule don't forget you have this to do."

Another participant spoke about the support he received from an English professor.

"One thing that actually motivates me are professors, not all of them, but specifically my English teacher. She is very, very supportive, she understands, in my case I speak with her in her office and when she sees that I'm not doing my homework or turning it in on time or my homework isn't as good as it should be she asks me what is going on, is there anything that is distracting me from doing my assignments and I do let her know she is very understanding, she gives me extra time, I mean I still turn in assignments late, but she tells me, you know it could be late, so she knows what the points going on with me."

Off-Campus Support and Services

- **Family members** - Students shared that their family members were a big part of their motivation in pursuing their education. Often times, it was based on the struggles that their parents overcame in order to create a better future for them. An example of family support is illustrated in the following comment. The student expressed reasons why he is pursuing his degree, and how the support of his family motivates him to do well.

"I look back at how hard my parents have worked for myself and I just keep that in my mind, it helps me, it helps me out knowing that I have family there that supports me saying we gave you everything you have now to where we want you to do something better, bigger, go to school, go to university, do something better than what we are doing now."

- **Peers/Friends** – Peers and friends were also identified as a key source of support. Participants shared that having peers who were passionate about education helped them stay focused and on track towards their goal. Outside of academics, peers were supportive by providing authentic support and financial resources. In the following statement, a student who identified as a veteran described how another veteran supported him without hesitation during a financial situation.

"If I need a loan for a couple hundred bucks I'm able to rely on him to come through for me. Because he understands that he stayed in [the military] because of the financial crisis that is going on in the economy so if I came to him and was like 'Hey I need a hundred or 2 hundred bucks' he doesn't ask any questions, he'll just [say] 'here you go, you coming to the bbq?'"

- **Online transfer resources** - Another source of support was the use of online transfer websites, such as Assist.org. Many participants turned to Assist.org when they were unable to get assistance on campus. It was described as a user-friendly website that allowed students to plan their transfer pathways.

"I would suggest like a really concise form on where to get all of your information like assist.org, just have all of that information on just one page where they can reference it."

What Campus Leaders Can Do - Participants provided insights into how campus leaders could best support other men of color at MiraCosta.

- **Address racial stereotypes through cultural competency training and hiring diverse faculty and staff** - Faculty and staff members should be aware of the challenges that men of color experience in their academic and personal lives. By understanding the challenges that men of color face, faculty members may be more cognizant of how to best engage and support men of color in and out of the classroom, as well as how to increase awareness of campus services that are needed to help men of color accomplish their academic goals. One participant suggested better preparing faculty who teach lower-level courses to work with their students.

"Maybe that is something that would be good advice for campus leaders to make sure that faculty members are more adequately trained as far as the resources particularly when they are teaching lower division courses."

Recommendation: Offer professional development for faculty on (1) the experiences and challenges of men of color in education and (2) utilizing culturally-relevant teaching and learning strategies.

- **Build authentic relationships with students** - Participants felt as though campus leaders did not take the time to understand their experiences and challenges. Students also desired opportunities to engage with and get to know campus leaders in ways that would help to enhance their academic experiences at MiraCosta.

"Honestly [campus leaders should] be conscious of what we have been through and what we still have to go through because there are a lot of people who are high rank and they don't think they are doing anything wrong by their undertones but they are.. But they don't know they are doing it because they don't bother to educate themselves, and even if we try to educate them they are not going to listen, and so it is just them as those in leadership positions taking time to understand us as we have taken time to understand them."

"Like nobody knows they exist and what they can actually do for the students or what they are supposed

to do for the students, like nobody knows until they actually have those interactions, ...that exposure like really helps in terms of like she is actually here for the students, she is actually like walking around talking to the students, she is here for us...there just needs to be more student interaction with these higher positions, because students don't know who they are at all other than what they read ... or see online..."

Recommendation: Provide opportunities—both formal and informal—for students and campus leaders to engage each other and to build relationships. Formal opportunities might consist of sharing their academic journey in a presentation. Informal opportunities could be eating with students in the student union.

- **Improve academic support services and encourage students to utilize them** - Students expressed a need for improving support services on campus to better serve the needs of men of color, particularly the counseling services and the career center. A concern students have with the services is the wait time to see a counselor. Students usually make the appointment at least two weeks in advance.

Yeah it just, those 2 resources being the counselor and the career center, just having more of that for the students because sometimes you do have to go by appointment and there has been appointments that have been 2 or 3 weeks maybe even a month that sometimes you don't have the time, it is not that you left it for the last minute it is just things happen.

Another student commented on the lack of visibility for pre-enrollment courses and the process.

Pre-enrollment process, that is just about what classes you're going to have to take, they don't have any classes or forms that are going to say this is how you navigate the system to be successful at Mira Costa.

Recommendations:

- Provide services that may be accessed online or via email or telephone
- Provide a pathway (or a visual map) of the required pre-enrollment courses for students.

- **Create a sense of community on campus to foster a sense of welcoming and belonging** - Students shared a need for reshaping the culture on campus and in the classroom to be more welcoming and inclusive. The following statement illustrated how the student viewed similarities between the campus and the classroom as divided spaces.

"Yeah I definitely say promote more of a sense of community, there is so much separation between students, even people who sit in classes who don't really know each other, unless the professor says okay we are going to get to know each other, you know, other than that you know it is like he is saying over here, you get in there classroom and if you're the only one which 9 times out of 10 I am, and people will just kind of create a barrier around you with desks, it is kind of like this unspoken ring and everybody just spreads everywhere else and people come in last and they are damn I got to sit [near you] -- you know."

Recommendation: Help faculty recognize the importance of creating conditions that enable students to build support amongst each other in ways that do not further marginalize men of color.

- **Reinforce academic deadlines for students in the classroom** - Although college deadlines are accessible, men of color are balancing their time between work, school, and family. With little time to check on deadlines, students expressed the need to have more reminders of deadlines within the classrooms. The deadlines range from in class assignments, add/drop classes, fees, transfer deadlines, etc.

"A simple reminder could help a lot within the classroom. So there is a lot of professors that just go out of their way, I mean they have no obligation to remind students like 'Hey don't forget the drop deadline.' Then you do see a lot of professors that are kind of like, 'Hey you guys are adults, you guys are big kids.' But also I mean it is community college we have to balance out of a lot of things so a simple reminder goes a long way. That is something that if the president could implement that would be good."

"Simple things like whether you're transferring or getting an associate's degree, there is still deadlines for you to

receive an associate's to put in your graduation class or the graduation petition."

Recommendations:

- Use mobile technologies and social media to send automated messages to students regarding key campus deadlines.
 - For classroom assignments, encourage faculty members and students to sign up for instant text messages on deadlines and updates through Blackboard.
- **Provide assistance (beyond financial aid) for students needing support with transportation, textbooks, and access to food** – During the focus groups, the participants indicated a need for support with transportation, textbooks, access to food, and other similar resources. For example, two of the students shared the following:

"I appreciate that the bus passes are at a reduced price for students."

"Add a meal plan to the financial aid package, that would definitely help, because the prices in that cafeteria are ridiculous. Ridiculous."

Recommendations:

- Maintain the discounts that are available to students for public transportation.
 - Partner with local grocery stores or restaurants within the community to support students who experience food insecurity by providing a food pantry.
 - Implement a low cost textbook rental program for students to access course materials—particularly early in the semester while students are awaiting financial aid disbursements.
- **Implement programs and services to assist non-traditional students and parents** - Many participants who identified as returning students, veterans, undocumented students, or parents expressed the need for specialized programs to serve their needs. These men enroll with different challenges, experiences, and needs. For example, in the first quote below the student mentioned colleges providing a care station for parents/guardians to leave their children while attending class. This is particularly important for parents who are enrolled in evening courses.

"Yeah. And also the whole daycare thing, I'm a single dad. My kids are out of school today and I had to find

a babysitter to watch my 2 boys and make sure what they were gonna charge is acceptable within my price range. I have papers to write, I have this to worry about, what about day care or babysitter for my child?"

Also as noted earlier, there is a need to address challenges and provide for student who identify as undocumented and for military veterans. Take everything else out and move quote to on racial identities.

Recommendation: Implement programs or have designated campus officials who will serves as the representative to serve the needs of veteran, undocumented, and other unique student populations.

CONCLUSION

The findings reported herein were derived from the qualitative component of a larger campus-based effort to improve student equity and success for men of color. These findings are not presented to be representative of a larger population of students at MiraCosta. Yet, the data were collected and analyzed in a way that will enable them to be transferable to the experiences of students whose profiles are reflective of those who participated in the inquiry. Decisions that are made based on these findings should be informed and leveraged by other institutional data sources and inquiry efforts—including insights that are gathered from other key campus constituents and stakeholders.