



Changing Deficit Narratives about Young Latino Men in Texas through a Research-Based Mentorship Program

EMMET E. CAMPOS, REBEKAH VAN RYN, AND TY J. DAVIDSON

Strong institutional partnerships led to the development of a research agenda and mentoring program for young Latino men that has yielded local results in Austin (TX) and scaled up to state and national networks.

I (Emmet Campos) became director of Project MALES¹ and the Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color in 2015, on the cusp of a transformative period for the project. Taking the helm at the end of our first phase of this Texas-based

initiative to serve male students of color, I had to hit the ground running. As we move into Consortium 2.0, the roller coaster ride shows no sign of easing.

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1. See <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/>.

Emmet E. Campos is the director of Project MALES and the Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color at the University of Texas, Austin. Rebekah Van Ryn is the principal of C.D. Fulkes Middle School in the Round Rock [Texas] Independent School District and former administrative supervisor in the Austin Independent School District Office of Teaching and Learning. Ty J. Davidson is the principal of Travis High School in the Austin Independent School District.

**PROJECT MALES:
ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL
CAUSES OF THE LATINO MALE
ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

When Project MALES began in 2008, little had been written about Latino male students and the growing achievement gap between Latino males and their peers. Although college access had increased nationally for Latina students at least since the 1980s and 1990s, males were falling precariously behind in high school graduation, persistence, and college graduation, and the gap was growing. Six out of ten college degrees that are earned by all Latinx students are earned by Latinas.² In addition to the moral imperative to address this issue, this trend, if not immediately addressed, will lead to dire consequences for U.S. workforce, given the expanding diversity of U.S. demographics.

In response to the growing racial and gender achievement gap for young men of color, and with special concern for Latino males, the University of Texas developed a research agenda that began with a Trellis Foundation (formerly TG) commissioned paper by Project MALES founders Victor Sáenz and Luis Ponjuán (2008) on Latino males in higher education that explored the multiple factors to address this troubling trend in higher education. They challenged the deficit-based thinking that dominated discussion of this issue, focusing attention on larger socio-cultural, structural factors that perpetuated the gap in Latino male college enrollment and degree attainment. One of the significant results of this paper was the birth of an idea that would positively impact the futures of young men of

color throughout the state of Texas at multiple scales. Joining the project when I did almost three years ago has positioned me to help the Project MALES/Consortium team to build on this foundation.

**LOCAL IMPACT: THE
MENTORING PROGRAM AT
TRAVIS EARLY COLLEGE HIGH
SCHOOL**

Five years ago, Sáenz approached William B. Travis Early College High School with an idea around mentoring young men of color in hopes of improving the matriculation and sustainability of this group in college by addressing the social, economic, and cultural obstacles impacting these young men. Austin Independent School District (AISD) and the University of Texas’s Project MALES began a partnership to design such a mentoring system.

Project MALES has become the cornerstone of our peer-mentoring program at Travis. Students in Project MALES receive guidance on topics consistent with other programs, such as attendance, grades, and social emotional development. But it is the shared sense of brotherhood, explicit focus on college and career readiness, and intentional development of these young men into leaders that establishes this program as unique in its effectiveness with our young men of color.

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2 See U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2013 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

Feeling Successful – and Being Successful

Every week, Project MALES mentors arrive at campus to mentor our students. Hours are spent breaking down barriers and discussing issues. We have built time periods called “Advocacy” into the school day for these discussions. Most of these young men come from low-income neighborhoods and Spanish-language dominant families. Critical mentoring approaches and social-emotional-based curricula are used to overcome the academic and emotional obstacles they face. Many students come from homes where poverty, mobility, increasing rental rates, taking in additional family members, and loss of jobs are recurring themes. Knowing this, the UT Austin undergraduate mentors who serve as role models are building leadership skills and resilience within our mentees. Students walk out of mentoring sessions with strategies on how to cope with change, be proactive at home, advocate for their learning, and find resources in the community.

Project MALES has also provided Travis Early College High School with a model to expand its mentoring program to include internal and peer mentoring. Middle and high school mentees are mentored by UT undergrads, who, in turn, are mentored by UT graduate students, who are mentored by staff and professors. This model has been recognized by former President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper Initiative, the STRIVE Network, *PBS NewsHour*, the *Atlantic*, and SXSWedu.

The partnership with Project MALES has led to positive outcomes for our students. Through telling their stories, these young men become advocates for themselves and emerge as leaders. They want to tell their stories, from our student who for the first time discussed

his sexuality and the effects of hiding his orientation, to another student who sat at the White House, next to basketball star Kevin Durant, and explained how his mentor helped save him from destroying his own life. Our young men feel they are successful – and they are. Perhaps most importantly, one of the biggest drivers of that success is accountability to their mentors and each other.

Positive outcomes show up in our data: increased average attendance for mentees from school year 2015-2016 to 2016-2017 was 5 percentage points. All senior students who returned to school and were part of the first mentee cohort applied to a post-secondary institution. We will monitor whether or not these students enroll in college at the end of the year. As mentoring programs have expanded over the past seven years, Travis Early College High School has increased its total student graduation rate by 40 percentage points for four-year cohort graduation.

Supporting Young Men to Meet Daunting Challenges

The trajectory of one young man in the Travis Early College High School mentoring program, Geraldo,³ illustrates the need the program addresses and the program’s impact. Geraldo entered high school having already dealt with difficulties with English, feelings of apathy toward school, a need to support his family, and the deportation of family members. As a freshman, he was working sixty hours a week, traveling back and forth to his home country to visit family members and provide money, and trying to keep a roof over his head and food in his stomach. He fell behind in class and into a spiral of absences.

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3 Pseudonym has been used.

After six weeks of sporadic attendance, he was approached about receiving a mentor.

In an introductory meeting, Geraldo was quiet and reserved, but opened up over the following year once he had someone to whom he could turn for help. His mentor used Advocacy not only to build a relationship, but also to discuss the real reasons why Gerardo was absent from school. Once those reasons became clear, the school provided support. Even with the fear of ICE deportations, his mother's decision to go back to her home country, and a full-time job, Geraldo is passing every class, is on track to graduate, and has maintained a 97 percent attendance rate for over fourteen months. His story is not unique – there are hundreds of Geraldos at Travis Early College High School. We just need to find the time to mentor them and provide the support they need.

An Impact That Reaches Beyond One School

Project MALES is a crucial component to the educational success of Travis ECHS male students. Yet the impact of this program goes beyond Travis ECHS to provide systemic support for young men of color at multiple levels of the educational journey. The undergraduate college male students who partner with our high school and middle school students are enrolled in a college credit service-learning course that counts toward their degree program. In this IMPACT class, UT undergraduates are introduced to the literature on males of color in K–12 and higher education and to cutting-edge mentoring approaches geared to this population. Along with fall and spring semester mentor retreats, *pláticas*,⁴ and other forms of training, this class creates an ongoing system to support the mentoring program.

Looking at the long-term impacts of educational support for men of color, we cannot fail to acknowledge the need of our college students to receive support themselves. UT undergrads and graduate students participating in Project MALES also receive mentoring to ensure they succeed academically. This intentional multi-generational approach to mentorship ensures that the program is sustainable, systematic, and successful. Former high school mentees are now moving up the chain to serve as mentors themselves.

STATE IMPACT: SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The partnership between UT Austin and AISD to address systemic barriers to college for young men of color began with developing a research agenda focused on Latino males, then with an intentional mentoring program at one high school campus and now at multiple campuses and school districts. More recently, the work has expanded to address statewide concerns through a regional and state-wide network.

Just before the 2016 Texas Male Student Leadership Summit,⁵ The Advisory Council for the Consortium⁶ met to discuss how to sustain and institutionalize their work to create systems that promote success for our male students of color. The Project

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4 *Pláticas* are a Project MALES monthly speaker series for our UT undergraduate and graduate mentors. We invite members of the local East Austin or university communities to discuss topical issues and to share their personal experiences as mentors and/or mentees.

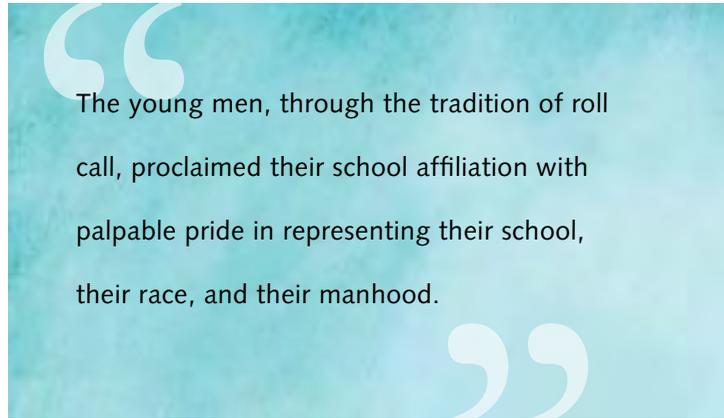
5 See <http://diversity.utexas.edu/txedconsortium/ut-male-student-leadership-summit/>.

6 See <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/texas-education-consortium-for-male-students-of-color/> and <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/about/>.

MALES research team is also developing tools and activities to be shared online to build institutional capacity, based on findings from two years of site visits at its seventeen charter institutions (the original founding members of the Consortium). We concluded the Council meeting with a shared sense of purpose and an intentional plan in hand to support replication of these practices. Empowered to influence this issue through a regional and state-wide network, we moved on to the opening ceremonies of the Summit.

As our Master of Ceremonies called out the name of each participating institution, the young men stood and, through the tradition of roll call, proclaimed their school affiliation with palpable pride in representing their school, their race, and their manhood. They went on to attend breakout sessions on brotherhood, leadership, college-career readiness, and health and wellness; heard inspirational messages from fellow successful men of color; and broadened their network to continue the systemic change at their home campuses. One young man embraced the concept of Restorative Circles and reflected on how he could bring those practices back to his college. Other students connected with mentors on financial management, filmmakers telling the story of immigrants, and other positive male role models.

The annual Student Leadership Summit continues to empower, inspire, and support young men of color and the adults who are committed to their success. In August 2017, a week after the horrific displays of racism in Charlottesville, Virginia, we united around the theme of “Brotherhood” – not only for young men of color, but for humanity fighting for a common cause. Each participant, in the shared endeavor of creating systems of empowerment to ensure equity for men



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of color, walked away with at least one thing they can personally do differently to continue this work in their own sphere of influence.

In addition to the annual Student Leadership Summit in Austin, the Consortium partners also attend Consortium Institutes around the state twice a year, in which administrators, faculty, and staff network, listen to expert presenters, and receive professional training. Starting in 2017, regional Male Student Leadership Summits led by local Consortium partners have convened around the state. Consortium members can also access new capacity building tools and activities developed in partnership with research institutions.

In one example of this partnership, the research team at Texas A&M University shared research findings with Austin Independent School District (AISD) from its AISD site visit related to four interdependent components, identified by research teams at UT and Texas A&M, of a broader system impacting the high school academic experience – transitioning to college, academic experiences, school engagement, and degree completion. Failure to provide intervention in any one directly results in a negative impact in at least one of the others.

A total of sixteen institutional site reports have been prepared by the Project MALES research team based on site visits with founding charter member schools, and a summary report that captures findings across all schools will be published in fall 2018. This research will be developed into tools and services that will be shared with other Consortium members. This, again, is the power of the Consortium: institutions representing three educational sectors – school districts, community colleges, and universities – sharing responsibility for the systemic change to better support our young men of color.

RAISING AWARENESS ACROSS THE NATION: THE FRUITS OF A DECADE OF WORK

Almost a decade following the initial call in Sáenz and Ponjuán’s paper, we are beginning to see the fruits of that initial provocation on Latino male research. In fact, that research agenda has now grown nationally under the auspices of Project MALES, an ambitious research-based action project housed in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. While the research agenda is focused specifically on Latino males in K–12 and higher education, the Division’s two other initiatives serve males in both of the two larger demographics in Texas: Latinx and African American communities. These three initiatives are integrally linked, informing the work of each. They are aligned with principles of critical narrative change, (moving beyond hopeless, criminalized, and deficit misrepresentations of boys and men of color) and gender-specific

focus, as well as the implementation of culturally relevant and inclusive practices.

The research agenda has now evolved into the Project MALES Research Institute. The Institute is made up of two research teams at UT Austin and Texas A&M University, led by Victor Sáenz and Luis Ponjuán, respectively, and the Project MALES Faculty and Research Affiliates program, a network of thirty-four researchers (and growing) across the country. The Institute focuses on understanding the experiences of Latino and African American male students across the education pipeline. Through research publications, policy and research reports, and presentations at national and regional conferences and meetings, Project MALES now brings awareness and attention nationally to the experiences and successes of male students of color and especially Latino males.

The Institute is able to raise the visibility of research on male students of color and seeks to become the premiere Latino male-focused research center in the country. The Research Institute continues to grow and further institutionalized its work in January 2018, when, for the first time, it convened all thirty-plus scholars from the Affiliates program and the UT Austin and Texas A&M research teams at its inaugural 2018 Symposium for Faculty and Research Affiliates at UT Austin.⁷ This exciting new development was made possible by the generous support of RISE BMOC, a national initiative led by Shaun Harper at the University of Southern California, and the Greater Texas Foundation.

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⁷ See <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/?s=symposium+for+faculty+and+research+affiliates>.

The importance cannot be overstated of collaboration and networking between major initiatives like President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative, the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (COSEBOC), and MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, among others, that are national in scope and focused on addressing the needs of males of color in K–12 and higher education. By fostering collaboration across various educational sectors, mentoring programs, and local, state and national initiatives focused on boys and men of color, practice-based research programs like Project MALES are providing some of the answers needed to sustain structural and systemic change for the futures of young men of color.

REFERENCE

- Sáenz, V., and L. Ponjuán. 2008. “The Vanishing Latino Male in Higher Education,” *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education Online* (December 11), <http://diversity.utexas.edu/projectmales/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Journal-of-Hispanic-Higher-Education-2008-Saenz.pdf>.