Establishing a research center: The minority male community college collaborative (M2C3)

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This chapter describes the establishment of the Minority Male Community College Collaborative (M2C3), a research and practice center at San Diego State University. M2C3 partners with community colleges across the United States to enhance access, achievement, and success among men of color. This chapter begins with a description of the national trends and concerns that led to the center’s focus on supporting the capacity of community colleges to address challenges facing historically underrepresented and underserved men, particularly men of color. Next, the chapter describes the concepts of “equity-mindedness” and “institutional responsibility” that informed the conceptualization of the center’s intervention approach. Guided by these concepts, partnerships advanced by institutional assessment tools such as the Community College Survey of Men (CCSM), the Community College Insights Protocol (CCIP), and the Community College Student Success Inventory (CCSSI) are described.

Establishing a Research Center: The Minority Male Community College Collaborative (M2C3)

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In Fall 2011, the Minority Male Community College Collaborative (M2C3) was established at San Diego State University’s Interwork Institute. M2C3 is a national research and practice center that partners with community colleges to enhance their capacity to support the success of historically underserved men, particularly men of color. Since its founding, the center has partnered with over 100 community colleges across the nation. This chapter describes the establishment and functions of M2C3, beginning with a description of the national trends and concerns that led to the center’s development. Also described is the epistemological perspectives employed by M2C3 to support institutional research professionals in gathering inquiry-driven evidence that promote equity mindedness and institutional responsibility.
The Rationale for a National Center

There are numerous factors that led to the creation of M2C3. Chief among these were (a) glaring outcome disparities between men of color and their peers, (b) limited research on community college men, (c) ineffective practices shaped by perspectives from the literature on 4-year institutions, (d) a lack of attentiveness to non-Black men of color, (e) inadequate employment of assessment for interventions targeting men of color, and (f) inadequate attention on the role of identity in student success.

Across the nation, scholars and practitioners are increasingly concerned about outcome disparities between men of color and their peers. With the use of data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal study, Wood, Harris, and Xiong (2014) found that only 17.1% of Black men and 15.4% of Latino men earned a certificate or degree, or transferred from a community college to a 4-year institution within a 3-year time frame as compared to 27% of White men. In addition, Wood and colleagues found variances by full- and part-time enrollment. Although 38.6% of full-time White men completed their goals in 3 years, only 26.1% of Black and 20.3% of Latino men did so. Similar patterns are evident for mixed (full and part time) enrollment students. Among these, 15% of Black and 15.2% of Latino men achieved their goals in 3 years, the rate nearly doubled for White men at 29.7%. Subsequent scholarship has found that Pacific Islander, Native American, and Southeast Asian (e.g., Hmong, Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese) men have experiences and outcomes on par with Black and Latino men (Wood & Harris, 2014; Wood, Harris, & Mazyck, 2015).

When M2C3 was founded in 2011, research specific to men of color in community colleges was woefully lacking. Although barriers to the success of boys and men of color in education had been rigorously explicated by scholars (Allen, 1986; Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Davis, 2003; Davis & Palmer, 2010; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009), the vast majority was focused on Black boys in K–12 education, Black men in historically Black colleges and universities, and Black high-achieving and gifted males (Wood & Palmer, 2014). In fact, although hundreds of studies had been published on males of color in education, only a handful had focused on the community college context (Wood & Hilton, 2012). This was concerning, given that community colleges serve as the primary pathway into postsecondary education for men of color (Wood, Palmer, & Harris, 2015). Moreover, the literature on men of color focused almost exclusively on Black males, overlooking other historically underrepresented populations including Latino, Native American, Pacific Islander, and Southeast Asian men. Thus, the educational realities of these men lacked appropriate understanding.

Given the national void of literature on men of color in the community college, research and policy efforts were generally guided by the 4-year
literature base on these men. However, there are significant differences between men of color in community colleges and 4-year institutions that severely inhibit the utility of 4-year college research and theories (Wood, 2011). Black men in community colleges are more likely to be older, have dependents, be independent, and have delayed enrollment into postsecondary education. They are less likely to have higher degree aspirations or to have completed high school coursework in foreign language, mathematics, and science. These differences led Wood (2013) to assert that Black men in community colleges are “the same, but different” from their 4-year counterparts. As such, the application of research on 4-year collegiate men to community college men is a core barrier to the success of male initiatives in community colleges (Wood, 2013).

In addition to the challenges of applicability, these initiatives often lacked in adequate assessment, evaluation, and institutional support. Many efforts lack data to inform the programmatic designs or to demonstrate greater outcomes for their target populations beyond anecdotal stories from a handful of men (Wood & Harris, 2015a). Programs are often eliminated because it is difficult to establish and/or align program and student learning outcomes with data demonstrating their effectiveness (Wood & Harris, 2015a). In addition to gathering program-level data, some campuses lack institutional buy-in and support (Wood & Harris, 2015b) from campus leaders. As such, key stakeholders did not prioritize opportunities for collaboration between program staff and institutional research offices, resulting in a lack of program needs- or outcomes-based assessments (Wood & Harris, 2015a).

Furthermore, many campuses employing male initiatives did not account for the fact that men of color often have salient identities as men, which greatly influence their success in college (Harris, 2010; Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013; Wood & Harris, 2015a). The role of men as breadwinners, their apprehension to seek help, perceptions of competition and achievement, as well as views of school as a domain more suited for the success of women than men, greatly affect outcomes for college men of color (Harris & Harper, 2008). Also of critical importance, efforts designed to enhance success for community college men of color were solely student focused. Campuses employed mentoring programs and life-skills workshops, efforts that are notoriously difficult to scale (Wood & Harris, 2015a). Campuses typically did little, if anything, to build the capacity of faculty, advisors, tutors, and other staff to educate men of color (Wood & Harris, 2015b). As a result, the focus of these interventions reinforced a perspective among educators that students were solely to blame for outcome disparities.

M2C3 was established given the issues facing research and practices for community college men of color. In the next section, we delineate the epistemological orientation informing the M2C3 intervention design.
Epistemological Foundations of M2C3

M2C3’s research and practice design is informed by the work of Dr. Estela Mara Bensimon. Bensimon is Professor of Higher Education and Co-Director of the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at the University of Southern California. Her research addresses racial inequities in postsecondary education through the perspective of organizational learning. In this vein, CUE partners with colleges and universities to use data, benchmarking, and inquiry processes to highlight and redress identified disparities. Frank Harris III, prior to serving as the founding Co-Director of M2C3, served as the Associate Director of CUE under Bensimon. This experience served to shape the core epistemological foundations of M2C3.

To inculcate equity perspectives among educational scholars, Bensimon established the Equity and Critical Policy Institutes. The Institutes sought to train emerging scholars from the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) on how to reorient quantitative qualitative and policy research to address educational equity. Both Harris and Wood participated in several of these Institutes, providing them with formalized training in the concepts of equity-mindedness and institutional responsibility.

Equity-mindedness is a “multi-dimensional theoretical construct derived from concepts of fairness, social justice, and human agency ... [by] achieving equal educational outcomes for college students from racial and ethnic groups that have a history of enslavement, colonization, or oppression” (Bensimon, Rueda, Dowd, & Harris, 2007, p. 32). Educators who are equity-minded recognize practices that are exclusionary, and are aware of institutional racism and how power inequities produce disparate outcomes for students (Bensimon, 2007). Guided by this awareness, equity-minded scholars assume that the origin of disparate outcomes is primarily constructed by institutional breakdowns rather than student deficiencies. As such, equity-minded scholars are informed by the concept of institutional responsibility, where educators take ownership for inequities and concentrate on factors within their power to counter institutional deficits. Notions of equity-mindedness and institutional responsibility chiefly inform the functions of M2C3.

Given the focus on institutional responsibility as informed by organizational learning, M2C3 has also adopted a systems-theory perspective. Guided by the words of W. Edward Deming, who suggested that, “every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results that it gets,” M2C3 aims to support educators, leaders, and institutional researchers in applying this notion to their specific contexts. M2C3 regularly highlights this quote, asking individuals to consider how every system, every college, every department, and every classroom are perfectly designed to achieve the results they get.
Establishing A Research Center

Functions of M2C3

M2C3 was established with the vision of becoming the national hub for research and practice focused on historically underrepresented and underserved men in community colleges. Guided by this vision, the M2C3 Co-Directors sought insights from highly regarded national scholars who could shed light on how to establish a research center. Many conversations involved how to obtain fiscal viability to operate a center. One national scholar recommended a funding model that avoided reliance on grant resources. This model included arranging direct service contracts with institutions, which would allow for greater focus on their individual needs.

Much discussion also focused on the name of M2C3, the Minority Male Community College Collaborative. In general, scholars have shifted away from the use of the term minority, which can serve to “other” and diminish the importance of communities of color. However, within the community college context, most programs and initiatives serving men of color were called minority male initiatives (MMIs). As a result, M2C3 was named with the intent of communicating to MMI leaders that M2C3 was created to serve their needs. The “mission of the collaborative is to develop knowledge and advance promising practices that enhance access, achievement and success among men who have been historically underrepresented and underserved in postsecondary education” (Minority Male Community College Collaborative, 2015). Three primary functions—assessment, capacity development, and research—were organized around this mission.

Assessment

The focus of M2C3’s assessment and evaluation agenda is informed by the data versus inquiry paradigm espoused by Bensimon. Under the data paradigm, institutional researchers are tasked with collecting disaggregated data that reveal equity gaps between students of color and their peers. Such findings then prompt college leaders and other stakeholders to engage solutions that are based upon the research literature or what has taken place in other locales. Yet, given the limitations of the research agenda on community college men of color, the data paradigm inhibits the ability of institutional leaders to advance outcomes for these male collegians.

Juxtaposed to the data paradigm, Bensimon argues that colleges should engage an inquiry paradigm. In this paradigm, interventions are informed by institutional-level data that provide insight into the equity gaps specific to the campus. Inquiry can be multifaceted in nature, comprised interviews, focus groups, surveys, self-assessments, and other data sources that encompass all institutional actors (e.g., students, faculty, and staff). Based upon these data, college leaders can then engage in meaningful dialogue about designing solutions to address equity gaps unique to the
socio-cultural-political context of their campus. Further, evaluation of the inquiry-informed solutions is necessary to determine effectiveness, as well as to identify areas of improvement.

M2C3 has created a litany of instruments designed to inform the development of interventions for men of color and to assess their effectiveness. Chief among these instruments is the Community College Survey of Men (CCSM), recently renamed the Community College Success Measure (still the CCSM). This instrument is an institutional-level needs assessment tool that identifies factors influencing the success of college men of color. The CCSM design was informed by the published research on college men (e.g., Dancy & Brown, 2012; Harper & Harris, 2010, 2012; Harris, 2010; Harris & Harper, 2008; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2011) and more specifically, the research literature on community college men of color (e.g., Bush & Bush, 2005, 2010; Sáenz et al., 2013; Wood, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Wood & Essien-Wood, 2012; Wood, Hilton, & Lewis, 2011).

The CCSM is administered in randomly selected classes with an oversampling of developmental education courses where men of color are often concentrated. Partnering colleges receive a report that includes descriptive statistics, within-group analyses, and predictive analytics. Within-group analyses consist of a presentation of the CCSM’s items and scales based on predetermined thresholds of being acceptable, concerning, or an area of immediate intervention. These classifications were derived from threshold scores established from prior inquiry across 60 community colleges with the use of data from 12,000 men. Thresholds termed acceptable represent instances where less than 20% of respondents indicate a level of dissatisfaction or frequency of “never” across response categories. Instances greater than 20% are termed concerning, and those indicating 30% or above are termed area of immediate intervention. The final section of the report includes predictive analyses that model faculty items and scales on faculty–student interactions; noncognitive outcomes on students’ action control (i.e., focus in school); and student services factors on their use of services on campus.

An extensive amount of M2C3 efforts are dedicated to assessing and enhancing the psychometric properties of the CCSM and other instruments. For instance, the CCSM was validated across a sample of 12,000 men in eight states, over 2 years, in three distinct phases. These activities are discussed further in the Research section. In addition to the CCSM, M2C3 has created other instruments, including (a) the Community College Student Success Inventory (CCSSI), an institutional self-assessment tool for determining an institution’s readiness to facilitate successful outcomes for men of color; (b) the Male Program Assessment of College Excellence (M-PACE), an outcomes-based assessment tool for programs and initiatives serving men of color; (c) the Community College Insights Protocol (CCIP), a focus-group protocol for understanding the perceptions and experiences of students that shape their outcomes in college settings; and (d) the Community College Instructional Development Inventory
Due to the (CC-IDI), an institutional level inventory to inform professional development programming for instructional faculty who teach underserved students.

M2C3 assessment partnerships with colleges are intensive in nature, often involving quantitative and qualitative data collection, as well as intensive professional development activities based on the assessment results. Such partnerships serve to support often overburdened institutional research offices with the inquiry needed to guide equity-focused efforts. Meta-level insights gleaned from these activities also serve to inform the capacity development of M2C3, which is discussed in the next section.

**Capacity Development**

Supporting the capacity of community colleges to advance student success outcomes for men of color has been a principal objective of M2C3. Recognizing that few practitioners have the time to read peer-reviewed journal articles, we found it critical to provide information to college professionals in a manner that was flexible and accessible to them. As a result, M2C3 established a rigorous schedule of webinars that addresses an array of topics focused on men of color. The first webinar was hosted in April of 2014 and was titled, “Men of Color in the Community College: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities.” The webinar, attended by over 250 participants, resulted in an increased organizational focus on this communication medium. Between July 2014 and December of 2014, M2C3 hosted three more webinars, addressing (a) the design and implementation of minority male initiatives, (b) teaching and learning strategies for men of color, and (c) a session on how to use the Community College Student Success Inventory (CCSSI). Webinar participation quickly grew, averaging over 1,200 participants across 250 to 300 community college sites. Many community colleges began showing the webinars in large rooms filled with faculty and staff concerned about improving outcomes for men of color.

When M2C3 begin in 2011, the organization set out to actualize a national consortium focused on community college men. However, given the extensive time demands of validating instruments, the consortium was not formalized until February of 2015, when M2C3 launched the National Consortium on College Men of Color (NCCMC). The consortium was organized via a member-college design, in which colleges interested in innovative practices and policies for addressing the achievement of underrepresented men could join. Consortium colleges receive access to M2C3 webinars, participate in information-sharing sessions on promising practices, can engage in conversations on strategic equity efforts using the member-only virtual discussion board, and attend an annual working group meeting in San Diego, CA. At the working group, individuals participate in a 2-day program designed to engage cross-institutional conversations and prepare action plans for strategic equity efforts.
Several key national organizations and associations became partners with M2C3 in support of the NCCMC. These affiliates include Community College League of California (CCLC), League of Innovation in the Community College, American College Personnel Association (ACPA), Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE), and African American Male Education Network and Development (A2MEND). These partner organizations provide insight on prospective topics to be discussed during webinars and information-sharing sessions, participate in consortium activities, and help to expand the reach of the consortium. For example, ACPA has made all consortium webinar recordings available through the ACPA on-demand website, so that student affairs practitioners in colleges and universities can benefit from the content. All M2C3 partners have been integral to the success of the consortium and the expansion of the network of partner colleges.

Recognizing that some colleges were apprehensive about joining the consortium due to internal and local campus politics, the webinar series has remained free and open to all individuals who want to attend. Under the consortium banner, five webinars have taken place, addressing topics such as counseling and advising men of color, assessing initiatives serving men of color, using the M-PACE for outcome assessment, equity-based strategic planning, and narratives of men who successfully transferred from the community college. In addition, the NCCMC hosts webinars scheduled at least once a month on topics raised by member colleges and affiliate partners. Currently, there are 67 member colleges of the NCCMC. In addition, thousands of community college professionals participate in the webinar series, which now average participation of 600 to 650 college sites per webinar. Although capacity development activities are primarily advanced through the NCCMC, M2C3 also provides on-campus professional development training for issues relevant to men of color. Moreover, the M2C3 website houses a free virtual warehouse on scholarly publications that address men of color in community colleges. This includes links to books, peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, reports, popular press articles, and other key publications.

Research

As previously noted, prior to the founding of M2C3, only a handful of studies had been published on men of color in the community college. M2C3 has greatly expanded the literature base; now, there are 61 articles, books, book chapters, and reports accessible through the virtual warehouse. Of these, the majority (66%) have been written by M2C3 staff or students, whose research is primarily informed by the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) model, as articulated by Wood et al. (2014) and Wood, Harris, and White (2015).
The SEO model postulates that four interrelated domains influence the success of men of color in college; these are noncognitive, academic, environmental, and campus ethos outcomes. The noncognitive domain is comprised of two sets of factors: (a) intrapersonal factors that depict students’ psychosocial outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy, degree utility, locus of control, action control, intrinsic interest) and (b) identity outcomes that focus on racial and gender identities (with a specific focus on breadwinner orientation, help-seeking, and perceptions of school as a feminine domain) as well as other salient identities (e.g., spiritual, sexual).

The academic domain is comprised factors commonly associated with campus involvement, including interactions with faculty and staff, as well as the use of student services. The environmental domain captures factors that occur outside of college that influence student success inside of college, including familial responsibility, transportation, employment, stressful life events, and similar considerations. The last domain, campus ethos, examines campus climate and culture, with a focus on validation from faculty and staff, perceptions of belonging from faculty, perceptions of being welcome to engage in and out of class, and other ethos factors. As articulated by Wood et al. (2015), the campus ethos and environmental domains are perceived as having an influence on the noncognitive and academic domains. A bidirectional relationship between the noncognitive and academic domains is also evident. Altogether, the interaction among these domains is perceived as having an influence on student success outcomes (e.g., persistence, achievement, attainment, transfer). This model has enabled the team to focus intently on the role of intrapersonal factors (e.g., self-efficacy, degree utility, locus of control), identity, and campus ethos on student success outcomes. Aggregate data from the CCSM and MPACE serve as apt sources for secondary research; however, large data sets such as the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study and Educational Longitudinal Study have also provided key insights.

Holistically, the M2C3 research agenda centers on factors that influence student success outcomes for men of color. The capacity development activities (particularly through the consortium) and assessment work of M2C3 often frame new research trajectories. This enables M2C3 to produce scholarship that informs practice and to enable practice that informs scholarship. The focus on men of color has been most intensive around Black, Latino, and Southeast Asian men (because of the research interests of individual team members). A number of M2C3 publications have also focused on evaluations of the psychometric properties of M2C3 assessment tools (e.g., De la Garza, Wood, & Harris, 2015; Harris & Wood, 2014; Wood & Harris, 2014). Prior to release, all M2C3 tools are rigorously validated for face, content, construct, predictive and confirmatory validity; and scale reliability. Given the focus on within-racial/ethnic group analyses, construct validity and scale reliability must be demonstrated for multiple racial/ethnic groups. As a result, validation efforts require an extensive dedication of time.
and resources, especially in consideration that most M2C3 instruments are given to colleges for use free of charge.

Although M2C3 is primarily staffed by faculty and graduate researchers, there is also great value and attention placed on the need to train the next generation of equity-minded scholars in education. Motivated by this notion, M2C3 operates the Aztec Research Fellowship Program (ARFP). The ARFP is an undergraduate fellowship program for students who are interested in researching issues relevant to men of color in community colleges. Most program fellows have formerly attended community colleges; all fellows attend SDSU. Fellows are fully integrated into the M2C3 research team, receiving coaching on methods of inquiry. At the end of each year, ARFP participants present their research at conferences and have opportunities to publish their results in peer-reviewed research journals. Advancing the next generation of scholars is critical to ensuring that the momentum gained within the past few years on college men of color continues to grow.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, the authors described the national trends and concerns that led to M2C3’s focus on supporting the capacity of community colleges to address challenges facing historically underrepresented and underserved men, particularly men of color. The chapter also described the concepts of equity-mindedness and institutional responsibility that informed the conceptualization of the center’s intervention approach. Guided by these concepts, an overview of the assessment, capacity-development, and research functions of M2C3 were described. Particular attention was given to M2C3 partnerships that are advanced by institutional assessment tools, such as the Community College Survey of Men (CCSM), the Community College Insights Protocol (CCIP), and the Community College Student Success Inventory (CCSSI). These tools enable M2C3 to understand better the complexity of challenges facing college men of color. Furthermore, M2C3 seeks to continue its collaborative efforts with partner colleges, whose campus leaders and institutional research offices play a critical role in facilitating equity-focused strategies to support male students of color in community college.

References


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