

## ***Urban African American Male High School Students' Educational Aspirations for College: The Influence of Family, School and Peers***

*Kimberly A. Grieve*  
*Lourdes College*

The college choice process for high school students is complicated, and interwoven by factors such as the family, school, and peers. While much is known about the choice process, there is a gap in the research regarding African American students', especially males', decision-making for postsecondary education. Little attention has been given to African American males for solving educational problems; most of the attention has been documenting that there is a problem (McGuire, 2005). Few studies have focused on minority students and their decisions to attend postsecondary education. Smith and Fleming (2006) point out the college choice frameworks that scholars have developed to describe high school students are from the perspective of White students. Hossler, Schmidt and Vesper (1999) agree that "special attention may need to be given to African American males because the factors that influence their aspirations are less certain" (p. 29). When these researchers examined urban African American males, they were the least successful in predicting what influenced their postsecondary aspirations.

Currently, while higher education researchers and the public are noting the disturbing decline in the percentage of males attending college (King, 2006; Mortenson, 2006), urban minority male students are not attending college at the same rate as other males (Freeman, 1997; NCES, 2005). Since educating the growing population of African American males for active participation in the twenty-first century workforce is important for our country's future, research on the factors that affect urban minority male high school students' postsecondary aspirations is very important. The educational plight of African American males is troubling in American society, including schools, the criminal system, and the workplace (Jackson & Moore III, 2008). Men, especially African American men, are lagging behind women in college attendance. This phenomenon has been building over the last decade and must be addressed by secondary school educators, counselors, administrators, postsecondary educators and policymakers as they strive to meet the challenges of high school graduation and postsecondary participation for urban male students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Previous research has shown there are three critical tasks on the path to college. These include acquiring the academic qualifications, earning a high school diploma, and applying for and enrolling in an institution of higher education (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). The purpose of this research is to examine the major influences affecting urban male African American students' accomplishment of these critical tasks. The key variables researchers have identified as influencing educational aspirations are family, school, and peer variables. This study will

examine how these variables affect educational aspirations for college of urban African American male high school students. While there is a body of literature on factors affecting educational aspirations, (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; King, 2002; NPEC, 2007) as well as a body of literature on factors affecting urban education and minority students' education (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Kao & Tienda, 1988; Jackson & Moore III, 2008; Moore III, Heinfield, & Owens, 2008), there is still very little research on how educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students are affected by family, school, and peer variables. "More research is needed to inform policy and practice to improve the conditions of education for African American males" (Jackson & Moore III, 2006, p. 203).

### **Significance of the Study**

If America is going to continue to be an economic leader in a global society, it will be important to college educate an increasing percentage of young Americans. This means educating our growing population of urban African American male students and increasing their preparedness and aspirations. To do so requires an understanding of the issues affecting African American male high school students' college educational aspirations and the disparity in college-going rates. Examining the effects of family, school, and peers on African American male urban high school students' college educational aspirations is the first step in developing strategies for meeting the challenges of high school graduation and postsecondary attendance. Currently, research on African American males is both "limited and disjointed" and does not look at the educational outcome of African American males (Jackson & Moore III, 2006). The goal of this research is to inform secondary administrators and policy makers of necessary changes to meet the challenge of increasing graduation and postsecondary attendance of urban male African American students.

### *Review of Related Literature*

According to Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) and Hanson and Litten (1981), research has demonstrated that college choice is most influenced by parents, and then the other influences are counselors, peers and teachers. This research will test the strength of the relationships between these variables in order to look at the most effective areas for intervention to increase urban male African American high school students' educational aspirations. Previous research has focused on White students and not the experiences and challenges of minority, low-income, and urban students (Smith & Fleming, 2006; Kao & Tienda, 1998). In 2005, the topic of African American males' education surfaced as a concern once again (Jackson & Moore III, 2008). Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Suh (2002), when looking at Gates Millennial Scholars, found that "urban, low-income students of color encounter unique challenges gaining access to rigorous academic courses, adequate educational resources, quality instruction, early college counseling, and other college prerequisites" (p. 2).

The conceptual framework for this study will be the college choice model by Hossler and Stage (1992), which includes three stages: the predisposition, search, and choice stage. According to Hossler and Stage (1992), the predisposition stage is when students determine whether they will continue to go to school past high school graduation; the search stage is when students begin to gather information about colleges, and decide on a "choice set" of college to

which they will apply; the choice stage is deciding on the actual college the student will attend. This study will look at the predisposition stage. The predisposition stage takes place from 7th-10th grade, so students and their parents can make plans for high school, since the possibility of college attendance depends on a college track curriculum, good grades, and extracurricular activities in high school. According to Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) during middle school, students need to make plans to attend college and then follow through with a rigorous academic curriculum, graduate from high school, and apply for college. King (2006) stated that the gender gap has increased the most since 2000 for low-income, traditional-aged students. Some of the reasons that King (2006) finds for the gender gap are: the media, where male role models tend to be athletes and musicians sending the message that you do not have to work hard in school to be cool. Also, maturation rates are slower for boys, thus they have difficulty meeting school requirements; and boys are being diagnosed with attention deficit disorder more often than girls.

There is not a generalized educational crisis among men, but there are areas of real problems. In particular, “African-American, Hispanic and low-income males lag behind their female peers in terms of educational attainment and are far outpaced by white, Asian-American, and middle-class men and women” (King, 2006, p. 1). King (2006) acknowledges that females outnumber males across all racial groups, but it is most pronounced for African Americans. Smith and Fleming (2006) acknowledge that a “clear majority of the African American college students are female” (p. 71). Even wealthy African American males lag behind academically (McGuire, 2005; Moore III, Henfield & Owens, 2008). Ogbu (2003) pointed out that African American high school student low performance has been due to inferior school resources and a lack of parent involvement. Freeman’s (1997) research students offered the following suggestions to increase African American participation in college: “improve school conditions, provide interested teachers and active counselors, instill possibilities early, and expand cultural awareness” (p. 530).

### *Family*

Another important factor in encouraging educational aspirations of high school students is parental encouragement. Previous research has concluded that parents have a strong influence when it comes to preparing and promoting college attendance (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000 & 2001; Stage & Hossler, 1992; Tierney, 2002). Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) reported that parental education had a stronger influence on educational aspirations than socio-economic status (SES) or student ability. Parental encouragement is a two-fold process according to Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) and Stage and Hossler (1989). First, parents need to have high educational expectations, and they must participate in school functions, and discuss the importance of college attendance with their children. To understand the effects of parents on current students, it is necessary to discuss the millennial generation. According to Elam, Stratton, and Gibson (2007), parents of the millennial generation are said to be aggressively protective of their students and play an active role in the children’s educational experience. This is not necessarily the case for low-income students. In a study conducted by the University of California Los Angeles Higher Education Research Institute, as part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), found that minority students reported that their parents were not involved enough in choosing a college.

The millennial generation is characterized by “helicopter parents.” However, urban low-income students often do not fit the profile of the millennial generation. They do not necessarily have “helicopter parents.” According to Tierney (2002), in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the definition of a family is distinctly different than the definition of family in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was the typical nuclear family: mother, father, and children. In low-income urban families, the definition of family has changed even more dramatically. It takes both schools and families to work together to make college a reality for their students. When parents and teachers hold high expectations for African American students they have higher educational aspirations (Flowers, Milner & Moore III, 2003). African American students depend on support from teachers and parents to increase academic achievement (Douglas, 2006). Urban high school students often have the same educational aspirations for college, but lack the rigorous academic curriculum in high school.

Another issue affecting college attendance of minority students is the lack of knowledge of how to finance their college education. “Obtaining financial aid can be especially difficult for first-generation, low-income students because of the cultural differences and parents lack of knowledge about the financial aid process” (Lake, 2008, p. 1). Test preparation and academics get most of the attention, with little attention being paid to teaching students strategies to finance their education. Unfortunately, many high schools do not teach families how to apply for financial aid or financial literacy.

### *Academic/School*

Holzman (2006) noted that Black male students usually attend racially segregated high schools, earn lower scores on national assessments, are suspended and expelled more often, and are assigned to special education courses more than White males; therefore, Black male students are unlikely to attend college. African American males are more likely to be suspended from school than any other group (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1998). Thus, African American males lag behind Caucasian males academically (Jackson & Moore III, 2008). Urban high school students often have the same educational aspirations for college, but lack the rigorous academic curriculum in high school. It is imperative that both students and counselors are aware of the need to enroll in a rigorous high school curriculum in order to be prepared for college. Literature discusses the importance of the academic rigor of the high school curriculum as one of the best predictors of success in college (Adelman, 2006; King, 2006). Hossler, Schmidt, and Vesper (1999) found that a student’s academic ability and the school environment and resources that are available are factors that affect the predisposition stage. Likewise, Way and Robinson (2003) found that schools influence student academic achievement, goals, and the psychological well-being more than family or friends of minority, low SES students.

According to Obidah, Christie, and McDonough (2004) college access is reliant on parental influence, plans to attend college as early as junior high school, a rigorous college preparatory curriculum and adequately equipped classrooms and teachers and other staff that encourage college attendance. Obidah et al. (2004) posit that this is not the picture of urban schools across the nation. Engle, Bermeo and O’Brien (2006) agree that first-generation students, many of which are from urban schools, are less prepared academically “due to the lack of rigorous coursework, low teacher expectations, and limited resources in the urban and rural school systems they attended” (p. 6).

According to Cooper and Liou (2007), it is critical for all students to have access to information regarding college access by the end of ninth grade so that they develop the skills and knowledge to pursue a college education and realize their career dreams. The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (2007) noted that students from higher Socioeconomic Status (SES) families relied more on their families for information and less on counselors for college information and the opposite was true for lower SES families. King (2006) found that low-income students needed college counseling and information to increase college aspirations. Likewise, Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) found that the lowest-SES students were the most reliant on high school counselors to provide information regarding going to college.

Researchers have noted that low-SES students rely more on high school counselors and teachers to provide information about college (Tierney, 2002). Students in the predisposition phase, especially low SES students, expect to receive their information regarding college attendance from high school counselors. However, during 7<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> grade (predisposition stage) counselors spend very little time with students, if any, discussing college. There is very little influence from their counselors and teachers (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). Therefore, counselors are not getting to students early enough. Perna (2000) found that “higher percentages of African Americans and Hispanics, than Whites, receive help from school personnel” (p. 6).

### *Peers*

Urban students are more likely to be raised in single parent homes or by other family members who often do not have the time or the resources to increase educational aspirations of their children. Therefore, it is important to explore if peers have more influence on urban high school students’ college aspirations than their parents do. Much of the previous literature concentrated on parents’ influence, but not peers of urban students. Wentzel, Caldwell, and Barry (2004) state that friends of minority students and their impact on academic adjustment in large urban inner-city schools have not been well researched.

Ryan (2000) notes that further research needs to take place to discover and understand the affects of adolescent peer groups on motivation, engagement, and achievement. Sokatch (2006) found that “friend’s plans are found to be the single best predictor of 4-year college enrollment for low-income urban minority students, even when controlling for variables traditionally assumed to affect college going” (p. 128). Singham (2003) found that peers can have a negative influence on educational aspirations and Ogbu (2003) discussed to gain acceptance from peers, African American male students often disengage from school. Therefore, this study will provide further research on peer influence and college aspirations.

### *Sample*

The subjects for this study were sixty 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade urban African American male high school students from the Midwest. Results showed that the majority of the students qualified for a free and reduced lunch (63%) and lived with their mother only (80%). Only twenty-eight percent reported that they lived with their father. Therefore, a majority of the students were raised in single parent home and a majority of participants’ parents (25%) and siblings (36%) did not graduate from a 4-year institution. Since most of the participants’ parents and siblings did not graduate from a 4-year institution, the participants would be considered first

generation college students. Only twenty-seven percent of the participants self reported a GPA above a 3.0. Seventy-three percent of participants reported a GPA of below a 3.0. This is a concern since college acceptances and scholarships are becoming more competitive. The participants were fairly evenly distributed between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

### *Instrumentation*

A locally-developed survey was designed. This survey assessed the attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and practices of family, school, and peer variables that affect college educational aspirations. The survey began with demographic questions and then the next section provided questions regarding the student's college educational aspirations using a 4-point Likert scale. The following sections asked questions about the student's family, school, and peers also using a 4-point Likert scale.

### *Data Collection*

The students who returned their parental consent form and signed an assent form during a class period at two urban high schools took the survey. Since sensitive questions were asked on the survey, no identifying information was collected, so that a violation of privacy was not a concern. The survey was developed and piloted with 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students from the same high schools during an after school study session.

### *Data Analysis*

The Rasch Model was used to create continuous dependent variables for educational aspirations. The independent family, school and peer variables, and the strongest predictor for each group were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression.

### *Results*

**Research question 1:** Do family variables (such as maternal encouragement for higher education, paternal encouragement for higher education, financial support, family involvement, and access to technology) effect educational aspirations for college of urban male African American high school students? If so, which family variables contribute to the difference?

The family model was not a significant predictor of educational aspirations. Table 1 shows the regression analysis summary for family variables predicting educational aspirations of African American urban male high school students. However, financial support is significant ( $p < .01$ ). The  $R^2$  is .24. Thus, 24% of the variability of educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students can be explained by the family variables.

**Table 1. Regression Analysis Summary for Family Variables Predicting Education Aspirations of Urban, African-American Male High School Students**

Variable	B	SEB	B
Maternal support	.14	.08	.23
Paternal support	-.12	.09	-.17
Access to technology	-.13	.08	-.20
Financial support	.16	.07	-.34**
Family involvement	-.01	.04	-.23

Dependent Variable: Educational Aspirations

Note.  $R^2 = .24$  ( $N = 60$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

\*\* $p < .01$

R=.488

**Research question 2:** Do academic/school variables influence educational aspirations for college of urban male African American high school students? If so, which academic/school variables contribute to the difference?

The school model consisting of school involvement, high school environment, support from teachers and counselors, academic performance and school suspensions was significant. School involvement, school environment, academic performance and school suspensions were not significant, but school support was significant ( $p < .01$ ).

Table 2 shows the regression analysis summary for school variables for urban African American male high school students. The  $R^2$  is .38. Thus, the school model explains 38.% of the variability in educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students.

**Table 2. Regression Analysis Summary for School Variables Predicting Education Aspirations of Urban, African-American Male High School Students**

Variable	<b>B</b>	<b>SEB</b>	<b>B</b>
School involvement	.16	.07	.03
High school environment	.03	.03	.14
Support from teachers and counselors	.30	.07	.52**
Academic performance	.13	.08	.19
School suspensions	-.02	.07	-.04

Note.  $R^2 = .38$  ( $N = 60$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

\*\* $p < .01$

**Research question 3:** Do peer variables (such as support/encouragement) influence educational aspirations for college of urban male African American high school students?

The peer model consisting of peer support and encouragement is a significant ( $p < .01$ ) predictor of educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students.

Table 3 shows the regression analysis summary for peer variables predicting educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students. The peer model included one variable: peer support/encouragement. The  $R^2$  is .20. Thus, 20% of the variability of educational aspirations can be accounted for by peer variables.



**Table 3. Regression Analysis Summary for Peer Variables Predicting Education Aspirations of Urban, African-American Male High School Students**

Variable	<u>B</u>	SEB	B
Peer support	.23	.06	.45**

Note.  $R^2 = .20$  ( $N = 60$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

\*\* $p < .01$

**Research question 4:** What group (family, school or peers) is the strongest predictor of educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students?

Table 4 shows results of the regression analysis for all of the significant variables predicting educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students. The group that is the strongest predictor of educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students is school support  $p < .05$  (support from teachers and counselors) with a Beta weight of .427. The second strongest predictor of educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students is peer support ( $p < .05$ ), with a Beta weight of .249, and the third predictor of the significant variables predicting educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students is financial support ( $p < .05$ ), with a beta weight of .245. The  $R^2$  is .44. Thus, 44% of the variability of educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students can be accounted for by peer support, school support from teachers and counselors and financial support.

**Table 4. Regression Analysis Summary for Significant Variables Predicting Education Aspirations of Urban, African-American Male High School Students**

Variable	<u>B</u>	SEB	B
Financial support	.12	.05	.25*
Peer support	.13	.06	.25*
School support	.25	.07	.43**

Note.  $R^2 = .44$  ( $N = 60$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$

## *Summary of Findings and Implications*

In order for improvements to take place teachers, counselors, students, parents, policy makers, and communities need to come together to promote and commit to academic excellence. The path for low-income high school students to graduate from high school and attend college has been wrought with many barriers. These barriers include: family, academic, and peer factors.

### *Family*

The family model was significant; however, maternal and paternal support was not a significant predictor of educational aspirations of African American male high school students. Most of the literature states that parental support and involvement is a significant predictor of educational aspirations for high school students. Perhaps parental support is not a significant factor for predicting educational aspirations of urban African American males. The results of the study would suggest that helicopter parents discussed in the current literature may not apply to urban African American male high school students' lived experience.

However, the financial support variable, in the family model was a significant predictor of educational aspirations ( $p < .05$ ). This finding was expected since students often lack the knowledge of how to apply and receive financial aid or the expected cost of a college education. According to the Pell Institute Study and the Council for Opportunity in Education, Blacks lack the knowledge regarding their options for financing college (Lake, 2008). This is due to cultural differences and the lack of family awareness about the financial aid process. Therefore, financial literacy education needs to be a goal for high school counselors, teachers, and other pre-college practitioners. We must dissipate these barriers of financial literacy to increase the educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students. Students need lessons in financial literacy beginning late in junior high and early in high school. If students were given more information regarding financing college and the options that are available as early as junior high school their educational aspirations may increase.

### *School Support*

The school model was significant ( $p < .01$ ). School involvement, school environment, academic performance and school suspensions were not significant in predicting educational aspirations of urban African American high school students. However, support from teachers and counselors was a significant variable for predicting educational aspirations ( $p < .01$ ).

Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith (1989) suggested that counselors and teachers have very little influence upon the predisposition stage of most high school students. The findings of the study suggest that the opposite; school support is very important for increasing the educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students. Therefore, it may prove advantageous to provide professional development opportunities to increase educational aspirations of urban African American male high school students. Instruction in teacher education programs should include men's identity development and multicultural awareness. Teachers in urban high schools often are culturally, racially and ethnically incompetent (Flowers, Milner & Moore, III, 2003). Flowers, Milner & Moore III (2003) suggest that if teachers and counselors develop the multicultural knowledge and skills needed to work with African

American males, their educational aspirations will significantly improve. If these techniques are integrated into training for teachers, they will be equipped to help African American males to understand the importance of academic performance and future career success (Flowers, Milner, Moore III, 2003). Creating a school culture including principals, teachers, counselors and peer, where urban African American male high schools students feel supported, recognized and encouraged is important for increasing educational aspirations and retention in high school. To assist urban African American male high school students, teachers and counselors will need to be educated and acknowledge the barriers regarding postsecondary education, and provide interventions to prepare all students for higher education.

In order to increase educational aspirations of high school students, there needs to be communication and assistance between high schools and colleges (Adelman, 2006). Moving toward a seamless and transparent K-16 model will be important to increase educational aspirations in the future. Students who have high academic aspirations are more likely to be engaged in educational opportunities that lead to attending college. Today, urban high schools are often in poor repair, suspension and dropout rates are high and graduation rates are low. More federal and state dollars need to be available to improve the school environment so urban students will feel a sense of pride and belonging. Additionally, the requirement of a college preparatory curriculum for all students and the assessment of learning is necessary to increase educational aspirations.

### *Peer Support*

The peer model was significant ( $p < .01$ ). This finding is not congruent as suggested by the foregoing review. Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith, (1989) reported that overall peers were not strongly associated with the predisposition stage. Many researchers have found that African American males who are academically talented and have high educational aspirations often endure negative peer interactions (Ogbu, 2003). Ford (2006) reported that African American males often purposely underachieve to be accepted by Black peer groups. Ogbu and Simons (1998) found that African American males are sometimes supported by black peers, but at times lose friends due to the stigma of “acting White.” This study found that peers were important to increasing educational aspirations.

Peers in this study were associated with increasing educational aspirations during the predisposition stage. Therefore, urban African American high school students would benefit from having a strong peer support system. The tremendous power of peer pressure can have a negative impact on academic achievement; however, with interventions by teachers and counselors this peer pressure may be reduced or even begin to have a positive effect on educational aspirations. Peer individual and group counseling may assist students in feeling more comfortable in discussing personal information and supporting each other. Peer mentoring in high schools between lower classmen and upper classmen with high educational aspirations may be helpful.

### *Limitations of the study*

The results observed herein should be interpreted with caution due to the limitations of this study. First, some students are embarrassed to report personal information, so students attempt to respond in socially desirable ways; and therefore, do not answer the questions

truthfully. Secondly, a cross-sectional research design has limitations of only providing a one time “snap shot” of the data as opposed to a longitudinal study, which looks at the same individuals over time. Thirdly, this study only took place in two urban high schools in the same city located in the Midwest. Although this was a fairly good sample of African American urban male high school students, it may not apply to all urban African American male high school students. Although there were limitations to the study, this study provides useful information that may inform school educators, counselors, post-secondary educators, policy makers and educational researchers. As pointed out in the literature review, more research is needed to better understand the plight of urban African American male high school students.

### **Conclusion**

Education is the key for improving our future. Policy changes at the local, federal and state level must take place so that urban male African American students are retained and prepared in high school and given the chance to participate in postsecondary education. Research has demonstrated that by the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade most students have made their postsecondary plans; therefore, early intervention is a necessity (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). A better understanding of the factors that affect the predisposition phase will assist in increasing urban male African American attendance by establishing policies and practices. Current literature is limited for analyzing the effect of urban African American male high school student educational aspirations; therefore, further research is essential.

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*You may contact the author at:*

*Kimberly A. Grieve – kgrieve@lourdes.edu*