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## Our youth are our solution, not our problem

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**Our youth are our solution; not our problem**  
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*Quisieron enterrarnos, pero no sabían que éramos semillas.* Translated it reads, “They tried to bury us, but they did not know we were seeds.” This Mexican proverb has gained prominence among Latinx and other minoritized population as it centers our resiliency. Similarly, Black and Latinx male youth fight to break through the barriers placed against them as they navigate systems that were built without them in mind. One such system is education. In his *Twisted at the Roots* article, Dr. D-L Stewart (2020) tells us how higher education in the United States goes back to 1636 when Harvard University was founded. At the time, higher education mirrored Eurocentric demographics, philosophy, and curriculum. It was restricted to children of the landed gentry who were White males with economic means that included slavers and slave owners. This produced the gaps and imbalances we still see in higher education today.

When we think of educational outcomes for young men of color, it is easy to understand why inequality and inequity still exist. According to the College Board (2012), there are six post-secondary pathways students take after high school graduation. They are college enrollment (two and four-year institutions), enrollment in the military, employment, unemployment, incarceration, and death. Below are data identifying male students, their pathways, and their age ranges.

<b>Pathway and Age range</b>	<b>African American</b>	<b>Asian American</b>	<b>Latinx</b>	<b>Native American</b>	<b>White</b>
College enrollment - 2 & 4 year; vocational – (15- to 24-year-olds)	44.5%	46.1%	45.7%	51.2%	48%
Military Enlistment (18- to 24-year-olds)	74.3%	81.8%	82.4%	81.4%	89.7%
Employment (15- to 24-year-olds)	49.8%	32.9%	41.6%	53.1%	52.8%
Unemployment (15- to 24-year-olds)	52.6%	59%	57%	48%	52.2%
Incarceration (18--to 24-year-olds)	94.6%	91.1%	93%	91.1%	89%
Death (15- to 24-year-olds)	77.5%	71.5%	79.4%	71%	72.6%

As evidenced by the percentages above, we still have work to do, especially in the college enrollment arena for young Black and Latinx males.

Current deficit narratives around young men of color do not necessarily portray positive and nurturing experiences. Unfortunately, these conversations establish or frame misconceptions that influence how others think, act, and intervene when interacting with these

youth. In my personal experience, I was told more than once how I needed to be saved because I was “too good for a Mexican” and that my aptitude and abilities should not go to waste. Conversely, I was told by a high school counselor to not consider college because it was going to be “hard” and that perhaps I should “find a job and earn money to buy me a car that I could customize.” Had it not been for the support system I had at home, I would have not been as resilient and as persistent as I was. That support was the main driving force that led me to where I am today.

Research by Drs. Sáenz and Ponjuán (2008) posits the idea of the “vanishing Latino male” from the American higher education pipeline. In retrospect, my community cultural wealth, along with my different types of capital (familial, navigational, aspirational, resistant, and reciprocal), provided me with the tools I needed to challenge my status quo. At the same time, I was able to lift myself up from the oppression I experienced and the violation of the promise that was made to me as a child that I could be anything I wanted (Yosso, 2005). Regardless of circumstance, young men of color should be given the same opportunities to succeed and fully realize their potential, even when the odds are stacked against them.

According to My Brother’s Keeper Alliance (2021), high school graduation rates for Black and Latinx students are 16% and 12% lower than for White students. Further, Black, American Indian, and Latinx children are between 6 and 9 times more likely to live in poverty than White children. When it comes to discipline, Black students make up 16% of the public-school population but make up 42% of suspensions and 34% of expulsions. Black students are 3 to 4 times more likely than their White peers to be expelled or face multiple suspensions from school (Rehabilitation Enables Dreams, 2021). This issue speaks to the school to prison pipeline. In my current home state of Utah, American Indian students are three and a half times more likely to receive a disciplinary action in schools than any other racial group. Black students are disciplined more than three times and Hispanic students are disciplined one and a half times more (Quinney College of Law, 2014).

Be that as it may, we cannot give up on our young men of color. They have overcome so much and still prove to be resilient. They have risen above their circumstances, the finger pointing, and the name calling. Just like the rest of us, they are full of hopes, dreams, aspirations, and *ganas* (grit/determination). While they are more likely to experience police brutality, discrimination, stereotyping, racial profiling, and many other forms of oppression, they are not alone. We must not fail them. Collectively, we have a moral obligation and a social responsibility to offer them pathways so they can realize their true potential and define success in their own terms.

We need to let them know that the stories that are told about them do not have to be about failure. Instead, we should listen to what they are telling us, because their stories are our stories. We should pay attention to their counternarratives – those that speak about lessons learned, uplifting each other, daring to dream, truly becoming who they were destined to become. We should affirm their dignity and validate their lived experiences. We should interrupt the privilege others have to tell our stories as men of color. Our youth, especially our youth of color, is our solution; not our problem. The world needs to see and hear their truth, as difficult as it may be. We cannot afford to lose their talents and genius. We cannot continue to dehumanize them. We must do our best in an unfair contest. We must let everyone know that when the world around us fails us – we got us.

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