

**Educational Attainment of African Americans in East and West Garfield Park**

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### **Abstract**

Education is a key driver of positive health outcomes. However, in the East and West Garfield Park neighborhoods of Chicago, Illinois, more than one-third of adults do not have a high school diploma or college degree. The purpose of this study is to utilize “positive deviance” to identify social facilitators that have aided high school graduates from East and West Garfield Park to attend, stay in, and complete college. Participants (N = six) were first recruited through community outreach and were interviewed about their high school and college experiences. Interviews were then analyzed using the grounded theory approach, which allowed for the identification of common themes among the participants’ responses. Mentorship from family, early exposure to college, and participant self-motivation were identified as key facilitators for attending college. Mentorship from professors, college as a place of refuge, and transition programs enhanced the ability to stay in college. Completing college was facilitated by participants wanting to be role models for their community and wanting greater career opportunities. Limitations in the analyses included restricted inclusion criteria, difficulty finding recent graduates, and small sample size. Implications of the study include, but are not limited to, mandated course work for the college application process, early exposure through campus tours and family members, and mentorship through school faculty.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), social determinants of health are the conditions that individuals are born, grow, and live in (Marmot et al., 2008). Among one of the social determinants of health is access to education. Educational attainment has been identified as a strong predictor of health outcomes, adult mortality, and the development of positive health behaviors (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). For instance, individuals without a college education were more likely to have age-specific rates of chronic conditions, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and were more likely to engage in high-risk health behaviors, such as smoking and adopting a more stationary lifestyle (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). In general, the United States has seen an overall improvement in health outcomes over the past three decades; however, in almost all race-sex groups, these gains have largely been reserved to the most educated (Sasson & Hayward, 2019). Although health outcomes have improved, disparities in health persist as less educated individuals are more likely to experience poorer general health and shorter life expectancies when compared to more educated individuals (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). For example, the remaining life expectancy at age 25—a strong predictor of adult population health—is 6 to 10 years higher for individuals with a college degree compared to individuals without a high school diploma (Montez et al., 2012). These disparities are further compounded when factoring in race and ethnicity. In a study done by Olshansky et al., they found that white men and women lived longer than comparably educated Black men and women across all age groups, with the exception of Black women compared to white women at age sixty (2012).

In segregated urban cities like Chicago, factors such as education, race, structural racism and access to healthcare can significantly contribute to the disparities in health outcomes experienced among residents on a city and community level (Gee & Ford, 2011). Among

Chicago's 77 neighborhoods, East and West Garfield Park are two examples. Located on the west side of Chicago, more than 90% of the residents are Black and the communities are disproportionately affected by health disparities. For instance, while the average life expectancy for Chicago as a city is around 76.9 years, average life expectancies for residents in East and West Garfield Park are 70.0 years and 68.2 years, respectively (Hunt et al., 2015). West Garfield Park, in particular, has higher rates of gun-related crimes and experiences more than double the rates of infant mortality compared to the city. Moreover, when examining rates of chronic disease and negative health indicators, East and West Garfield Park rank among the top neighborhoods with the highest incidences (Cohen et al., 2016).

In regards to education, East and West Garfield Park are two out of 19 community areas in Chicago in which one-third or more adults do not have a high school diploma (Dirksen et al., 2016). Moreover, while 22.3% of Chicago residents hold a bachelor's degree, only 9.4% and 10.9% of East and West Garfield residents respectively, hold a college degree (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 2019). However, despite the social determinants present, this percentage of residents in East and West Garfield Park have successfully navigated through the educational system and attained higher education. Therefore, understanding the factors that have aided these residents in obtaining and completing higher education is imperative for the future growth and health of the community.

One approach in identifying facilitators that have aided East and West Garfield Park residents to obtain higher education is positive deviance. The positive deviance approach is based on observing high performers who have demonstrated uncommon behaviors that have enabled them to find more effective solutions to obstacles than their peers (Baxter et al., 2015). This concept has been utilized in a study conducted by Harper (2012), who wanted to move

away from the exhaustive body of deficit-based studies focused on how and why Black males fail to enroll in higher education and obtain their degrees. Instead, Harper chose to identify and analyze the individuals, programs, and resources that have aided Black males in college enrollment and attainment. In his study, Harper (2012) interviewed 219 Black men from 42 public and private universities who were selected based on their academic and extracurricular achievements. Harper (2012) found the key influences of success included parental and familial support, mentorship from teachers, and access to knowledge and networks during the college application process. Based on these findings, Harper (2012) made several recommendations for improving Black male college success, such as providing parents knowledge about higher education, implementing successful college transition programs, removing financial barriers to college success, and creating safe spaces for peer support and mentorship. Through a process of identifying positive deviants, qualitatively studying common themes among deviants, and comparing these themes to a larger and more representative population, Harper was able to identify facilitators that fostered success among Black male college students.

Although Harper's study provided a promising framework in identifying the facilitators that have aided Black male students in college, more research is needed to build upon the factors that have aided Black individuals in educational attainment. Thus, the present study will focus on utilizing positive deviance in identifying facilitators that have aided Black high school graduates from East and West Garfield Park in college enrollment and degree completion. By identifying these facilitators, future interventions can be implemented in East and West Garfield Park for African American youth to increase their chances of completing higher education.

## **Methods**

This research was conducted through qualitative analysis, specifically utilizing the positive deviance approach. The study obtained these facilitators by conducting interviews, which were then analyzed through grounded theory. Grounded theory is a general research methodology based on finding emerging patterns from data in order to form a theory.

### **Sample and Setting**

Participants in this study included six African American college graduates that have attended high school in East or West Garfield Park and have graduated college within 10 years of entering high school. Participants included five females and one male.

### **Recruitment and Human Subjects**

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Rush University Medical Center (protocol # 17060503-IRB01-CR03). All participants in this study were volunteers. Participants were recruited through community outreach at several organizations and schools within East and West Garfield Park. Organizations included, but were not limited to, The Hatchery, the Chicago Community Services Center, the Illinois Department of Human Services, Lawndale Christian Health Center, and Breakthrough Clinic. In addition, flyers were distributed at each location and throughout several residential areas within East and West Garfield Park.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Prior to the start of the study, participants provided written informed consent. Consent forms contained information about procedures, risks and benefits of participating, the purpose of study, voluntary participation, and contact information of the private investigators. Participants were then asked to be interviewed using an interview guide, which consisted of 18 questions (Appendix 1). These questions focused on how/when participants wanted to achieve higher education, how social support from family members and teachers contributed to their decision,

and how/where participants were able to access additional resources that aided them during the college application process. In addition, participants were asked about the challenges and facilitators that arose during their time in college. Finally, the audio of each interview was electronically recorded and transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze focus group data, the authors first read the six transcripts to identify preliminary key ideas. Codes for key ideas along with transcripts were handwritten. The authors then read and re-read the field notes and transcripts independently and assigned codes to blocks of text. The authors came together to reach consensus on coding and group codes with representative quotes endorsing the responses. Representative quotes from the interviews were paired with the codes. .

### **Results**

An overview of information that the participants' shared related to their family environment and facilitators of successful educational attainment are provided below. Each of the six participants were assigned a pseudonym in an effort to maintain anonymity.

Participant 1, Linda, an African American woman (age undisclosed) was raised on the West Side of Chicago in East Garfield Park. Her parents were separated and she lived primarily with her mother in what she describes as an upper middle-class household. Her desire to pursue higher education stemmed from her high school's mission to have 100% of their students attend college. Her high school pushed their college agenda but did not provide guidance on the college application process. Therefore Linda had to research all the requirements needed to get into college. She attended SIUE with several scholarships, but her sophomore year she fell sick,

forcing her to return home. Linda's self-motivation urged her to obtain two associates degrees, but after working in education she knew she had to pursue an advanced degree. Later, she obtained a bachelor's in criminal justice and a masters in change management with a concentration in criminal justice because she wanted to improve her environment, Garfield Park, by becoming a DEA agent. Linda is a first-generation college student that knew she would need to pursue her education to have great career outcomes. She was aided on her college journey by student organizations that connected her with students from her city and her support system. Linda said she completed college because family members such as her cousin and stepbrother never finished, and she wanted to be a role model for her cousins and brothers. She has inspired her mother to pursue a degree and her own 17 and 18-year-old children to do the same.

Participant 2, Tanya, an African American woman (age undisclosed) was raised in Garfield Park by a father with a fourth-grade education and a mother with a high school diploma. Tanya's parents had conflicting views of their children pursuing higher education, but still wanted their children to have better lives than them. Tanya being the middle child, with an older brother and younger sister, took on the maternal parenting role for her younger sister. Tanya and her sister are now college graduates with terminal degrees. Members of Tanya's family such as her uncle and cousin provided the encouragement and motivation she needed to go to college. Her uncle inspired her decision to become a teacher and pursue a degree in education by exposing her to his work at Malcolm X. With the help of her supportive parents and high school college administrators it simplified the college application process. A friend in college stated that, "we gotta keep going don't you realize that we are black girls," they needed to overcome the racial barriers, continue their education and pursue a master's degree. This provided the encouragement to complete her degree. Through her masters work studies the disparities and

gaps in education, and further investigated these issues throughout her doctorate degree. Tanya faced barriers such financial insecurity and lack of representation, but through a solid support system and great mentors she was able to obtain three degrees.

Participant 3, Amber is a 51 year old African American woman born and raised on Chicago's west side in the Garfield Park area. She is a successful career woman in law. Amber and her siblings were raised in a working-class two-parent household, yet the socioeconomic setbacks that dominated the Garfield Park community were a deterrent to a seamless transition to college. Amber realized that these struggles persisted largely due to her parent's history of limited education. As the youngest in her family, she witnessed her three other siblings break barriers by way of excelling in academics. These experiences incentivized Amber to earn her undergraduate degree. Throughout college Amber faced barriers such as culture shock, struggling due to disparities in college academic preparedness, and financial insecurities. Despite these barriers, Amber acknowledged that there were three notable factors that helped her attend and complete college: 1) a program at her high school that introduced her to the world of college beyond her limitations at home, 2) positive role models such as teachers and older siblings actively showing her the impact of education, and 3) programs created by her college to promote a more equitable transition from high school to college.

Participant 4, Brandy, a 54 year old African American woman was born and raised on Chicago's west side in the Garfield Park area. Brandy was raised in a working-class two-parent household, and was the second oldest of four children. In her senior year of high school, Brandy initially did not know that she wanted to go to college until she attended a college fair. She visited the top college that she was accepted into, and that college visit was the motivating factor for her decision to attend college. Brandy realized that the socioeconomic deterrents that affected

not only her family, but the Garfield Park community were limitations that she wanted to overcome and motivated her to earn her undergraduate degree. Throughout college Brandy faced barriers such as limited familial support, and struggles with financial resources. She also described an initial exhaustion from the college application and acceptance process, “that she slept for days,” when she first arrived to campus. Despite these barriers, Brandy acknowledged the three most notable facilitators to her success in obtaining her degree were: 1) influential adults such as teachers and counselors actively showing her the importance of education, 2) high school college fairs and teachers and counselors that promoted college, and 3) support in navigating financial aid and scholarships as well as a college work study position. Brandy is now a successful career woman in non-profit work.

Participant 5, Sasha is a woman in her late thirties who grew up on the West Side of Chicago in East Garfield Park. When Sasha was in junior high, Sasha’s mother transferred her from a Catholic school to a private college preparatory school located in East Garfield Park. From that moment, attending college became an expectation for Sasha. Outside of school, Sasha’s mother and grandmother encouraged Sasha, her siblings, and cousins to attend college. Although Sasha’s siblings did not attend college, a few of her close cousins did. During her high school years, Sasha visited her cousin who attended Northwestern University. Sasha shared that applying to college was a good experience due to her mother’s active role in the application process. Sasha explained that her mother did not have all of the answers to questions that arose, but she did provide structure that translated into self-advocacy and confidence that allowed Sasha to be successful in applying to college and scholarships. Prior to the start of college and throughout her college career, Sasha faced many academic barriers which discouraged her at times. Instead of giving up, she used her support systems to her advantage and advocated for

herself. The summer before Sasha started her freshman year at University of Wisconsin, Madison, she participated in a summer bridge program which allowed her to live in the dorms and take summer classes for free! Currently, Sasha works full time as a counselor for a nonprofit based on the West Side of Chicago where she still resides.

Participant 6, William, the only male in the study, is a 25 year old who grew up on the West Side of Chicago in East Garfield Park. William is the youngest of five and has a twin sister who also attended college. Compared to the other participants, William realized when he was in middle school that he wanted to go to college due to his interest in student government and politics. William expressed a strong interest in becoming a lawyer. After realizing that in order to become a lawyer, one would need a college degree, the idea of college became even more salient. In high school, William thrived effortlessly. He was the top of his class, so college was an expectation from teachers/staff at his high school. Aside from William's twin sister, no one in his immediate family attended college, but William does have two cousins in his extended family that also attended college. Throughout his college career, William faced many barriers to success including little to no support from his family, being unable to pay his tuition balance, homelessness, and feelings of not belonging. In all, William says that having racial representation on campus, mentors, and personal determination are all factors that helped him complete his college degree at DePaul University. Currently, William is working full time as a Restorative Justice Counselor for Chicago Public Schools and continues to reside on the West Side of Chicago.

In general, facilitators related to attending college were support, mentorship, and self-motivation. Common facilitators aided participants throughout their college process are represented in Table 1. Although none of the participants had parents that attended college,

parents often provided emotional support and were the first ones to introduce participants to the possibility of attending college. For instance, Tanya stated, “It was something that my mother and father made the decision about college being one of the first important things that I must do....it was something I had to do back in grammar school because they would mention often that college would be the way I could do this and I could do that.” When asked if anybody else played a role in the participants’ decision in attending college, all participants identified a family member or school teacher that influenced their decision and acted as a role model for participants. For example, Linda recalled visiting her cousin in college and being introduced to the environment for the first time. According to her, college was a “different world” and from that moment she realized, “I need to go to college. I gotta get through this so I can go to college, so I can experience this life, too.” In another interview, Brandy said her fifth-grader teacher was instrumental in her decision to attend as he “...pushed her academically and was always telling her she was smart.” Finally, while participants often had someone that introduced them to college at a young age, a majority of participants were self-motivated to apply to college and seek out additional resources, such as scholarships and financial assistance. For example, when asked if anything else motivated participants to attend college, Amber said, “I think my siblings introduced me to college, but I was always motivated to do something. I was always driven to be the best.”

Representation and mentorship was identified as a facilitator for college retention. When asked about the challenges that arose during college, 5 out of 6 participants mentioned culture shock and feeling unprepared academically as barriers that they have faced. Amongst these participants, two highlighted the importance of pre-college and summer transition programs in their success in staying in college. For instance, Sasha stated, “Because my ACT was low, my

college allowed me to participate in a program, so whereas most students started their freshman year in September, I started my freshman year in June...It was my chance to have a solid GPA before I actually became an incoming freshman.” In addition, Sasha noted that her university provided a bridge program where minority students were able to take smaller classes with each other, which eased the initial culture shock of attending a predominantly white university. Along with transition programs, mentorship from professors was also a crucial factor. When asked what helped participants earn their college degree, William answered, “Having professors who looked like me.” He then went on to state, “...this particular professor, she was an African American woman...she encouraged me to just really change the way I view myself in college...she was one of my strongest support systems.” Finally, a major motivator for participants to stay in college was its status as a place of refuge or safe space for participants. Amongst the interviews, 4 out of 6 participants felt like college was a “...place to escape from home...” and was “...an opportunity for you to be in a better environment...”

As for facilitators to completing college, having a greater career and economic opportunities and acting as a role model amongst the community and family were common themes. In 5 of the 6 interviews, participants mentioned that one of the strongest drivers for them to complete college was the opportunity to act as a role model for their community and younger family members. For instance, William stated that while there were times where he considered quitting college, he ultimately decided to stay because he realized that by getting his degree “...it was an inspiration to a lot of people around me, who didn’t think they could make it. So, I realized, I wasn’t just doing it for myself. I was doing it for my culture.” Likewise, in another interview, a participant stated that, “...my thought was that I have 17 cousins. I have a younger brother, and whatever I do will help motivate--whatever I do, they’re going to follow.”

Finally, all participants identified completing college as a stepping stone to obtaining greater career and economic opportunities. After Linda obtained her associate's degree and took time off, she decided to go back to complete her bachelors because according to her "I know if I want to have a good job, a good career, I need my education, because if anything else, jobs come and go, but I can always fall back on my education to open some doors for me...That's my thing. That's one thing that can't be taken away."

Table 1: Results of facilitators related to attending college, staying in college, and completing college

Table 1	<b>Facilitators</b>
<b>Attending College</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support from family members and school staff</li> <li>2. Acquiring mentorship</li> <li>3. Early exposure to college</li> <li>4. Instilling a sense of self-motivation</li> </ol>
<b>Staying in College</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. High School to College transition programs</li> <li>2. Mentorship from professors</li> <li>3. College as a safe space</li> </ol>
<b>Completing College</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Obtaining greater career and economic opportunities</li> <li>2. Being a role model</li> </ol>

### **Discussion**

The primary purpose of this study was to identify facilitators that have aided African Americans in Garfield Park in attending and completing college. Emerging themes gathered from participants for attending college were self-motivation, mentorship, support from family

members and school faculty, and early exposure to college. Facilitators for staying in college included the implementation of bridge programs, building support systems with professors, and viewing college as a safe space. Finally, facilitators to completing college included becoming a role model amongst family and community members as well as having a greater career and economic opportunities.

Our results are consistent with previous literature on African American students who have attended college and obtained their degrees. In one study, it was found that early exposure to college, having a support system within the family and school, and mentorship from teachers were some of the key factors that helped Black male students in college enrollment and degree attainment (Harper, 2012). In addition, in several studies, it was shown that the implementation of bridge programs often led to increased grade point averages as well as higher retention and graduation rates (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Bir et al., 2015). Studies have also revealed that common themes that have influenced individuals in completing college included the opportunity for greater wealth accumulation, increased employment options, and enhanced civic involvement (Shapiro et al., 2017; Allen et al., 2018; Baum et al., 2018).

Through our findings, the following interventions can be implemented to better aid East and West Garfield residents in attending and graduating college. On a community level, successful members of the community can act as leaders and provide mentorship for youth in the community, which can further inspire and motivate young individuals to attend college and become pillars within their community. On an institutional level, high schools can provide ACT and SAT preparatory classes, offer advanced preparatory classes, hold college tours or fairs, and have students work closely with college counselors. Moreover, high schools can also provide financial counseling or classes in financial aid for parents and students. By implementing these

programs, the goal is to educate students more on their college options and to strengthen their profiles in the college application process. In addition, the goal of these programs is to not only ensure that students attend college, but also to ensure that the college they attend is a right match financially, socially, and academically. Meanwhile, colleges can establish bridge and pipeline programs to better assist students through the transition from high school to college. In addition, colleges can provide safe spaces for students to engage in campus enrichment activities and to build social circles among peers and faculty. Taking these suggestions as a whole, it can further aid and ensure the successful enrollment and completion of college among students.

While our study provided further insight on factors that have aided in the success of community members from East and West Garfield Park, there were several limitations present within our study. The limitations of this study include small sample size, restricted methods of reaching a targeted population, and difficulty finding college graduates in East and West Garfield Park. Since the study solely focused on East and West Garfield Park residents, the facilitators that were identified among this population may not apply to other neighborhoods in Chicago with a similar racial and socioeconomic makeup and across the nation. Moreover, there was a limited population that suited the inclusion criteria as only a small percentage of residents in East and West Garfield Park have at least a bachelor's degree. This, in turn, contributed to the small sample size collected for our study. In addition, there was a lack of heterogeneity in the population sample, as it consisted of five females and only one male. The limitation of a small sample size and lack of heterogeneity within the sample could have been improved by increasing canvassing efforts and working alongside more community organizations to help better identify and recruit participants of interest. However, given the limited amount of time, it was difficult to contact and recruit a large population of community members and organizations within the 2

month time frame of the study. Therefore, based on this study, future work should build on our current findings, with an increased sample size and longer duration, to provide more interventions for college success in the future.

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## Appendix

## Interview Guide

1. When did you first realize you wanted to complete college?
2. How did you realize that you wanted to complete college?
3. Did your parents or guardians attend or complete college?
4. Did other members of your family attend or complete college?
  - Prompt: You can define family as it fits your family structure ie extended family, relatives, or friends.
5. What helped you earn your college degree?
6. How did your parents influence your decision to attend college (or earn your degree)?
  - Prompt: Did your parents provide information to you about college?
  - Prompt: Did that information influence your decision to attend college (or earn your degree)?
  - Prompt: How so?
7. How did your family members influence your decision to attend college (or earn your degree)?
  - Prompt: Did your family members provide information to you about college?
  - Prompt: Did that information influence your decision to attend college (or earn your degree)?
  - Prompt: How so?
8. How did your friends influence your decision to attend college (or earn your degree)?
  - Prompt: Did your friends provide information to you about college?
  - Prompt: Did that information influence your decision to attend college (or earn your degree)?
  - Prompt: How so?
9. How did your high school(or college) help you obtain your degree?
  - Prompt: How did you continue to move forward?

- Prompt: What was the key to continuing to move forward?
10. How did your teachers influence your decision to attend college (or earn your degree)?
- Prompt: Did your teachers provide information to you about college?
  - Prompt: Did that information influence your decision to attend college (or earn your degree)?
11. Did anyone else influence your decision to attend college (or earn a college degree)?
- Prompt: If so, who provided the information? What information was provided?
12. Did you use technology to get information about the college, college assistance, or related resources?
- Prompt: What kind of technology would you use to help you earn a college degree?

So far, we've covered some influences that helped you to "successfully" complete college. Now we are going to transition and discuss some obstacles or challenges that you might have encountered.

13. Was there ever a time that you were unable to receive information about earning a college degree?
14. Was there ever a time that you were unable to receive information about financial assistance while in school?
15. What do you consider as barriers to earning a college degree?
- Prompt: What have you experienced as challenges to getting a college degree?
  - Clarity: College degree = Associate's or Bachelor's
16. Did you ever want to quit college? Why?
- Prompt: What would you do (have done) if you quit college?
  - Prompt: How so?
17. If you could change one thing about your education or college experience, what would it be?

- Prompt: What advice would you give a young person in Garfield Park considering college?

18. Is there anything else that you would like to add to our conversation before we end?