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A Deeper Dive into Worcester: A Follow-Up Report on Latino Men and Post- Secondary Education in Worcester, Massachusetts

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Introduction

This follow-up report builds directly on the findings and recommendations of the 2016 Boston Foundation and Balfour Foundation report entitled, *In Search of Opportunity: Latino Men's Paths to Post-Secondary Education in Urban Massachusetts* (ISOO). The report was based on qualitative and quantitative research on the five Massachusetts cities of Boston, Holyoke, Lawrence, Springfield, and Worcester, and it focused on three questions:

- 1) What are the college readiness and completion experiences of young Latino men in urban Massachusetts?
- 2) What helps or prevents young Latino men from successfully obtaining a post-secondary credential?
- 3) What influences young Latino men's decision-making processes about education and work?

By taking a closer look at one of the cities studied — Worcester — this study intends to supplement the findings and recommendations of the initial ISOO report. While relying on a significant amount of quantita-

tive data, the ISOO report takes a primarily qualitative approach: conducting interviews and focus groups with Latino men and their families in the cities of focus. This qualitative approach reveals a number of prevailing narratives about Latino men's experiences in and outside of school — ethnographically rich information that would have been impossible to gather from quantitative data alone. Though the major findings and recommendations from the ISOO report are included below, readers of this report are strongly encouraged to read the ISOO report in full in order to grasp the first-hand experiences of Latino men from these five cities.

Funded by Worcester State University's Latino Education Institute, this "Deeper Dive" follow-up report on Latino men in the city of Worcester takes the same approach as the ISOO report did by providing data about the experiences of Latino men garnered from focus groups. The major findings in this report follow the same structure of the ISOO report — Family, Institutions, and Peers — with one additional category of analysis: The City. The report concludes with a section offering recommendations.



Durkin Administration Building, WPS

Methodology

Each of the three focus groups for this research took place at Worcester State University and was comprised of roughly 6 participants. One focus group was comprised of Latino men over 18 who have spent at least 3 years of high school in Worcester Public Schools and have completed a 4-year bachelor’s degree. Another focus group was comprised of Latino men over 18 who have spent at least 3 years of high school in Worcester Public Schools and who have begun but not completed a 4-year bachelor’s degree. Another focus group was comprised of Latino youth practitioners, police, and high school guidance counselors who have direct experience with Latino men’s educational pathways in Worcester.

It is important to note that this follow-up report on the city of Worcester is based on a limited data set of 3 focus groups involving 18 informants. As such, this report in no way sets out to represent the voices, opinions, and experiences of all Latinos in Worcester. Instead, this report offers insight into the lived experiences of some Latinos in the city in an effort to better understand men’s pathways to post-secondary education. As is stated both in the ISOO report and in the final section of this report, much more research on Latino men’s experiences in relationship to post-secondary education is needed — research aiming to answer more specific questions and to capture a greater diversity of perspectives.

Each of the focus groups lasted for roughly one hour, were led by Dr. Timothy Murphy, Assistant Professor of Urban Studies (Worcester State University) and undergraduate student researcher, Elliot Rivera (WSU).

The focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed by Michael Allevato (WSU alumnus). The findings were then analyzed and discussed in toto by Murphy, Rivera, and Allevato. It also is important to note that in order to protect the identity of all participants and schools, actual names of participants have been omitted.

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Photographs of buildings were taken by Thomas E. Conroy, and are part of the Vincent “Jake” Powers Archive in CityLab. Other images were provided by the Latino Education Institute.

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FAMILY

The *In Search Of Opportunity* report revealed data from five Massachusetts cities about families' impact on Latino men's pathways to post-secondary education. In particular, the ISOO report examined familial support and expectations, families lacking college knowledge and know-how, and other challenges families face apart from school. This portion of the deeper dive provides additional findings in each of these three areas as well as a few other factors related to family that motivated Latino men to pursue a post-secondary degree.

MAJOR FINDINGS FROM ISOO

Familial Support and Expectations

The young men reported **positive associations with strong family support** in the form of extended family structures (e.g., grandparents, neighbors), strong male role models, and strong family bonds.

Familial bonds at times unintentionally posed challenges for young men, such as work expectations that challenged college success.

Families Lacking College Knowledge and Know-How

Parents wanted their children's lives to be better than their own but many lacked important information about education systems (e.g., ways to help their children succeed in K–12; college costs and funding; and college admission and financial aid application processes). Parents lacking this information relied on general supportive messages to youth and did not actively participate in college or career planning.

Living in poor and deindustrialized communities challenged the notion that higher education could transform lives (e.g., college educated youth working in low-paying jobs in Holyoke/Springfield; poverty means focusing on immediate needs; investing in college seems financially unwise; and going to college delays wage-earning).

Families Facing Challenges

Multiple stressors (e.g., low English-language proficiency, poverty, poor housing conditions, under-employment, high mobility, and trauma) negatively affected school attendance, students' ability to focus, employment opportunities, and hopes for academic advancement.

Absence of family attachment can pose challenges to young men. Some positive solutions came in the form of surrogate or supplemental family structures — the military, religion, and community based organizations (CBOs). Some negative outcomes reported were poor foster home placement, too much freedom, gang involvement, acting out in school, and engaging in criminal activity.

MAJOR FINDINGS FROM A DEEPER DIVE INTO WORCESTER

Worcester Latinos who participated in this research elaborated on the impact of familial support and expectations on performing well in school and becoming college-bound. On this front, focus group participants reported:

Familial Support and Expectations

Parents setting college expectations early on motivated youth. Latino men say there is an advantage to having parents who make it very clear that their children are expected to attend college one day. Some reported that parents often talked about how much they were sacrificing so their children could have a better quality of life than they did, and as a result, children felt motivated to go to college. One man even said, "There was no alternative." Another man made this notion even more clear by imitating his parents and saying,

We didn't leave El Salvador for nothing; you will be a doctor or lawyer; if you mess up you're going back, and because you're not a citizen, if you mess up you'll be deported.

Another participant experienced his family's expectations differently. For him, getting into college and trying was more important to his family than



whether or not he would eventually earn a college degree. A different man associated his family's low expectations around his performance in school with his grades slipping. He explained, "When you're doing well enough, you get ignored. When parents have low expectations – "at least he's not..." – it doesn't encourage students to excel.

Nuclear and extended family provided support.

Multiple men feel as if their parents, siblings, and extended family provide much support in terms of performing well in school, whether in terms of completing homework, regularly communicating with teachers, or having older cousins who pave the way for them to have good relationships with teachers and do well in school and later in college. One man spoke about an incentive his uncle gave to him and his cousins: "make the honor roll and I'll take you to Florida," the man reported. He explained that this incentive worked and resulted in his uncle following through on a trip to Florida.

Parent's high expectations for children sometimes have negative impacts. One focus group participant who has worked extensively with Latino children reported that sometimes parents' hard work and expectations for their children negatively affect their children's self-esteem when faced with adversity. While such children may be more likely to excel in school and eventually get to college, in some cases, parents working so hard in order to guarantee a better future for their children can result in

children lacking guidance at home and more opportunities for children to get off-track.

Families Lacking College Knowledge and Know-How

Families lacking this knowledge need help. Some focus group participants echoed the finding from the ISOO report by saying many Latino families struggle to understand the education system and need their children's schools to help them with this. Things such as academic tracking, honors and college-prep programs, transcripts, and even the word "college" can be confusing to parents who are unfamiliar with the system. (The word "*colegio*" in Spanish means "school," and often does not refer to post-secondary education). One focus group participant chimed in to talk about The Parent Institute – an initiative he is currently working on in Worcester to help with this. He explained,

It's gonna take all those parents – it works with immigrants really well. The program is gonna educate parents on how to deal with and take kids to a university. What are the steps to take your child to a university? It's non-judgmental; it has social and emotional components to it, so it's gonna empower the parents to do better for the kids and empower themselves to go to college.

Families Facing Challenges

Families face challenges related to employment, mental illness, and food insecurity that negatively impact children's education. Citing barriers that contributed to children's educational pathways, focus group participants say that coming from a nurturing family is not enough to get children to college. They explained that many Latino parents are single parents, or work multiple jobs, or lack motivation for themselves, or face mental illness and addictions, and therefore are unequipped to motivate their children to go to school and direct them toward college. One participant spoke about the problem with mental illness in relation to a limited number of opportunities for economic advancement. He explained that local economic structures are often a barrier to immigrant families' success and how this can result in their turning toward public assistance—an experience that can reduce parents' motivation and increase the likelihood of depression. Another participant discussed the problem of food insecurity in the family and how youth cannot learn when they are hungry — “there's no food in the belly; the student isn't going to learn,” he said.

Financial needs of families can weigh heavily on youth. One man currently enrolled in college reports that he wants to provide help to his mother and father but cannot seem to manage juggling both work and school. He said he feels overwhelmed because they have given him so much that he feels he owes them the help. Another Worcester man experienced a similar bind in college. He explained, “There were times I couldn't help my mom because I put money on the table.”

Having college-bound siblings at home was especially significant in encouraging young men to pursue college. One man says that his parents did not discuss college much, but he decided to pursue it by following the path of his older brother who was already in college. Another man explained how much he and his younger brother relied upon one another while they were both trying to balance college and working full-time while living at home. One participant in the focus group discussed how, being the first in his family to go to college, he felt responsible to help his younger college-bound brother to avoid the mistakes he made. He explained,



I was the first one in our family to start college, so I felt like I had a whole weight over my shoulders, and then my brother, two years behind. I had to make sure he's not stumbling whereas I messed up my financial loans. "Make sure you get this on time," making sure he's all set.

Parents' struggles sometimes served as motivation to pursue higher education.

One man tells about how self-sufficient he was by seven or eight years old because he had to make many decisions for his parents who struggled with English proficiency. This independence at such a young age, combined with seeing his parents struggle with English, he said, motivated him to go to college in pursuit of a better quality of life than what was possible for his parents. Another participant commented that despite his parent's lack of college know-how, their hard work and persistence in the face of adversity motivated him. He explained,

My parents were good advocates. Especially my dad... he's a hard worker. So it's embedded in me through seeing him in life, "when you start something you finish it." That's just how I behave, ... His drive taught me to expect to see things through. ...He might not know all the answers with the financial aid process ... so like, he's like, "let's just go" and we would go through it together.

INSTITUTIONS

The ISOO report revealed numerous findings from five Massachusetts cities about Latino men's experiences with and in educational institutions. This report groups the ISOO's major findings on institutions into three categories: schools failing youth; hurdles along the way; and a loss of hope.

MAJOR FINDINGS FROM ISOO

Schools Failing Youth

Ethnicity of faculty and administration of schools was **not reflective of their student bodies**.

In a context in which being cool was often equated with making trouble, **men expressed a desire for better quality classroom dynamics and contact with teachers**; if student-teacher relations are improved and students feel a sense of belonging in educational institutions, they believe they would be better students.

Men noted **an increasing lack of connection with school staff**. For example, in the transition from elementary to middle school, students no longer have one teacher looking after them, but instead, a host of different teachers and, thus, students are not kept accountable as much as in earlier grades.

Men expressed **an interest in** sometimes positive and sometimes negative **social activities** (hanging out with friends, gaming, playing sports, having relationships with girls, skipping school, stealing, selling and using drugs) **rather than academics**—especially beginning in middle school.

Hurdles along the way

The biggest hurdles to college and occupational success for young Latino men came well before college. Latino males were less likely than their non-Latino peers to overcome these hurdles, for example, taking the SAT, meeting high school graduation requirements on the 10th grade MCAS, and graduating from high school.

Young men expressed that they **lacked the knowledge to apply for and the know-how to succeed in college**.

Gay-identified men conveyed how **homophobia in school** (e.g., discrimination and bullying by fellow students) **negatively affected their academic performance**.

Men pointed out how **bad decisions and poor performance on standardized tests made early in school led to being labeled, which was difficult to undo**. Once labeled as bad kids / troublemakers / underachievers, this stigma shaped how others saw them and how they saw themselves, impeding their progress along educational pathways.

The narratives of the young Latino men and the statistical analysis suggested that those who scored below proficient on MCAS in earlier grades were less likely than their peers to score above proficient in 10th grade, controlling for observable factors. The correlation between early MCAS performance and scoring proficient in 10th grade progressively grows in higher grades. The findings also show that **Latino males were less likely than non-Latino males to improve their academic performance after a low MCAS score in early grades**.

A loss of hope

Young men's perspectives on their futures

changed with age (e.g., dreams of students in elementary school differed from dreams in later grades), and their dreams in high school became compromised in the face of pathways they perceived to be open/closed to them.

Some stories showed that **men often felt a sense of resignation about their lot in life and their future possibilities** due to a lack of investment of schools, family, and/or peers.

Other stories showed that **young Latino men were entrepreneurial with high aspirations about starting businesses or inventing products; often higher education was not part of these accounts, though**, as youth identified the Internet and open sources of knowledge as the font of information required to reach success.

MAJOR FINDINGS FROM A DEEPER DIVE INTO WORCESTER

Data obtained from Latinos who participated in this deeper dive into Worcester contributes to each of these themes. First, however, it is important to recognize a number of [positive experiences](#) focus group participants spoke about with regard to [Worcester schools and colleges](#). On this front, focus group participants report:

Positive College Prep Experiences in Worcester

Schools. Some men interviewed expressed positive experiences when reflecting on how primary and secondary public schools in Worcester helped them to do well and develop a sense of belonging in school, to think about their future, and to prepare them for college. In some cases, these experiences were specific to the school men attended or the guidance counselors they had, while other experiences were the result of being involved in specific college prep programs.

One participant talked about first being encouraged to think about his future by his guidance counselor while in 5th grade at a Worcester charter school. It

was this same school that helped him become better socialized through extracurricular activities other than sports. He wasn't a "guys-guy," he said, so having the opportunity to be involved in numerous clubs helped him establish friendships and a sense of belonging that he lacked at home in his neighborhood. "School was my life," he reported.

One young man cited how "graduation specialists" at his high school helped students get to college and follow them throughout to help ensure their chances of graduating. Another spoke about how a guidance counselor helped him onto the right path after initially failing 9th grade. Speaking about the guidance counselors at this school, he explained,

...they all had this idea of me being lazy - "do you not behave?" - because I failed every class, and when I went back for my second 9th grade, we had another guidance counselor at this time and he was like, "this is what I heard about you. How can we make this different?" And from there on I worked my butt off and got all As and went from last in my class to starting first, because it was only 31 students in my graduating classroom, so I was like, top ten. So, it was part of the competition of everyone



North High School, 9-12, WPS

thinking I was bad student, of a bad behavioral kid, to getting all "As."

A different Worcester man praised the technical high school he attended for encouraging both the specialization in a trade *and* the option of going to college. He said he never thought college was for him. He always saw himself as a mechanic and, therefore, went to a technical school. He said that historically this school was for people who were not college bound, but when he attended the school, guidance counselors were pushing college as much as going into a trade. The goal was to either get students a job in their trade or prepare them to go to college. He graduated, worked as a mechanic for a year, and during that year he applied to community college because he decided he wanted to do something other than work as a mechanic for the rest of his life.

Other men spoke about specific college prep programs at their high schools. One man in an honor's program said he remembers first hearing about college in 8th grade when students were recruited for a college prep program at his school. "This is your future. Work hard and you'll be able to get to college," they told him. It was his understanding at the time that if a student was part of the college prep program, he would receive guidance along the way to college, including applications and financial support. He is not sure what the criteria were for being accepted into the program, but thinks it was solely for honors students.

Another man reflected about the benefits he received from being part of *Bottom Line* – a program he was recruited to be in while at a technical high school. The program helped him choose and apply to schools, write essays, complete the common application, study for SATs, and make sure he met all the deadlines. They gave him waivers for applications, and he did not have to pay for any of it. He believes this program helped him significantly.

Bottom Line proved highly influential for another man interviewed. He said if it was not for this program, he would not have begun attending Worcester State. He wanted to go to Northeastern University but was not accepted. He had scholarships to go to WSU, and since his mom was unable help him pay for another school, he ended up studying there. He was hesitant because he had heard people say things like, "Worcester State is for dumb people." He went anyway, continued to live at

home, and got his first job so he could contribute financially to his household even though his family did not want him to work. He struggled a bit during his first semester but eventually became accustomed to the college routine. He now loves WSU and is very involved in the campus community – it has challenged him, helped him forge friendships he hopes to have forever, he says, and now considers WSU his second home.

Another man was part of an "academy" during high school (e.g., science and tech; business; social justice, etc.). He believes that because he was chosen to be a leader of his academy, his teachers chose him for "Junior Achievements" – a two-year college prep program at Holy Cross. Students went to the college after school and were paired up with college student mentors there, he reported. Companies such as Merrill Lynch came and helped them create resumes and college prep materials.

Positive Experiences in College. Accounts of positive experiences in education for Latino men in Worcester continued for some in college. Institutions of higher education also evidence stories of success. One Worcester man expressed how his interest in high school translated into his eventual major and success in college.

I was shy, I used to love to draw ... – I was so awkward talking to people, so I took this one class, TV production, they used to run the local channel 11 through there, and I started getting involved like, "wow, this would be pretty cool to do for the future." So I asked a teacher, "what field is this? Because I'd like to just mess around with the equipment and just learn more, maybe even get into this and follow sports with it," and he told me about it and from there in my sophomore point in high-school, I had the idea that I wanted to get into communication just for the hard skills but also for the social skills. It was the right major for me, because it allowed me to grow into other areas I had no confidence in like public speaking, interacting with others, even writing and reading, so that helped me.

Another man spoke of college success in a different light: college opens up new connections, ideas, and possibilities. He explained,

It's one of those things you don't know – I came in and thought I was set on a major. As time went on, I started making connections, meeting people, and that's how I got to be where I am today. Talking to people, learning experiences, and just being open to new things... Now that I'm graduating and possibly going to the Air Force, which I never even thought about before, it's really exciting and you gotta live life, you know?

Other success stories illustrate the help men received from offices, programs, and peers at their institutions of higher education. One man spoke about the support he found at WSU through the Alternatives for Individual Development program (AID) and the Multicultural Affairs Office. He elucidated,

One of the biggest things for me is just, the support I had here. Through AID, the Multicultural Affairs Office, a really good friend, and one gentleman who helped me through everything—he created the AID program; he's retired now, but he was a professor.

Another man says that the AID program provided him with a sense of belonging at WSU because it is where he made all his friends. He says he is unfor-

tunately the only one of them, however, that has not dropped out of college. In contrast, one man spoke about how his peers along with his job during college helped him with his college success:

...once I got here I felt very comfortable, I was already dating somebody who was already here and through her I had a network of friends and joined TWA (Third World Alliance), so like, I felt real comfortable coming here, like, you know, my people. ... I always knew I wanted to do psychology since second grade. So, psychology [was my major] and then I minored in communications because I wanted to do like, TV, radio, you know, nightclub promotion, fliers, I had all these big dreams to just make money in different ways. And so, what I did, since I didn't have any money and had to pay for it, I ended up applying at UPS and did the tuition program there. If you work three months they start giving you tuition reimbursement. So, I pretty much did that and when I left WSU, ... I think I only paid for one semester that came out of my own pocket.

Another man who currently works at a high school in Worcester dropped out of college after his first year to work. He attributed the importance of living



Chandler Magnet School, K-6, WPS



Goddard School, K-6, WPS

on a college campus for at least one year to college success in terms of feeling a sense of belonging. He believes all students should live on campus for at least one year to have that “college experience” – e.g., go to parties or football games. He says it will help them feel like they are studying in an environment where they belong. He even thinks this experience can be something that brings men back to school after they take time off. He says that getting a shot at that college experience helps students develop a sense of self and purpose:

I think it's more of just knowing—getting to know who you are as a person, rather than letting other people – it's letting your experiences define you instead of letting someone else define you. You know, not letting someone else say “you're this.”

Similarly, a different man spoke of how making the conscious decision to go to college and pay for it himself made him appreciate his education more:

Our experiences have made us kind of appreciate our education more. I know that me personally, I appreciate it so much...Working for my money and paying my own bills, I mean,

my mom's offered to pay for all my bills, but I said “no.” She's worked all her life to make my life easier. Now I want to make her life easier, too. It's a little bit of that “this is your education, you're in control, it's your life,” that makes you appreciate it more.

Although focus group participants reported a number of positive experiences in Worcester schools and colleges, just like the ISOO report exposed, participants in this deeper dive also elaborated on the ways in which schools and colleges are failing Latino men. On this front, focus group participants reported:

ELL Challenges

ELL and lack of familiarity with U.S. education system posed problems. For a young immigrant man from a Catholic military school in Ecuador, being both an English Language Learner and hav-

ing been cited for poor behavior led him to changing schools in Worcester. At his new school, he failed all classes, had no friends, and was miserable. He greatly improved his performance the following year with the help of a guidance counselor and became the poster child for how students could turn around. He says this experience – extra help from his counselor and the praise that followed his success – babied him and made it difficult for him to transition to college. It was a culture shock.

Transferring from bilingual to English education during middle school proved challenging. One man spoke about how it was easy for him to get As in the bilingual program during middle school, but when he switched to English classes, his grades dropped to Bs and Cs. He explained,

Because there were a lot of behavioral kids in my class, it was just like, if you got an A it was awesome. Like, I got all As in my seventh grade. In my eighth grade when they switched me to all English because I didn't speak English at the time but my parents were like, "if you're not learning anything in the bilingual system, let's put you here." My grades went from As to Cs and Bs. And it was because of the barrier of the language.

Possible solutions to language barriers. Another man interviewed identified language as being an obstacle that is not properly dealt with and suggests that some schools for bilingual students should exist. He imagines one half of the day in Spanish and the other half in English. This would help American Latino kids hold on to their language and culture, which they are losing. He explained,

Why isn't there a charter school for bilingual kids? Like half of the day Spanish, the other day is the English. Without that "oh, we have to be an immigrant to be in it." It gives you that label. To me, when I was leaving Catholic school, if there was a school that was bilingual or an all Spanish school, I would have jumped in like, full ahead, you know, whatever. And one of the problems that I see is that between Latinos and American Latinos, American Latinos are losing the language.

Lack of identification between students and staff

Teachers' lack of understanding of the role of the Department of Children and Family (DCF) in schools. A caseworker interviewed cited the problem of DCF in the classroom - when DCF is there, some teachers stop helping because they assume DCF is taking care of it all. They explained,

Because of child care assistance ... a lot of areas don't have the resources, what happens is that the school actually has to take care of their own problems. So what happens is that these teachers don't care because DCF is around. So now they'll just file because there's a lot of resources to take care of a community, "we don't have time for this."

Young Latino men's lack of identification with the student body, teachers, and staff. One professional working with Latino youth spoke to the problem of Latino students lacking identification with others in schools and how it can result in them turning on their own community. They elucidated,

I used to work with the Latino school – I still do it; I do training for the teachers, and one of the things that came up during a focus group is that they're really struggling. They work with their kids up to middle school and give them this amazing opportunity to go off to high-school, to private schools, to receive this really high quality education. Now what happens is that they're in this school this whole time—this place of love and support, and the teachers believe in them. None of the teachers really look like them, but they tell them that they're smart and special, and they are special, and they are smart. But what happens is when they transition to [cites names of private high schools] or whatever, this young kid of color that was surrounded in a community of other kids of color, that ate a certain kind of meal at his family's house and had these support systems, goes into this school, and sits in this classroom and has no idea what he's doing here; he feels so out of place...they're not prepared for the culture shock. The schools aren't prepared to support their emotional and social needs. And when they go in there, the likelihood of making it through, or doing something worse like tucking

it all deep down inside, the kids that are making it, that's what they're doing. They're just stuffing it and being like "I do start to believe that people are stupider, but I'm the one that isn't. They are lazy, I just work really hard." And they turn on their own community.

Another Latino who works in Worcester schools spoke about the need for more role models of color in public schools to which students can relate. They explained,

Go to high schools in Worcester, what do you see? There's no role models, there's no one there that will fight for their rights. We're constantly fighting, but there's only so many that can fight for their rights... And that's why we need the Worcester public schools to say "hey, we need to hire men of color, we need to hire role models for these kids" because they see, like, "A female! I can make it," or "he can relate to me."

One professional who works with Latino youth in Worcester spoke about the importance of hiring local administrators who are from Worcester and understand the immigrant populations of the city

and the specific problems they face:

It's like, "who is still here that is from here?" You know, I was reading an article about the new superintendent and there was something they were talking about like, "she's from here." You know, what difference does it make to be not just professionally regarded but regarded by the people you grew up with, that saw you come up, that you know, believe in you, that love you personally. What does it mean to be regarded by those people as well? And I think there's a different level of investment when you're home-grown. And the expectation from your family, from the people that care for you, that saw you, that helped support your growth, to re-contribute. I felt like there isn't — you know, the immigrant community isn't fairly new. There's definitely old roots, but there isn't a lot. It's like small groups of families that are here. But I think at this point as Latinos, we've established ourselves and put some roots in this community, where we have a second generation in college. You know, that first generation is finally breaking the ceiling level of "I'm a first generation!" My mom helped me get into college because she went to college, and that's a new conversation in this community, and you know, we have to put a peg on that because there's something to say that it's a new conversation and why things have been moving at a certain pace. But now that we've established that, and we're doing second generation in college, what's the responsibility of that first generation to turn around and create some change within our community? What's the responsibility to organize and have a voice and say "I actually know how elected officials work. Maybe my mom didn't know, but I know." And then "what responsibility do I have to go to the school committee or city council or harass the hell out of my city counselor because I'm mad about what's going on in schools?" That's usually how it works.

Another interviewee chimed in, "We need people to be more aware about the problems we are facing. People aren't aware of the problems we have." One person interviewed spoke about the pervasive problem of prejudice and racism among teachers and staff in Worcester schools and how change has to happen with administration on this front. The participant cited an example of how much the quality of one school improved after the school system



Quinsigamond Elementary School, K-6, WPS

began to pay attention to a number of problems at that school. The participant's understanding was that some teachers were fired and others quit when they began to implement trainings to make teachers more culturally sensitive. The participant explained, "people left because they were like, "we don't believe we should be talking about racism in school."

Lack of College Preparedness

Low college graduation rates of peers cited as due to lack of preparedness. One man says that in his high school graduating class of 31 students, all went to college, and only 8 graduated college. Those who dropped out did so because of issues like poor time management, attending big "party schools," not knowing how to pay, and coming from communities that didn't have the knowledge of how to navigate college etc. He explains,

With my high-school, yes, everybody passed the MCAS and got to college but they never taught us how to make it through college, and that's true. In our graduating class, thirty-one graduated from my high-school and went to college but only eight of us graduated college. So, it's just like, they don't tell you the other side of the story, how many really graduate. A lot of them dropped out during their first or second year because of issues we talked about here.

Too much handholding in high school. One man interviewed explained that high school handholding doesn't prepare students for college. He said that high school teachers let students get away with things like family trips. College does not let people get away with these kinds of excuses. He elaborates,

In high-school if you didn't turn in the paper and you might be able to wine and dine, you know, to like, 'lemme get an extension,' or mom calls, or 'we were absent Monday because we were in Jersey'; it's a hard and fast line in college. They don't care. That's it. 'Sorry, buddy.' That's what it is. So like, in high school there's still hand holding. And so I mean, that's what it is in most places, you know. But that's the difference. In college, it's like, you don't have time for that. The expectations are much more rigorous I think.

Need for more college readiness programs. One participant who has worked extensively with youth pointed out the effectiveness of summer college readiness programs like the one established in the Great Brook Valley neighborhood and the need for more programs like it that do not compete with one another for funding. He explains,

... when I used to work in the Valley - I worked there 13 years - I had 150 kids; they had problems. I had all the ones that were failing, and I had a whole bunch of people working there. We had maybe a half a million dollars every year, and those kids we worked with, they're all succeeding today. Some of them are teachers, some of them are working in markets, some of them went to college. They went to Worcester State; they went everywhere. But why did it work for them? Because we had a structured program. We had homework centers, we had work, we had everything that they needed, even though they were poor and had that stereotype that they lived in the Valley. But I grew up in the Valley, and I would say "look at me, I grew up in the Valley. I'm in college; I'm at Assumption, you know?" I took them and placed them in internships within the community; I put them in the Worcester Housing Authority, the Boys & Girls Club, and gave them internships and said "this is what you can do with your future." And it worked. A lot of the kids were ones that grew up in the Valley, and now they're working in maintenance or some went to college and now they're working for CBS in Puerto Rico, you know... So, things like that, if it works for people like that who maybe had a low self-esteem, through community and school, you can lift that up and take them to college. That's what we need. We need programs that work. There's too many agencies competing against each other for programs instead of combining and helping kids out. It's for money. It's a big problem. That's why when we bring programs into the schools, all those programs, it takes a village to raise a child. And that's what we need. We need that village. We need to go back to that village to raise a child.

Lack of college prep resources due to being on a technical track at tech school. One man who lacked college-prep resources after having graduat-

ed from the local technical school spoke about having to turn to his sister for guidance because she was in college at the time. She advised him to go to the administrative building at the local community college to help him fill out the FAFSA. His sister got all this information from her guidance counselor at the technical school when she went there. He did not get it because he was on a technical track there.

Middle School is too late to intervene. One professional who works with Worcester youth challenged one of the ISOO findings and recommendations by arguing that middle school is too late to intervene and help young Latino men plan their futures. He explained the need to teach the “why” of learning particular subjects as early as pre-K so students understand school as a pathway to their dreams and goals. When asked when to intervene and begin talking about college, the interviewee said,

Elementary school. That’s where we need to start. Middle school is too late. I believe that you save more dollars in prevention than intervention. So, if we want to have that highest reach and stretch our dollars and impact the most amount of kids, if we prevent them from even getting to that place of low self-esteem, and you know, “oh no, I don’t see where I fit.” ... I feel like right now, we’re still doing the same thing: the bandage. By the time we get to them, we’re trying to change, but it just takes so much more work to change and it gets so much more work to get their family situation worked out that if we can capture families when their kids are young, you know, when we can work with parents when their kids are younger or work with the kids when they’re younger – the impact, we see what’s happening like in New York in the Harlem Children’s Zone. There’s research, it’s not like a new idea. I don’t know why we’re so stagnant in working with elementary school kids.



Chandler Street Elementary School, Recess Yard, K-6, WPS

Poor Advising – Guidance Counselors

High School Guidance Counselors seen as discouraging college and emphasizing trades.

One man spoke about how his guidance counselor in high school discouraged him from going to college. His SAT scores were low, but his grades in school were very good. The guidance counselor disregarded his grades and just steered him toward a vocational career. He was determined to go to college – he thought he would be a failure otherwise. He had to take this initiative and do research on college on his own.

...my guidance counselor said “maybe college isn’t for you.” My SATs were bad. I don’t think there’s another word to describe them. I think I just got the point for writing my name. They were bad. So my guidance counselor looks at me, and I’m an A and B student, so it’s not like I struggle with academics. I mean, I’m not the brightest. And she’s like “maybe college isn’t for you. Have you tried any vocational things that you can possibly do?” And I’m like, “I gotta go to college, I’ll be a failure, I don’t want that. I don’t wanna lose the momentum or anything. I wanna get to college, help me get there.” She’s like, “it’s gonna be tough.” So that’s when I did my research and went through the AID program.

Other men interviewed recounted stories of counselors discouraging them from going to college. One bilingual student in particular explained that counselors focused on only a select few who they thought could make it to college. The rest they discouraged. He elucidates,

So, another big difference for me was, everyone in my school was getting into college and at that time I lived in Main South so I had a lot of friends who went to [cites names of high schools] and so forth, and my school was too small, so I played soccer with [cites name of high school]. So a lot of my friends there, while we were applying for colleges, their guidance counselor was telling them “college is not for you.” And it was just weird like, “how can a guidance counselor tell you that college is not right for you?” or that option was never presented to them. Either the guidance counselor had too many cases and didn’t want to show them how to fill out the applications, or they never had a backup plan. They tried to get into

a vocational program after high-school, or there was nothing else. So like, I have a friend who boxes and my guidance counselor actually helped him out even though he was in [cites name of high school], because his guidance counselor never gave him the option get into college, never helped him prep for his SATs; he was never shown the option. And that was in this bilingual program; that option was only for a certain few students, not for everybody.

Once men get to college, some, but not all teachers go the extra mile for their students; but when they do it, they can have a big impact. He explains,

I had gotten into WSU in the first couple of weeks and I took an economics class. I had never taken an economics class; I had never taken an economics class in my school because it was too small. I wanted to be a computer science major, but I liked it – “oh, this economics stuff is pretty interesting.” And after one year, I decided because of this one professor, “I wanna go with economics and Spanish. I want to double major in economics and Spanish.” And my adviser in economics, because my grades were not the best, she didn’t put much effort into helping me out when I was here. It took me like, 2-3 years to really find someone willing to help me out. [cites name of professor]. There were a few times where my car broke down and she picked me up. She put the effort and when I did bad and came back from Ecuador, I told her “I came back with zero credits,” and there was disappointment in her eyes; and when I told my professor in the [cites specific department] it was almost as if she expected it from me. So it was just like, finding that one person while I was in school to help me get through classes.

Lack of support for Guidance Counselors produces poor advising.

One man compared his small high school to a bigger one saying there were far fewer students to counselors at the bigger school and that this made a huge difference. At the bigger school, he said some students never even meet with their counselors during four years there. He explains,

I think that, I mean, it takes a village, right? So like, your teachers, that village includes not only your family, your immediate biological



Forest Grove Middle School, Recess Yard, 7-8, WPS

village, but your village at school – see that village is small and can be much more hands on at a place like [cites name of smaller high school] which is why they’re successful. Whereas, you sent fifty kids to a guidance counselor where realistically in the big high-schools it’s like, 250 kids to a guidance counselor or more. So like, several kids, they’ll never meet in four years, not even meet. So, there, that village is much more able to do quality work whereas at [cites names of larger high schools] you know, that village is like – you just gotta crank them out, like a factory.

Another man explained that the counselor-student relationship is not only about a school. It is also about counselors themselves. He had one counselor who never spoke to him but he felt this did not prevent the counselor from reaching conclusions about him that had negative affects. As he said,

It also depends on your guidance counselor because when I was failing in ninth grade in [cites name of school], that guidance counselor never spoke to me...Every teacher during the meetings in summer had these horror stories about me that were so bad, and they were not true. It was like, “what are you talking about?” And it was because I was the first one to get suspended; I was the first one for a lot of things...that first ninth grade was bad.

However, once a new counselor came into this path and learned about him, the counselor “was able to give [him] a shock” that showed him “it’s time to turn around.”

Uneven quality of Worcester Schools poses challenges

Pros and cons of behavioral school for special education students – a safe space but difficult to leave. One man who works with youth in Worcester schools reported that a local behavioral school for special education students had jail-like conditions. He said, “It’s a locked school. They’ve got like, two locked doors, it’s like a jail.” This same man told a story of one of youth he worked with – how the young man was forced to graduate despite not feeling prepared. The man explains,

And so they graduated him out and he didn’t want to graduate because he didn’t feel like he learned enough. And he told me this: “I don’t want to graduate from here but they’re forcing me to graduate,” so they just mailed the diploma to his house and “you’re graduated! You don’t have to come here anymore!”

Another focus group participant commented that this is a common experience among students at this school because many feel nurtured and taken care of there and, therefore, when it becomes time to

leave, they are fearful. He reports,

That school takes kids that are there and nurtures them... They have a woodworking shop there, and they give them hope. They learn about woodworking and all this other stuff and some of the kids, like maybe that kid, they come back every year and they don't want to leave because they have something there that might be safer. ... it's really great for those kids; it teaches them skills and sometimes they hire the kids after school. They do a lot of things for those kids there. So, that's probably one of the reasons why.

Institutional pressures schools face regarding suspension numbers negatively impacts students.

Methods of restorative justice used in one Worcester high school have been successful and they should be the rule, not the exception, according to one professional working with youth. Referring to this particular high school, he elucidated,

Look at their stats. In two years, they went from 700 suspensions to last year, 100 because they started restorative justice within the classroom... they're intentionally creating healing, right? For the kids... but they are the only school doing restorative justice.

Referring to the students at this particular high school, he elaborated,

[it] is located in the most poor community right now in Worcester. It's a school that has the most kids of color going to it. And then, as a community, unless we change the way our narrative is about how we talk about our kids in our school, like, we're perpetuating the conversation of "they're messed up, of course they're broken, that school needs to do something." It's like yeah, but is that helping?

Education system in general is not made for Latino youth. One professional working with the schools points out that the biggest problem for Latino youth in terms of education is the system itself. He says,

Until we change the system that fails our kids, it's gonna be hard for kids to be succeeding. Our system fails our kids. You know, it's not meant for our kids... We need to make it more culturally sensitive for our kids. When we're taking MCAS and talking about things I don't know, how am I gonna relate to that? I'm never gonna be able to pass that... We have to change this whole system. It's hard, and until we change the way that we discipline our kids ... you go to the alternative schools, you'll see for yourself. What do you see when you go to alternative schools? Tell me, what do you see? Do you see an alternative school full of white people? No. Hispanics and Blacks. Vietnamese... we're taking our own population and putting them and setting them up for failure and jails. And people forget about that, they don't even look at that stuff. Why are they kicking so many Hispanics out of the public schools? And suspensions don't work. What do we do when we put our Latino men — why can't they go to college? What if a kid in 12th grade gets into a fight and goes to an alternative school and there goes his whole future? I've seen that before with a super bright kid. Why are we failing them that way? What are we doing to fix that? And that's another problem that's stopping us. Our solution to behaviors and to helping our kids in need. It's suspensions and alternative schools. We need to wake up.

Some schools in Worcester have a bad reputation.

Local professionals working with youth spoke about how some schools in Worcester have bad reputations, causing students and parents to avoid them. For example, one interviewee spoke of a school that has far too many students in special education classes but says that nobody cares because of the school's reputation.

Participants in this deeper dive also discussed a number of hurdles they face on their pathways to as well as *in* college. On this front, focus group participants reported:

Gender Trouble on the Path to College

Education and machismo – the idea that “school is for girls” – resulted in underperforming. Another participant talked about being in the “smart” classes during K-8, but how these classes had few males in them. His male friends – the “dumb kids,” he called them – were able to go outside and play at recess more and study less. He explained,

From K through 8th, I was with the smart kids. Track one, ‘cause I used to like to read and so like, I read like all the school books, I would read the chapters, I would do the chapter at the end, so all my friends were like, “You need to knock it off!” And I was like, “uhhh, why?” So what would happen is the smart kids would go read and do all this cool stuff and then my friends ... would go to recesses and have extra lunch time and all that stuff. So I was like, the only boy surrounded girls but wanted to be with my friends.

When he started high school, he intentionally scored low on his entrance exams so he could be in the middle-level classes with his friends. This, however, made him less motivated. He barely tried in these classes and still got great grades because it was easy for him.

Another interviewee chimed in,

And usually when the kid is in high school, some of the parents say, okay, they’re big people, let them do whatever they want. And they think that they’re grown, but they need support and they need that hand holding sometimes and the Latino part doesn’t give them that sometimes because they’re men, they’re grown, they can do whatever they want. It’s also the machismo part of it.

Problem of empowering women and not men. One interviewee pointed out that a problem with empowering young women in the face of gender inequality is that Latino men get left behind. The participant commented,

A lot of men, Latino men, don’t go to college. They have to go to the workforce and this and that. And it’s changing, that thinking of Latino men is that “you can make it to college, you can go to college.” But in middle school, “what do you wanna do?” “I don’t know.” They have no... you guys see it a lot, through these programs. They do goals, we setup goals for them academically, so they get to see at least something. But none of those schools, the majority of the kids that don’t graduate from college, I mean, even high-school, is men. ‘Cause they have all these programs for girls, but not the guys. Middle school is hard because you know, it’s “I wanna be the big person, I wanna be the tough guy.”

Another focus group participant who has worked in afterschool programs with young women added,

So I had to spend a lot of time being like “okay, so there is a girl power movement going on” which I think very valid because women were left out of education. With that said, that is not culturally true. So when we think about men getting an education, it’s white men we’re talking about. So there is a huge gap in that conversation that is not inclusive of men of color because if we ever talked about women or even like, women’s rights in general, we know that it’s white women that are succeeding in these opportunities. And when we look at research we’re only looking at white men, and when we move programming and dollars over in support, we’re not serving this group of boys. We’re missing the mark on what boys had — all the services and all the advantages. And they just got skipped over and nobody is like, “hey!” When we talk about boys, are we talking about Latino or black kids? I think we’re just talking about white boys that did well. And now we have this huge hole that’s sucking up and it’s a problem that’s growing, so now we’re going backwards like, “how come our boys — Latino boys — are doing so poorly in education? There must be a problem.” And you’re like, “you created this problem! Because you didn’t make a responsible decision that was inclusive of how this country was changing demographically.”



Tatnuck Magnet School, K-6, WPS

Negative Labeling as Barrier to College

Long-term effects of early negative labeling. One participant explained how he worked with a young man at the Boys & Girls Club in Worcester who suffered the long-term effects of negative labeling at a young age, a lack of self-esteem and motivation in particular. He explained,

He was seventeen and he was scared. I asked him “what are we gonna do for college?” and he said “I’m too stupid to go to school.” And I was like, “no you’re not.” I mean, he pretty much ran a gang, so I knew that he wasn’t stupid, however, he had been labeled. He had a big black X mark since he was probably 13 or 12...every cop in Worcester knew about him, so he was always labeled and that kind of prevented him from moving forward. I knew he was very smart, but his self-esteem was so low that I couldn’t get him to move forward.

Lack of a Sense of Belonging in Worcester Schools

Honors programs’ lack of Latino men resulted in feelings of isolation. A problem one man participating in the study faced was being the only one of his friends in honors classes. During third and fourth grade, he was the only male in honors classes. And from then until 11th grade, he was the only Hispanic student in honors classes at his school. The teaching style and education level was also very

different – far below the level he had become accustomed to back in New York – and this was hard for him to get used to. He explained that he could not relate to other students there because he was from Great Brook Valley and most of the other kids were not. He felt labeled as a gang-banger and was ostracized despite being in honors. This did not affect his performance though. Once he was in 9th grade, more of his family members moved to Worcester, and he was able to make more friends and get to know their families even if some of those other kids went to a different high school. He made friends with other Latinos via his family members who had more Latinos at their schools.

Different quality public high schools in Worcester created a culture shock for student switching schools. One Worcester man explained that going to a big public school in Worcester and taking classes on a lower academic track made it easy for him to get by and get As versus when he transferred to a smaller school where teachers paid closer attention to students, and consequently, he got all Fs.

Different schools with different opportunities and problems developing a sense of belonging. Another man talked about living with cousins who went to a middle school with a poor reputation and how he went to a charter school from second



Doherty High School, 9-12, WPS

through eighth grade. He saw himself as different from them because he had to wear a uniform. He also felt he missed out on some sports and clubs that their middle school offered but his did not. This, combined with the fact that many of the students at his school lived in the same neighborhood, caused him to feel isolated. His grades dropped during this time. It was not until he left the charter school to go to high school and join his cousins that he was finally able to make more friends he could relate to.

College-as-Culture Shock

“It’s a culture shock.” One man reported that he wanted to leave Worcester and not go to WSU, but could not afford to go to the other schools to which he was accepted, so he started at WSU. The culture shock he experienced related to the fact that he did not know what his teachers wanted from him and that they all wanted something different. He realized he excelled in high school because it was a small school, and he knew what they all wanted. He did not have a support system like back in high school, and he became overwhelmed by so much of the college experience, including being able to park and get to class on time. He explained,

I thought I didn’t want to come to Worcester State. I didn’t want to stay in Worcester. I got into a bunch of colleges in Boston and New York, and my parents decided that year to buy a new house, and they were like, “your budget,

you have to pay the rest.” I actually got into WSU one week before school started and was able to register for none of the classes I wanted just because it was last minute, and that’s how I wound up with my major, because I was taking classes I didn’t want to but wound up liking them. But when I came here it was a big culture shock because my high school was so small; I knew my professors, I knew how he likes the homework, the tests, the grades, and when I came to WSU, that support system wasn’t there laid down for my career path; that was culture shock. Just coming here and finding parking, it was horrendous. Going from a school that was across the street, most of the time I drove even though it was right by my house. But coming to WSU, it was just completely different. None of my friends came here, so I didn’t have no friends. I kinda knew some people because of the older classes in my school, but they weren’t my friends.

Lack of belonging in College – feelings of alienation and lack of preparedness. Another man was the only one in his class to go to college and even though he did a summer program at WSU before starting, he was lost and behind most of his peers in terms of academics. He felt like he did not belong or deserve to be in college. He said,

I came to WSU and the first word that comes to my mind is “lost.” I was just completely lost and I think that lasted with me for three years.

Since from my high school crew, I was the only one who actually got into college and was actually ambitious enough to continue my education, so when I got here, I barely got to into WSU. I had a summer program. Six weeks. It was harder for me, but that's when I was a real introvert and I noticed that's how far behind I was from everyone else; I felt like I had no idea what they were talking about, I didn't have proper reading skills. We were supposed to have a list of books and readings we were supposed to read prior to getting into college. When I got here, they were talking about urban education, you know, and all these definitions, current events, and how to skim through newspapers, articles, facts, skimming through readings—that completely threw me off. Six weeks in that program, I felt like I was playing catch up, learning how to fit in with the rest of the group and not only that but we were also the group who needed additional help to get into college, so below just getting into the bottom level, just to get into the college. So that was my first two years, “do I deserve being here? Do I belong here? Is it really for me? Or is it just rhetoric?” the whole college idea.

Lack of knowledge of cost of college. Another man talked about not knowing how expensive college was going to be until after he got his financial aid package and had his dorm picked out and then realized he couldn't afford it. He elaborated,

I had gotten into Johnson & Wales and was the only student from my high school to get into there so I was like, “you know, I'm pretty high up on the mountain,” I was like “yup, I did it.” But then I took a tour, I had my dorm picked out, I had everything I was gonna do, I was gonna do a business major and maybe minor in culinary and like, I just had dreams to have my own business and I think like a month before I started they sent me my financial aid and my first bill and I was like, “woah!” And they were like, “yeah we have three semesters here, so you work on trimesters,” and I was like, “woah!” Let's pump the breaks, let's see how much more financial aid you guys are gonna give me and it was only like \$2000. So I asked my parents, “what's the point? I did everything you guys have asked

for my whole life, Catholic school, this, this, this, you know, always being home, never been arrested, very good boy.” And so when it came time for them to like, you know, pay it, they were like “we can't afford it,” like, you know? My dad was working at Polar so he was already working like 50, 60, 70 hours. So there was no more that I could ask of him. So I was like, “okay, looks like I'mma have to pay for it.” So I asked Johnson & Wales “what else can we do?” They pretty much said that's what I was gonna get and I was like, “nope, I'm not gonna go there.”

Difficult transition to college made for rocky start.

One student said it took him until his junior year to get the hang of college. He felt he did not retain anything during the first two years. He was just trying to get by. He doesn't know why the transition was so rough; he was just trying to get a good grade. He explained,

I felt lost. I felt like I had come here and would get by, take tests, try to get a good grade, but I wasn't really obtaining anything, it was just in one ear and out the other. Just memorize this for a test and then it's gone. I don't know if it was the public school system, or maybe it was something in my private life that had the impact but I felt lost. It took me junior year all the way here at WSU where I could be like “now I can hang now,” like “now I understand what this is about, how college prepares you for life.” But I can't pinpoint why it was such a tough transition though.

Difficulty staying focused. Another student spoke about first going to college out of state and then to UMass-Amherst. He described both as big party schools where he played sports and socialized a lot and academics always came second. This was a big culture shock for him; it was difficult for him to stay in line. He explains,

I went to West Virginia University for first semester freshmen year, so that was a big culture shift. I have a big family, so I'm used to a lot of people like, you know, just, parties and staying up late and that lively atmosphere within the family, so like, going to big a school was

my cup of tea, I think 30,000 [students] at the time, big football program and all that. I did well there, or I shouldn't say that. I did well culturally, like I fit in, I liked it, but I was still with my high-school girlfriend and I missed my family so I transferred here to UMass-Amherst, close to home, still its own little town, its own little atmosphere, but still a big school, so I liked that. But I felt "home" here in Massachusetts so that felt good culturally, to see friends, family, girlfriend and all that. Academically, definitely a culture shock or a shift because I kind of just skated by, average student, B - C student, most involved in the senior superlative because I was in like all the clubs, sports, involved. So my academics came second and so when I was having to endure the rigor of you know, college, that was tough. Especially when you have the distractions at those big party schools. I left West Virginia with like a 2.4GPA and had a 1.6 at Amherst so I was on academic probation, so that was shocking, so I had to fight outta there or was gonna get booted, so I did. I had to stay and finish up.

Lack of structure in college compared to high school. Another man spoke of the big culture shock for him being the lack of curricular structure of college. His high school had so much planned out in terms of MCAS prep, etc., that college seemed too unstructured with too many options and times for classes. He explained,

So, during that time, the MCAS was a big thing from 8th grade to 10th grade, you were training how to pass that test. And everybody passed. And in 11th and 12th grade, it was how to become a college student and they'll allow you to take classes at Clark, and train you how to take the SATs and all those tests and I noticed that with friends I had in private schools like St. Johns, their scores were a lot higher than ours. Whenever they took SATs, their scores were a lot higher than ours. And it wasn't that they were smarter than me, just that they didn't have to focus on the MCAS. And that's why they got into certain schools that I didn't just because their SATs were different even though they had the same grades as I did. They got into all the good colleges and it was just because of their SATs, and I know a lot of the public schools focus on passing that



Rice Square Elementary School, K-6, WPS

test. And when I came into WSU, that was a big shock, because we were so trained in my school that the curriculum was setup for you, and when you came here, you had all this free time because your classes were all over the place. That was a big culture shock, school-wise, for me.

Problems fitting in, too much like high school, and a lack of diversity.

Another participant in the focus groups said that WSU is like a really large high school with all its little cliques, except that the majority of the students are white. His experience was that people stick together in cliques like those in the AID program, TWA, etc. He commented that even though students at WSU study about race, the majority of the students are white and do not want to talk about it. They are people from the small towns in the area and the suburbs of Worcester.

High Stakes of College – Failure & Consequences

Failure first semester in college can result in dropping out and working. Another man talks about his difficulty starting college, having failed his first class at Quinsigamond Community College (QCC) and how it caused him to drop out of school and work. He eventually returned to QCC and is now in the process of transitioning to a university. He is still not sure which one he wants to attend. He explained,

For myself, in a sense, it was hard. Because I did fail my first class when I was at QCC and from that perspective, I never did have the support you might have had, so I just decided to leave the school at that point. That was back in 2013. I just decided to work, work, work, work. Go back to being a mechanic. But I just realized there was a purpose to my life, and there's a purpose to everybody's life because we're created to be something in life, so I felt like, "why don't I just go back?" So at this point now, I'm in the process of transferring from community college to a university, but I'm not too sure where. So, I'm just grateful of the fact, you know, I've gotten so far that, you know, you want to quit but at the same time you don't. You get what I'm sayin'?

Poor performance in college – difficulties balancing work and school. One man talked about having to work and help out his mother. He was part of the AID program at WSU, so he had spent the summer before his freshman year living on campus. He had to quit the football team to work – he needed money and could not ask his mom for help. He had a very difficult time balancing it all. By the end of the year his GPA was 0.8, and he failed out.

Today he considers this the best thing that ever happened because it made him realize he is paying for his education. He does not believe there's such thing as a "traditional college student" anymore and that college cannot be finished in 4 years anymore if you are a student who works. He also says it is hard to be around these other students who do not work and live on campus and have so much free time – "the white kids who get everything paid for," he said. He thinks he is better off, though, because they will all have loans that he will not:

My biggest thing is having to work, and help my mother. I live with my mom. It's just my mom, and my brother's married with his family and my sister has her family. My biggest struggle was, my freshmen year when I moved here, I actually lived on campus and I was working – I was going to school full time. I originally came to WSU to do football, I did the AID program, so it's like a bridge program from high-school to college. So I was living on campus during the summer, so I never really had time to just breathe. So my freshmen year, I was working 25-28 hours at a bank. I needed money. I wasn't gonna ask my mom for money. I stopped playing football, I made the decision to work. My freshmen year was on campus with my buddies. By the end of freshmen year my GPA was 0.8, I failed every class, was working on making money, failed out of school, but I think after failing out of school that was the best thing that ever happened to me because I learned that I'm paying for my education so my biggest thing and I think a lot of kids coming up into college are gonna struggle with the same thing, because there's no such thing as a traditional student anymore. College cannot be finished in four years anymore if you're a working, non-traditional student. But last semester I had a part time job, but it forced me to work six days a week, going to school for four classes. And

working at after school programs, different things I was doing. So I think working, when you see these students that don't work, living on campus, playing sports, mom and dad paying for them, it's the worst thing I ever see. Because at the end of the day, you get the students that are minorities, that are playing sports, that are getting loans but don't realize until when they finish those four years, they're gonna wanna be where I am right now, setting myself up without a college degree. You know? You get the kids who are able to live on campus, finish in four years, the non-traditional students, and the white kids who get everything paid for.

Lack of familial support meant dropping out of college. Another man said he had to drop out of college because his mother moved back to Puerto Rico, and he was all alone to fend for himself. He could not afford to be at school and his grades started dropping. Once he was able to stabilize his situation he returned to WSU. He explained,

I had to drop out because my mom moved back to P.R. and I was literally by myself at that time. So I had to pay for my apartment, pay for my car, pay for room and board for myself, so I couldn't really afford to be at school and my grades started slipping, so I decided I was gonna stop until I got stable. Eventually, when I got stable, I came back.

Problems with accruing and paying off debt from study abroad. Another man spoke of how much he had to work to pay back the debt he accrued in studying abroad during college where he accrued zero credits; work came first and school came further down on the list of priorities.

Struggles working and going to college. One man said that his GPA is not very high but he is proud of it because he has struggled and pushed himself to finish: "I am proud of that 2.7. Because that was blood, sweat, and tears. There was times I couldn't eat."

Participants in this deeper dive also discussed how important it is to encourage young Latinos in this climate of lost hope. On this front, focus group participants reported:

The need to meet students where they are at and encourage them more. In one focus group, a discussion emerged about how to encourage young Latino men to pursue their dreams without pursuing those that appear out of reach. One interviewee said,

The thing is, and I agree, it's never about what not to be. That's the thing that I feel like the conversation sometimes, you know, stems. I was just having a conversation with one of my friends; her daughter is 16. So yeah, their friend was 16. She was a young woman of color and she had to ask that question "what do you wanna go to college for?" more so than "what do you wanna be when you grow up?" But she said "I wanna be a hairdresser," and I was like, "Oh, word! You got skills?" and she was like, "Yeah," and I was like, "Yo, you should own your own business." And she was like, "yeah!" And I was like "why you gonna work for somebody?" And this school has really good business degrees and then you could employ your friends, and they could all get good jobs. And sometimes we think we have to be like, "nah, that don't make no sense, you not gonna be a ball player! You can't rap!" But it's like, I don't mean to say that to you. All I have to do is expose you to other opportunities.

Another interviewee talked about how important it is to expose young men to more than that which social media provides. Media saturation gives them unrealistic goals. They need real-life role models and early. He explained that they need to be exposed "to other things besides ball playing because they see that on the radio, music videos, on their Facebook, on their Snapchat." Referring to the impact of television, he added,

But they don't show how to be an astronaut or rocket scientist – I met a rocket scientist the other day. I'm like, "you're a rocket scientist?" "Yeah, I'm a rocket scientist." "Oh, I really wanna talk to you!" He puts satellites up in the air and that's his thing... That exposure,

even at that level, even 1st grade, 'cause they all wanna – they see what's on TV, because TV is a pacifier.

should be extended to students of other backgrounds because at his school all students were disadvantaged in this respect.

Need for programs to help students prepare and find jobs in their last years of college. Another man says programs need to exist for people finishing up college because jobs do not just appear. He says at schools like WSU, administrators say they will help you get jobs with things like resume preparation and career fairs, but they never bring people to campus who are looking to hire. Accordingly, programs need to exist for this transition, too. This man made all the connections he made to get his current job on his own, without any help like more prestigious schools provide their students.

POSSE is a start but needs improvement. Another man mentioned the benefits of programs like POSSE for minority students to get to prestigious schools but that at the moment the program is still very limited and needs to be expanded. Another student says this is not only a Latino problem and



City View Discovery School, K-6, WPS

PEERS

The ISOO report identified a few important themes with regard to peers' influences on Latino men's pathways to post-secondary education.

Major Findings from ISOO

Men reported that **peer groups shifted significantly in middle school, particularly in terms of peer pressure.** Being cool in front of peers became a priority and significantly influenced decision making; it involved engaging in risky and deviant behavior, and was linked to proving one's masculinity, or "machismo."

Peers were characterized as positive influences in terms of academic and emotional health, finding one's way to college, **providing support in the absence of family**, and helping them through difficult times.

A lack of positive adult presences in young men's lives influenced their decision making and **led to finding the "wrong" group of friends**, which compounded poor decision making.

Men cited the need for role models, mentors, father figures, and community centers to help keep them on a positive and productive path.

Mobility (in terms of moving from school to school) **and transience** (in terms of moving from school system to school system) **made developing peer groups** and the ability to critically assess the "right" group to spend time with **difficult.**



Focus group participants in this deeper dive into Worcester addressed positive and negative impacts of peers in terms of completing a college degree. Participants reported:

Some peers helped men get through college. Studying with friends who also studied and had fun was helpful, and also made one man realize that different people have different study needs to achieve the same grades. He elaborated,

Coincidentally, it was good timing where one of my good friends from high school was in the dorms with a roommate but his roommate left or vacated, I dunno why, so I moved in with him, which was a mistake. So we're playing baseball and Nintendo games, the old Nintendo games and just partying. But academics came easier to him. But we even had some similar classes; I remember we had philosophy together and we would go all the time. We'd have a routine, we'd go to lunch, then there, then whatever. And so we would study together and it just came to him easy, and I mean, he liked the class, but for me it was like, "it's alright, but I'm struggling to get Cs." And he's like, smoking me with As and maybe some Bs and I'm like, "I have to work so much harder." And that continued to be my experience even when I moved off campus into a house of eight, and three of us were psych majors and we had a lot of classes together and that was even more frustrating because they would not go to classes, and they would just cram like, literally the night before an exam and just stay up all night and do whatever they had to do to stay up all night and cram and I was going to all the classes and doing all the readings and doing all that and they would still edge me out and I was like, "that's so frustrating." It wasn't like, A to C like in philosophy class, but I put in all that time and effort and they just did this in one night before the exam and they would get the same grade or a little bit better. But, you know. I got to accept that I was a different learner than they were, and whatever, you know. I just gotta stay on my path.

Lack of identification with other college students.

One man talked about how hard it was to have a girlfriend in college who did not have to work as much as he did outside of school – she could not understand why he did not have more time. This was his experience with many people who lived on campus at WSU. They did not understand. Referring to his girlfriend living on campus, he elaborated,

She was living on campus, so I was hanging out on campus all the time, going to like, every event, everything social. But I also had a work schedule that I had to maintain Monday through Friday at UPS. So at 5 o'clock I had to stop whatever I was doing, whether I was on campus or whatever. I had to be at work by 6 o'clock; it was a half an hour drive. I'd get out 10, 10:30, 11 every night to study, to read, to do whatever I had to do, then call my girlfriend one last time and she would talk till like 1 or 2 in the morning and I just remember being like "why am I doing this? Why do you always wanna talk? I'm exhausted," and she was like "well this is the only time I get to talk." She used to live in Boston on the weekends and I would just sleep like, all day Saturday and she would just say "why would you come if you're just gonna sleep?" and I was like "I'm with you, this is what you asked." I didn't have a lot of free time; I couldn't participate in sports 'cause I had to go to work in order to pay for my school, and all the other free time I had I was studying.

Questioning the value of a college degree. Another man reported being motivated to go to school but does not like the fields of study he chose. He does not know what he wants to study or do for work. "Most of my friends I know have been to school and none of them are working in their fields," he explained. Now that he's paying for everything, rather than relying on the scholarships he initially had, he wants to be sure what he studies is something he really wants for his future.

THE CITY

Participants in this second phase of research spoke of a select number of problems Latino men face living in the city of Worcester.

Difficulty establishing a sense of belonging and adjusting to life in an ethnically segregated city. One man talked about moving from Brooklyn, NY, in the 3rd grade. He liked it there. He lived in an apartment complex where he would play with all kinds of kids of diverse backgrounds. It was an adjustment for him to move to Great Brook Valley and be around almost exclusively Latinos. He found this strange. He had difficulty adjusting because the other kids could not relate to where he came from. Eventually, he made friends with a couple neighbors and is still friends with them. He explained,

It was a huge adjustment when I moved here and first I ended up in the Valley with mostly other Spanish people, nobody else, it was weird. And then in the school, I couldn't relate to any of the kids because none of them had the same growing up environment, and I was sort of anti-social so it didn't...my first friends were my neighbors, and so I met the only three friends I have now, which are who I hang out with, and at school it was horrible, because the people I knew weren't in any of my classes since I was in honors classes. And the way they teach things here versus over in New York are completely different. In kindergarten here they're doing coloring and stuff, and there I was doing math and science. So I was little ahead of everyone, so they put me in honors.

Many professional people of color from Worcester leave because they do not feel they belong in Worcester's white-dominated professional world, resulting in a dearth of positive role models for youth. One focus group participant explained her educational trajectory to show what Worcester could do to produce more positive professional role models to whom Latinos and other students of color could relate. She said,

I went to school to be a teacher. I'm a kid that grew up in a poor neighborhood, I'm an immi-

grant. And the difference for me is that I joined a future teacher's program in middle school, and I used to come to Worcester State in the summer and do the future teacher's program, and I didn't apply to any other school except Worcester State because that's the only school I'd ever been to; it's the only school that made me feel like I belonged for a little bit, and I wanted to be a teacher because I participated in a pipeline, almost. And of course, that pipeline created a space for me to wanna stay in my community and contribute back. It's our own public school students going through a pipeline, receiving a quality education, having a quality program that they can participate in, having them do just like Clark does, having the mentorship there, being able to come back to your community and teach. Instead of us losing our succeeding people of color because they don't see themselves here because the professional world in Worcester is very white.

Racism in Worcester persists and is inscribed in the urban landscape. One focus group participant spoke about how imperative it is to amplify the current efforts to combat racism in Worcester. She explained,

We have the Latino History Project. I went to a session the other day because they did all this from the 1960s until now, and they had all these people there, who did this and that until now. And how they fought for the bilingual education and this and that. They have stories of people that came here and worked in the industry and all this other stuff. It was great. It's all our people; it's our story of Worcester. Latino stories in Worcester. It was good to see that. We have to eventually project that more to the people out there, so they can actually start to know "that's where we come from. That's how much people have fought in Worcester to get us where we are today." You have to break the stereotypes and the racism. Let's face it, as Latinos in Worcester, we still face racism. We face it every single day, growing up in the Valley or Lincoln Village, you already have a barrier to overcome. So it's really hard for the Latino males to get through

that when you're being told all the time that you're a loser, that you can't do nothing for yourself.

Latinos in Worcester losing sight of systemic oppression polarizes members of Latino community. During one focus group, participants began to discuss the problem of Latinos who become successful losing sight of systemic oppression and how this polarizes members of the Latino community. One participant explained,

For a long time, my family especially, they're immigrant, working, everybody works. So we're like shaming other people that are living off systemic resources. And at one point I had a moment where I had my "aha moment" of being like, "we've spent a lot of time blaming individuals, what we haven't looked at is what is the systemic influence that happens to these people? And are we looking at the right problem? Are they really the problem, or is there something larger at play that we should really be addressing that we are not having that conversation?"



Worcester City Hall

When asked where this finger-pointing comes from, the participant elaborated,

I think that oppression naturally creates the vibe. You know? I think of Jim Crow stuff, that's the best way I can describe it, about the idea of what people will do to feel some sense of dignity. So when you're stripped so constantly of power and you gain a little bit of situational power, let's say, a little bit of situational power. You know, you want to hold onto that so bad, that if anybody tries to take that away from you, and that's where I see the finger pointing happening. When people are like, "well, at least I'm not you." That whole "at least I'm not you." Instead of being like, "hey, we're in this suffering together, if we collectively made more efforts, we would have more impacts." But I think that people stripped of power take whatever they can and that can easily be turning on each other. "Each other" being whatever the community that they come from.

Need for Latino mentors during important moments of transition. One man said he thinks kids need mentors especially during transitions from 8-9th grades, and then high school to college. They can offer young men advice about how to succeed in these new spaces. He also sees this as a way for Latino men to give back to the community, something he currently does. He explained,

If we would have had a strong mentor, between the transition ages of like 8th grade to 9th grade and then from senior [year] to college, like, either somebody in your life or a program mentor, that you could — even if you're aged out, you could still be like, "hey. I'm now in college, I'm doing this, what do you think I should do?" That, I feel like would be so beneficial especially to boys to see Latino men still giving back to the community. And that's one of the reasons why I'm employed at where I'm at — so that I can do that now instead of saying "yeah, we should have mentors! We should have non-profits or business or whatever," like, no, "I'm gonna be the Latino and show people what they have to do." So that's giving me that motivation to be that person instead of just saying "we need more mentors, we need more mentors!" You know, you gotta find people who wanna give back to the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The ISOO report offered a number of recommendations, broken down into five different categories: Recommendations for Increasing Opportunity for Young Males; Public Policy Recommendations; Higher Education Recommendations; Recommendations for Schools; and Recommendations for Further Research.

Recommendations for Increasing Opportunity for Young Males

Expand the Commonwealth's Gateway Cities

Strategy to include paid internships and mentorship opportunities that allow youth to explore the world of work while earning a living wage.

Increase opportunities for free and effective ESL programs for out-of-school youth and their families, preferably connected to adult basic education programs.

Develop family-centered programs operated through partnerships, including K–12 schools, higher education institutions, and CBOs **that encourage youth and families to gain knowledge and power** about:

- Navigating the K–12 education system
- Financial literacy and budgeting for education
- The process of selecting colleges and applying to college
- The process of applying for financial aid and scholarships
- The college experience
- Career opportunities and the job market

Build capacity in community-based organizations—identified by youth as an important resource—to **augment college access programs**—beginning in middle school and lasting through

high school—to include the development of formal relationships with higher education institutions.

Public Policy Recommendations

Implement bold steps to make college more affordable and simplify the cost structure for families. For example, policy makers should support efforts at the national level to offer free community college education coupled with student support services to promote completion and the transition to four-year bachelor's programs. More locally, policy makers should promote and publicize new agreements between community colleges and state universities in Massachusetts that provide a pathway for students who complete their associate's degree and transfer directly to state universities to complete their bachelor's degree for a total not to exceed \$30,000 in four years.

Reconceptualize the middle school experience to include opportunities for future planning, and the high school experience to include vocational, early college, and co-op opportunities and ensure that online educational opportunities are explored.

Identify and implement initiatives that directly deal with out-of-school youth. Latino young men often fall into this category of youth, a subset of the population outside the domain of the K–12 or the higher education system. Efforts should build on the Gateway Schools model that allows out-of-school youth to enter into community colleges and earn high school and college credits.

Higher Education Recommendations

Improve and deepen relationships between colleges and the Latino community through partnerships with cultural institutions, community-based organizations, and K–12 schools to develop Latino cultural awareness programs on college campuses,

in K–12 schools, and in communities. Examples might include exhibits highlighting the history and biographies of Latinos, oral history projects involving elder community members, etc.

Create Latino mentor programs and opportunities in and through schools (K–12 with an emphasis on middle school, and colleges) and community organizations.

Become a part of the lives of potential college students by developing highly structured, yearlong programs for those unable to gain admission to build stronger foundational and socialization skills.

Develop schedules and conditions that recognize the need to earn an income while enrolled in college as an important factor, and increase career services to improve the quality of work opportunities including closer ties with regional employers and industries.

Recommendations for Schools

Ensure adequate administrative support of K–12 teachers to ensure positive classroom environments and implement school-wide staff training programs about the negative effects of labeling (e.g., “troublemaker,” “underachiever,” etc.) and the necessity of extending second (and third) chances to students in the hopes of getting them back on track.

Recruit more ethnically representative K–12 faculty and administrative staff by developing high school/college programs for aspiring Latino educators (e.g., a Future Latino Teachers Program) and building a greater sense of belonging for Latinos in all schools, K–16.

Explore curricular and extracurricular opportunities beyond Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) prep that develop student creativity, intellectual curiosity, and the ability see the world in interdisciplinary ways. Initiatives should begin early—particularly in middle school—and should be tied to college expectations and 21st century job market skills, and should also augment schools’ relationships with CBOs to help create positive environments for after-school hours.

Recommendations for Further Research

Studies that focus on how public health issues (e.g., substance abuse and mental health) **and social service issues** (e.g., family instability, foster care, physical abuse) **impact educational pathways.**

Studies that follow a cohort of Latino male college students from college admission to graduation to explore the college socialization process, academic readiness and performance, and other factors affecting completion.

Studies that explore the effects that specific educational policy environments and problems have on educational pathways in each of these cities.

Studies that examine how sociocultural dynamics within and among different groups (e.g., ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, geographic) in each city **affect educational pathways.**

Studies that focus on these cities independent of each other to **allow for in-depth research to help effectively implement statewide policy recommendations at the local level.**

Additional Recommendations from *A Deeper Dive into Worcester*

The findings from this deeper dive into Worcester confirm the critical need for the implementation of each of the ISOO report recommendations. For example, as the ISOO report recommends, family-centered programs are needed to help families better understand both how to navigate the educational system as well as the value of earning a college degree for Latino men specifically. Such programs will help parents encourage and monitor young men along their educational pathways. Also, making college affordable will lessen the financial and emotional burden on families and students, and in turn, making earning an undergraduate degree a realistic and achievable goal.

Despite some stories of positive college prep experiences in Worcester Schools and positive experiences in college, Latino men in Worcester face a number of institutional obstacles that make earning a post-secondary degree a formidable challenge. Given the ELL challenges among families and students, as the ISOO report recommends, ELL programs must be more accessible to all Latinos. Additionally, Worcester evidences a significant lack of identification between students and staff, warranting more ethnically representative K-12 faculty and staff.

Given the specific findings detailed above in this report on Worcester in particular, a few additional recommendations should be considered.

Future planning must begin earlier – middle school is not early enough. Young men need to be thinking about their future plans from as early as elementary school with a clear understanding of what role their studies play in those plans.

College prep programs must be available to all students – including students attending vocational schools – and should include financial support like Bottom Line.

Programs geared at inclusiveness and support for college students are helpful but **need to be improved** to prevent students from dropping out.

Schools must re-evaluate bilingual and ELL education programs to better cater to students needs, including but not limited to transitioning into English classrooms.

Programs must be developed to teach young men how to become successful and self-reliant students before leaving high school.

K-12 schools as well as institutions of higher education must undergo a cultural shift to become spaces of inclusion and success in which Latino men can experience a sense of belonging and see themselves as worthy and capable of pursuing an undergraduate college degree.

Programs must be developed **to help students prepare for and find jobs** during their final years of college.

Mentorship programs for Latinos should be developed to help men during important moments of transition (e.g., elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, high school to college, and college into the workforce).

Efforts must be expanded to help Worcester undergo a cultural shift so that professional Latinos and other professionals of color are able to experience a sense of belonging in the city, which in turn, will ensure more positive role models for youth.

More research on Latino men's experiences in Worcester is needed, specifically in relationship to post-secondary education — research aiming to answer more specific questions and to capture a greater diversity of perspectives.