

All dressed up with no place to go

The path to college for African-American and Latino males from North Philly

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In Philadelphia, more than 40 percent of African-American students and 50 percent of Latino students don't graduate from high school within six years.

We believe that after graduating from high school, African American and Latino males from North Philadelphia have a greater chance of making it to a jail cell than making it to college. As College Ambassadors for the First Person Documentary Project, we are a group of African American and Latino males working to learn about the challenges we face on the path to higher education.

The village

We believe that it takes more than one resource and more than one support to have good college preparation. To make it to college, we need our "village" to direct us on a positive path.

Our village first consists of our **community** — our neighborhoods, programs inside the neighborhood, and our old heads (what we call mentors). Some of the obstacles that we as Black and Latino males face in our community include drugs, alcohol, violence, disease, and peer pressure.

Right now we are struggling in our communities because of the obstacles placed in front of us every day. In zip code 19134, where several of us live, 178 youth under age 17 were arrested for drugs in 2004, and there were 41 gunshot victims between ages two and 24.

Drugs and violence everywhere force us to make choices between school and our personal safety. They scare away individuals and programs who might support us. They also make people stereotype and stigmatize us. All of this makes us lose hope and faith, which limits our chances of enrolling in college.

Another part of our village is **school**. Some of the obstacles we face in our schools in North Philadelphia are the few rigorous academic programs, the lack of tutoring, the shortage of college-related information, and the lack of commitment to help our brothers make it on our path to college.

Family is another part of our village. We expect our family to be there to provide us with encouragement and motivation on our path to college, and we look for their support if we have a financial problem. But in North Philly, 65 percent of Black youth live in single-parent homes, and 68 percent of Black families live under the poverty line.

Our **peers and friends** are another part of our village. Too many of our friends are smoking, drinking, selling drugs, or imprisoned. We have friends who have a positive outlook and who encourage us on our journey to college, but we need more.

Our research process

As a group, we went from debating opinions to gathering facts based on our opinions. We gathered information from research reports and compared neighborhoods based on statistical data.

Through this process, we identified five key factors that impact college readiness. We then compiled a survey based on these factors and gave it out to 232 people ages 16-25 at Temple University, Community College of Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, and Benjamin Franklin High School.

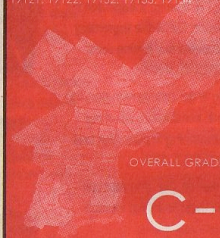
What we need from our village

We believe that for an African American or Latino male from North Philadelphia to get into college, our village must provide us with five supports.

First, we need **educational and academic supports** that prepare us for college, career, and social success — qualified teachers, challenging classes, SAT/ACT preparation, and high expectations.



NORTH PHILADELPHIA
19121, 19122, 19132, 19133, 19134



"Black and Latino males want to go to college, but too many people don't expect us to go. We believe that in order for us to make it to college, we need our community, school, family, and peers to help us. Our Village must provide us with five supports. We have graded North Philly on its ability to do so."

To learn more about the First Person Documentary Project and to support the College Ambassadors' efforts, visit: www.firstpersondocumentary.org

Education & Academic Supports

C+

We need preparation for postsecondary, career, and social success. But few schools in our area offer qualified teachers, rigorous academics, or SAT prep. For example, over 90% of the 11th graders at FitzSimons High School and over 83% of 11th graders at Vaux High School scored Below Basic on their PSSAs.

Mentoring and Social Supports

C+

We need motivation, information, counseling, and connections to help us with school work, finding college information, and with emotional support. We do have people to help keep us out of trouble, but we need more competent mentors who tutor us, teach us, and advise us how to go to college. We also need more college students to interact with us on a regular basis.

Competent Organizations and Programs

C-

We need organizations and programs that prepare us academically and culturally for college. Too many local Rec and Beacon centers are just "hang out" areas. Organizations and programs should be giving students SAT/ACT prep, college trips, networking opportunities and personal skill development.

Financial Assistance

C+

We need grants, loans, scholarships, and good financial advice. Even though it's out there, we don't always take advantage because we don't know where to find it or we are afraid we can't pay back loans. Because so many of us live in low-income neighborhoods and families, however, those who support us struggle to pay bills and save money. It can also be hard for adults in our village to find good jobs because so many of them have been locked up.

Neighborhood Leadership

D-

We need leaders who can rid our neighborhoods of obstacles so our young people don't get caught up in negativity. Our neighborhoods are dirty, drug infested, and full of crime and violence. We are worried about being beat up, robbed, shot, killed, using and selling drugs, and how we are going to get money. These worries make us lose hope and focus on doing well in school.

The North Philly College Ambassadors graded their village in providing college supports.

Few schools in our area offer these supports. For example, over 90 percent of the 11th graders at FitzSimons High School and over 83 percent of 11th graders at Vaux scored Below Basic on their PSSAs. A lot of schools in North Philadelphia are not preparing students for the PSSAs — or for college.

We also need **mentoring and social supports**. We do have supports to help keep us out of trouble, but not enough people who think it's important for us to go to college. In zip code 19132, for example, only 4.2 percent of adults have bachelor's degrees. We feel like we are struggling on our own but aren't getting anywhere. After a while, we lose hope.

Third, we need **competent organizations and programs**. Too many organizations and programs are incompetent when it comes to preparing students academically and culturally for college. Too many of us have to travel outside of our village to find extra-curricular activities that colleges are looking for. As a result, we are not able to compete with other students.

Fourth, we need **financial assistance**. Because so many of us live in low-income neighborhoods and families, those who support us struggle to pay bills, let alone save money. It can be hard for adults in our village to find jobs — so many of them have been locked up, and no one will hire them for a good job. We need grants, loans, scholarships, and good financial advice.

Finally, we need **neighborhood leadership**. We are worried about things we should not have to worry about — like being beat up, robbed, shot, killed, using and selling drugs, and how we are going to get money. These worries make us lose hope and lose focus on school. Neighborhood leaders like block captains, rec center and PAL center staff, and religious

leaders should be ridding our neighborhoods of these problems.

Grading our village

Black and Latino males want to go to college, but too many people don't expect us to go. We need our village to help us.

As College Ambassadors, we believe that youth have a voice and the right to evaluate those who are supposed to be providing us with these supports. We have created a report card for our North Philadelphia Village (see box). We also worked with the WHY Learning Lab to create a short video explaining the report card.

Overall, we gave North Philadelphia a C- for its ability to provide African-American and Latino males with the supports we need to go to college. There are some strong parts of our village, but we need more competent organizations that provide SAT/ACT prep and cultural exposure, more qualified teachers, more challenging classes, and more support to do better than just staying off the streets.

The authors are the initial group of First Person College Ambassadors. The group includes one high school graduate, seven rising seniors, and one rising junior. Hired by the First Person Documentary Project to evaluate the post-secondary support system available to African-American and Latino males in their communities, these young men will be developing their advocacy efforts over the 2007-08 school year.

First Person is working to expand the project into other communities. For information, visit www.firstpersondocumentary.org/college-ambassadors.

Eric K. Grimes (SEED Concepts) and Benjamin Herold (First Person Documentary Project) lead the College Ambassador Project and contributed to this article.



October is ASAP's
"Philly Plays Scrabble Month"

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