

# Building College Pathways Takes a Village

FINDINGS from the  
North Philadelphia College Ambassadors Project

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June 2008

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# Introduction

by Michael Kubiak

Philadelphia has been at the forefront of efforts to improve college readiness and access. Yet, despite the best intentions of these various interventions, the rates for high school graduation, college going, and post-secondary completion of Philadelphia's neighborhood high school students continue to reveal persistent challenges for low-income Black and Latino males. One-quarter of Philadelphia's residents have less than a high school diploma,

twenty-three of its sixty-two public high schools were labeled "dropout factories" in a 2007 study, and one in five of the city's sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds are neither in school nor working (Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board 2007; Snyder 2007).

The College Ambassadors project, designed to complement the feature-length documentary film *First Person* (see sidebar on next page), aims to radically change that equation. The project has two major goals: to build in a cohort of young men of color the skills they will need to navigate along the road to college, and to lay the groundwork for an accountability structure that places these young men at the center of efforts to speak truth to power in evaluating the adequacy of the college pathways in their own Philadelphia neighborhoods, as well as the post-secondary networks available to them.

The College Ambassadors Project is premised on the belief that young people's experiences, perspectives, and voices must be at the center of any effort to improve opportunities on their behalf. Through a rigorous research process, the College Ambassadors are asked to analyze and assess the support system as it currently exists, to envision a more comprehensive system that would work for them, and to begin advocating for this new and improved system.

*"As College Ambassadors, we believe that it takes more than one resource and more than one support to have good college preparation. We believe that it takes a Village to get an African American or Latino male into college."*

Piloted in the summer of 2007 with a group of African American and Latino males in North Philadelphia, the College Ambassadors Project has generated national interest as a model for authentic youth engagement and community-based evaluation.

The report cards, full recommendations, and video created by this initial cohort of young men are available on the Web at [www.firstpersondocumentary.org/college-ambassadors](http://www.firstpersondocumentary.org/college-ambassadors). As this report went to press, additional cohorts of College Ambassadors were scheduled to conduct similar efforts in Philadelphia during the summer of 2008, and a demonstration project was planned for fall 2008 in Providence, Rhode Island.

# FIRST★PERSON

*First Person* follows the lives of six promising Philadelphia public high school students trying to make it to college. The ninety-minute film, named “Best Documentary” at the 2008 Philadelphia Film Festival (Festival of the Independents), utilizes video diaries shot by the students themselves to provide a deeply personal examination of how the road to college too often leads to a dream deferred. “When I first met these six young people, their talent, charisma, and aspirations all clearly pointed them to college,” says producer and director Ben Herold, who won the 2008 Philadelphia Film Festival’s SCION Award for Best First-Time Film Director. “I figured *First Person* would be an uplifting story about talented kids beating the odds.”

Three years later, only four of the students had graduated from high school, and none had made it to a four-year college. Along the way, everything that could happen to them did. Malika was accepted to Drexel University, but her family could not afford to send her. Fresh dropped out of high school and bounced around the streets and odd jobs. Unable to leave behind the familiar comforts of his family and neighborhood, Macho flunked out of a prestigious dual-enrollment program at the Community College of Philadelphia. Kurtis was sentenced to twenty to forty years in state prison after pleading guilty to third-degree murder.

Hailed as “hopeful, but heartbreaking” by the Philadelphia Inquirer (John-Hall 2008), *First Person* is a unique look inside the lives of urban youth and a powerful testament to the urgent need to expand the opportunities available to them. Civic leaders in Philadelphia and elsewhere have embraced the film as a vehicle for rallying the public to become involved in helping urban public high school students make it to – and through – college, and public television broadcasts of *First Person* in fall 2008 provide a powerful opportunity to leverage these commitments.

For more information, visit <[www.firstpersondocumentary.org](http://www.firstpersondocumentary.org)>.

## The “Report Card”

The College Ambassadors describe their project in this way:

As a group, we started our research by brainstorming opinions about our communities, schools, and what we face every day. We debated about what problems are present and why they are present. We then gathered information from research reports and compared and contrasted our neighborhoods based on statistical data. Through this gradual process, we identified five core supports that impact college readiness: Education and Academic Supports, Mentoring and Social Supports, Competent Organizations and Programs, Financial Assistance, and Neighborhood Leadership.

We compiled a survey based on these factors and gave out the survey to 232 people within the ages of sixteen and twenty-five at four locations: Temple University, the Community College of Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania, and Benjamin Franklin High School in Philadelphia. Based on our research, we each assigned our own neighborhood a grade for each of these five core supports. Then, as a group, we developed a formula for grading the entire North Philadelphia “Village.”

The nine Ambassadors in the pilot project, after concluding that they had the right to expect the following supports, defined them and assigned these letter grades, reflecting the level at which those supports were being provided in their own “Villages” in North Philadelphia:

Education & Academic Supports C+  
Mentoring & Social Support C+  
Competent Organizations & Programs C–  
Financial Assistance C+  
Neighborhood Leadership D–

## Spreading the Word

The Ambassadors' grades were published and explained in a full report, a PowerPoint presentation and companion video, and a summary report card (see Figure 1). On the heels of their six weeks working to determine these grades and develop these materials, the North Philadelphia College Ambassadors shared their findings in presentations to policy-makers and program staff at the Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, in outreach events with community members through the Philadelphia Department of Recreation's City-wide Amateur Boxing Tournament, and with the general public through media coverage.

The College Ambassadors' full report and individual report cards on their neighbor-

*"We, as brothers, bound together like links to a chain, will work to have a positive impact on our community, family, those around us, and those yet to come – especially the children, who shall create our future!"*

hoods are available at the project's Web site at <[www.firstpersondocumentary.org/college-ambassadors](http://www.firstpersondocumentary.org/college-ambassadors)> (see Figure 2 on next page). As the documentary *First Person* is more and more widely disseminated, the College Ambassadors' research products will provide viewers with further information and tools to deepen their understanding of post-secondary support systems in urban communities and what can be done to improve them.



FIGURE 1.  
North Philadelphia College Ambassadors Report Card



FIGURE 2.  
First Person/College Ambassadors Web site

## Reflections on the Findings

To become credible evaluators, the Ambassadors first needed to develop their personal assets and deepen their understanding that their struggles to make it to college were rooted not only in their personal abilities and challenges, but also in social and political realities. (This process is described in more detail in pages 19–20 of this report.)

This is important, hard work, and the young men who spent the summer of 2007 as College Ambassadors deserve to be commended. Nothing better signifies the commitment and generosity of spirit of the Ambassadors and their adult program directors than the statement recited by

*The uniqueness of the College Ambassadors research model is the intersection of “first person” voice and community-wide assessments.*

the group before beginning their work together each day:

We, as brothers, bound together like links to a chain, will work to have a positive impact on our community, family, those around us, and those yet to come – especially the children, who shall create our future!

### A UNIQUE RESEARCH MODEL

The values, methodology, collaboration, and technology of the College Ambassadors model give us a foundation for the next generation of research, evaluation, and innovation tools. Two particular aspects of the evaluation rubric developed by the Ambassadors stand out as original contributions that were a direct result of the research process being grounded in their day-to-day lived experiences and perspectives.

First, the Ambassadors rated the organizations and programs that ostensibly served them on the organizations’ *competence* in two areas: *the ability to connect with young people*, and *an explicit focus on college*. Most of the programs in their schools and communities were

competent in one of these areas or the other, but rarely in both. Second, the Ambassadors recognized that urban youth need *neighborhood leadership* to make it to college.

They need adults to help them cope in difficult moments and make the best choices, and to mitigate some of the obstacles they face.

The uniqueness of the College Ambassadors research model is the intersection of “first person” voice and community-wide assessments (collected through analysis of publicly avail-

able data, surveys of peers and college students, site visits, and other mixed-method research). As the saying goes in this era of evaluation and accountability, “In God we trust; all others bring data.” Therefore, when the Ambassadors present their findings and say to a roomful of policy-makers and program staff, “I am labeled as a failure even though I am not, because the supports are there but they are just about keeping us out of trouble and out of jail, not about preparing us for college,” they have a robust set of evidence to prove the point.

#### LACK OF COLLEGE ACCESS: A SYSTEM PROBLEM

After watching the *First Person* film for the first time, Lisa Nutter, president of Philadelphia Academies, Inc., and a supporter of the First Person project, said:

The part that upsets me most is most of the kids in the film did everything we asked them to do, yet they didn’t all graduate. And these are all kids who had self-identified as wanting to go to college. That’s a system problem – when you have a set of kids who can see the future with you, but you haven’t put in the kinds of supports they need to get there.

And I don’t mean just a school system problem. I mean, all the systems put in place to support young people aren’t working. . . . I also think one of the things we could be more clear about is, we don’t just expect you to graduate and consider post-secondary education; we need you to graduate and consider post-secondary education. That’s a very different message. (*Philadelphia Weekly* 2008)

More than ever before, a college degree is the key to economic opportunity and to making a difference as a member of one’s family and

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community. Not only will two out of three new jobs require some post-secondary education, but also “the fastest-growing, best-paying jobs require the highest levels of education” (Jobs for the Future 2005, p. 2).

Yet, post-secondary education is as much a public good as it is a private good, which is why these young men deserve the title of “ambassador”: they have set goals to succeed for themselves and their families, but they are equally concerned about creating the conditions in their communities to give their younger siblings and other young people the best chance to reach their goals.

If we hope to build authentic, successful, and sustaining college pathways, then we’d better start now. The College Ambassadors model gives us an avenue to do just that. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform looks forward to supporting the College Ambassadors and First Person projects as they grow across Philadelphia and into other cities, because young people have a deep desire to be a part of something good, to believe in themselves and the communities around them, and make it to college or gainful employment. And they deserve a true system of supports as they travel that often-rocky road to college and beyond. They deserve this, and our cities, in fact, *require* it if we hope for a bright American future.

# How We Got Here

## The Need for the College Ambassadors Model

While many programs are available to urban youth, they have been woefully inadequate in the face of the overwhelming challenges they encounter. Furthermore, the perspectives of young Black men, in particular, are excluded and their needs and talents are ignored in the design and evaluation of these programs.

In this section, the leaders of the College Ambassadors' project, Ben Herold and Eric Grimes, reflect on the programmatic context for Black male failure, tell their own stories, and explain the motivations behind their collaboration to develop the College Ambassadors Project, their individual and collective goals for this innovative process, and how they accomplished together what would have been impossible alone.

### Turning Off the Light Switch

#### Reflections from Ben Herold



I took to calling it the “turning off the light switch” moment. This moment came to define my experience working to help urban public high school students make it to college and lies at the core of my desire to help build the

College Ambassadors Project as a model for including the voices and perspectives of urban youth in efforts to evaluate the supports that are ostensibly delivered on their behalf.

This turning-off-the-light-switch moment would almost always occur after I thought

the hard work of engaging a student was complete. It would involve a student who was invested in the program I was leading, a student with whom I had developed a trusting relationship, a student who had already granted me some insight into his or her aspirations and motivations. However, despite the connections I was able to develop, there inevitably arose a moment when it became clear that what I had to offer simply wasn't enough to help these young people resolve the fundamental conflicts they inevitably ran up against.

#### COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PROBLEM

When life happened to them – when they were forced to make a choice between attending school or attending to family responsibilities, or when they were shaken by fear for their own safety, or when they felt the powerful pull of the streets, or when they looked around and saw the limited opportunities that society seemed to offer people like themselves – no amount of explaining or encouraging, cajoling or nagging on my part could overcome their reactions. Their bright eyes would give way to blank stares. Their animated conversations would give way to monosyllabic responses. The painfully thin veneer that they would adopt was too transparent to hide their hurt, but too strong for me to circumvent.

Whatever I had to offer was not enough to prevent too many of these young people from turning off their light switches. Slowly – too slowly – I came to accept that the failure in these moments lay both with me and with the

system that I represented. At the times when our young people often need us most, we are there for them least. Given the frequency with which these moments arise, it seems clear that there should exist a comprehensive support system that anticipates these moments, aggressively challenges their underlying causes, and does not allow these moments to knock the hope out of our young people.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. Instead, far too many educators and college access professionals seem content to blame the young people themselves for their disengagement. Far too many fail to recognize that, for these students, in these situations, this reaction is, in fact, sensible and rational, if often self-defeating. It is not unreasonable for a bright young African American male living in the inner city to observe his surroundings, analyze the fortunes of the men in his family and community, assess the quality of the educational opportunities presented to him, and gauge all of this against his own experience of promises more often broken than kept – and come to the conclusion that counting on the educational system (and people like me) to deliver a better future is a losing proposition, a waste of their time.

Being on the receiving end of this turning-off-the-light-switch moment again and again stuck with me. I struggled to make sense of what was happening, to understand why it was happening, and to find a successful approach. While I found many colleagues and programs that shared my sense of frustration and concern, I encountered few who were consistently succeeding where I failed. Perhaps even more disconcerting, few seemed truly willing to assess either their programmatic or personal ability to reach and help young people through their turning-off-the-light-switch moments. Too often, the

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reality seemed to be that supports for making it to college existed only for those students who could resolve these fundamental conflicts on their own, and that efforts to improve college access were measured only by their capacity for working with this very small minority of urban students.

#### LOOKING INWARD

As I looked at my own work and sought to understand the sources of my own shortcomings, I saw that part of my failure in these moments was a function of my biography. As a middle-class White man who had been raised in the suburbs, I struggled to understand the psychological and emotional dynamics swirling in my students during these critical moments. I struggled to see their options as they saw them, to relate to the ways in which they experienced diminishing returns from their investment in school, and to understand what things like hope, promise, and disappointment felt like for them.

Over time, I came to realize just how different our experiences and frames of reference for understanding the world – and what it has to offer us – really are. But biography only accounted for part of the explanation as to why I was so helpless in the face of these turning-off-the-light-switch moments. There were White and middle-class teachers and

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college access workers who were much better able than me to help their students navigate these minefields, and I met many Black colleagues who had grown up in circumstances similar to those of our young people, yet struggled just as mightily as I did to reach and adequately support their students.

I have come to believe that, while a lack of understanding can partly explain why we so often fail our young people in the moments when they need us most, an even more significant – and more troubling – explanation is our willingness to accept this failure. The overwhelming statistics on high school dropout and college-enrollment rates, combined with our more personal experiences of losing so many students, provide irrefutable evidence that what we are doing now is simply not good enough. We need something different, better, and comprehensive.

I knew that I was incapable of pretending that the “light switch” moment wasn’t happening, but I also knew that I couldn’t pretend to understand what that moment really meant for my students. I knew that I felt helpless in the face of both the significance of that moment for each individual and the massive scale upon which that moment is repeated each day. But the question remained: What was I to do?

## TAKING THE FIRST STEPS

The first step, I concluded, was to do something that people in my position rarely do: step back, admit that we don’t have all the answers, and then relinquish some degree of control to people who might. When I looked at the professional arc of my own life, I realized that it was entirely possible that I could be leading and directing college access programming in my not-too-distant future. Something about this arc seemed drastically off to me; if I felt like such a failure, and if the statistics and stories of my students confirmed this feeling, why was I so likely to be rewarded for my efforts with more responsibility, more control, and more resources? So, my first step was outside of the programmatic work that I knew in my gut was not working. One thing I knew that I did have to offer was my willingness to be honest about my own capacity and a willingness to act on what I know to be true, even when it means acting against what might immediately seem to be my own self-interest.

Second, I committed to better understanding the full scope of the conflicts leading up to the light-switch moments. I needed to get to know my young people in a way that the work was simply not allowing: as human beings, not as clients or students or program participants. And to do that, I first had to remove myself from positions where I was constantly encouraged to see them as something less.

And third, I committed to finding and forming partnerships with other individuals and organizations whose strengths complemented my weaknesses, and vice versa. To me, giving up control did not mean pretending that I didn’t still have access to any number of material and social resources that could be valuable. But it did mean not immediately trusting that I alone was the one who best knew what to do

with those resources. It meant finding someone who knew better than I did how I could utilize my social network, my access to the technology, my skills to produce quality products, and my access to a meaningful platform for being heard – all on behalf of helping young people to better navigate these turning-off-the-light-switch moments.

#### DECIDING TO MAKE A FILM

To act on these commitments, I decided to make a documentary film that followed the lives of six Philadelphia public high school students trying to make it to college. The film-making process has been an effective vehicle for helping me to better understand the experiences, conflicts, and perspectives of our young people, and I am banking on the film's ability to do the same for a wider audience. Even more important, the film provides a realistic, relevant look at how urban public high school students perceive and experience the path to college. Just as I am hoping that it will help educators better understand their students, I am hoping that the film will help other students and their families recognize, anticipate, and discuss the circumstances and situations that often derail our young people, yet remain unacknowledged, unexplored, and unsolved.

But in order to be a part of a different kind of college access effort – work that is built around anticipating those turning-off-the-light-switch moments and around the belief that it is our collective responsibility to aggressively challenge their root causes – a film by itself is not enough. Ultimately, the film's most powerful utility is as a vehicle for generating attention and support for efforts to re-envision what a comprehensive college support network might look like.

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Therefore, I am vigorously trying to position *First Person* to support the efforts of those who recognize that the type of response our young people need cannot come from just an individual or a program. It needs to come from a village. When our children seek to turn off that light switch, they must be surrounded by people and institutions who have the knowledge to recognize what is happening, the will to act on that recognition, and the capacity to offer something different. Everyone involved with our children's college preparation – from policy-makers to admissions officers to parents to teachers to community members to program staff to peers – must uphold their respective responsibilities to not turn away from our children when they face the conflicts between home and school and neighborhood that so often throw them off track.

In order to create such a support network and in order to do more than help a few students beat the odds and marginally reduce the odds against a small portion more, we must hold each of these stakeholders accountable for understanding and addressing the conflicts we know our students are going to face. That recognition – and a subsequent willingness to be held formally accountable for outcomes, both successes and failures – is at the heart of the College Ambassadors Project.

## The Light Turned On

### Reflections from Eric Grimes



When life has yet to smack you in the face, it is easy to believe and hope that society will deliver on its promises. Many of our young people are told from a very early age by parents, teachers, pastors, and, especially, the media that the

“American dream” is there for the taking if they work hard and play by the rules. But when the smack comes – the moment that racial socialization theorists call “the encounter” – an ugly world is revealed, and many young people retreat in the face of it. For Black males, that moment often reveals the world at its most vicious. The smack these young men feel is often the most painful, and their retreat from the educational system and other institutions is often the most profound.

Despite this reality, however, I reject the notion that this moment represents our young people “turning off their light switches.” Instead, I choose to understand it as a light being turned on to the ugly realities of a fundamentally racist society and the limited opportunities that this society is willing to offer young Black men. And I believe that it is profoundly important that adults working with Black youth are evaluated by how effective they are at challenging these ugly realities and at helping our young people to successfully navigate these “encounter” moments.

## UNDERSTANDING “THE ENCOUNTER”

Racial socialization theorists posit that there is a process that African Americans go through as they become Black. Based on the seminal contribution of William Cross, Jr., the “encounter” stage is often defined by

a series of incidents, episodes, or circumstances that erode or transform the individual’s present outlook or world-view. . . .

The encounter nudges the individual outside his or her comfort zone and may cause them to be perplexed, apprehensive, or even depressed. (Harrison & Harrison 2002, p. 37)

Rather than conceptualizing this moment as an ending, however, Cross describes it as containing the potential for motivating an important “re-socializing experience that steers one’s preexisting racial identity from Euro-centric to Afro-centric” (Harrison & Harrison 2002, p. 36). For this re-socializing to occur, however,

the individual must personalize the encountered information in a way that changes the way the person sees the world and themselves. . . . The person may seek additional information and validation for their newly developing identity. (Harrison & Harrison 2002, p. 37)

For racial socialization theorists, this is a powerful and empowering process. “It is a mechanism by which African Americans who are assimilated, deculturalized, and in many cases miseducated develop into a more Afro-centric person” (Harrison & Harrison 2002, p. 37).

Our young people, and especially our young Black men, need to be better supported in undertaking this resocializing process. They are suffering greatly. When the light is turned

on to the harsh realities faced by Black males in America, particularly those living in the inner city, it becomes difficult for these young men to buy into the hype propagated by so many of the adults and programs that work with them. When the trauma of communities and families littered with unfulfilled dreams and broken promises becomes truly personal, it only makes sense that our young men adopt the blank stares, sullen responses, and angry demeanors that we know so well.

In these moments, young Black men truly know that even though their ancestors helped to build this country, they will be excluded from enjoying the full benefits of citizenship. They may or may not know the full history of slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and impoverishment that has led to centuries-old institutionalized barriers, but they do know that this history has marked them in the eyes of society as deficient, deviant, and dangerous. In these moments, in an extremely personal way, they know that a significant number of people like them aren't completing high school (and are not learning much when they do), are not enrolling in college, are entering jails and prisons at unprecedented rates, are not marrying or staying married, are not raising and caring for their children, are not working, and do not seem to care.

This is as true for our "star" students as it is for our "hard to reach" students. Even those youth we all know – the ones who have always been so easy to work with and so easy to motivate, the ones whose pictures appear in our brochures and whose stories we tout so vigorously – must confront this "encounter" moment. As a result, they turn their backs on the hype we have offered them rather than alienate themselves from all they know, love, and accept. More often than not, even the most "special" of our young men emerge

from "the encounter" having cast their lot with the "troublemakers" and "slackers" from whom they have been so encouraged to distance themselves. When we truly listen to the stories and outcomes of even these "star" students, we realize both the scale of the obstacles that our young Black men must overcome and the limits of their fortitude, self-efficacy, courage, perseverance, and self-determination in the face of these obstacles.

#### FAILING THE "RASHIDS" OF THE WORLD

It is precisely in these moments, when the light reveals an ugly, racist world and when these truths become personal, that our work with young people truly begins. And it is in our capacity to increase our young people's fortitude, self-efficacy, courage, and perseverance; our capacity to assist them in developing the new identities they will need to thrive in this society; our capacity in challenging the institutional racism and oppression at the core of these "encounter" moments; and our capacity to improve their life outcomes for which we should be truly evaluated.

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For many adult Black males who work with Black youth, trying to achieve these goals with limited access to resources and little room to maneuver can be a daunting prospect. For adults from other backgrounds, the struggle is often to recognize the basic humanity of our young people, to understand and empathize with what they experience and to know what to do. And while many Black practitioners share these struggles, we also have an entirely unique set of concerns, all of which are often made worse by a real lack of access to resources. Even when we understand exactly what is going on and have a proven strategy for addressing the problem, we are often denied both the material resources and the psychological freedom that could allow us to actually make a difference.

I reflect frequently on my own experience working with the “Rashids” of the world: Brothers whom I’ve met many times in my work as a college access coordinator, job skills coach, reintegration/reentry consultant, or any of the many other social service hats I have worn in a misguided effort to force these Brothers into a mainstream world that does not want them in it. At some point, Rashid had been a promising student with dreams of becoming a teacher, engineer, athlete, maybe even president. He had bought into the belief that he could make it out of the ‘hood if he played by the rules and followed the well-crafted plan we developed for him.

But, after all the hype, Rashid, like so many of his peers, ended up at the community college, or leaving a four-year college after two semesters of remedial-level courses, or as “state property,” or, in the worst-case scenario, dead. After cycling through various low-pay, low-esteem jobs or stints as a small-time drug peddler, he was now trying to “get it together” and get a real job. He’d keep in touch, call, or drop in wherever it was that I was currently plying my trade in some program or another showing disillusioned Black males that there was hope and light at the end of the dark tunnel they called the ‘hood. He’d sometimes watch and listen as I taught “soft-skills lessons” about how to smile, how to dress, and how to talk properly in the workplace.

I was supposed to help him figure out how to make a solid income without getting rejected, defeated, disillusioned, and locked up. At the same time, I was trying to figure out how to pay my own rent, car note, and utility bills. I wasn’t in a position to do anything but attempt to mold Rashid into something the White world could use – and everyone, including Rashid, knew it.

Better than anyone, Rashid knew that I was ultimately incapable of directly altering his fortunes. He knew that I was running my mouth and little else; I couldn’t directly get him a job, and I wasn’t addressing the reality of his predicament. Essentially, he was telling me that there was nothing that I or any other Black person could really do for him. Not only was I powerless to offer him the benefits that I argued were out there for him, but also, through my pretending, I had lost all credibility as an honest source of information and guidance.

## CONFRONTING THE REALITIES OF A RACIST SOCIETY

Boys like Rashid play along for only so long with adults who act like I was acting. For a while, they agree to pretend that their skin has nothing to do with their unemployment and that the past has nothing to do with Black people's current predicament. They will find their way into one of the many programs where adults advise the Rashids of the world on how to make it in someone else's society. But when Rashid consistently returns empty-handed from his job interviews, consistently scores poorly on his standardized tests, consistently deals with substandard teachers and facilities, and is consistently denied opportunities, there will eventually come a moment when he sees in a clear light the harsh realities of what a racist society has to offer him.

At these moments, in the absence of strong preparation and guidance, a clear strategy for confronting this reality, and the resources needed to do so, boys like Rashid will shut down and retreat from the hype and false promises. It is our responsibility to provide students with the preparation, guidance, strategies, and support to ensure that, rather than shutting down, they develop an identity and skill set to allow them to thrive despite this harsh reality and, ultimately, change that reality. Neither a lack of resources nor a lack of room to maneuver can remain excuses for our failures in these moments.

Programs and promises abound for young people in urban communities, but they are often surrounded by a legacy of defeat, failure, and despair. In the face of the significant obstacles that our young people continue to face each and every day – the academic

*Current efforts to reach out to urban youth are actively excluding these young men, who have little to no role in program design and implementation.*

achievement gap, the limited college enrollment of young Black men, the heightened violence gripping our neighborhoods, the sobering youth homicide statistics, the lack of access to productive work, the disproportionate involvement Black youth have with the juvenile/criminal justice systems – too many of these programs and promises come up empty.

Worse yet, those who are shaping current efforts to reach out to urban youth in general, and young Black men in particular, are actively excluding these young men from the change processes they are trying to effect. These young men have little to no role in program design and implementation, a reality that is most clearly reflected in how many of our programs fail to respond to the particular needs, challenges, and talents of these youth. And our youth have no role in evaluating the success of these programs. Their experiences and perspectives are usually absent from the conceptual frameworks currently in use for determining program efficacy, and their voices are almost entirely absent from the assessment process.

#### FACING UP TO THE CHALLENGE AND SEIZING AN OPPORTUNITY

Ultimately, my challenge was not all that different from Rashid's; after being continually smacked in the face by the reality of my limited capacity, I had to choose whether to continue down a road I knew led nowhere or to choose a new road that would allow me at least the hope that I could be the type of support I knew the Rashids of the world so desperately needed. At this stage in my personal, racial, and cultural development process, I chose the new road, and I have given up on the type of social service positions that used to pay the rent but that often ended with me in front of a room of slouching, disengaged young men. I have committed to an honest analysis of the factors shaping these "encounter" moments for young Black men and to developing strategies for preparing,

guiding, and supporting these young men through these moments.

I have found that there is a lot that can be done. But that hasn't impacted the struggle to overcome a lack of resources and access to real opportunities for either these young Brothers or for the adult Brothers who are trying to bring a fresh approach to working with them. When presented with the opportunity to develop the College Ambassadors Project model and pair it with the *First Person* documentary film, I agreed, because the opportunity to create an intervention that had the potential of making a real, tangible difference for the young men involved, put a little income in their pockets, and utilize the theories that have so liberated my thinking was an opportunity, no matter how small the scale, that I could not resist.

# The College Ambassadors Project

## Conceptual Framework

Not only are young Black men often absent from the frontlines of the unprecedented number of educational reform efforts currently in play, but “few initiatives [even] confront the unique conditions facing Black male students” (Jordan & Cooper 2003). As highlighted in the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board’s 2007 report, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Philadelphia is a city simultaneously on the rise and on the decline, a city of prosperity and disparity, a city of higher learning and a city struggling to learn. Not surprisingly, Black males occupy center stage in the tale of the struggling half of the city.

When light is cast upon this divided city of haves and have-nots, young Black men see the differential opportunity structure that exists for them relative to their White counterparts. They see that for the “Bobbys” of the world, who are White and live in well-resourced middle- or upper-income communities, the resources and supports needed to get to college are often comprehensively delivered through aligned programs and processes within the interconnected worlds of school, community, peer group, and family. Even when Bobby stumbles or makes a mistake, he is often assured that the readily available supports and social capital present in his Village carry him toward an awaiting college experience. With the full support of his family, peers, and community, Bobby will have to really try hard *not* to end up in college.

But for the Rashids, who live in low-resourced, low-income communities and attend low-quality schools in high-poverty neighbor-

hoods, the resources and supports needed must be found within the disconnected – and often competing – worlds of school, community, peer group, and family. Furthermore, the college-readiness and youth-development systems Rashid accesses are often not competent enough to provide the supports Rashid needs to overcome the erected barriers he faces. Even more daunting, when Rashid stumbles, he encounters the “school-to-prison pipeline,” a highly coordinated and connected system further diminishing his chances for economic and personal well-being. Even with the full support of his family, peers, and community, Rashid will have to really try hard to end up in college.

Ineffective socialization and education processes systematically “prepare” Rashid for a limited future, virtually assuring his lack of participation in, and/or attrition from, basic life milestones like high school graduation, post-secondary education, employment, business ownership, community development, and functional family life. It seems there is a destabilization process that effectively handicaps their potential as Black men.

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*Ineffective socialization and education systematically “prepare” Rashid for a limited future, virtually assuring his lack of participation in basic life milestones like high school graduation, post-secondary education, employment, business ownership, community development, and functional family life.*

Grounded in this conceptual framework, building on the tradition of the civil rights movement and struggles for social change, and guided by the work of Howard Stevenson (1997), Stevenson and colleagues (2005), Margaret Beale Spencer (1999), Roderick Watts and colleagues (2003), and Yasser Payne (2006), the College Ambassadors Project was designed to achieve two primary goals:

- to build in a cohort of young Black men the fortitude, self-efficacy, courage, perseverance, and self-determination they will need to navigate and overcome the obstacles they are sure to face on the road to college
- to lay the groundwork for an accountability structure that puts young Black men at the center of efforts to evaluate stakeholders at each stage of the college pipeline.

## Goals of the Project

The College Ambassadors Project was conceptualized as a complement to the feature-length documentary film *First Person*. As the film is shown through film festivals and community screenings, broadcast on public television, and distributed to schools, universities, organizations, and individuals, the College Ambassadors and their products will be made available as an informational and advocacy tool helping to inform viewers about the state of college-access support systems in urban communities and what can be done to improve them.

The College Ambassadors Project also seeks to break down the artificial barriers traditionally imposed between the researcher and the researched in an effort to restructure power relations and take back agency. Thus, the project was designed to engage neighborhood-based teams of young African American and Latino men in:

- analyzing the college-pathways opportunities available to them in their schools and communities
- envisioning a more comprehensive support system that would better meet their needs as they prepare for college
- developing a rubric for assessing the extent to which that type of support system is present
- grading the existing support system in their schools and communities according to that rubric
- advocating for the type of comprehensive system that they have envisioned

The teams of young men – the College Ambassadors – were charged with creating or contributing to four primary products: a full report of their findings, a report card

summarizing their findings, a short video summarizing their findings, and an interactive Web application pairing their findings with public data related to college access in North Philadelphia. Each of these products was to reflect both the personal experiences of the Ambassadors and their research and analysis of the factors that shaped these experiences. Both the report and the report card were to be structured around the rubric generated by the Ambassadors and the grades they assigned to their North Philadelphia “Village.”

The project’s emphasis on products reflected how we conceptualized our partnership. Through a curriculum and pedagogical approach specifically designed to help prepare young African American men for their “encounter” moments by engaging them in collective analyses of their specific social realities, we aimed to put the experiences and perspectives of young Black men at the center of their work and learning.

By placing their words and their findings in a professional package (including professional graphic design, printing, and Web development) and distribution through the national network developed as an audience for the *First Person* film, we also aimed to place the experiences and perspectives of these young men at the center of larger discussions around policy development, resource allocation, and program design, implementation, and evaluation. For Ben Herold, this meant gaining access to a fresh approach, but ceding control of the curriculum and pedagogy that would shape youth’s experiences and analyses. For Eric Grimes, this meant gaining access to resources and the potential social capital that could deliver new opportunities for the young men, but ceding some control over audience and product aesthetics.

*The College Ambassadors Project seeks to break down the artificial barriers traditionally imposed between the researcher and the researched to restructure power relations and take back agency.*

## **The Summer 2007 Pilot**

The College Ambassadors Project pilot in the summer of 2007 was made possible through a partnership with the Temple Youth VOICES Project, a program of the University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia (UCCP). VOICES/UCCP provided direct financial support, an administrative infrastructure for paying youth through a federally funded summer employment program, and access to facilities on the campus of Temple University in North Philadelphia.

Because the model focuses on the everyday lived experiences of participating young people and emphasizes neighborhood-level investigation, assessment, and advocacy, we attempted to recruit Ambassadors from a defined geographic area and a limited number of schools. Likewise, given the relatively short time frame for the pilot, we attempted to recruit young men with basic literacy and numeracy skills, although we did seek young men with different levels of engagement in school. To that end, First Person hired a cohort of nine young men, aged sixteen to nineteen, most of whom lived and most recently attended high school in North Philadelphia.

The pilot ran for six weeks, with Ambassadors working twenty hours a week. Eric Grimes led the Ambassadors on a day-to-day basis. There were four additional staff members providing

support: Ben Herold, who provided instructional support and served as the administrative liaison between First Person and VOICES/UCCP; two instructional support staff who led specific lessons (e.g., on research methods) and provided individualized attention to the Ambassadors; and a technical coordinator who focused on incorporating the Ambassador's findings into the interactive Web application that was to be one of the key products of the College Ambassadors Project. In addition, WHYY, Philadelphia's PBS affiliate, partnered with the project. The WHYY Learning Lab, an after-school and summer program through which youth learn video-production skills, agreed to produce a short video highlighting the work done by the Ambassadors.

#### METHOD AND TIMELINE

The driving motive behind the College Ambassador Project's curricular and teaching model is fostering the capacity of the Ambassadors to authoritatively speak in the first person to a wide range of stakeholder audiences. Our overarching goal was for these young Brothers to voice their own concerns, issues, analytical frameworks, research

findings, and policy recommendations to the policy-makers, peers, parents, program staff, and others who have the potential to support them across the college pipeline. We sought to frame their voices and findings through two primary means:

- the development of a new evaluative framework for assessing college-pathway support networks, including indicators that reflect the needs of young Black men as they navigate their specific social realities – including the “encounter” moment – on the path to college
- grades assigned to their community for its ability to deliver support across the range of identified indicators

Ultimately, we sought to position the Ambassadors as evaluators of the supports ostensibly being delivered on their behalf. Using the Social Justice Youth Development Framework developed by Shawn Ginwright and Taj James (2002), the Ambassadors' investigation was premised on the belief that racism and oppression are the core lenses through which to analyze their social realities. Figure 3 outlines the principles, practices, and potential outcomes this approach intends.

Principle	Practice	Potential Outcomes
Analyzing power in social relationships	Reflecting about power in one's life	Youth transforming public and private institutions by sharing power with adults
Making identity central	Critiquing stereotypes regarding one's identity	Awareness of how socio-political forces influence identity
Promoting systemic social change	Working to end social inequality	Developing a sense of purpose, empathy for the struggle of others, and optimism about social change
Encouraging collective action	Involving oneself in collective action and strategies that challenge/transform local and national systems	Building capacity to change personal, community, and social conditions
Embracing youth culture	Celebrating youth culture in organizational culture	Authentic youth engagement, youth-led and youth-run organizations

FIGURE 3.

A Framework for Youth Development and Advocacy. Adapted from Ginwright and James (2002)

This approach relies on *multiple methods of eliciting voice*. Consistent with this approach, throughout the six-week session the Ambassadors utilized various media and means of inquiry (e.g., photography, creative writing, debate, discussion, other creative expression) to express their views about community issues. These multiple methods of eliciting voice were also reflected in the Ambassadors' final products, which included written reports, a short video, and an interactive Web application.

The approach was also based on the principles of *participatory action research*, through which the group collectively strove to democratize data by looking critically at their social realities, starting with the issues that emerged from their everyday lives and lived experiences, trying to navigate the fractured college-pathways support systems in their schools and communities.

Finally, the approach also sought to *identify, value, and leverage community social capital for collective efficacy*. The Ambassadors' research began with the premise that the knowledge possessed by themselves, their peers, and those in their communities is not only valid, but an essential resource for any effort to improve college access.

Through our partnerships with UCCP and others, we also sought to leverage the institutional and organizational assets that are present in the Ambassadors' communities and to provide the Ambassadors with a platform for delivering their analyses to those in positions of power.

Over the six-week time frame of the summer 2007 pilot, we sought to incorporate these principles and approaches, through:

- extended team-building and experiential learning activities integrated into each session

*Our goal was for these young Brothers to voice their own concerns, issues, analytical frameworks, research findings, and policy recommendations to [those] who have the potential to support them across the college pipeline.*

- ritualized opening and closing activities to start and end sessions
- discussion and debate of their beliefs and "knowledge" about the factors needed to make it to a four-year college/university
- analysis of relevant secondary data related to college going in urban public high schools
- introduction to the qualitative research process, development of survey instruments, data-collection fieldwork, and analysis of the youth-identified college-readiness factors
- development of an evaluative rubric
- collective assignment of grades based on this rubric
- publication of findings via a report card, written report, short video, and interactive Web application
- public presentations of research and findings to spur advocacy for the supports Black and Latino males need to make it to college

## STEP 1 TEAM BUILDING AND PRELIMINARY UNDERSTANDINGS

In order to become qualified evaluators whose assessments carry weight, the Ambassadors needed to first complete a process through which both their self-efficacy and personal assets were developed and their conceptual understanding of what it takes to get to college was challenged. Thus, the first

*The first goal was for the young men to come to the understanding that their struggles to make it to college were not only rooted in their personal abilities and challenges, but were also a shared social and political reality.*

goal was for the young men to come to the understanding that their struggles to make it to college were not only rooted in their personal abilities and challenges, but were also a shared social and political reality. From this initial understanding, they could then begin to both build their individual capacities and develop an evaluative framework to assess the effectiveness of those charged with delivering college-pathways supports on their behalf.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of building an empowering group dynamic among the Ambassadors as we sought to position them for these heady roles. The pragmatic foundation for much of our work with the Ambassadors was building strong interpersonal bonds within the group. Even though the participants were from North Philadelphia, most did not know one another before the project. Therefore, team building and experiential learning activities were used extensively in the first weeks of the program to build bonds of trust and teamwork among the young men. Through the ritualized opening and closing activities, including a brief exercise routine led by a rotating series of Ambassadors, we also sought to provide informal and nonthreatening ways for each Ambassador to assume a leadership role.

Finally, each Ambassador was expected to memorize and periodically lead the group through a recital of the following Statement of Commitment, which served to provide each

member of the group with both personal leadership opportunities and a constant reminder of the group's collective purpose:

We as brothers, bound together like links to a chain, will work to have a positive impact on our community, family, those around us, and those yet to come – especially the children, who shall create our future!

It would also be difficult to overstate the importance of providing the Ambassadors with a rigorous, highly structured process for challenging and developing their beliefs and analyses. Our curriculum uses an iterative approach to problem analysis, beginning with an exploration, articulation, and assessment of the Ambassadors' preexisting beliefs about the factors that impact the ability of young Black men to make it to college. During this phase, they brainstormed and prioritized the personal, school, and environmental factors that they believe influence their desire and readiness to attend college. The preliminary list of factors generated was:

- Teacher/Staff Quality
- Academic Preparation
- Post-secondary Preparation
- College as a Clearly Stated Goal
- Funding/Expenses
- Internal/External Involvement
- Tutoring
- Enrichment Programs
- Enforced Rules/Behavior Controls
- College/Job Preparation

At this stage, the young men also identified the existing individual, school, and community supports that assisted them through the college-going process and developed a preliminary report card to assess and grade the existing college-going support system within their schools and communities.

## STEP 2 CONDUCTING RESEARCH AND INVESTIGATING THE DATA

The next phase of the process required participants to collect, analyze, and publicly debate available data and documents related to college readiness and access. Baseline information and reports were accessed via the map-based, interactive Web application to which the Ambassadors would later contribute (see Figure 4).

During this process, the Ambassadors explored data related to their specific neighborhoods and compiled a profile of what external research has to say about their communities. Once these profiles were complete, the Ambassadors engaged in a comparative analysis of their respective neighborhoods.

After further secondary research, the Ambassadors were challenged to review their preliminary list of factors impacting college access and readiness and to determine whether each factor involved an individual, school, family, community, or societal support. Through this stage of the process, Ambassadors began to realize that there are factors beyond the school building that impact college going.

The final investigative stage focused on helping the Ambassadors to master basic research skills and to develop instruments allowing them to systematically collect authentic local knowledge from peers, educators, parents, and other community-based stakeholders. The Ambassadors were to visit neighborhood

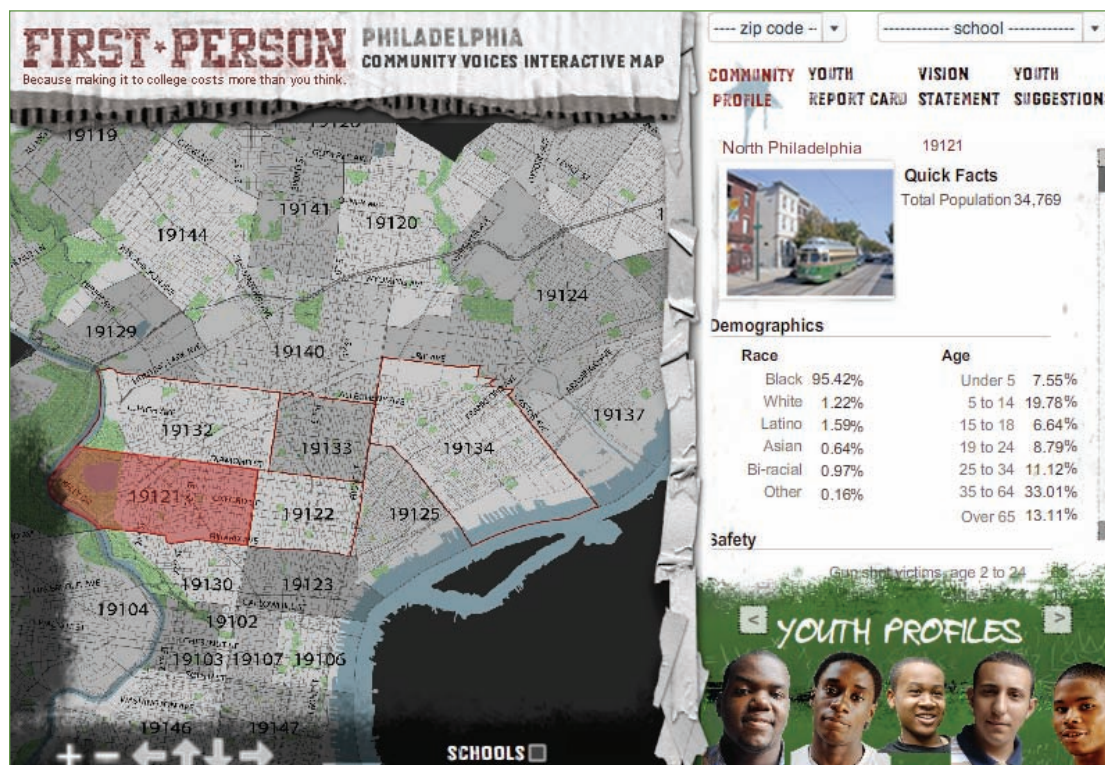


FIGURE 4.

A page from the College Ambassadors Web site showing “neighborhood data” for the 19121 zip code

schools, area campuses, college-readiness programs, and regional schools with high college-going rates in the region in order to conduct their research. For the purposes of the condensed pilot, this research stage consisted primarily of developing and administering a “Path to Higher Education” survey at four locations: Temple University, Community College of Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, and the summer school session at a local neighborhood comprehensive high school.

### STEP 3 CREATING THE EVALUATION RUBRIC

At this stage, having examined their preexisting beliefs, having reviewed a range of publicly available data and secondary research, and having conducted primary research focused on the authentic local knowledge to which they often have the best access, the Ambassadors began development of their assessment rubrics. With the new wealth of information and experience at their disposal, the Ambassadors reexamined and revised their initial beliefs about the factors necessary to help young Black men make it to college. Once a consensus had been reached, those factors were formalized into an assessment

rubric, and the Ambassadors began their “final” grading process of the various factors.

By the time the Ambassadors completed their investigation, they had a solid foundation for developing an evaluation rubric. For the Ambassadors, this rubric ultimately came to rest heavily on the notion of the “Village,” which they conceptualized as comprising four primary components: Community, School, Family, and Peers and Friends (see Figure 5).

From this framework and based on personal and group reflections, along with qualitative and quantitative research, the College Ambassadors identified five interconnected core supports for college pathways that their Villages must provide African American and Latino males and defined them as follows:

- *Education & Academic Supports* are the preparation we need for post-secondary, career, and social success and for a lifelong learning process. These supports include: SAT/ACT Preparation, Challenging Classes, Qualified Teachers, and High Expectations.
- *Mentoring & Social Support* is the motivation, information, counseling, and connections we need to help us with school work, finding college information, and emotional

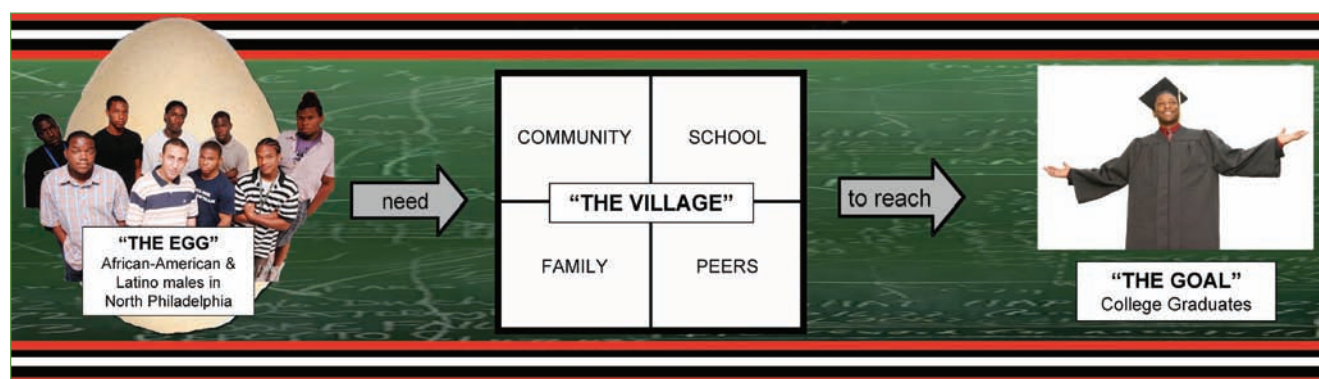


FIGURE 5.

The initial conceptual framework developed by the College Ambassadors team

support. This support includes: Tutoring, Motivation/Encouragement, Help with Personal Problems, and Networking Opportunities.

- *Competent Organizations & Programs* exist outside the basic school structure and prepare students academically and culturally for college. In order to be considered competent in helping students get to college, a program or organization should provide: SAT/ACT Preparation, Organized Learning Activities, Personal Skill Development, and Cultural Exposure.
- *Financial Assistance* includes anything that helps you money-wise with getting to college, especially: Grants, Loans, Scholarships, and Good Financial Advice.
- *Neighborhood Leadership* can come from any individuals or groups who can deliver what the community needs and speak up for the community to those in power. The components of the leadership we need include: Competent and Available Adult Role Models, Removal of Obstacles from the Community, and Political Connections.

These five factors formed the pillars of the Ambassadors' evaluation rubric. From our perspective, two aspects of this rubric stood out as new contributions developed specifically as the result of this process being grounded in the day-to-day lived experiences and perspectives of these young men.

The first was their emphasis on *competence in the organizations and programs* that ostensibly served them. For the Ambassadors, competence included two main components: an ability to connect with young people and an explicit focus on college. In their discussions, it became clear that these young men believed that most of the programs in their schools and communities contained one of these components, but rarely did a program contain both. Those programs that were

*They needed adults who could walk with them through these “smack in the face” moments, remove or mitigate some of the obstacles they faced, and provide them with survival and coping mechanisms.*

“more laid back” or “chill” attracted youth but provided virtually no meaningful support for getting into college, while more rigorous programs struggled to connect with and retain youth.

The second aspect of this rubric that stood out was the Ambassadors' understanding of *neighborhood leadership* as being a critical support that urban youth need to make it to college. In many ways, this factor was grounded in the young men's experience of the “encounter” moment. Given the poverty, violence, and limited opportunity structure that pervade many of their communities, the “smack in the face” moment had occurred early and often for many of these young men and their peers.

They talked frequently and passionately about their sense of hopelessness and discouragement, as well as their need for adults who could walk with them through these moments, remove or mitigate some of the obstacles they faced, and provide them with survival and coping mechanisms other than “turning off their light switches” and shutting down. In order to make it to college, the young men knew they would need adults who were willing to be honest about the obstacles these young men face, who had strategies for helping them as individuals through these obstacles, and who were capable of lessening the prevalence of these obstacles across the community – a critical and nuanced support that is often overlooked or glossed over in most college access work.

# “All Dressed Up with No Place to Go”

## The College Ambassadors in Their Own Words

As College Ambassadors, we believe that it takes more than one resource and more than one support to have good college preparation. We believe that it takes a Village to get an African American or Latino male into college.

Having developed their rubric, the Ambassadors, through both their investigation and their collective consensus-building process, sought to determine the extent to which these core supports were being delivered to young men of color in their communities. By this stage, they had clearly developed a sense of themselves (as individuals and as a group) as worthy of conducting this review; in their products they emphasized that “we have the right to evaluate those in our Village who are supposed to be providing us with college support.”

The grades they ultimately assigned to their North Philadelphia Village, and their explanations for these grades, reflected this belief, as well as the process that led to it.

These grades were published and explained in a full report, a PowerPoint presentation, and a summary report card. On the heels of their six weeks working to determine these grades and develop these materials, the North Philadelphia College Ambassadors shared their findings through presentations to policy-makers and program staff at the Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform; through outreach

### In their own words:

#### EDUCATION & ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

C+

In our Village, the majority of eleventh-graders at every neighborhood high school but one scored below basic on their PSSAs [Pennsylvania's standardized test of record]. At many schools in our

**“The comprehensive high schools in the area are not strong, and there are not enough special admission high schools within our Village.”**

Village, 90 percent of eleventh-graders scored Below Basic in reading or math. We are academically unprepared to compete with other students. The people we surveyed who are from

Philadelphia thought that Qualified Teachers and Challenging Classes were the most important of these supports, but these were the supports they were least likely to receive. We feel discouraged, angry, and like we have been set up to fail.

#### MENTORING & SOCIAL SUPPORT

C+

In many parts of our Village, less than 5 percent of adults have a bachelor's degree. We have lots of people who care for us as people, but they don't

**“We need current college students to interact with us on a regular basis. We need to see other Brothers who know where we come from and who also know what it takes to get to college and be successful.”**

think college is important. The people from Philadelphia who we surveyed were less likely than people from other areas to believe that adults in their communities and peers in their schools were qualified sources of mentoring and

social support. This makes us think that we are not made for college, even though we are.

## COMPETENT ORGANIZATIONS & PROGRAMS C-

Too many local Beacon and Recreation Centers are just “hang-out” areas that don’t give students the extra support we need. We need to be exposed to different demographics, and we need to be educated on how to deal with people outside of our own neighborhoods. We have to travel outside of our Village to find the support we need. This is an added burden and makes us less competitive with students who can find these supports in their own Villages.

**“In my community there are basketball leagues to keep kids off the street, but there are not really any services regarding colleges. Telling us to stay out of the streets isn’t enough. We need information and guidance on what it takes to get to college.”**

## FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

C+

Financial assistance is especially important for us because of the low income levels in our communities and families. The highest median household income in any zip code in our Village was \$20,903. That is very low. We believe that there is financial assistance available, but we need more of it, it is harder for us to find, and we pay a penalty in our Village when we try to be responsible and find it.

## NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERSHIP

D-

In our Village in 2005, 649 young people were arrested for drug offenses, 236 young people were shot, and 29 young people were murdered. These young people are us. We are worried about things that we should not have to worry about, like being beat up, robbed, shot, killed, using and selling drugs, and how we can get money. All of this kills our hope and limits our enrollment in college.

events with community members at the Philadelphia Department of Recreation’s City-wide Amateur Boxing Tournament; and with the general public through media coverage in the *Philadelphia Weekly* and the *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*.

Even in these relatively limited settings, the College Ambassadors Project’s potential to genuinely “shake up” how college access supports are conceptualized and evaluated became quite evident. At the Philadelphia College Prep Roundtable, for example, the Ambassadors’ presentation was followed by a series of questions from the audience about how their respective programs might better attract and retain urban youth. The line of questioning demonstrated an underlying assumption that programs’ difficulties with recruitment and retention were primarily the result of a lack of awareness among youth.

The responses of the Ambassadors directly challenged this assumption, stressing that many youth were aware of multiple programs in their communities but often did not perceive these programs as *competent* and, thus, chose not to participate. The mediocre grade the Ambassadors assigned to North Philadelphia for Competent Organizations and Programs reflected youth’s perceptions that many programs either failed to connect with the lived experiences of students, or failed to provide supports explicitly focused on college, or both. When these young people experienced the “encounter” moment, they rarely believed in the capacity of these programs to understand their predicament and/or to help them overcome it.

The resulting exchange during this presentation illuminated the vast chasm between how program staff and youth understand such basic issues as recruitment and retention, pro-

viding further evidence that the perspectives and experiences of urban youth are often entirely absent from program design, implementation, and evaluation.



The College Ambassadors with Eric Grimes

# Reflections and Implications

The Ambassadors were clear that “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.” Their publication and outreach efforts represented a first step to involve young men such as these in efforts to reconceptualize what an effective, comprehensive college-support network looks like for urban public high school students in general and young Black men in particular, and then to evaluate existing supports based on this clarified vision. In considering the merits of the College Ambassadors Project’s approach, as well as its potential to be expanded and brought to scale, it is first useful to consider some of the key challenges that emerged during the Summer 2007 pilot program.

## The Impact of Necessary Compromises

First among the challenges to surface during the pilot program was the fundamental struggle between adopting a “program” approach versus a “movement” approach in designing, delivering, and evaluating our own model. From the beginning, we faced significant challenges in living up to the intentions and core components of our own model and conceptual framework. Believing that it is necessary for those working with urban youth to “go all in” and believing that our fates are inextricably intertwined with those of the young people with whom we work is one thing; figuring out ways to operationalize those beliefs and sustain the requisite financial and emotional investment is an altogether different thing.

During our pilot, for example, the immediate pressures of fundraising and day-to-day logistics impacted our ability to operationalize our core beliefs in such basic elements as recruitment and facilities. Ideally, we would have created an opportunity to work with a cohort of young men from a single neighborhood, in a community location, with access to surrounding institutions and organizations. The compromises we made in order to secure funding to make the pilot possible, however, led to a hasty recruitment process that drew young men from across North Philadelphia and to our day-to-day operations being based at Temple University, several miles from the neighborhoods where the Ambassadors lived and went to school. While there were benefits to these necessary decisions, the realities of the recruitment process and the operational base contributed to an overall dynamic that led our efforts to feel more like a temporary program than an authentic organizing effort.

This foundational challenge made two of our key goals – encouraging these young men to ground their work in their everyday lived experiences, and helping them to develop new identities and worldviews that would help them better navigate these everyday experiences – more difficult than we anticipated. Many of the Ambassadors reported that they signed up “for a paycheck” or because “it seemed like an interesting program.” Challenging the mindset that preparing for college is something to be done during “program hours” and that it can happen in isolation

*Seeing a high school other than their neighborhood comprehensive high schools, they were acutely aware of the supports their schools lacked, in a way that was much more personal than reading reports.*

from the families, communities, and schools through which they move was made much more difficult by the compromises that resulted in offering the Ambassadors a work environment that often felt like many of the programs that were content to allow them to do just that.

### **Time Enough to Engage the Disengaged**

The second key challenge to emerge from the pilot is the need for an expanded time frame and the additional work that needs to be done to ensure that the Ambassadors' assessments are meaningful, valid, and consistent. Again, because of funding constraints, the time frame of the pilot was condensed from an intended twelve or sixteen weeks down to six weeks. This compromise resulted in a decision to recruit only those young men who were a priori capable of succeeding in a relatively rigorous academic environment.

There was little time for remediation, literacy instruction, or resocialization of disengaged young men into collaborative working environments. As a result, the process and products that resulted from the pilot did not include some of the most marginalized – and important – perspectives and experiences that

we intended: the voices of young Black men who had already been profoundly failed by, and consequently profoundly disengaged from, the educational system.

Another shortcoming that resulted from our condensed time frame was our inability to provide the Ambassadors with a meaningful comparative experience as part of their investigation. Months after the Ambassadors assigned grades to their North Philadelphia Village, we finally had an opportunity to travel with them outside of Philadelphia, where they could investigate firsthand better-resourced schools with more-established college-going cultures and in an environment outside of their familiar worlds.

For many of the participating Ambassadors, this was their first time seeing a high school other than a neighborhood comprehensive high school in Philadelphia. Suddenly, they were acutely aware of some of the supports that their schools lacked, in a way that was much more personal than reading reports had allowed. Partly as a result of this experience, many of the Ambassadors wished to retroactively lower the grades they had assigned to North Philadelphia. For example, where once they had believed that their Village deserved a C+ for its ability to deliver educational and academic supports, they now believed that a more appropriate grade would be a D or even an F. Clearly, access to these kinds of comparative experiences is a critical element for preparing urban youth to become valid, consistent evaluators.

## Investment by Key Stakeholders

Each of these challenges, however, is primarily internal. A different set of obstacles to positioning urban youth to serve in these evaluative roles exists external to the College Ambassadors Project model and inner workings. In order for this type of work to truly be at the core of a meaningful accountability structure, the investment and support from key institutional stakeholders is necessary. In short, youth evaluations of schools, programs, organizations, neighborhood leaders, and others will only have teeth if they are embedded into a larger structure for determining key issues related to policy development, resource allocation, and program design and implementation.

In considering this program of developing urban youth as evaluators of the supports ostensibly being delivered on their behalf, it is essential to ensure their capacity for delivering meaningful, consistent, valid assessments that reflect a new and relevant understanding of what a comprehensive college-pathways network should look like. We believe that the rigorous, research-based process described above has the potential to develop this capacity within young people. Their words and findings, as well as our reflections on some of the major challenges encountered in the pilot, provide further evidence to determine the value of this approach, its feasibility for replication and scaling up, and the potential benefits for foundations, institutions, cities, and school districts that invest in this model.

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## College Ambassadors Pilot Program: Schedule and Objectives

### APPENDIX A

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Instructional Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team building</li> <li>• Brainstorming initial beliefs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data analysis and debate</li> <li>• Writing framing paper</li> <li>• Research methods #1 (surveys)</li> <li>• Research methods #2 (observations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research methods #3 (observations)</li> <li>• Developing research instruments</li> <li>• Testing instruments and fieldwork</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data analysis and debrief</li> <li>• Fieldwork (community location)</li> <li>• Fieldwork (comparative community location)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data analysis and interpretation</li> <li>• Writing collective report</li> <li>• Presentation practice</li> <li>• Video planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing final report</li> <li>• Video production</li> <li>• Final presentations</li> </ul>
Evaluation Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficacy survey and research skills pre-test</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing diagnostic #1</li> <li>• Formative evaluation re: program satisfaction</li> <li>• Journal #1 (program satisfaction)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journal #2 (research experience)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journal #3 (research experience)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing diagnostic #2</li> <li>• Journal #4</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program satisfaction focus group</li> <li>• Efficacy survey and research skills post-test</li> <li>• Portfolio assessment</li> </ul>
Deliverables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preliminary Ecogram</li> <li>• Preliminary Report Card</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual framing papers</li> <li>• Initial photo projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instruments</li> <li>• Collected data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collected data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual and group: vision statement, Report Card, recommendations, and ecogram</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Videos</li> <li>• Presentations</li> <li>• Final report</li> </ul>

## The North Philadelphia College Ambassadors Team

### Andrew

#### ABOUT ME

Hello, my name is Andrew Rivera. I'm a College Ambassador working on the First Person



Documentary Project. I was born and raised in Philly and I go to Puerto Rico to visit my family from time to time. I'm an outgoing, fair, and very friendly person, and I'm always on point. My goal in life is to pass high

school and learn as much math as possible and to work for a famous company like Sony or Nintendo.

#### MY NETWORK

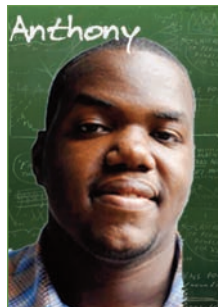
**FAMILY:** My mother teaches me life lessons and how I should handle money better. My aunt helps me with math.

**PEERS:** I learned from Greg that it's OK to be funny some of the time, but I have to know when I go a bit too far. Alex and Alexis give information about colleges and lessons on how to avoid trouble.

### Anthony

#### ABOUT ME

Anthony Linton is a seventeen-year-old senior at Paul Robeson High School. He was raised



in North Philadelphia and knows firsthand how bad the streets are. After succumbing to his father being shot, Anthony was determined to be different. Now Anthony, who is of Christian faith, reaches out to the

community for a change. When Anthony is finished high school, he wants to go to college and major in political science. Anthony loves politics and things that surround it. Anthony wants to take business administration as well as Bible. Anthony believes that the community, with a little help, will become one of the best. That's why Anthony loves being a College Ambassador. He feels he can help get African American and Latino males to open their eyes and realize that the streets have nothing for them, yet colleges hold the keys to their future.

#### MY NETWORK

**FAMILY:** My mother, Kathleen, Grandmother Roberta, Uncle Marshall, and cousin Andrea have pushed me to achieve my goals.

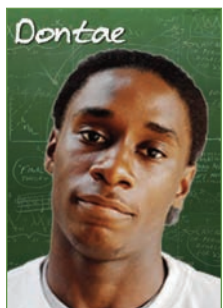
**SCHOOL:** Ms. Bolden [teacher] has helped me get this far in high school and also helped me fill out college information.

**COMMUNITY:** Chosen Vessels Restoration Center helped with scholarship information.

## Dontae

### ABOUT ME

I am an African American male from the city of Philadelphia, which is supposed to be the city of brotherly love. But there's no love here – people die almost every day, and drugs are being sold on almost every block. If this is love I would never want to see what hate is. To me I am simply Dontae, but to



the world I'm a percentage. I am always judged by my skin color and never given the benefit of the doubt. On the other hand I believe I can do anything I set my mind to. The things I would want to do in life consist of three things. First, I want to get out of high school and go to college. The second thing I want to do is become a lawyer. After I finish school, I want to just make enough money to get me and my family away from all this drama going on here. Being a College Ambassador to me is good because it's keeping me off the streets and I'm learning new things about college every day.

### MY NETWORK

**FAMILY:** My mom encourages me to strive to achieve my goal of moving on to college.

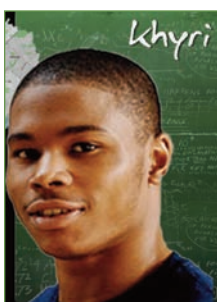
**SCHOOL:** My teachers give me the education required to get into college.

**PEERS:** First Person Documentary keeps me off the streets and gives me a positive outlook on college.

## Khyri

### ABOUT ME

My name is Khyri Henry. I'm a young Black male in the city of Philadelphia. I come from North Philly – it's a rough neighborhood. A lot of violence, crack-heads, and drugs. The neighborhood hasn't broken me. I'm still standing strong. I just graduated from Strawberry Mansion High School. In my spare



time I box, relax, and spend time with my girl. I'm easy to get along with, and just can relate to a lot of life's incidents. I plan on going into either the sheet metal or carpentry union when I turn eighteen. Ten years from now I plan on owning my own business. I also plan on having a wife, children, nice home, and about two cars. Basically I want to be successful in life. So far I have no regrets, and I hope I don't have any in the near future. Now I'm a College Ambassador, and that will motivate me because I can help people to have a brighter future and also expand my intelligence.

### MY NETWORK

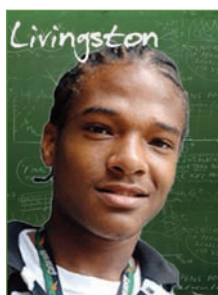
**FAMILY:** My mom, Ursula, stays on my back; she wants me to do something positive with my life. My dad, Anthony, is a good influence because he is very respectful and he teaches me a lot. My cousin Aaron believes in me also and always tells me to be better than everyone else.

**SCHOOL:** Ms. Kent, Ms. Bailey, Ms. Brennan, Ms. Holiday, and many more at Strawberry Mansion High School helped me through some rough times and kept me on the right track.

COMMUNITY: The Recreation Center at 26th and Master keeps me out of trouble because I box there. Silk and Freddy J are the trainers that influence me. But my community really doesn't do too much.

PEERS: All the guys I work with as College Ambassadors are a team and we are trying to focus on college.

### Livingston

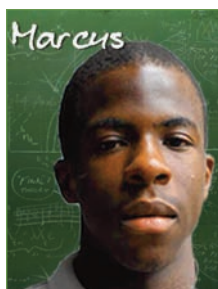


Livingston Edwards is in the class of 2009 at FitzSimmons High School in North Philadelphia, which is the first all-boys' public school in Pennsylvania.

### Marcus

#### ABOUT ME

Hi, my name is Marcus Jarel Jones and I am with the First Person Documentary Project.



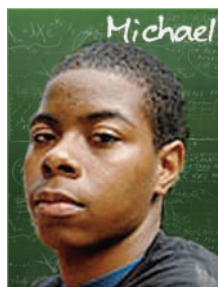
I've lived in Philadelphia all my life. I live with my grandmom, sister, and five brothers. Three of them are in jail and the other two are in college. I am trying to be like my big brother. I got one more year in school. I

got to work hard so I can go to college and be all that I can be, like keep coming to the program and stay off the streets and stay out of trouble. I like coming to this program because I want to learn about college. I hope I learn more in this program, like not being scared to speak in front of people.

### Michael

#### ABOUT ME

My name is Michael Magobet. I'm from North Philly. I go to Fairhill Community High School. I would like to go to college and take up business. What motivates me most is that no one expects me to go – even my own family. It's probably because I mess up so much. Despite that, they still try to encourage me. I feel as though I have to make them proud, as well as myself.



### Robert

#### ABOUT ME

Philly is in a desperate need of an icon. That desperation will soon come to an end. My

name is Robert Den-son. I am born and raised in North Philadelphia, and I am a senior (2008) from Benjamin Franklin High School. I'm a full diverse blend of almost everything that knows where he comes from



and knows where he is going.

My dream is to do theater/acting, as I have been performing theatrical poetry and African dance in over fifty plays all over Philadelphia. I also want to study why we as people behave the way we do and to help those who are dealing with life as it is now. I also want to become the first worldwide big and tall male supermodel. I'm going to be breaking a lot of society's rules in the future.

Being a College Ambassador is very important to me because I believe that there is a solution to the problems that are surfacing right now in our inner-city neighborhoods. I want to express statistically the problems and prove to everyone that secondary preparation starts very early.

#### **MY NETWORK**

**FAMILY:** Mom, Dad, Brother, and Sister provided emotional support and motivation.

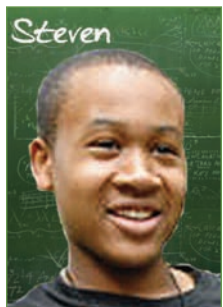
**SCHOOL:** JROTC provided discipline. Principal Johnson at Benjamin Franklin High School helped me with college and social advice.

Ms. Strapp, Mr. Burris, and Mr. Kresye [teachers] helped me with English, writing, history, and college work. Majeedah Scott from GEAR UP, Ms. Cole Beatty from the Legacy Program, the Student Success Center Leadership Academy, and the Kappa League helped me with college.

### **Steven**

#### **ABOUT ME**

Hey! My name is Steve Butler. I am seventeen years old and I'm from Northwest Philadel-



phia. My goal is to become a famous, successful neuro/cardiovascular surgeon. I want to attend Johns Hopkins University. I want to go to college and major in pre-medicine and minor in Spanish. My

two motivations are my family and my community. My family because I can have a big influence on my younger siblings and older family members; and my community because a large percentage of people don't go to college. I think that I could set a good example. Once I leave college, I plan to continue on to medical school and then on to a residency.



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