



“DIFFERENT STORIES, SAME PATH”:

ALUMNI REFLECTIONS ON THE ONE MILLION DEGREES EXPERIENCE

/ INTRODUCTION

With 34 percent of adult residents holding a postsecondary degree, Chicago ranks 18th among the top 100 metropolitan areas. As in other urban areas, college attainment rates vary by community and neighborhood. The stratification of degree attainment by communities in Chicago, however, is incredibly stark.¹ While neighborhoods in the top quintile have attainment rates above 60 percent, no neighborhood in the bottom quintile has an attainment rate above 15 percent. Given the similarities in demographics (non-white, low-income) among communities with the lowest attainment rates, the increasing need for postsecondary educational credentials to secure stable employment may further escalate racial and socioeconomic stratification in Chicago.

Table 1: Postsecondary Attainment Rate of Population 25+ by Chicago Community Area²

Community	Attainment Rate %
South Lawndale	8.7
Gage Park	10.1
West Englewood	10.7
New City	11.0
West Lawn	12.5
Englewood	12.6
Hermosa	12.9
North Lawndale	14.3
Humboldt Park	14.8
East Side	14.9
Lincoln Park	83.8
Hyde Park	82.7
Loop	80.6
Lakeview	80.3
Near South Side	79.6
Near North Side	79.2
North Center	71.1
Near West Side	64.4
West Town	62.8
Beverly	60.8

Community colleges, as local educational institutions with open enrollment and multiple functions (workforce development, transfer paths to four-year institutions), play a critical role in addressing stagnant postsecondary attainment rates. A significant challenge to increasing completion rates among students attending community college is college readiness. Nationally, over half of students entering community colleges are enrolled in a remedial course, compared to 20 percent of students entering four-year colleges. Additionally, African Americans (68 percent), Latina/os (58 percent), and low-income students (70 percent) have disproportionately high enrollment rates in remedial courses. The need for remedial coursework is related to low persistence rates, increased time to degree completion, and low transfer rates to four-year institutions.

Despite stagnant attainment rates and stratification of postsecondary completion, public funding for postsecondary retention programs is in decline. Filling the void are community-based, philanthropic organizations with a specific mission to support the postsecondary aspirations of students from underserved neighborhoods. One such organization is One Million Degrees (OMD), which provides a multifaceted program to support low-

income, highly motivated community college students from underserved communities in the Chicago region.

Graduating high school seniors, current community college students, and adults returning to college apply to the OMD program during the spring and are admitted for the upcoming academic year. Eligible applicants must have a minimum 2.0 GPA, must be low-income, and must be eligible for a federal Pell grant. OMD boasts a 70 percent postsecondary completion rate and its alumni have an average annual household income of \$50,000. The success of OMD has gained considerable attention from local policymakers. Recently, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced a new partnership between OMD and City Colleges of Chicago to expand the program to serve an estimated 6,000 students over the next five years³.

Purpose of the Study

As OMD grows in capacity, maintaining experiences most influential in shaping college and career aspirations for participants will be challenging. Taking innovative practices to scale requires a thoughtful process to ensure that significant program components are consistent as environments (internal and external) diversify with expansion. A valuable source for understanding the role of OMD participation in shaping college and career trajectories are the participants themselves. In particular, OMD Alumni are uniquely positioned to reflect on how OMD assisted them with successful completion of postsecondary credentials and with transitions to four-year universities and employment.

Research Approach

During the summer of 2014, Dr. Lorenzo Baber, Department of Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, conducted focus group interviews with OMD Alumni. A focus group setting allows for the gathering of a range of opinions based on individual reasoning that is further prompted and elaborated through a discussion with peers. As part of the annual survey mailing in January, OMD Alumni were informed about the project and invited to participate. In total, nineteen OMD Alumni participated in six focus group interviews during the second week of July. The focus groups ranged in size from two to five participants and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. With permission from participants, focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To promote an honest dialogue, participants were told that actual names would be replaced by pseudonyms.



/ FINDINGS

Analysis of discussions among participants across six focus groups revealed multiple themes, five of which are briefly presented below:

- 1 The critical value of financial assistance;
- 2 Leveraging existing individual strengths;
- 3 Fostering a sense of community;
- 4 Widening the road for career opportunities; and
- 5 Developing an OMD identity related to paying forward the investments OMD had made in their futures.

The Critical Value of Financial Assistance

One Million Degrees offers last-dollar scholarships and educational stipends to help scholars defray the cost of educational expenses related to attending community colleges. Though these awards are relatively small (the scholarship averages about \$300 per semester per scholar and the stipend is \$500 per semester per scholar), the financial support offered by OMD incentivized many students to apply to the OMD program.

For many, the additional scholarship alleviated the need to take on part-time job(s) to pay for tuition and/or books. The scholarship and stipend offered by OMD boosted personal or family budgets, allowing participants to focus on academics or add additional classes. “Ann,” a 2013 cohort member, provided an illustration: “We didn’t have money for daycare so (prior to joining OMD) I was afraid I was going to have to squeeze in my class here or there and only be able to take one or two (classes).” “Stuart,” another 2013 cohort member, stated that prior to enrolling:

I had this job at UPS. I worked overnight and I had school sometime in the morning, sometimes at 8 o'clock. So sometimes I had sleepless nights for four days. When I got into One Million Degrees, I got to stop that job because I got a scholarship (. . .) So that way I was able to get more sleep, (be) more healthy, and (maintain) my grades.

Among OMD Alumni participating in focus groups, the financial incentive offered by OMD was critical in reducing stress load, allowing them to refocus on academic work. Financial costs attached with postsecondary education are increasing even for students attending community college.

Students from non-traditional backgrounds are particularly sensitive to the cost of attendance that includes both direct costs (tuition, fees, books), and indirect costs (daycare, transportation, limited availability for employment opportunities). While OMD financial assistance did not cover all costs, participants expressed the positive impact of the award on pressures both internal and external to their academic pursuits. Hence, participants were able to dedicate more time and energy to their studies.

Leveraging Existing Individual Strengths

It was clear that the signals of confidence from OMD leveraged existing strengths among participants as they entered the program. Several heads nodded in agreement when “Brandi,” a 2012 cohort member, stated that before OMD, “We were all dedicated to our studies and that was because of us and our love for our education...” Fitting with the OMD mission to find highly motivated students, participants expressed various inspirations for pursuing further education. Participants, particularly those of traditional college age (18-24), mentioned that they were looking for additional support to persist through potential challenges to completing their studies.

For returning adult students participating in focus groups, change in personal status (e.g., becoming a parent; losing employment and benefits) sparked motivation. For “Mary,” having college-aged children inspired her return to school, “My kids were my motivating force. They mentioned it to me, ‘Mom, aren’t you a little old to be going back to school [laughter]?’” “Mary” elaborated further, sharing that she and her children engage in supportive competition for best grades.

Alumni also shared that they initially viewed OMD as an opportunity to elevate role model status within their community or family. “Maria,” a 2011 cohort member, emphasized her stature as the first in her family to attend college and was looking for navigational guidance to match her determination to finish. “I mean, I think with or without OMD, I would still keep doing... it’s just that OMD, they provided me – they help you more, like even though you had the motivation inside you...I think it was more that OMD also helped you.” Examples provided by focus group participants suggest that, as they entered the program, the strengths and motivations of OMD Alumni were firmly rooted in a commitment to community and family.

Based on conversations, at least two types of students are attracted to OMD support – students who acknowledge the forthcoming challenges that may impede their path to achieving long-term educational goals; and students who were refocused on educational attainment after a shift in personal status or added responsibility. Both types of students have strengths grounded in internal motivation and recognition that such motivations may not be enough to accomplish postsecondary goals. **While individual agency is a critical component for student success, participants seemed to recognize larger structural issues that may influence individual persistence in higher education.** Further, OMD served as access to valuable information about less visible norms, customs, and rules in postsecondary education.

Fostering a Sense of Community

Researchers have found that persistence in college is linked to student engagement and involvement.⁴ For community college students, who are commuter students with competing responsibilities outside of the classroom, a sense of community on, and engagement with, their campuses may be limited.

OMD works to build intentional community among its scholars through monthly workshops, affinity groups, experiential events, and structured interaction with staff and coaches, which are intended to build a sense of belonging and group cohesion among OMD Scholars as both participants in the OMD community and as college students.

By far, the most discussed aspect of the OMD experience among alumni was the sense of community. Participants used familial metaphors repeatedly to describe the collaborative characteristics of OMD. In particular, the relationships among OMD Scholars, from a variety of backgrounds and positions in life, fostered a supportive environment. In discussing relationships with her fellow OMD Scholars, “Amber,” a 2009 cohort member, stated, “...you have a sense of family. I still communicate with [those who] I met in this group. I have a huge network.” In describing her experience, “Mary” offered additional insight:

I learned that I wasn't alone. You know, everybody may have a different story, but we kind of (were) on the same path. We all had a goal. We were all trying to meet one goal. We were like family who was trying to meet that one goal. It's just interesting how, you know, everybody has their own story, [but] we all bond. We build relationships that were like that.

In the same focus group, “Manuel” followed up on “Mary,” stating that he felt inspired by his cohort peers, “[The] main thing I learned from seeing other people's situation [is] if they can do it, then I can do it. If they did it working two jobs, single parents, and being away for so long, what's stopping me from achieving my goals?”

With support from OMD, alumni avoided isolating educational experiences that lead to delaying continued enrollment or permanent departure from the institution. Further, the diversity of the cohorts – across age, neighborhoods, ethnicity, gender, parental status, etc. – provided students with an opportunity to engage with others with different backgrounds but similar education pursuits.

The value of having a collective experience with a cross-cultural group of peers fostered both personal aspirations and sense of responsibility to support the success of others.

Widening the Road for Career Opportunities

Expressing pre-OMD motivation and personal strengths, alumni seemed to carve out a ‘road’ to professional success, perhaps narrowed by limited resources and networks. During focus group discussions, it was evident that the OMD experience expanded career roads while also clearing up visibility for professional goals. Particularly valuable in this process was the coaching program, where volunteer coaches meet one-on-one or in a small group with OMD Scholars on a monthly basis to provide support, encouragement, and guidance. Many alumni recalled fondly their coach's holistic interest in their success. In describing her relationship with her coach, “Brandi” stated, “although the [scholarship] is good...just to be around people who are successful, it just shows you it could be – it could happen.” In the same focus group, “Steve” followed up:

When you're dealing with people that are impressionable and still dreaming and still trying to figure out where they're going in life, I think one of the best things that you could do to someone is expose them to something that they haven't been exposed to and introduce them to people that they haven't met, because we can learn something from everybody.



Alumni also discussed ways in which the coaching relationships validated career aspirations. “Kerri,” discussing her opportunity to shadow at a local law firm, stated, “Getting all of these experiences was eye opening for me because I never thought my career field was going to be that exciting.” Later, “Kerri” revealed that her coach was influential in shaping her decision about what type of law to pursue: “Being a corporate lawyer, it’s a lot of responsibilities; but at the same time, I’m not the type of person who wants an easy job. I want to get challenged. (My coach is) one of the reasons why I’m going into corporate law.”

Overall, the willingness of coaches to share professional networks appeared to be a key part of the validating professional experiences for participants, extending personal and career confidence. Further, participants reflected on how professional skills and confidence can make a difference in career opportunities. They discussed the importance of viewing employment as more than offering technical skills, but a position that necessitates proactive engagement. “Bridgette” stated, “I have to learn more about the position that I’m in and how to move up in the company...OMD gave me the confidence to be able to reach out versus just kind of staying to myself and just trying to do my job and go home.”

Paying it Forward: The OMD Identity

In each focus group, the concluding question for participants was “What does being an OMD Alumni mean to you?” Responses from participants were rarely isolated to individual gains. Rather, alumni expressed strong desires to pay the OMD experience forward to others, particularly those in their extended network (neighborhood, friends, family). As “Ben” responded:

For me, it's like an achievement in my professional career. [It was great] simply to be part of a program that guided me a step further into my dream job and [that] also, with it, made me have a sense of social responsibility to become that leader in the community, to become a mentor, and [to] live the example of their mission, carry it within ourselves and come back with it.

In a different focus group, “Bridgette” offered a similar sentiment:

I'm grateful that I can have that achievement and then also to help my friends and family see that there are programs like OMD to assist them and to help them achieve their dreams and I always – I do hope to be – in the future be a part of the alumni family and give back at a time where I would have whatever to give back to OMD.

These descriptions reflect a grateful appreciation for the experiences, both challenging and supportive, offered by OMD. More importantly, participant descriptions of OMD identity represent collectivist perspectives that encourage consistent contributions to the ‘greater good.’ More recent OMD Alumni start with the informal sharing of knowledge and resources, while older alums are eager to return to the program in a more formal coaching capacity. Ownership of an OMD Alumni identity reflects both the strengths participants entered the program with and holistic support provided through mentoring, coaching, advising, and financial assistance. An OMD identity also includes interest in the future direction of the program. At least one person in all the focus groups referenced the recent announcement about the partnership between OMD and the City Colleges of Chicago.

/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, findings from the six focus groups with 19 OMD alumni suggest that OMD has been very successful in supporting academic and career aspirations for students from traditionally underserved populations. Alumni found the OMD experience reaffirming to motivations for success in school and work. Further, OMD stimulated affective and behavioral development among students, elevating levels of self-reflection and social responsibility. Based on these findings, several recommendations are offered:

1 As OMD scales, maintain holistic, nontraditional strategies for recruitment

The populations targeted by OMD have a broad range of strengths and circumstances that are not easily captured through traditional assessment methods. The current selection process, which includes a written essay and multiple interviews, provides a holistic review for each student who applies to the OMD program. Additionally, the 'highly motivated' criteria are broad enough to encompass a wide range of diversity (both demographic and interpersonal). Growing visibility of OMD assumes an increase in applications, challenging current in-depth assessment processes. In balancing student complexity and selection efficiency, OMD should consider identifying measures both fair and comprehensive. Dr. Baber recommended building off the work of William Sedlacek⁵. Dr. Sedlacek has spent decades developing quantitative assessment tools that connect to the strengths of nontraditional students. Variables include measures of positive-self concept; realistic self-appraisal; successfully handling systems reflecting inequality (racism, sexism, classism, etc.); preference for long-term goals; availability of strong support systems; leadership experience, and community involvement. In reviewing findings from focus group studies, each of these constructs parallel experiences of OMD Alumni. Further, these measures have been tested for reliability and validity across diverse groups of students. Adding this survey to existing processes (interview, essay) would also provide a pre-test measure.

2 Support construction of multiple identity development

The value of the OMD community was one of the clearest themes across all focus groups. OMD contributes to a distinguishable sense of belonging for students, one that is invested with significant meaning and value. As such, the OMD community can also become a space for negotiation as participants process the socio-structural contradictions between various contexts (OMD events/neighborhood, work/school/family). In the focus groups, there was some evidence of potential tensions of identity as students emerge from the OMD experience with a newly validated social status. Currently, OMD emphasizes development of participants' self-efficacy and presentation of self to others. A third component, attributed identity, appears to be addressed less significantly. The social construction of various forms of identity (race/ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexuality, citizenship status) uniquely bounds American society, fostering stigmas and stereotypes that participants will face, unfortunately, in various contexts. Dr. Baber encouraged OMD to incorporate the scholarship of Susan Jones, Elisa Abes, Diane Reay, and Tara Yosso⁶ in formal components of the program. Specifically, OMD could build upon a sense of belonging and community by presenting identity research to students directly, stimulating additional reflection through small discussion and/or journaling exercises.

3 Continue to expand OMD Alumni Experience

As OMD enters a new period, the first cohort of scholars is now several years removed from program participation. As grateful alumni, they are eager to give back to the program in meaningful ways. OMD is developing an alumni experience strategy that will include formal ways of getting involved, including coaching current scholars, representing the program in their neighborhoods and communities (particularly those with low postsecondary attainment rates) and participating in alumni career panels, as well as ongoing professional development opportunities.



/ CONCLUSION

Dr. Baber concluded that in spending a week interviewing OMD Alumni through focus groups, it was evident that the OMD program has successfully shifted the academic and career trajectory of a talented, diverse group of people. Individual strengths, including aspirations for success, have been boosted by the holistic sustenance of the program. **Insight of OMD Alumni reminds us that extending the range of choices for individuals widens perceptions about what is possible - in education, career, and life. Further, the current success of OMD demonstrates that hope is an essential element of the human experience, one that is contagious when nurtured consistently. While the challenge of creating more equitable systems of opportunity in the United States remains, One Million Degrees and their alumni demonstrate the power of optimistic commitment to change.**

/ NOTES

- 1 Analysis of data provided by the Social IMPACT Research Center. 2013
- 2 Ibid
- 3 "Mayor Rahm Emanuel Announces Expanding Access to 6,000 Community College Students to Proven Program that Helps Students Graduate from Community College," City of Chicago, accessed on February 2, 2015. http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/mayor/press_room/press_releases/2014/may/mayor-rahm-emanuel-announces-expanding-access-to-6-000-community.html
- 4 Cindy Veenstra, "Community Colleges: Student Engagement and Workforce Development," ASQ Higher Education Brief, (January 2010)
- 5 William E. Sedlacek, "Beyond the Big Test: Noncognitive Assessment in Higher Education," Jossey-Bass, (2004); William E. Sedlacek, "Using noncognitive variables in assessing readiness for higher education" Readings on Equal Education, 25 (2011): U 187-205; David Kalsbeek, Michele Sandlin, and William Sedlacek, "Employing noncognitive variables to improve admissions, and increase student diversity and retention," Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly, 1(2) (2013): 132-150.
- 6 Susan R. Jones and Elisa S. Abes, "Identity development of college students: Advancing frameworks for multiple dimensions of identity," John Wiley & Sons (2013); Diane Reay, Gill Crozier, & John Clayton, "Strangers in paradise? Working-class students in elite universities," Sociology, 43(6). (2009): 1103-1121; Tara J. Yosso, "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth," Race Ethnicity and Education, 8(1)(2005): 69-91.

LORENZO BABER

Assistant Professor, Education Policy, Organization and Leadership, College of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Lorenzo DuBois Baber is an Assistant Professor in Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His primary research agenda focuses on the impact of socioeconomic background and ethnicity on identity development and academic outcomes for postsecondary students. He is particularly interested in investigating structural factors related to the persistent disparities for traditionally underrepresented students attending Traditionally White Institutions. Additional research interests include examination of university-neighborhood partnership initiatives in urban communities and international comparative education. Dr. Baber received his Ph.D in Higher Education from Pennsylvania State University.



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