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COVER STORY

Studies on succeeding: Urban Prep's 1st grads

It hasn't been easy, but youths pursue dream to get through college

Lolly Bowean, Tribune reporter



Tyler Beck, a member of the first graduating class at Chicago's Urban Prep Academies, talks about how the South Side charter school still influences him, as he continues his studies at Lake Forest College. (Chris Walker, Chicago Tribune)

As a student in the first class of Urban Prep Charter Academy for Young Men, Tyler Beck found himself enveloped in a nurturing environment where teachers came in early and stayed late to help tutor struggling students. There, the boys formed a brotherhood and learned affirmations that kept them pumped up to achieve.

"We were taught, 'Each one reach one,' and 'It takes courage to excel.' We all learned to help each other because we all wanted to succeed," Beck said. "There

were people who could say they'd been right where you were from and they could say they knew what your life was like."

But four years later, at the idyllic East Coast private college to which Beck was accepted, the atmosphere was dramatically different. And even though he had earned a full academic scholarship to attend, Beck was not prepared.

In the time since he became one of the celebrated 107 African-American men in that first graduating class of Urban Prep who were all accepted to

college, Beck said he has had to battle stoic professors, academic hardship and unforgiving college administrators. He's faced financial predicaments and feelings of isolation, along with self-doubt and insecurities. He has journeyed from the pristine, gated campus of Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., to his brother's couch in Madison, Wis., and then back to his gritty South Side neighborhood.

He ended up losing his scholarship and is now starting over with renewed focus at Lake Forest College, which is closer to home and his support network.

Urban Prep got him to college, he said. But the road to earning a degree has been more complicated than just collecting acceptance letters.

The struggle black men like Beck have endured is indicative of a wider problem, experts say. Studies show that not only do black men account for a small percentage of fall undergraduate enrollment at degree-granting colleges — less than 6 percent in 2012, according to a National Center for Education Statistics report — but most never finish.

Black men stumble in college typically because of a combination of financial, social and academic obstacles, experts say. They may need money to support their studies or families. They may struggle to fit in in the dramatically different environment. And they can become overwhelmed by the coursework. Because of notions of masculinity, they tend to not aggressively seek out help.

Long before they were handed their high school diplomas, the 2010 graduates of Urban Prep fulfilled the promise by the school's founder and CEO, Tim King, that they would all get accepted into college.

Although Urban Prep's alumni office keeps in close contact with the 2010 graduates, the school will not release figures detailing how many of the students enrolled in college, finished college or

are still in school, saying it will do so in 2016. King said in an email that he was unavailable to comment for this story.

But interviews with several members of that first class reflect what research shows: It's not enough to get African-American men accepted into college. It takes grit, a strong support circle, outreach and programs that offer assistance before it is requested to help them navigate the rigors of college academic life.

"The college acceptance letters and getting black males into college is commendable," said Terrell Strayhorn, an associate professor of higher education at Ohio University and one of the authors of the book "Black Male Collegians: Increasing Access, Retention, and Persistence in Higher Education."

"But true success is college acceptance, matriculation and graduation. We know from research, those who finish college are more likely to occupy competitive jobs, they assume higher status occupations. Those that graduate are more likely to vote, volunteer their time to community service and have a successful marriage."

The reasons black men find it rough

in college are numerous and systematic, Strayhorn said. Many start out disadvantaged by showing up from high schools that didn't offer Advanced Placement classes and from families without a college tradition. They may feel unwelcome on campuses where there are few cultural rituals they can relate to.

The stories of four young black men who graduated from the celebrated charter school offer a glimpse of those difficulties, but also a look at how perseverance and support led to success.

Deontae Moore

The campus of Northwestern University is only 25 miles from the South Shore neighborhood where Deontae Moore grew up. But the communities feel completely different, Moore said.

On the South Side, he learned how to avoid certain streets that were considered gang territories, and he knew to keep his eyes open and his head down. The sounds of sirens, gunshots and chaos often punctuated the night air.

From the time he was a sophomore at Urban Prep, Moore was fixated on at

tending the prestigious school in Evanston. He visited the campus over and over and participated in three summer enrichment programs to bolster his application. Several of his teachers and counselors at Urban Prep were Northwestern graduates, so he relied on them for advice, he said.

"I grew up in the projects. I was often around drugs and violence and negativity," Moore said. "My mother struggled to make ends meet, and I've seen her literally have no money to cover the electricity and we'd have to live with no lights.

"I wanted to show my family, my mom, that I could handle Northwestern and create a better lifestyle for us," he said. "I wanted to show my mom that we don't have to struggle."

On campus, Moore relished his new freedom and reveled in the relaxed mood of the campus. He joined several organizations, got involved in athletic activities and socialized.

"I didn't read clearly. I didn't ask questions in class. I just took notes," he said. "I thought I was doing well. I was doing what it appeared other people were doing."



Deontae Moore was in the first senior class to graduate from Urban Prep Academy and has since graduated from Northwestern University and is doing a summer internship at Think Glink Media in Glencoe. Moore is standing outside the office. (Nancy Stone, Chicago Tribune)

His grades told a different story. After one semester, Moore was placed on academic probation. He swallowed his shame and sought help. Desperate but determined, he turned back to Englewood and to his teachers at Urban Prep.

"I had a lot of people watching my back," he said. "That motivated me to do better. I didn't work that hard to get there just to leave."

Moore's counselor at Urban Prep taught him how to set a schedule to manage his time. He told him he'd have to learn to study throughout the day, not just before bed, like he did in high school. Then the charter school hired a writing coach to review Moore's assignments and tutor him on grammar and punctuation. With that help, Moore was able to pull himself back up.

"I had monthly sessions with the assistant dean," he said. "I had to learn to join the discussions in class because sitting quietly wasn't benefiting me."

"Northwestern is not an easy school to get through," Moore said. "I was able to push through because I had a lot of people behind me."

Moore, 22, is scheduled to graduate in December.

Paris Williams

For Paris Williams, there was never any doubt that he'd get into and attend college, he said. His parents expected that from him. He decided to attend Urban Prep specifically because its mission was to get graduates to college.

"Both of my parents emphasized education as the route to success," said Williams, 22. "They taught me (that) not long ago, we as a people were fighting for access to education. I knew to take it seriously."

So Williams was proud, but not surprised, when he was accepted to Georgetown University, in the bustling northwest region of Washington, D.C.

As he settled in, he began to notice what set him apart from many of his classmates.

"The other students, some were very wealthy and resourced," he said. "They came from boarding schools. It became hard for me to adjust to the workload. It was stressful. I was in a different environment where everybody was smart."

By his second year, Williams said his grades slipped, and he, too, ended up on academic probation. He was warned that he had to improve or he'd have to leave.

Then came the self-doubt. But Williams said he could hear King's voice echoing in his head.

"Paris, buckle down," he could hear him say. "Paris, tighten up."

And he did.

Williams meticulously selected a circle of friends with the traits he wanted to emulate, he said. When he wanted to give up, they stepped in and offered their encouragement.

"I can talk to people who are not from my background. I found commonality that we could lean on," Williams said. "My friend told me, 'You started here and you will finish here. We started this together and we will end this together.'"

With that support, Williams said he dug into his studies.

When he got a call from an Urban Prep counselor asking how he was doing, Williams admitted he was having some trouble keeping up. And in order to graduate in four years, he needed to take summer courses he couldn't afford. So Urban Prep stepped in and paid for his courses.

"It felt great because I couldn't make it (alone)," Williams said. "I had them in my corner."

In May, Williams' parents traveled from their Englewood neighborhood to the nation's capital. There they watched their boy become the first in their family to earn a four-year degree.

"They always knew I was going to

do it," Williams said. "They didn't cry. They were like, 'OK, we're proud of you. But you are going to do even bigger things. Now it's time to get out there.'"

Robert Lee Henderson III

Robert Lee Henderson III promised himself he wouldn't cry.

But as Henderson marched across the stage, wearing his black cap and gown, he felt his throat tighten. And as his class of graduates from Lake Forest College filed out of the ceremony, he spotted his sister, aunts, girlfriend and grandmother sitting in the audience. Then the tears welled up and streamed down his face.

He had done something no one in his family, long rooted in Englewood, had managed, he said.

He graduated from college.

"I thought, 'Wow, I really made it,'" said Henderson, 23, recalling that special day. "I pointed over to my family. I wanted them to see this was for them, not for me. I started to think of all that I had been through, and it was a lot. But I actually accomplished something. It was so powerful, I cried tears of joy."

Henderson was only a baby in 1993 when his father killed his mother, he said and records show. From then on, he and his six siblings were raised by their grandmother in a modest house where 12 people crammed into a three-bedroom space.

On his block, Henderson became known as a hardhead.

"In the streets, people talk about the savage life, and I've experienced that," he said. "I hung around the wrong crowd that was doing the wrong things. I was around guns and drugs and was in places I had no business being."

But at Urban Prep, Henderson found a new identity among the boys who had to wear button-down shirts and ties daily. He began to look at his classmates

as brothers, he said. He saw his teachers and administrators as parents. The school gave him hope that he could turn his life around.

Henderson applied to more than 25 colleges, he said, and was accepted into more than a dozen. When it came time to choose, he decided to stay close to home so he could keep tabs on his grandmother.

In Lake Forest, Henderson wanted to make new friends and form the same relationships he had in high school, he said. But the more time he invested socializing, the more his studies suffered.

"I was lost at first," he said. "I thought I didn't have to go to class. They sent out warning grades and I saw I was near failing. I thought, 'I've got to change what I'm doing.'"

From then, Henderson curtailed hanging out, he said. He focused solely on studying, spending days and nights in the library. He blocked out the old neighborhood, the old alliances.

"I only came back to Englewood when I had to come back," he said. "I didn't make it a habit to come back because I had so much to catch up on."

"I knew if I wanted it, I had to work for it."

Tyler Beck

For Beck, the path wasn't so smooth. Coming from such a nurturing, supportive environment, he wasn't prepared for a campus that couldn't fully embrace him, he said. He was 17 years old and hundreds of miles from home in a region he didn't understand and an academic culture that felt foreign.

He doesn't blame Trinity, but he said they didn't have a system in place for students in need like him.

"Not everyone comes from a boarding school where they have been exposed to those types of classes," he said. "I'm

from the South Side. We just didn't talk about books the way they did there. We didn't have the types of classes other students at Trinity had taken."

But Beck said he didn't know how to ask for help. He had graduated at the top of his class and was a leader in his community in Chicago. In Hartford, he didn't know whom to reach out to.

"It was a new realization ... people don't care about your success. How do you deal with that?" he said.

Beck struggled in his classes and earned poor grades. He was placed on academic probation and then asked to take some time off.

"I was torn up," he said. "There were tears shed, but it brought me to a place of mental maturity."

Beck left Hartford and went to Madison to live with his brother. There he worked in a sandwich shop and tried to figure out his next moves. He appealed his probation at Trinity and returned for another semester, but it didn't work out, he said. So he came back to Chicago.

Back in Englewood, Beck called his Urban Prep counselor.

"I said, 'Can you help me get back into school?'"

The counselor did. Now at Lake Forest, Beck lives on campus and works there too. He's currently a junior and determined more than ever to graduate with a bachelor's in communications.

"I know I'm smart. I know I'm brilliant," he said. "I've got to finish. From here, it's nothing but upward."

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