

Black student must overcome long odds and stereotypes

CONTINUED FROM 1A

is, will he seize it?
As a young black man, Colin is fighting an uphill battle against the statistics to earn a college degree.

Only 41 percent of black students graduate from four-year institutions within six years, according to the U.S. Education Department. That's compared with 48 percent of Hispanics, 60 percent of Anglos and 66 percent of Asians. Those numbers include women, who earn two-thirds of all bachelor's degrees awarded to blacks, hiding just how badly black men are faring.

The problem starts in elementary, middle and high school, where black men get behind early and stay behind. But it follows them to college as well, where too many leave without grabbing the prized degree.

"That's not going to change overnight," Kevin Carey, a researcher at Education Sector, an independent think tank in Washington, said of the achievement gap. "In the meantime, there are things colleges can do to better support students and improve their odds of success. Not all colleges do all of those things."

Dismal high school graduation rates often make headlines, but college graduation rates are even worse, Carey said.

"A 50 percent graduation rate would be an improvement at some colleges," he said. "There has been nothing like the same level of outcry, and I think there ought to be."

Scholars who study the issue say it is tangled and complex, the causes ranging from poverty and cultural patterns to a school environment that stereotypes black boys and does not expect much of them academically. Those who do make it to college often feel like outsiders and are hard pressed to find role models among predominantly Anglo faculties.

"For African American males, if you don't see many people like you, it is going to take awhile to build trust," said Chance W. Lewis, a professor of urban education at Texas A&M University. "You feel like a guest in somebody else's house. You are not sure whether you can put your feet up on the table or go to the refrigerator or what have you."

That description fits Colin, who approached UTSA with a wary eye, uncertain if he would find his place at a university with 28,000 students, most of them Hispanic and Anglo. He also squeaked in just under the admissions bar, earning him the label of academically at-risk before he even stepped foot on campus.

But Colin, who is majoring in psychology, has plenty going for him. He is smart, upbeat and has parents who are able to support him financially and emotionally.

After a year at UTSA, he seems to be warming to the campus. But he still goes home most weekends to see his girlfriend, Frintha Clay, and hasn't found anyone he would call a role model.

"I believe I am going to get my bachelor's degree," Colin said. "I will not stop until I do get it. There are no exceptions."

HUDDLING TOGETHER

Colin walked across campus one day this spring, cell phone cradled to his ear, balancing two soft tacos atop a can of soda.

"Mama, you're not listening!



UTSA freshman Colin Wright dribbles a tennis ball on his way to his Drugs and Society class last month.



Colin Wright (center) had a solid upbringing. He attends Ulit Avenue Missionary Baptist Church in East Austin, where his father is pastor.

What did I say?" Colin said, stopping dead in the middle of the humanities building.

"This is the worst time, Mama. I have to study for this test tomorrow."

Colin's roommate had not paid his half of the rent, and the apartment complex was threatening to lock them out of their room.

"Irresponsible people," Colin groused. "He buys too much stuff. I try to tell him you don't need that and he don't listen."

Colin shook off his frustration and exchanged handshakes and shoulder bumps with his friends, who gather in the lobby between classes to talk smack about pick-up basketball games or football matches. Almost all of them are black.

At universities where their ranks are thin, it's common to see black students huddling together, said Fred Bonner II, a professor of higher education administration at Texas A&M University.

At Manor High School, 30 percent of Colin's fellow students were black; at UTSA, 8 percent of the students are black.

"The climate can seem very chilly for these students," Bonner said. "Looking from the outside, it seems isolationist, but if you look at it from the inside, it is survival."

Colin grew up in predominantly black East Austin, playing basketball on neighborhood courts and enjoying a "blessed" childhood, as mother Cora Wright puts it, complete with suburban home, minivan and presents under the tree at Christmas. As a

teenager, Colin played trumpet in the band and sang in the church choir. Colin's father, Melvin Wright, worked as a store manager for Gage Furniture for nearly 30 years before going into the ministry, and now is pastor at Ulit Avenue Missionary Baptist Church in East Austin. Colin's mother holds a master's degree and is assistant director for the Austin Parks and Recreation Department.

Despite his middle-class upbringing, Colin doesn't know of any men in his family who hold a bachelor's degree, including his father. Colin's four brothers and sisters all started families early in life and never got serious about college.

Colin's parents are convinced their youngest child will blaze the trail.

"I do know that black men can make it without a degree and do very well," Melvin Wright said. "But it's more difficult. You don't have as many choices. A lot of times, I felt locked in."

STARTING FROM BEHIND

In addition to feeling out of place at college, black men must battle long-held perceptions that they're just not as smart as Anglos, Bonner said.

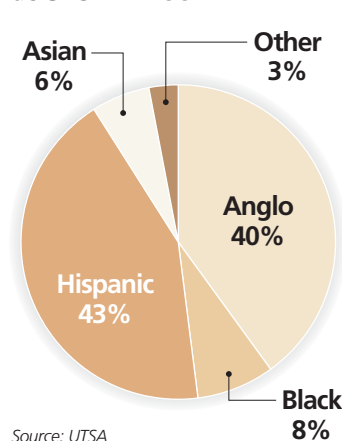
That's likely the case for Colin, who started out behind academically. He's one of 500 students accepted at UTSA each fall on provisional admission, which means his class rank at Manor High School and SAT score fell below the admission threshold.

Colin is the first to admit he didn't try very hard in high

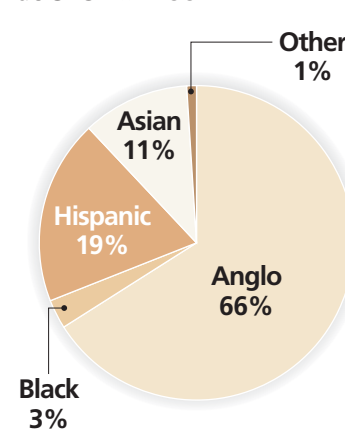
LACK OF ROLE MODELS

Black students often make up a small slice of the campus population, but the percentage of black faculty is even smaller:

Ethnic makeup of students at UTSA in 2007



Ethnic makeup of faculty at UTSA in 2007



Source: UTSA

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school. But he also didn't feel like his teachers cared.

"They were just trying to get their paycheck," he said.

Colin found his inspiration on the basketball court, where he looked up to his junior varsity coach. But that coach left, and was followed by two others.

"We didn't have a good coach, I had a new coach every year," Colin said at his meeting with Coach Thompson.

"Don't say you didn't have a good coach, say you had a new coach," Thompson said, gently steering Colin away from making excuses.

Bottom line, Colin didn't get the basketball scholarship he was hoping for. He applied to UTSA because it was close to home.

Because he is a provisional student, Colin must earn a 2.0 grade point average after 18 hours, take a freshman seminar class and meet frequently with his academic adviser, Jessica Williams.

His grade point average after his first semester was 2.5. The extra attention has been good for Colin. He made a connection with Williams that he doesn't have with any other faculty or staff member, and produced his best work for her. The freshman seminar course, which Williams taught, was his favorite.

"We were only 22 in my class and he sat right in front," Williams said. "He did amazing. Every project that we had, he took it and ran with it. The class loved watching him. He had such a positive attitude and was friends with everybody."

The large, impersonal lecture classes were another sto-

ry. Colin slogged through earth science and psychology, often sitting in back and texting his girlfriend.

Colin also took remedial reading and math, which earned him no college credit. He did well, but the classes weren't challenging.

One day last fall, a group assignment in Colin's remedial reading class was to draw a six-panel cartoon to demonstrate cause and effect in "Where the Heart Is," a novel by Billie Letts.

The students moved into clusters and took turns sketching stick figures; most of their conversation centered on Halloween costumes, Britney Spears losing custody of her children and playing video games on Adderall, a prescription drug often used as a stimulant.

A spat broke out at a nearby table.

"I think you need to move him!" one girl shouted, glaring at a student at her table.

"This is a college class," the teacher clucked. "You need to remember that. Now, quiet time again."

Bored, the students finished up and left early.

"This class is easy," said Ashley Green, a freshman in Colin's group. "I thought it would be a lot harder."

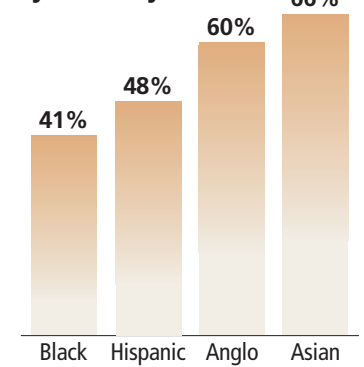
FINDING A ROLE MODEL

To foster success, experts say it's crucial for student like Colin to find a mentor on campus, usually a black faculty or staff member. But that's tough at UTSA, where only 3 percent of faculty members are black, said Michael Jennings, a professor of educational leadership and policy studies and director of a fledg-

GRADUATION GAP

More minorities are going to college, but blacks and Hispanics still lag behind Anglos and Asians when it comes to graduating.

Six-year graduation rate at four-year institutions, by ethnicity



Source: U.S. Department of Education

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ling minor in African-American studies.

Jennings hopes that program will attract more black scholars and plans to start a mentoring program for black students.

"In the past, it was just not a source of concern at this campus, but it has been on the radar for the past year or two," Jennings said.

Another way of shepherding students to the finish line is to get them engaged in clubs and students organizations. At UTSA, there are black fraternities, but Colin isn't interested and spends most of his time playing pick-up basketball in the recreation center.

There is also a black student network called UMOJA, which Colin is not a part of.

That's typical, said Michael Cuyjet, a professor at the University of Louisville in Kentucky and editor of the 2006 book "African American Men in College." Black student clubs are often dominated by women, while the men assume they are outsiders and don't get involved, he said.

"The only way to get around that is for people to prove that (assumption) wrong," Cuyjet said.

Making the basketball team could be a boost for Colin because he would get more attention and be motivated to make good grades.

"However one gets there, it doesn't matter," Cuyjet said. "If we could replicate for African Americans in general what the athletics department does as far as study tables and advisers, we could really boost the retention and graduation rate of a lot of these young men."

Unfortunately, UTSA's retention and graduation problems are not limited to minority students. Only 30 percent of students who start at UTSA graduate within six years.

UTSA has made raising those rates a priority, but there is still a lot of work to do.

As for Colin, he may not ever feel totally connected to UTSA, but he has conquered the freshman year, which is often the toughest. And he is not completely without role models.

For that, he looks to his father, Melvin, and to a faded picture on his nightstand. It's his grandfather, Willie Ray Davis, one of the first black firefighters in Texas. Taken in 1956, the picture shows a muscular Davis sitting on a porch with a little dog perched in his lap, a cigarette between his lips.

Davis's death in 2006 was the hardest thing Colin has ever faced.

"Everything happens for a reason," Colin said. "I could have had everything handed to me. I worked for a lot of stuff."



Colin has loved basketball since he was a child and will try out for the UTSA team in the fall. Making the basketball team could help Colin find his place at the university.

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Colin has a lot going for him — he's smart, upbeat and was raised in a good family. "I believe I am going to get my bachelor's degree," Colin says. "I will not stop until I do get it."

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