

Curry professor sheds light on resilient low-income students' success
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Many education researchers have documented the academic achievement gap between students from high-income and low-income families. They also have shown that it persists from pre-kindergarten through college.

Joseph Williams, an associate professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, said this research fails to capture the complete story of how low-income students perform in school.

"There are millions of students from impoverished backgrounds who are academically successful, despite obstacles that keep the majority of others from succeeding," Williams said. "We have become experts on why these students fail, but not on why they succeed."

Williams spoke about his research on the academic resilience of high-achieving, low-income students at the Curry School on Wednesday. The public lecture was sponsored by UVa's new Center for Race and Public Education in the South.

Williams said his personal interest in student resilience is rooted in his childhood in Wyandotte County, Kansas, where today nearly a quarter of residents live below the poverty line.

"The resilience story is part of my own story," Williams said. "My friends and I were written off as students from that background."

Williams said that he and many of his friends did well in school. However, he saw other young people

struggle and become ensnared in the criminal justice system. As a professor of school counseling, Williams has focused on understanding why two children who live on the same street can experience these starkly different outcomes.

Williams worked as a counselor at an Iowa elementary school before becoming an assistant professor at George Mason University in 2011. He joined the Curry School faculty in 2017.

For a forthcoming journal article, Williams conducted in-depth interviews with 19 finalists for the Ron Brown Scholar Program — a national scholarship for African-American students headquartered in Charlottesville — to identify factors contributing to their academic success.

Ron Brown Scholars currently attend some of the nation's most selective colleges and universities, including Harvard, MIT and Stanford.

In Williams' interviews with the scholarship finalists, a common theme emerged: the importance of their families and social networks.

"It's more than just individual traits or characteristics that lead to success despite the odds," Williams said. "It doesn't happen through the individual alone. There has to be support structures."

Most of Williams' subjects said their parents fostered a "college-going culture" at home, regardless of whether they had attended college themselves. Some said they were grateful that their parents had tried to prepare them for the prejudice they could face in college and throughout their lives.

Many of the scholarship finalists said they had classmates who had helped them through the college application process.

One interviewee said their friend group continually updated an online spreadsheet to gather information on more than 150 college scholarships. "We all keep informing each other, like we are our own group of college counselors," they said.

Almost all of Williams' interviewees said they benefited from relationships with adults at their school. One student spoke about a principal who allowed them to take two Advanced Placement courses in ninth grade and inspired them to continue challenging themselves throughout high school.

Some subjects spoke about the importance of support from their neighborhoods, churches and other communities they belonged to. These communities often helped them pay for extracurricular opportunities and connected them to adult mentors who had graduated from college.

Williams noted that many of the Ron Brown Scholar finalists expressed pride in their African-American identity and heritage. "We have to be thinking about the intersections [of race and socioeconomic status], and how important that is," Williams said.

Williams said low-income students who are successful in school consistently demonstrate "... an ability to navigate to resources and negotiate how those resources are applied to them."

"These are traits and ways of doing things that students can actually learn," he said.

Williams said he did not want his research to detract from efforts to raise consciousness of systemic obstacles facing children living in poverty. He was critical of the belief that income achievement gaps

could be closed by teaching students to have more “grit” — defined by psychologist Angela Duckworth as a combination of passion and perseverance.

“To me, grit is a coded way of blaming kids for some of their issues,” Williams said. “Grit is important, but a lot of kids I work with already have the grit. The key is the access to other things.”

Since 2013, more than half of all children enrolled in American public schools have been from low-income families, as measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. The National School Lunch Program serves families earning no more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level.

This year, four-person households in the continental U.S. must earn no more than \$31,980 annually for their children to be eligible for free lunch and no more than \$45,510 to be eligible for reduced-price lunch.

Low-income students make up 30.1 percent of Albemarle County’s public school enrollment and 55.6 percent of Charlottesville’s.

Bernard Hairston, chief of engagement for Albemarle County Public Schools, attended Williams’ lecture on Wednesday. He said a school division’s awareness of achievement gaps should be paired with a belief in the strengths of students and their families.

“Labeling students as being ‘at-risk’ expresses a deficit mindset,” Hairston said. “We should rethink our messaging to students and parents, because it affects how they think about themselves.”