# ABSTRACT

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| Title of Document: | LIFTING THE VOICES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING, MIDDLE-CLASS, AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS |
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The state of African American education is complex. Beginning in the 17th century, African Americans fought for an education that allowed them to read and write. During the 21st century, African Americans value on education extends beyond only reading and writing to using these skills and other skills to maintain strong academic and leadership backgrounds for a higher education. The purpose of this study was to understand the college preparation process of high-achieving, middle-class, African American students at a large research institution in the mid-Atlantic United States. This study was important because despite high-achieving, middle-class, African American students' success, there still exists an achievement gap between African American students and their White and Asian peers. Three theoretical frameworks and models were used as a guide for this study, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), Perna and Titus' (2005) integrated conceptual model on college enrollment, and the predisposition stage of the college choice research (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith,

1989). Utilizing a constructivist case study methodology, data was collected using personal interviews, a focus group, and personal documents (college admissions statement and/or resumes). Through a within-case and cross-case analysis, school, family, and community contexts that influence the college preparation process were explored.

LIFTING THE VOICES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING, MIDDLE-CLASS,
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS


by


Stacey Marvetta Brown




Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my daughter, Alexandria and my son, Tommy

I thank God for blessing me with two healthy, wonderful children. Continue to work hard in school, stay focused and strive to be everything that you want to be.

I love you so much!

you brought specialized expertise to my topic and I was able to use your feedback and suggestions to strengthen my writing as well as to consider including other scholar's work.

To my 10 participants, thank you for taking time out of your busy, hectic schedules to understand that this was important research and that you wanted to have a role in this research topic. Your unique experiences and stories from Illinois, New Jersey, and Maryland, made me even more excited about my topic as I analyzed the findings and wrote my discussion sections. I am encouraged not to stop here, but to make sure that your voices and stories are heard by helping other families to prepare for college as early as when their children come out of the "womb." As you all shared in so many words, it is never too early to plan for college.

I thank my parents, Moma and Daddy, who from the very beginning of my life nurtured and valued getting a higher education. They never stopped encouraging me to get good grades, have good conduct (as it was called in my day) and to do my best, while NEVER letting me settle for a C on an assignment. College was stressed as early as elementary school and I never imagined doing anything else after high school. Although they stressed getting a bachelors and masters degree, I am not sure they imagined me striving for a doctorate degree. As the first person on both sides of my family to receive a doctorate degree, I thank Moma and Daddy for instilling in me the value of a higher education and a debt free education because not only did it inspire my dissertation topic, but it has allowed me to leave a lasting legacy in the Price (Daddy) and Davis (Moma) family, and the Brown (Husband) family. A HUGE thank you to my parents for taking care of Alexandria and Tommy, during the summers and this past Christmas, so that I

could complete comprehensive exams, complete writing my proposal, and complete writing chapters 4 and 5.

I also want to give a huge thank you to my second advisor, Susan Jones, who accepted me after my first advisor, Marylu McEwen went into retirement. Susan, you were also a great advisor, who gave me one of the best opportunities in my life, to be a part of your research team. Although you knew I had a busy schedule and I hesitated to add anything else to my schedule, you knew that I needed to participate in the autoethnography project for my own professional development as well as to truly understand qualitative research. I trusted that you knew what I needed and rushed to our 8:00AM meetings in the Student Life office once a week after getting the family ready for school and work. It was hard but I did it! Participating in this project among colleagues and being published will be something that I will never forget, it helped me to complete my research comprehensive exam question and my own dissertation work.

I want to acknowledge my first advisor, Marylu McEwen, who offered extremely helpful advice on being admitted into the doctoral program. Even though I did not get into the program on my first try, after meeting with Marylu in a one-on-one and asking her what I needed to do to get into the program, I was successful on my second try. Although I heard that my GRE scores were low, which they were, you believed and advocated for me and I thank you from the bottom of my heart! Your advice on taking the prerequisite statistics courses and other doctoral level courses worked and I was able to enter with the 2003 cohort!

I want to thank my husband, Thomas, who supported me from the very first day that I shared with him that I wanted to earn my doctorate degree. You are one of the most

driven and dedicated individuals that I have ever met in my life and I could not have asked for a better mate to walk through this process with me. You never accepted me "quitting" and your encouraging words, "When you become Dr. Brown, …..," always made me know that I had to keep going, and keep working hard until the end. You have achieved so much in your life, which has been an inspiration to me to keep reaching for all of my goals. Because I have been in school almost the entire time since we met one another, almost 13 years ago, I look forward to sharing a life with you without the books, studying, and writing papers. You are a great committed husband and I thank you for all of your prayers as I worked to become Dr. Brown. In addition to my husband I want to thank Alexandria and Tommy, who I birthed in the program and only know "Mommy" as a student. I have finally finished, so my answer to your question, "Are you finished being a student," "YES, I am finished being a student!

I want thank my sister, LaSheta, who is my best friend and who I probably talked to 2 and 3 times a day through most of this process. She never let me quit when times got difficult from the time that I pledged Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated at Appalachian State University in 1995, to my first semester at Indiana University when I did terrible on my first writing assignment and I wanted to come home. I would not expect anything more from a strong, African American woman, who at the time was completing her professional degree as an Optometrist at Pennsylvania College of Optometry in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Today, Dr. LaSheta David, who has opened her own business in Concord, NC and has inspired me not only to complete my PhD, but to put my dissertation into action by opening my own business on helping other families to prepare for college.

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To all of my family and friends, I want to thank you for offering kind words and encouraging me throughout the years. I also want to acknowledge Nannie Helen Burroughs, who was an African American educator, orator, and business woman who started the National Training School for Girls and Women in Washington, DC and who Burroughs University was named in the study. Finally I will have some extra time, so hopefully we can go out and do more with one another and the children. When writing a dissertation, I think of the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," and I want to reiterate this proverb by stating, "It takes a village to write a dissertation," and you have been my village!

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**CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

Since the 17$^{th}$ century when African Americans were enslaved, they have

struggled for the right to be educated (Carter, 2001; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996;

Freeman, 2005). Even though African Americans did not have the same rights as White

people they still used the resources that were available to learn to read and write

(Anderson, 1988). In fact, in 1896, the United States (U.S.) Supreme Court formally

ended that Blacks had the same rights as Whites to participate in the U.S. society by

passing the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. This decision enforced that Blacks were separate

from and "equal" to that of Whites and that "racial segregation was legal and not against

the U.S. Constitution" (p. 46). A decade later, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka,*

*Kansas* (1954) was a Supreme Court case that outlawed *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

*Plessy v. Ferguson*, which was "the pillar of Jim Crow laws and practices was finally

judged to be what it had been all along—unequal and racially oppressive" (Bowser, 2007,

p. 74). This case was a landmark desegregation case, which gave African Americans the

opportunity to attend previously segregated White higher education institutions (Kinzie et

al., 2004). However, even the winning of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka,*

*Kansas* (1954) court case did not lead to immediate desegregation or equality of

educational opportunities (Carter, 2001).

Following these two court cases and under the leadership first of President

Kennedy and then President Johnson, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, playing

an instrumental role in outlawing racial segregation (Bowser, 2007; Melendez, 2004).

This Act broke down barriers of "discrimination in employment and education on the

basis of race or gender" (Lacy, 2007, p. 30). Furthermore, the passing of this Act not only

meant more access to job and educational opportunities, but also increased the number of minorities in college (Kenzie et al., 2004). Because African Americans had greater access to education and white-collar jobs, the emergence of the Black middle-class became more prominent (Lacy 2007), making this one of the major triumphs of the Civil Rights Era. Since then, substantial numbers of Black Americans have moved up the economic ladder, many even surpassing a substantial number of Whites (Attewell, Domina, Lavin, & Levey, 2004; Patillo-McCoy, 1999) within the same social class. After many years of fighting to pass laws to ensure equality of education for African Americans, today, many Blacks have benefited and been successful in an educational system that has favored some races, social classes, and academic abilities, while hindering the educational dreams of others who may not have the same access and exposure as their peers to opportunities inside and outside of school environments.

## Future of Higher Education for African Americans

Bringing to the forefront the historical experiences faced by African Americans to obtain an equal education is worth discussing when examining the future of higher education for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students. Learning about historical court cases as they relate to education provides a framework to better understand these students' present and future achievements and triumphs. The college planning process for these students is distinct in that they are often treated as a monolithic group. For instance, these students come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse in-school and out-of-school experiences that influence the individuals and resources to which they gain access in order to prepare for college (Fries-Britt, 2002). Above all, this group of students will be some of the 'new students' who will enroll in higher education

institutions, with strong academic and leadership records as well as family and community networks that play a role in their success (Project of Institute for Higher Education Policy (PIHEP), 2006).

The PIHEP (2006) released a report stating that higher education institutions will become increasingly more racially and ethnically diverse by 2015. To gain a clearer understanding of just how diverse college campuses will become, a demographic snapshot of the future college student population follows. Between 1995-2015, 80% of all new students will be African American, Latin American, and Native American. By 2050, the percentage of White students will drop to 57.6%, while the percentage of Black students will increase to 13% and other racial minorities will increase to 12% of the student population (Talbot, 2003).

Given these enrollment projections, Black students' background characteristics will look different. Acknowledging these students' background characteristics is imperative because having this knowledge will help to understand what factors contribute to their college preparation process. For example, according to the "Black Undergraduates From Bakke to Grutter: Freshman Status, Trends and Prospects, 1971-2004" report that used data collected through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), more second-generation and third-generation Black students will enter the college campus. By taking a closer look at trends, African American students will matriculate to college campuses with parents who have earned bachelor's degrees and many with graduate degrees. For example, in 1971, of the African American first-year cohort, only 11% of fathers and 12% of mothers had some college education, 8% percent of fathers and 11% of mothers were college graduates, and 5% of both mothers and

fathers had earned graduate degrees. However, in 2004, 19% of fathers and 24% of mothers had some college, 20% of fathers and 25% of mothers were college graduates, and 13% of fathers and 14% of mothers had earned graduate degrees. In regards to family income, in 1971, only 2% of African American respondents reported incomes of $30,000 or higher compared to 2004 in which 30% of respondents reported incomes of $100,000 (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2005). Given these statistics, some Black students will not be entering college from lack of knowledge regarding college planning but will come from families who hold bachelors and graduate degrees and the financial resources to help them obtain information about college.

Not only will African American students' family background characteristics look different, but also will their academic records. Over the last 34 years, the African American first-year student has become stronger academically. In 1971, 8% of African American students reported high school grade point averages of A- or better compared to 20% of first-year students overall. By 2004, 28% of Black first-year students were in this range. Compared to the national first-year student population in 2004 and 1971, Black students were more likely to rate themselves above average or in the top 10% in regards to drive to achieve (79% in 2004 vs. 71% in 1971), leadership ability (66% vs. 60%) and intellectual self confidence (69% vs. 58%). Between 1984 and 2004, Black students made substantial progress in the number of students who met or exceeded the minimum course requirements based on the National Commission on Excellence in Education in English, math, science, and foreign language (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2005). Based on these statistics, more Black students will have the intellectual and leadership abilities to be admitted into college, where family background, academics, and

involvement may play an important role in how they figure out the college planning process. In sum, these students possess the family background, education, experiences, and credentials that make them just as competitive as their White peers as they get ready for a higher education (Fries-Britt, 2002).

## Problem Statement

The state of African American education is complex. From fighting for an education during the 17$^{th}$ century to maintaining strong academic backgrounds to obtaining a higher education in the 21$^{st}$ century, these students understand the value placed on education. Although Allen et al. (2005) offered positive and relevant information on the changing demographics of college campuses pertaining to Black students and their families, little is known about the contextual influences high-achieving, middle-class, African Americans students use to prepare for college because most scholarly research on African American students is conducted from a deficit lens. By studying only Black students' weaknesses and deficiencies, and giving limited attention to their strengths or needs (Freeman, 1997; Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1997), this perspective offers only a one-sided perspective that does not address school, home, and community contexts that these students bring into the educational arena to prepare for college. There is a segment of the African American student population that is achieving academically; however, the problem is these high-achieving African American students have often been understudied, given that there is such an emphasis on Black students who are at risk, experience academic difficulty, (Griffin, 2006; Fries-Britt, 1998) or are from low-income backgrounds (Mortenson Research Seminar, 2001; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). To learn more about high-achieving, middle-class, African American

students, a move away from a deficit mindset is necessary. Embracing a new mindset acknowledges that these student's demographics and high school experiences may place them in positions to gain access to various resources so that they are competitive for admission into America's four year colleges and universities.

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how high-achieving, middle-class, African American students prepare for college. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to find out how these students plan for college using school, family, and community resources. Given that high-achieving, middle-class, African American students experience marginalization due to their race, but experience privilege due to their academic abilities and social class backgrounds, included in this study will be an examination of how race and social class influence their college preparation process. The following research questions will guide this study:

1. How do high achieving, middle-class, African American students understand their college preparation process?

2. How do school, family, and community factors influence or impede the college preparation process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students?

3. How do race and class influence or impede the college preparation process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students?

## Definition of Terms

Prior to moving forward, I define the terms used throughout this study. First, the term "high-achieving," which was used interchangeably with "high-ability," "high-performing," and "gifted," refers to students who maintained a minimum high school cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.0, took a college preparatory curriculum in

high school that may have included Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and Honors courses, participated in college preparatory programs, were involved in organizations and held leadership positions outside of the classroom in high school. Second, the term "middle class" refers to students whose families met at least two of the criteria: (a) family household incomes over $50,0000, (b) one parent or family member who held a bachelor's degree, (c) a secure job that offered access to healthcare, retirement security, including deferred compensation plans (401K or 403b), and paid time off for vacation and illness, (d) savings account for the future (IRAs, mutual funds, stocks, bonds, CDs), (e) owned a home, and (f) the ability to provide a college education for one's children (529b plans) (Drum Major Institute for Public Policy, 2010; Gilbert, 2003; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Patillo, 2005). These identifiers were chosen because one definition/perspective did not include the multifaceted influences that make up this class, however, blending multiple scholars and organizations perspectives more thoroughly described this class status. Third, "African Americans" (used interchangeably with "Black," "Black American," and "Black student") was used to describe Black students whose parents were native born in the United States. Lastly, 'college preparation' and 'college planning' was used interchangeably to address any action a student took to plan for postsecondary education.

<div align="center">**Research Design**</div>

I used the qualitative methodology, case study (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1987; Stake, 2000; Yin, 1994), for the present study. Case study methodology was chosen "to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). By studying cases rich in information of African American

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students from high-ability and middle-class backgrounds and their college preparation process I 'lifted the voices' that have been traditionally ignored, understudied, and even silenced in scholarly research (Lacy, 2007). A constructivist epistemological perspective and a critical inquiry perspective informed this case study because I did not just study the backgrounds of the students, but I explored how their relationships with others as well as school, home, and community contexts challenge traditional social structures (Crotty, 1998; Friere, 1972). Exploring how high-achieving, middle-class, African American students understand the college preparation process, in spite of challenges faced within different structural contexts, provided insight into how structures can be changed and policies revised to provide a more inclusive environment for these students. Data collection sources included demographic surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and collecting and reviewing resumes and personal statements that participants wrote to get into college or a campus program or organization that nominated them for the study. To enhance the credibility of the findings, I provided a rich, thick description of the case as well as use triangulation of methods, member checks, and peer debriefers.

## Significance of Study

This constructivist case study was significant because despite high-achieving, middle-class, African American students' success, African American student enrollment rates continue to lag behind White and Asian students (Melendez, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2002), high school and college graduation rates are lower than White Americans (Neimann & Maruyana, 2005), and there are still achievement gaps in suburban and rural school systems as well as among low-income and high-income African American families as compared to their White counterparts

(Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006). Examining these students' unique experiences added more depth to school, home, and community contexts that influence the college planning process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students.

This study was significant because 30 years after *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954)* and the passage of the Civil Rights Act, despite increased educational opportunities for African Americans, there still remain significant achievement gaps between Black Americans and their more affluent, White peers (Carter, 2001; Melendez, 2004) as well as growing inequality in college participation and enrollment (Haycock, 2006; National Center for the Public Policy and Higher Education, 2009). To illustrate further, when compared to other minorities, Asian American students enroll in college at 63%, while African Americans enroll only at 33% and Latino Americans at 27% (Learning Point Associates, 2010). This growing inequality has been attributed to: (a) urban and rural high schools that do not offer courses students need to be admitted to many colleges, (b) segregated and inferior schools, (c) inexperienced, less-qualified, or uncertified teachers, (d) low teacher expectations, (e) less challenging coursework, and (f) decreases in student aid (Haycock, 2006; Melendez, 2004; The Educational Trust, 2006). Additionally, there are stark differences in the racial/ethnic minorities who take or who gain access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses in their respective high schools. "While only 5.4% of entering first-year students at four-year institutions reported attending school where no AP courses were offered, this percentage was much higher among… African Americans (6.8%) students compared with White (5.3%) and Hispanic (3.6%) students" (Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), 2010, p. 3). These inequities may contribute to the achievement gaps between Black

students and their peers; however, the benefit of studying high-achieving, middle-class, African American students was a focus on resources these students used or did not use to be resilient in spite of these inequities to obtain a higher education degree.

Some African American students experience unfairness in their secondary experiences as they plan for college due to their racial/ethnic background; however, race/ethnicity should not be studied without taking into account social class status. Social class was important to study along with race because the stories of middle-class African Africans who make up three fourths of African American households (Patillo-McCoy, 1999) was acknowledged and added a breath of knowledge to the Black community as well as higher education researchers. The growth of the Black middle-class has coincided with shrinkage in the proportion of Black families living in poverty from 34% in 1967 to 21% in 2001 (Attewell et al., 2004). Although addressing the needs of the Black poor is important, equally important is that they "no longer constitute the standard for African-American households" (Attewell et al., 2004, p. 7). Indeed, one in four African Africans are poor; however, rarely do we hear the stories of the other three-fourths of African Americans who make up the middle and upper class of this ethnic group (Patillo-McCoy, 1999). Therefore, studying middle-class Black Americans contributed more research on Black Americans who were not from low-income backgrounds in order to gain a clearer understanding of how their college preparation experiences may be different from their peers from low or working class backgrounds.

Studying social class within African American students' college planning process was important because federal and state policymakers have increased financial aid to middle- and upper-class college students and their families as college costs have

increased (Haycock, 2006). Increased financial aid may contribute to why students from middle- and upper- income families are attending and graduating from four-year institutions (Kinzie et. al, 2004). Specifically, by age 24, 45% of students from the top income quartile received at least a bachelor's degree; however, the picture becomes bleaker when examining African American students. African Americans between 25 and 29 within the same income quartile, attain bachelor's degrees at nearly one half the rates of Whites (Haycock, 2006). These alarming statistics made this study significant to find out the role that financial aid plays in the college planning process and the motivational influences to which these high-achieving, middle-class, African American students have access to this information to obtain bachelor degrees.

Finally, this study was significant because it was conducted at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Institutional type was important because a report published by the U.S. Department of Education showed that 88.1% of all Black college students attended PWIs (NCES, 2007). With this in mind, it is imperative that higher education and student affairs administrators, faculty, and staff at these types of institutions are knowledgeable about their pre-college experiences, so that similar environments are created inside and outside of the classroom among faculty, staff, and peers networks. By creating supportive environments and experiences, students will have the opportunity to continue to excel in college, just as they have excelled in high school.

## Summary

Studying high-performing, middle-class, African American students was essential to the college preparation process so that these students' voices can be heard and experiences can be recognized and included in higher education policies, practices, and

procedures. As mentioned, these students have a long and rich history of valuing education and being resilient, in spite of discrimination and inequality experienced in school environments (Carter, 2001; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Freeman, 2005). Unveiling these students' stories opened doors to know how school, home, and community networks, as well as race and class shape their college preparation process. Because limited research has been conducted on African American students from high-achieving backgrounds (Fries-Britt, 1998, 2002) and middle class backgrounds (Lacy, 2007), there is still much to learn about the advantages and disadvantages that they experience as they interact with individuals in home, school, and community contexts.

Although some of these student's college resources are readily accessible inside and outside of the home, we still cannot disregard that others still may need guidance in figuring out their 4- to 6-year journey. Although prior research indicates that many of these students do not enter elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools as clean slates, unaware of the importance of a higher education, the courses and standardized tests that need to be taken for college admissions, and the financial aid that may be available to their families; others will be on the other end of the spectrum trying to prepare for college with little direction. With this in mind, it is imperative to respect that high-achieving, middle-class, African American students should not be treated as a monolithic group because they share dominant and subordinate identities, however, acknowledging their unique pre-college experiences will chart a path to discover new ideas on how these students prepare for college. Now that I have provided a historical overview and background of the topic, followed by the problem statement, research

questions, definition of terms, and significance of the study, next, I turn to a discussion of

the literature on this research topic.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter describes the prior research that has been conducted on this topic. Although high-ability African American students are an understudied student population (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007), acknowledging their middle-class status recognizes that they bring more than only strong academic backgrounds into the college planning process, but experiences and resources that students from lower class backgrounds may not have access. I begin with an overview of high-achieving African American students. Second, I review literature on school and family contextual influences that play a role in the successes and challenges that Black high school and college students encounter in these environments. Third, I explore social class, specifically middle-class status, and the influence that this identity has on access to higher education resources. Finally, I describe three theoretical frameworks and models that I used as a guide for my study.

### High-Achieving African American Students

High-achieving African American students are a population of students that represent diverse and complex backgrounds (Fries-Britt, 2002). Many of these students have academic records similar to their White peers, ranging from high standardized test scores and grade point averages (GPA) to taking an academically rigorous curriculum to prepare for college (Fries-Britt). Not only do these students excel in the classroom, but they also engage in high-level leadership positions in clubs and organizations out of the classroom (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2005). As a result of maintaining excellence inside and outside the classroom, these students' academic and co-curricular experiences provide a rich foundation to compete with peers in order to be admitted into

colleges and universities nationally and internationally. As high-performing African American students plan for college, acknowledging their dual identities and exposing their demographic backgrounds will offer important information for colleges and universities to improve campus policies, practices, and programs so that these students continue to excel in college just as they have in secondary school environments (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

**Dual Identities: High-Achieving and African American**

High-achieving African American students have a reputation of exceeding college admissions criteria; however, this population of students is complex, due to possessing dual identities. Their dual identities of being Black and gifted has presented internal and external challenges, leaving room for more to be learned about a group of students who have often been understudied (Freeman, 1997). Less attention has been given to high-achievers; instead, there is an emphasis on African Americans students who are at risk, experience academic difficulty, (Fries-Britt, 1998; Griffin, 2006) or are from low income backgrounds (Mortenson Research Seminar, 2001; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). In addition to focusing on deficits, there is a misconception held by educators that because these students have excelled academically they have fewer problems than their low-achieving peers (Fries-Britt, 2002) and as a result do not need support services in the form of tutoring or mentoring (Freeman, 1999a). Such an increased focus on deficiencies, underachievement, and decrease in support services may paint an inaccurate portrait of Black high-achievers (Fries-Britt, 1998, 2002), possibly sending negative perceptions about Black high achievers in secondary or postsecondary literature. For this reason, acknowledging these dual identities and understanding the

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experiences of Blacks who have been successful is noteworthy of studying to dispel commonly held beliefs, mindsets, and stereotypes that impact campus policy and programs (Fries-Britt, 2002), so that campus climates are improved for African American males and females students at higher education institutions.

Particularly, it has been a challenge for educators in secondary school environments to acknowledge and to identify students who are Black and high-ability for gifted and talent programs. Many have been blamed for why these students are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. According to Bonner (2000), parents ascribe the problem of not identifying students to the schools, the schools ascribe the problem to the gifted and talent coordinators, and the coordinators assign the problem to the standardized tests. Despite who is to blame, these students should not be treated as a monolithic group, but as individual students who bring diverse academic and background experiences that influence precollege and college experiences.

**The achievement patterns of African American men and women**

The topic of high-ability and African American becomes even more complex for campus climates when the statistics of Black men and women college goers and graduation rates is taken into account. According to the 2000 Census data, in the United States, the collegiate enrollment of women who attended college outnumbered the number of men, and is somewhat greater than their percentage in the general population. In 2005, the Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac compiled data and reported that 16,611,700 students enrolled in college in 2002, 43.4% were men and 56.6% were women. These data was broken down further into racial/ethnic categories for male and females, Blacks, 35.8% men, 64.2% women; Hispanics, 42.1% men and 57.9 % women;

American Indians, 39.6% men and 60.4% women; and Whites, 44.0% men and 56.0% women. Clearly, in 2002, African American male enrollment figures showed that they attended college in lower percentages than the U. S. population, but out of any other racial/ethnic group their male/female ratio is the most skewed, just over two to one. Additionally, within 6 years of initial enrollment, only two-thirds of Black men who started college did not graduate (Mortensen Research Seminar, 2001), which is the lowest graduation rate of all racial/ethnic groups and both sexes. Strayhorn (2010) imparted that when researching the disparities in graduation rates this may be due to educational contexts, specifically predominantly White schools, classrooms, and colleges where the campus climates may be chilly or unwelcoming for Black male students (Fleming 1984), lack of supportive relationships, (Strayhorn, 2008b), and racism and discrimination (Strayhorn, 2008a).

Cuyjet (2006) shared that many individuals in academia and mainstream press have addressed the social conditions of African American men, particularly from the perspective of experiences in elementary education, secondary education, employment, criminal justice system, interracial social interaction, and intraracial social interactions. In the media and mainstream press, Black American men are often described with negative connotations: dysfunctional, at- risk, endangered, and lazy, which tends to emphasize commonly held stereotypes and beliefs that their White peers and teachers may hold about them (Strayhorn, 2010). In elementary and secondary schools, racial discrimination is extensive in special education, which is where many educators encourage Black males and females to take classes. When Black students were studied by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, in elementary and secondary schools,

Black students were three times more likely than their White peers to be labeled mentally retarded; and 1.3 times more likely to be labeled with a specific learning disability. Even more astonishing, Black boys from more affluent communities who enrolled in quality, integrated schools, were more likely to be encouraged to enroll in special education classes than Black boys in segregated black schools in low-income schools (Price, 2002). The achievement patterns of African American males and females is shocking when college enrollment patterns are considered, however, this issue is a problem long before these students ever enter secondary or postsecondary environments.

### Demographics of High-Achieving African American Students

In contrast to how Black students are generally portrayed in the literature, academia, and the main press, it is imperative to present an alternative portrait of high-achieving African American students. Academically, they have strong high school grades, high SAT scores, have taken Advanced Placement (AP) courses, participated in gifted and talented programs, and attended private high schools and highly ranked public high schools (Fries-Britt, 2002). Socioeconomically, they are from families that range from low- to high-income backgrounds, where some are from families below the poverty level and others from families with incomes above $200,000. Additionally, one or both parents have no college education, are college educated, and in some instances hold terminal degrees (Fries-Britt). Spanning a wide range of demographic characteristics, African American higher-performers are a group of students with a broad scope of experiences that contribute to their college preparation process.

By providing a backdrop of student and familial demographics, these high-achieving students' educational and family backgrounds are influenced by school, home,

and community environments that assist them in how they make meaning of their schooling process as well as their college planning process. Through experiences encountered in these environments, students come to understand the most significant contexts that contribute to their aspirations to pursue a higher education and to dismiss the contexts that impede the college preparation process. In the next section, the most important contextual influences that help high-ability Black American students make meaning of their college preparation process will be addressed. These contexts will include school contextual influences (in-class and out-of-class high school and college environments and peer influences), community, and family contextual influences.

## School Contextual Influences

School context is one significant influence that plays a role in the successes and challenges high-achieving, African Americans experience in secondary and postsecondary environments. Through in-class and out-of-class experiences, African American students learn to be successful as well as overcome barriers. As students matriculate from high school to college, they understand the college preparation process better through in-class and out-of-class environments and peer influences within school environments.

### In-Class High School and College Environments

In a qualitative study conducted by Griffin and Allen (2006) on nine high-achieving Black high school students in one high-resourced and one low-resourced school, the researchers learned about the benefits and obstacles students encounter with school gatekeepers in gaining access to a college preparatory curriculum in high school. One advantage academically talented Black students faced at the high-resourced school

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was college counselors who were supportive, "providing information on scholarships and schools students were interested in attending" (p. 490). Even though students at the high-resourced school were high-achievers who were motivated to plan for college and attended a high school with a rigorous curriculum and advanced classes, they also experienced the challenge of school agents – teachers and counselors – not encouraging or permitting them to take these courses (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Suh, 2003; Hemmings, 1996; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). On the other hand, students attending the low- resourced school expressed that not as many AP courses or counselors were informed about college information; however, their AP teachers played a dominant role in helping students' with their college preparation process by providing college information and creating a college preparatory environment in their classrooms. Although students in Griffin and Allen's (2006) study were enrolled in high school during the time the study was conducted, they were aware of the teachers and counselors who had the greatest influence on helping them to map out their college journey.

Within high school environments, researchers have found that high-achievers do not only encounter problems with gaining access to the appropriate resources to plan for college, but they also face the barrier of overcoming stereotypes that school agents hold about Black students' achievements and abilities (Fries-Britt, 2002; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Griffin & Allen, 2006). As aforementioned, in the Griffin and Allen (2006) study on high school students, these researchers also found that these students had to "fight against doubts driven by racist stereotypes for access to college preparatory resources more available to their peers" (p. 490). Furthermore, these students were encouraged to attend community colleges based on the teachers' and

counselors' stereotypical beliefs about the abilities of African Americans and about the types of institutions that they believed were best for them to attend. These students' experiences is what Steele (1997) referred to as stereotype threat which is "a situational threat – a threat in the air – that, in general, can affect members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists" (p. 614). Stereotype threat is a concept that African American students are forced to cope with when placed in environments in which they are the minority. Even though Steele's research was conducted on college students, his stereotype threat concept is still relevant to some of the same experiences that high school students experience in classroom settings.

To illustrate the stereotype threat concept in college environments, Fries-Britt's (2002) qualitative study found that high-ability Black college students felt that they had to prove their academic ability and felt constantly evaluated by their White peers. In another study, Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) studied the collegiate experiences of a select group of high-achieving Black students at a large public university and learned that these students spent a considerable amount of time resisting and dispelling myths and stereotypes about their race, academic abilities, and perceptions of their social activities and behaviors. Although these students knew that they had the academic ability to be in the honors program, this did not halt the misperception from their White peers that they were there only because of affirmative action policies and to diversify the campus (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Academically-talented students made conscious efforts to behave in a manner believed to be non-Black, became involved in activities where they could be seen as positive role models, and proved that they had the academic abilities to be enrolled in a competitive academic program (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

Similarly, Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) gathered data from 34 Black collegians (juniors and seniors) as a part of a larger study conducted at a historically Black college and university (HBCU) and a traditionally White institution (TWI) within a multi-campus system on the East coast. Black students at HBCUs did not face the same issues in regard to racial discrimination and stereotypes as students in the TWIs. In the TWI, Black students spent a considerable amount of time dealing with negative stereotypes and serving as the "Black voice" (p. 326) in classes with Whites who had grown up in homogeneous communities. These students expressed that academics almost became secondary to addressing stereotypes that White students held about their race. The internal struggle to dispel stereotypes diverted energy and attention away from their academic abilities. Oftentimes, these threats can be a barrier to achievement, while at other times these threats motivated students to prove themselves beyond the stereotype (Steele, 1997).

Other recent studies have explored the perception of race and how race shapes academic experiences, specifically, interactions with faculty and Physics students. For example, Fries-Britt, Younger, and Hall (2010) demonstrated that faculty behaviors and attitudes created classroom environments that impeded the success of underrepresented groups and contributed to stereotypes. Data were collected over a five year span on 110 students who attended the National Society of Black Physicists (NSBP) and the National Society of Hispanic Physicists (NSHP). In this study, students shared that faculty behaviors consisted of suggesting that students change their major, in spite of doing well in the class, while other students perceived different expectations being applied to minority students. In another recent study conducted by Strayhorn (2008b), the

relationship between academic achievement (as measured by college grades), satisfaction with college, and the role of supportive faculty relationships was measured in facilitating African American men's success in college. Findings from this study revealed that having supportive, meaningful relationships with faculty, as well as peers, resulted in higher satisfaction levels with college for African American men.  Clearly, classroom environments and faculty behaviors and attitudes toward students influenced the achievement patterns of students in individual classes, as well as their overall success in college.

Fries-Britt and Holmes (2012) employed a qualitative approach to study the experiences of female students in Physics and related science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. These scholars found that Black students precollege exposure to science as well as academic preparation played an instrumental role in developing an interest in the science field.  Through a small focus group and individual interviews, participants disclosed how participating in science competitions, visiting museums with their families, and having resources available in the home enabled them to develop an interest in science early in their lives. Participants also shared that because many of their parents, family members, or mentors worked in STEM-related fields, having access to these individuals helped to develop their confidence in science. Other findings included interactions with faculty and peers were not always positive because their academic abilities and commitment to the field were questioned or faculty gave them minimal tasks to complete on research and lab projects. In this study, Black female students valued the precollege experiences, which exposed them to networks and mentors who embraced science-related majors and careers. As a result of precollege experiences

and college classroom interactions with faculty and peers, Black high achievers were aware of the positive and negative behaviors and attitudes that influenced and impeded success.

**Out-of-Class College Environments**

High-performing African American students not only fight to dispel myths and stereotypes within school environments with their teachers, faculty, counselors, and peers, but also have to work to overcome stereotypes in out-of-class environments (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2005). For example**,** Harper (2005) studied 32 high-achieving African American male students and the effects of active out-of-class engagement at six predominantly White institutions. Prior to college, these talented students excelled in the classroom, and were also involved in co-curricular activities including, sports, high school clubs, and organizations. Their active involvement in high school translated well into college, in which they sought organizations that afforded them opportunities to uphold high profile leadership positions, while maintaining good grades and becoming the institution's ideal students to debunk stereotypes that faculty may have about African American men. Participants in this study were involved on campus and held leadership positions to change the mindsets of how faculty and staff perceived Black men on campus (Harper, 2005; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Furthermore, in Harper's (2005) study, high-achievers believed through involvement they could make sure the voices and concerns of African American students and other students of color were acknowledged in mainstream student organizations and major campus committees. Likewise, Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) found a similar finding in their study on Black high-achievers, where although students felt like they were "in a position of being the only or 'token' Black

student" (p. 11), when asked to serve on a variety of committees, students felt that this was yet another opportunity to be at the table to express their personal ideas and learn from others. Thus, academically talented students in this study became involved and held leadership positions to learn and to prove themselves, while dispelling stereotypes about their race. Within these out-of-classroom environments, high-achievers learned that involvement in co-curricular activities was another way to address racial stereotypes, while preserving their academic reputation in predominantly White environments. Their leadership abilities complemented their academic abilities placing them in prominent positions on campus to serve as positive role models on campus.

As high-achievers expressed overcoming stereotypes inside and outside of classroom environments, they faced internal turmoil that caused them to question their own identities and behaviors and made conscious efforts to change these behaviors to be in line with mainstream society.  These students demonstrated that in order to survive obstacles presented in high school and college class and out-of-class environments, they needed to be aware of stereotypes and find ways to rise above these barriers. As in Fries-Britt (2002), Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007), Fries-Britt and Turner, (2002), Griffin and Allen (2006), Fries-Britt et al. (2010), Strayhorn (2008b), Fries-Britt and Holmes (2012) and Harper (2005), these students realized supportive and unsupportive behaviors and as a result, used threats from faculty, teachers, counselors, and peers as motivation to prove themselves above and beyond the stereotype.

**Peer Influences in School Environments**

Overcoming stereotypes and myths in school environments is a challenge high-achieving African American students face with teachers and counselors; however, peers

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can also be a barrier to academic achievement as these high achievers plan for college and enter college settings. Peer influence is unique to high-ability African American students because peers can be an advantage as well as a disadvantage to their academic success. Whether these peer relationships are positive or negative, through these relationships students become aware that their intellectual ability may be rejected by some, and embraced and valued by others as they work hard to maintain academic excellence. Within peer influences, the acting White phenomenon, managing academic success, the curriculum, and school types are important to address to understand how some students develop opposition to achievement, while others develop an admiration toward academic achievement.

**Acting White phenomenon in high school environments.** Within some African American communities, students develop a negative perception of high achievement and negative peer influences by associating these behaviors as "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1988, 2003). The phrase "acting White," has been defined differently by many ranging from speaking Standard English, enrolling in Advanced Placement or honors courses, and wearing certain brands of clothes, such as GAP or Abercrombie and Fitch as well as wearing shorts in the winter (Fryer, 2006). Additionally, Fryer (2006) described "acting White" "as a set of social interactions in which minority adolescents who get good grades in school enjoy less social popularity than white students who do well academically" (p. 53). Within this phrase, there is an inherent belief that African Americans who aspire for academic excellence is perceived as assimilating or internalizing the values of the dominant group (Ford, 1996).

Black students who are academically talented have been accused of "acting White." Although Fordham and Ogbu (1986) did not invent the term "acting White," in their ethnographic study at Capital High, (a pseudonym for a predominantly Black high school in a low-income area in Washington, DC), these researchers found that students developed an oppositional culture toward education. Fordham and Ogbu learned that many intelligent Black students downplayed their intelligence to avoid being accused of "acting White." Fordham and Ogbu defined this term as one in which Black youth dismissed academically focused or intellectually focused behaviors as "White." Because students in their study acknowledged academic success as being synonymous with the White culture, they avoided academic achievement to avoid being accused of "acting White."

**Managing academic success among homogeneous and heterogeneous peer groups in high school environments.** Even though Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that Black students developed an oppositional identity to academic excellence, other researchers demonstrated contradictory findings. Horvat and Lewis' (2003) qualitative study on understanding the educational experiences of eight college-bound female Black students in their senior year of high school focused on the college choice process and the ability of students to achieve academic excellence while effectively managing their academic success among their peers. Through extensive on-going participant observations and interviews in two public high schools in California, Horvat and Lewis's major finding was that there were multiple peer groups with whom Black students interacted; some opposed academic excellence while others affirmed the participants' academic pursuits. Horvat and Lewis found that participants did not believe

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that being Black and being smart were incongruent. These students learned to handle academic success by surrounding themselves with supportive peers who did not undermine or derail their academic and career aspirations. Additionally, Dartnow and Cooper (1997), in their three-year longitudinal study on African American high-achievers enrolled at a predominantly White elite independent high school, found that these students were respected by their peers and seen as role models. Black high-achievers in Dartnow and Cooper's study adopted academic behaviors that promoted an identity of success. Similar to Fordham and Ogbu's concept of "acting White," Horvat and Lewis (2003) and Dartnow and Cooper (1997) discovered some instances where Black students modified or downplayed academic success or were not accepted by African American peers outside of school, but this was only one piece of a larger practice that Horvat and Lewis (2003) called "managing academic success" (p. 266). In both Dartnow and Cooper and Horvat and Lewis's studies, the burden of "acting White" was not a dominant force in relationships with peers as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found in their study.

As students managed their academic success they seemed not to camouflage their academic success with all of their peers, but only the peers who called them names or peers who were unsupportive of their academic success. Most noticeably, with supportive peers they shared their academic success through words of encouragement, "contributing to the affirmation and validation of the participants academic pursuits" (Horvat & Lewis, 2003, p. 271). Their academic achievement and college aspirations did not lead them to suffer from the "affective dissonance" or oppositional identity described by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) in which peer groups influenced their friends to oppose academic excellence.  Rather than focusing on the Black homogeneous peer group which may have

a negative influence on achievement, Horvat and Lewis (2003) and Dartnow and Cooper (1997) emphasized the heterogeneity of Black peer groups, which embraced and celebrated their intellectual abilities to provide the support needed for future college and career aspirations.

In a more recent ethnographic study on academic disengagement, Ogbu (2007) discovered reasons why some Black students performed well and others did not at Shaker Heights School in Ohio. Consistent with Horvat and Lewis' (2003) and Dartnow and Cooper's (1997) studies, some students did not let the negative impact of peer pressure of the Black homogeneous peer group deter them from taking AP classes and making good grades. Their deep passion for challenging self was instilled in them from family upbringing and support that encouraged good grades, taking challenging courses, monitoring school work, and choosing friends who possessed the same passion for academic excellence. However, consistent with the Fordham and Ogbu (1986) study, in the Ogbu (2007) study, there were Black students who avoided taking AP and honors classes because they considered these courses too hard, while others believed that most of the students who took them were White. Peer pressure prevented academically capable students from making good grades for fear of being labeled as acting White.

**Peer groups and high school types.** In relation to peer groups, the "acting White" concept presents challenges for African American students who excel academically; nevertheless, this concept takes on a different meaning for students who attend certain high school types. Bergin and Cooks (2000) and Fryer (2006) conducted studies on high-achieving students of color, not specifically Black students. Even though these studies did not focus specifically on Black students, they presented findings that

were relevant to high-achieving African American students during their high school years. Bergin and Cook (2000) interviewed 41 high-achieving students (31 were participants in the EXCEL program and 10 from the comparison group) of color, African American, Mexican American, Asian American, and mixed (ethnicities not specified), about the competition of grades within different school contexts, mainly public and private secondary schools. The data presented in this study were part of a larger longitudinal study of EXCEL, a program for students underrepresented in higher education. Bergin and Cook and Fryer found competition to be beneficial among peers in private schools, where students did not reject or camouflage academic achievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), but they focused on grade point average to improve grades, flaunted good grades, and argued with teachers for more points on exams. Thus, students competed for grades to prepare for future classes or to be admitted into college, realizing that working to their full potential would pay off when they began to compete with their peers for admission into college.

In like manner, Fryer (2006) used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Adhealth) to examine African American and Hispanic students in regard to the "acting White" phenomenon and school contexts. He learned that this concept was most prevalent in integrated schools rather than in private schools or predominantly Black public schools.  Specifically, in schools where Black students comprised 80% of the population, Fryer found "no evidence at all that getting good grades adversely affects students' popularity" (p. 57). With this in mind, Perna (2000) also found in her quantitative study on differences in the decision to attend college among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites that African Americans who attended

segregated high schools were more likely to enroll in a four-year college than other African Americans in integrated schools. Even though participants in Bergin and Cook (2000) and Fryer's studies attended high school during the time that the studies were conducted, these findings are relevant to African American college students who reflected on their high school college preparation process because these qualitative and quantitative studies examine African American high-achievers and their experiences with peers, the curriculum, and school types.

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**Family Contextual Influences**

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**Parental Involvement and Expectations Offer a Foundation for Academic Success**

Another influence on the college preparation process is parental and family involvement and expectations. Studies have found that parental involvement in school is related to a child's school success and college attendance (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2000). Other studies share that parental involvement plays an important role in students' aspirations to go to college and enroll in college. Over the last few decades, researchers have documented a positive link between parents' involvement in schools and children's academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2007). Moreover, in a study conducted by the Henderson and Mapp (2002), data suggested that the family was critical to students' achievement.  Results from this study showed that students with involved parents, irrespective of their income or background, were more likely than those without involved parents to have good attendance records, perform better in class and on tests, enroll in more challenging courses, have fewer social problems, graduate, and go to college. By showing an interest and participating in their child's education, parents and family set a firm foundation for academic excellence to

pursue a higher education.  Overall it is important to address parental involvement for students from all racial/ethnic backgrounds; yet acknowledging studies that focus specifically on parental and family influences on academically talented Blacks is critical for the college planning process of these students.

**Parental and Family Influences on Academically Talented Black College Students**

The role and power of parents and family members is important in the lives of academically talented Blacks (Hrabowski, 1991; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Hrabowski, Maton, Greene, & Greif, 2002) and other Black students who aspire to go to college (Freeman, 1999).  For academically talented students, "studies have consistently found that family background and parental influence serve as primary forces in determining achievement over time" (Fries-Britt, 1997, p. 69). To illustrate parent involvement further, Hrabowski (1991) conducted a study on Black male students in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, which is a program to produce more MDs and PhDs in science and technology. Students were selected for this program for their high standardized test scores and good high school grades. Both students and their parents were interviewed about factors that contributed to their success. The role of parents, especially the mother, contributed to the success of students in this study. Mothers could give explicit examples of when counselors in secondary school environments encouraged their children to take lower level courses or what they considered inappropriate for their child's academic ability. These parents were in a position to advocate on behalf of their children to take a more challenging and rigorous curriculum, which more adequately matched their academic potential.

Freeman (1999a) asserted in her qualitative inquiry across a range of cities, schools, and family circumstances that African American students' college choice process was influenced by parents and other family members. Working with a population of first-generation college goers, or students whose parents did not attend college, she learned through 16 group interviews and a total of 70 students that family members wanted the student to achieve beyond the education that they had received. Family members in this study did not necessarily need a college education to acknowledge that having a higher education contributed to upward mobility and a better life for these students. Even though Freeman's study did not focus specifically on African American high-achievers, the study is relevant because of the focus on African American students in general and the influence of the parental and family unit that helped students make sense of their college planning process.

In another study, Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif (1998) interviewed Black men and their families and shared what these families did to raise academically successful men. These young men were in the top 2% percent in terms of their scholastic test scores and high school grades. They were selected into the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, "the university experience developed originally for high-achieving African American males in science and math" (p. 197). These students received support services in the form of academic advising, personal counseling, tutoring and mentoring, involvement with faculty in research, and access to role models in science. The researchers reported key findings leading to success:

(1) the importance of reading, beginning with parents (especially mothers) who read to their sons at a young age;

(2) the parents' view of education was necessary and valuable;

(3) active  encouragement on the part of parents toward academic success;

(4) close interaction between the parents and their sons' teachers;

(5) strong parental interest in homework;

(6) considerable verbal praise (p. 194).

Specifically, parent involvement in the schools included visits to observe classrooms, telephone contact with teachers, counselors, and principals, involvement in the PTA and volunteer work, and appropriate placement in special programs. Parents also were just as involved in their sons' extracurricular activities, believing that it was important to balance academic ability with co-curricular activities.

In a similar study on Black women, Hrabowski, Maton, Greene, and Greif (2002) conducted interviews and questionnaires on African American women who were students or graduates of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, their parents, and others who had influenced their lives. These girls excelled in science and mathematics in high school and had high SAT scores in math, the primary criteria for the scholars program. These participants were from a variety of familial, geographic, educational, and economic backgrounds. There were two-parent and single-parent homes. Some of the parents had a college education, while others did not. Some were from urban environments as well as suburban and rural environments. The students attended private, parochial, and larger public schools, and their economic backgrounds ranged from low to middle income. Family members, specifically mothers, played an instrumental role in advocating for their girls in school and out of school. They developed relationships with teachers who had high expectations of their daughters' abilities and "some of these teachers were helpful in providing opportunities in laboratories, special programs, and advanced classes" (p. 212).

However, one-third of the mothers had to confront teachers who had placed their daughters in low-level courses when they felt teachers had made inaccurate placements and insisted that they be placed in higher level courses, particularly in math and science. On the other hand, fathers, too, played a role in contributing to their daughters' successes. They also had to advocate on their daughters' behalf to be placed in advanced placement classes. If the fathers had a college education, many worked with them on their homework. From the daughters' perspectives, their parents were instrumental in helping them to be successful. These young women identified several characteristics that attributed to their success: the importance of reading at an early age, high expectations accompanied by encouragement, showing interest in their daughter's homework, getting to know their teachers, and supporting them in outside activities such as athletics, band, and multicultural club, science clubs, and community service.

Griffin's (2006) qualitative study on nine high-achieving Black college students in an Honors program at a large research university examined sources of internal and external motivation and how this motivation contributed to their experiences. In Griffin's study, the focus was not specifically on college planning, but on sources of motivation. Nevertheless, students who were motivated internally or externally seemed to excel in school and acknowledged that parents saw college as an opportunity for their children. Participants stressed that parents did not necessarily force them to work harder but instilled in them early a strong passion and desire for academic excellence and to "do their best" (p. 392). Accordingly, these students were aware of their parents' expectations to work to their academic potential to meet college and career goals and sought their approval for their success.

Indeed, many high-achieving Black American students have the academic and leadership potential to pursue a postsecondary education. In prior research studies, students learned to make meaning of their college planning process, through their networks in school and family environments. They also learned to overcome obstacles while recognizing positive and negative networks that contributed to their success throughout high school and college. In their journey through high school and the college planning process, they faced low expectations, racism, discrimination, and stereotypes. However, these high-performers relied upon in-class and out-of class experiences to persevere so that they reached their higher education goals.

**Social Class and Its Influence In School, Family, and Community Environments**

In addition to studying how academic achievement and race contribute to college preparation for high-achieving African American students, social class is also an identity that helps students gain access to resources and tools to plan for a higher education. In certain environments, social class is described only in terms of money or income that provides the economic means to gain access to resources and tools to prepare for college. Barratt (2007) broadened the definition of social class to include social class as an identity, income and wealth, capital, occupational prestige, educational attainment, a system of structures and relationships, and an enacted role which individuals co-create as a social construct. Social class is an identity that all individuals own and impacts all lived experiences, it is an identity seldom discussed in educational settings (Barratt, 2007; hooks, 1994, 2000). Even though social class is rarely discussed in educational settings, it does not mean that it does not play a salient role in school, family, and community contexts. In school settings, class influences diversity of student population, teacher

expectations of students, and tracking decisions. Within family contexts, a students'
family SES or social class status has some bearing on school success, and as a result
many poor students enter schools without the social or economic benefits that middle and
high SES students possess (Sirin, 2005). In community environments, social class may be
a driving force in where an individual chooses to live, who their neighbors will be, and
the educational resources and services they have immediate access to (Patillo-McCoy,
1999). This relationship between social class and school, family, and community is so
apparent due to the fact that, social class, which is usually passed down from parents to
children, influences educational attainment levels and educational aspirations (Horvat,
1996; Kao & Tienda, 1998; McDonough, 1997). With this in mind, individuals' social
class can provide insight into the experiences and resources that are available and
unavailable in school, home, and community environments to prepare for a
postsecondary education.

**Social Class and Privilege and Marginalization**

On the other hand, researchers should acknowledge the influence that social class
has on privilege and marginalization in different environments (Ostove & Cove, 2003).
Specifically, when studying high-performing, middle-class, Black students, sometimes
positive and negative perceptions come into play. There may be an assumption that these
individuals are privileged because of their academic abilities and middle-class status,
while being simultaneously marginalized because of the racial discrimination they may
face in educational and social settings. Although these perceptions may be reality for
some students, for others these perceptions may be false depending on the student's
individual lived experiences. For this reason, when studying social class and its influence

on education for African American students it is imperative to study their triple identities, the definition of middle-class, and the types of capital individuals possess based on social class; specifically, parental social class' link to college aspirations and academic outcomes in secondary environment will be addressed in this study.

**Triple Identities: High-Achieving, Middle-Class, and African American**

High-achieving, middle-class, African American students learn to balance their triple identities, (i.e., high-achieving, middle-class, and Black). As reviewed in the literature on high-achieving African American students, many times school constituents and peers stereotype Blacks so that they only focus on their deficits (Fries-Britt, 1998; Griffin, 2006) instead of the academic achievements that they may bring into school settings. At other times, school agents blur race and social class so that the prior knowledge and experiences students have learned through parents and other networks are ignored by teachers and counselors. It is important to keep in mind that race and class are not separate entities of one another, but are both closely related (Bowser, 2007). To gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between the two identities for this group of students, it is important to address 'who is middle class' and more specifically, 'who is the Black middle class.'

**Who Is Middle-Class?**

The middle-class is considered one of the largest classes, and therefore, includes a wide range of individuals depending on the class model used. According to Gilbert-Kahl model of class structure, which is drawn from Karl Marx, the class structure is divided into upper- middle class and middle-class. The upper-middle class constitutes approximately 14% of households, while the middle class includes approximately 30% of

households. Typical occupations for upper middle-class includes well paid, university-educated managers and professionals, medium sized business owners as well as doctors, lawyers, accountants, and other specialists (Gilbert, 2003). Likewise, typical occupations for the middle-class include lower-level managers, teachers, nurses, insurance agents, plumbers, and electricians. Between both class levels, typical incomes range between $55,000 to $120,000 (Gilbert, 2003). Moreover, Oliver and Shapiro (2006) designated individuals who hold a college degree as well as individuals without a college degree and who they acknowledge as occupationally defined middle class, white-collar workers or the self employed.

The debate on who is middle class is multifaceted, however, 'who is the Black middle class' becomes even more taxing when one includes multiple scholars' perspectives. Patillo (2005) reiterated this point in her study on middle-class Black neighborhoods by sharing that there will never be a full consensus because the income, educational, and occupational ranges are so broad, including individuals who hold a terminal high school diploma to individuals with incomes well over $75,000. Oliver and Shapiro (2006) asserted that some scholars limit the definition in terms of only income, while others include occupation and education in their definition, however, the definition that these scholars presented earlier includes educational achievement, earnings, and occupation. For African Americans, the two middle-class groups discussed above become three distinct groups: lower-middle class, middle-class, and upper-middle class Blacks. According to the U. S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey 2000, lower-middle class Blacks or those who earned between $30,000 and $49,000 made up 65% of the Black middle-class. The second group, which is the focus of Lacy's (2007) research in

three middle-class subdivisions in the suburbs of Washington, DC revealed middle-class

Blacks, who resembled the White middle class, earned more than $50,000 annually who

made up 35% of the Black middle-class. Some of the occupations that this group held

included doctors, accountants, lawyers, engineers, corporate managers, which required a

bachelor's degree.  This group as well as upper-class Blacks have received far less

attention from researchers. Lower-middle-class Blacks have received more attention

because even though their income, occupation, and educational levels are different, they

share a common daily experience with the Black working class or the Black poor.

Additionally, scholars primarily have conducted research mainly in urban areas or in

established suburban areas outside of these urban centers, where these communities are

infested with some of the same problems that inner cities experience: high

unemployment, low-performing school districts, White flight, high rates of poverty, and

drugs (Lacy, 2007). Many middle-class Blacks live in the same communities with lower

class Blacks and therefore, the communities typically studied by sociologists (Patillo-

McCoy, 1999).

**Social Class and Types of Capital**

Even though social class is associated usually with an individual's economic

capital or economic means to have the finances to provide home resources for studying

and learning (Coleman, 1988), it also offers more opportunities in regard to other types of

capital that an individual possesses, such as social, cultural, and human capital (Bourdieu,

1977).  The benefits of having material resources that can transfer into educational

resources can influence educational aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998). "Parents who

invest their financial resources into scholastic activities further increase their children's

educational aspirations, but financial resources appear especially crucial in eighth grade, before students are sorted into college and vocational curriculum tracks in high school" (Kao & Tienda, 1998, p. 370). Specifically, social class also increases opportunities for individuals to have social capital through supportive relationships with individuals (e.g., other parents), who promote the sharing of societal norms and values, which are necessary for success in school (Coleman, 1988; Dika & Sigh, 2002). In fact, Bourdieu (1977) stressed that individuals from middle and upper socioeconomic backgrounds possess the most valued types of cultural capital in educational settings, which affords opportunities to which their peers from lower income backgrounds may not have exposure. To acknowledge the social class influences, this section will address the following areas: social class and parental involvement linked to academic outcomes and college aspirations, social class linked to college preparation resources, and social class linked to school and home/community environments.

**Parental social class linked to college aspirations and academic outcomes in secondary environments.** Parent social class has been found to influence educational aspirations. In secondary environments, particularly, studies have been conducted linking parental involvement and class-based differences to college aspirations and academic outcomes (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Lareau, 1987; Sirin, 2005). Yet none of these studies has exclusively focused on African American students, which makes a study on middle-class African American students' college planning process an important one.

Kao and Tienda (1998) conducted a longitudinal study on educational aspirations, including college and graduate school aspirations, of minority youth (Black, Asian, and Hispanic) between eighth and twelfth grades. Using the National Education Longitudinal

Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), family socioeconomic status (SES) strongly influenced the educational aspirations of girls and boys in the study. These researchers found that family socioeconomic status contributed not only to high aspirations in eighth grade but also to the maintenance of ambitious aspirations throughout the high school years. Furthermore, they found that minority youth were much more likely than their White counterparts of comparable SES backgrounds to aspire to graduate school training. By tenth grade, Black boys were more likely to have high aspirations, such as graduate school, given their previous experiences and family background and resources and Black girls were more likely than Whites to maintain graduate school aspirations throughout high school, given their family background, previous school experiences, and previous aspirations. Additionally, families who had the financial resources to enroll in outside classes and scholastic activities raised college aspirations throughout high school for their children.

In her study on middle-class and working-class parents, Lareau (1987) found that there were differences in how these groups of parents interacted and communicated with the educational system. Although a limitation of Lareau's study is that she did not study high school or college students and their college planning process, her study has significance for this study on middle-class African American students in relation to how middle-class parents' involvement in secondary environments contributed to their children's academic success. Lareau found that middle-class parents who were often as educated or more educated than their children's teachers were more likely to see themselves as equals with the teachers and initiated contact with teachers. Another study that supports Lareau's finding on social class and parental involvement suggests that middle-class parents tend to intervene more effectively than working-class parents

(Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). "Educated middle-class parents are more likely to be involved in their children's schools, to insist on high standards, to rid the school of bad teachers, and to ensure adequate resources (both public and private)" (Kahlenberg, 2001, p. 62). Kao and Tienda's (1998) and Lareau's studies are informative because McDonough (1997; 1998) found that college planning begins early for students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, so being knowledgeable about how middle-class parents interact within school contexts prior to high school can indirectly influence college preparation and the application process in high school.

**Social class linked to college preparation resources.** Although Lareau's (1987) findings highlighted class-based differences and parental involvement on academic outcomes prior to high school, Bloom (2007) further elaborated on how social class shapes students' developmental experiences and choices as students' transition from high school to higher education. Through a multi-site ethnographic study on a group of high school seniors in three small urban high schools, Bloom (2007) acknowledged that students from working class backgrounds lacked the same resources that middle-class parents offered their children. For working class students in Bloom's (2007) study, the college planning process was "unfamiliar territory" (p. 357), while for middle-class students, parents used connections to get college interviews, letters of recommendations, paid to mail applications express at the last minute, and completed the FAFSA form for their children because parents felt that it was their own responsibility. More specifically, Bloom (2007) shared that middle-class students were surrounded by college information, even when they were not conscious that information was being shared. For example, unconsciousness behaviors were observed through "parents' conversations about their

alma maters and college days, family and friends who apply a few years ahead of them, and the names of top colleges that are a part of everyday conversations among peers" (p. 357). The social, cultural, and economic capital that middle-class parents deposit into their children offer their children advantages that place them in positions of privilege when completing the college application process.

In McDonough's (1997) study, case studies on class-based differences were used in family values to examine contexts (organizational, social, and cultural contexts) that shape college choices, how they affect the way students organize the college-choice processes, and how students think about the range of acceptable institutions. McDonough examined high and low socioeconomic status (SES) and found that students whose parents had completed college were at an advantage when compared to students from lower SES, first-generation college-bound students. Although McDonough's (1997) study made comparisons between high SES and low SES students, not middle SES and low SES, similar to Bloom's (2007) study, these high SES parents had the capital to ensure that their children had the resources to prepare for college that low SES students' parents did not have. For example, in McDonough's study, these students seemed to think about going to college earlier, getting "a head start in elementary school by taking the right courses and maintaining the right good grades, and their families convey[ed] information to them about colleges and universities" (p. 6). This study, which conducted in-depth interviews with 12 White women, as well as their best friends, parents, and counselors, showed that parents gave their children resources to help ease the college choice process. In fact, parents who held college degrees identified tasks and helped their children to stick to a schedule; some assisted with reading and editing college essays and

other college application materials, and others hired a private college counselor to assemble the best application portfolio or to help manage the stress of the admissions process. Consistent with Lareau's (1989) and Bloom's (2007) study, parents used their social class to provide their children resources that they needed to complete the college planning process.

**Social class linked to school and community environments.** Beyond providing resources for their children in home environments, middle-class parents are also involved in community and school environments to ensure that their children are adequately prepared for college. Specifically, studies have been conducted on middle-class African American neighborhoods and the influence these communities have on access to a quality education to prepare for college. According to Coleman (1988) and Dika and Singh (2002), family SES, which can determine the location of the child's neighborhood and school, not only directly provides home resources, "but also indirectly provides 'social capital' that is, supportive relationships among structural forces and individuals (i.e., parent-school collaborations that promote the sharing of societal norms and values, which are necessary for school" (Sirin, 2005, p. 420).

To illustrate this point, Patillo-McCoy (1999) conducted an ethnographic three-year study on the Black middle-class in Groveland Park in Chicago, Illinois, in which she examined communities in which Blacks chose to live and the influences that these experiences and communities had on access and equity to quality education and social experiences. Due to the close proximity of this neighborhood to lower income Black communities, Patillo-McCoy realized that middle-class Black parents were empowered to be proactive, using their personal connections (i.e., social and cultural capital) and money

(i.e., economic/financial capital) to choose private or accelerated programs as well as outside activities (e.g., church groups, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts), so that their children were not influenced by the crime and violence observed in lower income Black communities. "Many Groveland parents possess financial, social, and human capital that greatly facilitate parenting" (p. 102) and these families have the "financial resources that have provided access to private schools, paid for sports equipment and dance lessons…." (p. 103). Specifically, middle-class parents in this study who held bachelor's and graduate degrees, including Ph.D.s, chose magnet programs and Catholic schools that had reputations for attracting elite colleges, graduating high percentages of students, and sending students to four-year colleges. Parents who held college degrees helped their children with the college application process as well as influenced their graduate school aspirations, however, parents who did not possess college degrees, and still categorized as lower middle class or middle class, sought out reputable high schools that could offer the resources that students needed to pursue higher education.

In another study, Lacy (2007) examined three African American middle-class subdivisions located in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. She focused mainly on residential location and "how middle-class blacks think about and make use of their social identities" (p. 5). Through in-depth interviews, this ethnography found how families living in these areas managed race in public spaces, which included schools located in Prince George's and Fairfax counties. Lacy referred to these families as solidly middle-class and upper middle-class African American families who chose private schools and competitive magnet schools as well as enrolled their children in public schools where they felt they could improve the system within. These families made

conscious efforts to choose schools that had talented and gifted programs and competitive

high school programs that offered AP courses where students could earn college credit.

"High school students choose from magnet schools devoted to the natural sciences,

technology, visual or performing arts, or programs linked to the University of Maryland"

(p. 212). Parents also used their own social capital to advocate on behalf of their children

to be enrolled in college preparatory courses in middle school, including algebra and

geometry, and talented and gifted programs, even when students may not have passed

tests to be recommended into these programs.  In these studies, middle-class African

American families possessed the economic, social, cultural, and human capital to choose

neighborhoods and schools with challenging and competitive programs that would

prepare children for a college education.

However, conscious efforts to choose quality school and community programs

still did not prevent students from encountering racism or discrimination within school

environments. Other findings from Lacy's (2007) study demonstrated that even when

middle-class Black students and their parents possessed different types of capital, they

still encountered White and Black teachers and guidance counselors who encouraged

their children to follow the trade school track rather than the college preparatory track.

The maltreatment Black students experienced came in the form of teachers presenting

students with less challenging work and lower teacher expectations when compared to

White students.  As a result, middle-class parents in Lacy's study worked collectively

with school administrators and teachers to change stereotypes and inappropriate

behaviors toward their children. Accordingly, these parents possessed the capital to

advocate inside and outside the classroom by monitoring their children's teachers and

counselors more closely so that school officials held high expectations of their children's educational goals (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009).

Both Patillo-McCoy's (1999) and Lacy's (2007) studies inform the present study on high-achieving, middle-class, African American students because they offer insight on how social class provides resources in school and community environments to make sure students are equipped with the tools to prepare for college. Furthermore, using qualitative methodologies, such as ethnography, the voices of marginalized groups are acknowledged and respected, so that their stories can be heard through their own perspectives. Recognizing their distinct experiences gives voice to individuals who have been understudied (Freeman, 1997) in the literature to enhance understanding of influences that contribute to their higher education aspirations despite institutional, organizational, racial, and class barriers. Additionally, qualitative and quantitative studies conducted by Kao and Tienda (1998), Lareau (1987), Bloom (2007), and McDonough (1997) demonstrated that social class is at the foundation of how parents interact with school constituents early in the educational process, how parents impart knowledge about the college planning process, and how parents choose school and community environments to ensure that their children are challenged through their academic experiences.

For high-performing Black students, academic excellence is critical when studying postsecondary goals; however, their middle-class status is equally important because in society, a person's social class position may expose her or him to opportunities to which peers from lower social class backgrounds may not have access. Acknowledging academic abilities and race without acknowledging social class when

studying this group of students focuses on the Black population as a monolithic group while ignoring their uniqueness and differences from their lower-class, high-achieving peers or low-achieving Black peers.

### College Preparation Process

College preparation is important to individuals and society; however, the journey to higher education can be a challenging one depending on an individual's academic abilities, race, and social class. For instance, in 2007, the percentage of high school students who persisted to higher education was 67%; however, for African Americans this percentage was 56% (Pryor et.al, 2009). Furthermore, minority students, specifically African American students, seem to be clustered more in community colleges than in four-year colleges and universities (Pryor et. al,, 2009; Taylor, Fry, Valasco, & Dockterman, 2010). Above all, college is important to the world economy because the U.S. Department of Labor statistics indicate that college graduates earn an average of $15,000 per year more than students who hold only a high school diploma, while the U.S. Census Bureau indicated a figure slightly over $16,000 per year. Clearly, college preparation is important so that students from diverse backgrounds can reach their educational goals and contribute to society by using networks and resources to plan for a higher education and future careers.

The college preparation process is one that can be complex for many students and their families; however, the complexity can be minimized by planning early and gaining information through networks that have firsthand knowledge about what it takes to plan for a college education (McDonough, 1997). There are many constituents and contextual influences that can help high-ability, middle-class, African American students make

meaning of the college preparation process so that their transition from high school to college is seamless. Some of the ways that high-achieving, middle-class, African American students learn to make meaning of this process include: interactions with teachers and counselors, the curriculum, co-curricular activities, parents, and peers (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997; Muhammad, 2008). In this college preparation process section, literature on African American students as whole as well as students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, not only high-achieving and middle-class students is explored. Specifically, school environments, an academically rigorous curriculum, standardized tests, school counselors, and parental encouragement and support will be examined to gain a clearer understanding on how these contexts support a college-going culture so that all students, regardless of background, can navigate the college planning process and achieve their college aspirations.

**High School Environments Create a College-Going Culture**

Schools with abundant resources and a heavy emphasis on college-going have a positive influence on students' aspirations and institutional choices (McClafferty, McDonough, & Nunez, 2002; McDonough, 1998). Additionally, schools that serve students from affluent backgrounds are more likely to develop a "college focus" (McDonough, 2005), where parents, teachers, students, and school personnel expect that students will pursue higher education.

 In a study conducted by Freeman (1997), 70 African American students in an inner city and private school described obstacles and ways to overcome these obstacles in order to participate in higher education by stressing the importance of the elementary and secondary school environments. One finding in this study is that public schools with

structured counseling programs had larger numbers of students participating in higher education. This study acknowledged that awareness was important to pursuing higher education. Similar to the stereotype threat concept (Steele, 1999), educators formed "established views" (Freeman, 1997, p. 546) of students in Freeman's study. Teachers and counselors began "stripping away the students' personal cultural values, which can lower their perception of their worth and leave them without hope of ever becoming high achievers and ultimately robbing them of their passion for pursuing preparation for a college education" (p. 546). Through the use of group interviews, Freeman examined participants from five U.S. metropolitan cities where African Americans had the highest median incomes and lowest poverty rates and a more holistic and less biased picture of African American students' experiences and solutions to increasing their participation rates in higher education.

Furthermore, school types, public versus private schools, and integrated versus segregated, indirectly influences higher education aspirations and a college-going culture due to the resources that are available to students (Freeman, 1997; McDonough, 1997). Historically, for African American students, exploring school type is informative because of the conditions that these students experience in schools with high minority populations. For instance, according to the *Status and Trends in the Education of Blacks*, Hoffman, Llagas and Snyder (2003) reported that African American students were more likely to attend public schools with high concentrations of minority students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, less likely to take advanced math and science courses, and less likely than Hispanic students to take a foreign language class. Even though many majority and minority students enroll in integrated schools (Huido & Cooper, 2010),

many minority students in urban areas attend homogeneous schools or segregated schools. Segregated schools continue to suffer from inequitable resources, lack of certified teachers, low expectations, and dilapidated and outdated facilities (United States Department of Education (USDE), 2000, 2001). Facing these types of obstacles can make the college preparation process seem out of reach for many students. Creating a college-going culture becomes even more of a challenge for school environments in public schools and urban areas when they do not even have the necessary resources to offer students the opportunity to follow the college preparatory track.

Furthermore, school type is useful when studying influences on higher education aspirations because private schools have been found to offer more college planning resources than public schools (McDonough, 1997), making creating a college going culture not as difficult as in a public, urban school. In fact, seniors enrolled in private high schools were more likely to attend college and enroll in a four-year institution, and had more students on the academic track than did public schools (McDonough, 1997). Private schools also helped students to develop their college aspirations better by providing more counselors per student (McDonough, 1997). Similar to McDonough's "rich case studies of individual college choice processes and the organizational contexts that shapes those choices" (p. 14) for students from high and low SES backgrounds, Freeman (1997) found that public schools with structured counseling programs had larger numbers of students to participate in higher education.

These qualitative studies conducted by McDonough (1997) and Freeman (1997) demonstrate that school type alone may not be enough to make conclusions regarding a student's higher education aspirations. But examining other contextual influences, such

as: the number of students who enroll in college, the number of students who are on an academic track versus a vocational track, and the intensity of the counseling program on college preparation may be more beneficial to understanding how students adapt to the college-going culture to understand their college planning process.

**Curriculum: Race Influences on AP and Gifted Education**

Another school context that influences higher education aspirations is the high school curriculum. Increasingly, researchers recognize that students who take a challenging high school curriculum are better prepared for college and more likely to earn a college degree (Adelman, 2006; Roderick, Nagoaka, & Coca, 2009). According to Adelman (2006), high school curriculum accounts for 41% of the academic knowledge that students bring to college, test scores account for 30%, and class rank/grade point average, 29%. Furthermore, the curriculum produces a higher percent of individuals earning a bachelor's degree than any other measure. In fact, "the impact of the high school curriculum of high academic intensity and quality on degree completion is far more pronounced and positively for African American and Latino students than any other pre-college indicator of academic resources" (Adelman, 2006, p. 3). Other influences on bachelor degree completion include: Advanced Placement (AP); a College Board Program that allows high school students to take college-level courses, take an exam, and receive college credit (Wakelyn, 2009); completing a course beyond algebra 2; and academic resources, which is the composite of high school curriculum, test scores, and class rank. Depending on how one presents the data, different outcomes may be presented. For example, according to the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS), the typical high school student completes the college preparatory curriculum or New Basics

Curriculum as outlined in the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Moreover, according to ELS in 2003-04, 30% of seniors earned credit in an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate (IB) course. In a slightly different report, Balfanz (2009) asserted that the college preparatory curriculum has been redefined by some to include not just total credits but specific courses, one credit of mathematics higher than Algebra II, one science credit higher than biology, and two credits in a single foreign language.  These results are similar to what students reported who took the American Council of Testing (ACT) exams for admission. Of that group of ACT takers, 56% said that they took a traditional curriculum, while 28% took the more specific and advanced curriculum as identified by ACT. By taking these more advanced courses these students were more likely to pass college level courses.

Thompson and Rust (2007) conducted a 16-item questionnaire on 41 students from a southern regional, state-supported university where 29 participants were enrolled in AP courses in high school and 12 participants had no prior enrollment in AP courses. The researchers predicted that AP students would earn significantly higher GPAs than high-achieving non-AP students, which Dodd, Fitzpatrick, De Ayala, and Jennings (2002) found in their study on AP students. Questions on the survey pertained to AP courses, grades received in English and natural science college courses, high school grade point average, and ACT or SAT scores.  Contrary to Balfanz's (2009) findings on AP courses, the sample of high-achieving students in this study who took AP classes in high school did not have higher GPAs in college. However, these students reported that they enjoyed their high school AP courses more than their general education courses. In another study by Morgan and Ramist (1998), AP students who received AP credit were

compared to non-AP students who took prerequisite courses. The findings suggested that AP students performed as well or better in these courses than non-AP students.

A challenging curriculum and AP completion influences degree completion; yet, for Black and Hispanic students, who enroll in AP courses at approximately half the rate as their White peers (Adelman, 2006), the issue becomes one of inequality and inequity. African American and Hispanic enrollment in AP courses does not match their representation in the nation's schools (Klopfenstien, 2004). These students are disproportionally tracked into non-college preparatory curriculums, which impacts the networks and information channels that they have access to within the school setting to plan for college. For example, in a study conducted by Yonezama and Wells (2004) from Fall 1992 to Spring 1995, the research team studied 10 racially and socioeconomically mixed segregated schools and found that although AP courses were open to all students, educators relied on neighborhood networks to inform students about the open access policies for AP classes. Specifically, students could find out about AP courses "through brothers and sisters," "through the neighborhood," or at parent "coffees" held by the counseling staff (p. 51). Therefore, Black students who did not live in the local networks where information was shared were excluded from receiving vital information about the open-door policy to a more challenging curriculum. Another finding from this study was that there were hidden prerequisites to get into the open-door policy for honors courses. Students may have needed another course or successfully completed another course before they could use the policy. A third finding is that students did not take high track classes because they felt that their contributions to class would not be respected and for fear of abandoning one's friends (Yonezama & Wells, 2004).

Besides examining literature on high school AP coursework for African American students, it is equally important to address gifted education and the impact that this has on college aspirations. College aspirations and college enrollment become even more astounding for gifted students when percentages are reviewed on placement of African Americans in gifted education. According to Ford (1998), Black students were underrepresented by approximately 60% in gifted education. Low representation has been attributed to low teacher referral, low students scores, and student and family choice (Ford, 1996; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Troutman, 2002).

First, low teacher referral means that teachers do not refer Black students for screening or placement in gifted programs (Ford et al., 2002). There are many reasons for low teacher referral; however, one of the most popular beliefs include deficient thinking, or teachers' lack of understanding about cultural differences, and instead acknowledging these differences as weaknesses, rather than strengths that these students bring into the classroom (Ford & Grantham, 2003). Second, low standardized test scores have prevented Black students from being admitted into gifted programs. Overall, African Americans tend to score lower on standardized tests that their White counterparts (Ford & Grantham, 2003). Third, student and family choice have kept African American students from participating in gifted education. Therefore, Black students and their parents choose not to participate in gifted education because of stigmas and negative perceptions attached to high achievement and alienation from Black peers (Ford, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1996).

For these reasons, Blacks and Hispanic Americans and low-income students are placed in non-demanding vocational tracks that do not prepare them to attend college

(Niemann & Maruyama, 2005). Their underrepresentation in more challenging coursework and instructional practices is partly due to tracking and ability grouping (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000) and which slows their path to pursue a higher education.

**Standardized College Admissions Tests**

Standardized college admissions tests are another important influence that impacts students' college preparation process. The SAT and the ACT are two standardized test that many colleges and universities require for admissions into their programs. Historically, African American students have scored lower on standardized tests than their peers. In 1995, in African American families where parents lacked a high school diploma, the average SAT was 655, while in African American families where the highest level of parental education was a graduate degree, the SAT score was still only 844 "(191 points below the national average score of 1035 for Whites in the same category)" (Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, 1998). The achievement gap between Black and White students is worth studying because in order to be competitive with their White peers, these students must learn to improve their test-taking strategies.

Walpole et al. (2005) used qualitative methods to interview African American and Latino high school juniors and seniors in Southern California about their college choice process. Students in the study were enrolled in college preparatory courses in their urban high schools. Through individual and focus group interviews, these researchers learned that some students believed these tests were unjust but were hopeful that they would do well on the test. Despite the inequities viewed by the students about the test, they still used whatever free or reduced test preparation assistance available and familiarized

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themselves with the test by taking it repeatedly. These free and reduced sessions were mainly a few hours long or a one-day Saturday session. Commercial test providers share that single interventions do not result in significant learning or retention (Walpole et al., 2005). Taking advantage of only single interventions is a limitation that places African American and Latino students at a disadvantage in the college preparation process when compared to their White peers.

**School Counseling and College Planning**

School counselors play another dominant role in helping students to make meaning of the college planning process. The literature suggests that school counselors have a positive impact on students' college choices, aspirations, and rate of applying to college (McDonough, 2005). In a study conducted by Muhammad (2008) using the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS), the researcher considered the role of school counselors on African Americans students' college choice process. The author found that students' understanding of their counselors' expectations for their future positively impacted college predisposition stage, which is the first stage in Hossler and Gallagher (1987) college decision making model. In another survey of 600 young adults aged 22-30 conducted by the Public Agenda for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2009), this organization found that students rated guidance counselors performance from fair to poor ratings. These ratings have been attributed to student-counselor ratio of 250 students for every counselor and in some states like California, 1,000 students for every counselor. Low ratings have also been attributed to the counselor's multifaceted job which includes: addressing discipline issues, scheduling, supervising testing programs, substitute teaching and filling in for other teacher shortages, and administrative mix-ups

(Public Agenda for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2009). Although these key stakeholders play an important role in college aspirations, college counseling responsibilities are challenged with other counseling and non-counseling related activities (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009). Therefore, counselors' multidimensional jobs make it more difficult for students to rely solely on them to make meaning of the college planning process because counselors are not available to ask questions about the college admissions process.

In another study, using the 2002 Educational Longitudinal Study database of U.S. high school seniors, Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, and Day-Vines (2009) found that African American female students, who attended smaller schools and schools with lower percentages of free or reduced lunch, were more likely to seek out counselors for college information. Additionally, African American female students whose parents contacted the school about their child's high school plans were also more likely to pursue counselors for college information. To illustrate this point further, Farmer-Hinton and Adam's (2006) qualitative study of five school counselors in a public charter high school explored the school's college preparatory plans. Counselors in this study convinced first-generation, college-bound Black students that college was attainable in spite of their background. These gatekeepers provided support in relation to college preparation and advisement through college tours, college preparatory classes, and one-on-one support through the college search process. Above all, counselors became a "network of adults who could help students overcome the sociostructural limitations of concentrated poverty" (p. 114). Through qualitative and quantitative methodologies and studying

different populations of students, these researchers found that school counselors were institutional agents who influence higher education plans.

**Parent Educational Level and Parental Encouragement and Support.**

Beyond institutional agents who influence higher education plans, parental educational level and parental encouragement and support are important to the college choice process. College choice literature addresses the importance of parental educational level and parental encouragement and support. Parental educational attainment (i. e., attainment of a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution) was a better predictor of college enrollment than family income for African American and low-income students (USDE, 2001, 2002).

To illustrate further, Hossler, Schmidt, and Vesper (1999) found that parental educational level influenced postsecondary plans. Consistent with Stage and Hossler's (1989) findings on parental educational level, Hossler and Stage (1992) found in their study on 2,497 ninth grade students and their parents, that "parents' educational level was positively related to expectations for the student, higher GPA, greater involvement in activities, and students' aspirations" (p. 442). As parental educational level increased, children were more likely to plan to go to college (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Thus, parents who had attended college were more likely to have college-going values and to be able to explain to their children how the college system works and how students can prepare for college.

Stage and Hossler (1989) analyzed a sample of Indiana high school students to determine the effects of parental education on postsecondary plans of ninth graders. The single most important predictor for postsecondary plans was parental encouragement and

support. "Parental encouragement was defined by frequency of discussions between parents and students about the parents; expectations, hopes and dreams for their children" (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999, p. 24). Parental support was defined as "parents saving for postsecondary plans, taking students on visits to college campus, or attending a financial aid workshop with their child" (Hossler et al., 1999, p. 24). Furthermore, Hossler et al. (1999) used descriptive and univariate analyses and revealed that students who spoke with their parents about their postsecondary plans were more likely to plan to go to college and be certain about their college plans.

As mentioned in the Family Contextual Influences section, parental involvement has a major influence on the college planning process for middle and high school students. However, the college choice research looks beyond parental involvement to include parent educational level and parent encouragement and support as most influential in predicting students' postsecondary plans. Because participants' parents in these studies were proactive in helping their children go through the college admissions process, they helped to chart their voyage to higher education by providing their children with the necessary tools (e.g., money, college visitations, co-curricular involvement, and financial aid workshops) to ensure that they were adequately prepared for college.

**Theoretical Frameworks and Models**

As literature on high-achieving African American students, school contextual influences, family contextual influences, social class influences, and the college preparation process has been reviewed, there are many factors learned that influence how these students make meaning of their college preparation process. To support these influential areas on the college preparation process, three theoretical frameworks and

models are used as a guide for this study on high-achieving, middle-class, African American students. These frameworks include critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson & Billings, 1998), Perna and Titus' (2005) integrated conceptual model on college enrollment, and college choice research (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999). Studied together, these frameworks and models provide a comprehensive understanding of contextual influences that help high-achieving, middle-class, African American students make meaning of their college planning process.

**Critical Race Theory**

To address issues of racism, discrimination, and stereotypes that high-achieving, middle-class, African American students and their families encounter in school environments with institutional agents and peers, critical race theory (CRT) will be used as one theoretical framework to guide this study. CRT was chosen because of its focus on the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In the field of education, critical race theorists seek to understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, controversies over curriculum and history, and IQ and achievement testing (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT is a useful framework for this study because of the basic features that lay the foundation for how society understands race, power, and domination. First, CRT acknowledges that "racism is ordinary, not aberrational-'normal science,' the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Because racism looks normal and ordinary in our culture "racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000

p, xvi), making it challenging to question institutional arrangements, for example, school agents' discouraging African American students from taking a rigorous curriculum and advanced classes to prepare for college (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Suh, 2003; Hemmings, 1996; Solorzano & Ornelaas, 2004) or why African Americans take AP courses at approximately half the rate as their White American peers (Adelman, 2006). Second, critical race theorists believe in a concept called "interest convergence" or "material determinism" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). This means that because racism advances the interests of both White elites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998) and working class people, many in society have no motivation to destroy it if it threatens the superior status of Whites (Rousseau & Dixson, 2006). However, White elites will tolerate the advancement of Blacks only when these advances promote White self-interest (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Third, CRT recognizes that race is socially constructed, which means that race is not a "biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). To acknowledge that race is a social construct is to speak against blaming Blacks for their own disparities (Chang, 2002), and instead examine the systemic policies and procedures that contribute to disparities. Indeed, CRT offers a perspective to look at how schools, systemic structures of "segregation and wealth transmission" (Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002, p. 2), privilege and marginalize certain groups.

CRT is relevant to this study because of the discrimination and inequity that high-performing, middle-class, Black American students face in school settings (in-class, out-of-class, and peer environments) regarding controversies over tracking, the curriculum,

and teacher and counselor expectations. Another reason CRT is pertinent to this study is because of the achievement gap between Black students and their White peers (Haycock, 2006; The Education Trust, 2006) and what this gap means when receiving guidance from teachers and guidance counselors on taking a college preparatory curriculum to get into college. A third reason CRT is important to this study is because researchers, school administrators, and teachers often treat Black students as a monolithic group – low-income, underachievers, and inadequately prepared for school – overlooking racial, ethnic, social class, and academic abilities. These institutional agents assume that these students have the same elementary through secondary school experiences and family experiences that support and prepare them for a higher education. These experiences are worth recognizing because they influence various types of capital and resources that students gain access to when planning for college admissions as well as the wealth that students may or may not possess (Orr, 2003). Educational institutions that take a proactive approach examining these students' experiences and their institutions' policies, procedures, and practices demonstrate to African American students that regardless of student demographic backgrounds the institutions are committed to improving their campuses so that these students are academically and socially successful.

For high-achieving, African American students, planning for college in a society and educational system that is dominated by White, middle-class, male perspectives (hooks, 2000) can be challenging. However, awareness that discrimination exists toward intellectual abilities, race, and class can be a coping mechanism that African American students and their families use to combat its consequences. As high-ability, middle-class, African American students make meaning of their college preparation process through

their interactions and networks with others within various contexts (i.e., school agents, parents, and peers) scholars and policymakers will gain a clearer understanding of the resources and tools used to dismantle systemic, organizational, and institutional barriers that contribute to student success inside and outside of school settings. By using CRT, discrimination will be addressed as students and their families fight to gain equal access to a quality education that will make them competitive with their White peers.

**Perna and Titus Model**

The Perna and Titus (2005) comprehensive conceptual model on college enrollment is used as another organizing theoretical framework to inform this study. This model is relevant to this study because it examines racial/ethnic group differences on four forms of capital: social, cultural, economic, and human, and looks at how these forms of capital have varying effects on students' decision-making to enroll or not to enroll in college. This model integrates aspects of Coleman (1988), Bourdieu (1986), and Lin (2001a, 2001b), developing a broader model that explores not only different types of capital that an individual possesses but also school level contexts and student level contexts for understanding the relationship between parental involvement as a form of social capital and college enrollment for different racial and ethnic groups.

**Model adapted for African American, middle-class, high-achievers.** For this study, the Perna and Titus (2005) integrated model was adapted to include other institutionalized relationships, information channels, and social networks beyond only parental involvement for an inclusive review of contexts that inspire higher education aspirations. Examples of other relationships and information channels include teachers, siblings, extended family, guidance counselors, and community/neighborhoods.

Specifically, the Perna and Titus (2005) model served to identify contextual influences that helped these students recognize the individuals, coursework, and programs that contributed to their college planning process. Additionally, in the same manner that the integrated model explored ethnic/racial differences in college enrollment, this study will focus specifically on African Americans, their middle-class status, and how they were influenced by organizational, societal, and institutional environments as they planned for college. Furthermore, in the Perna and Titus (2005) model, contextual influences included different forms of capital that a student possesses prior to college, as well as structural characteristics of the schools, communities, and extracurricular activities that may shape postsecondary plans.

**Overview of model.** Perna and Titus' (2005) model showed that student-level characteristics, including the amounts of different types of capital that the student possessed prior to college, and structural characteristics of the school that the student attended influence college enrollment. The focus of the conceptual model was on parental involvement as social capital; however, the model acknowledged "that other forms of capital, such as economic, cultural and human capital---reflect aspects of an individual's habitus and thus influence college enrollment decisions" (p. 493). Other student-level characteristics explored include race/ethnic and gender.

In the model, the different forms of capital that students bring to their college planning process are measured in various ways. First, economic capital is measured in terms of family income, perceived importance of costs and aid, and perceived importance of living expenses. Second, cultural capital is measured by four variables: (1) parent's educational attainment, defined as the highest level of education that either parent has

attained, (2) highest level of education that parents report that they expect their child to attain, (3) whether English is the primary language spoken in the student's home, and (4) participation in cultural classes (music, art, or dance classes at least once a week). Third, human capital is measured by academic achievement (i.e., National Longitudinal Study (NELS) test score) and academic preparation (i.e., highest-level math taken in high school). Fourth, social capital is measured by parental involvement. Utilizing Coleman's (1988) conceptualization of parental involvement, this type of involvement is described as a form of social capital that may promote college enrollment because of the four following variables: (1) the relationship between a student and her/his parents, (2) the relationship between the student's parents and school officials, (3) the relationship between the student's parents and the student's friends' parents, and (4) disruptions to involvement based on geographic mobility.

**Structural contexts.** Drawing from a model grounded in Bourdieu's (1986) and Lin's (2001b) theoretical frameworks, the Perna and Titus (2005) model is important because it acknowledged that individuals are not independent of their structural contexts or the world around them, but that they shape and are shaped by organizational, societal, and institutional contexts (Horvat, 2001). With this in mind, it is important to think about how these environments may affect race and class differences in college choice (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1998), which is a finding in the Perna and Titus study. Because of race and class differences, there are still questions as to why inequities persist and how they are perpetuated in specific contexts. For this reason, when exploring race and class disparities, it is important to look beyond the individual level and move toward asking

more in-depth critical questions regarding "systemic and structural roots of oppression for students of color" (Horvat, 2001, p. 195).

The Perna and Titus (2005) model is beneficial in studying contextual influences, but studies on high-achieving, middle-class, African American students must go a step further to explore how these structural contexts perpetuate inequality through hidden and intrinsic rules of the oppressive system (Horvat, 2001). By using a model grounded in Bourdieu's framework, systems of domination are revealed and aid in studying "social inequality and places notions of power and domination at the center of the analysis" (p. 201). Although Bourdieu (1971, 1977) brings to the forefront class differences in French society and how educational settings have been known to value middle- and upper-class values, there is concern that this framework does not adequately explain the educational experiences of students of color with varying class statuses, cultural backgrounds, and U.S-centered experiences (Freeman, 1997). As described by Horvat, Bourdieu's work complements critical theory in that it privileges the role of power and domination in understanding lived experiences in regards to social class dominance. However, critical race theory takes it further by working to change systems of power and oppression within organizational contexts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

**Social capital.** Acknowledging the capital that students and families possess can make a difference in how students chart their course through the college planning process. First, students and families invest and activate social capital (Lareau & Horvat, 1999) to navigate structural, organizational, and institutional contexts. Social capital has been defined in different ways; however, an underlying theme of networks and relationship building is one of the key concepts at its core. Social capital consists of

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institutionalized relationships, information channels, and networks that provide

information and guidance about the college preparation process, financial aid process,

college decision-making and behaviors and mindsets learned to prepare students for

college (Bourdieu, 2001; Lin, 2001). Portes (1998) focused on how individuals are

advantaged based on their membership with specific social networks and social

structures. Bourdieu (1977, 1986) emphasized the size of these social networks, and that

the larger the network the more access the individual has to other individuals who possess

greater amounts of social, economic, and cultural capital. Additionally, Bourdieu (1977,

1986) focused on the size of the social networks, but one major insight on educational

inequality is that students with the most valued social and cultural capital perform better

academically in school than do their peers with less valuable social and cultural capital

(Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Coleman (1988) addressed social capital in a similar fashion, but broadened it to

focus specifically on the communal aspect of families and communities organizing

resources to take action to achieve a common goal of the group. For Coleman, social

capital provides information that facilitates action; where "one should forego self interest

and act in the interests of the collectivity" (Coleman, 1988, p. 104). Coleman (1990)

further explained social capital as resources that are gained through relationships in

which 'actors' or individuals exchange and transfer resources. Accordingly, throughout

all of the explanations on social capital, individuals work collectively to invest in social

relations with an expected return of resources (Lin, 2001). Bourdieu (1986), Lin (2001),

Portes (1998) and Coleman (1988; 1990) shared that social capital consists of resources

embedded in social relations and social structure, which can be mobilized when an individual wishes to achieve success in a purposive action**.**

        **Cultural capital.** Coleman (1988, 1990), Bourdieu (1986) and Lin (2001a, 2001b) explored social capital; yet, cultural capital is another form of capital that Bourdieu (1971, 1973, 1977) described in the social reproduction theory. This type of capital is the most popular and thoroughly examined by sociologists of education (Dumais, 2002). Although sometimes treated synonymously with social capital, there are differences between social and cultural capital. Cultural capital consists of cultural competencies: cultural signals, behaviors, linguistic skills, attitudes, and a knowledge base shared through family members and usually not transmitted through schools, but rewarded by the educational system (Dumais, 2002; McDonough, 1997). Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (1996) believe cultural capital to be an asset to the schooling process because these students have more exposure to cultural activities, and therefore, "may be better prepared to master academic material, may develop a greater taste for learning abstract and intellectual concepts, and may be favored directly by teachers over children who have less cultural capital" (p. 24) The accumulation of this type of capital early in life usually is transmitted through an individual's parents or family members, which in essence defines an individual's class status (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Dimaggio & Mohr, 1985). Individuals from middle and upper socioeconomic backgrounds possess the most valued types of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Equally important when studying cultural capital is the concept habitus (Bourdieu). Dumais (2002) stressed that to study cultural capital while ignoring habitus leaves an incomplete practical application of the social reproduction framework. Habitus is an internalized set

of beliefs and thoughts acquired by an individual's environment (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; McDonough, 1997) and described as "one's view of the world and one's place in it" (Dumais, 2002, p. 45). Researchers can understand better how students navigate through the education system by studying both an individual's cultural capital and habitus.

**Economic and human capital.** Other types of capital discussed in the Perna and Titus (2005) model included economic and human capital. In the model, economic capital is measured by an individual's perceived and actual ability to pay for college (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Equally important, human capital is measured by academic achievement and academic preparation (Perna & Titus). In a similar manner, Coleman (1988) believed that families provide or possess three types of capital: financial, human, and social. In a divergent meaning to Perna and Titus' definition of economic and human capital, Coleman's social capital theory described financial capital as a family's income or wealth and human capital as equivalent to parental education. Financial capital provides the resources to aid in achievement, for example, "a fixed place in the home for studying, materials to aid learning, the financial resources that smooth family problems" (Coleman, 1988, p. S109). On the other hand, human capital possessed by parents provides potential for a cognitive environment for the child that aids learning" (Coleman, 1988, p. S109). Both types of capital influence the postsecondary plans of students after high school.

In conclusion, this model has advantages for studying high-achieving, middle-class, African American students; however, it does have limitations. First, it does not offer a critical lens to explore how the capital that an individual possesses or the contexts

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that an individual encounters adds to or impedes his or her journey to a college education. Second, it does not address that even though a person may have diverse types of capital, there are still oppressive structures in place that may have power over the capital that an individual brings into various contexts. For this reason, using critical race theory along with Perna and Titus' (2005) integrated conceptual model provides a holistic perspective on influences that help high-achieving, middle-class, African American students make meaning of their college preparation process. Third, this model only explores parental involvement in the college planning process, and does not consider ways that other immediate and extended family may have played a role in this process.

**Research on College Choice**

The last model that guides this study is literature on college choice. Even though college attendance is more of an expectation expressed by family, friends, and school personnel early in life rather than a choice for high-achieving, middle-class students (McDonough, 1997), using college choice literature to inform this study will help to seek out influences of others, the cost-benefits of a college education, and the impact of social status and inequities in college attendance (Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989). College choice research complements critical race theory as well as the Perna and Titus (2005) model for studying this population of students because in addition to studying race and power and social status in school, family and community environments, this model provides a broader explanation of influences on the college choice process. These influences will include some contexts that have been addressed and others that have not been addressed in the literature on high-achieving African American students and middle-class students.

When considering the influences on college choice decision-making, there are three basic approaches to consider:

(a) *social psychological studies,* which examine the impact of academic program, campus social climate, cost, location, and the influence of others on students' choices; student's assessment of their fit with their chosen college' and the cognitive stages of college choice

(b) *economic studies,* which view college choice as an investment decision and assume that students maximize perceived cost-benefits in their college choices; have perfect information; and are engaged in a process of rational choice; and

(c) *sociological status attainment studies*, which analyze the impact of the individual's social status on the development of aspirations for educational attainment and measure inequalities in college access. (McDonough, 1997, p. 3)

For this study, only sociological status attainment literature will be utilized to enlighten college choice decisions for high-ability, middle-class, African American students. Sociological status attainment literature will be used because the purpose of the study is to understand the college planning process of high-achieving, middle-class, African American students. Class status, not race alone, impacts the development of higher education aspirations and exposes inequities in college access. Incorporating this research will help to explain that college aspirations and college attendance are shaped distinctly for individuals from different social classes and races. Additionally, Hossler et al. (1989) referred to the sociological model of student choice as the umbrella model for cultural and social capital, which means that this model acknowledges that there are other

influences in the college planning process that must be taken into consideration beyond class and race alone.

Furthermore, college choice models include a variety of stages that students pass through to narrow their choices to a few institutions. Specifically, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, which is based on the work of Chapman (1984) and Litten (1982), hypothesizes three stages in the college-choice process: predisposition, search, and college choice.

(a) *Predisposition* refers to the plans students develop for education or work after they graduate from high school. Student's family background, academic performance, peers, and other high school experiences influence the development of their post-high school educational plans.

(b) The *search* stage includes students' discovering and evaluating possible colleges in which to enroll. The model posits that students' searches help them determine what characteristics they need and which colleges offer them (e.g., is the college residential or commuting? Is it large or small? Are the campus facilities adequate? Does the faculty concentrate on teaching or on research?)

(c) The *choice* stage is when students choose from a school from among those they have considered. Some students consider only one school, perhaps one that is close to home so they can commute. As the academic performance of students and the socioeconomic status of their families increase, the number of colleges considered also increases. High ability students might apply to five or more colleges throughout the states. (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999, p. 9)

For the purpose of this study, only the predisposition stage will be considered to look intensely at the experiences that contribute to high-achieving, middle-class, African American students' post-high school educational plans. In the predisposition stage, influences on college aspirations include: SES, race and ethnicity, parental support and encouragement, parental education, peer encouragement and support, teacher and counselor encouragement, student academic ability and achievement, and family residence (Hossler et al., 1989). Accordingly, Hossler et al. (1999) demonstrated through their multivariate analyses that parental support and encouragement was the best predictor of postsecondary plans (Stage & Hossler, 1989; Hossler & Stage, 1992). Additionally, Hossler et al. (1999) found that academic ability in reference to grade point average is the second best predictor of postsecondary plans. This finding is consistent with previous research, as an individual's grade point average increases, so does an individual's college plans (Bishop, 1977; Jackson, 1976; Tuttle, 1981). Additionally, McDonough (1997) suggested that students who earned better grades received more encouragement from parents as well as peers, teachers, and other family members to continue their education. Lastly, parent educational level has an influence on the predisposition stage (Hossler et al., 1999). Similar to grade point average, as the parent education level increases, children's aspirations to go to college also increases (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Stage & Hossler, 1989). In brief, parental encouragement, academic achievement, and parental education have been found to have the greatest influence on students' college plans.

Just as it is important to recognize the advantages of using this model, it is also important to present disadvantages for using college choice literature in this study. First,

although this study on high-achieving, middle-class, African American students is not on college choice, but how these students make meaning of or understand the college preparation process, this college choice model provides factors that influence the college choice process for students who aspire for a higher education. Second, although these models describe the stages that students pass through in the college choice process, it is important to recognize that most of their work has studied these stages through the perspectives of White and affluent students (Smith & Fleming, 2006), not African American, middle-class students. Third, the model explores the role of parental support and encouragement, but similar to the Perna and Titus model, it does not include the influence of other family members. Even though the model does not focus on the complexities of the college planning process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students, the model does acknowledge the role of peers and parents on students' predisposition stage (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et. Al., 1999), which make it an appropriate model for this study. Lastly, this model, does explore the role that parental support and encouragement has on the college choice process, but it does not include sibling and other family member support as well as religious/church support.

**Conclusion**

Incorporating three theoretical frameworks and models, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson & Billings, 1998), Perna and Titus' (2005) integrated conceptual model on college enrollment, and college choice research (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) in studying high-achieving, middle-class, African American students offers a broader perspective on different contexts, specifically school and home contexts, that help these students to develop a plan to obtain a higher education. Studied together, these frameworks and models provide insight into various background characteristics,

environments, and individuals that help and hinder high-achieving, middle-class, African American students in making meaning of their college planning process, while exposing and dealing with the inequitable structures they encounter within these contexts. Examples of school and home contexts that have been reviewed in the literature that help these students make meaning of the college planning process include: schools that offered students access to college preparatory curriculums, specifically AP, Honors, and gifted education; teachers and guidance counselors who supported and did not support students taking a challenging curriculum or providing one-on-one counseling; and parents who did and who did not hold the capital and resources to choose quality schools, challenging curriculums, and co-curricular activities that helped their children adequately prepared for a higher education.

By reviewing literature on high-achieving African American students, middle-class families, and college preparation, it is apparent that these students encounter successes and obstacles as they negotiate organizational and societal contexts to achieve inside and outside the classroom. Examining only these students' individual and background influences without considering the contextual influences that contribute to their success does not adequately explain their experiences as they plan for the college. Likewise, studying high-performing African American students only through the experiences of low-income African American high-achievers or high-achievers from different ethnic/racial and class backgrounds does not give voice to these students' unique experiences. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology and methods that guided this study.

# CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This chapter describes the methodology and methods and their appropriateness for the study. Case study methodology was chosen to gain a better understanding of the college planning process of high-achieving, middle-class, African American students. I begin with the research questions that guided this study and then discuss the epistemological paradigm and methodology chosen. Next, I elaborate on the data collection and data analysis procedures. I conclude with trustworthiness, ethical issues, and limitations of the proposed study.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand the college planning process of high-achieving, middle-class, African American students. As students who possess marginalized and privileged identities, their experiences were informed by the environment around them. Three research questions guided this study:

1. How do high achieving, middle-class, African American students understand their college preparation process?

2. How do school, family, and community factors influence or impede the college preparation process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students?

3. How do race and class influence or impede the college preparation process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students?

## Constructivist Epistemology and Critical Inquiry Perspective

The epistemological paradigm used for the study was constructivism. An epistemology provides a "philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge

is possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate" (Crotty, 2003, p. 8). Second, a paradigm is utilized because it "is a way of looking at the world" (Mertens, 2005, p. 7) and understanding how individuals interpret the world around them. A constructivist epistemological paradigm is applied because it focuses exclusively on "the meaning making activity of the human mind" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58).

Schwandt (2000) suggested that the constructivist epistemological paradigm considers that reality and knowledge are socially constructed by participants in the research process and the researcher should attempt to understand the complex lived experiences from the perspective of people who live in it. Likewise, as human begins interact in the world, it is through lived experiences that "meaning is not discovered but constructed" (Crotty, 2003, p. 42). As people engage with the world around them, they are interpreting and constructing meaning of experiences encountered with each other. In the case study, I invited participants to discuss their meaning making of contextual influences as well as how race and class shaped lived experiences prior to college. Specifically, this case study is constructivist because the focus was on high-achieving, middle-class, African American students' interpretations of their pre-college experiences.

Additionally, Freire (1972) reiterated his thoughts about critical awareness between human beings and the world. From Freire's viewpoint, human beings do not exist in isolation of the world, but are in relationships with the world encountering inequality and injustice. Therefore, humans must reflect on their situation and take action to overcome oppressive structures. With this in mind, the case study was informed by a critical inquiry perspective because I questioned commonly held values and assumptions, challenged traditional social structures, sought new ways of understanding, and engaged

in social action for change (Crotty, 2003). An example of a commonly held value or an assumption held by teachers and counselors who hold dominant power in school settings is that Black students are underachievers and for this reason encourage them to take a vocational track curriculum rather than a challenging college track curriculum (Niemann & Maruyama, 2005). Another belief held by researchers and school administrators and teachers is that Black parents are not involved in their children's education (Ford, 1996). Still another assumption held by scholars, parents, teachers, and peers is that Black students oppose academic excellence because of the fear of being accused of acting White (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1988, 2003). By challenging traditional social structures, I lifted the voices of high-achieving, middle-class, Black American students so that their experiences were recognized to give notice to commonly held assumptions and stereotypes. Through this case study, assumptions and beliefs were dispelled that African American students were only low-achievers with deficiencies who do not aspire to excel or to take a challenging curriculum to prepare for college and whose parents were not involved in their education.

As students shared their experiences, I listened for relationships within contextual influences, school, home, and community environments that exposed inequality, unfairness, or injustice (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Specifically, critical theorists claim that society is oppressive and that certain social groups have more power than others (Broido & Manning, 2002). From a critical perspective, the exploration of race and class helped the participants and me to engage in dialogue about these oppressive structures. Through interviews, a focus group discussion, and the collection of personal documents (i.e., college admissions essays or high school resumes), students thought

critically about the tools, resources, and knowledge utilized to plan for a college education.

Blending multiple theoretical perspectives, constructivism and critical theory, was important to studying high-ability, middle-class, African American students because neither perspective adequately addressed the realities of this group of students who may have faced privilege due to academic ability and social class, but oppression due to race. However, coupled together, a clearer picture is created of their lived experiences (Abes, 2002). For example, a constructivist perspective concentrated on the complexities of contextual and social capital influences such as relationships, activities, coursework, programs, and interactions that these students experienced in their schools, in their communities, and in their homes to prepare for college, but the critical perspective challenged students to explore how race and class played dominant and subordinate roles as participants intermingled with others in different environments. By employing a combined analysis that focused on complexities and challenges, these two perspectives addressed the experiences of a marginalized and privileged group.

I used a constructivist approach to explore participants' construction of meaning and understanding of their college preparation process. A constructivist epistemological paradigm along with a critical analysis was used for the study because the voices of oppressed and advantaged groups, such as high-ability, middle-class, African Americans usually are not recognized in scholarly research (Fries-Britt, 1997, 2000; Griffin & Allen, 2006). Accordingly, learning about the participants' experiences will help policymakers, secondary education administrators, and higher education administrators acknowledge how participants connect with constituents inside and outside of school environments, as

well as overcome power relationships within these environments, to remain high-achievers planning for a college education.

## Methodology

Case study methodology was "employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). In particular, case study design is the most appropriate qualitative design when the researcher wants to answer the questions "how" and "why" (Yin, 2003, p. 1), "when the investigator has little control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (Yin, 1994, p. 1). Case study was used because this methodology helped to understand a group of students in which limited research has been conducted. In addition, the limited number of students who can be interviewed in the study makes it "bounded enough to qualify for a case" (Merriam, 1998, p. 28). To meet the criteria for a case, the phenomenon must not only be bounded by the number of people that can be interviewed, but also by the data that can be collected or the amount of time for observations (Creswell, 1998, 2007; Stake, 1995).

I chose case study methodology because of the "intensive focus on a *bounded system*," (Jones et al., 2006, p. 53), or the unit of analysis (Yin, 2003). The unit of analysis can be individuals, students, program participants, or clients. Defining the unit of analysis is acknowledging what the case is or what it is the researcher wants to be able to say something about at the end of his or her study (Patton, 1987; Yin, 1993). For this study, the unit of analysis was high-achieving, middle-class, African American students at one large research institution in the mid-Atlantic United States. I chose to focus on this group because more students from these backgrounds will be admitted into college in

forthcoming years (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2005). With this in mind, by the end of the study, I was able to dispel myths and stereotypes about Black American students by exposing the contextual factors that they utilized to understand and to make meaning of their college preparation process. Equally important, I explored the role that race and class played in influencing the college planning process. By focusing on African American students' surpluses rather than only their deficits, a more holistic and insightful perspective was acknowledged and respected by others to add more depth to the higher education research on this group of students.

When writing the case report, it is important to acknowledge that the purpose "is not to represent the world, but to represent the case" (Stake, 2000, p. 448) so that more detailed information is learned about a particular case in comparison to other cases. I sensed that more could be learned about this group by conducting an intense study on their lived experiences and listening to the stories of their personal journeys and the different approaches they took to navigate the college preparation process. Studying these students from this perspective added to the knowledge base of higher education policies, practices, and procedures so that they were inclusive of this group, appreciating the distinct experiences that prepare these students for college success.

Because I studied a unique population of students, there is much that can be revealed about African American students, and I gained new insight and learned new meanings that expand the reader's prior knowledge about the topic (Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, case studies become very helpful when a researcher wants to learn more about a problem or situation in-depth and where "one can identify cases rich in information – rich in the sense that a great deal can be learned from a few exemplars of

the phenomenon in question" (Patton, 1987, p. 19). Indeed, studying cases of African American students from high-ability and middle-class backgrounds brought to life voices that have been traditionally ignored, understudied, and even silenced in scholarly research (Lacy, 2007).

Stake (2000) described three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. An intrinsic case study is when the researcher wants a better understanding of a particular case. An instrumental case study is when a particular case is examined "to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization" (Stake, 2000, p. 437). A collectivist case study is used to examine many cases "to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition" (p. 437). For purposes of this study, I employed a collectivist case study because I studied multiple cases (Yin, 2003) to better understand how this group of students planned for college.

## Methods

In this section, I outline the methods used in this constructivist case study. I begin with providing a description of the setting, the unit of analysis, the criteria for participation, and identification of participants and an introduction of the participants. Next, I share data collection and data analysis procedures.

## Research Setting

I conducted this case study at Burroughs University (a pseudonym). Burroughs, a Carnegie doctoral/research land-grant university and flagship of the Burroughs University System, is a major public, research university located outside of the nation's capital. For Fall 2010, the total undergraduate and graduate student population was 37,641, with undergraduate students totaling 26,922 and graduate students totaling

10,917. For Fall 2009, racial/ethnic minority students total 34%, including 12% African American/Black, 15% Asian American, 6% Hispanic American and .34% Native American (University of Maryland Fast Facts, 2011).

In addition to Burroughs' diverse study body, the university has received prestigious rankings and a distinct reputation in attracting and graduating students of color. In the *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* 2011 report, as established by the U. S. News and World Report, Burroughs is ranked 20 in awarding African American undergraduate degrees (751) among top U. S. public universities. Black students have not only been admitted to Burroughs, but also graduate at higher rates than their peers at peer institutions. Overall Burroughs' four-year graduation rate is 62.8 %, five year graduation rate is 79.7 %, and six year graduation rate is 81.7 %.  As a result of African Americans' successful graduation rates at Burroughs, this site is a unique environment to study high-achieving, middle-class, African American students.

As the state's public, land grant research university it is important to acknowledge the history of how and why this university was created. During the Civil War, these universities were created to provide the highest quality education to young Americans who could not afford the costs of a high quality private education (The Education Trust, 2010). Flagships also have a long tradition of preparing and educating future leaders in business, government, and academia.  In 2007, flagships enrolled more than 200,000 freshmen, including 3,000 more students who were African American, Latina American, and Native American than the 2004 freshmen class (The Education Trust, 2010).

Clearly, these institutions' missions were established to serve and to prepare leaders for the economy, but unfortunately, these institutions have been accused of

moving away from their historic mission. One accusation is the students at flagships do not look much like the states that they serve, serving fewer students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, and more White students. A second accusation is that they do not look much different than the students who attend the elite private research universities in their states (2009 Educational Watch State Reports).  A third accusation is that these institutions award more financial aid dollars to families who can afford to pay for college than families who cannot afford to pay for their child's college education. For instance, flagships and other-research intensive universities are the wealthiest public institutions, where students receive more financial aid from the institution than federal or state aid.  In 2007, these institutions spent a combined total of $361 million on students whose families earned more than $115,000 per year and another $400 million on students whose families earned between $80,400 to $115, 000 (The Education Trust, 2010). In regards to high-achieving students, students from families earning more than $100,000 have made the public, four-year, doctorate-granting institution the default college choice (The Education Trust, 2010). With these statistics in mind, studying high-achieving, middle-class, African American students at Burroughs, provided an opportunity to hear firsthand how these students' college preparatory experiences were comparable at this institution.

### Unit of Analysis and Embedded Unit of Analysis

As previously mentioned, it is important in case study to identify the bounded case for this study or the unit of analysis (Jones et al., 2006; Merriam, 1998; Yin 1993, 2003). Yin (2004) elaborated further focusing not only on the unit of analysis, but also on the embedded unit of analysis. In particular for this case study, the unit of analysis was

high-achieving, middle-class, African American students at Burroughs University and the embedded unit of analysis was the multiple cases or individual participants in the study. The analysis for this case study was consistent with the constructivist epistemology (Jones et al., 2006) as well as the analysis of multiple cases because I wanted to understand how more than one (Yin, 2003) high-performing, middle-class, African American student used family, school, and community contexts to prepare for college. Furthermore, I wanted to find out how race and class influenced the college preparation process for these students.

## Criteria for Participation

A purposeful sampling technique was used to select information-rich cases (Creswell, 1998; Krathwohl, 2004; Mertens, 2005) so that more was learned about the phenomena under investigation. As mentioned, this study was well suited for a case study because the bounded system was only students who met the participant selection criteria. When enough students did not respond to the original interest email, I used snowball sampling, a technique in which I asked other faculty, staff, and students who they thought knew a lot about the phenomena in question to identify more participants (Mertens, 2005).

The selection criteria for the information-rich cases included Black students whose parents were born in the United Sates. Middle-class identifiers included students whose families met at least two of the criteria: (a) family household incomes over $50,0000, (b) one parent or family member who held a bachelor's degree, (c) a secure job that offered access to healthcare, retirement security, including deferred compensation plans (401K or 403b), and paid time off for vacation and illness, (d) savings account for

the future (IRAs, mutual funds, stocks, bonds, CDs), (e) owned a home, and (f) the ability to provide a college education  for one's children (529b plans). Participants maintained a minimum high school grade point average (GPA) of 3.0, took a college preparatory curriculum that included, but was not limited to, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and Honors courses. In addition to these criteria, participants were involved in school, church, and community organizations where they held leadership positions.

Black male and female college students who attended high school in public, public charter, private, and independent schools were eligible for the study. College students were chosen from different high school types, as well as selective, competitive academic programs (e.g., science and technology magnet programs) to reflect on the diverse ways that these school type contexts and competitive programs influenced the meaning making process for preparing for college. Additionally, I chose participants who lived in diverse geographical regions in-state and out-of-state to value the influences that these environments may have on preparing for college. Lastly, a complete description was provided of each participant in the introduction of the next chapter.

**Identifying Participants**

Participants for this study were nominated by key informants (Jones et al., 2006). Key informants included Burroughs faculty, staff, and administrators who worked specifically with high-ability, middle-class, Black American students in curricular and co-curricular activities, teaching, advising, and counseling roles. These key informants included the Honors College, Burroughs Scholars Program, Center for Minorities in Engineering, Office for Multi-ethnic Education, Multicultural Involvement and

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Community Advocacy, The University Career Center, the Office of Orientation, the Cultural Center, the College of Letters and Sciences, the College of Education, and the Vice President of Student Affairs African American Male Initiative. I contacted these key informants via a personal phone call (see Appendix A: Personal Phone Call Script), and sent a formal letter via email (see Appendix B: Nominator Letter for Participant Request) introducing the purpose, significance, procedures, and length of the study. This formal letter asked colleagues to nominate and send contact information of students who met the selection criteria within a two-week timeframe. I received 57 nominations from key informants. Specifically, I selected participants from nominations that came from the following offices, Burroughs Scholars Program - Earth, Life, and Time Scholars Program, the Honors College, Center for Minorities and Engineering, School of Public Health, The Career Center, College of Letters and Sciences, and the Orientation Office. A small number of participants came through snowball sampling. I concluded the study with 10 participants; and collected data until I reached a point of saturation (Jones et al., 2006) or redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in which no new information could be learned about the phenomenon of interest. I narrowed the participants from 57 nominations to 10 participants by choosing 4 males and 6 females whose parents were U.S. born, attended school in diverse educational environments (public, charter, private and independent schools), chose diverse selective, competitive academic programs, lived in diverse communities (rural, suburban, and urban/metropolitan areas), and geographical regions, and met the middle-class identifiers.

Once I received nominations, I sent an email letter (see Appendix C: Email Letter to Nominated Students) to students that explained the study and included the name of the

person who nominated the student, a short introduction of my background, and a demographic survey (see Appendix D: Demographic Survey) to the nominees. Including the name of the person or organization that nominated the student was one way to build rapport and trust with students who may not have known me directly but may have felt more comfortable participating in the study if there was a mutual relationship with their nominator. The demographic survey served as a document to gather background information, high school information, club and organizational information, and parental education, job, and housing information so that I elaborated more on in-depth college preparation information during their interviews.

After I received the demographic survey, I understood their interest in the study and if they met the selection criteria. Next, I contacted the participants by phone, text, or email to continue rapport building and trust before I met with them for the interview. At the end of the phone call, text, or email, I asked participants to bring a copy of their resume or college admissions essay or personal statement they submitted when they applied to Burroughs or to get into the program that nominated them for the study. During this time I also shared that they would receive $15 cash incentive for participation in the study. Participants received an email 24 hours prior to the interview to confirm the date and time for their interview.

**Introduction of Participants**

A previously stated, four African American men and six African American women were selected to participate in the study. A pseudonym was chosen by the participants or for the participants to protect their identity. A diverse group of majors were represented among the participants, including, Psychology, Family Science,

Broadcast Journalism, Animal Sciences, Biochemistry, Music Composition, Food Science, Biology, and Economics. Two of the participants were first generation college students, which means that neither parent held a bachelors degree, seven participants were second generation college students, which means that at least one parent held a bachelors degree or a paternal or maternal aunt or uncle and one participant was a third generation college student, in which her grandmother and at least one parent held a bachelors degree. All of the students considered their families middle class, however, four described their families as lower-middle class, two as 'solidly middle-class or middle-middle class,' and four as upper middle-class. These participants also were from different geographical areas as well as states. Five students lived in suburban areas located in two Maryland counties within a 25 mile radius outside of the nation's capital, two students lived in suburban communities located in Baltimore, Maryland, and three students were from Illinois, New Jersey, and New York. Out of the 10 participants, all took Advanced Placement, Honors, and/or International Baccaulareate courses, and 4 participants were enrolled in magnet programs. School types included: 7 participants who attended predominantly Black public high schools and 3 participants who attended predominantly white public high schools, and 1 participant who attended a predominantly Black private high school. Only one participant attended high school in an urban major city, while the other participants attended high schools in suburban areas located right outside of an urban major city. I provide this section as an introduction of the participants in the study; however, a more detailed description of each participant/case will be included in the findings section of the study.

- Patty is a second generation college senior majoring in Psychology. She graduated in Spring 2011 and has been selected into the University of Maryland-Baltimore County Industrial Psychology graduate program where she will begin Fall 2011.

- Kerry is a third generation college student junior majoring in Family Science.

- Kelly is a second generation college student sophomore majoring in Broadcast Journalism with a minor in Leadership Studies and a certificate in African American Studies.

- Dee is a second generation college student senior majoring in Animal Sciences with a minor in Spanish Language and Cultures.

- Kevin is a second generation college student sophomore majoring in Biochemistry.

- Rick is a first generation college student senior majoring in Music Composition with a minor in African American Studies.

- Ann is a second generation college student senior majoring in Food Science.

- Idris is a first generation college student sophomore majoring in Biology-Pre-Medicine track.

- Amber is a second generation college student senior double majoring in Economics and Family Science. Amber graduated in August 2011, with plans to begin her career immediately and to start graduate school Fall 2012.

- Raymond is a second generation college student who has not decided on a major.

## Data Collection Procedures

Data collection sources included demographic surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and documents. By using multiple data collection methods (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995) on a group of students about whom limited research has been conducted, this study added new knowledge to the higher education and student affairs fields.

### Demographic Survey

A demographic survey (see Appendix D: Demographic Survey) was administered as the final verification to select students who met the participant criteria. A final verification was included because even though the nominator may have thought the student met the selection criteria, after answering questions on the survey, many students were not eligible and were not called to participate in the study. Personal information on this demographic survey included background information: name, pseudonym, race, city, state, college classification, and best days and times for interviews.

The next three sections of the demographic survey were divided into community/neighborhood information, high school and college information, and parent/family information. I divided the demographic survey into these sections to provide a guiding framework for developing the open-ended interview protocol. The community/neighborhood section included, city, state, home location (urban, suburban, or rural), was a college/university located within 10 miles of their community, and a series of choices that participants checked on what their community/neighborhood did to prepare participants for college. The second section, the high school and college information section, included high school name and address; was the high school located

within 10 miles of a college/university, high school type (public, private, charter); high school location (urban, suburban, rural); high school/college GPA; college preparatory curriculum (college track, AP, IB, Honors programs); and involvement inside and outside of school. There were also a series of choices that participants checked on what their teachers and guidance counselors did to prepare participants for college. The last section included parent/family information. In this section I included information about mother and father's country of origin, number of siblings, parental educational level and parental occupation/job, parent's class status (upper middle or lower middle), financial aid, housing information (own or rent primary residence), and an approximate yearly family income. This section served primarily as identifiers for middle-class status. I chose to structure the demographic survey in this manner so that interview questions focused on more in-depth information that helped to understand the multifaceted lived experiences from the standpoint of high-achieving, middle-class, African American students. Additionally, one question was asked if they would be interested in participating in a focus group session.

**Interviews**

I conducted one semi-structured interviews (see Appendix E: Interview Questions) with all of the participants. The time period to conduct interviews took three months, due to IRB approval at the end of April, which was impacted by the institution's last day of class, final examinations, spring graduation, and summer break. The interviews lasted from 39 minutes 58 seconds to 1 hour and 26 minutes. At the beginning of the interview, the consent form was reviewed and signed. Next, if students had not chosen a pseudonym on the demographic survey, then they were asked to choose one for

confidentiality purposes. Eight interviews were conducted on the campus of Burroughs University, and two were conducted and recorded through Freeconferencecall.com due to one student attending a summer research project located in another state and another student's participating in a summer internship located in another state. All interviews were recorded with participant's permission and transcribed verbatim.

The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is on someone's mind or to assist a researcher to understand a population for who limited research has been conducted (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Patton, 1990). Through interviewing, individuals can hear feelings, thoughts, and intentions, which may not be experienced through other qualitative methods (Patton, 1982, 1987, 1990). An interview is chosen in case study because it provides "an inner perspective to outward behaviors" (Patton, 1987, p. 109). As I listened to participants' thoughts and feelings, I entered into their world to gain a clearer understanding about the topic from the participants' perspectives.

I used semi-structured interviews that included open-ended questions that were recorded verbatim by the researcher (Krathwohl, 2004). Similarly, Merriam (1998) described these questions as a mix of more and less structured questions. As mentioned previously, I wanted to gain more in-depth knowledge about a group of students who receive limited attention through the research literature. Through interviewing, I learned the distinctive experiences of high-ability, middle-class, Black American students as they prepared for college. As respondents described the different contexts that have influenced the college preparation process in specific ways, more information was gained to inform policies, practices, and programs in the higher education community.

I designed the interview questions to address the three research questions for the study. The semi-structured interview included specific questions that asked all participants open-ended broad questions that were followed up with probes, and a list of topics that I wanted to know more about but did not have enough information to form questions about at the beginning of the interview (Merriam, 1998). The interview prompt included some questions that were structured, although most questions were issues to be explored when "neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time" (p. 74). This format allowed me to respond to new ideas, new questions, or information that might surface during the interview as well as to ask probing questions to seek clarification or elaboration.

Prior to each interview, students received an email message to remind them about the time and location of their interviews and to bring the requested personal document (resume or college admissions essay submitted when they applied to Burroughs or to get into the program that nominated them for the study). At the beginning of the interview, a consent form was reviewed and issued to the participant. Then, in an effort to continue building rapport and trust with the participants, I began the interview with three open ended questions that I asked all participants.

The first two questions focused on each participant's definitions of high-achieving and middle-class as well how they would describe their personal high-achievement and middle-class status. The third question asked the participants to elaborate on experiences that helped them to know or to learn that college was or was not an expectation early. At the beginning of the interview, I believed it was important to hear their thoughts and perspectives on these topics so that I had a better and deeper awareness on why

participating in this research project was important to them. Through their answers on the first question I could hear their passion, determination, and motivation to be a high achiever. I learned quickly that when answering the middle-class question, many of the participants paused before sharing a very well thought out answer of what this class status was and what it was not. When I asked the college expectation question participants seemed to exude a level of confidence answering the question, whether they remembered thinking about college as early as elementary school, or during their junior year of high school.  Asking these first three questions laid a solid foundation that framed the probing questions that I developed for the next set of questions that focused specifically on community, school, and parent/family contexts that influenced the college preparation process.

Second, I asked more open-ended, descriptive questions about community, school, and parents/family factors that influenced (positive and negative influences) the college preparation process.  By reflecting back on the demographic survey, where I asked participants to check all of the ways that community, school, and parents/family assisted with the college planning process, during the interview I asked participants to elaborate 'only on the items checked' so that I could hear about who was and was not involved, when the process began, how the process looked, how the process made them feel, and what steps were taken to achieve the end result, being admitted into college.   I was able to use the answers that the participants provided in the first three questions to frame these questions to be more personable. For example, if the participants mentioned a specific teacher's name or family member's name that helped them to realize that they were a high-achiever or plan for college early, then I would begin the question by

inserting that person's name and proceeding with the question. This format helped participants to see that even though they may have provided a general answer to a similar question earlier in the interview, I was listening closely to what they were saying and I wanted to hear more about what they had shared because either their answers were too vague or unclear.

The last two interview questions included one question that asked the role that race and social class played in understanding the college preparation process. For many of the participants, this question was challenging to answer because they had never consciously been asked to think about how these identities played a role in the college planning process. However, throughout the interview, I was able to identify specific events or incidents, where these identities were salient. Before closing the interview, I asked what other factors played a role in understanding the college planning process, just in case the participant had neglected to mention other factors in their resumes, college admissions essays, demographic surveys or during the interview. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked, I collected their personal documents, when available, and I shared that I would be sending an email to confirm the focus group time, date, and location.

Merriam (1998) recommended pilot interviews to find out if the questions were ordered correctly or worded awkwardly and to welcome additional questions that participants suggest be included in the study. For this reason, I conducted a pilot study of interview questions on one undergraduate student. From this pilot study, I changed the order that questions were asked about the college preparation process. By beginning the interview with the community influences, followed by the school influences, teachers and

guidance counselors, and ending with family/parent influences, the students began the interview by focusing on a factor that seemed less complex as well as a factor that provided a foundation for how the community influenced school choices and family decisions about the college planning process.

**Focus Groups**

I conducted one voluntary focus group during the study (see Appendix F: Focus Group Questions). After three months of interviewing, I sent students an email confirming the best date and time for the focus group discussion. I proposed three different dates for the focus group. The first date set for the focus group yielded only three participants. I decided to reschedule to a second date to get more students to participate. The focus group lasted 2 hours and 2 minutes and was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Litosseliti (2003) described focus groups as small structured groups, "*focused* in the sense that they involve some kind of collective activity around a small number of issues… and are *interactive* in that the group forces and dynamics are of utmost importance" (p. 2). Focus groups usually consist of seven to ten people, are relatively homogeneous, and are places where people are in a more natural environment (Krathwohl, 2004; Litosseliti, 2003) among their peers. The focus group included six of the ten participants (3 males and 3 females) in the study and was held in a conference room on the Burroughs campus. Three students did not respond to the first date or the second date to participate in the interview. Seven students agreed to participate in the focus group session, however, on the day of the scheduled session the seventh participant got sick.

During this session participants were able to respond to and build on perspectives shared by others in the group, which cannot happen in a one-on-one interview (Litosseliti, 2003). Specifically, I used a focus group to provide an opportunity for participants, who shared similar backgrounds, African American, middle-class, and high achievement, so that they could engage with one another on a specific main topic, the college preparation process as well as subtopics that were relevant to the main topic. During the focus group, I observed participants who felt comfortable 'agreeing to disagree', thinking critically based on their peer's perspectives and lived experiences, confirming or changing thoughts shared in the one on one interview, demographic survey, and essay, and sharing new ideas on how they prepared for college. This second face-to-face meeting also allowed more participants to elaborate on experiences that they shared during the interview. Even though this was the participants first time together for the study, many of the participants seemed to be more relaxed and at ease answering the questions because they had previous experiences with one another on the Burroughs campus inside and outside of class.

From a critical perspective, the focus group provided space for participants to be in dialogue with one another to speak openly about overcoming barriers and stereotypes encountered inside and outside of school environments. Additionally, I listened for sites or spaces where students may have experienced marginalization or privilege due to race and class, when the participants did not explicitly state it, but mentioned it implicitly as they explained how other individuals responded to their college preparation process. Also, the focus group, in which participants were among their peers, allowed me to hear the language used to describe their experiences, which in some instances was different

from the language used in the individual interview. For example, did they refer to terms as "acting White" or "the proving process" or did they use different terms? Specifically, in regards to language, I listened to how these students interacted with their peers in describing how parents, other family members, teachers, counselors, and peers reacted to them as high-performers and being from a middle-class background.

The main purpose of the focus group was to be present as the interviewer to guide and moderate the interview. Fontana and Frey (2000) stated "the interviewer/moderator directs the inquiry and the interaction among respondents in a very structured fashion or in a very unstructured manner, depending on the interview's purpose" (p. 651). Although I jotted down limited notes, the sole purpose of the focus group was for me to focus exclusively on the purpose and the experiences shared by members of the group. By listening during the focus group, I heard personal responses to respondents' comments, and reviewed language used with peers to describe college planning experiences.

During the focus group session I served pizza and drinks. At the end of the focus group session, I distributed $15 cash for their participation in the study. I had students sign and date that they received compensation for participation in the study. Because the focus group was voluntary, students who did not participate in the session, but had completed the interview and turned in all of their personal documents, were emailed, thanked again and reminded to pick up their compensation.

**Personal Documents**

I asked participants to submit two personal documents: high school/college resumes and college admissions essays/personal statements that they wrote to get into

Burroughs University or a campus program or organization that nominated them for the study. Creswell (2003) shared that documents are valuable data sources for two reasons: (1) they are thoughtful and individuals have to put time and energy into writing them, and (2) they are written evidence so the researcher does not have to transcribe. I requested these documents from participants to help gain a clearer picture about who or what activities helped participants to prepare for college and the types of activities participants thought were important to include in their essays to get admitted into college or the special program that nominated them for the case study. Lastly, when reviewing documents, I explored other contextual influences or factors that might not have been mentioned in the interview or the focus group session.

## Data Analysis

Creswell (1998) suggested that analysis for case study "consists of making a detailed description of the case and its setting" (p. 153). Likewise, Jones et al. (2006) stressed the importance of setting the context for methodologies such as case study because context is an important part of the case. For this reason, a description of the setting and a description of each participant are provided in the sampling section.

As I began the analytic process, I reflected on and revisited the preliminary notes and themes that I had written while conducting interviews and the focus group session and reading essays because in qualitative research, at certain times, data collection and data analysis can occur simultaneously (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Next, Merriam shared that the researcher should read the first transcript, set of field notes, or the first document collected. As the researcher reads through the document, she or he should write down notes, observations, and comments in the margins. With this in mind, I looked at

this period as having a conversation with the data by asking what was relevant to previous literature on this topic. According to Miles and Huberman (1984), at this time, I conducted a within-case analysis to compare data against theories and models that I used, the Perna and Titus (2005) conceptual model, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), and college choice theory (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999). By conducting a within-case analysis utilizing my theories and models, I made sense of my participants' experiences and responses to questions as they reflected on their college preparation process. These theories and models serve as a guiding framework to better understand specific contextual influences as well as how participants' make meaning of their race and class during their college preparation process. Although these theories and models helped in making sense of the data, I remained open to participants' experiences that fell outside these theories and models.

After conducting the within-case analysis, Yin (1994, 2003) suggested a cross-case analysis. Because I treated each individual student as a case, performing the analysis of multiple cases, Yin's (1994, 2003) cross-case synthesis was especially relevant for this case study. I created word tables (see Appendix G: Word Tables) for each research question from the individual cases based on the data collected in interviews and the focus group session. As a result of developing word tables, commonalities and differences were found across cases that did not appear within cases, therefore, adding new discoveries to the college preparation process.

First, to develop the word tables I began by writing the research question at the top of the page, then creating a word table to answer each research question. For

example, a visual display is created in the form of a matrix of columns and rows, where the students' pseudonyms are placed on the top row and the influences on the college planning process on the left column. For each student, data was written in the appropriate rows below each student's name to explain what was learned about each influence and how she or he made sense her or his college planning process. After this was complete, I analyzed the data by looking for similarities and differences and comparing and contrasting across cases to develop final themes (Yin, 2003). After the first word table was created, I developed a second and third word table to answer the two additional research questions, following the same format as above. These tables enabled me to explore specific contextual influences and race and class influences on the college planning process.

Through the development and collection of word tables, a cross-case analysis allowed patterns and themes to surface so that conclusions were drawn about the influences on the college planning process for high-achieving, middle-class, Black students. Furthermore, strengths of conducting the analysis beyond a single case are that it broadened my knowledge about the topic, prompts new questions, and discovers new patterns and themes.

**Trustworthiness**

To enhance the credibility of the findings, I used several strategies. For transferability purposes, it was important to provide enough description about the case so that researchers on other campuses can see how these findings may be transferred to their institutions, programs, and student bodies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Specifically, I provided a detailed description of the institution and participants'

background characteristics (demographic survey information), as well as a description of their communities, schools, curriculum, and extracurricular activity involvement. Each description of the participant provided enough information that researchers have a transparent understanding of the contextual influences as well as the social, cultural, economic, and human capital that these students possess in planning for higher education.

Next, I used triangulation, which is the use of multiple sources of data, investigators, theories, or multiple methods to confirm findings (Krathwohl, 2004; Lincoln & Guba; 1985; Mertens, 2005). In particular, I used multiple methods for data collection, demographic surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and at least one personal document. In addition to multiple methods for data collection, I also utilized multiple theoretical frameworks, the Perna and Titus conceptual model, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000), and college choice research (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999). These three theoretical frameworks provided insight and a broad knowledge base on contextual influences that help high-performing, middle-class, Black American students understand their college planning process. Specifically, I used these theoretical frameworks to support my preliminary and final analyses.

After semi-structured interview and focus group sessions were transcribed and preliminary analyses of themes developed, I conducted member checks to verify that the themes were a reflection of the participants' voices, perspectives, and thoughts (Jones et al., 2006; Merriam, 1998). I conducted member checks by sending an email on preliminary analyses of my themes along with quotations that supported themes so that students reviewed and provided missing information, alternative language, and "critical

observations or interpretations" (Stake, 1995, p. 209). Students were given a one-week deadline for getting this information back to me. I took this information back to my final analyses so that I could make changes to my analyses.

Lastly, I used peer debriefers, or what Merriam (1998) referred to as peer examiners, which is an external review of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba defined the role of the peer debriefer as a "devil's advocate," an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations" (Creswell, 2007). My peer debriefers or peer examiners were UM faculty and staff who nominated students for the study because they were most familiar with the population of students who met the selection criteria. I used this information to think critically about methods chosen as well as my own meanings and interpretations to ensure that they were a reflection of the participants' experiences and not my own biases.

## Ethical Issues in Researcher's Role

There were ethical issues that I anticipated for this case study. First, I built a relationship with the participants as soon as they returned their consent forms and demographic surveys by giving them a personal phone call or sending an email. After returning their consent forms and surveys, I shared the purpose of the study, and had a discussion about confidentiality and anonymity issues (Creswell, 1998; Jones et al., 2006; Krathwohl, 2004; Mertens, 2005), this ensured their participation in the project, set up interview times, and asked them to bring to the interview a copy of their high school/college resume or personal statement used to get into the university or the program that nominated them for the study. In addition to building rapport, I asked all

participants to choose a pseudonym to protect their privacy and identities (Creswell, 2003).

In regards to the research problem, I made sure that I identified the significant problem and shared the importance of this problem with the participants. Because this study explored high-achieving, middle-class, African American students, it was possible that feelings of marginalization surfaced as they participated in the study. In an effort not to "further marginalize or disempower the study participants" (Creswell, 2003, p. 63), I conducted a pilot study, so that the interview questions were formulated in a manner that participants felt open to share their own opinions and viewpoints rather than giving me answers that were socially desirable. For example, I included semi-structured rather than structured questions so that questions were open-ended, which helped students to share personal feelings without the prescribed guidance of structured close-ended questions. With this in mind, the goal of the interview was for students to feel that I was not judging them or stereotyping them based on personal information that they shared, but I cared about the factors, whether positive or negative, that helped them to prepare for college. I also expanded my own understanding as well as others' understanding, so that their lived experiences were recognized in the higher education literature.

Other ethical issues that may arise in data collection include participants' feeling embarrassed by some questions, privacy invaded, and sharing information that they did not intend to share (Merriam, 1998). These issues were addressed by reiterating the confidentiality agreements shared on the consent form, personal phone call, and at the beginning of the interview and focus group sessions. Also, I reemphasized that individual and group interviews will be kept in a secure file cabinet in my university office.

As the researcher, who was a first generation, high-ability, middle-class, African American high school and college student, who believed that college was my only option after high school, I recognized my own biases. I expected students to have similar experiences to my own, for example, parents and family members who were supportive verbally and financially during the precollege through the college years, teachers and guidance counselors who provided in-class and out-of class assistance with college admissions essays, recommendations, and scholarships as well as peers who waited anxiously to receive their college admissions letters to many in-state and out-of state colleges. Because of my experiences, I assumed that this group of students had something different to offer from African American low-achievers and African American students from low-income backgrounds. My reason for believing that these students would bring a unique perspective to the literature is because they had not only excelled academically, but there was an assumption that they had been supported by their parents/families, who may have been to college, placed a heavy emphasis on receiving a higher education, or knew individuals who had been to college that could help with the process. I also assumed that their parents/families knew the right curriculum and activities to get them involved in to be competitive for college admissions. Additionally, I believed these students may have not had to cope with the economic barriers that may have hindered them from getting additional help if needed to prepare for college, for example, hiring a private counselor, taking SAT preparation classes, and visiting colleges (McDonough, 1998). Furthermore, just as my parents had saved for me to go to college, I assumed that these participants' families had the economic means to pay for their college education.

My own biases may be an issue because I analyzed the data through my epistemological and theoretical assumptions (Merriam, 1998). As the investigator, I made decisions on what should be included and what should be excluded, so data was included that was contradictory to my personal views and thoughts prior to conducting the study. For biases that I could not control, I acknowledged these biases in the written report, and for biases that partly supported the predictions, I provided enough information so that readers can draw their own conclusions.

## Limitations of the Study

There were limitations to this study. One limitation was the case examined only African American middle-class, high-achievers, so findings may not have implications for students from other races and social classes and achievement levels. A second limitation was sensitivity to my own biases. As the primary investigator and instrument of data collection and analysis, I brought my own "construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied" (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). I recognized and acknowledged that I filtered others' views through my own viewpoints. A third limitation was that not all students kept copies of their college admissions essays or high school resumes, so I was unable to collect these personal documents from students. A fourth limitation was that due to the timing of data collection, Summer 2010, one participant was doing a research internship out of the state and another student had returned home and lived out of state, so both students interviews had to be conducted via Freeconferencecall.com and recorded through their online recording system. A fifth limitation was that not all participants were able to participate in the focus group session due to illness, scheduling conflicts, and lack

of response to the call to participate in the focus group session. Lastly, a sixth limitation was all participants self reported middle-class status, which means that in reality these student's families may or may not belong to this class status.

**Summary**

A constructivist case study was chosen to understand how high-achieving, middle-class African American students understood factors that contributed to their college preparation process. By using this methodology, I learned about the lived experiences of a population of students who have been understudied (Lacey, 2007). Through blending theoretical perspectives and using multiple data collection methods, I saw how these participants interacted, questioned, and interpreted the world around them as they prepared for college. From a constructivist standpoint, the participants created meaning, which may be similar to or different from how others have interpreted their academic abilities. From a critical perspective, I learned about new meanings that may challenge commonly held stereotypes, beliefs, practices, and values experienced by these participants. Lastly, conducting a cross-analysis on multiple cases provided broader insight and findings to understand the multifaceted nature of this group of African American students. The next chapter provides detailed descriptions of each case and discusses the findings of the study.

# CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to share the lived experiences of 10 college students who reflected on their college preparation process. This case study explored the students' understanding of the college preparation process in the context of being a high-achieving, middle-class, African American student prior to being admitted to Burroughs University. Taking into consideration the research focus on high-achieving, middle-class, African American students, the methodology, and the philosophical foundations, I first present participant descriptions, which includes demographic information and descriptive information about the high schools that participants attended as well as descriptive information about their high school in-class and out-of-class activities. Second, after conducting a within-case analysis against the theories and models I used for data clarification and then a cross-case analysis to search for commonalities and differences across cases, I present themes that support existing literature as well as add new discoveries to the college preparation process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students. I will begin with descriptions of each participant to provide a foundation for how their backgrounds influenced their college preparation process.

## Participant Descriptions

### Patty

Patty is a second-generation college student majoring in Psychology. She grew up in a suburban area outside of Washington, DC with her parents and two siblings, one younger brother who is in college and one older brother who has some college; however, at the time of the study her brother was only working. Her mother holds a master's degree and her father holds a high school diploma. Patty considers her family "middle-

middle class." They own their home, and she reported their approximate combined yearly family income is between $100,000-$149,000. Her mother is employed as a manager of employment and her father works as a warranty service superintendant. Patty shared that her family does have health care insurance. Her parents partially paid for her college education, her older brother paid for one semester, and the remainder of her college education was paid for through loans.

Patty attended a public high school located in a suburb outside of Washington, DC and in the state of Maryland. Her high school had approximately 1,292 students, 757 African Americans, 435 Whites, 15 Asian Americans, and 10 Native Americans (2011 Maryland Report Card). The number of students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses in all subjects was 195. The percentage of students who scored 3-5 on the final exam was 22.7%. The graduation rate was 87.9% and the percentage of students reporting to attend a 4-year institution was 42.4% (2010 Maryland State Report Card).

In high school, Patty maintained a cumulative grade point average of 4.0 and took AP and honors courses. The highest math class that she completed was Pre-Calculus and the highest science class that she completed was Physics. At the time of the study, Patty could not remember her SAT or ACT scores. Patty was involved in Air Force Junior ROTC, National Honor Society, Tennis, Mock Trial, Key Club, and Future Business Leaders of America. Through these high school organizations she participated in food drives, toy drives, and other community service activities, however, she was not involved in any activities outside of school. Patty has continued her involvement and leadership experiences at Burroughs University, while maintaining a college cumulative grade point

average of a 2.96. In Fall 2011, she began graduate school in Industrial Psychology at a state university.

**Kerry**

Kerry is a third-generation college student majoring in Family Science. She grew up in a suburban community in New Jersey located approximately 45 minutes outside of New York City. Both her mother and grandmother completed their Bachelor degrees and her father completed his Associates degree. She considered her family as lower middle-class. Kerry has one brother who is 13 years older and who completed some college. Her mother is an accountant and her father is self-employed. They own their home; their approximate combined family income is $60,000-$79,000; and her mom provides health care insurance. Her parents helped her to pay for college, and she received loans, scholarships, and she has a job.

Kerry attended a public high school located in the same suburb close to where she lived in New Jersey. According to the 2010 NJ State Report Card, the student population was approximately 1,426 students. Student demographic data was unavailable on this website. The percentage of students enrolled in AP courses was 36.6% while the state average was 19.9% and the number of students with scores between 3-5 on AP exams was 433. The percentage of students with four-year college plans was 81.7% and the school graduation rate was 99.7% while the state graduation rate was 94.7%.

Kerry took AP and honors courses, while maintaining a 3.6 grade point average. In high school, she was involved in the Student Government Association, Captain of the Cheerleading Squad, Black Student Union, and Captain of the Step Threads Club, Diversity Council and the Dance Team. Outside of high school, she was involved in her

church as the President of the Youth Council and the Praise Dance Ministry. She also was on a competitive dance team, which gave her the opportunity to travel inside and outside of the country. Kerry was not as involved at Burroughs and has maintained a cumulative grade point average of a 3.0.

**Kelly**

Kelly is a second-generation college student, majoring in Broadcast Journalism with a minor in Leadership Studies and a certificate in African American Studies. Kelly lives in a suburban community located outside of Washington, DC. Kelly lives with her mother, father, and younger sister. Kelly describes her family as upper middle-class. Her mother holds an Associate degree and her father holds a Bachelors degree. Kelly's mother is a medical records specialist and her father is a cartographer. Their approximate combined family income is $100,000-$149,000. They own their home; have health care insurance; and a 401K plan. Kelly pays for college through loans and scholarships.

Kelly attended a public high school located in Montgomery County, Maryland. Kelly's public school enrollment was approximately 1,770 students. The demographic breakdown included 271 Asian, 524 Black/African American, 381 Hispanic/Latino and 543 White students. Students enrolled in AP classes included 383 students, while 65.1% scored a 3-5 on the AP Exams. In 2010, 252 students took the SAT, with a mean score of 1489. The graduation rate was 92.96% and 57.9% planned to attend a four-year college (2010 Maryland State Report Card).

Kelly took AP and Honors Courses while maintaining a 3.8 cumulative grade point average. She was involved in Student Council, Coyote Ambassador, Yearbook Staff, Newspaper Staff, Keystone Club, the Congressional Student Leadership

Conference, and Student Government Senate Member. Kelly also was just as involved in her community, whereas a member of the People to People delegation she traveled to Italy, France, and England. She was also a Global Children's Center Volunteer and appeared in a write up for outstanding teens about her community service in the Next Step Magazine. In high school, she submitted and was the recipient of many essay contests sponsored by NBC4, WJZ13, the Washington Mystics and the NAACP ACT-SO. Kelly is involved in various organizations at Burroughs and she has maintained a college cumulative grade point average of a 3.18.

**Dee**

Dee is a first-generation college student, majoring in Animal Sciences, with a minor in Spanish Language and Cultures. She grew up in a suburb outside of Baltimore, Maryland. Dee grew up in a single parent home, where primarily her mother, as well as her grandmother raised her. Her mother holds an Associate's degree and her father holds a Bachelors degree. Dee has one younger sibling who attends Millsaps College in Mississippi. Dee describes her family as upper middle-class, where their yearly family income is approximately $60,000-$79,000. Her mom works as a probation officer and her father is in the music industry. They rent an apartment in Baltimore County. Her college education is being paid for by her parents and grandmother, loans, scholarships, and Dee's on-campus job.

Dee attended a public high school located in a suburb outside of Baltimore, Maryland. This high school had a magnet school program in which she was enrolled in the Biomedical Technology, Gifted, and Talented Program. The enrollment was 1,095 students, including 12 Asians, 1,048 Black/African Americans, 15 Hispanic/Latino, and

14 White students. The number of students enrolled in AP courses was 75, and the percent of students who scored a 3-5 on the AP exam was 31.6%.  At this high school, 151 students took the SAT and the composite mean score was 1220. The graduation rate was 86.93% and 55.6% planned to attend a four-year college (2010 Maryland Report Card).

Dee graduated as valedictorian of her class. Her cumulative grade point average in high school was 3.81. She scored a 1610 on her SAT and a 21 on the ACT. She enrolled in college preparatory courses, AP, and honors courses. The highest math that she completed was Pre-Calculus and the highest science that she completed was AP Biology. Dee was involved in the debate club, Future Educators of America, Future Business Leaders of America, the Spanish Club and the RAMS Read Book Club. She did not report being involved in any community, social, or cultural organizations in high school or college. Dee has maintained a college cumulative grade point average of a 3.049.

**Kevin**

Kevin is a second-generation college student, majoring in Biochemistry.  He grew up in a suburban area outside of Washington, DC. Kevin considers his family lower middle class. He was raised by his mother and has three siblings; however, he lives with only his younger brother. His mother has a Bachelors degree in Physical Education and his father's education status is unknown.  Kevin's mother is retired, but she is self-employed. His father is a veteran and is unemployed. He reported that the approximate family income is over $150,000; they rent their home; and his mother carries health care insurance for the family. Kevin's college education was paid for primarily through

scholarships and a work-study job. He also reported that his mom did not save for him to go to college.

Kevin attended a public high school located in Prince George's County, Maryland, which is located 5 miles outside of Washington, DC. He was enrolled in the Science and Technology Magnet Program. The enrollment at Kevin's high school was 2,431 students.  The student population included 12 American Indian/AK Native, 48 Asian, 2,292 Black/African American, 58 Hispanic/Latino, and 12 White students.  At his high school 282 students were enrolled in AP courses, while 12.9% scored 3-5 on the AP exam. Additionally, 434 students took the SAT and the mean composite score for the school was 1333. Within 30 days of graduation, students documented decisions out of 575 who completed the questionnaire, 72.7% of the students planned to attend a four-year college. The school graduation rate was 93.22% (2010 Maryland State Report Card).

His high school cumulative grade point average was a 3.5. He took AP and honors courses. Kevin scored a 1400 on his SAT.  He did not take the ACT. The highest math course that he took was Statistics and Linear Algebra and the highest science course was AP Biology. Kevin was not involved in any school extracurricular activities. Outside of school he was involved in the Christian Men's Group and the Alpha Phi Alpha Group (Beautillion). Kevin has maintained a college grade point average of 2.75.

**Rick**

Rick is a first-generation college student, majoring in Music Composition with a minor in African American Studies. He grew up in a suburban area located outside of Washington, DC. Rick considers his family lower middle-class. His parents do not have college degrees; however, his mother has some college and his father a high school

diploma. He has seven siblings, two younger, and five older siblings. His older brother graduated from University of Maryland Baltimore County in 2009. Rick's mother works at Bank of America in the mortgages department and his father works for the United States Department of Transportation. They rent their home; the family has health care insurance; and his dad has a retirement savings. Their approximate combined family income was unknown. He received a state merit-based scholarship of $10,000 and a university merit-based scholarship that covered the remainder of his college expenses.

Rick attended a public high school located in Prince George's County, Maryland, which is approximately five miles outside of Washington, DC. His high school was located in a suburban area. Rick was enrolled in the Biotechnology Magnet Program. The enrollment at Rick's high school was 1,266 students. The student demographic data includes: 16 Asian, 1,216 Black/African American, and 18 Hispanic/Latino students. The number of students taking AP courses in all subjects was 142, while the percent of students scoring 3-5 in all subjects was 11.1%. The number of students taking the SAT was 184 and the composite mean score was 1194. Within 30 days of graduation, students documented decisions out of 277 students who completed the questionnaire, 58.8% of the students planned to attend four-year college and 86.7% was the graduation rate (2010 Maryland State Report Card).

Rick maintained a high school cumulative grade point average of 3.5, and his SAT score was a 1580. He enrolled in AP and honors courses. The highest math completed was Trigonometry/Algebra II and the highest science completed was Biotechnological Applications II. In high school he was involved in Track and Field, Gospel Choir, and the National Honor Society. He did not report that he was involved in

any community, social, or cultural organizations outside of high school. Rick has maintained a 3.7 college cumulative grade point average.

**Ann**

Ann is a second-generation college student, majoring in Food Science. She grew up in Doughquay, New York, which is located in a suburban area outside of New York City. She lives with her mother and father and fourteen year old brother. Her mother has a Bachelor's degree in Biomedical Engineering and her father has a Doctoral degree in Electrical Engineering.  Presently, her mother is a homemaker and her father is an electrical engineer. She describes her family as upper middle-class. Her parents own their home. Their approximate combined yearly family income is over $150,000. Her parents were prepared to pay for her college education; however, Ann was the recipient of the most prestigious merit-based scholarship offered at Burroughs University. The selection criteria include academic achievement, standardized test scores, letters of recommendation, extracurricular activities, awards, honors, and an essay.

Ann attended a public high school in Lagrangeville, New York. The enrollment at her high school was 3,421 students. The student demographic data includes: 105 Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 249 Black/African American, 245 Hispanic/Latino students, and 2818 White students. Out of the 764 graduates, 369 went to a four-year college. The school's graduation rate was 86% (The New York State School Report Card 2009-10). Data was unavailable on AP testing or SAT testing.

She maintained a 4.0 high school grade point average and enrolled in AP and honors courses.  Her SAT score was unavailable. Her high school clubs and organizations included marching band, National Honor Society, Debate Club, Arlington Broadcast

Channel, and Culinary Arts Club. Ann was also involved outside of high school where she was a volunteer at the local library, participated with Sunday School and Vacation Bible School and church mission trips, and the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. Ann has maintained a college grade point average of 3.551.

**Idris**

Idris is a first-generation college student, majoring in Biology, on the Pre-Medicine track. He grew up in a suburban community outside of Baltimore, Maryland. He is from a single parent home, where he lives with his mother, however, was raised by his mother and father through late elementary school. Idris has one brother who is 7 years older. Idris' mother has an Associate degree and his father has a high school diploma. They rent their home and his mother carries health care for the family. He considers his family lower middle-class, however, has experienced a higher social class before his parents divorced and his father played for the Yankees. His mother's occupation is a community manager for an independent living facility. The approximate family income is $60,000-$79,000. Idris' college education is paid for by his parents, loans, scholarships, and grants.

Idris attended a public high school located in Baltimore, Maryland that enrolled 1,348 students. The student demographic data includes: 16 Asian, 1,272 Black/African American, and 34 Hispanic/Latino students. The number of students taking Advanced Placement courses in all subjects was 68, while the percent of students scoring 3-5 in all subjects on the AP exam is 7.1%. The number of students taking the SAT was 155 and the composite mean score was 1196. Within 30 days of graduation, out of 241students

who completed the questionnaire, 52.3% of the students will attend a four-year college. The graduation rate at this high school was 90.83% (Maryland State Report Card, 2010).

At Idris' high school he was enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program and maintained a 4.1 weighted grade point average. Idris scored an 1890 on the SAT. He took AP and IB courses. The highest math class completed was AP Calculus and the highest science class was IB Biology. In high school he was involved in Varsity Tennis, Indoor Track, Concert Chorale, Theatre Ensemble, Fashion Club, and the National Society of Black Engineers. Outside of school, he participated in an internship at a highly ranked reputable state institution, the Alpha Phi Alpha Beautillion, and the Praise and Worship team at his church. He has continued involvement at Burroughs and has maintained a college cumulative grade point average of a 3.0.

**Amber**

Amber is a second-generation college student, double majoring in Economics and Family Science. She grew up in a community on the south side of Chicago, Illinois. Her parents divorced when she was in late elementary school, and she and her sister lived with their mother, but their father was always involved in their lives. The family owns their home and both her parents have health insurance. Amber's mother and father have some college education, but she also has aunts and uncles who have received Bachelor degrees on both sides of her family. She has two older sisters; however, just one sister attended college. Amber considers her family 'solidly middle class.' Her mother is a rating specialist for the Department of Veteran Administration and her father is a retired military officer and a police officer with the Chicago Police Department. They own their home. The approximate family income is $80,000-$99,000.

Amber attended a public high school in Chicago, Illinois. Amber's high school enrolled 1,533 students. The student demographic data includes: 1 Asian, 1,473 Black/African American, 28 White, and 31 Hispanic/Latino students. The number of students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses was 423, while the percent of students scoring 3-5 on the AP exam was 11.1%. The number of students taking the ACT was 304 and the composite mean score was not reported (Illinois State Interactive Report Card, 2010).  Within 30 days of graduation, students documented decisions out of 241 students who completed the questionnaire, 52.3% of the students will attend a four-year college (Chicago Public Schools School and City Wide Reports 2010). The school graduation rate was 83.8%.

She was enrolled in the World Language Program, where she maintained a 4.5 weighted cumulative grade point average and graduated number nine out of her class of 540 seniors. She was enrolled in AP and Honors courses. Amber did not take the SAT; however, she took the ACT and scored 25. The highest math course completed was Pre-Calculus and the highest science course completed was Honors Chemistry. Outside of class, Amber was involved with the Student Council, Student Mentors, her high school Step Ministry and her church. She was not as involved in college and maintained a college cumulative grade point average is a 3.68.

**Raymond**

Raymond is a second-generation college student who is an undecided major. He grew up in a suburban community located outside of Washington, DC. Raymond is from a single parent home, where his mother raised him; however, his father has always been involved in his life. He has one younger sister and three older sisters.  His mother has

some college and his father holds a Master's degree. Raymond considers his family upper middle-class. Their approximate family income ranges between $100,000-$149,000. They own their own home and his mother has health care for the family. His mother works in financial services and his father owns his own business. Raymond's college education is paid for by his parents, loans, and grants.

Raymond attended a private school located in a suburban/rural area outside of the nation's capital. His high school student population was 196 students. The student demographic data for his high school includes: 80% African American and 20% other, which includes White, Latino American, and Native American. The school's graduation rate was 100% and the percentage of students going to college was 100%; however, through an honors program set up through Burroughs some students go to the local community college first to receive free tuition and then transfer to Burroughs to complete their baccalaureate degrees (Jada Harris, personal communication, January 31, 2012). The registrar could not provide data on the percentage of students enrolled in AP or the percentage of students who scored 3-5 on AP Exams. Raymond's cumulative high school grade point average was a 3.23 and his SAT score was 1670. He was enrolled in Honors courses. The highest math class completed was Honors Calculus and Physics.

In high school he played varsity soccer, baseball, and track. He was also an active member of Boys Scouts of America, where he was awaiting his Eagle Scout decision and involved in the community recreation center. He was completing one summer session at Burroughs University and at the time of data collection a college cumulative grade point average was unavailable.

**Summary**

    This chapter is organized according to the first two research questions. Integrated throughout the findings chapter, research question three is addressed due to the intersection of race and class on factors that influenced or impeded the college preparation process in school, community, and family environments. The research questions were:

1. How do high-achieving, middle-class, African American students understand their college preparation process?

2. How do school, community, and family influence or impede the college preparation process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students?

3. How do race and class influence or impede the college preparation process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students?

To address the research questions, the first section discusses how participants understood the importance of college, demonstrated through early planning by parents and families in elementary and middle schools. The second section discusses how early planning laid a foundation to segue into high school, and how high school, community, and family factors influenced or impeded the college preparation process. The third and final section discusses how the participants made decisions about the college they attend.

## College Was an Expectation, Not an Option

    For high-achieving, middle-class, African American participants in this study, going to college was not an option, but an expectation expressed by parents as well as other family members, teachers, guidance counselors, and community members. Participants did not make decisions about whether or not to go to college, but instead,

they made decisions on what college to attend. Beginning in the early years, the college preparation process was not an afterthought for participants and their families. Family members made conscious efforts to instill a college-going mindset and culture by placing participants in environments that nurtured learning and education. Value was placed on receiving a college education from the early childhood and elementary grades until the time that participants arrived at Burroughs University. For the participants who were educated about college in the early years of their schooling experiences, they learned about the importance of higher education through their parents, grandparents, and extended family.

**The Elementary School Experience**

During the elementary years, participants expressed how parents instilled the value of education by stressing high expectations continuously. Amber shared how in a broad sense, "Education has always been a big part of my family." She did not realize until much later in life that her parents did not have college degrees; still, they put a strong emphasis on education. In addition to her parents' strong emphasis on education, Amber thought about the resources provided in her home environment that made her aware that learning was important.

> …both of my parents really pushed education, before we started school, we had books, like a grade level up…working on 'em during the summer. My mom playing Scrabble, reading books, and just seeing that, made me look forward to school, once I did start school.

Her reflection made her mindful of how these experiences influenced her desire to want to start school as well as eventually go to college. Another early childhood experience that Amber remembered about her parents' deep commitment to education that nurtured her academic success to go to college was a summer camp.

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> And when we [my sister and me] were younger, we went to little [summer camp initials]. It was some like really smart camp, but that was younger, younger, when my parents, like, my mom made sure that I had to do these things.

While considering these early experiences, Amber appreciated her parents' proactive behavior to offer her opportunities that nurtured her thirst for academic excellence. As she thought about these experiences, Amber recognized and made the connection to how reading books, playing educational games, and attending a talented and gifted summer camp laid a foundation to promote learning and education, which eventually influenced her decision in choosing to go to college.

Likewise, Kerry grew up in a family environment where college was a topic of discussion on a regular basis. She shared that the majority of the family members on her mom's side matriculated to college after high school and graduated from college. She was surrounded by college-goers from the beginning of her life.

> Well, I grew up in a household where we discussed college, and it was known that you were going to college. I grew up in a family where, basically, everybody graduated from college, even my grandmother. So, it was something that was expected.

In Kerry's family, the college-going culture was not foreign to her. Both her home culture and her personal higher education goals were in sync, so she felt supported throughout her life to pursue a college education.

Ann also communicated that her parents' college expectations were instilled at an early age. Ann's network was saturated with college expectations; with both parents holding four-year college degrees, living in a college town, and her family surrounding her with African American college graduates, she thought that college was the only natural path to take.

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Well, I think ever since I was really little, my parents had sort of made it clear that I was going to go to college. Both of them had gone to college. They were actually the first ones in their families to go to a four-year institution. They actually met at college and got married there. They made it clear that I was expected to do well in school. Like, when I was also really little, my parents would talk about college all the time, and I also lived in Austin, TX when I was very, very young. So, just being around a major college town sort of led me to believe that everyone went to college. I think I was maybe five or six when I realized it was not just like a given [and] I realized not everyone went to college. My parents, from an early age, just had me around college-educated Black people.

In addition to living in a college community and being surrounded by college-goers, and as a result of her parents' being engineers and working for engineering firms, they involved Ann in many engineering activities on their jobs and in the community.

...my dad, from when I was really, really little had sort of brainwashed me into becoming an engineer. There was all the Take Your Daughter to Work Days, all of like the explaining. Both my parents worked for computer [companies] like digital and Xerox and all those places, and so they would tell me about things. And so my dad would always just [have] the building toys, Legos, the circuit boards telling me about like math stuff, telling me about science stuff, just always telling me, "Oh! Engineering is so cool! It's so great! Engineers do everything."

As she considered her participation in science-related activities, Ann remembered how exposure to these activities helped to introduce her to the field of engineering. She had the opportunity to see her parents at work as well as to engage in activities that fostered analytical skills, problem solving skills, and mathematical skills. Being involved in these types of activities early on provided a basis so that Ann still preferred the sciences in high school and in college.

Dee had a comparable experience to Ann while living in the State University of New York (SUNY) college community during her elementary grades. At the time she and her cousin did not know why her mother and grandmother were talking to them about college at such an early age, but as she pondered on the experience during the study, she realized that they were planting a seed for her to go to college.

So, she would drive us around SUNY college and tell us, "This is where you're gonna be. You should consider going to college." And [cousin's name] and I would look at her puzzled, 'cause we're 8 and 6. Why are we even talking about this now? I guess, because they slowly instilled into us an expectation that we would go, that we just thought it like a natural step after high school.

At an early age, Dee's mother also surrounded her with college-goers, just as Ann's family had done for her. By having positive role models within her network, she, too, felt college was the path that she wanted to take.

When I first moved to Maryland, my mom started to hang around other relatives who had either gotten master's or bachelor's degrees. Even 'til this day, we still keep in close contact with my [aunt's name], she's actually my older cousin. She had a master's degree in some type of management. And she looked high, and we always like visit her and stuff. And she just tried to have me around her and other people that she hung out with, so they gave the impression of that's what I wanna aim for, as far as education and socializing with people.

Association with college graduates seemed to be very important to why Dee chose to go to college. Her perception of college graduates was they had professional jobs, high social statuses, and socialized with other individuals who held the same social statuses. As role models for her, she wanted to strive to imitate the positive impressions that they modeled so she, too, could attend college and have the same respectful reputation and social status as these individuals.

Idris could relate to Amber, Kerry, Ann, and Dee as he returned back to his childhood experiences. Before moving to the state in which he presently lived, he lived in a northeastern state in a very affluent community where he reiterated, "it was kinda like expected to go to college." By his parents' surrounding Idris around others who embraced a college mindset, he attributed exposure to early experiences as having an influence on making his decision to go to college. Furthermore, his mother instilled in him that he was going to college. She shared college expectations so early that he used the analogy,

"…you know when you teach a baby something early, it sticks with them…kinda like inception." Idris' analogy to inception demonstrated from the beginning of his life and as long as he could remember, his mother stressed the importance of a college education. As a result of her behaviors in his early childhood, he did not recall her giving him other choices after high school, so he believed that her insistent actions did not allow him a chance to chart a plan outside of receiving a higher education.

As participants thought about early experiences and how these experiences influenced their college interests, they were clear that parents supported their academic talents so that college seemed like the natural path to take after high school. Parents' focus on exposing their children to a college-going culture in the early years was the impetus for developing college planning goals in the future years. To further develop each participant's college interests, parents continued to foster a college focus beyond elementary school into middle school.

**The Middle School Experience**

College expectations set by family members in the early years were just the beginning of college awareness for many of the participants. As these expectations extended into middle school, students and their families made decisions to attend selective magnet school programs and to participate in college-focused extracurricular activities. While considering middle school experiences and their impact on college preparation, participants mentioned that by applying and enrolling in selective magnet school programs and extracurricular activities, they gained skills and knowledge needed to excel and to apply to competitive high schools and eventually to apply to college.

**Choosing selective magnet school programs.** Amber, who was admitted into a competitive middle school talented and gifted program, revealed, "Once I got into about middle school, college really did become a reality. Like, Oh! You have to apply for high school, and then, after high school, you have to apply again to like the next step in life." The application process for Amber was a trial run for what it would be like to apply to high school and then to apply to college. She and her sister began to think about the application process immediately following elementary school, because their elementary school ended at fourth grade. In the focus group discussion, Amber further reiterated how the application process of applying and testing boosted her self-esteem and validated her own abilities when she compared her abilities against her peers.

> I had to apply and test to get into my middle school and high school. So, going through those processes and knowing that I was gonna be surrounded by other smart people and people smarter than me prepared me for college because I had those fears. I had doubts, about myself and my abilities. But from a young age, I had to apply, and, I was able to succeed in those magnet schools. So, it boost my self esteem. I was able to compete, and I achieved as well as my peers around me.

Amber was happy her academic abilities were recognized as early as middle school; therefore, she as placed into the gifted and talented program. As a result of experiencing the middle school application process and being in class with other high-achievers, Amber gained self-assurance that she could compete with her peers. Having these skills translated well when it was time to apply for high school and college.

In like manner, Dee spoke highly about the Computer, Applications, and Mathematics Program at [Johnson Middle School], which was a competitive middle school magnet program. In Dee's opinion, this program was the best program for her as she prepared for college, even better than her high school magnet program. In this

program, she "learned how to do Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Publisher." Additionally, she expressed how impressed she was with the computer science program.

> … pretty much that was just the foundation for me to do well in high school, 'cause knew how to work with computer programs, do well on my assignments, do research. I'm not a really fast typer, but I type pretty well. And I think that was very helpful for me 'cause pretty much all the skills I have from middle school I use practically now every day.

Dee considered this middle school magnet program to supply her with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed as a college student. As she reflected on what she took away from the program, she realized making the decision to attend this school was not only beneficial when she was eleven, twelve, and thirteen years of age, but she learned information that she could use for a life time or at least throughout the computer technology era. Furthermore, Dee did not only believe the computer technology component of the program was beneficial, but she elaborated on how in, "Seventh and eighth grade we were writing research papers, [doing] citations…We were working on grammar. And then, we would get homework like every night, and we had to do readings." While attending [Johnson] magnet program, Dee was immersed in an environment that helped her to make connections between how the middle school curriculum compared to the high school curriculum and eventually the college curriculum. Idris also participated in a competitive middle-school magnet program at [Johnson Middle School]; however, his program focused on music and the arts. Although Idris did not talk extensively about the application process and the curriculum, he consciously chose this program because of his love for music.

**College-focused extracurricular activities.** Not only did participants make known that competitive middle school magnet programs were important, but they also talked about middle school extracurricular activities, which they believed contributed to their college preparation process. One salient middle-school college preparatory extracurricular program in which Patty participated was the [Academic Talent Program]. Her middle school guidance counselors identified her for this program. By participating in this program, what stood out for Patty was that students got to visit colleges on the east coast, which played a role in visiting colleges that they may not have been able to visit on their own.

Similarly, Ann's parents enrolled her in a science-focused afterschool program. She described the middle school program as, "goofy science experiments, like slag making and bottle rockets," but as a Food Science major in college, she believed that this program helped to foster an interest in the sciences during the middle years.

Lastly, Raymond mentioned another middle school program that he was invited to participate in during his eighth grade year at a local reputable university in his state. The name of the program was the [High Achievers Program].

> So, I went to [local university] for a weekend. They gave us like little introduction courses, which I thought were crazy at the time 'cause they were talking about sciences and things like that, and I was all confused. But I did go there with my mom, it was in the fall, and I had that opportunity.

In middle school, Raymond did not understand the importance of the program and did not take advantage of many other extracurricular opportunities; however, as he thought about the [High Achievers Program] that was offered at a prestigious university in his state, he acknowledged the importance of having this opportunity and the impact his participation had on his college plans.

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In brief, the middle years allowed participants to acknowledge their academic talents by participating in competitive magnet programs and college-focused extracurricular activities. Through these experiences, participants gained self-confidence and academic skills as well as made college visitations to learn more about going to college. The middle-school experience gave participants resources to prepare for the high-school experience so that they could continue to understand the college preparation process better through rigorous academic programs and extracurricular activities that cultivated their academic and social interests and abilities.

**The High School Experience**

As participants matriculated to high school, the 'college was an expectation' theme became even more prominent than in elementary and middle school. Parents planted the college expectation seed during the early and middle school years and nurtured the seed with college discussions, living in college communities, surrounding participants with college-goers, and applying and enrolling participants into competitive magnet and college-focused extracurricular programs. Participants utilized these prior experiences, as well as parent and family, teacher, guidance counselor, and peer support to take ownership of the college preparation process. For the first time, participants saw the "college was an expectation" theme as not only an expectation expressed by others, but an expectation that they had set for themselves. Even though the key supporters mentioned above were still salient to the participants in planning for college, the participants began to take more control of the day-to-day responsibilities by enrolling in a challenging curriculum, maintaining good grades, meeting with teachers and guidance counselors, overcoming stereotypes by applying to diverse college and university types,

applying and excelling in outside of the classroom activities, and submitting college applications online. When participants did not feel supported inside or outside of the classroom, they took the initiative to develop a plan of action to ensure that they met college application deadlines and got admitted into the colleges of choice.  For the most part, developing a plan of action was important for all participants, whether or not their parents had college experience and could steer them in the right direction. If parents could not help, students sought out others who had higher education expertise and could guide them in the right direction. Once participants were in high school, their desire for college was influenced through self-reliance and self-determination and less on external drive or external motivators

**First-generation students.** Specifically, for first-generation college students, meaning students whose parents did not have four-year college experience or experience with the college application process, participants understood that they had to take ownership of the college application task if they wanted to reach their ultimate goal of going to college as well as choosing a major. During the focus group session, Rick responded to an observation that I had made after completing the one-on-one interviews; there seemed to be a relationship between high-achievement, self-reliance, and motivation as each participant prepared for college.

> I guess one of the most important things that got me here, because my parents aren't really motivating me. Like, they'll say, "Oh, you should do this. You should go." At the end of the day, it was me motivating myself to do that essay, to apply for financial aid, to do like a lot of thing, because they didn't go to college. So, they see it as a goal that you should try to achieve. But yeah, self-reliance, self-motivation is I feel it's very necessary for a first-generation student.

Generally speaking, Rick did not feel that he needed to rely on his parents to motivate him to want to receive a college education.  He disclosed that even though his parents did

not have four-year college degrees, they still had a favorable attitude toward a college education; however, as a first-generation college student, he had the willpower to complete the college application and scholarship applications on his own.

As Idris pondered my observation of there being a relationship between high-achievement, self-reliance, and motivation, he pointed out that a person's life is his or her own. Idris emphasized that an individual is responsible for his or her own destiny, which for him as well as the other participants, was working to his full potential in high school to prepare for college. Idris shared:

> It doesn't matter how much advice you get, how many recommendations you get, how any people support you, how many people believe in you…If you don't take that and build self determination and self worth in yourself, then you can still fall. So, I believe having that is a huge factor [to] achieving higher, because you wanna achieve more, you wanna make a name for yourself. So, having self-determination is what can catapult you, in addition to support from outside sources into that success.

Even though Idris acknowledged that outside support was important; he felt strongly that defining one's self beyond outside supporters was more critical to one's success. He believed the driving force behind his high-achievement and overall success to be admitted into college was based on self-reliance, not external motivators.

Dee contemplated how personal drive included not only getting a college degree, but also choosing a major and a career that was not the norm in her family. As she thought deeply about the 'college was an expectation' theme in relation to other family member's major and career choices, Dee was able to look beyond her family's limited education and career choices, so that she could do something greater, something that had never been done before in her family.

> Also, I guess a strong desire to do something or a lot of imagination is a really great motivator. As I think about it, at a young age, I wanted to be a veterinarian,

and I realize that was possibly very strange in my family, cause no one really had a degree. So, I didn't think anything of my family not having like a formal education as a deterrent for me to try to attempt to get a degree.

Because some of her family members chose not to go to college or to study more traditional majors and fields for African American women, Dee was not discouraged from pursuing a nontraditional field for her gender and race. Her dreams of going to college and majoring in a field where as a woman and as an African American she was underrepresented encouraged her to strive to do something unimaginable – to obtain a college degree to become an animal doctor.

**Second-generation students.** Amber, a second-generation college student, agreed with Rick in the discussion on high-achievement, self-reliance, and motivation. Although Amber's parents did not have four-year college degrees, her desire for a college education was sparked by recognizing that she was responsible for her own goals and accomplishments.

> … Once I got to the point where I realized the sky is really the limit and I can do whatever, I think that's what motivated me and pushed me to want to excel more. Like [Rick] said, my parents aren't telling me, "Oh! You should go to grad school! and Oh! You should look at this. You should think about these other things." But something in me wants to go and do more.

Recognizing that her options were limitless was a sign to Amber that nothing could and would stop her from wanting to obtain not only an undergraduate degree, but even a graduate degree. Without constraints on her goals, Amber believed that she could achieve whatever she wanted to as long as she put the work in and her mind into it.

Likewise, Patty, shared feelings regarding placing herself in a position to navigate toward a higher education.

> But this is just the direction that I saw myself in. So, I kinda made sure that I steered myself in that direction just to kinda see how far you can go. Like I

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mentioned earlier, my mom got a master's degree, but nobody else on my mom's side really went to college. And on my dad's side, I don't think anybody on his side went to college either. So, it's just believing in yourself and knowing that you can do it, and just putting yourself on that road and just going.

Patty, similar to Amber, had family members who were college graduates as well as family members who had only a high school diploma. Still, whether family members chose to go to college or not, their attendance was not a determining factor in why she chose a higher education. Patty believed in her own abilities, so she situated herself to take the road that would get her a college education.

Kevin, whose mother graduated from a four-year institution also mulled over my observation of a relationship between personal drive and going to college; yet, he focused more on learning from one's own mistakes.

> ...based on the fact that we grow up when we learn from our own mistakes. I mean, your parents can tell you, "Yeah, don't do this or don't do that." But what really determines how you grow up is how you handle situations, your obstacles…

He, like Idris, recognized parental influence but he believed he wanted to go to college by learning how to deal with the challenging situations that he encountered throughout his high school career.  These obstacles were not deterrents for Kevin as he prepared for college, but he used these obstacles as strength to remain resilient as he worked through the hurdles. Kevin's resilience helped him to prepare for college, while using his problem solving skills to overcome barriers.

**Summary**

Participants acknowledged that through their lived experiences, they learned that college was an expectation as early as the elementary grades. Even though not all parents or family members held four-year college degrees, this credential did not

dissuade parents or the participants from discovering that a college education was the direction toward the next level of high-achievement. Through one-on-one interviews and the focus group session, participant's uncovered factors that contributed to how they learned about the importance of college and took ownership of the college planning process before actually beginning the college application process. Some of these factors included college discussions, living in college communities, surrounding participants with college-goers, applying and enrolling in competitive middle school magnet and college-focused extracurricular programs, and self-motivation. Eventually, the high value placed on education during the early and middle years laid a firm foundation for the participants so that when they got to high school, they believed in their own abilities to work toward preparing for higher education. In the next section, I share how participants' self-motivation in high school influenced the college preparation process.

### High School Influences Prepare Students for College

The high schools in which participants enrolled played a role in how they became aware of the curriculum they needed to take in high school to be prepared for college admissions as well as to be successful in completing college-level work. According to the participants, a heavy emphasis was placed on searching and applying to selective high school programs, enrolling in a challenging high school curriculum, getting assistance from teachers and guidance counselors, and seeking out opportunities outside the classroom that could augment students' college applications. In essence, high schools concentrated on equipping students with the academic and extracurricular resources to exceed minimum college requirements so that participants could be competitive with peers who would be applying to the same institutions.

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I begin by sharing participants' stories on the high school selection process. Second, I address the curriculum and programs chosen and how the intersection of race and class influenced this process. Third, I address teacher influences followed by guidance counselor influences and then peer influences. Next, I discuss extracurricular activities in which participants were involved. Lastly, I discuss experiential learning programs in which participants participated to learn more about college and college majors.

**High School Selection Process**

When participants were in the eighth grade, some began searching for selective high school programs to prepare for college. Researching and being admitted into selective programs was important because these programs offered students more challenging opportunities than they would have access to if they did not choose these programs. Others chose to take advantage of the high schools in close proximity to their homes due to costs that may have been involved to travel to other schools. As I listened to how students selected high schools, I learned that while some participants made conscious efforts to choose selective magnet school programs outside their neighborhood schools, others chose neighborhood schools that offered the same challenging academic programs and courses that magnet schools offered to include on their college applications.

**Choosing selective magnet school programs.** In the first examples, participants navigated the high school selection process by selecting programs that provided a challenging curriculum to prepare for college-level work as well as to prepare

for future majors and careers. For example, Amber chose a high school program based on her interest in studying other languages as well as the rigorous curriculum.

> It was a public school, but I had to test to get into the program at the school. So, it wasn't in my neighborhood. It was a world language international program. We had all honors classes and had to take four years of a language.

Amber chose a competitive world language program at a public school in the inner city that she believed could offer intensive study in college courses as well as study diverse languages from around the world. Having to apply and to test into this high school program, which was similar to her middle school application process, was the second opportunity that Amber experienced a selective admissions process. As a result, when it was time to apply to college she was comfortable with the application, selection, and testing processes.

Likewise, Idris' selection process placed more emphasis on getting into a rigorous program than choosing his neighborhood school, which was more convenient to travel to because it was right across the street from his house. Idris chose his high school based on his interests, but not the reputation of the overall school.

> But [the neighborhood school], overall was a better school than the school I went to, but just those only two schools in [the city] area had IB (International Baccalaureate). And that was what I really wanted to do. So, I, once again, walked to [neighborhood school], and got on the bus that dropped the kids off at [another area school], and then went to [IB school].

Idris had a strong desire to be in the rigorous and competitive IB program, which is a program that teaches students' skills to be critical thinkers and internationally-minded as well as prepares students for final examinations and qualifications recognized by leading universities around the world (Gadza-Grace, 2002). Being accepted into this program was more important than the time it would take to travel to his neighborhood school as well as

the reputation of his neighborhood school. Idris preferred to be bused several miles to take advantage of his chosen IB program, which would be a platform to learn about other cultures and to compete with peers internationally.

On the other hand, Dee decided to choose a high school program based on what she wanted to study in college. During the focus group session, both Idris and Dee realized that they had applied to some of the same magnet school programs. They also found out that they lived in close proximity to each other. Both were zoned to go to the same neighborhood school; however, neither participant considered attending their neighborhood school.

> I was actually zoned for [neighborhood school]. But [neighborhood school] didn't really have a magnet program, and I wanted to go to a school that would be geared toward science, 'cause I was interested in doing science in college. And when I was in middle school, we were looking around for schools to go to, and I knew there were two things I was good at. I was good at English, and I was good at Science.

For Dee, knowing that she wanted to major in the science field served as an impetus for choosing a science-related magnet program. Dee was strategic in how she chose high schools by thinking about her college major in advance as well as the subjects or content areas in which she excelled.

Amber, Idris, and Dee consciously selected magnet programs outside their neighborhood schools that matched their subject area interests. As high-achievers, these three participants decided to ride extra miles to school so that their thirst for knowledge was quenched by enrolling in programs with demanding curricula. Participants were adamant that they chose their schools because of the reputation of the programs that the high school offered, not because of the reputation of the overall school, which sometimes was not as favorable as the selective magnet program chosen.

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**Choosing neighborhood or zone schools.** Although some participants chose magnet programs outside of their neighborhoods, other participants chose to attend public neighborhood schools, or what is known as zone or feeder schools. In Patty's reflection on how she chose her high school, she thought about the number of high schools that were located within close proximity to her house; yet, ultimately choosing her zone school.

> So, I have about five high schools within 20 minutes of my house, but I'm only zoned for one, which is really weird, 'cause the other one is just a few minutes away, but I'm only zoned for one. So, I ended up going to the high school that I was zoned for, because to go to a school that I'm not zoned for, I wouldn't have transportation for that. I wouldn't be able to get a bus or whatever so I had to go to the school I that I could get to.

Similarly, Rick communicated that he, "went to the school that was down the street from my house." He, like Patty, did not put much effort into searching for other high schools within his area that might have programs that were content focused or aligned with his future goals. Kevin also expressed how he, "would've gone to an outside school, but the whole finance thing with the buses, and so, I went to a neighborhood school." After talking with Kevin more to explain the "whole finance thing," he elaborated on the school's not being located in the safest community, so his mother did not trust his riding the bus and he did not have the money to purchase a car to travel to a school outside his neighborhood.

**Summary**

Choosing a high school for these high-achieving, middle-class participants was the first step in making a decision about the type of environment that they wanted to be in as well as how they would be able to get to their high schools on a daily basis. Even though these students reported that they were high-achievers and middle-class, they still

had to think about the advantages and disadvantages or the costs of attending high schools located outside their neighborhoods. Whether students chose to participate in magnet programs or to attend neighborhood schools, which may not have had a magnet program, students selected schools that focused on specific topic areas as well as high schools that were located near home, so they did not have to accrue expenses for public transportation but still had opportunities to take the courses needed to get into college.

**High School Programs and Coursework**

I wanted to hear more about the programs and the courses that influenced the college preparation process once participants selected high schools to attend. Now that participants had been admitted into college and experienced college-level coursework, they were able to look back on how their high school coursework influenced the college preparation process as well as choosing a college major. When making sense of how high school coursework prepared them for college, mixed emotions surfaced as participants discussed choosing to study a college preparatory curriculum and deciding to take or not to take advance placement tests to gain college credits.

**Choosing to complete a college-preparatory curriculum.** With attention to the college preparatory curriculum, I learned how and why participants wanted to take a challenging curriculum to prepare for college. All participants either chose to take Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors courses or enroll in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program. I present participants' stories on why they chose AP, Honors, or IB programs, which eventually led to participants' overall evaluation about these programs and if they believed the curriculum prepared them for their AP and IB assessments as well as college-level work.

Even though some students realized their potential to take a challenging curriculum, others, like Patty, were encouraged by teachers who believed that, based on their work ethic; they would excel in more demanding courses than only honors courses. For example, as Patty thought about her teachers' comments, she decided to challenge herself by signing up for one AP course then for other AP courses. When making a decision to take more AP courses, Patty chose courses that she thought she would enjoy and would be interesting.

> So, I took like AP Psychology and any continuation of a class. So, I was taking Spanish for four years, then we had like AP Spanish, and I was like, "Well, I've done this for so long, why not do that?" So, I didn't really have a specific strategy as far as which AP classes to take. I kinda just took what I thought would be good, or also what would be good on my transcript, or whatever. I'm just gonna sign up and see how hard it is. And if it's hard, then I'll go back to honors. And now I'm thinking, you know, "It can't be that hard. It's just extra work, right?"

Patty chose courses that would look impressive on her transcript to be admitted into college. Because she had taken Honors courses, she did not doubt that she could do the work; instead, she thought that the curriculum would present her with more work.

When Ann reflected on the curriculum that she chose to take in high school, her reflection began from the first day of school. Unlike Patty, Ann knew that she was going to take AP courses.

> So I feel my school had a really, really, solid Advanced Placement and honors program. Because my high school was so large, and they also had like really big, AP programs and Honors programs, it seemed like the high achieving students almost from day one, freshman year, sort of got funneled off away from the more average and lower achieving students. So, like around my senior year, I had basically been seeing and interacting with and having classes with about the same 100 to 200 kids each day.

Ann also felt that her high school coursework prepared her for her current major, Food Science, which was decided on before she enrolled at Burroughs University.

Yes, by the time I graduated, I was pretty much set on Food Science. I was looking to do something science-related by the time I started high school, and it had evolved into nutrition. And then it changed to Food Science.

Specifically, Ann narrowed her major decision because she

… really enjoyed all of my science classes. I think I enjoyed them the most out of most of my subject areas. I enjoyed social studies, but I was sort of thinking about the money related to like a social studies major.

Similar to Patty, Ann chose AP courses based on her interests in the science and the social studies fields. Taking these courses, exploring a variety of science-related courses, and researching career salaries in high school made choosing a college major less challenging.

Raymond, who attended a private school, where the course levels were set up slightly differently from public schools, had favorable feelings toward his college preparatory curriculum. As a first-year student at Burroughs, he even felt that his high school work was more challenging than his college coursework.

Actually, in some ways, I feel as though they were a little more challenging. Well, a little more challenging than my college courses. There are a lot of ways where my college courses are way more challenging, just because of the work load and things like that. In high school, for a time, I had eight periods. I know my last two years I had seven periods a day. But, for a time, I had eight periods a day, and I had homework in every class, well, I had to at least read something or do math. I had math homework every night. And there would be some nights when I didn't get homework, but a lot of the evenings I spent doing homework for a lot of my classes that were due the next day. Like in college, here, I take three classes a day, at the most, and I skip days, except math. So, it wasn't like that in high school.

Furthermore, he gave a specific example comparing his high school math class to his college math class.

So, in that regard, I feel as though it was a lot more challenging, whereas now, my math class is way easier. Like, my homework for tonight is like three problems. The first one has like ten parts to it, but there's only like fifteen problems, if you count all the parts. And I had to do 25-30 problem sets every night for my math classes in high school. So, that was one thing.

Raymond believed his high school coursework provided a solid foundation for his college coursework. Because he did not have to take the same class everyday and the homework seemed to be shorter in college, he believed his college courses did not seem as demanding as his high school courses.

During my interview with Amber, who was enrolled in one of the top-ranked World Language Programs in her area, she talked about how her AP and Honors courses prepared her for college-level work, which as a result, "increased my critical thinking skills; helped me as it relates to how I view life, which is important when you're about to go away to college." She elaborated more by thinking about her peers' responses in her AP, non-AP, and non-Honors courses, and how she believed that her AP and Honors courses had an influence on how she contributed in class discussions.

> And I could even tell, in the classes where…Oh, answer this question about a book…just the responses, of course, were different. Not all, but at the same time, a lot of my other classes were with other honor students or with AP students. But even in those groups, I could still tell few differences, just as far as I really think I'm really strong in critical thinking. So, I think that was the biggest thing that I noticed.

Amber believed enrolling in college preparatory courses helped her to gain skills important in college survival. She recognized her analytical skills were stronger than most of her peers, which she believed made her stand apart from her peers in the application process as well as her classes.

Idris, who was the only participant enrolled in an IB program, brought a different perspective, a global perspective to the college preparation discussion, by first describing the actual IB program and how this program compared to the AP courses and non-IB courses. He talked about how they competed with peers across the world. Idris elaborated on the rigor of the IB curriculum by focusing on the rigor of his senior thesis, other IB

courses, and how this work prepared him for the IB tests. The discussion centered on competing with peers around the world versus only competing with peers in the United States.

> So, it ended being about twenty pages that we had to send overseas to get graded. And every exam that we took we had to send overseas. It was sent somewhere else. We had an essay for TOK, which is our Theory of Knowledge, which is kind of like a philosophy course you would take in college, which is one of my favorites that I took in that place. We also had math studies, which is a combination of Calculus and Stats [statistics] which is only an IB course. It was just like a lot was thrown at you. All of this was preparing for the IB test that you took. So, as opposed with AP, where you would take select AP classes and courses, your whole curriculum was IB. So, like you kinda couldn't get out of it other than the few electives that you had.

After being enrolled at Burroughs for one year and experiencing his first two semesters, he appreciated the rigor of the IB program and thought the adjustment to college was a smooth one.

> So, coming here, the work load was about the same, and so, it was no huge reality check, 'cause in IB, in high school, we had those main papers we had to write…the tests you'd have to write…three papers and then they give you like two hours. So, definitely it was stressful while I was there, but I'm thankful for it.

The course assignments and grade expectations that Idris experienced in high school were similar to what faculty expected in college. When making the comparisons between high school and college, Idris acknowledged that it was demanding, yet, he was grateful how the IB program teachers modeled high expectations so that he did not experience culture shock when he got into his college classes.

Although Dee appreciated the magnet program that she enrolled in as well as the Content that she learned, she expressed her concern about her AP courses and not being happy with teacher instruction. She, unlike Idris, did not feel teachers put much effort into holding high expectations for assignments or grading.

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The content was challenging…maybe the instruction wasn't as challenging. We didn't get a lot of homework, or what homework we did get, we got easy grading on. The material's good, but the instruction, it wasn't as strict. So, we were still getting high grades, even though we didn't put as much effort as we should've or something.

Dee's varied feelings toward her AP courses was demonstrated as she reflected on her dedication to her work and teacher instruction. She enjoyed the content, but she felt that the instruction was below her standards.

Kerry also had mixed feelings regarding whether her AP coursework helped or did not help her to prepare for college. Kerry's AP courses focused heavily on projects, writing, and analytical skills, which is where her learning style thrived.

I think it [AP coursework] did. Sometimes it hindered, and sometimes it was worth it. It hindered because, with my AP classes, one of my classes, my history class, we didn't take tests. We did, but it didn't really matter. He was all about projects, and I loved it, because I'm not a test taker. I'm very creative, so projects are perfect for me. But projects would still entail writing a lot of stuff. So, it wasn't just visual projects. It was doing a lot of writing. Doing a lot of analytical stuff, which is completely me. So, that's where I kinda got to shine, but it took a minute for me to get back into the whole idea of studying, because I kinda lost that my junior year and senior year. Because, when it came to big tests, like history and math, I always had tests, but that was different. But stuff where you had to study, like your sciences, it was all based on points. And so if I did really good on those projects, I could get a C on my test and still have an A+ in the class.

When contemplating her answer, Kerry thought about the college classes she had taken over the past three years and realized when she got to Burroughs the emphasis was more on tests and studying, so she had to learn to study all over again. Kerry stressed that she believed that learning the analytical skills in high school helped her to succeed in college-level work.

When I asked Kevin about whom or what influenced him to take a demanding

course load, he immediately responded with his own personal motivation as well as his desire to be a role model for his younger brother.

> That was mostly internal because I really wanted to make the best out of myself and be a good role model to my little brother, who was also entering like high school when I was entering twelfth grade.

He also shared that he had to enroll in these courses automatically because of the magnet program in which he chose to enroll. Kevin knew early on that he wanted to pursue a career in a science field so other than the school's close proximity to home, equally important was the science and technology program.

> I talked about earlier the science and tech program. How they make you take honors courses and AP courses. So, that's the only part of the reason why I took Honors courses. But I woulda took it anyway if I had to cause I love challenges. My overall career goal, I wanna be either a doctor or a scientist in the medical field. But I haven't really decided yet. So, I try to take as much courses that are related to that career as possible.

Kevin chose Honors and AP courses because he welcomed challenges. In addition to enjoying challenges, he thought about his future in the science field. As a result of his interests, Kevin believed these courses were an ideal fit for his career path.

**Gaining college credits.** Deciding to take college preparatory courses was one piece of the puzzle to prepare for college; still, another piece that did not seem to fit as well into the puzzle was preparation for AP exams to gain college credit. In general, participants believed AP and IB courses prepared them for college level work; however, they expressed mixed feelings on whether they felt AP courses prepared them to gain college credits.

During her senior year, Patty took her AP tests; however, she believed that she could have done better on these tests if the instruction in some of her AP classes was more demanding. Although her overall evaluation of her AP teachers was high, she still

felt that some of her AP teachers' instructional styles were not as strong, which impacted her final AP exam scores.

> I took multiple [AP exams]. I did very well on one. And I'm not good at reading it [Spanish] and writing it, but I can speak it very well. So, that didn't do too well. I took two AP English. One of them, I did well on. I think I got credits for that. The other one, I just missed the mark, because I know you have to make a certain score. The psychology one, I did fantastic on. Got a four out of five. I was very happy. So those credits came to [Burroughs University], which really helped me. So, I came into the school with some credits. Six, I think. So almost two classes…

Ironically, Patty eventually chose to major in Psychology for her undergraduate degree and Industrial Psychology for her graduate degree.  Even though in high school she did not know that she would major in Psychology, taking this challenging course in high school introduced her to a topic that eventually lead her in the direction of her career path.

> When Patty thought about how other AP courses were beneficial in relation to her actual college coursework, she had mixed feelings.

> When I came here, it was completely flipped! Everything was different, so I didn't do as well as I thought I did. So, I'm really (*Laughter*) glad I had those six. Thank goodness. 'Cause I know when I came here, they made me do that stupid math zero zero. You don't get any credits for that…At all! Oh, it was just Pre-Calculus or something. So, I think the math placement was just complete bogus. But, luckily I came in with some credits. So, even though that class was zero credits it still helped me graduate in four years.

Patty expected to do better on her math placement tests, yet, she was thankful for the six credits that had been accepted by Burroughs. Patty was graduating on time, even after she took a challenging math course in high school and still had to take a remedial math course her first year in college.

When I asked Ann about whether she felt that the AP curriculum prepared her for college work, she responded with a simple, "Yes, I did feel prepared for college when I

first started taking classes." Her answer was supported by her comments on the number of credits that she accumulated through AP coursework. "Yes, I placed out of about 29 credits."

In addition to choosing AP courses, Ann enrolled in an advanced level foreign language course. Ann explained the dual enrollment program that her high school had with an area community college, due to the fact that they did not offer this AP course at her school.

> …Technically the classes were taken in high school. My high school had worked out a deal with [local community college], because they had actually discontinued AP, due to lack of funding. So they worked out a deal with the community college, so that Italian 4 and Italian 5 would count as [local community college] credit.

Although she was in a level four foreign language class, she did not feel that this course helped her to prepare for college because the course did not count toward college credits or her intended college major:

> Not really. I took Italian. I did well in Italian. I actually had six community college credits in Italian, but I did not transfer them because they would not have gone toward my major, and my Italian is terrible.

Based on Ann's reflection on her high school courses, overall, she believed that these courses prepared her for college. Yet, the extensive amount of time that she put into her Italian courses was not as beneficial because these courses did not count toward her chosen major.

Raymond's school also had a partnership with a private school in another state where he was able to enroll his Physics course via distance learning. Raymond, like Ann, took this course at another school because his small private school did not have a teacher to teach AP Physics. He believed that most of his high school coursework prepared him

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for college; however, he did not feel that this advanced level course prepared him to take the AP exam so he did not receive college credits for the course.

Amber elaborated on the dual enrollment program that her high school had with the local college and how taking courses at this level helped her to accrue college credits. Contrary to Ann's and Raymond's thoughts on how their high school courses offered at other schools did not allow them to transfer these credits into college, Amber felt differently.

> So, our school partnered up with the university, and for college credit we could take a class at a university. So, I took Sociology 101 and like Legal Environment of Business. And so those counted as 6 college credits. I came in with 9.

Amber felt differently from her peers because she was able to gain credits through the dual enrollment program that transferred to Burroughs. With nine credits on her transcript, Amber distinguished herself from her peers who did not bring in AP or dual enrollment college credits from their high schools.

Kevin expressed varied feelings about the rigor of the science and technology magnet program. He thought that the program could have been more challenging, especially when he compared it to the work that his younger brother was doing in regular classes in high school. His negative feelings focused more on the quality of teaching instruction and how this instruction impacted his AP test scores.

> …I think the Advanced Placement and the Honors courses didn't help me prepare for transition [to college], because it was a step up from the regular work that I saw my little brother doing when I was in high school. We were both in high school. And the work that he was doing would be just easy work compared to what I was doing beside the grade difference [in] AP courses and the teaching-wise, so I didn't get much out of it when it came [time] to take the test. That's why I didn't do so good on it.

Kerry also decided not to take her AP tests because of her past experience with taking these types of tests and not doing well.

> Like I said, I'm not good with tests. So, I stayed away from big tests. So, I didn't take any of my AP class [tests]. I didn't take any of those fucking tests, and I was like, "86 dollars? You're crazy."

Kerry's negative feelings toward big tests deterred her from putting herself in a position where she could bring college credits into Burroughs. As a high-achiever, surprisingly, she allowed her test anxiety to take over her abilities. In addition to test anxiety, she also believed each test was too expensive, so she decided not to sacrifice and spend the money.

As shared in the previous section, Dee was disappointed by the lack of quality of the teacher instruction in her classes. As a result, she attributed her low AP test scores to poor instruction.

> So, that kind showed on my AP scores, 'cause even though I knew the material, it's like I didn't do as well as I thought I would. Like, I got a three on AP US History. I was hoping for a four or five. I got a three in Biology. I was hoping for a four or five. And then for Spanish, I'm like, "Hey! I'll get at least a three." I got a one on that crap.

Dee expected to do much better on her AP exams than she actually did. She expressed disappointment in receiving lower scores on her U.S. History, Biology, and Spanish exams, even though she excelled in her AP coursework.

**Summary**

Participants expressed diverse feelings on whether their AP and IB programs as well as dual enrollment programs prepared them for college level coursework before being admitted into Burroughs. Some shared how choosing a college preparatory curriculum helped them choose their college majors and future careers, manage time

better, develop critical thinking and analytical skills, and understand college expectations for assignments and grading. Others shared how they enjoyed what they learned in these courses; however, they did not always feel that these courses prepared them for AP final exams. Even though they enrolled in competitive college preparatory programs and courses, some participants believed that the content met their expectations, but the instruction was below some of the participants' expectations, which impacted whether or not they decided to take their AP tests. In the next section, I address teacher influences on the college preparation process.

**Teacher Influences**

Under the guidance of teachers, high-achievers were kept on the right path toward meeting college requirements. Teachers provided verbal support in making sure that high-achievers stayed college-focused. On the whole, there was an expectation that participants would go to college rather than choose to work after high school. With this expectation in mind, teachers did not spend a considerable amount of in-class time reviewing college requirements with students. Through students' own research, they learned that they had to complete a college application, submit a college application fee, write a personal statement, get recommendations, submit a transcript, and take a standardized test. In regards to verbal support, this support came mainly from AP teachers, not from non-AP teachers. For the most part, teachers were supportive; yet, there were teachers who participants remembered as being unsupportive or not as supportive as they would have liked for them to be.

**Supportive teachers.** Through teachers' support, participants were expected to go to college, encouraged to stay on track to meet deadlines, and seek teachers out if they needed help with the college application process. As participants talked about the internal motivation that influenced the college preparation process in the previous section, I understood why having self-motivation was so important if participants wanted to go to college. I begin with participants who felt that teacher support was positive.

On Amber's demographic survey, she checked that her teachers planned college preparatory workshops, shared standardized test dates, reviewed her college essays, taught a college preparatory course, and shared scholarships and grants; yet, in her personal interview, she focused on teacher support in a different way. Amber concentrated on how teachers realized her potential and supported her potential.

> My teachers were more of like role models and making me want to do better. They really found interest in me to wanna spend time with me outside of the class, to build stronger relationships. And I think those semi-mentor relationships, or people I could look up to help me to want to do better and to strive to do better. So, just being there for me and not looking past me because I wasn't like the rest of the students, or not wanting to spend time with me because I didn't need extra help, or I didn't need extra attention.

For Amber, her teachers did more than just teach a subject area. Her teachers went the extra mile to develop meaningful relationships with her beyond the classroom. She recognized her teachers' interest in her success and accomplishments. Additionally, she realized that when she compared herself to peers at her public high school, she was different and she valued that her teachers did not assume that because she was a high-achiever, she did not need help or attention.

I learned through Patty's demographic survey the role her teachers had in her college planning process, which included sharing standardized test dates, reviewing

college essays, sharing scholarships and grants, and encouraging her to apply to schools and attend college fairs. Patty's experience with her teachers was similar to Amber's, in that teachers noticed her abilities and expected her to go to college and to meet deadlines. When asked who was most influential in the planning process, Patty responded,

> I think, for me, it would probably have to be my teachers. Yeah, my teachers were always making sure that I was always in line with certain things. It was almost like when I talked to my teachers, they wouldn't ask me, "Oh. Are you going to college?" The first question was, "Which college are you going to?" Like, it was an expectation for them that I was going to go to college. So, they were always making sure, "Did you meet this deadline or does that school have scholarships?" So, I think that they really pushed me. And it wasn't just one teacher. It was actually a few teachers.

In the same manner, I heard that college was an expectation expressed by participants' families in the early, middle, and high school years, participants repeated the same expectation expressed by teachers. Patty's teachers expressed confidence she would be able to choose between many colleges, not only one college, and that she needed to apply to schools that offered scholarships. Patty's teachers' positive attitudes helped her to stay focused so she could meet deadlines and be accepted into college.

When I first reviewed Kelly's survey, I was impressed that her teachers had taken so many steps to prepare her for college. In addition to the steps mentioned in the previous high-achievers' surveys, Kelly's teachers planned college visitations, college fairs, held conferences with teachers and parents, shared college preparatory programs, and taught a college preparatory course. Kelly elaborated more on the classroom discussions that teachers led on their alma maters, which included Burroughs, their shared excitement of going to college, and how college would help her to get a job.

> We did a lot of college essay writing for the applications. And we actually talked about college a lot. Most of my teachers went here for college, so they talked about Burroughs and like a lot of Virginia schools. They always just talked about

college and how fun it was and just how good it was. And how you can get any job. So they constantly instilled that.

Kelly acknowledged teachers went above and beyond only teaching college essay writing to meet one requirement for her college applications. In addition to writing recommendations, her teachers spent time having discussions about different colleges and what students could expect from a college life.

Similar to Kelly, Kerry had positive comments to share about her teachers. Like other participants, her teachers showed an ethic of care; however, Kerry emphasized and recognized that teachers helped students if they showed initiative, but if the student did not, and then the teacher did not spend their time on the student.

> Teachers were good. You had your ones who really cared and connected with their students. I actually had two teachers that until my sophomore year kept in touch with me, 'cause they were always worried about me. They always said I did too much, and that I was gonna burn myself out before I even graduated college. They were always looking out for the students. And then of course, you had some who really didn't care and were like, "If you don't wanna do your work, then I'm not gonna force you."

Furthermore, Kerry focused more on how her English department helped with personal statement and essay writing.

> Just, as far as the English department, they were working on our writing, as far as gettin' us ready to write our college personal statement and essay. I think they might've spent maybe one day on it. They were just kinda big on, "We've taught you everything you know, so I don't see why we should be taking out weeks to help you do your college stuff." And they were always, you know, "If you wanna come after school and work on that, that's fine," but we really didn't spend much time in class.

Because students in Kerry's classes were in AP and Honors courses, teachers did not spend a substantial amount of time in class on college preparation assignments. Kerry made clear teachers welcomed students' assistance on college essays during after-school hours, but not during class time.

Kevin also expressed that his teachers' verbal support made sure that he and his peers were thinking about college, but he did not consider their actions as helping students really plan for college.

> So, they would tell us, "You need to meet these dates or you need to get ready for college." And stuff like that. But that's the only thing that they would tell us to do. And they would probably lend some advice, but it wouldn't be preparation. It [college preparation] would just be getting your act together and stuff like that.

Teachers' verbal support was helpful to Kevin in ensuring that he stayed focused on college.

Raymond wrote in his demographic survey that his teachers stayed late and held one-on-one interviews with him to discuss college topics. In his interview, Raymond expanded on his teacher influence comments.

> They always asked if I'd applied, where I'd applied to, what I was planning to major in. Because I had deep-rooted relationship with these people over a pretty lengthy time, they had grown to care about me.

Raymond valued the ten-year relationship he had developed with his teachers. Because many of his teachers were alumni of Burroughs, they encouraged him to apply. He felt that his teachers were genuine in making sure he stayed college-focused.

**Unsupportive or restricted support of teachers.** Another recurring theme was the lack of support from some Black teachers as participants prepared for college. Participants considered some teachers unsupportive of their high-achievement and goals to receive a baccalaureate degree, while others considered teachers exhibiting restricted support toward their college preparation plans.

During the focus group session, Dee, Rick, and Idris had similar experiences in high school as they prepared for college. Dee had an experience in one of her classes

where she did not feel her teacher was particularly supportive.

> One of the messages I think that were not the most positive was that you won't receive a lot of empathy or support from your professors and TAs. And that you have to work hard and do everything by yourself. And that you won't get extra credit or anything if you're struggling. And I realized that was a very negative message, because I started to close out from others in my classes, as far as trying to get help. But then, I realized that it's okay to ask questions and to get other people's opinions so you can understand the subject more, and I thrived because of that.

Prior to coming to Burroughs, teachers put fear in Dee by telling her she would not receive the same support from college faculty that she had received from teachers in high school. Once Dee actually took college classes, she realized comments she heard from her high school teachers during her college preparation process influenced how she did not want to ask for help or contribute to discussions in college. Eventually, she dispelled this belief that she had to do everything herself and began to contribute to class discussions and seek out help from peers.

Rick received messages from teachers that college classes would be more challenging than his high school classes. In addition to these comments, he also received messages that targeted his race as well as his abilities in regards to choosing a predominantly White institution (PWI).

> I guess most of what the messages about college were one, that it's very rigorous, more rigorous than high school. So, I needed to prepare for that, but also because I was going to a PWI, people were saying that everyone else, or everyone who isn't Black, they are smarter than you. They had XYZ on standardized test and everything. So, "You're gonna need to make friends with them." And I guess they would give me strategies to succeed, but at the same time, they were demeaning my ability.

Rick considered his teachers' comments, as restricted support, not necessarily unsupportive. His reason for considering their comments as restricted rather than unsupportive was because he still felt that the teachers only shared these comments

because they were offering advice for him to succeed in an environment that did not resemble the predominantly Black environment that he was used to.  During this dialogue with the group, I wanted to know if the students felt the teacher's comments were true since they were now college students.  Rick's response,

> I feel like they weren't true, at all. Pretty much everyone was on the same playing field. Maybe some people were coming from more privileged areas or places with more resources, but, I mean, it's really when you come to college, everyone starts from the same spot. So, everyone has the same opportunities, the same resources available, and the same ability to get to that degree.

> Dee offered her reactions to the same question.

> It's very similar. The negative feedback that I received, I believe they were inaccurate. And I guess, my feelings on it is that I wish I would've ignored them more in my freshman year, because it was very distracting, and I could not focus on my work, or do as well, because I kept thinking back to what other teachers had said that weren't necessarily true for all situations in a college setting.

Despite teachers' comments not being as supportive as students would have liked, participants did not feel these comments held true for all situations in a college setting. For participants, these comments were salient during the college preparation process as well as once students enrolled in college; however, after being in college classes, they used teachers' opinions as strength to overcome obstacles, not barriers to derail their college dreams and success in college courses.

Contrary to Rick's and Dee's comments, Idris felt slightly differently. Actually, he was encouraged by these comments to network with peers who had similar goals.

> Just based on what [Rick] and [Dee] said I feel as though that the comments or remarks aren't like in all entirely inaccurate, but I don't see them necessarily as negative, because I came to college like hearing some of the same things, and from the aspect that people would be smarter than me, people would be more prepared, more organized, not necessarily smarter, but more academically ready, I would say. I came in looking for that…I'm gonna be surrounding myself with some of the top of the top.

Idris illustrated that he used his teachers' comments as a tool to remain resilient when faced with peers who were just as smart, prepared, and organized as he. He wanted to be in company with peers who shared the same high-achievement values. Idris added,

> So, I looked at people, with comments like that saying, "Oh! I'm ready for that. I'm ready to find someone smarter than me, so I can learn, and I can get up there." That's the whole point of college. And what [Dee] was stating about teachers not caring and no extra credit. College is a different playing field than high school, and some of those things are true at certain times, but it's when you make the effort. You have to make more of an effort to get the teacher to care about you, 'cause initially I would still say this from definitely my first year, if you don't, then you're just a number in their eyes. And I felt that way sometimes, but I just feel you take the criticism, and you take the comments,
> and you take 'em as a challenge. That's what I like to put at it. Take it as a challenge, in order to turn it into a positive criticism.

Idris referred to his teachers' comments as positive criticisms, which encouraged him to work harder. He thought of these comments as opportunities to welcome the challenge while striving to get to the level of peers who may be smarter or better prepared for college-level work.

**Summary**

Whether teachers were supportive or unsupportive or offered positive criticisms, participants still stayed on track to a higher education. As high-achievers, they remained committed to this goal and completed college preparation tasks through internal motivation and drive.

**Guidance Counselor Influences**

As students reflected on relationships with their guidance counselors, once again I heard positive and negative feelings regarding whether they felt counselors were supportive or unsupportive of their college plans. Similar to their relationships with their teachers, some participants expressed receiving lots of support from guidance counselors,

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while others did not receive any support.  Through surveys, one-on-one interviews, and focus group sessions, I learned just how influential these high school constituents were in the college preparation process.

**Supportive guidance counselors.** As I listened to Ann share her experience, I discovered that her relationship with her guidance counselor did not become strong until her senior year. Even though she did not speak with her guidance counselor until her senior year, she still felt he was influential in her college planning process.

> …senior year, I did see him. Every other year I didn't see him. But I think my high school guidance department did a really good job helping people out with college preparatory workshops and exercises. They would come in during certain class periods and during homerooms and basically hand out information on SAT prep courses and explained it to us, explained prices. They would come in and help us like register and pay for the AP test, help people who needed financial aid to pay for the AP test with their stuff. When the [national scholarship] applications came in, they would call everyone who was eligible and have them all fill out the thing and explain the process to us.

Ann's survey indicated that her guidance counselor helped her write her college essays, Offered workshops, registered her for standardized tests and AP courses, and identified students for national scholarships. For the first time in the college preparation process, I began to hear students talk about how their counselors identified them for scholarships. She elaborated further saying, "When I got all my information for the National Achievement Scholarship, my guidance counselor talked to me about that, helped me with the process, always checked in with me about that…."  By the same token, Ann acknowledged that even though her guidance counselor had an extremely heavy case load, her counselor still recognized her by singling her out for certain scholarships. "I think with everything at my high school, you had to sort of stand out or actively come and get it, because I think each guidance counselor was assigned something like 300

students." As a student at a large high school, Ann knew that she benefitted from being a high-achiever. At her school, if students did not stand out, then they had to take the initiative to be identified for special recognitions. By holding high-achievement status and taking the initiative, she was aware that she stood out to her counselor to receive a prestigious award.

Similar to Ann's experience, Kelly had a favorable attitude toward her guidance counselors. Throughout high school, Kelly had two guidance counselors because when she started at this new school, it was just a few students, but as the school grew larger she was assigned another guidance counselor. She explained how she utilized both guidance counselors in the college planning process.

> Well, we were assigned by last name. One was really close. And then, I had another one I had the year before, 'cause when our school first opened, it wasn't many people. So, I had two, and even my other one would help me with going over stuff. And he actually wrote recommendations, too. Sometimes I needed two counselor recommendations and stuff. So, yeah. I really liked my counselors.

On Kelly's demographic survey, she checked many ways that her guidance counselors had helped her to plan for college. During her interview, I began to hear more about how her guidance counselor played an active role.

> And my guidance counselor, with me personally, she did a lot, like 'cause of all the schools I applied to. I was always in her office. She wrote me a lot of recommendations letters. She gave me scholarships and she actually went to some of my awards stuff that I got. So, I was really close to my guidance counselor in high school.

From writing recommendations, telling Kelly about scholarships, to attending scholarship recognition ceremonies, Kelly's guidance counselor extended beyond her normal job duties of helping students to plan for college at school. She gave Kelly extra time, demonstrated her support by not only writing a recommendation to tell about her

accomplishments, but extending her support by attending recognition ceremonies for

financial aid after beyond school hours.

Likewise, Amber had a good relationship with her guidance counselor; still, she

planned her daily schedule to make sure that her counselor helped her to meet deadlines.

She shared how she "definitely went to her office more, a lot more than a lot of my

peers," so she got what she needed from her counselor.

> So, that was the person I went to for my transcripts. I would sit in her office and
> we would put out all the stuff, "Okay. This needs to go for this school." She
> would have envelopes. Put it in an envelope. So, she was really helpful for me.
> But at the same time, I really sought her out. She would come to our homerooms,
> I think like the fifteen minute period we had, and I would go to her, like, "Let's
> get this done now."

Amber's behavior to adjust her schedule to meet with her guidance counselor validated

that she was serious about her college preparatory process. Taking time in between her

classes to meet with her counselor showed that Amber took control of her college

planning process.

Raymond's experience with his guidance department was positive, but minimal.

He shared that his guidance counselors told him to go to Burroughs because most of the

counselors had attended this institution. His relationship with his counselor focused

mainly on receiving information about scholarships.

> And they asked if I got any scholarship or anything, and especially my guidance
> counselor, who was also one of my teachers. He sent me a lot of scholarships, and
> I think he still sends me scholarships…a lot of scholarship opportunities.

Raymond's thoughts about his relationship with his counselor revealed how his

counselors still sent scholarship opportunities even as a college student.  His experience

with his guidance counselors, as well as the other participants' experiences, showed that

their counselors recognized their academic abilities, and for that reason, thought that they were eligible for scholarships.

**Unsupportive guidance counselors.** When I interviewed Rick, I began to hear divergent opinions between what students wrote on their demographic surveys and what they expressed in their interviews and the focus group. On Rick's demographic survey, he wrote how his counselors planned college visitations and college fairs. He elaborated on this topic in his interview and added that his guidance counselors reviewed his college essays and wrote recommendations and gave feedback on schools to which to apply. By the same token, I learned how his Black guidance counselors showed skewed support, by encouraging students to only apply to certain types of institutions.

> I guess on the other side of that is that her and the other guidance counselors were persuading all of us to go to either technical or trade school or HBCUs, and I don't know why. At the same time dissuading us from going to a larger state school or just like applying to new schools. Their intentions, I think, were good, because they were trying to keep us from, I guess, being hurt by getting rejected by one of these other PWIs, but at the same time, I don't know, again undermining like the ability. The thing I noticed, however, was that most of the people [and] kinds of institutions they were bringing in were either technical, trade institutions or Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs).

His guidance counselor's skewed support focused on only exposing students to certain types of institutions, not all higher education institutions.

> Well, one of the guidance counselors said and this wasn't out in the open, but that we didn't really have a good chance of getting into institutions that didn't fit the two categories I just described. But in turn, they just limit us, and not that some of those institutions aren't good, but they were only giving us one option.

The counselors' behaviors and actions seemed to demonstrate that they invalidated their students' abilities to attend selective institutions or non-historically Black institutions. Their comments did not limit or stop Rick or others from applying to and being accepted into a college that through the counselors' eyes was not an appropriate choice for the

students at their high school.

During the focus group session, Idris' perspective about his guidance counselors differed from other participants' perspectives about their guidance counselors. Even though he wrote on his demographic survey that his counselors planned college visitations and college fairs and reviewed his final application packet, he said in the interview and focus group that he did not find his guidance department to be really helpful because they were more focused on the students who were not high-achievers and making sure that they graduated from high school. From Idris' perspective, high-achievers oftentimes were overlooked because counselors had to put more of a focus on at-risk students and helping these students to graduate from high school. However, Idris made it clear to the group that although his guidance counselor assigned to him was not helpful; his IB Administrator stepped in and played a pivotal role by serving as his guidance counselor and helping him to prepare for college.

> As for my guidance counselor, there was a counselor that was assigned to me, based on my last name, through high school. But like I said this in my one-on-one interview Ms.[name omitted], who was my IB administrator, was actually like my second mom. And she was like really blunt also. So, she kinda took the wheel and said, "Fuck your guidance counselor. I'm gonna do what you need to do to get into college." So, she would go to my guidance counselor, and say, "What do you have of [Idris]?" and take it from her, and then handle it from there. So, she basically became my guidance counselor. So, no disrespect to my guidance counselor. She [IB administrator] was instrumental in my success and my transitioning to higher education.

Fortunately, Idris had another administrator to advocate on his behalf when his guidance counselor did not meet his expectations. Idris was able to overlook his unsupportive guidance counselor by finding another administrator who ensured his college applications were complete.

I was disturbed when I received Kerry's demographic survey and she checked off that her guidance counselor did not help with college preparation. I wanted to hear how this had happened and thought maybe she had made a mistake or just did not remember what her relationship was like with her guidance counselor. In Kerry's interview her whole demeanor changed when she talked about her guidance counselor: she rolled her eyes, her voice got louder, and she began to use profanity to describe her relationship with her counselors. Kerry expressed her discontent with the guidance counselor staff.

> They were terrible. Didn't do a damn thing. Terrible. We actually used to crack jokes about it all the time, and say they don't even need to have degrees. It was really that bad… Everyone knew there was always one…there was one that was decent, and everybody would get mad if they didn't get her. And we all like look on our folder and say, "Who's your Guidance Counselor?" We'd be like, "Aw man! You got her!? That's so bad."

Kerry then proceeded to talk specifically about her personal experience with her White guidance counselor. Similar to Rick, Kerry experienced an unsupportive counselor, yet in a slightly different manner than Rick.

> So my Guidance Counselor was in the medium. She wasn't the worst one, and she wasn't the best one either. My Guidance Counselor was a little on the borderline elitist, borderline racist. And she didn't believe, because my GPA wasn't a 3.9, that I was gonna get into [Burroughs]…It was funny, because she used to always tell me, [*In a higher voice*] "So, you know, are you looking at any other schools besides Burroughs? I really just don't want you to get your hopes up." Or "I don't want you to be so upset if you don't get in." And I'd be like, "No. I'm getting in."

The interchange that Kerry had with her counselor did not dissuade her from applying to a competitive school like Burroughs. After receiving her acceptance letter, she showed off the letter to the counselor that did not encourage her to apply. Even though the counselor expressed how proud she was and that she knew Kerry would get in, Kerry did not feel these comments were genuine due to what she had experienced during the application process. As with her peers who did not feel supported by their counselors,

Kerry also did not allow their comments to limit or hinder her from achieving her college goals.

Similar to Kerry's experience, on Kevin's demographic survey he checked that his guidance counselors did not help with the college preparation process. In the interview and the focus group, Kevin disclosed the same attitude toward his counselors.

> With the counselors, you would hear from them, I guess once every school year. And they would say that you can come to us for advice and stuff, for college preparation. And I did go a couple of times, but I didn't get that much information. No, I didn't hear anything for scholarships. I remember I asked my guidance counselors if she could keep an eye out for any scholarships for me, and I didn't hear back from her. But, I still visited her when I was in school, but I didn't hear anything.

Kevin's guidance counselors did not seem to be proactive in helping students to plan for college. Even though Kevin visited their offices a couple of times he still did not receive what he needed to prepare or to pay for college.

Patty checked on her demographic survey that her guidance counselors shared scholarships and grants, which helped her to receive a $500 scholarship; yet, in her interview she added how she did not have a relationship with her guidance counselor.

> I honestly didn't know who the Guidance Counselor was. But I didn't, because (*sigh*) It's like, "Go to the Guidance Counselor's office." And I don't know where that is, and I don't know who that woman is, and I was in her office like twice out of my entire four years in high school. Like it wasn't a very active like outreach type of going to classes.

Patty did not even know where her guidance department was located, which does not demonstrate that her counselors established meaningful relationships with the students. She also admitted she did not visit their offices very often and counselors did not visit her classes regularly.

**Summary**

Students interacted with their guidance counselors in different ways. For some students, this experience was positive, while for others it was not positive. Guidance counselors played a role in helping students to seek out and apply to local, state, and national scholarships, writing recommendations, getting transcripts, and critiquing essays. For participants who took the initiative by staying visible to their counselors, participants found their counselors to be resourceful. These participants did not have to worry about counselors' missing application deadlines or not telling them about scholarship opportunities; however, for participants who just used their guidance counselors passively, they tended to view their relationships with their guidance counselors unfavorably.

**Peer Influence**

Participants also talked about how their peers in predominantly Black and predominantly White high schools influenced the college planning process. As a result of having multiple social identities, participants were in classes with a select few high-achievers, as well as attending schools and elective classes with students who were the same race as well as a different race from them and who were not enrolled in a rigorous curriculum. For the most part, participants talked about being the only Black person in these challenging classes and what this experience was like for them as well as their peers. As a result of being the only one, in many classes students were presented the challenge of learning to deal with peers who were supportive and unsupportive of their high ambitions as they prepared for college.

**Supportive Peers vs. Unsupportive Peers**

During my interview with Ann, she spoke about her peers in her predominantly White high school where she was one of only three Black students who took AP courses out of 200 to 300 students. She shared how she did not feel unsupported in her AP courses, however, encountered resentment for her high-achievement in her non-AP courses.

> It's rare that I feel resented for my like high achievement. I mean, there have been certain circumstances where I feel people, more or less, class me an "Oreo," and I feel that has had to do with the grades I've earned in school.

Furthermore, Ann explained how she did not get resentment from her Black peers but received resentment from White peers who were in general classes or elective classes. Ann did not let their negative comments deter her from doing well in school or aspiring to go to college.

> I would mostly sort of ignore it because I felt like the "Oreo" comments came purely out of resentment of the fact that I was both high achieving and Black, while they were not and they were White…Like, why do you expect, sort of, to just have things given to you by virtue of your skin color? That's not how it works. I would be insulted, but I would not sort of try to like hash it…like rehash it over with those people.

> Contrary to Ann's experience with her White peers, Dee, who attended a

predominantly Black high school where she took classes with other Black high-achievers, talked about bitterness toward her high-achievement in relation to other Black peers.

> Well, even though, in high school the majority was Black. I kinda sense a jealousy almost. "Yes, I did well on school and stuff." But there were other girls who still were part of the popular crowd, and even though their GPA wasn't as high as mine, they could still go on dates, go to parties and stuff, and they were still angry with me. And I'm like, "But you have practically everything."

When she measured herself against these high-achievers, she felt that they had more in regards to a social life because she did not consider herself to have a social life. Later, I

found that Dee did not just feel resentment from her Black peers who were in her classes, but she also did not feel included with peers who were not in her academic program. In this sense, she was a double outcast among her AP peers and non-AP peers. During the focus group session, she extended her comments on measuring up to her peers.

> I didn't really have that issue [underperforming]. Honestly, I didn't really fit in with people who were in my like advanced academic programs or standard. I had my own interests that just really stood out, to the point there were just like, "What's wrong with you?" So, I just kinda did what I wanted to do, and I didn't really talk a lot. But for some reason a lot of people thought I was snobby, which is strange, because the really snobby kids were the ones that had lower GPAs than me.

Dee did not let her peers' comments influence her to underperform or impede her success from doing well to go off to college. She recognized that she had to be dedicated to her work so that she could make the grades that she wanted to get into college.

Similar to Dee's experience with her Black peers at school, Kelly encountered some of the same jealousy from her Black peers at her predominantly White school. Kelly explained that her White peers did not mind being in classes with her because they knew that she was smart and had the same academic abilities as they did.

> I think I was praised by a lot of people, but also, some people were jealous because I was doing a lot of stuff…I guess, more so praised by the White community and kind of looked down upon as being the overachiever by the Black community.

When Kelly thought about her Black peers' jealousy, she attributed peers' jealousy to her own high-achievement as well as the differences between White and Black students' parental involvement and parent expectations of their children's plans after high school. Kelly believed that Black families exposed their children to limited options after high school.

> I guess they're [White parents] just more involved, 'cause they really just know

college is a option and college kinda is a necessity. Whereas, a lot of my Black friends were thinking….Oh, just some people knew they were going to [local community college] or some people knew they were gonna go to trade schools or cosmetology schools or stuff like that.

As a result of lack of confidence and initiative on her peer's part, Kelly experienced being the "only one" or only African American student in her classes as well as her extracurricular activities.

Yeah, in my classes, it's pretty much White and me and maybe another Black person, just 'cause I had honors and AP. I think my only class [that] was diverse was editor of yearbook, and that was pretty diverse, and then I was on newspaper staff. It was mostly White, but there was a good amount of like Asians and Indians, too, in newspaper.

Kelly was used to being the only Black person in her classes. Still, she acknowledged in certain classes she had the opportunity to be in class with a more diverse population of students. Kelly did not express that she did not receive support from her peers in non-AP and non-Honors classes.

Another perspective on the peer influence theme that resembled Dee and Kelly's experiences was Kerry's encounters with the Black community and White community at her high school. Kerry, who attended a predominantly White high school, added complexity to the topic by disclosing how she did not feel supported by either community, especially when it was time to apply and to get admitted into Burroughs.

But it was really competitive with the Blacks that were there. It was only ten percent of us. And a lot of my friends weren't academically as high achieving as I was, and I was involved in a lot of stuff. So, we had a lot of issues with that. And it would always be, "Oh, there she goes again. Her awards again…" Or different things like that. So, I definitely had a lot of issues with the Black community, as far as what I was doing. Oh, and then on the opposite end, I had a lot of issues with the White community, because it was quick to throw out the affirmative action, or "Oh, that's only because she's Black that she got to do that," including getting into [Burroughs], 'cause…[Burroughs] was popular, as far as people applying in my school, and some of the White people didn't get in.

In addition to having these thoughts about her peers, she shared how only five students from her high school got admitted into Burroughs. Kerry was the only Black student who got into Burroughs and she was one of three Black students who applied to six community scholarships and received three of these scholarships. When I asked her why she felt other Black peers did not apply, she responded with the same two reasons as Kelly's responses about her peers – not having the motivation and lack of parental involvement.

> A lot of them academically didn't have the grades to do it. Some didn't know what schools they wanted to go to, if they were going to school at all. Also, laziness…finding out last minute, and then being like, "Oh. Whatever, I don't care. I don't need that." Oh, and parent involvement had a lot to do with it. My mom was always on me about stuff, and a lot of my friends' parents let them, it's like, "Well, if you wanna go to college, then you need to map out what you need to do to get there." My mom didn't play that. She was there every second. So, that was a big one actually.

On the other hand, Kerry had supportive older friends who stayed on her about each step of the college preparation process. She received support from them, which counteracted the negative attitudes that she received from her same age peers.

In reference to Patty's peer influence on the college preparation process, she began the conversation by talking about being the only one in her AP classes even at her predominantly Black high school. She also elaborated on being the only one and how she encouraged others to take AP courses because she knew that taking these classes would benefit her peers. Patty was the first participant in the study who wanted her Black peers to take AP classes with her. Other participants seemed not to be bothered that they were the only one in their classes or enjoyed being the only one in their classes, but not Patty.

> Being in AP classes, there'd be one or two African Americans, and everybody else is not. In all the classes I took, it seemed it was a very diverse school, but then when I, walk out into the hallways, I guess it wasn't really. Yeah, it wasn't that many African Americans in my class. But I always encouraged people to take

AP classes. It felt so good.

As Raymond contemplated his peer influence, I also heard how he enjoyed being among classmates in his college preparatory classes. He considered his peers as friends. He talked about how these relationships were cultivated in a small, private high school, majority African American environment.

> We were friends. Everybody was proud of each other if you got a good grade. And everybody knew everybody. If you were doing bad in a subject I always tried to help out. They had a positive response toward my high achievement.

Just like Patty, Raymond felt a personal responsibility to make sure his friends were successful. Raymond expressed how his friends supported one another. They seemed to have like-minded goals and worked hard for good grades so that they did not fail.

During Amber's reflection on her peer influence at her predominantly Black high school, what stood out for her the most was her peer's responses to her religious affiliation versus her race, high-achievement, or aspirations to go to college. I noticed that her peers' comments were similar to the resentment comments other participants shared about peers' attitudes toward their race and high-achievement; yet, she thought that she received these comments because of her strong identity of being a Christian.

> At first I transferred into [high school name] my second semester freshman year. So, starting off, I was kinda, the new girl. .I didn't get the "Oreo"…And then, because I was a Christian. I forgot our Christian like organization through the school…I didn't have anything else to be associated with, but I did get the…"You sound so proper." …I did get comments like that, but it was never over the top or never made me feel uncomfortable. I'm proud of who I am. I'm proud of the way my parents brought me up.

Again, I did not hear that Amber was offended by her peer's comments or wanted to underperform or not work to her abilities. She had pride in who she was and continued to strive for excellence.

During the focus group session, Idris brought a slightly different perspective toward his peers and the topic of resentment. I found out from Idris that because the IB program secluded him from a lot of his peers, he resented that his non-IB peers may have felt that he thought he was better than them since he was enrolled in this rigorous program and they were not. He emphasized that even though he felt this way, he did not underperform but found ways to connect with non-IB peers through out-of-class activities. By joining extracurricular activities, Idris found a balance between his peers in his classes and his peers in regular classes.

> So, I was forced to join extracurricular activities in order to do that. So, I found myself having a negative [attitude], I guess toward that whole IB Administration system, and I was just like, "They think we're better than these people." "Who's to say that I'm better than this person by some standard." So, then, I would look down at IB, even though it was a very prestigious thing and wanna not hang out with my people that are in the IB going to the regular school. They always knew I was educated. I never tried to change my slang and sag my pants or whatever people do that shows that they are less educated.

Idris' perspective on peers was that he found ways to stay connected to his non-IB peers, while not undermining his academic success with his IB peers. Idris' peers seemed to respect him whether they were in his classes or were not in his classes. Contrary to the other participants, Idris was concerned about being accepted by all peers and went the extra mile to ensure that he had relationships with high-achievers and non-high-achievers.

**Peer influence and acting White.** Peers demonstrated resentment toward participants' high-achievement; however, peers, whether Black or non-Black or high-achievers or non-high achievers, went a step further to consider participants' behaviors as acting White. When I asked Patty if she had experienced the term acting White, she seemed to become annoyed with the question; yet, agreed that her peers did consider her as acting White. Her expression changed from having a lot of pride and support for her

peers to take a challenging curriculum to saying jokingly that she did not want to talk

about her peers and the acting White phenomenon.

> I don't even wanna talk about that. No, I'm joking. I'm joking. It bothers me. But it didn't bother me that much, 'cause I was like, "Forget you guys!" I mean, I made friends with a lot of people. So, I know a lot of people could be joking, but I feel there's still some truth in it. That, there's only one or two or three Black people in this class, and, they're doing very well and, "Oh! Well if you just act a certain way, then you could probably succeed in this class." You know!?

For Patty, acting White was more of a way that her peers thought that she behaved as a

high-achiever, than referring to her academic abilities. She began by describing how the

non-AP students behaved and then how the AP students behaved.

> Well, they [non-AP students] don't act this way or they act more…I don't know. I don't wanna say ghetto, but that's why they're not in AP classes, but you see these higher achieving people who act differently. I act differently than some of the other school students who might be in like A-level courses or something…

In Kerry's response to my question on whether or not she experienced the acting

White phenomenon, she, too, acknowledged that her peers used the term to describe her.

Her reaction brought on a slightly different response than Patty's reaction in that I began

to hear opposition toward her Black peers, while nurturing relationships with her White

and Asian peers.

> I would say all the way until high school, my friends were always White or Asian. That was all my friends. I actually liked it better that way. I didn't wanna hang out with Black people. I thought they were crazy, loud, and, I had my family and my church was completely Black, and that was fine with me. But yeah, I definitely was called…you know, "Oh, she talks different when she's with them, and she talks different when she's hanging out with us." And I told them, "It's the same thing if you're talking to an adult versus talking to your peers. You're gonna change your language. You're gonna change the way you talk. It's the same way." I was like, "It's the same exact thing, but you guys are so busy trying to judge me that you don't see it." So, of course you're gonna change your lingo and your dialect and how you're gonna speak.

Like Patty, Kerry also talked about acting White and how individuals may act differently depending on their environment. In her explanation, she tried to make clear that individuals change the way they behave and speak depending on who is in the room. For Kerry, she felt comfortable explaining to her Black peers why she behaved and spoke differently when she was among other high-achievers.

> And I've never, ever used a lot of slang words and different things like that. I've always been proper. It was just how I was brought up. So, I always told them, and they got mad. I was like, "There's a difference between acting White and being polished. Learn…" I was like, "Go in the dictionary."

Kerry expressed that her experience in high school with same-race and different-race peers prepared her for successes and challenges that she encountered at a predominantly White institution. I listened to her confidence as she responded to her peers' comments about her high aspirations and how Kerry used these comments as strength to accomplish her ultimate goal, of preparing and going off to college.

As Idris reflected on the topic and thought about how he made a conscious effort to develop relationships with IB and non-IB students by joining outside clubs and organizations, his affiliations still did not allow him the opportunity to escape the acting White comments.

> But a couple people they would get the, "Why you talk White? Why you acting White?" like that…And then, they would just like stop right there. Just like, and, "I'm speaking correctly. I'm not talking White."

Just as some of the other participants encountered in their schools, Idris had to learn to deal with the criticism on how he spoke. He informed his peers that his use of Standard English was speaking in a correct manner, not as if he thought he belonged to another racial group.

**Summary**

Participants expressed varied feelings in relation to peer influence on college preparation plans. For the most part, peers, regardless of race, showed resentment toward participants' high-achievement and high involvement. This resentment came to the forefront because many of the participants acknowledged that they were in challenging academic programs with only a select few students who resented their high-achievement. As a result of being enrolled in these programs, some experienced being the only one and/or the acting White phenomenon, which I used the acting White term during my interviews and participants identified with and used the term to describe peers responses to their high-achievement if they attended a predominantly White or predominantly Black high school. When participants faced challenges with peers in high school, they used these instances as teachable moments to let their peers know their personal feelings about the derogatory comments. As they interacted with peers in predominantly White and Black high schools, peers' negative comments did not discourage participants from striving to be high-achievers and aspiring to go to college.

**Life outside the High School Classroom**

Participants in the study were strong students inside the classroom as well as outside the classroom. Exposure to these activities and programs outside the classroom helped them learn skills to network with college alumni and employers as well as learn lifelong skills that could help them maintain success throughout high school and college. Extracurricular activities and experiential learning programs in which they participated in high school demonstrated that they understood the importance of engaging in activities that enhanced their leadership skills.

**Extracurricular activities.** One experience that stood out for Idris was an organization that was introduced to him during his junior year. Even though this high school organization focused on Engineering and not his chosen major, Biology Pre-Medicine, he still felt that he took away a valuable skill from this organization, which was networking.

> [Name of Advisor], who was my advisor for NSBE, which is National Society of Black Engineers. We would go to conventions, and you would have maybe 30 seconds to a minute to basically sell yourself or get to know this person or have this person have a first impression on you. And he actually taught me a couple of life ideals that I still learn by, and that's "Networking is gonna get you where you need to be. It's not the grades you make all the time, but it's the hands you shake." And also, "Discretion is key in a lot of different fields. So, stay yourself, stay humble and the networks will stay strong.

Idris utilized this experience to get to know professionals in the world of work. Idris understood that learning to network was an important tool to have beyond getting good grades. Even though Engineering was not the field in which he chose to major, he recognized that networking was a tool used in all fields.

Kelly, who turned in a four-page resume, was actively involved in sports in high school. Her sports of choice were cheerleading, volleyball, basketball and dance (i.e., ballet, tap, and jazz). She did not just play these sports, but she excelled at these sports and received numerous awards at her school and in her community. Reflecting on her high school sports career, Kelly acknowledged that she chose to be involved in sports not because she wanted to be a professional athlete or a desire to do sports in college, but because sports served as a vehicle to get her into college and developed her skills for her intended major.

> I did basketball and volleyball. No desire to play these sports in college. It was just more so to help me get into college. I do like sports, and that's why I do wanna be a sports agent. But college, yeah, I didn't want my whole life to be

revolved around sports.

Kelly also was very involved in her school newspaper as the News Managing Editor and the Editor-in-Chief for her school yearbook. During her tenure as the News Managing Editor, the newspaper won two prestigious national honors, and as Editor-in-Chief of the yearbook, the yearbook won first place from the American Scholastic Press Association Competition. Through participation in sports and communications-focused extracurricular activities, Kelly took the initiative in high school to start preparing for her future major and career in Broadcast Journalism. Her early involvement in these activities in high school gave her the knowledge needed to be a competitive applicant in order to be admitted into the School of Journalism at Burroughs University.

Kerry's love outside the classroom was dance. Most of her life outside the classroom revolved around traveling around the country and even the world to nurture her love for dance. As Kerry reminisced on her dance experiences in high school, I could see in her eyes and hear in her voice her zeal for dance; still, she understood that dance did not come at the expense of getting a college education.

> …Well, my first love was dance, and so, I knew that I still had to go to college, whether it was a arts college or a regular college, I needed to go. So, it was always in my brain to go. I never really felt like I didn't wanna go to college.

Through her passion for dance, I discovered how this experience opened doors for her to be exposed to different people, cultures, and activities, which she believed was instrumental in planning for her education at a predominantly White college. Life in dance school was a second home for her, which made her transition to Burroughs smoother.

> …We competed all over the world. I danced on a Carnival cruise. I danced in Mexico. So, that had a role on different things. And then my dancing school was

very diverse. So, I was around them. That was like my second family,…As soon as I got outta school, that's where I was at dancing school. And weekends, I was at dancing school or competitions. That's what we did. And we went to like different colleges and performed.

Her dedication and involvement in dance also played a role in the time management and decision-making skills that she had in high school as well as in college. Because most of Kerry's out-of class time was consumed with dancing school and gymnastics, she did not have much time for other social activities or to hang out with peers.

Similar to Kerry's experience, Patty felt that involvement outside the classroom helped her to balance her time more efficiently. Some of her outside activities included: Air Force Junior ROTC, National Honor Society, tennis, mock trial, Key Club, and Future Business Leaders of America. Unlike Idris, Kelly, and Kerry, Patty did not focus on a specific extracurricular experience that helped her to prepare for college; however, she recognized the impact that multiple experiences had on planning for college. For instance, Patty shared how it was not just her classes that prepared her for college because as she stated earlier, some of her AP classes just were not that challenging; however, a compilation of her classes, involvement, and work experiences laid a firm foundation for managing her time in high school as well as in college.

> I think that [extracurricular activities] they prepared me. But it wasn't just that. It was also being involved that prepared me, …It's really about time management, and that's something that being involved and going to school helps me learn. 'Cause, I had some AP classes that weren't hard for me; they really just weren't hard. And then I had some teachers that were more challenging. Like my AP Psychology wasn't really hard, but it was a lot of information. It was so much. And to be able to do that and still, you know, be involved, and then, when I became a junior, had a job. So, I did after school stuff until 5:00, and then I would go to work, and then come home at 10:00, and then have to do homework from 10:30 to whenever…I feel like that prepared me. 'Cause when you're in college, it's kinda like that. We don't really sleep, and we just go to class class class class class, and I'm still involved. And I feel like I don't have time. But then it's almost like, this was what high school was like for me. So, I think the combination of the classes and being involved really helped for college.

In high school, Patty valued her hectic schedule because holding this schedule meant that she did not waste time. Every moment of the day counted, motivating her to complete tasks in a timely manner. Patty believed that with such a demanding schedule she knew her time was limited and that forced her to get her work done.

**Experiential learning programs.** High-achievers worked hard in school, while complementing high school coursework, extracurricular activities, as well as experiential learning opportunities. These experiential learning opportunities were academic and college preparatory focused summer programs and school year programs that were held at colleges and universities located within a 10-mile radius of the participants' homes or high schools. In these programs, students explained that they gained hands-on experience for their prospective majors by conducting research, participating in internships, networking with college faculty, and learning more about college life.

Dee remembered her biomedical research experience at a local university by first telling me how information about two area programs was shared with only a handful of students in her Chemistry class. She, unlike her peers, took the initiative and did not throw away the application: "I'm like the only one who actually filled it out and went. And I actually learned a lot from it." After contemplating which program to apply to, Dee chose the program in which she had to pay a fee to participate. She believed that even though she had to pay for this program versus the other program, this did not deter her from applying because she felt that the experience would be worth the money. Dee also shared that, "all this shadowing of professional stuff, it gave me a lot of insight into

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what was expected from me for college, what I should be preparing for." Dee then

proceeded to tell me specifically what she accomplished in the program and how long

the program lasted.

> For the whole summer, I was paired with a oncologist…I guess he's a physicist. Let's call him a oncological physicist. He's a physicist that works with radiation. I still keep in contact with him. And so, I'm supposed to follow him around. He tells me what he does. So I was taking his files for patients and transferring it into different discs for him. And then, I'll do that and give it to him.

Finally, I asked her about how she felt the program helped her get into college, and she

expressed positive feelings about the program.

> It helped probably have me stand a part in the application process because the fact that I could put down that I know a doctor of some sort, like a physicist. That seemed impressive in a way. So I would write down, contact who I worked for, Dr. [doctor's name], what I did...And so, it made my experience, a little different and unique. So, I wasn't like coming from, "I don't know anyone, but I would like to be in this field.

> During Idris' senior year he participated in a 24-week research and internship

program at another highly ranked university. Idris applied to the program to which Dee

decided not to apply. By participating in this program, Idris was able to gain firsthand

knowledge about the field in which he wanted to major. Idris did not learn about this

experience from his school or his teachers, but he learned about this experience through

networking with one of his close friends.

> Well, one of my friends' grandmothers is a dean of science there. And she knows I was interested in science, and she liked me. So, she gave me information about it, and basically it's an internship. We work with grad students that were doing research, and we completed an experiment. Since I wanna be an ophthalmologist, that's like my career goal. I've wanted to do it since the second grade, so, I did mine on the effect of UV rays on cataracts, and I was actually dissecting cow eyes and put 'em under different UV wavelengths. And at the end we dissected 'em and took 'em into the actual [local university] lab.

Idris gained skills that he could use for a lifetime in his future career. However, the

benefits extended beyond the internship and research experience to include the

opportunity to travel to a national and local conference to present his research findings

and develop his presentation and networking skills.

> And then, I went to the Annual Minority Science Symposium in Kentucky and presented. So, it was just a really good experience networking. I have some connections. I met actually an optometrist. He owns his own business, and he went to Morehouse, but he went to optometry school in Pennsylvania, and I learned a lot from him, 'cause there was a workshop in the convention center called Optometry is More Than Meets the Eye. And I was like, "Oh! I gotta go to that!" So, after that I talked to him. And then, I learned a lot. I got his information. He's been keeping in contact with me for when I apply to schools. Even though now, I decided to go all the way to ophthalmology, but still, that was good to know. I also submitted my project to [a local university] before we went to Kentucky, and I got second place there.

Idris' participation in this program opened up other doors to attend a national conference

where he broadened his professional network. As a result, the skills learned in this

program were skills that Idris believed helped him to get into college as well as be

successful at Burroughs.

Kevin's pre-college experience was comparable to Dee and Idris' experience in a

sense that he traveled to a college campus to participate in an internship and research

experience. He learned about this yearlong program as well as other similar programs

through the selective high school magnet program. His experience was unique in that the

program was located on the Burroughs campus.

> The only experience that I received to going to colleges was when I had an internship here, at [Burroughs University], my twelfth grade year. And I would always go on the campus. We always had a fifteen-minute grace period before we could actually do the internship. So, I would just explore the campus sometimes. But it wouldn't be past the [traffic circle] or anything. It would just be at the [the Student Center].

Kevin got to walk around the campus, network with faculty, and establish relationships

with mentors before being officially admitted into Burroughs. He chose this particular

program because he knew that he wanted to apply to Burroughs University and be in the

Engineering field, and he believed this opportunity would put his foot in the door at the

university as well as the Engineering department.

> [The program] gave you the option of doing an internship somewhere, like at
> NIH. I chose to do one here, because I was interested in this school. I did an
> internship with a chemical engineer. The whole project was to use a labview,
> which was a computer program, to program this PCR machine, which is Polymers
> Chain Reaction. And that machine would just basically amplify DNA or replicate
> small fragments of DNA, which is commonly used to seek out mutations and
> stuff. So, drugs can be used to combat mutations in viruses and bacteria and stuff
> like that. We got to program the software and everything. It was a long project. It
> was a whole year.

Kevin acknowledged how his research and internship experience was beneficial, but

equally important, were the mentoring relationships that he developed with Burroughs

faculty while in the program. Establishing these relationships was important to his

personal growth in his senior year in high school as well as once he got to college.

> I have a few mentors here now, probably, I have three or four.  I have one in
> computer science, another one is an advisor in letters and sciences. They really
> help me out a lot. Oh, and the other one, I guess, would be the professor in the
> Biochemistry, which I work in his lab. So, he's also a mentor.  I would categorize
> him as a mentor.

Through this precollege experience, Kevin broadened his mentoring base and he learned

the importance of utilizing mentoring relationships to be successful during his first year

of college.

Ann's high school summer program included an experience that did not focus as

much on research, internships, and networking skills; yet, the program provided college

preparation workshops. In addition, this program also gave her the opportunity to travel

abroad.

I was a member of the [High Achiever Program (HAP)] and they did a lot of college preparatory workshops on college campuses. I went abroad with HAP to, China, after my freshman year of high school. So, they help people out with college preparatory workshops. The trips are usually in the summer time, but they have these college workshops that are usually about a day, and they are all throughout the year.

Ann participated in these workshops to help her prepare for college. She also expressed during her interview that by participating in this international experience, she was inspired to do a study abroad program at Burroughs University during the second half of the summer.

**Summary**

Participants' schools had a major influence on college planning. From selecting competitive programs to participating in extracurricular activities, participants learned to take advantage of challenging coursework in their high schools as well as learned personal skills in extracurricular activities that would help them to do well in college. As participants thought about their lives inside and outside the classroom, they recognized that both environments provided opportunities to gain knowledge on making informed decisions about college and to learn lifelong skills.

**Community Influences Prepare Students for College**

The community in which participants lived played an important role in how they made meaning of the college preparation process. On their demographic surveys, participants wrote down the city and state in which they lived as well as if their home location was located in an urban, suburban, or rural area. I was intrigued to learn more about how participants' descriptions ranged from thinking about community in regards to resources offered in their own neighborhood, county, or town in which their families lived. Overall, students defined community to include any service, activity, or program in

which they participated outside their school environment. The main reason for wanting to learn about the communities in which the participants lived was to learn more about what their community/neighborhood did and did not do to prepare participants for college. Through the survey, interviews, the focus group session, and the personal document, I was able to see and hear about specific services, programs, and activities in which they took advantage to figure out the college planning and admissions process. Participants communicated the role that churches, area businesses, and work and volunteer experiences had in offering community resources to plan for a college education.

**Church Support**

When participants talked about their communities and college preparation, church affiliations surfaced immediately. Whether the church was located within their neighborhood or outside their neighborhood, participants still considered church an integral part of their larger community that was a contributing factor to the college planning process. I heard and observed voices of thankfulness and smiles of excitement as participants described the ways that their churches contributed to college planning. For almost all participants, going to church was more than receiving spiritual guidance, but also a place where participants received college and career guidance to accomplish future goals.

In Amber's reflection on her community, her definition of community included her church; however, her church was not located in her neighborhood but still on the south side of the city in which she lived.

> I was very active in church, and my church wasn't in my community. But, I Basically lived at church. So, when I think about community, I think about like the area of my church. My church actually took us on a college tour, and we came to [Burroughs University]. And this is the first place or the first time I saw

[Burroughs University] was from a college tour with my church.

For Amber, her understanding of church involvement included planning for college. She acknowledged that her first college visit to Burroughs University was with her church. Her church not only took students on college tours, but also awarded scholarships and held workshops to prepare students for college and future career paths.

> We had a scholarship. I go to a mega church. My first lady, she did this scholarship fund. I was one of the recipients of that. So, we went through like a six-week program, where we had like mentors, learned about different career aspects and different seminars. And this was outside of the college tour.

Additionally, Amber's church leadership stayed on the students about meeting application deadlines, seeking letters of recommendation, taking standardized tests, and providing opportunities for community involvement to create a competitive college application packet.

> So, that gave me a lot, and that was all through my church. We had a very active youth ministry. So, you know, it would be like, "Okay, seniors or juniors. So, what's up with the ACT?" Or, "When are we turning in our college apps?" Our youth pastor, "Do you guys need recommendations?" So that really gave me a lot of my volunteer and community service opportunities.

Amber's church also offered leadership involvement in community service, mentoring younger youth, and the step ministry. She was appreciative for the multifaceted ways that her church helped her plan for higher education.

Kerry, who described her home location as suburban, attended church in another suburban area in the town next to her home. In the same manner Amber thought of her church as part of her community, Kerry also thought of her church as a part of her community where she spent a substantial amount of her out of school time. She also portrayed her church as a large or mega church as well as an affluent church that seemed to have an extensive social network that she utilized to plan for college.

My church is big. It's in the town next door to mine, which is a predominantly Black town. It's called [church name]. It's a middle-class, upper-class church. Basically people who go to [church name] have money. Didn't mean to happen that way. That's how it worked out. And as we got to know people, that's how you started figuring that out…lot of big name people…different companies and a lot of status. So, they were very willing to help me, as far as college and making sure that I was on the right path, and telling me, you know where to take my college prep classes. They were telling me there was one in the town over from us, which was [nearby town]. They were like, "Oh, you know, you should go to [nearby town]." And different things like that. And then, a lot of them had older kids, who had already been in college. So, they just kinda helped my mom with that, if she didn't know already.

Kerry's social network at church informed her about college opportunities since some members had experienced the college preparation process themselves or with their own children. With attention to her church members' social class, employers, and overall status, she became aware that these members possessed resources and knowledge to steer her in the right direction. For instance, she communicated how her mom's best friend who was also a member at the church assisted her with the college preparation process.

[She] got me in touch with the different people at church that would help. They went over my personal statement. They also wrote recommendation letters for me to go to college. And one of them was a psychologist, so I did that, because that's what I wanted to do.

Kerry's feelings toward her church were that it "was amazing." Her church was amazing because not only did her church offer college and career guidance, but it also offered different ways that she could stay involved. According to her high school resume, she was involved and held leadership positions on the Youth Council and Praise Dance Ministry. Kerry revealed that there was just an expectation that the children at her church were going to college because most of their parents and older church members were college graduates. As our discussion came to an end, I could hear how her church

members demonstrated an ethic of care through their actions to ensure that the students were prepared for college.

Kelly, who also lived and went to church in a suburban area, shared how her church provided support in preparing her for college. Even though her ongoing church resources were not as extensive as Amber and Kerry's resources, she still felt that her church played a central role in planning for college. Specifically, her members provided lots of verbal support and financial aid.

> Well, for one, I would say church is huge, 'cause everybody in church was just always praising you when you do well and always talking about college and their days in college. I got a church scholarship, too, just five hundred dollars.

Similar to Amber and Kerry's churches, members within this organization demonstrated their value of higher education by sharing their own experiences and investing in students financially.

Ann's reflection illuminated how her church provided ongoing support for high-achievement as well as offered scholarship assistance. Again, there seemed to be an expectation that children would do well and the church acknowledged each student's hard work.

> I know my old church would always sort of encourage the high grades by like having recognitions for students every quarter, and at the end of the year, they would have like a scholarship luncheon, where all the graduating students would be honored, and various book scholarships and small scholarships would be given out to each of them. So, it was like scholarship assistance, but it wasn't that much.

Although Ann verbally stated that she did not feel her church assistance was substantial, I still considered her church salient to the college planning process because she mentioned her church at multiple times during the interview as well as on her demographic survey.

As I continued to listen to the stories of the next two participants, I also began to hear how churches extended support beyond their building or the surrounding community. Churches offered other forms of support that included international experiences and donating a resource that could help a participant pay for transportation to travel back and forth to college as well as work. Kelly talked about how her church offered a youth an international experience. By participating in this precollege opportunity, Kelly believed her desire to want to go to college was influenced by this international experience.

> Yes, going to Europe was one of the best things, I think, I did in high school, 'cause you do get to see outside the U.S. You didn't see like the slums. We saw the nicer parts and that's what made me also wanna go to college, 'cause I wanted to study abroad again. I want to be able to go back there, which you have [to have] money for, which is going back to why you should go to college, so you do have money to go back there.

By participating in this international experience, Kelly made the connection that getting a college education would offer her a career as well as the finances so that she could afford to travel abroad again.

Similar to the other participants, Idris talked about his church's verbal and financial support; yet, in a different manner than the previous participant. First, he shared how church members just believed in him and helped him out when it was time to apply. For the most part, Idris, as well as the other participants, discovered that their churches had either awarded or told participants about scholarships, but this was not the case for Idris. His church offered another form of support in the form of transportation. By seeing a financial need beyond scholarships, his church offered him a car to travel back and forth to get home and to get to work, so he considered this gift to be a "huge blessing." He continued, "they [church] gave me a couple hundred just for like books…nothing too

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big." So from Idris' perspective, the car was the most substantial resource that his church offered, in addition to the verbal support and small book allowance. The car was a critical resource because he was able to have the means to make additional money to pay for college expenses.

Through Amber, Kerry, Kelly, Ann, and Idris' narratives, churches were places where members had college knowledge and shared this knowledge with younger generations to ensure that they were afforded the same opportunities they had been given. In other instances, church members respected students' college aspirations and nurtured aspirations through offering support. By nurturing their college dreams, participants thought about the instrumental ways that certain members and organizations helped them become familiar with the college planning process. I not only learned about churches that acknowledged that going to college was important through their actions and events, but I also learned how the participants took the initiative to participate in the events that their churches offered. Now that students were in college and were reflecting back on church experiences, this time gave participants a chance to appreciate these acts of kindness and make sense of how each act helped them pay for college, choose a major, develop leadership skills, network with other college goers, and explore international opportunities.

**Business Support**

The participants valued church support as well as the support received from area businesses to plan for college. When participants thought about community influences in regards to business support, again, many did not only think about their neighborhoods but

thought about any resource outside school in their local area, county, or next town that helped them prepare for college.

From Kelly's perspective on business support, she chose to focus on what the county in which she lived did to prepare her for college. When asked during her interview to elaborate on community influences that she marked on her demographic survey, without hesitation, she explained, "[My county] just has a good college system. Sets you up…We have annual college fairs that I had been going to since my freshman year in high school. So, I had brochures and stuff." Throughout her high school career, college fairs stood out the most and helped her to learn more about colleges by reading through the college literature. Secondly, Kelly thought about her neighborhood community, which also exposed her and her family to college resources. She focused on how various businesses posted information about college. Kelly expressed, "And even in my community just going to like [grocery store] and stuff, I'd just always see stuff about college and college fairs. And they have stuff for my parents, stuff for kids." For some individuals, learning about college in a supermarket may be considered a minor action taken to get students interested in higher education; however, having college postings in a location where community members frequented often demonstrated the importance of furthering an individual's education.

As Kerry thought about her community's contribution in the college preparation process, her focus was on her small town's contributions not her neighborhood. From Kerry's perspective, her community definition focused on what businesses and organizations did to help students finance their education. She was direct that it was not her neighborhood, but the organizations surrounding her high school that offered

competitive scholarships and awards. In Kerry's reflection, she took into account the application and interviewing process as well as the financial aid that these area businesses awarded for students' high-achievement and community involvement.

> As far as scholarship and grants, our high school had different businesses and different organizations that were around in the town, and it was known, every year, that there was a big booklet, and you would look through and apply to the different ones that you would want to apply to for grants or for scholarships. And then, you would have to go and interview with them. And you would be competing with basically everyone who wanted to go for that scholarship. So, you would pick out the ones that like would work for you. And you would say why you need that scholarship and kind of basically sell yourself. And then, at the end, we would have a big award ceremony at night.

From Kerry's perspective, she did not have to travel far to take advantage of this resource. These organizations had a pivotal role in how she thought about financing her education. Just as she took the initiative to take advantage of college preparation resources offered by her church, she also took the initiative to take advantage of resources offered by area businesses.

Ann's thoughts on community involvement in the college preparation process encapsulated all of the various ways that Kelly and Kerry talked about how the county and small town in which they lived contributed to the college preparation process. Through Ann's reflection, the church, businesses and organizations, community/recreation center, and community organizations all played a role in how she prepared for college. Above all, she talked about one of the major employers in her area for which her father worked and how this organization awarded scholarships to area high-achieving students. "IBM is a major employer for this area, so some of the schools around this area are like super competitive and affluent because a lot of the people around here are engineers' kids." Ann elaborated further on this prestigious scholarship by

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saying, "Because so many people are children of parents who work at IBM, they would actually put if you received the [Engineering] Scholarship in like my high school graduation recognition thing. There were about eight of us who won." Ann's father's place of employment offered a form of social capital that put her in a position to know about and to apply for a scholarship connected to IBM. As a result of Ann's hard work and connection to a local business, she was fortunate to be awarded this competitive scholarship.

**Work and Volunteer Experiences Support**

In addition to churches and local businesses that helped students understand the college planning process, work experiences helped participants to network with other college graduates while gaining transferrable skills for which college admissions officers sought in prospective students. Work experiences also helped students to learn more about their future majors as well as balance time so that they were able to make decisions on college majors prior to coming to Burroughs.

Working gave Kelly hands-on experience with selecting her chosen major. Prior to matriculating at Burroughs, Kelly worked in various public service environments, which provided opportunities to introduce her to the field of Psychology. For example, Kelly thought about her work experiences and how she felt these experiences prepared her for her major.

> Because I worked at a lot of places with children, I worked with a lot of college people. And then they told me about their experiences and stuff. And like, "Oh, you should go here. Oh, you should go here." So, I guess that helped me too. Like [employer name], I worked there for a while. Even my daycare now, where I work, [employer name], one of my boss' went here, and then my other boss went to[another institution]. And she teaches at [local community college] now, and they would just be pushing me my whole like senior year, "Oh, did you apply here? Did you apply here?" So yeah, I guess stuff like that.

Through informal conversations at Kelly's job, she got to talk with her coworkers about their college experiences. Specifically, they told her about their experiences at Burroughs and other institutions and encouraged her to apply to their alumni institutions.

Similar to Kelly, prior to college, Amber knew that she wanted a career in which she could help people, especially young people, and her work and volunteer experiences in high school helped her to make the decision to major in Family Science at Burroughs. As Amber reflected on these experiences, she believed that, "pouring back, giving back, helping others is definitely something that isn't like mandated of us, but I definitely think it's a very good thing to do." This belief was deeply rooted in everything that she chose to do as she spoke about her summer work experiences.

> I worked every summer since like in high school. And I would work in my school. I would either tutor or be a teacher's aide at a elementary school. So that's what I really did during the summers.

She also volunteered as a mentor in her church where she worked with helping to boost the self-esteem of young girls and served as a role model for them.

> I mentored sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. We had a step ministry, a high school step ministry, and when I became a junior and senior, I became the leader of that. And even now, when I go back home, I still go back to the old same group of girls and be a part of their practices. You know, they look at me as a big sister.

Amber's work and volunteer experiences laid a foundation for her to gain experience with a population that she eventually wanted to work with in the future. She loved these experiences because they nurtured her professional goals as well as her personal values.

As Kerry recalled her diverse work experiences, she realized that holding various jobs and juggling multiple tasks was instrumental to how she learned to balance her time in college as well as enhance her personal growth and development. Similar to Amber,

Kerry worked in a field that eventually contributed to her selected major, Family Science. Kerry conveyed in her interview how she appreciated these experiences.

> And then I would go home in the summer. Until sophomore year, I would go home and be a camp counselor, and then work my retail job also. So, I always had either two to three jobs. Like since I was 15. I would have rathered just do what I wanna do, and write my own story of my life. I wasn't that lucky. But no complaints. People gotta work. It is what it is. But, I mean, I think that my mentality would be different if all I did, all my college life, was just worry about school. The fact that I'm able to balance things, and I'm able to have my own money and sense of maturity, and I handle things in a very mature manner.

As Kerry reflected on high school and college work experiences she admitted that she would have preferred to be doing something else. However, these experiences helped her to maintain a balanced, mature life, which she feels contributed to her college life.

In the same manner that Kerry felt that holding various jobs helped her develop better time management skills, Patty felt this way about her high school work experience, too. Patty had just one work experience in high school, but in addition to this one work experience in high school at a local grocery store, she talked more about the balance between having one job, taking a challenging high school curriculum, and being involved in multiple high school activities.

> It's really about time management, and that's something that being involved and going to school helps me learn. When I became a junior, I had a job. So, it was like, I did after school stuff until 5:00, and then I would go to work, and then come home at 10:00, and then have to, you know, do homework from 10:30 to whenever. I feel like that prepared me. 'Cause when you're in college, it's kinda like that. But I feel like I had that drive to get things done, because I know that I had so many things on my plate. I had so much, and I just needed to get everything done.

Patty felt that her hectic schedule contributed to the good time management skills that she learned in high school and was able to exhibit in college. Without a demanding schedule,

she was not sure she would have done as well as she had at Burroughs because she would have had too much idle time on her hands.

**Summary**

Participants appreciated the contributions that their communities offered to plan for a college education. Even though each individual thought about community in different ways, above all, they took advantage of community resources through their churches, local businesses, and work and volunteer experiences to broaden their knowledge on college planning. For the most part, the community focused on teaching participants about colleges, majors, careers, networking, and awarding financial aid primarily in the form of scholarships. In essence, the community concentrated on introducing participants to college, helping them meet college requirements, and awarding scholarships. Next, I discuss the role that family had in preparing participants for college.

<p align="center">**Family Influences on College Preparation**</p>

Participants' families played an instrumental role in their college preparation process. Although some students were first-generation college students and others were second- and third-generation college students, each participant's family was involved in the college planning process. Whether only offering words of encouragement or actively being involved, families made sure that participants stayed on the right track to receive a higher education. I chose to focus on families, not only parents, because when students described who was most instrumental in the college planning process, they included: siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Families were involved in school activities as well as out-of-school activities providing participants with the resources needed to

complete competitive college applications and to learn more about different colleges and universities. Specifically, family support came in the form of exposing participants to opportunities so students were knowledgeable about what college was like. Participants only described two instances in which family members did not encourage them to go to college. First, I begin with the influence of mothers and female family figures and then address the influence of fathers, father figures, and other male family members. Finally, I discuss the influence of unsupportive family members.

**Supportive Family Members: Mothers and Female Family Figures**

As Dee shared earlier, college was always an expectation that her mom stressed from an early age; yet, I learned it was in high school that her mother provided a support system as well as economic capital to ensure that she could prepare for the standardized tests and college visitations to be exposed to as many colleges as possible. When asked who was most influential in her college planning process, she shared,

> I believe my mother, because she did allow me to, I think, attend [visit] about 30 Black colleges, pretty much in southern states and sort of in Maryland, northeast area. And it was to expose me to what is expected, as far as admissions, the culture of the schools, the students there, how they interact with each other, and it was a really nice experience, because I knew what to expect when applying to schools; how dorms normally are; and what is college life really all about, as far as networking, especially in HBCUs.

As Dee continued her discussion about her mom's support, I learned more about how she helped her prepare in other ways.

> …At one point, she took it upon herself to take me to Kaplan, and even though we couldn't afford the tutoring, she would at least take me to preliminary testing. And I guess, that allowed me to have an idea of where I was, as far as what I needed improvement in. She helped me work on getting the resources I needed to prepare for the SAT. And she helped pay for like the test and everything, and then she took me to a couple colleges. She spent maybe over a thousand dollars for three trips. But she pretty much paid a lot of money for me to like prepare for college. And I learned a lot from the experiences, as far as visiting the college, and what

resources they have, and what I should look for, as far as my needs.

Dee's mom provided financial resources to take standardized test preparation courses and to make college visitations. She recognized that her mother contributed a lot of money to these activities but felt guilty that she had chosen a predominantly White institution over a historically Black institution. Additionally, her grandmother was influential and would inquire about where she was applying and contribute money for application fees. Both women were there to help Dee stay focused, offer money, and to introduce her to college life.

Similar to Dee's experience, Kerry's mother was there every step of the way as she planned for college. When she compared her mother to her friend's parents, she realized just how much more her mom's expectations were of her than her friend's mom. Specifically, her mom made sure that she took SAT preparation courses, and that she applied to a variety of schools so that she had a backup plan just in case she did not get into Burroughs. Kerry explained her mother's involvement, "But she made me take the SAT prep stuff. She got that together, and I think that was on weekends during the school year." Her mother also helped her to manage her time wisely and to stay organized so that she could develop good study habits and meet deadlines.

> My mom was always on me about stuff, "Well, if you wanna go to college, then you need to map out what you need to do to get there." My mom didn't play that. (*Laughter*) She was there every second. So, that was a big one actually. But my mother would threaten me and say, I couldn't go out. And she would be like, "You better get in your room…" "Well, you're not going out unless I see you at least study for two hours."

Lastly, her mother was very involved in her extracurricular activities outside of school. She emphasized her mom's having the money to offer and pay for these activities as well as being a road mom with her dance group.

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Idris did not feel that his mother was involved in the same manner as the other participants. He knew that his mother had a gift for writing and had majored in English, so Idris utilized his mother's writing skills by having her to review his college applications and essays. Additionally, his mother provided verbal support to keep him focused on college as well as provided the economic means to pay for precollege expenses.

> But my mom, this is gonna sound really cliché, but it is true. Like, she didn't do so much as go to my school and talk to my teachers and do all that. She, basically, just believed in me, believed in my academic ability, and just kinda kept me on a straight path. 'Cause she was like, "Okay, I know you don't wanna look in the mirror and look at a failure. So, you're gonna do what you need to do to get where you need to be." So, you can tell my mom is real straight to the point. But aside from just visiting teachers, she did support me in anything that I needed, resource-wise. Whether it be SAT prep getting me there. I was in the IB program in my high school. She did everything I needed to do—paid for the exams and things like that. So, she was very supportive.

His mother also made him aware that he was the first man in his family to get a four-year degree. Putting this pressure on him was another way that she prepared him to work toward obtaining a college degree. Idris knew that going to college was not only important to him, but especially for his mom. Getting a college degree was important because he was going to be achieving a goal that no other man in his family had achieved. Although Idris felt the pressure from his mom, he remained humble and just believed that he would receive a baccalaureate degree.

Kelly and Raymond acknowledged their mothers' writing skills and took advantage of these skills to review college essays. Kelly said, "My mom is a really good writer. That's probably where I got my writing from. Like she'll check my essays over and over again, and make sure I had everything done." Raymond shared,

> I went to my mom for that [help with college essays], 'cause my mom…even

though she works in financial services, she writes for a living. So, especially when I was at home, she would peer review my papers for me.

Additionally, Raymond talked about how his grandmother wanted him to go beyond his bachelor's degree to even attain his master's degree.

> My mother and my grandparents usually, especially my grandmother, made it verbally aware that they wanted me to go to college because my father had gotten a master's degree, and they always, especially my grandma…she always said, "You're gonna go to college and get a master's degree like your father."

Raymond also had an older sister, who was also a college student, who was helpful.

> One of my older brothers and older sister were very supportive and encouraging of me going to college. I went to her frequently, especially this summer, about what I should do regarding where I should go, what classes I should take, how hard it would be, what I should expect, and things like that. She's in her senior year now. And she's been very, very helpful in terms of what I came to expect and I mean not overstressing over things and things like that.

Raymond remembers how these three women played a role in his college planning process: his mother helped with essay writing, his sister assisted him in developing a manageable first-year course schedule, and his grandmother encouraged him to strive for a bachelor's as well as a master's degree. Ironically, they offered advice in areas of precollege planning, college planning, and post-college planning, which helped him think about his present college goals as well his future college goals.

Rick's mother also assisted him as he planned for college. He communicated, "So, if I needed to go visit the school, she would take me there, like no questions asked. So, she was just very supportive." In addition to the college visitations, his mom also supported him with verbal support when he participated in extracurricular activities.

> Like, I ran track. So, she came to my track meets. I had recitals and concerts; she came to those. She always asked me how I was doing in school. She just encouraged me, and she supported, like, a lot of the extracurricular things that I did.

Rick remembers his mother being there for life outside the classroom activities. Equally important, she showed interest in his school work so that he felt supported in both areas.

In high school, Kevin's mom did not take much of an active role in the planning process, but she did talk to him about her past college experiences.

> My mom sometimes would brag about her college experience. And she would say, "You have a lot of options." But she told me that she went to college for one year. Then, she transferred to [local university] to major in physical education, my mom did, and any college preparation stuff that they [local university] would have available, they would tell it to my mom, and my mom would tell me about it.

Kevin's mom used resources at her college to network with others to obtain college information for him. There were individuals within her network that offered information that she thought would be helpful for Kevin's college planning process.

Most participants felt mothers or female family members had important roles in the college preparation process. From family members who had college experience to family members who did not, most female family members encouraged and expected participants to choose college after high school.

**Supportive and Unsupportive Family Members: Fathers, Father Figures, and Other Male Family Members**

In general, most family members were supportive of students' college-going goals. Participants communicated how they appreciated their fathers, father figures, and other male family members in the college preparation process. However, they recognized that some of these male figures were not as supportive as they would have liked for them to be. First, Amber, Ann, Kelly, Kerry, Patty, and Rick discuss the pivotal role that these men had in the preparation process.

Because Amber was a focused student and took sole responsibility for doing well in her classes, her mom just attended parent conferences, but her dad took a more active role in connecting her with other family college alumni and paying for her to visit Burroughs multiple times.

> As I mentioned before, my parents, they didn't finish school, but my grandmother on my dad's side, she was a vice principal throughout my younger years until she passed away. So, I have family, like older, my dad's aunts and uncles, a lot of them are well off, as far as it comes to education. One of my uncles, he was a professor at [ivy league]. Another one of my uncles, he was a dean here at the [Burroughs University]. So, of course, I've known them for a while, but as I got into high school, me and my dad, we spent a week up here with my uncle. Well, actually, once I told like Burroughs I was officially coming here, we stayed up here that spring with my uncle here. So, my dad tried to allow me to become more familiar with people in my family who did go through and finish school.

In addition to her father's support, she had another father figure in her church, her male youth minister who held a Master of Divinity and aspired to have a Ph.D., who stayed on top of her about her college planning process.

> So, he really like poured into me. So, he was instrumental. He would like try to stay on top of me, as far as, "So what schools have you applied to?" He's the one who encouraged me to apply. Well, actually, he didn't even encourage me. He just told the people, "Oh, send Amber an email…an application for this scholarship foundation." Anything that he heard, he would pass along to me. We still have the relationship where now that I'm starting, to go on to work professionally…He called me last night, "Oh, I need you to send me an email, so I can send it to such and such for you." So, he helps me network.

Amber's minister had deep respect for her drive and determination to excel beyond high school and even college. He believed in her and forwarded his networks to her so that she could apply for scholarships to pay for her college education. Their relationship extended into college and now that she was about to enter the job market, Amber used his network to learn about job announcements.

Ann remembers her dad's nervous demeanor throughout the process. He hovered over her to make sure she was meeting deadlines.

> I remember my dad during the entire process was antsy. So, he was always checking in on me, like standing over me whenever I would click submit from like the online processes. But it was, for the most part, sort of on me, but they would check in on me. My dad would help me mostly with like college profile web sites.

Finally, the time had arrived for her to go off to college after many years of living in college environments and exposing her to engineering majors. Ann's dad wanted to make sure that the time and energy he had put into the early and middle school years would pay off as she applied to colleges.

On the same lines as Amber and Ann, Kelly spoke highly about her relationship with her father and his active involvement in her school as well as an activist in her community. After reviewing Kelly's four-page resume that highlighted her academic, athletic, arts, leadership, work, awards, and community service experiences, I understood why she attributed much of her success and involvement to her father.

> I'm really close to my dad. I'm really close with both my parents, that's why I wanna be a sports lawyer because of him. He got me into sports. He's always at my school. My dad was NAACP president. He's still in the NAACP. He's doing a lot like at my school, my sister's school, just helping out. At my high school, everyone knows my dad, 'cause he's always there.

Kelly admired her relationship with her father because he was involved in her life and was the person responsible for sparking her interest in her major as well as promoting school and community involvement. He was there for her in high school and as she prepared for college. She made sure to include in her personal document that he was her hero, her role model for success, and as a result, she won the Washington Mystics Award to acknowledge her many accomplishments. Kelly modeled her dad's example as a hard

worker and high-achiever, which was illustrated in how he influenced her college

planning process.

Kerry spoke about her dad's support, but she felt that he had an unusual way of

backing her academic accomplishments.

> My dad had a weird way of encouraging me. Well, he has issues, 'cause he's adopted, number one. So, his method of encouragement is strange. So, he saw it as encouraging; I saw it as just pissing me off or being annoying. But, yeah, he was encouraging in his own way. But, I was just kinda like, "Just stop talkin' to me." 'Cause he would always put extra pressure. My mom had to always yell at him about that. He would always be like, "Why do you have an A minus instead of an A." "What were you doing to get the A minus?" "Clearly you could have pulled an A in this class." And I would just be like, "Just be quiet."

Kerry's dad recognized her potential and wanted her to strive for the best, not one point

lower than the best. He wanted her to work hard, not settle for less. Although she thought

that his encouragement was unusual; she still considered his comments supportive.

Beyond father and father figure support, Patty explained how her father's brother

was influential in her college preparation process. Her uncle had not completed a college

degree; still he wanted a college education for her. Her uncle thought highly of her

academic abilities and always encouraged her with verbal support.

> Oh! Oh! Well, my uncle. He always calls me. Oh! He's great! 'Cause I'm like the only niece on my dad's side of the family, so he calls me "Number One." So every time he calls me, he's like, "Oh! I'm speaking to my Number One!" 'Cause I'm his number one niece. He always gives me these pep talks. 'Cause he's always like, "What schools are you applying to? What are you interested in? What do you wanna do with your career? I'm so proud of you! Girl, you're gonna go so far!" It's just like, You're right! I can go far!" He never pressured me either, but he really influenced my decision, as well.

As the only niece on her father's side of the family, her uncle took interest in her

motivation and determination to do well in school. He nurtured Patty's high motivation

by constantly telling her she was the best and showing an interest in the colleges she was applying to as well as her chosen career.

Rick added to this topic on male family influences by including how his older brother was helpful in the process.

> I have a brother who went to college, too. I have one who graduated. He graduated in 2009. Yeah he was giving me advice, especially about the financial aid. Yeah, mostly things dealing with the financial part of college.

Rick appreciated his older brother's sharing information on available financial aid options. With his brother's knowledge and Rick's academic abilities, Rick sought out financial aid options to find scholarships to cover full college costs.

Although participants described many supportive male family members, some family members were not supportive. Two participants, Dee and Kerry disclosed how they believed some family members were not proud of their desire to go to college. Dee's father was not helpful in the college preparation process. During the time of the study, she had not spoken to her father in one year, and she had just started speaking to him in the spring of 2009, and prior to this time, he did not support her college ambitions. She expressed, "And so he doesn't help really with my financial aid anything, I think, when he feels sorry for me, he'll send money."

Dee also shared that she had some extended family members who were not supportive.

> But as far as the extended family, not so much; especially on my father's side…I would tell them, "I'm planning on going to college." They would just act like they didn't hear me. So, I'm like, "Okay." And then, as soon as I get in, they're like, "Oh, great for you!" And then, I never heard from them again. So, yeah, that was pretty much how my family reacted.

Kerry added how her brother made fun of her.

> My brother, yeah. No. He's just a jerk. 'Cause we're 13 years apart, so, he just likes messing with me. So, no, he didn't try to help me. My brother didn't care,

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My brother would crack jokes about me going to college. And be like, "Oh yeah, so she can get more [snobby]. 'Cause he's always told me that I had no street smarts, 'cause I went to an all-White high school.

Kerry felt that her brother was unsupportive because he did not make comments that supported her academic accomplishments.

**Summary**

Overall, I learned family members who were supportive outweighed family members who were unsupportive. Family members offered help in a variety of ways as participants planned for college, but some of the ways that stood out were offering verbal support, helping students to meet deadlines, reviewing college essays, and taking participants on college visitations. Just as in the early and middle years there was an expectation for participants to go to college, when participants got into high school, the expectation to go to college was supported even more as family members made sure that students were using the information that they had instilled in them to get into college. Fathers, father figures and other male family members had an equally important role in the college preparation process for some participants. Even though some male figures were unsupportive, their actions did not impede participants' college plans. Participants who recognized male figures communicated how they were supportive of their college plans from the beginning of the process through the time of enrollment at Burroughs and beyond Burroughs. As family members provided experiences for participants to take advantage of precollege opportunities, participants recognized family involvement and expressed how their involvement played a role in the final college decision-making process.

## College Decision-Making

When the time arrived to make the decision to attend Burroughs, participants disclosed how they made final decisions. Participants used various ways to narrow down their college selection list to one college, from finding a good fit between the student and the college culture to considering college costs. When participants considered college costs, I learned how the financial support of family was not as strong when students started making final decisions as it had been when students were conducting college searches and applying to colleges. Even though many of the participants applied and were awarded multiple renewable and nonrenewable scholarships, students and their families still had to take out a substantial amount in loan money. With this in mind, some participants made final college decisions based on affordability, not necessarily if the college or university was their first choice. Many applied to multiple institutions across the country, and just as some participants weighed the advantages and disadvantages of attending neighborhood high schools versus outside of neighborhood magnet high schools, participants used the same decision-making processes to choose certain colleges before making final decisions.

### Weighing Advantages and Disadvantages of Choosing In-State and Out-of-State Colleges

Dee, who applied to three schools of which Burroughs was not her first choice but a safe school, chose her college by reviewing college costs and the college culture. Although Dee received a few scholarships, she thought that she would have received more because of her 3.81 high school grade point average, but she and her mother still had to take out two loans to cover her college costs. Dee wanted to go to one of two out-

of-state HBCUs, but these institutions did not award the financial aid that Burroughs awarded to her.

> I did get into all three, but I ended up going to Burroughs because as the deadline started to approach in June, [Burroughs] was the only one that had a financial aid package for me. I really wanted to go either to [two HBCUs] but I was nervous, because I read that, it's important to know what they're gonna give you. And they were saying, "Well you're gonna get something." And it's like, "Well, I didn't receive a full scholarship, so what exactly is something?" And I became really nervous. I was disappointed in myself, 'cause I'm like, "Mom, I didn't get as much money. You still have to help pay. I thought with a 3.81 I could get a full paid scholarship. I didn't, I'm sorry." She's like, "It's okay."

For Dee, making a decision on which college to attend was a difficult decision. She had to think about college costs and the amount of financial aid that each college offered. She was let down that her high grade point average did not award more merit-based financial aid.

Because Burroughs is a predominantly White university, Dee thought about what her experience had been like when she visited a predominantly White high school and how it was not the right environment for her. Dee had chosen a predominantly Black high school and preferred this same type of environment in college. She utilized the same skills that she used in high school to make her decision to come to Burroughs, in spite of this university being a predominantly White university.

> I thought it was really important to transfer that experience to college and get a feel of whether or not I would like it, and I ended up going to Burroughs a couple times for overnight programs. And I realized how beneficial that was, because pretty much by the time I did orientation, I knew pretty much where everything was, and I got along a lot better than some people who were going there for maybe the first or second time.

In essence, Dee felt comfortable with the campus culture after she had taken advantage of multiple college visitations. The campus culture was a good fit for her, as well as the financial aid that she received to pay for an education at Burroughs.

Rick and Patty decided to choose Burroughs due to college costs and the financial aid offered for in-state tuition versus out-of-state tuition. Rick was fortunate enough to receive one merit-based scholarship and one university scholarship, where he and his family did not have to pay anything out-of-pocket. He explained that without this scholarship, his parents had not saved to pay for college, so he based his college decision on graduating from college without loan debt. In Rick's forward thinking about having a stable financial future, he confessed, "For me, like my decision was made based on finances. Burroughs was the only school I was accepted to where I could graduate debt-free. Plus, they had a really good program."

Similar to Rick, Patty applied to three other institutions, but her final decision was based on college costs as well. When Patty was ready to go to Burroughs, she asked her father if he had a college fund for her, and his response was, "We got a little something, Patty. Don't worry about it." However, when it was time to pay for tuition, she had to take out $50,000 in loans and her older brother helped to pay for college, too. As a result of learning money was not available, Patty made the decision to go to an in-state institution where it would be cheaper.

> My final decision came down to finances as well. I applied everywhere, and I just ended up going to what was most affordable at the end of the day. Even though I did get into some schools that are out of state, but they didn't offer me enough money to compensate. They didn't offer enough money that will compensate for the cost of tuition here. So, I just ended up going to Burroughs.

Idris applied to19 schools because of the "No essay, no application fee," but he was really interested in only five schools, which included one out-of-state HBCU and two out-of state Ivy League institutions. Even though HBCUs were included on his list of 19, after college visitations and talk with his mother about [the importance of] being able to

communicate with other races, he decided against HBCUs. One of his Ivy League schools was his top choice; however, he was not accepted. Being rejected from this university did not bother him because after visiting many colleges, through an elimination process, he decided which colleges were good fits and which colleges were not. Furthermore, Idris talked about how his college visitations had to provide a sense of community because this was one expectation that was very important to him when choosing a college.

> It came to the community. I'm really big on a sense of community, building relationships, networking, that's probably one of the most important things in life. So, when it came down to the Ivy League and [Burroughs]…like Ivy's in general; you visit, and you talk to people, and you shake their hand, and you smile, and you introduce yourself; but you still feel this competitiveness throughout the whole campus. Like, "Hi. I'm your friend, but you're my competition. Nice to meet you." So, it's Like the whole campus had a cutthroat atmosphere. When I came to [Burroughs], it's still like a highly, top grain, number 9 public university in the nation, but everyone is going for their success, but in a more of a unified way. Like, people I've met, I've never like felt that, "I'm going against you. I wanna do better than you. I'm kinda being two-faced because I'm only like here to get my degree."  I'm here for the whole experience. And so, once I visited, I said, "[Burroughs], that's where I wanna be." And so far, it's fulfilling all my expectations.

Although Idris chose an in-state school that was more affordable than an out-of state school, he was astonished when comparing price tags of attending college. He explained that he received a $4,000 renewable university scholarship to attend Burroughs as well as one smaller scholarship. Nevertheless, his family still had to take out a loan of approximately $60,000 and pay out-of-pocket to cover full college costs.

When Amber made her final decision to come to Burroughs, from the very beginning of the college planning process, she was confident that she did not want to go to a college near the high school or the city and state in which she lived. She wanted a different cultural experience. She did not apply to any historically Black institutions

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because Amber thought that her high school and church were predominantly Black and because she spent most of her time in those two environments, she was ready for a change. When Amber was making her final decision to come to Burroughs, she conveyed that the challenge that she faced was the geographic location. Amber, whose father planned to pay for the majority of her out-of-state college education, still had to take out a $30,000 loan, even after receiving a small scholarship from her church. With this in mind, Amber considered the reputation of the in-state colleges and college costs, and even though one of the in-state universities was highly ranked nationally and less expensive, she still decided to choose Burroughs, which was her first choice.

> I had my reasons for not wanting to go to [a nationally-ranked state institution], which is a better school than Burroughs. Everybody from [City Public Schools] is going there, and we know everybody. I don't want to be forced to hang around people just out of obligation, because I know them. I wanna make my own way. I wanna hang out with people and not feel pressure. So, they never like tried to talk me into like going to a state school, where it would be cheaper.

When she reflected on all of the schools that she had applied to and her college visitations to various schools, she felt confident that she would fit into the Burroughs college culture.

> I guess out of all the schools I applied to and the schools that I actually saw in person, coming here [Burroughs University], I definitely like saw myself being here. I really love the campus. This is somewhere that I wanted, you know, to spend four years away from home.

For Amber, as well as for other participants, college visitations were important to making final decisions between colleges. When participants visited campuses, they were able to see and feel how the campus met their expectations. Amber could see herself in this new environment meeting new people and making a reputation for herself at Burroughs.

Likewise, Kerry who applied to six schools and was admitted into all of them, decided early on that she did not want to go to an HBCU, but her reasons for not wanting

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to attend were different from Amber's. Kerry decided that after going to high school in a predominantly White environment and being the only Black student in most of her classes and extracurricular activities, she did not want to attend a HBCU because she enjoyed being the only one. Kerry felt that possessing the only one mentality in high school would translate well into Burroughs, a predominantly White institution where she could continue to standout.

> I don't have an issue with that [being the only one] at all. It's why I also go to Burroughs. Why I would never consider going to an all-Black school. I like being different. I like when people look at me strange. I'm like, "What do you want?" So I like it that way.

Despite Burroughs being an out-of-state school, the out-of-state tuition did not deter Kerry from still wanting to be the only one. Kerry indicated that she "had CDs and different things and bonds and stuff like that. But, I mean it only lasted but so long." Kerry's family was not prepared to pay the full cost of her out-of-state college education. Although she explained that she was awarded three community scholarships, she and her family still had to take out $60,000 in loans to pay for her college education.

During Raymond's college decision-making process, he applied to four schools, which included one in-state HBCU. After visiting Burroughs and the HBCU, he still could not make a decision on which school to attend until the summer prior to enrollment.

> I almost didn't come, because I was accepted to the [another state institution], and I had agreed to come to Burroughs in May, 'cause that's the deadline for when you have to accept it or deny the application, 'cause they accepted me. And I liked this school. When we came to campus, I really liked the school. I think this was my number one school.

Even though Raymond had to negotiate between the two schools at the last minute, he still chose his first choice, Burroughs University.

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> Yeah, this was my number one school. I wanted to come here, but in July, I received a letter from [an HBCU], stating that they would pay my tuition and fees for my entire [four years]. Well, starting from my first semester and, as long as I kept my GPA above a 3.4, they would continue to renew that agreement up to four years.

He also considered the overall campus, the facilities, and the curriculum, which he felt were better at Burroughs.

> So, in July, I was having second thoughts about coming here, due to financial issues, because coming here, we had to take out loans. The starting price was a little less, plus, if we take the tuition and fees off, that's a lot less on my mother and my parents…we'll say my mother. So, had it not been for that, I am pretty sure I never would've doubted coming to this school, 'cause I really like this school. The campus is nice. It's fast. Whereas, at [an HBCU], it's a lot smaller, as you probably know. Oh yeah, it's like a fourth of this size. And I just generally like this institution. I felt the facilities were better. The curriculum, there was a lot more to choose from here.

After contemplating the pros and cons of choosing a predominantly White institution over a HBCU, Raymond's decision also included thinking about college costs. Similar to other participants, Raymond considered college costs and financial aid; still, having this information did not hinder him from choosing Burroughs. Although he hesitated to answer my loan range question, he eventually shared that he and his mother took out approximately $25,500 in loans to pay for his education, but the rest of his college costs were out-of-pocket because he did not receive any scholarships.

Kelly applied to multiple out-of-state schools, in which Burroughs was her last choice. She also applied for multiple scholarships. Originally, her parents were prepared to pay for college; however, when a family member's house burned down, they used her college fund to help the family to rebuild their lives. She applied to 50 to 60 scholarships; yet, she received only 20, which she referred to as small nonrenewable scholarships that would pay for her first year of college. During her first year at Burroughs, she took out a

small loan of $5,000, but she did not know how she was going to pay for the other semesters.

Moreover, Ann received a full Burroughs University scholarship as well as community and national scholarships. Her parents, who were prepared to pay the full cost of her education, did not have to pay because she received such a substantial amount of money in scholarships. Similar to Rick and Ann, Kevin also received a full scholarship to attend Burroughs; however, his family had not saved money for him to go to college either. He applied to two other out-of- state schools, but his ultimate decision narrowed down to selecting Burroughs. Kevin chose Burroughs, which was his top choice, because of the college location as well as his prior research and internship experience at Burroughs. As he shared earlier, through these experiences, he became familiar with the campus and learned about the campus culture.

**Summary**

When participants made final decisions about choosing a college, their main focus was on fitting in with the college culture and being able to afford college. Although out of the ten participants, three participants received full scholarships to attend Burroughs, while the other seven participants were paying for their college education out-of-pocket and through loans; the participants agreed that making the decision to come to Burroughs was the right decision. Some participants did not let college costs keep them from coming to a reputable out-of-state institution; yet, for others, they thought about the expensive costs of attending certain colleges, mainly out-of-state colleges, and made the final decision to come to an affordable in-state institution where they could still fit in with the college culture.

**Conclusion**

Participants in the study shared how their lived experiences in school, community, and family contexts influenced and impeded the college preparation process. Overall, with only a few exceptions, when participants entered each of these three environments, there was congruence between the goals and expectations that they set for themselves to go to college and the goals and expectations that others set for them in their schools, in their communities, and in their families. Because goals and expectations were aligned, participants were not distracted to consider other options after graduating from high school. Goals were aligned not only when it was time to make a decision to go to college, but also from an early age, participants had been encouraged to develop a college-going mindset. As a result of encouraging this mindset early, high-achieving, middle-class, African American participants valued precollege experiences in school, community, and family contexts that helped them understand the college preparation process.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I explored the school, community, and family factors that influenced participants' understanding of the college preparation process as high-achieving, middle-class, African American students prior to attending Burroughs University. Methods used for the study included: a demographic survey, an interview, a focus group session, and personal documents. The major sections of this chapter summarize the findings, connect these findings to previous research, and discuss their implications for the study.

### Review of Methodology, Methods, and Findings

The state of African American education is multifaceted; from struggling for an education during the 17th century to maintaining solid academic backgrounds to attaining a higher education in the 21st century, students understand the value placed on education. Although more African Americans with diverse precollege experiences will enroll in college in future years (Allen et al., 2005), little is known about the contextual influences high-achieving, middle-class, African American students utilize to prepare for college since most scholarly research on African American students is conducted from a deficit lens. The study reported here was a case study on 10 students who were current college students at Burroughs University and who were reflecting back on school, community, and family factors that influenced the college preparation process. As a case study, this research used qualitative methods to listen to the participants' stories and to learn about the experiences that helped them prepare for college.

In the findings of the study, three factors, school, community, and family, helped high-achieving, middle-class, African American students understand the college

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preparation process. Through the demographic survey, interviews, the focus group session, and the personal document, I became aware how these factors, as well as race and social class, either influenced or impeded the college preparation process. An overarching theme shared among school, community, and family influences was college was an expectation, not an option, throughout the precollege years. Participants remembered and considered beginning the college preparation process in the elementary and middle school grades while thinking about the behaviors and activities in which their families, teachers, guidance counselors, peers, and community members engaged to nurture learning, high-achievement, and a college-going mindset. By instilling a firm foundation during the early grades, participants possessed self-motivation in high school, where they believed in their own abilities to work toward pursuing higher education. With attention to the early grades, there was heavy reliance on parents and family; however, in the secondary grades, participants expressed independence by initiating more conversations with teachers, guidance counselors, community members, and family members to ensure they were on the right track to accomplish their college-planning goals.

First, to achieve their college-planning goals, participants communicated how they selected and enrolled in selective high schools and/or magnet programs. Particularly, when considering school influences, participants believed taking a rigorous curriculum, having one-on-one time with teachers and guidance counselors, engaging with peers inside and outside the classroom, and participating in extracurricular activities influenced the college-preparation process. Second, in addition to school influences, participants imparted the role communities played in gaining knowledge about the college preparation

process. Community influences included: churches, area businesses, and work and volunteer experiences. Third, participants voiced the role that family had on the college-planning process, which included supportive and unsupportive female and male family members. Lastly, when the time arrived to make final college decisions, students weighed the advantages and disadvantages of choosing certain colleges, which included considering the college culture, differences between the high school experience and the college experience, and college costs.

## Discussion

### Peer Influence: Oppositional Culture toward Education

African American, middle-class, high-achievers acknowledged the importance of learning, while striving to do their best inside the classroom as well as outside the classroom. Each participant's intrinsic motivation to excel in academics and extracurricular activities was noticed by teachers, guidance counselors, and peers. Even though recognition in the school environment among these constituents was not always supportive, overall, high-achievers did not let unsupportive behaviors and comments preclude them from striving for academic excellence.

Contrary to Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) study on a predominantly Black high school in a low-income area in Washington, DC, in which academically-talented students developed an oppositional culture toward education, I did not find the same results in my study. Over half of my participants attended predominantly Black high schools in suburban areas, where they were enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP), Honors, and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs. These programs provided challenging coursework with peers who aspired to do well and to go to college. In some instances,

teachers recommended that participants take a more rigorous course load because teachers recognized their high abilities and motivation. In other instances, participants' academic talent was acknowledged and cultivated in middle school so they possessed cultural and social capital to know that enrolling in a challenging curriculum was a natural progression to continue high-achievement. Cultural capital, which is usually transmitted through parents, played a role in how participants learned cultural competencies such as behaviors, linguistic skills, and attitudes to communicate with high-achieving and non-high- achieving peers as well as teachers, guidance counselors, and community leaders as they prepared for college (Carter, 2003; Dumais, 2002; McDonough, 1998). Participants understood that there was an accepted manner to behave, which included changing the way in which they spoke, when entering certain environments. Social capital played a role in how participants developed institutionalized relationships and networks with school and community leaders, who provided guidance about the college preparation process, financial aid, and college decision-making behaviors and mindsets (Lin 2001a; Lin, 2001b). For the most part, students did not express feeling forced to enroll in these courses neither did they feel that they had to oppose high-achievement to fit in with peers who were not high-achievers. Participants wanted a challenge. They believed that by taking a demanding college preparatory curriculum and being involved in activities outside the classroom with peers who shared the same values and ambitions, they did not have to downplay or oppose high-achievement or education.

**Peer Influence: Accused of Acting White**

Participants disclosed that although they enrolled in a rigorous college preparatory curriculum with other high-achievers, enrolling in these courses did not exclude them from receiving acting White comments or resentment for high-achievement from same race and different race peers as well as non-AP, Honors, and IB students. Whether participants attended a predominantly Black or predominantly White high school, peers still accused them of acting White (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham & Ogbu, 1996; Ogbu, 1988, 2003), which was a term I used and participants agreed with being accused, as well as being called an Oreo, which was another term with the same meaning as acting White used by participants.

With this in mind, the term acting White has been defined differently, ranging from speaking Standard English, enrolling in Advanced Placement or Honors courses, and wearing certain brands of clothing (Fryer, 2006). Mainly, participants in the case study were accused of acting White or being an Oreo or resented by peers because they spoke Standard English or changed their language or dialect when among other high-achievers, behaved in different ways from non high-achievers, earned high grades in school, or enrolled in AP and Honors courses. As aforementioned, participants possessed cultural capital so they were aware certain behaviors and linguistic styles were valued in educational environments (Carter, 2005; Dumais, 2002; McDonough, 1998).

Fryer (2006) found the acting White concept prevalent in integrated schools rather than private or predominantly White schools. In my study, there did not seem to be a difference between participants who enrolled in integrated or segregated schools as well as public or private schools. Participants were accused of acting White or experienced

jealousy from peers as well as other behaviors that their peers considered non-Black because of high-achievement or being the only one or one of few Blacks in college preparatory courses at their schools.

Attending a certain type of school did not determine if students would or would not encounter the acting White concept from peers. The most prevalent factor in whether students encountered the acting White concept was holding high-achievement status and high involvement in extracurricular activities. Because participants were high-achievers who enrolled in selective classes, they were considered a minority in predominantly Black high schools as well as predominantly White high schools. Peers noticed participants were isolated from the majority population and behaved differently, and as a result, peers developed an aversion to participants' high-achievement status.

**Family Influence: Female vs. Male Influence**

The family unit was an important influence in figuring out the college preparation process. From the elementary years through high school years, parents as well as other family members served as effective advocates for students to value learning and to do well in school, which led participants to choose a higher education.  Although participants spoke highly about African American mothers and other female family members' roles in the college preparation process, many spoke just as highly about the role of fathers, male family members, and father figures in the college preparation process.

Hrabowski (1991), Hrabowski, Maton, and Grief (1998), and Hrabowski, Maton, Greene, and Greif's (2002) studies focused on high-achieving Black male and female students and their parents, specifically mothers, but not as much information on fathers or

other family members. I found that African American fathers, older brothers, uncles, and father figures had an influential role in the college-planning process for some of the participants. Specifically, fathers and father figures had an active role ensuring that participants were: (a) completing college applications and meeting deadlines; (b) networking with other college-goers in their families, communities, and churches; (c) offering verbal support and praise for academic accomplishments; (d) helping with the financial aid process; (e) attending college visitations; and (f) instilling a college-going mindset. Previous literature acknowledged the role female and male family members have in the college planning process (Hrabowski, 1991; Hrabowski et al., 1998; Hrabowski et al., 2002); yet, this case study brings more insight than is found in prior research on the role that fathers, male family members, and father figures had on making sure participants stayed on the right track to obtain a higher education.

**The Role of Social Class**

Throughout the study, social class provided participants with the means to a variety of resources that helped them to prepare for college. As participants gained access to college preparatory and extracurricular resources in schools, community, and family, they acknowledged that social class offered them access to resources to plan for college. These resources ranged from participating in educational activities inside and outside school during the early years, to having access to competitive middle schools as well as high schools and programs, experiential learning opportunities, networking with other college students and college graduates, and visiting and applying to various colleges across the country, so that participants were equipped with the tools to meet college requirements.

Similar to Kao and Tienda (1998), Coleman (1988), and Dika and Sigh (2002), in my study, social class provided the means for participants to have access to cultural, social, and economic capital. In regards to cultural capital, which is usually passed down from parents to children, participants learned to use certain behaviors and languages when placed in different environments. Specifically, when in school environments with other high-achievers, participants did not speak the same way that they spoke with other non-high-achievers or with students who were not in AP, honors, and IB courses. Their peers may have referred to these behaviors as acting White or as being an Oreo; yet, participants knew there were acceptable and unacceptable ways to behave when among individuals in different environments. In regards to social capital, participants networked with constituents in school, community, and family settings who embraced receiving a college education. Some of these individuals included: teachers and guidance counselors, peers, college students, faculty mentors, business owners, church members, organizational advisers, and family friends. These people gave students information about college planning that helped them to develop competitive college applications to be admitted into Burroughs. In regards to economic capital, participants had the financial means to pay for college application fees, to attend college open houses and visitations, as well as to afford extracurricular activities that complemented their academic coursework in high school.

## Theoretical Implications of the Study

### Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) was used as one theoretical framework to think about key issues high-achieving, middle-class African Americans encounter when preparing for

college. CRT was chosen because of its focus on the relationship between race, racism, inequity, and power (Delegado & Stefancic, 2001). In the field of education, critical race theorists work to understand issues surrounding school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, controversies over curriculum and history, and IQ and achievement testing (Delegado & Stefancic) as well as teacher and guidance counselor expectations of students (Hammarth & Suh, 2003; Hummings, 1996; Solorzano & Ornelaas, 2004).

Contrary to the belief that oftentimes school constituents hold lower expectations for students of color than they do for White students (Haycock, 2006; Melendez, 2004; The Education Trust, 2006), I found there was an expectation expressed by teachers and guidance counselors that Black high-achievers would enroll in Advanced Placement, Honors, and International Baccalaureate coursework, participate in experiential learning opportunities outside the classroom, and pursue a college degree immediately after graduating from high school. Teachers and guidance counselors went the extra mile to recommend students take a rigorous curriculum and to apply for research and internship opportunities on college campuses; teachers and guidance counselors also shared and recommended students for scholarships to defray college costs.

By the same token that participants experienced high expectations from school personnel that they would go to college after high school, there were still incidents where critical race theory played a role in poor teacher instruction in AP and IB classes, teachers who undermined their academic abilities, as well as guidance counselors who steered participants to certain types of colleges. Some participants who attended predominantly Black high schools recognized Black and White teachers who did not give quality instruction, were not certified to teach a course, or lowered grading expectations on

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assignments in challenging classes. Other participants also voiced Black teachers who used an approach to college preparation in which they warned them that college faculty would not be as lenient as high school teachers and would demand more from them in regards to course assignments and expectations than was expected of them in high school. Black teachers also stressed that in college, non-Black students, specifically White and Asian students, would be smarter than them and that they would need to be friends or study with these students to be successful. Not only did the teacher's comments demoralize the student's abilities, they also undermined the teacher's abilities. Although participants did not address these concerns with their teachers or administrators, they were not happy with their teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward their education.

In a third incident, a White guidance counselor strongly encouraged a participant not to apply to Burroughs because the counselor did not feel that the participant's academic record was strong enough to get into this type of institution. As a Black student and a high-achiever, this participant believed this counselor's comments targeted her race more so than her academic ability. The fourth incident was a Black guidance counselor strongly encouraging the Black students at the predominantly Black high school to choose community colleges, trade schools, or historically Black colleges and universities over Burroughs University as well as other predominantly White institutions. As a Black student and a high-achiever, the student believed this counselor's comments were demeaning, but he also believed that she was only doing what she thought was best for the Black students at his high school.

Using CRT to think about key issues in school environments helped me to see how race, racism, and equity played a role in teachers' attitudes and expectations toward

students' course assignments as well as counselors' expectations on the types of colleges that they should attend. In the first two incidents, high-achievers enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum expecting the course content and the teacher instruction to be challenging only to find out that once enrolled, some teachers did not make an effort to add rigor to these courses or to have high expectations of students. Teachers knew students were academically-talented; however, participants who had this experience believed that because of the majority race of the class and the school, which was predominantly Black, the  school leadership did not care to give top quality teacher training in pedagogy and instruction for AP courses. Rather than believing that the students deserved a quality education and were just as academically capable as their White and Asian peers, even though they were not present in their classes, the teachers made the students believe that they were not as smart as their peers.  In regards to CRT, the school administration, who were in a position of power to make changes in these classes, did not seem to place a high value on ensuring teachers were AP certified, neither did they hold these teachers accountable for ensuring that the course content was challenging enough so that students took and passed AP tests to obtain college credit.

In the third and fourth incidents, both high-achievers recognized that high-achievement was disregarded, and these participants believed their race played a role in the type of college to which counselors thought they should apply. Guidance counselor expectations were lowered about the types of higher education institutions to which they believed these Black students had the academic capabilities of being accepted.  However, the first incident may be considered a form of blatant racism, while the second incident may be considered a form of internalized racism. Regardless of the form of racism, both

school constituents lowered their higher education expectation of the type of higher education institution to which they believed these Black students had the academic capabilities of being accepted. Although discrimination existed toward participants' intellectual abilities, lowered expectations did not discourage students from applying to Burroughs as well as other baccalaureate-seeking institutions.

In this study, CRT brought awareness to discrimination based on race and intellectual abilities and how students in the study were impacted by Black and White teachers' and guidance counselors' actions and behaviors as they prepared for college. As the researcher, I could not understand why participants enrolled in college credit bearing courses yet still did not feel prepared or did not pass as many of the final tests as they intended to pass in order to receive college credit. By using CRT to illuminate these issues, I became aware of why participants made these decisions either not to take these tests or why they did not pass these tests. While students were conscious that their teacher and guidance counselor teaching practices were not always up to par in their college preparatory courses, they did not report the teachers or guidance counselors to the administration in order to dismantle institutional barriers related to teacher instruction and guidance counselor training.  In essence, using CRT to inform issues Black high-achievers encounter in school environments was informative so that administrators are knowledgeable about these barriers and engage in steps to address these barriers.

**Perna and Titus Model**

The Perna and Titus (2005) comprehensive conceptual model on college enrollment was used as another theoretical framework to think about key issues that inform the study. This model is relevant to the study because it examines racial/ethnic

group differences on four forms of capital: social, cultural, economic, and human, and explores how these forms of capital influence students to enroll or not to enroll in college. In addition to different forms of capital, this model also examines school level and student level contexts for understanding the relationship between parental involvement as a form of social capital and college enrollment for different racial groups. Parental involvement as a form of social capital provides individuals with access to resources that encourage college enrollment. Included in this model is an individual's actions to go to college cannot be fully understood except in terms of the structural context or characteristics of the high school and how well the school encourages parental involvement, as well as the amount of resources that students may have access to via social networks at school and other forms of capital.

For high-achieving, middle-class, Black students, parental involvement as social capital was important in participants' gaining access to social networks within elementary and middle school settings, but when students got to high school, the parent relationship changed.  Even though parents were present, Black high-achievers seemed to rely on parents more in the early and middle school grades; however, when they entered high school, participants used the knowledge that parents instilled in earlier grades to navigate and interact with the appropriate social networks to learn more about the college preparation process. Participants sought out a range of resources and networks on their own, for example, enrolling in challenging coursework such as AP and IB programs, forming relationships with peers, teachers, and guidance counselors who supported college-going, seeking out and getting involved in extracurricular activities as well as experiential learning opportunities, and learning about scholarships to pay partial or full

college costs. Aside from attending parent/teacher conferences to check on students'

grades and progress in classes, I did not find that parents took an active role inside high

school environments to introduce their children to specific social networks or to network

with school officials to prepare for college enrollment. However, parents seemed to be

more involved with assisting their children in gaining access to social networks outside

school environments, such as family, friends, church, and other community members or

individuals who could help them to write letters of recommendations, review college

essays, or share information about their future college majors and careers.

I also did not find that schools restricted African American high-achievers from

gaining access to networks or resources that could assist in planning for higher education.

For these students, school contexts did not seem to present barriers for their college goals

because these schools offered rigorous coursework, high teacher and guidance counselor

expectations, and help if students asked for assistance with the college application

process. Because these students were high-achievers, tracked, encouraged, and chosen to

enroll in AP, Honors, or IB courses, they were surrounded by an environment that

supported a college-going culture.

Specifically, the Perna and Titus (2005) model identified school structural

contexts as well as student-level characteristics that influenced students' college decision-

making plans. Overall, Black high-achievers from middle-class backgrounds took the

initiative to build their own social networks and relationships in high school

environments by meeting with teachers and guidance counselors to review college essays,

write letters of recommendations, and meet college application deadlines, without day-to-

day assistance and guidance from parents. By not only exploring school structural

contexts, but also student-level characteristics, I had a chance to learn more about the social, cultural, economic, and human capital, which played a role in how students prepared for college. Participants seemed to possess these four forms of capital, which gave them access to social networks inside and outside of school settings; academic, cultural, and experiential opportunities; college preparatory classes; and involved families. Students were positioned in nurturing environments inside and outside school so making a decision to go to college and prepare for college was less challenging.

**College Choice Model**

The last model that helped to frame key issues in the study was the College Choice Model. Even though for the high-achieving, middle-class, African American participants in my study college attendance was more of an expectation rather than a choice as this model suggests, using college choice literature helped to underscore influences of others (Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989). Specifically, the predisposition stage of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) college choice model was relevant to my study. The predisposition stage refers to the plans students develop for education or work after they graduate from high school, while taking into consideration students' family background, academic performance, peers, and other high school experiences that influence the development of their post-high school educational plans.

In the predisposition stage, influences on college aspirations include: SES, race and ethnicity, parental support and encouragement, parental education, peer encouragement and support, teacher and counselor encouragement, student academic ability and achievement, and family residence (Hossler et al., 1989). Through quantitative analyses, the researchers of this model found that the top three predictors of college plans

were parental support and encouragement, academic ability, and parental educational level. I found support for these three predictors in my dissertation; however, parental educational level varied from a high school diploma to a terminal degree. According to this model, as parental educational level increases, childrens' aspirations to go to college also increase (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Yet, I found that regardless of parental educational level, participants' aspirations to go to college were high, and participants were encouraged and supported to go to college by at least one parent, specifically if the parent lived in the home. Because I used qualitative methods, I was able to hear how parents provided support and encouragement, which included starting college planning and talking about college as early as elementary school, enrolling students in competitive middle school academic and college preparatory programs, connecting students to networks in the community, making sure students met deadlines, and taking students on college visitations. Finally, academic ability influenced college aspirations because as high-achievers worked to take challenging coursework and participate in other high school experiences outside class, they believed their hard work was a natural progression to receive a college education.

## Implications for Practice

While a single study involving multiple cases cannot be a sound basis for understanding all school, community, and family factors that influence or impede the college preparation process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students, this study may suggest that when studying the college preparation process for these students, more partnerships should be formed with elementary, middle, and high schools, communities, and families to start college preparation earlier.

**Building Stronger Partnerships with Schools, Communities, and Families:**
**Financing a College Education**

One example how higher education institutions can build stronger partnerships with schools, communities, and families is through early education on financing a college education. Wimberly and Noeth (2005) recommended that high schools help students and parents create a financial plan to pay for college, including college costs, financial aid, and other financing options. In the study, I learned that while three middle-class, high-achievers received full scholarships to attend Burroughs, other participants still had to pay out-of-pocket as well as take out loan amounts ranging from $20,000 to $60,000 to pay for college. Many participants received numerous, small, nonrenewable scholarships that covered college costs for the first year; however, after the first year, parents and students realized that these small scholarships were not enough to cover Burroughs University $22,433 resident and $39,804 non-resident per year tuition and fees.

This finding was surprising for two reasons and posed additional questions. The first reason was because participants in the study were high-achievers with high grade point averages that completed a rigorous high school curriculum and were involved in outside activities that complemented the curriculum; I assumed that they would receive merit-based aid. The question that remains is why did more high-achievers who might have been eligible for national, state, and institution specific renewable full and partial scholarships not apply for this type of financial aid? The second reason I was surprised with this finding was because land-grant institutions (e.g., Burroughs University) traditionally have been criticized for awarding merit-based financial aid to affluent families who can afford to pay for college rather than need-based financial aid to needy families who cannot afford to pay for college (The Education Trust, 2010), so why did

many of the affluent families in this study not receive more merit-based aid? Specifically,

I was surprised to learn that seven out of ten participants were not awarded university

merit-based aid and had to take out loans to attend Burroughs University.  Some

participants did not even seem to be knowledgeable about national, state, and university

scholarships that they could apply for to eliminate or to decrease college costs.

**Building Stronger Partnerships with Schools, Communities, and Families: Developing Affordable Precollege Programs**

Another example of how higher education can build stronger partnerships with

schools, communities, and families is through developing more affordable college

preparatory programs for middle-class families at the elementary, middle, and high

school levels.  Even though there are free college preparatory programs for low-income

families (i. e. Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, etc., there are limited

affordable college preparatory programs for middle-income families. By implementing

and broadening the university focus to include more college preparatory programs,

seminars, and outreach efforts for middle-class families, families can plan earlier and

learn about financial aid options, including 529b educational plans as well as learn about

more university sponsored research and internship opportunities.  Early education can

decrease and even eliminate loan debt as well as increase application and acceptance

rates to research and internship opportunities to enhance high-achievers' college

application packets as well as their competitiveness for merit-based financial aid.

**Building Stronger Partnerships Between Higher Education Academic Departments, Student Affairs Departments, Schools, and Communities**

A third example of how higher education can build stronger partnerships with

schools is through academic departments, specifically teacher education programs,

offering professional development in instructional practices and models that add rigor to the AP, honors, and IB curriculums. High-achievers revealed that course content in these classes was challenging; still, teacher instruction and course assignment expectations were not as challenging. Some even considered high school college preparatory courses so easy that they attributed failing AP tests to poor teacher instruction. Others decided not to take AP tests at all because they did not feel prepared to take these standardized tests. As a result, participants spent time enrolling as well as being successful in the AP college preparatory curriculum, but unfortunately, they did not receive college credits to place out of certain classes. Through teacher education partnerships with high school teachers, these courses can include rigorous content as well as teacher instruction so that high-achievers are prepared to take and to pass AP tests.

Additionally, a fourth example how teacher education as well as counselor education programs can offer more professional development for teachers and counselors is through multicultural training. In my study, participants had White and Black teachers and guidance counselors who undermined their academic abilities or urged them to apply to only certain types of colleges and universities. By participating in multicultural training, teachers and guidance counselors can develop cultural sensitivity counseling skills when advising gifted African American students on college and career planning (Ford & Harris, 1999; Grantham & Ford, 2003) so that their actions or behaviors are not perceived and received as discriminatory or racist. If teachers, as well as counselors, hold stereotypes about the students to whom they are working, whether they are same race or different race from the students, they are less likely to create a cultural responsive learning or counseling environment (Day-Vines, Patton, Baytops, 2003; Ford &

Grantham, 2003). By taking courses at area colleges and universities, attending multicultural workshops and conferences offered by professional associations, and subscribing to publications that address issues of diversity, teachers and guidance counselors can learn more effective ways to counsel students on their future college and career paths.

A fifth way for higher education to build stronger partnerships with schools is through student affairs departments working with academic departments, employers, high school guidance departments, and high school and college students to develop and implement more experiential learning programs. Student affairs can take a leading role in creating these opportunities for high school students because they have models in place, such as, internship experiences, research experiences, living learning programs, leadership experiences, study abroad, international experiences, alternative spring break programs, volunteer experiences, and community service-learning programs. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) 2011 employer survey, employers are more likely to hire students who have had an internship. College students can serve as mentors/advisors for high school students as they participate in experiential learning opportunities by helping them to reflect, understand, and articulate how these opportunities help to contribute to a diverse democracy as well as complement their high school and college experiences, while making their transition to college smoother.

Participants disclosed the importance of research and internships, as well as international, work, and volunteer experiences that influenced the college preparation process. Strategically planning these experiences can help students make connections between challenging high school coursework and college coursework as well as help

students to learn more about college life, career paths, and intended majors prior to entering college.

Particularly in regards to career planning, employers are concerned that college students have strong experiential learning experiences; however, students do not know how to articulate these experiences to make meaningful connections between what they learn about themselves during the experience to the jobs for which they are applying. By student affairs developing and implementing partnerships with academic departments, employers, guidance counselors, and high school students, students will not only participate in these opportunities to include on their college applications, but they will also learn to answer contextually meaningful questions to stimulate critical thinking, help advance student learning, and enhance self-discovery to present oneself to college admissions and scholarship committees as well as future employers.

### Recommendations for Further Research

Additional research is needed on the college preparation process for middle-class, high-achieving, African American students. Although Fries-Britt (2002), Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007), and Harper (2005) have done extensive research on African American high-achievers and their success while in college, limited research has been conducted on middle-class, high-achieving, African American students' precollege experiences that prepare them for college. Additionally, most scholarly research on African American students is conducted from a deficit lens, focusing only on students' weaknesses and deficiencies or conducting research only on students from low-income backgrounds (Mortenson Research Seminar, 2001; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). To move away from a deficit mindset so that more can be learned about this specific population of

students, research must be broadened to include the diverse school, community, and family experiences that middle-class, high-achieving, students utilize to maintain high achievement so that they experience continued success in college.

**Increase Research on Community Influences: Church or Religious Affiliations**

To understand the college preparation process for these students, more research should be conducted on life outside the classroom as well as community influences (e.g., church, area businesses, organizations, and work and volunteer experiences), specifically church influences. Since the founding of Black churches, at the center of these institutions' missions has been to serve in the role of offering spiritual, community, and educational guidance for its members to overcome racial discrimination and to be treated equal in an inequitable society (Foster, 2009; Green-Powell, Hilton, & Joseph, 2011). Prior research on how religious influences impact academic success among Black students found that students who participated in more religious activities were more likely to report higher grades in school (Toldson & Anderson, 2010). Although this finding is not directly related to influencing the college preparation process, its relevancy to the topic is worth recognizing because there is a relationship between participation in various religious activities and high achievement, which the participants in the study acknowledged influenced their college preparation process. For many, when not in school or with their families, these church experiences occupied their extra time so that they learned to manage their time wisely and did not engage in activities that impeded their success. Fifty years after the Civil Rights Movement, Black churches have not forgotten their institutional commitment to offer educational guidance to ensure that members contribute to society and serve as equals to their White peers. Although participants did

not state why their churches instituted college planning for young members, it was clear that  through their leaders' actions and behaviors, they thought encouraging students and helping them to take the necessary steps to plan for a college education would improve their lives after high school as well as their career options.

Most of the participants indicated that their churches played an important role in their college preparation process.  Churches as well as other community influences helped participants in: (a) developing strong networks with individuals who ensured they met college requirements and met college deadlines, (b) being able to apply classroom knowledge to practical research, internship, and work and volunteer experiences that helped them navigate the college planning process better, and (c) developing mentoring relationships that they still used during college as well as learning how to develop new mentoring relationships while in college so they could continue to be high-achievers at Burroughs University. In places of worship, church leaders recognized the academic and leadership potential in young parishioners and offered the guidance needed to navigate the college preparation process successfully. Participants acknowledged that by utilizing these resources, they met application and scholarship deadlines, learned about scholarships, as well as gained valuable information to network and to speak with members who had experience writing college admissions essays and letters of recommendation and who could serve as mentors in their fields of interest. Churches were proactive in having ministries available that went beyond only meeting students' spiritual needs. These ministries also met students' educational needs by making sure they provided the steps to keep students on track to a higher education.

**Increase Research and Outreach on Parents' Knowledge on Financing a College Education**

To understand the college preparation process for these students, more research should be conducted on parents' knowledge about creating a financial plan for a college education (Cooper, 2009; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). As stated above, high-achievers in the study took out loan amounts ranging from $20,000 to $60,000. Oftentimes, participants expressed not knowing how they were going to pay for the next semester of college, which indicated that parents had not prepared to pay for college tuition, room and board, and other fees. The discussion about paying for a college education was absent, even for students whose parents started talking about college as early as elementary school. Even though parents seemed to spend a considerable amount of time nurturing academic excellence, supporting extracurricular activities, making sure their children completed college applications, and going on college visitations prior to college, parents did not spend the same amount of time on investing in financial resources or financial aid workshops to ensure that high-achievers graduated from college debt-free.

**Increase Research on Fathers, Father Figures, and Male Family Members**

Finally, to understand the college preparation process for middle-class, high-achieving, African American students, more research should be conducted on the role of other family members, specifically, African American fathers and father figures, brothers, and uncles. In the study, these family members participated actively in the college planning process. In several studies, African American men have not been shown in a positive light in higher education or in society (Howard & Flennaugh, 2011; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Kim, 2011; Strayhorn, 2010); however, in my dissertation, participants

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acknowledged the important role that these individuals had in offering words of encouragement, serving as role models by being involved inside and outside their schools, and assisting in the financial aid process.

**Conclusion**

   The purpose of this study was to understand how high-achieving, middle-class, African American students prepared for college utilizing school, community, and family resources.  By conducting a qualitative analysis, participants shared in-depth stories about how these three factors, as well as their race and class, influenced or impeded the college preparation process. After analyzing the data and reviewing the findings, there is still work to be done on studying this population of students. By acknowledging the complex experiences and backgrounds that high-achieving, middle-class, African American students experience prior to college, higher education institutions can enhance partnerships at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels to ensure that families and communities are prepared to help students plan for college. Adequately preparing high-ability, middle-class, African American students for college can place them in positions of power beginning in their first year through graduation by obtaining college credits in high school to obtaining full scholarships to graduating from college debt-free.

Appendix A: Personal Phone Call Script

Greeting (Good Morning or Good Afternoon)!

My name is Stacey Brown, and I am a doctoral candidate in the College Student Personnel program at the University of Maryland College Park. I am calling in reference to an email letter I sent two weeks ago regarding my dissertation topic. I will be conducting a study on high-achieving, middle-class, African American students' college preparation process. In the email I asked you to nominate and send contact information (name, email address, and telephone number) for students who meet the selection criteria for my study. These students will be sent a follow-up letter via email by **(insert deadline)**. I have chosen you because you work closely with African American students through **(insert name of the nominator's department, program, or organization)**.

I am calling to ensure that you received the email, to answer any questions that you may have about the study, and to find out if you would like to nominate students for this study. If so, feel free to share their names and contact information with me at this time or you can send this information to me via email, sbrown2@umd.edu. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support!

Appendix B: Nominator Letter for Participant Request

Researchers' Address
Date
Nominators' Address
Dear (Nominators' Name):

Thank you in advance for agreeing to nominate students for my dissertation study on **the college preparation process of high-achieving, middle-class, African American undergraduate students.** I have chosen you because you work closely with African American students through (**insert name of the nominator's department, program, or organization)**. The purpose of my study will be to understand how high-achieving, middle-class, African American students prepare for college.

I am asking you to nominate and send contact information (name, email address, and telephone number) for students who meet the selection criteria for my study via email by **(insert deadline)**. The selection criteria is as follows: (a) African American students whose parents were born in the United Sates, (b) have maintained a minimum high school and college cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.0, (c) taken a college preparatory curriculum that may include, but is not limited to, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and Honors courses, and (d) been involved in school and community organizations where they may have held leadership positions outside of the classroom.

For my study, students will complete a demographic survey, one interview, a focus group session, and submit one personal document (personal essay to be admitted into Maryland or the program or organization that nominated them for study). The approximate time commitment for participants is 3 hours over a two-month time frame.
Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support!

Sincerely,


Stacey Brown                          Stephen John Quaye, Ph.D.
Doctoral Candidate                    Assistant Professor & Stacey Brown's
University of Maryland                 Advisor
Sbrown2@umd.edu                        University of Maryland
202-271-8148                           3214 Benjamin Building
                                       College Park, MD 20742
                                       sjquaye@umd.edu
                                       (301) 405-8431

Appendix C: Email Letter to Nominated Students

Dear **(Insert Participant's Name):**

My name is Stacey Brown. I am a doctoral student in the College Student Personnel Program at the University of Maryland College Park. I am completing my dissertation on **(insert title of study). (insert nominator's name and organization)** has nominated you for this study based on your academic success in high school. This letter will explain the nature of my study, the time commitment, and what you can expect of me as the researcher.

My study will focus on how high-achieving, middle-class, African American students' describe their college preparation process. You will complete a demographic survey, a 45-60-minute interview, a 60-minute focus group, and submit one personal document (resume or personal statement submitted when you applied to UM or to get into the program that nominated you for the study). Interviews will be held at a convenient location for you. I will ask you to bring the personal document to the interview. You will receive a lunch/dinner gift card as a small token of my appreciation for participating in the study.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Maryland. Upon the conclusion of my research, I will give you a report of the study's findings via email to verify that the information is a reflection of your perspectives expressed in your interviews, focus groups, and personal documents. I propose to start collecting data in April 2011.

I would appreciate your participation in my study. Your participation in this study will add a depth of knowledge on high-achieving, middle-class, African American students. Please complete the attached demographic survey via email by **(insert deadline).** By completing and returning the survey this will let me know if you are interested in participating. I will contact you **via telephone to** confirm an interview time and location. Thank you for your time and consideration of this endeavor.

Sincerely,

Stacey Brown                                  Stephen John Quaye, Ph.D.
Doctoral Candidate                            Assistant Professor & Stacey Brown's
Advisor College of Education                         College of Education
University of Maryland                        University of Maryland
Sbrown2@umd.edu                               3214 Benjamin Building
202-271-8148                                  College Park, MD 20742
                                              sjquaye@umd.edu
                                              (301) 405-8431

## Appendix D: Demographic Survey

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

**Name:** _____     **Pseudonym:**_____

**Race:** _____ _____     **Male** _____          **Female**_____

**Cell Phone Number:**_____

**Best Days Times For Interviews: M T W TH F     9AM-12PM   1PM-5PM   6PM-9PM**

1st Choice_____, 2nd
Choice_____,
3rd Choice_____

**Would you be interested in participating in a focus group on college preparation? ____ Yes      _____
No**

## COMMUNITY/NEIGHBORHOOD INFORMATION

**City:** _____     **State:** _____

**Home Location (please check one):** _____     **Urban**          _____**Suburban**          _____**Rural**

**Was your community or neighborhood located within 10 miles of a college/university? _____Yes
_____No**

**What did your community/neighborhood do to prepare you for college? Circle all that apply.**

O held college preparatory workshops

O reviewed college essays

O planned college visitations/tours

O planned college fairs

O held college days

O shared college preparatory programs

O Other _____

O shared standardized test dates and information

O shared scholarships and grants

O made sure I took a college preparatory curriculum

O reviewed final college application packet

O connected me with college alumni

O did not help with college preparation

## HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE INFORMATION

**High School (HS) Name and Address:**

_____

**Was your school located within 10 miles of a college/university? _____Yes or _____No**

**HS Type (please check one): _____ Public        _____Private _____Public Charter**
**HS Location (please check one): _____Urban _____Suburban          _____Rural**
**HS Cumulative Grade Point Average: _____**

**HS Curriculum (check all that apply):**
_____ **College track** _____**Advanced Placement** _____ **International Baccalaureate** _____ **Honors**
_____**Technical** _____
**Other, please specify:**

_____

**What did your teachers do to prepare you for college? Circle all that apply.**

O planned college preparatory workshops

O shared standardized test dates and information

O reviewed college essays

O planned college visitations

O planned college fairs

O held conferences with teachers and parents

O shared college preparatory programs

O Other _____

O taught a college preparatory course

O shared scholarships and grants

O made sure I took a college preparatory curriculum

O reviewed final college application packet

O connected me with college alumni

O did not help with college preparation

**What did your guidance counselors do to prepare you for college? Circle all that apply.**

O planned college preparatory workshops

O shared standardized test dates and information

O reviewed college essays

O planned college visitations

O planned college fairs

O held conferences with teachers and parents

O shared college preparatory programs

O Other _____

O taught a college preparatory course

O shared scholarships and grants

O made sure I took a college preparatory curriculum

O reviewed final college application packet

O connected me with college alumni

O did not help with college preparation

**Please list high school organizations, clubs, and sports that you were involved (Or attach high school resume and/or college personal statement):**

_____

_____

**Please list community, social, or cultural organizations that you were involved in outside of high school (Or attach high school resume and/or college personal statement):**

_____

_____

**College Cumulative Grade Point Average:** _____

**Classification (please check one): _____ Freshman _____Sophomore _____ Junior _____Senior**

## PARENT/FAMILY INFORMATION

**Mother's Country of Origin:**_____

**Father's Country of Origin:**_____

**How many siblings do you have?**_____

**What is the highest level of education of your mother or primary female guardian?**

O Elementary school only

O Some high school

O High school diploma

O Associate's degree

O Some college

O Bachelor's degree

O Some graduate school

O Master's degree

O Ph.D./Professional degree

O Unknown

**What is the highest level of education of your father or primary male guardian?**

O Elementary school only                   O Bachelor's degree
O Some high school                       O Some graduate school
O High school diploma                 O Master's degree
O Associate's degree                  O Ph.D./Professional degree
O Some college                         O Unknown

**Parent's Class Status (circle):**      Upper middle (professionals/white collar/managers)
                                        Lower middle (semiprofessionals/technical/lower level management)

**Mother's/ Primary Female Guardian**
**Occupation/Job:**_____

**Father's /Primary Male Guardian Occupation/Job:**_____

**What did your parents/family do to prepare you for college? Circle all that apply. (More choices on next page.)**

O paid for standardized test preparation courses      O attended college preparatory workshops
O reviewed college essays                           O found scholarships and grants
O visited colleges                                 O made sure I took a college preparatory curriculum
O hired a private counselor/tutor                 O reviewed final college application packet
O held conferences with teachers and counselors      O paid for my college education
O enrolled me in college preparatory programs        O did not help with college preparation
O provided college resources in the house
O Other _____

**How do you pay for college (please check all that apply)?** _____ **parents** _____**loans** _____**scholarships** _____**work study** _____**job**

**Do your parents** _____**own their home or** _____**rent their home (please check one)?**

**What is your approximate combined yearly family income?**

O under $20,000                            O $60,000-$79,999
O $20,000-$39,999                     O $80,000-$99,999
O $40,000-$49,999                     O $100,000-$149,999
O $50,000-$59,999                     O $150,000 +
                                         O Unknown

Return to:
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Program Director
Education, Public Health
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Appendix E: Interview Questions

**Opening Comments:** Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study to help researchers, educators, and families to understand how African American students from high-achieving, middle-class backgrounds prepare for college. Your personal stories will add depth to a body of literature that has been understudied. I will begin with general questions about how you understand the terms high-achieving and middle-class. Next, I will ask you open ended questions about factors that influence or serve as barriers to the college preparation process.

**General Questions**

1. How would you define high-achieving? Would you describe yourself as a high achiever? Why or why not?
2. How would you define middle-class? Do you describe yourself and your family as middle class? Why or why not?
3. Elaborate on experiences that helped you know or learn that college was an expectation or was not an expectation from an 'early age.'

**Factors that Influence (Negative or Positive Influences) the College Preparation Process**

1. On your demographic survey, you shared that your parents/family………
    Probe: Elaborate on how your parents/family influenced your understanding of the college preparation process.
    Probe: If parents/family members did not influence the college preparation process, please explain.
2. On your demographic survey you shared that your teachers and guidance counselors…………….
    Probe: Elaborate on how your teachers' and guidance counselors' experiences influenced your understanding of the college preparation process.
    Probe: If your teachers and guidance counselors did not influence the college preparation process, please explain.
    Probe: What other school factors influenced or impeded the college preparation process?
3. On your demographic survey you shared that your community offered the following resources and support…………………….
    Probe: Elaborate on how your community/neighborhood (where you lived) resources and support influenced your understanding of the college preparation process?
    Probe: If your community did not offer resources and support, please explain.
4. Based on factors addressed in questions 1-3, what role do you feel your race and social class played in understanding the college preparation process? What role do you feel race and social class did not play in understanding the college preparation process?

5. What other factors (church, international/study abroad experiences, summer programs, social and cultural organizations and events) played a role in understanding the college preparation process? Please explain.

Appendix F: Focus Group Questions

**Opening Comments:** Once again thank you for agreeing to participate in this study to help researchers and educators understand how African American students from high-achieving, middle-class backgrounds prepare for college. This focus group session will add depth to a body of literature that has been understudied.

1. Breaking the ice question: Share their name, major, future career path, and what you did over the summer.
2. Why did you choose to participate in this study? How did you hear about this study?
3. What voice or voices do you want others to hear about your college preparation process?
4. What voice or voices do you want others to hear about being a high-achiever, middle-class, and African American?
5. What generation college student are you? (verification and confirmation question)
6. What did you believe about going to college? What messages did you receive about going to college?
7. Have your feelings changed or remained the same about those messages that you received from others?
8. Who or what experience was most influential in helping you to understand the college preparation process? Please explain. (verification and confirmation question)
9. What were barriers or challenges that you encountered when you were planning for college (verification and confirmation question)?
10. How did you go about choosing colleges or the UMD?
11. How were your parents involved in high school? (This question was included to get beyond just the college preparation process?)
12. Talk about how and if your parents or families introduced you or surrounded you with a network of college-goers or alumni of college goers? (confirmation and verification question)
13. How early did you start planning for college? (confirmation and verification question)
14. What influence do you think your middle school had on college preparation?
15. How did you feel about your class status and what you could or could not achieve? What resources were you exposed to, what networks were you exposed to?
16. Were your high schools ranked high or low, middle within your states? How did you choose your high schools?
17. Did your high school offer the classes that they needed to get into college, and if not, could you take them at other high schools or colleges in the area?
18. Talk more about your guidance counselors and the college preparation process? (confirmation and verification question)
19. What do you think has helped you to maintain high achievement?
20. Did you ever feel like you did not perform to your highest ability?
21. Is there anything you feel that I left out about your college preparation process; about being a high-achiever, middle-class, or African American?

Appendix G: Word Tables

**Research Question One:**
**How do high-achieving, middle class, African American students understand their college preparation process?**

| **Name** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Planning Early-Elementary and Middle School (curriculum and financial planning)** | | | | | |
| **Parent Discussions and Expectations** | | | | | |
| **College Preparatory Programs (Educational Talent Search, summer programs)** | | | | | |
| **College Research** | | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **College Visitations** | | | | | |
| **Expectations From Others (Teachers, Family, Friends)** | | | | | |
| **Standardized Tests (PSAT)** | | | | | |
| **Extracurricular Activities** | | | | | |

**Research Question Two:**
**How do school, community, and family influence or impede the college preparation process for high-achieving, middle-class African American?**

| Name/Contextual Influence | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| School Type | | | | | |
| Curriculum | | | | | |
| Teachers | | | | | |
| Guidance Counselors | | | | | |
| Peers | | | | | |
| Parents | | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Community/** <br> **Neighborhood** | | | | |
| **Extracurricular Activities** | | | | |
| **Churches** | | | | |

**Research Question Three:**

**How do race and class influence or impede the college preparation process for high-achieving, middle-class, African American students?**

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Name/Race and Class Influence** | | | | | |
| **Expectations from Teachers and Guidance Counselors** | | | | | |
| **School Choice** | | | | | |
| **Neighborhood Choice** | | | | | |
| **Teacher Choice/Certified Teachers** | | | | | |
| **Parent Educational Level** | | | | | |
| **Tracking Decisions** | | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cultural Capital** | | | | | |
| **Social Capital** | | | | | |
| **Human Capital** | | | | | |
| **Economic Capital** | | | | | |

Appendix H: Participant Table

| Participant | Gender | Generation Status | Class Status | H.S. Location | H.S. GPA | School Type | Mother's Education | Father's Education | Financial |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Patty | F | FG | M | Suburban | 4 | Public, PB, Magnet | Masters | H.S. Diploma | L, S, F, J |
| Kerry | F | SG | LM | Suburban | 3.6 | Public, PW | Two Bachelors | Associate | L, S, F, J |
| Kelly | F | TG | UM | Suburban | 3.8 | Public, PW | Associate | Bachelor | L, S |
| Dee | F | FG | UM | Suburban | 3.81 | Public, PB, Magnet | Associate | Bachelor | L, S, F, J |
| Kevin | M | SG | LM | Suburban | 3.5 | Public, PB, Magnet | Bachelors | Unknown | S |
| Rick | M | FG | LM | Suburban | 3.5 | Public, PB, Magnet | Some College | H.S. Diploma | S |
| Ann | F | SG | UM | Suburban | 4 | Public, PW | Bachelors | PhD | S |
| Idris | F | SG | LM | Urban | 4.1 | Public, PB, Magnet | Associate | H.S. Diploma | L, S, F, J |
| Amber | F | SG | M | Urban | 4.5 | Public, PB, Magnet | Some College | Some College | L, S, F, J |
| Raymond | M | SG | UM | Suburban | 3.23 | Private, PB | Some College | Masters | L, F |

**KEY**
**Gender:**               Female-F          Male-M

**Generational Status:** First Generation-FG  Second Generation-SG
                              Third Generation-TG

**Class Status:**       Lower Middle-LM    Middle-M         Upper Middle-UM

**School Type:**       Predominantly Black-PB
                      Predominantly White-PW
**Financial Aid:**     Loans-L                   Scholarships-S
                      Family/Parents-F         J-Job

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