

ABSTRACT

TITLE OF DISSERTATION: NAVIGATING COLLEGE SEARCH AND CHOICE: HOW IMMIGRANT CAPITAL PAVES A PATH TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS OF COLOR

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Immigrant youth represent one of the fastest growing and most diverse groups in the U.S. K-16 system. Though immigrant youth generally report high educational aspirations, they face multiple interrelated obstacles to postsecondary enrollment. Despite barriers, data indicate that immigrants are going to college and in some cases are enrolling at a rate higher than their non-immigrant counterparts. Previous research highlights multiple forms of capital, including community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), that immigrants who share a racial or ethnic background leverage to access higher education. However, few studies have examined the extent to which immigrants, across race and ethnicity, engage similar resources to navigate the college choice process. This study sheds light on the pre-college experiences of a racially diverse sample of 1.5-generation immigrants who, at the time of this study, were first-year students at a 4-year institution.

The following research questions guided this study: (a) How do low-income immigrant students of color engage in the college search and choice process? (b) How do various forms of capital and community resources shape students' college choice process. Through semistructured interviews, 10 Asian, Black, and Latinx immigrants shared detailed accounts of their family

background, migration, and transition to U.S. schools; development of college aspirations; and college search, application, and decision-making experiences. Participants also discussed the tools and resources they used, individuals who assisted them, and how they made sense of their experiences, significant moments, and turning points in their journey.

Findings reveal multiple forms of capital that developed within participants' immigrant families: capital that fostered an early predisposition toward college and enabled participants to navigate a complex college application process, during the COVID-19 pandemic, to ultimately gain admission to multiple postsecondary institutions. Findings from this study suggest *immigrant capital* as a unifying concept capturing skills, assets, and perspectives immigrants use to achieve their educational goals. Findings also have implications for future research, policy, and practice.

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A PATH TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS OF
COLOR

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DEDICATION

For my parents: Claude and Evelyn (Williams) Malcolm

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I began to first identify with the term “immigrant” in my mid-twenties while working as a middle school counselor serving students and families in Silver Spring, Maryland. According to recent data (McCann, 2022), Silver Spring is the fifth most ethnically diverse city in the United States. The boundaries of our school enrollment zone spanned East African, Southeast Asian, and Latin American enclaves that regularly welcomed recent migrants to their vibrant and close-knit communities. As I got to know my students and their families, I was humbled by their openness and trust, as well as their confidence that our school would take great care of them. My students experienced immense pressure to do well in school, an expectation that was often illustrated in their parents’ or caregivers’ exclamations: “We moved to this country so that you can have a better life!” They were also pressured to follow the traditions and values of their homeland’s culture. Parents wanted their children to make the most of the educational opportunities offered in the United States, but not become “too American” and lose their sense of cultural identity and ethnic pride. The mission was clear: Dream big. Reach for the stars. Work hard in school and remain connected firmly to their cultural roots.

Although my parents were from Jamaica and moved to the United States decades earlier, the words uttered by the parents I served to their children were familiar to me. These words mirrored the advice, lessons, and guidance I received as a child. The conversations I had with my students’ families brought back a flood of personal memories: stern lectures emphasizing the importance of education, family stories of struggle and sacrifice to make it in America, and clear boundaries on what I should and should not do as a respectable West Indian Adventist girl. I was also socialized within an extended family of Caribbean “aunties” and “uncles” who embraced a similar cultural narrative of sacrifice, pride, and achievement.

Like my own narrative, I wondered whether my students' efforts were largely driven by their experiences growing up in an immigrant household. It could be that my students carried with them a sense of optimism that, no matter their troubles, their hard work in school would pay off. Or perhaps they were motivated by a responsibility to honor their parents or caregivers for sacrifices made to leave their homeland and move to a foreign country. Or maybe their family or co-ethnic community instilled in them a sense of cultural pride that anchored their effort in school. Whether they were from Vietnam, Guatemala, Eritrea, or somewhere else, I wondered whether there was something about being an immigrant that contributed to their academic success.

Driven by these personal and professional experiences, this dissertation explores how being an immigrant shapes the college choice process for foreign-born students of color, defined as students who identify racially as Asian, Black, or Hispanic/Latin American/Latina/o/x. More specifically, to what extent do immigrant youth, across race and ethnicity, draw upon resources within their immigrant identity and experience to access information about postsecondary education and navigate the college application process? In this introductory chapter, I first provide an overview of recent data and trends in postsecondary enrollment of immigrant youth. Then, I briefly discuss the field of college access and choice and outline key barriers immigrant students may face in their pursuit of higher education. Subsequently, I introduce the theoretical frameworks that guide my study and preview my research questions and design. Next, I contextualize the significance of college access and choice for immigrant youth within the current sociohistorical landscape. This chapter concludes with a list of key terms and definitions applied throughout the study to frame my understanding of this topic.

College Enrollment and the “Immigrant Advantage”

National statistics show more students are choosing to attend college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018a), the total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting institutions increased by 28% between 2000 and 2016. During this time, statistics also show an increase in postsecondary enrollment across racial groups (Espinosa et al., 2019; NCES, 2018b) with much of the growth attributed to gains in the enrollment of Latinx¹ students (Espinosa et al., 2019). However, long-standing enrollment gaps persist between Asians and Whites and their Latinx and Black counterparts (Espinosa et al., 2019). In 2016, the total college enrollment rate among 18-24-year-olds was higher for Asians (58%) and Whites (42%) than for Latinx (39%) and Blacks (36%). The White-Black gap in total college enrollment reported in 2016 is similar to the gap in 2000 (NCES, 2018b). Additionally, an examination of racial subgroups reveals varied outcomes for Asian and Latinx students based on ethnicity. For example, the average college enrollment rate for Asian 18-24-year-olds ranges from 78% for Chinese students to 23% for Burmese students. Among Latinx subgroups, Chilean students enroll at a rate of 64% compared to 27% for Honduran students (NCES, 2018b). Therefore, despite gains in the national college participation rate, statistics illustrate continued disparities in college access across racial and ethnic categories.

In addition to race and ethnicity, extensive research highlights the inequities in college access for low-income² students (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; McPherson

¹ I use the term Latinx throughout this paper as a gender-neutral term to describe populations of Latin American origin or decent. This term will be used to describe populations referred to in the literature as Latino, Latina, and Hispanic.

² Low-income student is defined as an individual whose family’s income is below \$25,000. This is the approximate cut-off point at which students lose eligibility for the Federal Pell Grant (Pell Institute, 2008)

& Schapiro, 1998) and students whose parents did not complete college (known in the literature as first-generation college students; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Thirty-seven percent of students from low-income households enroll in college (Balemian & Feng, 2013); this rate is even lower among Latinx, Black, and Native-American youth (NCES, 2016). Results from a nationally representative cohort of 10th grade students indicate that 24% of students whose parents had no college experience later enrolled in college; the enrollment rate of students with college-educated parents for this same cohort was 43% (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Decades of research illustrates that college-going disparities are inextricably linked with both racial and socioeconomic variables.

Immigrant students, one of the fastest growing groups in U.S. primary and secondary schools (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020; Camarota et al., 2017; Pong & Zeiser, 2012), are likely to be students of color, come from low-income households, and have parents with limited college experience (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020; Baum & Flores, 2011; Enchautegui, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Erisman & Looney, 2007). Yet, they also report high educational aspirations (Porche et al., 2016; Wells, 2010), high levels of academic achievement (Conger & Atwell, 2012; Pong & Zeiser, 2012), and strong parental support for college-going (Auerbach, 2004; Griffin et al., 2012; Kao & Tienda, 1995). With the rising immigrant population in K-12 schools, it is important for practitioners and scholars to understand their aspirations for life in the United States, unique needs, the barriers they face, and the resources they possess and leverage toward college enrollment (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Kim & Díaz, 2013).

Like their counterparts with generational ties to the United States, low-income immigrant youth of color contend with socioeconomic barriers to college enrollment. They also face additional barriers: obstacles that multiply the systemic disadvantage they face in accessing a

college education. For example, youth born abroad must adjust to U.S. cultural norms while transitioning to and navigating unfamiliar primary and secondary school systems to get to higher education (Kim & Díaz, 2013). Immigrant youth are likely to enter the United States with limited English proficiency (Bleakley & Chin, 2004) and may hold an immigration status that limits their eligibility for financial aid (Gonzales, 2012). As a result of these and other factors, immigrant youth generally enroll in and complete college at a lower rate than their native-born peers (Kim & Díaz, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Interestingly, there are exceptions to this general finding. When disaggregating statistics by factors such as country of origin, age at migration, and U.S. residency status, the literature shows higher college enrollment for some groups of foreign-born youth (Baum & Flores, 2011; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Hao & Ma, 2012). For example, students from Asia and Africa are more likely to enroll in college than their counterparts from Latin America (Erisman & Looney, 2007). Additionally, youth who migrate to the United States prior to 13 years of age have higher levels of educational attainment than those who arrive as teenagers (Kim & Díaz, 2013). With regard to resident status and college enrollment, 47% of immigrants who became naturalized U.S. citizens enrolled in college versus 22% of noncitizens (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). These varied outcomes show the complexity of college access for immigrant youth and illustrate a need for greater understanding in this area.

Scholars (e.g., Hao & Ma, 2012; Pérez, 2012; Pong & Zeiser, 2012) have linked the high educational attainment of some immigrant youth to a phenomenon known as “immigrant advantage” (Kao & Tienda, 1995), whereby children and adolescents achieve at a more optimal rate than their U.S.-born counterparts. An advantage may seem counter-intuitive based on the various challenges immigrant youth face in adjusting to a new country and culture (Coll &

Marks, 2012). Yet, an immigrant advantage is noted in studies across multiple educational domains, such as academic engagement (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009), educational attitudes and values (Aretakis et al., 2015; Greenman, 2013), high school persistence (Perreira et al., 2006), college aspirations (Porche et al., 2016; Wells, 2010), and educational attainment (Lauderdale & Heckman, 2017).

The early development of high educational aspirations may be a key factor explaining an immigrant advantage in college enrollment. Researchers (e.g., Conger & Atwell, 2012; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Louie, 2004; Pierre-Louis, 2022; Pong & Zeiser, 2012) have attributed students' high aspirations to immigrant parents who, through socialization, transmit norms and values conducive to academic achievement, such as a high regard for education; strong work ethic; sense of purpose that motivates achievement; and collective goal of upward mobility.

Additionally, college aspirations may be influenced by the presence of a close-knit social network of family and non-familial agents who encourage, expect, and even demand academic achievement (Glick & White, 2004; Hao & Ma, 2012; Imoagene, 2017). In fact, in some ethnic communities, a college education is considered a cultural norm, as this quote illustrates:

“Education was the thing if you are a Nigerian, because to not get an education is almost a shameful thing....It is expected in our culture that we do well and succeed.” (Imoagene, 2017, p. 80).

Aspirations for postsecondary education may also relate to a sense of optimism immigrant youth and their families have regarding their opportunities for success and upward mobility in America (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Louie, 2005; Pérez, 2009; Perreira et al., 2006). This optimism often stems from a belief in the mythical “American Dream” – that hard work, persistence and determination will pay off and that each successive generation will be better off

than the one before it (Knight et al., 2016; Lopez et al., 2018). Many immigrants transmit this belief to their children by intentionally and explicitly interweaving themes of sacrifice and hope for upward mobility into their family's migration story (Ashbourne et al., 2014; Campa, 2010; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). "My parents came from the Philippines and when they came here, they didn't have that much money, but they always worked hard to get where they are today and they always told me that you should always strive for a better education and exceed what we have now" (Surla & Poon, 2015, p. 8). As this quote suggests, the academic success of immigrant youth may stem from their parents' encouragement to use education as a vehicle to a better life. In fact, a student's primary reason for pursuing a college education may be to repay their parents for their hard work and sacrifice (Fuligni, 1997; Pérez, 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Sue & Okazaki, 1990).

In many ways, the socialization and educational aspirations of many low-income immigrant youth of color uniquely position them to pursue and succeed in higher education. While these students may have limited access to resources traditionally associated with college-going, such as financial wealth, college-educated parents, or a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, resources within their immigrant family and community may serve as protective factors against poor achievement and outcomes (Coll & Marks, 2012; Perreira et al., 2006) and facilitate postsecondary readiness and enrollment. In this regard, family and community values may be viewed as assets or resources embedded in immigrants' sociocultural experience that helps students succeed (Coll & Marks, 2012). Exploration of these values and assets shift the perspective from what immigrant students and their families lack to the cultural wealth they possess and employ to reach university gates. Consequently, an asset-based perspective may

reveal sources and forms of capital that may be overlooked by White- and middle-class-centered theories and frameworks that seek to explain college-going.

College Access and Choice

The terms *college access* and *college choice* are often used in tandem to reflect a broad body of scholarship and practice that describes the precollege experiences of students and the resources needed to bolster their path to postsecondary education. *College access* is defined as “a field of work in which programs and initiatives focus on assisting individuals, often from segments of the population that are traditionally underrepresented in institutions of higher education, to pursue and complete education beyond high school” (National College Access Network, 2011). *College choice* typically refers to a student’s individual precollege experience: a multistage developmental process that involves a student forming college aspirations, searching for and applying to colleges, making a college decision, and enrolling in a selected institution (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989).

Overwhelmingly, the literature (e.g., Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Espinosa et al., 2019; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Perna, 2006; Tierney et al., 2005) demonstrates that for underrepresented students, one cannot separate the individualized developmental process of college choice from the social and structural mechanisms that support or constrain choice. To further illustrate this point, I will refer to a metaphor used by Edward St. John and colleagues (St. John et al., 1996) in their seminal paper *The Nexus Between College Choice and Persistence*. St. John and colleagues describe college access and choice as branches of a tree.

As long as we focus on the branches one at a time, treating them as separate and distinct, then we develop an understanding of the branches, but risk missing the integral interconnections. However, when we take a step back for a moment and focus on the tree,

we can see the branches of inquiry...are interconnected, that they are both parts of the broader process of student choice (p. 176).

I argue that this perspective presents an important way to examine the precollege experiences of immigrant students. Like the interconnected branches of a tree, a unique interplay of both individual and social mechanisms influences the extent to which immigrant students of color with limited financial means successfully navigate the complex pathway to college. For example, a student may aspire to attend college because she was raised in a family that values education and views higher education as a way to honor the migration sacrifices of her parents. However, this student's aspirations are not enough: they are simply one branch of the tree. Structural factors, as well as how these factors interact with her precollege aspirations, will likely determine whether she enrolls in college or ends up on another path after high school. In other words, this student's aspirations may be fostered or hindered based on the availability of college preparation resources at her high school, such as financial aid counseling or college prep classes (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002; McDonough & Fann, 2007; Perna, 2006). Without these resources, this college-aspiring student may miss key financial aid deadlines or be tracked into a noncollege prep curriculum. In conclusion, if education scholars and practitioners aim to increase the rate at which immigrant students enroll in college, it is important to take a step back and examine both the individual assets and structural barriers that influence college choice.

Barriers to Higher Education

Immigrant students are likely to face distinct disadvantages on their path to college based on the following factors: transition and academic adjustment to U.S. schools; limited English language proficiency; and structural limitations to college enrollment and funding based on U.S.

residency status (Baum & Flores, 2017; Kim & Díaz, 2013; Erisman & Looney, 2007). Each factor in isolation may constrain a student's opportunity to go to college. Immigrant students often face a complex confluence of multiple barriers that profoundly impact their readiness for and access to higher education (Kim & Díaz, 2013). While a comprehensive exploration of these barriers is beyond the scope of this paper, understanding some common challenges faced by immigrant students of color can aid the exploration of the assets and resources students use to overcome them.

A key barrier for many immigrant youth is the process of adjusting from the school setting in their home country to the academic and social expectations of the U.S. education system. As primary and secondary education systems vary by country (Erisman & Looney, 2007), so does the extent to which youth access quality schooling in their country of origin. Some immigrant youth transition to U.S. schools with academic skills at or above grade-level standards (Erisman & Looney, 2007). Others enter schools with limited skills and achievement (Erisman & Looney, 2007), and approximately ten percent experience interrupted schooling during their migration experience that places them at long-term risk when compared with same-age peers (Potochnick, 2018). As a result, immigrant youth may struggle to adapt to and meet the local, state, and national academic benchmarks that align with secondary school completion and college readiness. Additionally, the educational systems from which youth transition may diverge greatly in terms of curriculum, instructional methods, course sequencing, diploma requirements, and postsecondary planning (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Wambu et al., 2017). Many immigrant families are unfamiliar with the precollege courses and college entrance exams that are required for postsecondary enrollment (Baum & Flores, 2008; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Kim & Díaz, 2013; Louie, 2005). Immigrant families may also be unaware of the eligibility

criteria and process for securing federal and state financial aid (Auerbach, 2004). Therefore, immigrant youth and their parents may miss out on critical steps in preparing for college, a multistep process that begins well before senior year of high school (Hossler et al., 1989).

Limited English skills present another barrier for immigrant youth whose primary language or language of school instruction was not English (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Kim & Díaz, 2013). Limited English proficiency is likely to affect a student's quality of learning in K-12 settings as well as their readiness for postsecondary curricula (Bleakley & Chin, 2004; Oropeza et al., 2010; Erisman & Looney, 2007). Additionally, high school students may be excluded from enrolling in college preparation courses, like Advanced Placement, due to the structure and academic pathway of the ESL (English for Speakers of other Languages) curricula (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Students may also struggle with passing mandatory standardized exams or achieving college-ready scores on the SAT or ACT (Erisman & Looney, 2007). Finally, the complex process of applying to college is compounded by limited access to college and financial aid information in the native language of youth and/or their parents (Ceja, 2006; Taylor, 2020). In multiple ways, immigrant youth are disadvantaged by educational and government systems that hinder access to the resources and information necessary for college readiness and enrollment.

Immigrant students often contend with barriers related to their residency status (Abrego, 2011; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Romo et al., 2018). Unlike the K-12 education system where public schools are free for students regardless of nativity or status, college is not free and involves an application process that all students must go through to gain admission. In some states, students who cannot show proof of citizenship or eligible noncitizenship (e.g., permanent residency) are excluded from enrolling in public colleges (Soltis & Shashahani, 2018). Even in

states without such restrictions, undocumented youth are ineligible for federal grants and loans that can greatly supplement college costs and increase affordability (Gonzales, 2012). Even immigrant youth who are U.S. citizens but have parents who are undocumented may be hesitant to apply to college or submit a federal financial aid application in fear that, if their parent's status is revealed, their parents will be at risk for deportation (Zatz & Rodriguez, 2015).

These barriers illustrate the structural mechanisms and intersecting power dynamics of race, social class, and nativity that shape K-12 inequities and restrict access to college for foreign-born students of color (Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2020; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Despite the aforementioned barriers, data indicate that students from immigrant households are going to college (NCES, 2012) and in some cases are enrolling at a rate higher than their non-immigrant peers (Keller & Tillman, 2008). To explain these findings, the literature (e.g., Auerbach, 2006; George Mwangi, 2015; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Louie, 2005) often highlights the role of family-mediated cultural and social capital in promoting postsecondary access for low-income immigrant-origin youth. Immigrant youth draw upon their parents' optimism and expectations to set college aspirations (Auerbach, 2006; Hofferth & Moon, 2016) and often seek non-parental agents who can share college knowledge and assist with planning (Martinez, 2012; Surla & Poon, 2015). In this manner, immigrant youth who contend with multiple and layered disadvantages in the education system benefit from trusting and affirming relationships with family members, peers, school personnel, and community mentors to negotiate the college choice process (Carey, 2016; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012).

To better understand the multiple forms of capital immigrants use on their path to college, I employ Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) student college choice model and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model offers a

multistage developmental approach to examine individual and social factors shaping college choice. This model describes the college choice process as unfolding in three stages: Predisposition (setting early aspirations for postsecondary education), Search (researching colleges and developing a “choice set”, or list of colleges of interest), and Choice (completing applications and selecting and enrolling in college) (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989). Yosso’s (2005) model offers an asset-based frame through which I can better understand immigrant students’ precollege experiences within the context of their familial, cultural, and community milieu. By focusing on community cultural wealth, my study will foreground the skills, knowledge, abilities, and social resources immigrant families of color possess and leverage to overcome barriers on their journey to higher education (Yosso, 2005). I also introduce *immigrant capital* as a concept that captures both tangible and intangible assets leveraged by foreign-born youth of color and their families to cope with, and counter, marginalization and oppressive structures in their new environment and succeed. While community cultural wealth and immigrant capital may not be valued by theories that uphold a White middle-class standard, they may be critical to understanding the college choice process for low-income immigrant Asian, Black, and Latinx youth – students whose socioeconomic circumstances may place them at risk for poor educational outcomes.

Problem Statement

Researchers (e.g., Carey, 2016; George Mwangi, 2015; Liou et al., 2009; Martinez, 2012; Surla & Poon, 2015) have engaged community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to explore the resources youth of color use to overcome barriers and achieve academic success. A few studies have specifically focused on the experiences of immigrant youth on their path to college. For instance, in their study of undocumented college graduates, Romo and colleagues (Romo et al.,

2018) found that during their precollege years, participants' academic efforts were largely fueled by their college-going aspirations and optimism for better opportunities in the future. Martinez (2012) examined the community social networks and internal strengths that Mexican American high school seniors drew upon to navigate the college choice process. Findings show how seniors utilized application support and advising from members of their church. Additionally, participants' college aspirations were driven in part by a desire to combat negative racial stereotypes and prove others wrong. While these studies highlight key factors that influence the college choice process for Latinx immigrant-origin youth, findings also reference factors that may be applicable across ethnic identity, such as the role that immigrant optimism (Auerbach, 2006; Kim & Gasman, 2011), ethnic capital (Louie, 2005), religious communities (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Park & Sharma, 2016; Regnerus, 2000), and resistance to racism (Imoagene, 2017) play in educational achievement. However, few studies have examined the extent to which low-income immigrant youth of color, across race and ethnicity, engage similar cultural wealth to navigate the college choice process.

There is also limited research on the Search stage of the college choice process, which presents a gap in understanding the experiences of precollege students at large (Hossler et al., 1989; Klasik et al., 2018; Myers & Myers, 2012). Securing accurate information about one's college options is a critical part of the college choice process, having implications for institutional fit, financial aid, postsecondary enrollment, and ultimately satisfaction with collegiate experiences (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). This gap in scholarship is problematic because immigrant youth are more likely than their native peers to be unfamiliar with the U.S. higher education system and have parents who also have a limited understanding of college options (Auerbach, 2004; Baum & Flores, 2008; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Kim & Díaz, 2013;

Louie, 2005). Thereby, promising students with high aspirations may have limited support with the critical and time-sensitive steps involved in researching colleges, developing a choice set, and completing college and scholarship applications (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989). Furthermore, immigrants may become discouraged as, through the college search and application process, they come to learn the limitations placed on their enrollment based on their resident status or English language proficiency (Dominguez et al., 2009; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Hernandez et al., 2010; Nienhusser et al., 2016). It is important for scholars and practitioners to understand how to best support immigrant youth with their college research, as this is an exercise when students, perhaps for the first time, assess their “fit” for college, rule in (and rule out) specific institutions, and in some instances rule in (or out) college altogether.

Purpose and Overview of Research Design

The purpose of this study was to understand the college choice process, focusing on the search and decision-making processes, of low-income immigrant high school students of color. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do low-income, first-generation immigrant students of color engage in the college search and choice process (e.g., “go about” accessing college information, developing their choice set, completing college applications, and making the college decision)?
 - a) What tools and resources do students use?
 - b) Who assists them and in what ways?
 - c) How are they making sense of their experiences, significant moments, and turning points and strategizing in this process?
2. How do various forms of capital and community resources shape students’ college choice process?

This research project was conducted as a narrative study, an approach that is “best for capturing detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Creswell, 2013, pp. 73-74). Narrative research typically highlights turning points that are presented within the telling of the story; these turning points represent events that mark a significant decision or change in the research participant’s narrative (Creswell, 2013). As part of this research, I invited ten immigrant college students in their first semester to share detailed accounts of their path to college and defining moments in their journey, such as when they first decided to pursue a college education or when they received their first college acceptance. To address the first research question, my interview protocol included prompts to identify individuals (such as family members, friends, or community mentors) who offered guidance and support throughout their college search, application, and decision-making process. I also asked participants about the strategies they used to assess their academic interests and sift through college information to find schools that aligned with their interests. My protocol also included questions about participants’ use of web-based resources, such as institutional websites or college search databases. To explore how students made meaning of their college planning experiences, the protocol invited participants to think beyond the people and the tools that aided their process and reflect on significant moments and turning points that were memorable and impactful. Through these stories, I gained a sense of participants’ characteristics, motivations, and values (Wertz et al., 2011) and how participants integrated these significant moments in the larger narratives of their lives.

Responses to the first research question highlighted key individuals that aided participants’ college planning process. These individuals represent familial and social capital as referenced in Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model. To address the second research

question, I explored how additional forms of capital, such as ideals, values, and other assets not always visible to researchers, influenced participants' college going. For example, several participants discussed how their development of early aspirations was embedded in the family's migration narrative of sacrifice and hope. As a result, although most participants did not have college-educated parents personally familiar with the U.S. education system, they drew motivation from their parents' expectations of collective upward mobility through their children's academic achievements. I also reviewed a college or scholarship essay written by each participant, a first-person narrative that reflected aspects of their personality, background, or life experiences and how they influenced their college and career goals. By employing both interviews and a written narrative as part of my research methods, I was able to coconstruct with participants a detailed understanding of their experiences and use of multiple forms of capital on their path to college.

Significance of Study

Throughout history, each wave of immigration has heavily influenced U.S. culture and society, defining and then redefining communities and policies and altering employment sectors and education systems (Hirschman et al., 1999; Taylor, 2014). In prior waves of immigration, the U.S. education system has played a key role in providing opportunities for social and economic advancement (Erismann & Looney, 2007; Kim & Díaz, 2013). Unlike previous generations of immigrants, earning a postsecondary degree is now critical to upward mobility and economic success (Conway, 2010; Coll & Marks, 2012). In fact, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, occupations with the fastest growth will be those that require an associate's degree or above (Lacey & Wright, 2009). Additionally, as baby boomers retire (Taylor, 2014) and the nation's birth rate declines to its lowest point in 30 years (Hamilton, et al., 2018), there is a need

to increase opportunities for college enrollment for those who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020). Immigrant youth, a growing segment of the K-16 population, are well-positioned to increase the labor force and contribute to the socioeconomic growth of our nation as a whole *if* they have equitable access to higher education (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020; Baum & Flores, 2011; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Lauderdale & Heckman, 2017).

By conducting this research project, I (a) gained an understanding of how low-income immigrant students of color, across race and national origin, navigated their path to college, (b) focused on an understudied aspect of college planning: college search, a developmental stage when students rule in (and rule out) postsecondary institutions prior to application and matriculation, and (c) countered traditional deficit approaches by considering the various forms of capital and community resources immigrant students use along their journey to higher education.

The qualitative approach of this investigation offers a detailed analysis of how participants (foreign-born Asian, Black, and Latinx college students) navigated college search and decision making. Although the barriers remain high for immigrant students of color from low-income backgrounds, the focus of this study is on the assets and strategies participants used to access higher education. Findings highlight participants' needs and how their needs were met (or not met) by the social networks and systems in which students engaged. Implications of this study hold relevance for K-16 educators and policy makers who embrace a strengths-based anti-deficit approach to effectively serve the growing population of immigrant youth and position youth to contribute to society.

Definition of Key Terms

I recognize that terminology associated with immigration varies across bodies of literature. Therefore, I outline how I defined key terms in my study:

Immigrant: a foreign-born individual who moved to the U.S. with intentions to live permanently in the United States (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006)

1.5 generation immigrant: a foreign-born individual who moved to the United States before the age of 13; while a 1.5-generation immigrant may have started primary school their home country, their secondary education is largely obtained and completed in the United States (Rumbaut, 2004)

2nd generation immigrant: a U.S.-born individual of at least one foreign-born parent (Rumbaut, 2004)

Immigrant-origin student: term inclusive of students born abroad and U.S.-born students with immigrant parents; students from immigrant households (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020)

College choice process: a complex developmental process in which students form aspirations for higher education (predisposition), determine their college options (search), apply to college(s) and ultimately select a postsecondary institution (choice); this process traditionally spans middle childhood through late adolescence (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989).

Community cultural wealth: Drawing from critical race theory, Yosso (2005) offers a conceptualization of cultural capital that challenges White-centered notions of capital and centers the experiences of People of Color and their communities. Specifically, she argues that members of marginalized groups possess and draw upon unique forms of capital that are not recognized or

valued by White-centered theories. From this perspective, Yosso outlines six forms of cultural capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant.

People of Color: A pan-racial and ethnic identity that includes people who identify as either Black, Asian American, Latinos/Hispanic, Native American (Pérez, 2021); a collective term to refer to non-White racial and ethnic groups collectively (APA, 2020)

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is three-fold: (a) to introduce the theoretical frameworks that guide this study, (b) to examine and critique the “immigrant advantage” in precollegiate education and college enrollment, and (c) to synthesize research examining how youth from immigrant households engage multiple forms of capital in the college choice process. Section one provides an overview of the theories that inform this study’s theoretical framework: Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) college choice model and Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model. I outline the major tenets of each model and explain how I incorporate concepts and themes from both models to examine the college choice process of youth from immigrant families. Section two takes a close look at what some scholars deem an “immigrant advantage” in academic achievement, postsecondary aspirations, and college enrollment. I explore various factors that may lead to positive educational outcomes for immigrant-origin youth. I also introduce and operationalize the concept of *immigrant capital*, a key resource integrating these factors. Section three examines the role of immigrant capital, community cultural wealth, and other assets that first- and second-generation immigrants of color leverage to develop college aspirations and navigate college research, the application process, and decision making. This chapter concludes with a summary of key findings as well as gaps in the literature I intend to address in this study.

Theoretical Frameworks

Student College Choice Model

Early models explaining student college choice generally fall into two categories: sociological and economic (Jackson, 1982). Sociological models (e.g., Sewell et al., 1957) outline social and individual factors that lead to aspirations for higher education, such as social status and family values. Economic models explain college choice as a function of a student’s

evaluation of costs (for example, tuition and the availability of financial aid) and benefits (such as income after postsecondary degree; Jackson & Weathersby, 1975). Although these approaches stem from different fields of study, sociological and economic perspectives are described as complementary (Hossler et al., 1989) and early models have been combined to describe a multistage process of student choice (Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). For example, Jackson (1982) proposed a combined model of college choice that outlined the following stages: first, students develop aspirations largely based on their social context and academic achievement while assessing the financial resources available to pursue college goals. Second, students rely on their knowledge about college options and the information available to them to exclude schools based on characteristics such as geographical location and cost. Finally, faced with a defined set of postsecondary options, students rate and ultimately make a college choice that considers costs and benefits.

Drawing on the work of Jackson (1982) and Litten (1982), Hossler and Gallagher (1987) conducted a systematic analysis of empirical studies to develop a theoretical framework describing student college choice. Their literature review combines variables found in both sociological and economic research with individual and social characteristics, asserting that multiple factors influence the college choice process (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Specifically, they posit that characteristics such as parental and peer attitudes toward college, the high school curriculum, institutional outreach, and the availability of financial aid interact with individual attributes, such as student ability and attitudes toward education, to influence the development of aspirations and, ultimately, postsecondary enrollment (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) conceptual model integrates these myriad

variables with early theorists' stage approach to describe a process that unfolds in three developmental phases: Predisposition, Search, and Choice.

According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), during the Predisposition phase students make tentative decisions about whether to pursue education beyond high school. This stage occurs during the period of childhood to one's junior year of high school (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Developing a predisposition toward postsecondary enrollment is influenced by student ability and academic achievement, parental income and education level, parental encouragement, and the quality of one's high school academic program (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). While forming a predisposition toward college is an important first step in the college choice process, during this stage most students' aspirations are general and vague with limited specificity on their postsecondary plans (Hossler et al., 1989).

As students enter the Search phase, they begin to develop more specific college goals and seek information about their postsecondary options (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Search is characterized by students actively engaging in several tasks: college information-seeking, assessing their interests and needs, sorting through college options, and creating and refining their list of potential schools based on variables such as college cost, geography, and academic programs (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Students ultimately create a "choice set," that is a set of desirable institutions for which they will seek more information and likely apply (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). For many students, college search activities commence during junior year and continue into the early months of senior year as students continue to learn about colleges and subsequently evaluate and refine their choice set (Hossler et al., 1989).

The third and final phase of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is Choice. This phase consists of two stages: (a) students finalize their list of colleges to which they will apply (called

the “application set”) and (b) students decide to enroll in a particular institution (Hossler et al., 1989). Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model indicates that the following variables positively correlate with postsecondary enrollment: family socioeconomic status, academic ability, parent educational level, and parental encouragement. Additional factors that shape a student’s enrollment decision are the amount of financial aid received and the effectiveness of college communication strategies (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Although the role of parents and peers remains important to decision-making, the college decision is portrayed as one ultimately made by the student (Hossler et al., 1989).

While Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) conceptual framework includes a developmental stage for each phase, later research (e.g., Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; Terenzini et al., 2001) refines this timeline: Predisposition typically occurs between the 7th and 10th grades, Search during the 10th through 12th grades, and Choice during the 11th and 12th grades. Scholars agree that each phase of college choice involves multiple individual, socioeconomic, and organizational factors that influence a student’s progression from general aspirations to the development of specific college goals to enrollment (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; Perna, 2006; Terenzini et al., 2001). Researchers also agree that a successful college choice process culminates with students making an informed decision on which college to attend and enrolling in said postsecondary institution (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; Klasik et al., 2018; Perna, 2006; Terenzini et al., 2001).

Limitations of the Student College Choice Model

Decades after its introduction, Hossler and Gallagher’s model remains the most common framework applied to college choice research (Iloh, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018). Yet, this model is not without limitations. First, scholars suggest that Hossler and Gallagher (1987) do not

adequately account for and detail the multiple and complex steps involved in the college research and application process (Iloh, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018). For example, their framework largely omits college entrance exam preparation and completion (Klasik et al., 2018): how students come to know about the ACT and SAT, how they prepare for these exams, when they take them, how students make sense of their results, and how their results shape their choice and application set (Holzman et al., 2019). Additionally, the college research and application process is described as an active (versus passive) process, where students drive their own activities “as opposed to using sources of convenience or passively waiting for information to come to them” (Hossler et al., 1989, p. 27). Researchers take issue with the limited attention this model pays to adolescent psychology and the extent to which students can effectively manage the complex and multiple tasks involved in college planning (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012; Southerland, 2006). Developmental skills and processes like self-regulation, self-efficacy, motivation, identity development, coping skills, and adaptability influence a student’s ability to effectively navigate college planning (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Yet, the college choice model seems to assume that all students have the requisite skills and internal resources to be successful active agents in their own college planning (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012).

Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model outlines a linear stage approach to college choice based on their synthesis of research examining the pathways of White middle- and upper-class students. Several scholars (e.g., Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Perna, 2006) have critiqued the stage approach and the extent to which minoritized students follow a universal and straightforward path from setting college aspirations to college enrollment. Recent scholarship (Iloh, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018) suggests that the college choice model offers simplistic assumptions about how minoritized students move

through the three phases and assert that college pathways for minoritized students are more complex and more dependent on sociocultural factors than Hossler and Gallagher (1987) portray. For example, while Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) support the three-stage approach to college choice, their research uses quantitative data to illustrate the multiple barriers that influence precollege pathways for low-income youth, first-generation students, and students of color.

Similarly, Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice highlights the sociocultural factors that influence the development of aspirations, information-seeking, planning activities, and decision making. Perna (2006) explains how a student's decision to enroll in college is nested within and shaped by multiple social contexts, such as the availability of college preparation resources in their schools and communities as well as the marketing efforts of postsecondary institutions. As illustrated by Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), Perna (2006) also argues that college enrollment pathways are not universal and vary based on factors such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic factors, and the availability of social and cultural capital. Perna's (2006) model counters the simplified portrayal offered by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) stage theory and asserts that there are multiple routes to college enrollment.

Furthering this critique, scholars (e.g., Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hurtado et al., 1997; McDonough, 2005; Perna, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2009) have challenged the college choice model's assumption that students have equal access to college planning resources in their schools and communities. The college choice model sets a standard primarily based on the experiences of White middle-to-upper class students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). A long line of research reveals the inequities faced by students of color, first-generation students, and other minoritized populations that limit the availability of resources in their schools and communities (Iloh, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018; McDonough, 1997; Southerland, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). In fact,

the term “college choice” can be considered a privileged concept (Iloh, 2018). The illusion of choice negates the multiple and layered forces that work against minoritized students to constrain viable postsecondary options (Iloh, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018; Southerland, 2006). Additionally, the portrayal of college decision making as an individual choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) underestimates and obscures the influence of various familial and community networks that emerge to create college opportunities for students and families and guide choice (Freeman, 2005; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). The literature (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 2005; Pérez & McDonough, 2008) suggests that if it were not for these networks, students of color may struggle to obtain information about various colleges, complete complex college and financial aid applications, or even feel like going to college is a realistic goal.

While Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) student college choice model offers a limited understanding of the precollege pathways of minoritized students, the model offers a starting point to examine a multifaceted complex process from a developmental perspective. To address some of the limitations with Hossler and Gallagher’s theory and expand college choice scholarship, I approach my study with a critical theoretical framework that centers the experiences of People of Color: community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). I used this framework to address Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) limited acknowledgement of structural oppression and identity-based barriers face by minoritized students, in this case, low-income immigrant students of color. Specifically, engaging community cultural wealth centers the precollege experiences of systemically marginalized youth and their intersecting identities of race, ethnicity, class, and immigrant status to reveal how students leverage assets within their cultures and communities to forge a path to postsecondary education.

Community Cultural Wealth Model

Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model offers an asset-based framework that can be used to explore the lived educational experiences of racially-minoritized students underrepresented in higher education. Scholars (e.g., George Mwangi, 2015; Jayakumar et al., 2013; Reddick et al., 2011; Romo et al., 2019; Welton & Martinez, 2014) have applied community cultural wealth to examine the college choice process and cultural resources precollege students use to form educational aspirations, explore college options, and make decisions about where to apply and ultimately enroll. For my study, I plan to engage Hossler and colleagues' (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) student college choice model to the examine the precollege experiences of immigrant students of color. I explore these experiences through the critical lens of community cultural wealth.

The community cultural wealth model derives from critical race theory (CRT), a framework that examines, challenges and seeks to dismantle racist ideologies, structures, and practices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2005). CRT emerged from legal studies where scholars like Derek Bell (1980), Alan Freeman (1977), and Kimberle Crenshaw (1987) sought to examine and transform the relationship among race, racism, legal structures and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and has since been adapted and applied to exploring issues of systemic educational inequality (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 1998). Education scholar Daniel Solórzano (1998) outlined the following principles that should inform theory, research and pedagogy that uses a CRT approach: (a) the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the utilization

of interdisciplinary approaches. Grounded in CRT tenets, researchers seek to identify, analyze, counter, and disrupt pervasive deficit-oriented assumptions about People of Color (Yosso, 2005).

Yosso (2005) leverages Solórzano's (1998) scholarship to challenge the traditional interpretation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), a concept that has been used by scholars and educators (e.g., McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2011) to explain persistent racial disparities in postsecondary enrollment. Bourdieu's (1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) theory asserts that in a hierarchical society that seeks to reproduce itself, the cultural knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the upper and middle classes are deemed valuable capital. Thereby, members of the upper and middle class are privileged, and the capital they possess becomes the socially constructed norm. The generational transmission of cultural capital among family members ensures that this capital is maintained as the cultural and social standard and recirculated among the privileged class. Bourdieu (1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) theorizes that those who are not born into upper- and middle-class families may be able to acquire cultural capital through formal schooling that transmits the norms of the privileged class to members of the lower class, i.e., less privileged persons.

Even though Bourdieu's (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) notion of cultural capital was originally conceptualized as a class-based phenomenon, scholars have applied his framework to examine the cultural needs and experiences of students of color (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). As a result, interpretations of Bourdieu's theory "exposes White, middle-class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms and expressions of 'culture' are judged in comparison to this 'norm'" (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). The assumption is that, due to an inherent lack of privileged cultural capital, students of color (who often come from working-class households) are unable to achieve the same educational

outcomes as Whites and wealthier students (Yosso, 2005). Community cultural wealth rejects this explanation for educational disparities. Yosso (2005) offers an alternate explanation: students of color are disadvantaged by educational systems because schools do not recognize and value the cultural skills, knowledge, and abilities their families and communities possess and that students bring to their schooling (Yosso, 2005). As a result, the cultural needs of students of color are not met in the classroom and students fall behind. Yosso (2005) argues that students of color do have and draw upon valuable cultural knowledge, just a different kind. They leverage knowledge that emerges from the wealth of their cultures and communities.

Yosso's (2005) framework asserts that the wealth of Communities of Color is cultivated through six types of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant (see Table 1). Aspirational capital references "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). For example, aspirational capital may drive working-class parents who did not attend college to hope for and seek postsecondary preparation and planning resources for their children (Auerbach, 2004; Hallett & Griffen, 2015; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Linguistic capital captures the "intellectual and social skills obtained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). Yosso (2005) offers an example from bilingual education research (Orellana et al., 2003) to highlight the real-world literacy and communication skills brought to the classroom by students who serve as language and cultural brokers for their parents. Familial capital includes "cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Yosso's (2005) model offers a broad understanding of kinship that includes extended family members and non-relatives who care for, sustain, and uplift one another as a commitment to collective well-being. For

example, relationships with extended family members, fictive kin, teachers, and mentors are often leveraged by students of color to support college aspirations and aid the application process (George Mwangi, 2015; George Mwangi et al., 2020). Social capital is defined as “networks of people and community resources....that provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). In many communities of color, ethnic and faith-based organizations counter pervasive under-investment by offering practical and important resources to their members, including tutoring, SAT/ACT prep, and assistance with accessing social services (He et al., 2017; Park, 2012; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Navigational capital encompasses “skills associated with maneuvering through social institutions....not created with Communities of Color in mind” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). When faced with institutional obstacles that stand in the way of their college goals, students will often find creative ways to figure out who to talk to and get the information they need (Reddick et al., 2011; Romo et al., 2019; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Resistant capital is defined as “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). For example, students of color may seek academic success and pursue a college education as a way to reject negative racial stereotypes (George Mwangi et al., 2020; Jayakumar et al., 2013).

Table 1

Table 1: Community Cultural Wealth: Forms of Capital	
Aspirational Capital	the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers
Linguistic Capital	intellectual and social skills obtained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style
Familial Capital	cultural knowledges nurtured among <i>familia</i> (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition
Social Capital	networks of people and community resources
Navigational Capital	skills associated with maneuvering through social institutions
Resistant Capital	knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality

Yosso (2005) asserts that People of Color possess and engage these forms of cultural wealth to resist marginalization and survive within a racist society. To this end, each type of capital often overlaps with and builds upon another. As a case in point, members of familial and non-familial social networks may encourage academic achievement and college-going through stories of collective struggle and resistance (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2013). In this regard, People of Color are engaging social, familial, linguistic, and resistant capital to promote high educational aspirations in youth. Yosso (2005) highlights that the accumulation of and the interplay among each type of capital forms a collective wealth that exists in Communities of Color. Yosso (2005) proposes that by examining and engaging the under-utilized forms of

cultural wealth minoritized students bring from their homes and communities to schools, scholars and educators have the potential and opportunity to “transform the process of schooling” (p. 70).

Within *Communities of Color*, it is important to explore intersectional identities that disrupt the larger narrative of a universal experience related to race (Museus, 2011). For example, systemic structural inequalities often converge to subjugate students who hold multiple marginalized identities: low income, immigrants, students of color, and English language learners (Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2020; Museus, 2011; Welton & Martinez, 2014). In this regard, it is important to consider the experiences and needs of students situated at the intersection of race, class, and immigrant status (Museus, 2011; Welton & Martinez, 2014). In a society that centers middle class experiences and whiteness, low-income immigrant youth of color often experience a confluence of prejudice and subordination, based on race, phenotype, class, culture, immigrant status, and language (Esses, 2021; Welton & Martinez, 2014; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Racist anti-immigrant attitudes are perpetuated in English-only school systems that, if they actually have an ESL curriculum, often block access to precollege courses for ESL students (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Higher education systems uphold standardized college entrance exam requirements which has been used for decades to block low-income, Black and Latinx, and ESL students from institutional admission and merit-based aid (Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Shewach et al., 2017).

In this dissertation, I aim to nuance the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) to explore how low-income immigrant students of color navigate intercentric systems of racism, nativism, and classism (Solórzano, 1998) to access higher education. This study notes distinctions between community cultural wealth and its application to People of Color broadly

and social and cultural resources that are nurtured and cultivated within immigrant families of color. In other words, this study aims to advance understanding of how community cultural wealth and other assets and resources operate in immigrant communities and serve as forms of capital that facilitate high educational aspirations, precollege academic success, and a path to higher education for immigrant youth. Later in this chapter, I will define the term *immigrant capital* and describe how it emerged as a construct related to but distinct from community cultural wealth. Through the exploration of both community cultural wealth and immigrant capital, this study will acknowledge the intercentricity of race, ethnicity, social class, and immigrant status: multiple forms of subordination (Solórzano, 1998) that shape opportunities to access a college education. This study also acknowledges that while frameworks highlighting the assets, capital, and wealth nurtured within marginalized communities is important, these frameworks must not ignore the systemic inequities that are deeply entrenched in our society (Park et al., 2020) and the work that remains to dismantle systems that propagate the need for resistance.

I draw upon both Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) student college choice model, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, and the emerging conceptualization of immigrant capital to examine the college choice process of low-income immigrant youth of color. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model offers a multistage developmental framework to examine individual and social factors shaping college choice. In their early papers, Hossler and colleagues (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989) outline additional areas for student college choice research that include the following: applying their model to students of color, expanding research on the steps and processes involved in the Search phase, and conducting qualitative research on student college choice. By examining the college choice process with a focus on

community cultural wealth and immigrant capital, my study addresses Hossler and colleagues' call by centering the narratives and lived experiences of low-income immigrant students of color who, despite systemic challenges faced in and out of school, have enrolled in a selective 4-year college or university. Yosso's (2005) model offers an asset-based frame through which I can better understand student aspirations, motivations, and college-going behaviors within the context of one's cultural and community milieu. Immigrant capital recognizes the unique assets that emerge from the experiences of foreign-born parents and their children that influence college aspirations and enrollments. In the following section, I further explain how these theoretical frameworks were applied in this study.

Engaging these models provides a developmental frame that incorporates multiple activities that often occur during planning and decision making while focusing on college search, a critical yet under-researched experience of college planning (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989; Klasik et al., 2018; Myers & Myers, 2012). Rather than simply identifying the tasks that students complete and subscribing to a universal linear path to enrollment, incorporating community cultural wealth and immigrant capital in my study design and analysis allowed me to complicate the student college choice model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989) in these three ways: (a) examine *how* students navigated college planning and selection, (b) *how* they described their journey from setting aspirations to college enrollment, and (c) *how* they engaged forms of capital to support their endeavors. Additionally, incorporating community cultural wealth and immigrant capital offers a way to challenge and reframe student college choice by using a non-White/non-middle-class lens.

The theoretical frameworks collectively influence multiple aspects of this study's methodology. For example, Hossler et al. (1989) suggest a need for more qualitative research to

“explain the interrelationships among the various important factors in the college choice process” (p. 36). Community cultural wealth is grounded in “the centrality of experiential knowledge” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74) and highlights storytelling, *testimonios*, and narratives as legitimate methods to capture the lived experiences of People of Color. Since immigrant capital is an emerging concept, qualitative analysis is well-suited to explore participants’ perceptions of how their precollege experiences were shaped by their families, communities, and immigrant identity. Informed by and in alignment with these theoretical approaches, I engaged narrative inquiry as my research method.

Each model also informed participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. Hossler and colleagues (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989) identify the 11th and 12th grades as years when students are most likely to complete college research and application activities. I interviewed participants in the summer or fall after they completed high school. Although at the time of their interview participants were more than a year removed from some of their research and application activities, participants were able to recall their college planning experiences in great detail and the process of making their college decision making was fresh on their minds.

I drew upon both theories to develop my interview protocol. Hossler and colleagues’ (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989) model informed my questions about the tasks participants completed during this period, while Yosso’s (2005) model and immigrant capital helped me craft questions that addressed how participants leveraged both tangible and intangible resources to forge their path to college and how participants’ experiences as immigrants of color shaped their college pathway. The theoretical frameworks also influenced thematic analysis. For

example, I organized my coding to capture forms of capital, including community cultural wealth and immigrant capital, students engaged through the college choice process.

Utilizing the student college choice model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005), and immigrant capital offers three advantages: (a) this approach challenges the White middle class notion of cultural capital in a way that recognizes the unique resources that are often mobilized to resist systemic oppression, (b) this approach focuses on experiences of low-income, immigrant students of color and explores how students often marginalized in educational spaces leveraged their racial and ethnic heritage and immigrant identity to cultivate and pursue their educational goals, and (c) this approach provides an opportunity to understand the intercentricity of race/ethnicity, social class, and immigrant identity on an under-researched yet critical phase in the college choice process: Search – a time during which students rule in (or out) postsecondary institutions from their list of desired options.

It is also important to note that while Yosso's (2005) model, a framework derived from CRT, acknowledges structural barriers and systemic inequalities that People of Color face, the focus of this model is not on barriers, but on assets that emerge within their communities to resist marginalization, counter inequities, and survive within a racist society. When applied to educational systems and practices, Yosso's focus on assets, or cultural wealth, has the potential to subvert existing power structures and transform schooling (Yosso, 2005). Based on this premise, this dissertation will address the barriers faced by low-income immigrant students of color but center the forms of capital that, despite oppressive forces, shapes the ambitions of immigrant student of color and their journey to higher education.

Pre-Collegiate Experiences of Immigrant Youth

Section two of this chapter provides an overview of research that highlights forms of capital influencing the educational experiences of immigrant-origin students. This section begins with a brief survey of challenges facing immigrants as they migrate and resettle in the United States. Next, I explore the notion of an “immigrant advantage” some scholars have found when examining educational outcomes of first- and second-generation immigrant (vs. continuing generation) youth. I then introduce two critical social factors that determine to what extent an immigrant advantage actually bears out. Then, I suggest and define the term *immigrant capital* to capture the multiple and distinct assets immigrants possess and leverage toward achievement: factors that scholars have previously associated with culture but that speak to a broader cross-cultural immigrant experience. Subsequently, I outline and describe these factors. This section concludes by situating immigrant capital alongside community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) as a resource used to counter marginalization of immigrants and support their advancement.

Transition Challenges Facing Immigrant Populations

As migrants transition to the United States, they face many challenges that may limit their employment prospects and ability to achieve financial stability. While 32% of migrating adults have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, the majority of new arrivals are not college graduates (Budiman, 2020). The education and skill level of new arrivals varies greatly by home region and country (Budiman, 2020). Approximately half of immigrants from Mexico and Central America enter the United States with less than a high school diploma; Over two-thirds lack English proficiency (Budiman, 2020). Immigrants who arrive without college credentials or financial resources often settle in communities that are under-resourced (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Louie, 2005) or, as in the case of newly established immigrant destinations, have limited

social programs and support networks to aid resettlement (Lee & Hawkins, 2015). Even college graduates who migrate often contend with barriers such as gaining English language proficiency, navigating complex and unfamiliar employment systems, and leveraging foreign education and occupational credentials to a new lateral position (Singer, 2012). Overall, newcomers arrive with varied levels of human capital which has implications for the types of jobs immigrants can attain, their economic prosperity in the United States, and access to well-resourced schools and resources for their children (Singer, 2012).

A long line of research spanning health, sociology, psychology, and education has documented the many barriers affecting migrants' mental health, emotional adjustment, and ability to gain a foothold in new environment (Ogbu, 1991; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Pumariega et al., 2005). Some immigrants arrive after enduring difficult circumstances in their home country, such as economic instability and community conflict (Krishnakumar & Indumathi, 2014). All immigrants experience the stress of a major life change: leaving behind loved ones, familiar social institutions, and cultural traditions (Casado et al., 2010). Upon arrival, immigrants often struggle to learn U.S. norms and customs and how to access and navigate basic resources, such as social services, transportation, and education systems (Garrett, 2006; Singer, 2012). Additionally, foreign-born residents often face social discrimination and racist and xenophobic attitudes in their new environments (Morey et al., 2018; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Despite myriad financial, social, and psychological challenges, immigrants continue to arrive at U.S. shores: more than one million immigrants enter the country each year (Budiman, 2020). Historically (Gamio, 1931) and in contemporary times (Buriel, 2012; He et al., 2017), a key pull factor for foreigners are prospects for upward mobility and better opportunities for their children's education.

Immigrants' hopes for their children's education anchor the sacrifices they make to migrate (Kao, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2009). However, school-aged children of immigrants face challenges similar to their parents as well as unique barriers as they transition to U.S. schools (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Erisman & Looney, 2007). For example, youth often enter school systems that employ dramatically different curricula, teaching methods, and norms for student behavior (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Garrett, 2006; Wambu et al., 2017). English is the primary language of instruction in U.S. schools, which serves as a major hurdle for newcomers who do not speak English (Kim & Díaz, 2013). High-quality and well-resourced ESL (English for Speakers of other Languages) programs and experienced staff may not be available in all schools and school systems, especially in newly established immigrant communities (Lee & Hawkins, 2015; Sutcher et al., 2016).

Immigrant youth with postsecondary aspirations face another hurdle: navigating the college planning and application process (Baum & Flores, 2011; Erisman & Looney, 2007). Preparing for college is multiyear process with many sequential and time-sensitive steps (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989; Klasik et al., 2018; Perna, 2006). Low-income immigrant youth of color contend with making sense of complicated processes for college entrance exams (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Gray, 1996), accessing materials in their native language (Ceja, 2006; Taylor, 2020), and figuring out what financial resources are available to them based on their residency status (Pérez, 2010; Romo et al., 2019; Suárez-Orozco, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015). Due to prerequisite requirements or scheduling conflicts, students who are placed in ESL classes may be blocked from taking advanced college-prep courses (Kanno & Kangas, 2014).

Immigrant Advantage in College Enrollment

While most parents in the United States expect their children to go to college (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Heimlich, 2012), research indicates that immigrant-origin students are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education than their U.S.-born counterparts (Baum & Flores, 2011; Callahan & Humphries, 2016; Hofferth & Moon, 2016; Lauderdale & Heckman, 2017). This finding had been linked with a larger phenomenon called the “immigrant advantage: the academic benefit first- and second-generation students experience relative to native-born peers” (Callahan & Humphries, 2016, p. 263). Closely related to this concept is the “immigrant paradox,” the paradox being that immigrant youth not only outperform their non-immigrant peers, they “enjoy academic advantages in the relative absence of socioeconomic advantages, such as high parental education and income, that are usually associated with school success” (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011, p. 4). This advantage is not limited to educational settings; it is also apparent in other developmental domains, such as birth outcomes, physical health status, and general well-being (Coll & Marks, 2012; Crosnoe & Turley, 2011).

Evidence for an immigrant advantage in education often references Grace Kao and Marta Tienda’s (1995) seminal study *Optimism and achievement: The educational performance of immigrant youth*. Their research examined three forms of academic success among Latinx, Black, and Asian 8th graders: grades, achievement test scores, and educational aspirations. Participants’ nativity varied across three generational statuses: foreign-born students (first-generation immigrants), U.S.-born children of foreign-born parents (second-generation immigrants), and U.S.-born children of U.S.-born parents (natives). Across all three forms of achievement, Kao and Tienda (1995) reported better educational and social outcomes for first- and second-generation immigrants. Additionally, when compared with their same-race native

counterparts, first- and second-generation youth reported higher grades, test scores, and academic aspirations. The authors explain that while the educational performance of first- and second-generation students was noteworthy, the nativity of the parents, rather than students, drove achievement. Kao and Tienda (1995) suggest that foreign-born parents are likely to hold optimistic views about their children's opportunities to succeed in U.S. education. Regardless of the child's nativity, parents' optimistic views are instilled in their children subsequently shaping their children's attitudes toward education and their performance in the classroom. Other studies (e.g., Callahan & Obenchain, 2016, Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Hirschman, 2001; Hsin & Xie, 2014; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Louie, 2004; Raleigh & Kao, 2010) have examined the school experiences of immigrant youth and found support for Kao and Tienda's suggestion that parental optimism is a key factor that drives the academic performance of immigrant youth.

Despite a good deal of evidence that points to positive outcomes for immigrant youth, the extent to which all children from immigrant households are advantaged in education is debatable (Coll & Marks, 2012; Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017). The literature shows differential outcomes by child nativity, race/ethnic group, gender, and age (Coll & Marks, 2012). For instance, the immigrant paradox is more pronounced for children of Asian and African newcomers when compared with children from other regions (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017). It is also more pronounced for boys than girls (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011). Additionally, in their seminal work Kao and Tienda (1995) suggest that second-generation immigrants are advantaged over their first-generation counterparts. They explain that while both groups benefit from having optimistic parents with high expectations, second-generation youth also benefit from the social, language, and psychological acculturation that

comes with being born in the United States. Scholars continue to debate which group fares better in this regard (Coll & Marks, 2012; Enchautegui, 2014; Lauderdale & Heckman, 2017).

In addition to demographic characteristics that complicate the notion of a universal immigrant advantage, the academic success of immigrant youth is largely influenced by additional factors: (a) parental human capital and family characteristics and (b) immigrants' incorporation into the communities and social systems that receive them. I briefly address the role of each factor next.

Parental Human Capital and Family Characteristics

Leaving one's homeland to move to new country is a complex process that often involves financial resources and personal sacrifice (Feliciano, 2020). As a result, an assessment of one's human capital, defined as individual characteristics including knowledge, skills, and abilities, may play a role in the decision to migrate (Borjas, 1999). Although the education and skill level of new arrivals varies greatly by region and country (Budiman, 2020), those who voluntarily migrate typically represent a "select" group (Borjas, 1987). In other words, when compared to non-migrants from one's home country, those who migrate tend to possess higher income, advanced education or occupational skills, and personal characteristics that enable them to take the risk (Borjas, 1987; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). As a result, regardless of their socioeconomic status post-migration, the selective nature of migration tends to attract individuals and families from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds (as compared to nonmigrants) to the United States which has implications for their prospects (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Feliciano, 2005).

Across levels of human capital, research shows that newcomers tend to have certain family structural characteristics that bode well for positive resettlement, adaptation, and

intergenerational mobility (Fuligni, 2012). For example, when compared with U.S. natives, immigrant families tend to have two parents in the home (Landale et al., 2011; Lyons et al., 2013; Thomas, 2011; Turner et al., 2015), lower rates of divorce (Hernandez et al., 2012), and at least one employed parent (Morse, 2005). Research suggests a positive correlation between family structure and stability and the academic success of immigrant-origin students (Fuligni, 2012). As a case in point, Bennett and Lutz (2009) found an immigrant advantage when comparing the college attendance of Black immigrants, Black natives, and Whites. The authors advanced a partial explanation for this finding: immigrant participants in their study were more likely to be raised in two-parent households. This difference points to family structure as a factor that may indirectly influence immigrant educational outcomes.

Immigration research also highlights forms of psychological factors (e.g., personality traits, values, and dispositions) that positively correlate with intergenerational mobility (Buriel, 2012). Research that compares migrants with compatriots who do not migrate associate the following characteristics with the decision to leave one's homeland: a sense of optimism for their prospects in the United States, a willingness to delay gratification for greater rewards post-migration, and risk-taking in hopes that the outcomes will outweigh the uncertainties of migrating (Buriel, 2012). While these psychological factors can be attributed to socioeconomic privilege in one's native society, these characteristics are also apparent in migrants who occupy working class or low-skilled positions pre-migration (Buriel, 2012). In this regard, the selective nature of migration draws immigrants who possess multiple forms of both tangible and intangible human capital conducive to advancement in the U.S. context (Fuligni, 2012).

Mode of Incorporation and Segmented Assimilation

As research indicates, immigrant success is not the norm for all newcomers (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011) and is partially dependent on a highly selective process and the forms of human capital migrants possess prior to arrival (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Fuligni, 2012). Decades of research has determined that immigrant experiences and outcomes are also greatly influenced by the communities that receive them (Menjívar, 1995; Van Hook & Glick, 2020).

Sociologists Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993) offer a theoretical framework to explain why some immigrants fare better than others in adapting to U.S. society. Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory describes three different patterns of integration and mobility that operate within the receiving community. Newcomers may follow (a) a linear path to adaptation where they are economically, socially, and culturally integrated into the White middle-class majority, (b) a path toward economic advancement attributed to a deliberate preservation of cultural values within the home and a connection with co-ethnic networks in the community, or (c) a downward path into the "underclass," characterized by poverty, under-resourced urban communities, and limited opportunities for employment and economic advancement. Portes and Zhou (1993) further explain that one's path, or mode of incorporation, is determined by several factors that include government policies that shape economic opportunity for certain immigrant groups, the social values and prejudices held by destination community residents, and the presence and characteristics of a co-ethnic community in their resettlement area.

Recent scholars examining segmented assimilation theory agree that the interplay of multiple individual, familial, structural, and cultural factors in the receiving community collectively affect migrants' reception, their path to adaptation, and the experiences and

outcomes of their children (Louie, 2005; Yazykova & McLeigh, 2015). The most vulnerable immigrants are those who settle in communities that offer few opportunities for contact with successful upwardly mobile co-ethnics (Borjas, 1987; Portes & Zhou, 1993). These circumstances may lead to downward adaptation and few opportunities for intergenerational advancement (Portes & Zhou, 1993) and may explain variable academic outcomes for immigrant youth across generations (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011).

A Case for Immigrant Capital

While the immigrant advantage and paradox are not universal and are highly dependent on demographic factors, human capital, and mode of incorporation the receiving community, scholars (e.g., Fuligni, 2012; Pong & Zeiser, 2012) highlight resources and assets that immigrant students make use of that lend to their success. These resources appear to be consistent across immigrant families in spite of key differences between and within ethnic groups and the economic disadvantage many immigrants face post-migration (Louie, 2005). These resources include: (a) a belief in meritocracy and an optimism about prospects for a better life and upward mobility in America (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Louie, 2005; Pang et al., 2010), (b) the ability to draw upon resources rooted in pre-migration experiences and ethnic identity to set high expectations for children's academic success (Louie, 2005), (c) strong family and community ties (Hofferth & Moon, 2016; Pang et al., 2010), and (d) the use of community resources and relationships that align with the family's educational values and aspirations (Hofferth & Moon, 2016).

These and other assets that immigrants possess and leverage toward social mobility have been referred to in the literature as "cultural mechanisms" (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Louie, 2005), "cultural capital" (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2015), and "cultural orientation" (Portes, 2000).

However, these characteristics highlight a phenomenon not tied to a particular culture or ethnic heritage; they are also not specific to one's pre- or post-migration social class. Therefore, referring to these resources as "cultural" may misrepresent their origin. Additionally, linking these characteristics with culture is problematic because it perpetuates a model minority myth that elevates one minoritized cultural group as inherently more intelligent and resourceful than others (Imoagene, 2017; Lee & Zhou, 2015). In reality, these characteristics and the educational outcomes of immigrants likely emanate from structural and systemic factors that include immigrant selectivity, close-knit ethnic networks, and positive stereotyping (Imoagene, 2017; Lee & Zhou, 2015). Instead of attributing these assets to culture, I suggest that resources stem from one's experience as an immigrant or child of an immigrant. Therefore, I offer the concept *immigrant capital* to capture these assets more adequately.

The term *immigrant capital* is not commonly found in the literature; the few studies that use it are limited almost exclusively to business, entrepreneurship, and public policy (Adichi Ndofor & Priem, 2011; Corrie, 2008). One such study (Sundararajan & Sundararajan, 2015) examining the success of immigrant entrepreneurs used a grounded theory approach to develop immigrant capital as a concept and theory. The authors analyzed archival data from Canadian and U.S. websites featuring success stories of immigrant entrepreneurs and concluded that immigrant capital is an asset that comes from a newcomer having a dual (or multiple) cultural perspective that facilitates access to diverse information, social networks, and business opportunities (Sundararajan & Sundararajan, 2015). Immigrant entrepreneurs leverage these resources to recognize business opportunities that host country entrepreneurs may overlook. As a result, immigrant entrepreneurs are well-positioned to create innovative and lucrative ventures in their new community (Sundararajan & Sundararajan, 2015).

I found only one study that discussed immigrant capital in the context of education. Samar's (2020) research explored the experiences of foreign-born college students in Iceland and theorized that participants leveraged a specific form of capital to cope with challenges and navigate a foreign system of higher education. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of "habitus," Samar (2020) offered the following definition: "Immigrant capital refers to cultural capital that is transformed (shaped by habitus) through [the] migration-adaptation process" (p. 66). Samar (2020) highlights a key component of immigrant capital: selective adoption of the host country's cultural attributes while retaining the values of the home country. Both Sundararajan and Sundararajan (2015) and Samar (2020) seem to concur that a bi-cultural identity, perspective, set of skills, and network are at the core of immigrant success in business and education.

I draw upon the definitions offered by Sundararajan and Sundararajan (2015) and Samar (2020) to operationalize the term *immigrant capital* in the context of this study as follows. Immigrant capital includes skills, assets, and perspectives that are possessed by migrants, transferred to their children through socialization, and leveraged toward success and intergenerational mobility in the new society. Immigrant capital develops from two sources: (a) culture of origin and pre-migration experiences and (b) the process of migration, resettlement, and adaptation to the host society. During migration and adaptation, certain forms of pre-migration capital are transferred (Fernandez-Kelly, 2008) and others are developed as immigrants adjust to their receiving society (Portes & Zhou, 1993). For immigrants and their children, these resources help foster a set of bi- or multicultural skills, perspectives, and networks post-migration that promotes high occupational and educational aspirations and enables youth to navigate unfamiliar systems, cope with social discrimination and other barriers,

maintain hope in the face of adversity, and view school success as the most promising mechanism to succeed in the United States (Ogbu, 1987; Waters, 1994).

In the sections that follow, I will synthesize research that examines immigrants in education and highlight assets that facilitate success: immigrant optimism, dual frame of reference, pre-migration habitus, obligation ethos, and social and ethnic capital. I regard these assets as forms of immigrant capital to support the development of this concept.

Immigrant Optimism and Dual Frame of Reference

The “American Dream” is a powerful narrative and dominant ideology that fuels the hope and aspirations of both immigrant youth and adults (Daoud et al., 2018; Knight et al., 2016; Leo, 2019). Many immigrants believe that the pathway to success in the United States is through hope, hard work, and education (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Garrett, 2006; Hill & Torres, 2010; Knight et al., 2016; Ogbu, 1991). Continuing education beyond high school is often viewed as the best opportunity for a child’s success and for the family’s social advancement (Griffin et al., 2012; Knight et al., 2016). To engender possibility, hope, and motivation, family members share stories of other family and non-relatives who experienced social mobility through educational achievement (Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Knight et al., 2016). In some respects, the pursuit of higher education is embraced by newcomers like a classic folk theory (Ogbu, 1991) and becomes embedded in the family and cultural narrative.

Because of this meritocracy belief, when compared with non-immigrants, immigrant parents may be more likely to hold higher educational aspirations and more optimistic views about their children’s opportunities to succeed in the U.S. education system (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Hirschman, 2001; Kao & Tienda, 1995). Regardless of a child’s nativity (whether foreign- or U.S.-born), immigrant parents instill these educational expectations and optimistic views in

their children which in turn influence their child's attitudes toward school (Kao & Tienda, 1995). Children are socialized to take full advantage of the academic resources afforded to them as a result of their parents' migration (Griffin et al., 2012).

A sense of optimism is thought to be fueled by what scholars call a "dual frame of reference" (Ogbu, 1991; Suárez-Orozco, 1987), a term used to describe immigrants' comparison of opportunities for success in the United States with the opportunity structure in their native country. Immigrants are likely to view prospects for advancement in the United States as better than in their homeland; In most cases, this positive expectation motivated their decision to migrate (Ogbu, 1991; Suárez-Orozco, 1987). When thinking about life back home, some immigrants may also feel a sense of privilege for being in the United States which may further motivate their mobility efforts (Blum, 2012; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). Therefore, even in the face of resettlement challenges, immigrants' effort and perseverance may be grounded in a positive evaluation of their prospects in the United States that presents their current situation as more favorable than the life they left behind (Suárez-Orozco, 1987).

Due to racism and xenophobia, even the most idealistic and hopeful newcomers will likely be subject to hostile attitudes, prejudice, and discrimination challenges their sense of optimism (George Mwangi et al., 2020; Knight et al., 2016). As immigrants experience racism and prejudice, research suggests that they employ different interpretations and strategies to cope and respond than their non-immigrant same-race counterparts (Daoud et al., 2018; Matute-Bianchi, 1991). To explain this finding, educational researchers often cite the work of Nigerian American anthropologist Jonathan Ogbu and his cultural-ecological theory of minority school performance. Ogbu's (1987, 1991) work, grounded in multiethnic cross-cultural comparative analysis, argues that immigrants are likely to view racism as a temporary experience and a

surmountable hurdle, one that they must endure to advance in their new society. Ogbu (1991) describes this view as part of a broader cultural model shaped by three factors: immigrants' dual frame of reference, general trust in U.S. institutions (e.g., schools), and a positive sense of their own ethnic identity. Ogbu (1991) contrasts the cultural model of immigrants with minoritized non-immigrants, for example descendants of those who were enslaved in the United States. Because of the historical trauma of slavery and the continued systemic subjugation of Black natives, non-immigrants are less likely to hold optimistic views of opportunity and advancement in a U.S. system that has never worked to their collective advantage (Ogbu, 1991). Instead, non-immigrants develop a cultural frame of reference that (a) views racism as a permanent entrenched part of the U.S. minority experience and (b) is skeptical of U.S. systems and institutions. Because of pervasive racism, discrimination, a general mistrust in social systems, non-immigrants develop cultural identities in opposition to the dominant group (i.e., Whites). As a result, Ogbu (1987, 1991) suggests that immigrants and their children may be more willing than non-immigrants to "play by the rules" of the dominant society. Ogbu argues that while natives do not see this as a fruitful strategy for advancement, immigrants view playing by the rules as the best way to overcome prejudice and get ahead.

Sociologist Mary Waters, a prolific scholar in the field of immigration studies and ethnic identity development, also examined differences in perceptions of racism among immigrants and U.S. natives. Waters' (1994, 1999) research with Black West Indian immigrants largely mirrors Ogbu's (1987, 1991) findings that immigrants perceive racism and discrimination as obstacles that can be overcome. However, Waters' (1999) research challenges the assumption that over time immigrant optimism will withstand racism. Her research found that as immigrants adapt to their new society and experience the harsh realities of racism and prejudice, their optimism and

belief in meritocracy erode. Waters' (1999) research with second generation youth also explicates further the role of ethnic identity as a mediator between experiencing racism and educational outcomes. To summarize, Waters (1999) asserts that the extent to which children of immigrants identify with their ethnic heritage and adopt and retain their parent's perceptions of racism, optimism, and mobility influences their attitudes toward school and their school achievement.

Current literature (e.g., George Mwangi et al., 2020; Oropeza et al., 2010) supports early scholars' findings that associate a dual frame of reference and optimism with academic success among immigrant youth. For example, Perreira et al.'s (2006) study with foreign-born Latinx high school students found that holding optimistic views about their opportunities for advancement in the United States served as a buffer against dropping out. Knight et al.'s (2016) study with West African immigrants found that when faced with challenges participants were motivated to persist by imagining the limited educational opportunities they would have had in their home country. Additionally, when faced with discrimination, participants challenged and expanded their "meritocracy narrative" (Knight et al., p. 839) to include the idea that because they were immigrants who were also Black they would have to work harder than others to get ahead. In support of Ogbu (1987, 1991) and Waters' (1994, 1999) research, this new understanding of what the "American Dream" entailed helped participants view challenges as barriers that could be overcome and sustained participants' optimism and aspirations.

Pre-Migration Habitus

In addition to holding optimistic views and a dual frame of reference, immigrant families are also likely to draw upon life experiences in their home country that, when applied within their new environment, have positive implications for their children's achievement (Feliciano &

Lanuza, 2017; Feliciano; 2020, Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Griffin et al., 2012). As previously discussed, most migrants represent a group that is positively selected from their homeland. That is, newcomers often hold a higher social class position relative to those that do not migrate (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017). By virtue of their former class position, migrants may possess class-specific resources, namely cultural practices, skills, dispositions, and aspirations that, when transferred to a U.S. context bode well for intergenerational mobility (Fernández-Kelly, 2008).

Post-migration, scholars have found that immigrant families continue to use their former lifestyle and class-based habitus as their frame of reference (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Portes, 2000). Parents share family narratives and emulate practices that represent the social status they belonged to prior to migration (Fernández-Kelly, 2008). Parents raise their children transmitting class-based cultural values that may include resilience; delayed gratification; respect for elders, teachers, and authority figures; and a sense of purpose that motivates school effort and achievement (Buriel, 2012; Coll & Marks, 2012; Conger & Atwell, 2012; Hao & Ma, 2012). Within the context of their new environment, immigrant parents are likely to hold utilitarian views toward their children's education (Louie, 2005), view college-going as the best tool for their child and family to succeed in the United States (Hao & Ma, 2012; Portes, 2000), and hold strict definitions of success that guide their children's aspirations (Imoagene, 2017; Lee & Zhou, 2015).

Regardless of whether families resettle in communities with a large presence of other co-ethnics, these class-based orientations persist and subsequently guide the socialization of children in their household (Portes, 2000). As a result, many immigrant children develop identities, practices, and academic skills that are conducive to success in U.S. schools (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017). From early childhood through adolescence and secondary education, these pre-

migration class-based characteristics represent intangible assets that are not always visible and captured in quantitative research exploring educational outcomes (Feliciano, 2020; Fernández-Kelly, 2008).

A long line of research has documented that despite positive selection and human capital, many immigrants experience downward social mobility post-migration due to multiple factors that include a lack of legal documentation, difficulty transferring academic or occupational credentials to U.S. schools or employers, or limited English language proficiency (Feliciano, 2020; Gans, 2009; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Louie, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Singer, 2012). As a result, parents may end up in low wage jobs despite possessing human capital and a habitus that would otherwise lead to a middle-class status (Feliciano, 2020). Even as they may experience a loss of privileged status in transition, the class-based knowledge learned as a result of their former social status remains. For example, parents who experience downward mobility may continue to prioritize their children’s education by supplementing school instruction with home lessons to reinforce the family’s value for academic success (Griffin et al., 2012). Consequently, immigrants’ pre-migration habitus is a critical but often hidden element that engenders in youth a predisposition toward school achievement and high educational and occupation goals (Buriel, 2012; Fernández-Kelly, 2008).

Obligation Ethos

Another intangible asset and source of capital that drives the school success of immigrant youth is a sense of duty or obligation to perform well in school (Kao, 1995; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). This phenomenon is well established in the literature (e.g., Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Flores, 2018; Fuligni, 2012; Louie, 2012; Schneider & Lee, 1990) and has been referred to as “obligation ethos” (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Coll & Marks, 2012). This

sense of obligation is often prompted by parents who describe their migration as a profound sacrifice in which they suffered great losses including a decline in social status and lifestyle (Kao, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2009). Parents may also detail the difficult circumstances they currently face on their jobs, circumstances they endure so that their children can have a better life (Carey, 2016). Upon hearing these messages, youth may be inspired by their parents' struggles (Kim & Gasman, 2011) and feel a sense of responsibility to do well in school, stay out of trouble, and set aspirations that align with their parent's wishes (Fuligni, 2012; Imoagene, 2017; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Lee & Zhou, 2015; Louie, 2012). It is also important to note that students may also experience negative emotions due to their perceived responsibility, ranging from overwhelming pressure to earn high grades or choose a lucrative or prestigious major (Lee & Zhou, 2015; Tang et al., 2013), to a sense of burden or indebtedness to their parent for their hardships (Kang & Raffaelli, 2016; Tang et al., 2013). Negative feelings notwithstanding, immigrant college students often indicate that their precollege aspirations and achievements stemmed from a desire to honor and justify their family's sacrifices (Fuligni, 2012; Imoagene, 2017; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Lee & Zhou, 2015; Louie, 2012).

Intangible resources such as hope and optimism, pre-migration habitus, and obligation ethos all contribute to educational outcomes for immigrant youth. Yet, they are often hidden dimensions of the immigrant experience (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017). These resources are not exclusive to one's socioeconomic status in the United States or inherent to one race or ethnicity. These resources emerge from the experience of migration (Griffin et al., 2012) or they may develop in the United States as a survival and mobility strategy (Flores, 2018; Fuligni, 2012; Knight et al., 2016; Ogbu, 1991). Described in the literature as culturally-based family-mediated

capital (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Portes, 2000), I regard them as immigrant capital that is cultivated within families but also by extended family and non-familial social networks. The next section provides an overview of social networks that scholars have found beneficial to the academic success and precollege experiences of immigrant youth.

Social Networks and Ethnic Capital

Marginalized youth who enroll in college often attribute their success to family encouragement as well as the support of non-familial networks that include school personnel, community mentors, and faith community members (George Mwangi, 2015; Louie, 2012; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Martinez, 2012; Reddick et al., 2011). Early and recent scholarship (Kao, 2004; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Portes & Zhou, 1993) has explored the influence of these social relationships through the lens of Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital, or resources embedded in relationships between individuals and within interpersonal networks. These relationships facilitate behaviors, such as combining resources or sharing information, that help individuals or groups obtain something of value. Social capital operates within families, within communities, and among parents within social institutions (Coleman, 1988).

Coleman (1988) explains that social capital manifests in 3 forms: shared expectations and a sense of obligation within a group, the flow of valuable information within the relationship, and prescriptive norms that reward actions in the best interest of the group and sanction those based on self-interest. Distinct from other forms of capital like physical materials and financial assets, social capital is often intangible and abstract. However, social capital can lead to the development of other, more tangible, resources; It is "productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (Coleman, 1988, p. S98).

A central concept in segmented assimilation theory, Portes and Zhou (1993) use social capital to explain positive outcomes and academic success of immigrant youth, noting that they benefit from being a part of an ethnic community that exchanges material resources and information to aid upward mobility. Similarly, in his economic analysis of intergenerational mobility, George Borjas (1992) asserts that the quality of the ethnic environment in which children are raised, defined as “ethnic capital,” influences intergenerational mobility. Akin to the sociological concept of social capital, Borjas (1992) describes networks that include parents and co-ethnic members of the community, such as business owners. The members of these networks pass down social norms and cultural traditions as well as human capital and economic resources to the younger generation. Collectively, the presence of and engagement with ethnic capital supports the intergenerational mobility of immigrants (Borjas, 1992).

As with other minoritized groups in the United States who are systematically blocked from accessing networks of privilege (Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Ogbu, 1991), research shows that immigrants often rely on social capital generated within their own communities to gain footing in the United States and advance (Imaogene, 2017; Lee & Zhou, 2015). Similarly, Yosso (2005) includes the concept of social capital as a form of cultural wealth and references research with immigrant communities that illustrates how co-ethnic social networks are leveraged to overcome structural and systemic adversity. Kao (2004) suggests that although immigrants may have less access to privileged social capital when compared to non-immigrants, they tend to reap greater rewards from their familial networks, schools, and communities. In the section that follows, I will briefly synthesize literature that examines the social networks that support immigrant success: family, schools and community-based organizations, and the ethnic community.

Familial Networks

The literature shows that strong ties within immigrant families contribute to a sense of familism, that is, an orientation that prioritizes the needs of family over one's individual needs (Schwartz, 2007). Scholars suggest that familism supports the academic success of first- and second-generation youth (Gong et al., 2015; Kao & Thompson, 2003). Researchers have found that immigrant families are likely to be headed by both parents (Bennett & Lutz, 2009; Thomas, 2011; Turner et al., 2015) and include a broad and redefined notion of family that includes relatives by marriage, distant kin, and non-familial relationships, for example, uncles, distant cousins, in-laws, neighbors, or close friends (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010; Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Foner, 1997; George Mwangi et al., 2020). Scholars have highlighted myriad ways that both formal and informal kinship ties support the advancement of the collective unit (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Menjívar, 1995). For example, immigrants may provide a place to stay for relatives or friends from their homeland or offer loans for new arrivals to secure housing (Menjívar, 1995). Similarly, in their study Pfeiffer et al. (2017) found that immigrants may pool financial resources to purchase homes that can accommodate multiple, multigenerational, and often extended family members. While the support of immigrant kinship networks is not automatic and often depends on factors present in the receiving community (Menjívar, 1995), research points to the interconnectedness of dense familial networks as an important resource utilized during resettlement and adaptation (Landale et al., 2011).

Additionally, migrating family members maintain relationships with relatives and friends back home (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010) and lean on their hopes and expectations to seek opportunities for success in the United States. In current times, media and digital technology make it easier for immigrant youth to stay connected with friends and relatives in their homeland

(Yazykova & McLeigh, 2015). As a result, immigrant youth are likely to construct a transnational identity that includes cultural values from both the United States and their homeland (Kebede, 2017; Yazykova & McLeigh, 2015). Relatives back home hold high expectations for their migrated family members, and immigrant youth may feel pressure to please not only their family in the United States but also their family and friends in their homeland (Yazykova & McLeigh, 2015). In this distinct manner, children of immigrants may be able to draw upon the values and expectations of local and distant familial networks as motivation to do well in school (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Louie, 2005).

Schools and Community-based Organizations

While strong family ties are important contributors to the success of immigrant youth, research shows that family-based capital often works in concert with school and community agents who encourage high academic aspirations and assist families to navigate a foreign system of education (Gong et al., 2015; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Liou et al., 2009; Louie, 2012). Schools serve an important role in the adaptation of immigrant youth; They are the place where children spend the most time outside of home and have extended contact with members of their new society (Hao & Pong, 2008; Louie, 2005). At schools, immigrant youth not only build upon their academic skills, they also develop proficiency in U.S. English, become familiar with U.S. social norms and customs, develop relationships with peers and educators, and learn about pathways to higher education and careers in a U.S. context (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011). As a result, immigrant youth can gain the knowledge and extra-familial social support required for achievement in the U.S. education system (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011).

Schools serving immigrant communities can also be powerful sites for sharing and strengthening ethnic social capital and promoting the development of a bicultural identity (Louie,

2005; Sampson, 2019). For example, Jaffe-Walter and Lee's (2011) research provides an ethnographic account of an ESL-serving public high school that built on students' linguistic and cultural skills by encouraging students to use their native language in the classroom and centering their experiences and cultures in curriculum and pedagogy. Community organizations also play an important role in supporting the needs of immigrants (Patraporn et al., 2010; Singer, 2012). In traditional immigrant destinations like New York City and Washington, DC, co-ethnic organizations are often available to offer employment assistance, language classes, and guide parents on where and how to enroll children in school (Singer, 2012). Immigrants in nontraditional immigrant destination cities might find it harder to connect with a broad network of co-ethnic support (Wille et al., 2019). However, the schools and organizations that are present may find ways to serve a growing immigrant population and generate a multicultural community network of support for recent arrivals (Walker, 2012; Wille et al., 2019). For example, after receiving services by a North Carolina organization supporting immigrants and refugees, participants in He et al.'s (2017) study later volunteered or were employed in service to recent arrivals in their small town. In their new roles, participants drew from their own cultural transition experiences to develop and facilitate services for recent arrivals, like homework clubs, adult computer classes, and English tutoring programs. In this regard, through community organizations recent immigrants may use their resettlement experiences and lessons learned to aid the transition of new arrivals and generate a network of support.

Ethnic Community Networks

In an oppressive society that inequitably structures access to capital, the act of remaining firmly embedded in a co-ethnic community is a key strategy used by newcomers to access material, social, and psychological resources (Liou et al., 2009; Mitra, 2012; Portes & Zhou,

1993). Established members may be able to offer moral and emotional support during transition and help newcomers find employment, navigate social services, and access educational resources for their children (Fuligni, 2012; Park, 2012). These networks also allow immigrants to seek refuge and comfort from challenges they face in the outside world (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Because of a homeland bond and a shared migration experience, newcomers may feel a sense of connection, trust, and reciprocity with co-ethnics and be more likely to exchange resources within this network (Kao, 2004; Mitra, 2012).

Co-ethnic communities are spaces where knowledge and use of one's country of origin language, dialect, or accent may serve as a form of cultural capital (Oropeza et al., 2010; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Information channels embedded in these networks advise co-ethnics on topics such as how to choose the best schools for their children, prepare their children for college entrance exams, and access financial aid for higher education (Kao, 2004; Park, 2012). Importantly, ethnic-based organizations, such as churches, businesses, and civic associations, can also facilitate interaction and the flow of valuable information and resources between low-, middle-, and upper-class families (Louie, 2005; Park, 2012). Consequently, recent arrivals benefit from established co-ethnics who have lived in the United States longer and have greater socioeconomic capital and information about their new society (Louie, 2005; Park, 2012).

Ethnic communities often include multiple sets of families: nuclear and extended, biological or fictive (Menjívar, 1995). Hao and Bonstead (1998) use the term "between-family social capital" to describe close and supportive networks of single immigrant families. Their research suggests that the relationships between immigrant families generates a unique form of capital that has implications for children's academic aspirations and achievement (Hao & Bonstead, 1998). Relatedly, research (e.g., Liou et al., 2009) has applied a concept known in the

literature as “intergenerational closure” (Coleman, 1988; 1991), defined as the extent to which children benefit from having parents who maintain social ties with the parents of their friends. These close relationships reinforce parental expectations for youth, promote guidance and discipline, and encourage academic effort and achievement (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Park et al., 2019). For example, as evidenced in Ryan and Ream’s (2016) study, a high degree of intergenerational closure among Latinx immigrant students positively correlated with college enrollment. In this manner, resources shared by family, community, and cultural networks ground migrants within the traditions and values of their home country (Foner, 1997) while generating valuable social capital leveraged toward advancing success and mobility.

To summarize, although a large body of research indicates positive educational outcomes for immigrant-origin students, scholars agree that the immigrant advantage may be overstated (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Fuligni, 2012; Louie, 2005). Instead, educational outcomes are influenced by myriad factors including the family’s socioeconomic status pre- and post-migration, the reception and adaptation of migrants in the resettlement area, and the presence of a co-ethnic community in the new destination. In fact, researchers suggest that in many cases immigrant youth actually replicate the pre-migration position of their parents who were likely better educated than their nonmigrant counterparts (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017).

While an immigrant advantage may not exist, research exploring educational outcomes offers both tangible and intangible mechanisms that operate in many immigrant families and communities to counter disadvantage and support the academic success of their children. These factors include: a sense of hope and optimism for advancement in the United States (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017); a sense of obligation to one’s parents who have experienced hardship and sacrifice to migrate (Fuligni, 2012; Louie, 2012; Onuma et al., 2020); a

perspective that positions the opportunity structure in the United States as better than their homeland (Ogbu, 1991; Suárez-Orozco, 1987); academically-oriented attitudes, expectations, and habits developed as a result of their family's pre-migration experiences (Buriel, 2012; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Onuma et al., 2020); and a local and transnational network of family members and co-ethnics who engender high aspirations and provide valuable information and resources to aid transition and mobility (Fuligni, 2012; Louie, 2005; Park et al., 2019; Portes & Zhou, 1993). These factors are evidenced in immigrant families across racial groups and nationalities (Lee & Zhou, 2015; Louie, 2012; Ogbu, 1991; Onuma et al., 2020). They are uniquely valuable because working-class immigrants of color have limited access to resources that are typically associated with social and economic advancement in the United States, values that often operate in White or middle- and upper-class families (Lee & Zhou, 2015; Louie, 2012; Ogbu, 1991). Instead, research suggests that immigrants of color rely upon and leverage assets within their nuclear and extended family and community to resist racism and xenophobia, gain a foothold in American society, and pursue upward mobility through their children's education (Lee & Zhou, 2015; Louie, 2012; Ogbu, 1991).

In this regard, resources that are present in low-income immigrant families represent a non-White, non-middle-class form of capital – immigrant capital – that supports academic achievement and college-going. Akin to Yosso's (2005) notion of community cultural wealth, immigrant capital is often overlooked, mis-identified, and underutilized in U.S. education systems. Yet, youth continue to draw upon immigrant capital to succeed in school and access higher education. In some ways, forms of immigrant capital closely align with community cultural wealth as outlined by Yosso (2005). For example, immigrant youth utilize an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and cultural networks to do well in school and forge a path to higher

education (He et al., 2017; Liou et al., 2009; Munoz & Maldonado, 2012). In fact, the definition of aspirational capital exemplifies the hope and optimism immigrants draw on in pursuit of what some regard as the “American Dream” (Louie, 2004). Immigrant capital is also like ethnic capital in that parts of it are embedded in co-ethnic spaces and the relational networks within them. Yet, immigrant capital is distinct because resources are generally tied to the experience of being an immigrant, which may include holding a middle-to-upper class pre-migration habitus; making a decision and having the resources to migrate; and the process of migration, resettlement, and adaptation in a new society. In other words, immigrant capital is not solely based within social networks like ethnic capital. Immigrant capital as previously conceptualized is broader. It includes social and ethnic capital as well as a cross-ethnic intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences.

It is important to note that immigrant families are not the only families who are rich in capital. Non-immigrant families of color also have cultural wealth. However, they may possess different forms of capital that are less common in immigrant families, such as an emphasis on sports participation or highly structured enrichment activities (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Leo, 2019). Conversely, immigrant families draw on capital that is less common in native families, for example, obligation ethos, to support goals for educational success (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016). Feliciano and Lanuza (2016) argue that a shortfall in forms of capital traditionally found in White middle-class families is more than compensated for by the unique resources and wealth found in immigrant families. They suggest further exploration of these non-dominant resources and how they shape educational ambitions and postsecondary achievement. By applying both community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and immigrant capital to the study of college choice,

this research study will explore forms of capital that shape the search and decision-making process of immigrant youth.

In the section that follows, I will narrow my scope from broad educational outcomes of first- and second-generation immigrants to the college choice process specifically, i.e., the process in which students form aspirations for higher education (Predisposition), determine their college options (Search), apply to college(s), and ultimately select a postsecondary institution (Choice).

College Choice Process of Immigrant Youth

Researchers (e.g., Alvarez, 2010; Poon & Byrd, 2013; Surla & Poon) have applied Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) college choice model to examine the precollege experiences of first- and second-generation immigrant youth of color. Recent research (e.g., Carey, 2016; Hernández, 2015; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Pérez, 2010; Romo et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2013) has focused on how immigrant youth engage multiple forms of capital, including community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), to develop an early predisposition toward college, assess their postsecondary goals, research college options, and navigate the college and decision-making processes. A preponderance of this literature has focused on early aspirations. Mirroring a trend in the broader college choice scholarship, a relatively limited number of studies centering immigrant youth have examined the college research, application, and decision-making activities that typically occur in the 10th through 12th grades. Additionally, most research has examined the use of social/cultural capital and college choice with single-race samples of immigrants, predominately Latinx youth with a particular focus on undocumented students. A limited (but growing) number of studies explore how Asian and Black immigrants draw upon various forms

of capital on their path to college. Finally, few studies have engaged a multiracial sample of immigrant youth of color to explore the use of social and cultural capital in college choice.

In the sections that follow, I will organize my synthesis of college choice studies with first- and second-generation immigrant youth by first presenting literature on Predisposition, the stage defined by a student's emerging interest in pursuing postsecondary education (Hossler et al., 1989). I will then present literature on Search and Choice, the stages that include assessing one's career interests, researching colleges, completing college and financial aid applications, and making one's college decision (Hossler et al., 1989). I will further organize my review using themes that emerged from the literature – themes that may be considered forms of immigrant capital that promote college-going: migration narrative and family obligation, higher education as an ethnic value and tool of resistance, narrow success frame, use of extended family and social networks, and college choice as a family decision.

Predisposition

According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), during the Predisposition phase students make tentative decisions about whether to pursue education beyond high school. This stage occurs during the period of childhood to one's junior year of high school (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Developing a predisposition toward postsecondary enrollment is influenced by the student's ability and academic achievement, parental income and education level, parental encouragement, and the quality of the student's academic program (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). During this stage most students' aspirations are general and vague with limited specificity on their postsecondary plans (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989). However, forming a predisposition toward college is an important first step in the college choice process (Hossler et al., 1989).

Migration Narrative and Family Obligation

Scholars have found that the lives of immigrant-origin children are greatly influenced by their family's migration narrative, that is, the collection of stories told about the experience of moving and resettling in the United States (Daoud et al., 2018; Ogbu, 1991; Pérez Huber, 2009). Growing up in an immigrant household often means hearing parents and family members tell tales of life back home, their move to the United States, and the many sacrifices that were made to seek a "better life" for their children (Burrell-McRae, 2009; Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Kang & Raffaelli, 2016; Kao, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2009). For many immigrant families, earning a college degree represents a fulfillment of the family's long and arduous quest to migrate and pursue their vision of the "American Dream" (He et al., 2017; Kanno & Kangas, 2014).

Overwhelmingly, research with Latinx, Black, and Asian immigrant youth recognize the influence of the family migration story on the development of high educational aspirations (George Mwangi et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2012; Romo et al., 2018; Sanchez et al., 2010; Surla & Poon, 2015). For example, Tang et al.'s (2013) study with second-generation Cambodian American college students found that participants, many of whose parents were refugees, were well aware of the hardships their parents endured during their migration and resettlement in the United States. This awareness motivated participants to develop college and career aspirations that they perceived as justifying and honoring their parents' sacrifices. Other studies (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Carey, 2016; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2015; Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Fuligni, 2012; Louie, 2012) indicate a similar finding: to show respect for their parents' hardships youth may feel a sense of obligation to adhere to their parent's wishes and do well in school. Several researchers have also found that college aspirations emanate from a sense of obligation to be a

positive role model for younger siblings and to inspire their siblings' college goals (Flores, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2010; Váscones-Gatski, 2015). Indeed, a sense of family obligation can extend beyond one's nuclear family. As Daoud and colleagues' (2018) research with Black immigrants shows, college student participants expressed a sense of obligation to uphold the high expectations not only of immediate family members, but also family back home, and familial co-ethnics in community.

Relatedly, college aspirations may come from a drive to contribute to the collective mobility of the family unit (Griffin et al., 2012; Salerno, 2018). Immigrant youth from low-income households may view college as the best path to future financial stability for themselves and their families (Louie, 2004; Surla & Poon, 2015; Tang et al., 2013). For example, Sanchez and colleagues' (2010) research with first- and second-generation Latinx immigrants found that participants were more likely than their native counterparts to pursue college to earn a career that would enable them to contribute to their family's finances.

In these ways, the literature suggests that family relationships and aspirations work together to serve as key sources of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that promote early college predisposition. Despite barriers immigrant youth may face in school, their educational goals are embedded within their family's migration history and sustained by a sense of family obligation and collective approach to upward mobility (Oropeza et al., 2010; Sanchez et al., 2010; Surla & Poon, 2015; Tang et al., 2013; Yazykova & McLeigh, 2015). As a result, socialization within an immigrant family may engender an external and instrumental value to school achievement that supports college aspirations (Pong & Zeiser, 2012; Sanchez et al., 2010).

Higher Education as an Ethnic Value and Tool of Resistance

Research (Buriel, 2012; Imaogene, 2017) focusing on first- and second-generation immigrant youth indicates that ethnic identity, that is, an individual's sense of membership and connection to a particular ethnic group (Phinney, 1996), may play a role in promoting an early predisposition toward college. Embedded within a family's migration story, immigrant youth may grow up hearing laudatory tales of their ancestral land, rich culture, and esteemed and successful relatives and friends back home (Fernández-Kelly, 2008). As families settle in their new destination and transition to a minority group status, they may experience racism, xenophobia, and social discrimination (Hopkins, 2010; Newman et al., 2018; Ogbu, 1991; Saramo, 2017; Waters, 1999). Stories about the home country can serve an important function by enabling immigrant youth to develop a dignified and affirmed sense of their ethnicity and culture (Fernández-Kelly, 2008). In this manner, immigrants may contextualize academic success and educational goals within a larger narrative of ethnic pride (Burrell-McRae, 2009; George Mwangi et al., 2020; Kebede, 2017). For example, scholars studying Black first- and second-generation immigrants have found that going to college was perceived not just a family value but as an ethnic value, in other words, what it means to be Nigerian or West Indian (Daoud et al., 2018; Griffin et al., 2012; Imaogene, 2017).

The literature also suggests that minoritized youth of the same race may draw early college aspirations from their identities in distinctive ways. Daoud and colleagues (2018) found that both Black immigrant and Black native college students possessed a strong sense of academic motivation that was related to their cultural background. However, the motivation of native participants was in part fueled by a response to racism and negative stereotypes about Blacks. In contrast, the motivation of Caribbean and African first- and second-generation

participants was largely motivated by their identity as immigrants, their ethnic pride, and their desire to obtain the “American Dream” through education.

Similarly, research with Latinx youth suggests a positive correlation between cultural knowledge, ethnic pride, and educational aspirations (Buriel, 2012; Liou et al., 2009; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Welton & Martinez, 2014) as well as a distinction between the attitudes of first- and later-generation immigrants (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012). In their study examining the experiences of first-generation Mexicana college students, Muñoz and Maldonado (2012) attribute participants’ school success to their first-hand knowledge of Mexican culture and their ability, in the face of negative stereotypes about Mexicans, to draw on their culture as a source of strength. In this manner, participants’ sense of cultural pride not only fostered a positive academic identity, but pride also served as a tool of resistance, a mechanism participants used to excel within a racist society that essentialized them as illegal (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012).

Viewed through the lens of Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model, researchers have identified the important role of resistant capital in developing a predisposition toward higher education. Studies with Latinx immigrant youth shows that motivation to do well in school is often rooted in resisting anti-immigrant attitudes and disproving negative ethnic stereotypes (Chang et al., 2017; Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2020; Liou et al., 2009; Martinez, 2012; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Welton & Martinez, 2014). In this manner, students attempt to shield themselves from society’s negative attitudes and develop a positive academic self-image and college-going identity (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Welton & Martinez, 2014). To summarize, research with immigrant youth shows that early aspirations for college may be influenced by both a sense of ethnic pride and resistance to marginalization. In considering

Yosso's (2005) model, students leverage aspirational, familial, and resistant capital to achieve school success and set their sights on higher education.

Narrow Success Frame Shapes Educational Goals

Overwhelmingly, early and recent scholars agree that parental expectations for college attendance significantly shapes their children's emerging interest in postsecondary education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989; Kao, 2004; Kirk et al., 2011). Recent literature reveals that Asian and Black immigrant parents may hold very specific expectations for the type of college and career they expect their children to pursue (Imaogene, 2017; Lee & Zhou, 2015). These familial expectations are based on a narrow definition of success, that is, a strict vision for achievement that guides childrearing practices and expectations for behavior (Lee & Zhou, 2015). For example, Lee and Zhou's (2015) research suggests that many Asian immigrant parents consider success to include the following: graduating high school with top honors, earning a degree from a prestigious university, and gaining a career in a high-status lucrative field like medicine, law, or engineering. Other researchers (e.g., Kim & Gasman, 2011; Surla & Poon, 2015) have found that for Asian American families, early college aspirations specifically identify attending a "good" college as an important and distinct goal. Research also shows that Caribbean and Nigerian immigrants use a similarly exacting success frame for their children's educational and occupational goal setting (Burrell-McRae, 2009; Griffin et al., 2012; Imaogene, 2017). This exacting view of success is also often reinforced by extended family members and members of the co-ethnic immigrant community (Burrell-McRae, 2009; Griffin et al., 2012; Imaogene, 2017; Lee & Zhou, 2015).

Lee and Zhou's (2015) research also points out that Mexican immigrants aspire for success and upward mobility as well. However, their success frame is often defined with a wider

scope and includes multiple ways to achieve success. For example, the college aspirations of Mexican American participants in Lee and Zhou's study were motivated by a desire to do better than their parents and seek intergenerational mobility (Lee & Zhou, 2015). However, unlike Asian American participants, success was not linked with a specific college or occupation type. The authors assert that while Asian American immigrants may set their sights on elite universities as a marker of achievement, Latinx immigrants who enroll in a community college or a less-selective 4-year institution may fulfill their family's definition of success (Flores, 2018; Lee & Zhou, 2015). Thereby, immigrant youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds leverage a success frame as capital in that, despite barriers, there is an expectation for mobility that fosters early aspirations and predisposes some youth to set their sights on selective postsecondary institutions specifically.

Search and Choice

Although research on the Search stage of the college choice model is scant, the activities that occur during this stage are critical and determine whether a student's early aspirations are ultimately realized (Klasik et al., 2018). The Search stage involves actively engaging in multiple, time-sensitive, and complex planning tasks (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989). These tasks include assessing one's career interests; exploring postsecondary programs; and registering, preparing for, and completing high-stakes entrance exams (Klasik et al., 2018; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Scholars (e.g., Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989) associate Search with the 10th through 12th grades.

In 12th grade, precollege students shift from assessing their interests and college options to applying to college and making their college decision (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Terenzini et al., 2001). During the Choice stage, students continue to

manage multiple time-sensitive tasks that include filling out and submitting college applications, completing and submitting financial aid and scholarship applications, receiving college decision letters and responses regarding financial aid, and evaluating their options from the set of institutions to which they have been admitted (Klasik et al., 2018).

Extended Family and Social Networks

During the Search and Choice stages, the literature shows that parents continue to encourage college aspirations, support self-exploration and college and career research, and set search parameters regarding distance from home or cost (Hossler et al., 1989). However, as concrete planning begins, many immigrant parents and their children face barriers that include a limited knowledge of the college application process and higher education system and limited access to college guidance (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Gonzalez, 2017; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011). As a result, they often need additional support to gather, interpret, apply, and synthesize the information they receive (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012). Scholars have found that while immigrant parents continue to encourage college-going, their children receive emotional and instrumental support from a range of individuals, including extended family members, peers, and school and community agents as they research, apply, select, and enroll in college (Chhuon et al., 2010; Hernández, 2015; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Surla & Poon, 2015).

Extended Family. Siblings, cousins, and other extended family members who have attended college serve an important role during Search and Choice (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Surla & Poon, 2015). Because of their familiarity with the college application process, college-educated family members may assist students to complete applications, take students on campus visits, and offer advice and guidance on college options (Carey, 2016;

Hernández, 2015; Surla & Poon, 2015). As relatives, they are uniquely positioned to offer college planning advice that incorporates family needs and is contextualized within the family's culture and values (Flores, 2018; Surla & Poon). Additionally, language familiarity may also aid this process. Oropeza and colleagues (2010) found that participants, who were all multilingual and first-generation, leveraged their language abilities to map out college plans with co-lingual family members. Specifically, participants' ability and use of their native language enabled them to gain valuable encouragement, support, and advice from those who shared their linguistic forms and styles.

Peers. Researchers also acknowledge the unique support of same-age peers as well as older peers who have gone through the college application process (Pérez, 2010). Studies show that immigrant youth exchange application information and tips with friends (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Martinez, 2012) and even translate during meetings with institutional agents (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012). Pérez (2010) found that applicants prioritized the advice of experienced older peers in making their college decision. Through assistance like this, students' bidirectional peer support and the act of paying it forward reflects themes of reciprocity and commitment that are central to the college-going narratives of many underrepresented students (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; George Mwangi, 2015).

This type of lateral mentorship and support illustrates what Acevedo-Gil (2017) refers to in her framework *college-conocimiento*, an interdisciplinary college choice model that centers the experiences of Latinx students. Acevedo-Gil (2017) suggests that as a response to inequitable access to resources, many Latinx peers reject a competitive approach to college search, embrace peer support and collaboration, and create a community-based environment of trust with one another. From a community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) perspective, students leverage peer

social capital to navigate institutions that were not built with the needs of underrepresented students in mind.

Educators. For low-income immigrant students of color, educators often play a critical role in the final stages of the college choice process. For example, teachers and school counselors may provide individual support with filling out college applications (Kim & Gasman, 2011) and facilitate family planning meetings and financial aid workshops (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Surla & Poon, 2015). After students receive college acceptances and funding information, school-based staff may also help students and families weigh pros and cons of each college as they prepare to select a school (Hernández, 2015; Surla & Poon, 2015). Research with immigrant youth also shows that participation in college access programs can support the application and decision-making process (Collins et al., 2016). Program personnel help students develop knowledge about a variety of colleges, encourage students to apply to multiple colleges, assist with applications, and offer application fee waivers (Collins et al., 2016; Surla & Poon, 2015). Additionally, immigrant families may often rely on educators to translate and explain the complex forms and processes required for college financing and enrollment (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012).

College Choice as a Family Decision

As an extension of the singular frame of success (Imaogene, 2017; Lee & Zhou, 2015) that shapes college aspirations, immigrant youth may feel pressure from family to consider only “good” colleges, in other words, selective or elite institutions with a strong academic reputation, a high level of prestige, or a national ranking (Griffin et al., 2012; Imaogene, 2017; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Lee & Zhou, 2015). Beyond having the opportunity to enroll in higher education,

receiving an acceptance letter from a selective institution might bring prestige, honor, or status to their family and co-ethnic community (Imaogene, 2017; Lee & Zhou, 2015).

As students weigh their options for college enrollment and financing, their decisions often balance prestige with affordability and practicality (Burrell-McRae, 2009; Griffin et al., 2012; Hernández, 2015). In Surla and Poon's (2015) study, although some students dreamed of applying to top tier institutions out of the area, several decided that staying close to family was important because it would be easier for them to support their family members emotionally and financially. Studies show that family members may also encourage students to narrow their search to reputable and "acceptable" colleges located in close proximity to home (Hernández, 2015; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Poon & Byrd, 2015; Surla & Poon, 2015).

When making college decisions, scholars have found that immigrant youth continue to reflect on familial needs and expectations. Immigrants may expect to work while in college to contribute to family finances or pay their own tuition (Sanchez et al., 2010). In addition to providing financial support, youth from immigrant families may also feel a strong sense of duty to provide other practical forms of support, such as language translation, or elder- or child-care for family members while in college (Flores, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2010; Surla & Poon, 2015). In fact, when compared with low-income non-immigrants, Sanchez and colleagues (Sanchez et al., 2010) found that immigrants were more likely to expect to juggle multiple family and financial responsibilities while in college.

These expectations and responsibilities may influence the timing of college enrollment (Allen et al., 2020). For example, some college aspiring Latinx high school graduates in Sanchez and colleagues' (2010) study chose to matriculate right after high school as the first step in a long-term investment for the sake of their family. Other graduates chose to prioritize

employment in the short-term and attend college later in life so that they could help with immediate family needs. Similarly, Hernández (2015) found high-achieving first- and later-generation Latinas weighed dreams of a “full college experience” with the realities of family needs, expectations, and financial limitations. Even when parents presented college as an individual choice, participants carefully considered how their choice would affect their ability to stay connected with family, impact their family’s finances, and affect their younger siblings’ future opportunities for college. Ultimately, all participants selected a college that was within a 90-minute drive from home: far enough from home to experience the independence of campus living, but close enough that they could go home on the weekends.

These findings challenge original college choice theorists’ (Hossler et al., 1989) view that while parents and peers may play an important role in decision making, ultimately students perceive college choice as their individual decision to make. Findings from existing literature centering the experiences of immigrant-origin students indicates that family needs shape decisions on where to apply and when and where to ultimately enroll (Allen et al., 2020; Flores, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2010). It is also evident that when making their college decision, youth from immigrant households may feel obligated to choose a school that prioritizes family expectations, needs, and responsibilities (Allen et al., 2020; Flores, 2018; Hernández, 2015; Sanchez et al., 2010). In this regard, college choice may actually be a family versus individual decision.

Summary of Literature Review

This chapter reviewed major areas of research on the precollege experiences of immigrant youth and the resources they engage to navigate the college choice process. Although immigrants and their children experience daunting challenges and barriers as they migrate,

resettle, and adapt to U.S. society, they possess and utilize multiple distinct assets that lead to their academic success. These assets include a belief in the “American Dream”; hope and optimism for collective success and intergenerational mobility; the ability to transfer pre-migration habitus and class-based resources to a U.S. context; and the use of familial, social, and ethnic networks to share information and generate additional resources to aid mobility. These assets represent a form of capital, conceptualized in this research study as *immigrant capital*, that promotes high occupational and educational aspirations in immigrant-origin students.

First- and second-generation immigrant youth engage multiple forms of capital, including community cultural wealth and immigrant capital, throughout the college choice process in the following ways. Students’ aspirations for college are often influenced by parental expectations that embed college-going within the family’s narrative of migration, sacrifice, hope, and collective achievement. Students may also develop high educational aspirations to counter and resist racial, ethnic, and anti-immigrant stereotypes and the social inequities that plague their schools and communities. As students begin to research and apply to colleges, their choices are often shaped by their family’s strict definition of success that prioritizes high prestige colleges. The literature also suggests that immigrant youth may rely on the opinion of family members and extended kin more than their native counterparts and feel a sense of obligation to incorporate familial needs throughout the search and choice process. Finally, immigrant youth may uniquely benefit from familial and social networks that include members who speak the same language, ascribe to familiar cultural traditions, and share resources within a closed inter-generational network. In many cases, these co-ethnic or co-linguistic networks help immigrant youth and families build the navigational skills necessary to guide their path from secondary to higher education.

Although recent research has applied an asset-based approach to understand the college choice experiences of immigrant students of color, the literature is primarily focused on studies with same-race participants. What we do not know is to what extent immigrant youth, across racial groups, draw from similar forms of capital to access college. My research addresses this gap by engaging a racially diverse sample of first-generation immigrant students. Additionally, my research addresses an under-researched stage in the college choice process: Search, the stage at which students explore their academic interests, take high-stakes entrance exams, gather college information, and develop a list of desirable institutions.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research rationale, strategy, and methods I employed to examine the college search and decision-making experiences of immigrant students of color. My investigation addressed the following questions:

1. How do low-income, first-generation immigrant students of color engage in the college search and choice process (e.g., “go about” accessing college information, developing their choice set, completing college applications, and making the college decision)?
 - (a) What tools and resources do students use?
 - (b) Who assists them and in what ways?
 - (c) How are they making sense of their experiences, significant moments, and turning points and strategizing in this process?
2. How do various forms of capital and community resources shape students’ college choice process?

I chose narrative inquiry to address these questions. In the next section, I provide an overview of narrative inquiry and explain why this methodological approach aligns well with the investigation. In sections that follow, I provide my positionality statement, a reflection on my social identities, values, and personal experiences relevant to this study. I discuss how my positionality may have affected this study and my engagement with participants. Then, I present an overview of my methods, including participant eligibility criteria and the steps I took to sample and recruit participants. This section is followed by an overview of data collection, analysis procedures, and measures used to ensure trustworthiness. To conclude, I outline the scope and limitations of this study.

Narrative Inquiry

This research project was conducted as narrative inquiry, a methodological approach that falls under the category of narrative research. Narrative inquiry rests on the assumption that a person's life experience is "filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17) and that people often experience and communicate life events through stories. Narrative inquiry uncovers a deeper understanding of a person's lived experience related to the phenomenon of interest (Bold, 2012; Creswell, 2013). Through the detailed stories shared, researchers and participants work together to explore key details, the meaning these stories hold for participants, and how early events have influenced participants' lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Wertz et al., 2011).

Narrative inquiry involves a collaboration between the researcher and participants in which the researcher aims to "settle in, live and work alongside participants, and come to experience not only what can be seen and talked about directly but also things not said and not done that shape the narrative structure" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 67–68). Broadly, narrative inquiry is defined by the following characteristics: a focus on story features such as the context, place, situation, and people involved; a reconstruction that chronologically connects significant storied moments, events, and subsequent thoughts, feelings, and actions together; and a collaborative relationship between the participant and researcher who together coconstruct the larger narrative (Bold, 2012; Wertz et al., 2011).

Furthermore, narrative research typically highlights turning points within the retelling and reliving of the story; these turning points represent events that mark an important decision or change (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013). Narrative researchers understand that the person's story will not contain a complete and factual description of events (Bold, 2012). What is

most relevant to inquiry will be the meaning and truth that each participant believes occurred, in essence, their vantage point and interpretation (Bold, 2012). Narrative researchers are not limited to oral storytelling. They may draw from varied forms of data, such as written narratives, pictures, or observations, to enhance the richness of the narrative (Bold, 2012). Through these methods, themes and analysis not only portray the person's life events, but also explore their sense of self or identity, their ways of knowing and understanding the world around them, and how these life experiences influence subsequent thoughts, emotions, actions (Wertz et al., 2011).

Another defining characteristic of narrative inquiry is its focus on the "person in context" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 32). In their seminal text and comprehensive guide *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*, Clandinin and Connelly explain that one cannot understand a person's experience without exploring the contextual features of their story: time, space, and social context. Time involves exploring, in the present, what happened before and after the event or situation. Space captures the physical surroundings of the event or experience. Social context includes several elements: the participant's emotions and perspectives, descriptions, insights into the other "characters" involved in the story, and external sociocultural factors that may have influenced the event (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Exploring these features is critical to understanding and interpreting each participant's lived experience related to the phenomenon of interest (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also recognized and addressed the complexities of storytelling: the various layers and elements of a story, how turning points may intersect with other significant events, and how participants shift from their own thoughts to the actions of others involved in the story. To address these nuances, Clandinin and Connelly offered researchers an analytic frame called a *three-dimensional narrative inquiry space*. In this space,

researchers explore multiple facets of a participant's narrative: (a) *inward* (one's feelings, hopes, and morals), (b) *outward* (one's interaction with others in the environment), (c) *backward* (reflecting on the past), and (d) *forward* (looking to the future). Like a video camera zooming in, out, and around a scene, a three-dimensional lens may highlight various threads and layers of a story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this manner, a three-dimensional approach elicits a greater understanding of each person's larger life narrative (Wertz et al., 2011).

Narrative inquiry offers several methodological strengths to this investigation of immigrant students' precollege experiences. First, narrative inquiry is well-suited for a deep and layered exploration of notable events that occurred along their path to college, data that may not be adequately understood through quantitative measures (Yilmaz, 2013). For example, I invited participants to relay a story that described the moment they received their first college acceptance letter. Life-changing moments such as these are often remembered narratively as a vivid story that interweaves time, place, social context, and emotion (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A quantitative approach may not fully capture these elements; thus, a narrative methodology is warranted. Second, I invited participants, who at the time of the interview were first-year college students, to reflect on their past experiences thinking about and planning for college, how their feelings and attitudes changed, and how they were feeling about their precollege experiences in the present. Narrative inquiry's three-dimensional frame aligned with my interest in participants' development over time. Finally, narrative research is an ideal framework for this investigation because it brings the voices of participants into focus in a way that positions the participant as the teacher (Bold, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this manner, participants drive the research findings, and power dynamics between the researcher and the participant are reduced (Creswell, 2013). This aspect of narrative research is appropriate for

inquiry with low-income immigrant youth of color, students who contend with multiple intersectional social identities typically marginalized in educational policy, research, and practice.

Epistemology

Marginalized populations are often misunderstood by research methodologies that regard knowledge as absolute, assert that there is one reality and one truth, and regard truth as facts determined by the researcher (Bermúdez et al., 2016). My choice to engage qualitative research, and more specifically narrative inquiry, for this study is to disrupt traditional power relations in research and foreground the voices of students who are often marginalized based on several identities, such as race, ethnicity, citizenship status, language proficiency, accent stigma, or income. My work with adolescents has taught me the importance of viewing experiences from their perspective, within the context of what they know to be true. Consequently, I regarded emerging adult participants as the authority in their own lived experiences. Instead of imposing my views to interpret their stories, I aimed to validate participants' opinions, ideas, and feelings as true for them within their present understanding.

This ontological worldview guided my approach to inquiry. I used a constructivist paradigm to focus on participants' perspectives and meaning making along their path to college. Within this paradigm, objectivity is deemed impossible, and knowledge, meaning, and reality are believed to be coconstructed through human interaction (Crotty, 1998; Jones et al., 2014). Accordingly, constructivist researchers embrace the existence of multiple realities and seek to gain knowledge through close interaction with participants (Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2014). Constructivists are further guided by an assumption that the researcher's values cannot be detached or separated from the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Clandinin and Connelly (2000)

explained that working in a narrative space means that researchers “become visible with our own lived and told stories” (pp. 61–62). Consequently, it is important for the researcher to become “autobiographically conscious” of their reactions and alert to possible tensions between their personal history and the narrative research they undertake (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 46).

Given my constructivist orientation and narrative approach, it was important for me to reflect upon and acknowledge the influence of my personal and social identities on the research phenomenon and process (Jones et al., 2014; Mao et al., 2016). I was challenged to identify and examine my position, power, and privilege to uncover potential blind spots and biases that might influence this investigation (Jones et al., 2014). Additionally, I was challenged to suspend my assumption that just because I identify as a Black, second-generation immigrant from a working-class background, my ideas, values, and experiences would be similar to my participants (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Jones et al., 2014). Instead, I approached this study with an open mind, a listening ear, and a learner lens ready to be taught through the narration of participant-storytellers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Before recruitment activities commenced, I engaged in three critical steps. The first step was to make my “position” explicit (Creswell, 2014) by writing a positionality statement that delves into my upbringing and experiences. Through this exercise, I explored my background, identities, and assumptions and how they may lead to potential biases in this investigation and interpretation of findings. Additionally, throughout recruitment, data collection, and analysis, I incorporated techniques (e.g., memoing, peer debrief) to enhance confidence and trust in my research findings. The sections that follow include my positionality statement and steps taken to address bias in my work. I will address three experiences and identities relevant to the study: counseling a multiethnic population of students and families, being raised as a child of immigrants, and my emerging worldview as a social justice educator.

Positionality

The first time I personally identified with the term “immigrant” was in my mid-20s, when I started working as a school counselor in ethnically diverse Silver Spring, Maryland. My school’s student body was approximately 75% first- or second-generation immigrants, many from Central and South America, with a strong representation of students from southeast Asia, and east and west Africa. A critical issue that often emerged during counseling was acculturation differences between my students and their parents. Families struggled to navigate childrearing in a context where some of the values their children learned in school conflicted with the traditions, values, and expectations taught at home. Many students experienced great pressure to do well academically, an expectation often illustrated by parents emphasizing that “We moved to this country so that you can have a better life.” However, many foreign-born parents made clear their expectations for their children to maintain an identity that adhered to the family’s culture and country of origin, the way “we do things back home.” As a result, parents and their children often experience a cultural disconnect, or acculturation gap, that influences their relationship (Kim et al., 2020; Phinney et al., 2000).

Although my parents were from Jamaica and I was a Black woman born and raised in the United States, I realized I had more in common with my Latinx, Asian, and African families than I previously thought. I was surprised by how much I resonated with my students’ frustrations. I was drawn into vivid teenage memories and feelings of annoyance and resentment toward my parents. For example, in reaction to my request to sleep at my best friend’s house, I recall my father quickly and firmly shutting that down, replying with disdain, “You’re becoming too American.” I imagine that, in his view, sleeping at a friend’s house was not something a respectful Jamaican girl would be allowed to do. But in my mind, it was no big deal because my

American friends had sleepovers often. I primarily identified as Black or African American, but this category had always felt limiting. It did not fully capture who I thought I was. In essence, I recall feeling like a foreigner trying to fit in two worlds but landing nowhere: I was too American for my parents and too Jamaican to feel like I truly belonged with my nonimmigrant peers.

As an adult, aunt, educator, and counselor, I was also able to understand the perspective of parents as well. I imagined what it must have been like for my parents to raise four daughters in a culture and social system vastly different from what they knew. I presumed my parents felt a sense of sadness and cultural loss when their girls adopted certain practices that were strange to them and hard to understand. I empathized with my students and their parents, and I developed a broader sense of understanding, connection, and solidarity with immigrants that spanned racial and ethnic boundaries. I also experienced my own process of identity exploration, reconceptualizing my understanding of what it meant to be an immigrant in the United States.

Love God, obey your parents, and do well in school: these were the primary messages I received growing up. During my childhood, I was socialized within three achievement-oriented settings: family, church, and school. At home, my parents constantly spoke about their life in Jamaica and all they gave up to migrate. My parents settled in Washington, DC, so my mother could attend Howard University, an institution they learned about through college instructors in Jamaica and friends who had previously migrated. While my parents diligently pursued their educational goals, they also ensured that their U.S.-born daughters took full advantage of seemingly every free or low-cost enrichment opportunity available in their community: summer reading programs at the library, piano and violin lessons, and annual visits to the Smithsonian. My parents learned about many of these activities from members of our church family, “brothers

and sisters in Christ,” who served a critical role in our lives. Our congregation provided spiritual nurturing and fellowship in a social space where West Indian cultural traditions were respected, shared, and celebrated. Additionally, the elders of our church—many were esteemed professionals who graduated from Howard—placed a high value on knowledge and the pursuit of school success as a way for youth to reach their full godly potential.

Growing up in the Malcolm household and within our larger church family, my identity as an achiever developed and served as a foundation for my school experiences. I did well, often receiving praise from teachers for my mannerly comportment, diligence, and high proficiency on assessments. In second grade, I was tested for the Talented and Gifted program and thereafter placed in an accelerated reading group. Little did I know that the label “gifted” was affixed to my permanent school file. Due to family struggles during my youth, I moved around quite a bit. I later realized that this identifier followed me from the DC public school system to school districts in Maryland and Massachusetts, then Florida, where I completed high school. Although I attended low-performing schools in these areas, being identified as “gifted” opened doors to the best resources the schools could offer. Throughout my childhood and K–12 experience, family, church, and school provided me with various forms of capital that shaped my early aspirations for college and my path to higher education.

As a college graduate, some may say that I have attained the “American Dream”—that I am proof that the United States is a place where children from immigrant families, working class individuals, and People of Color can survive and thrive in a society that, inequities withstanding, provides an abundance of opportunities for social mobility. I have earned two postsecondary degrees and enjoy a career that provides financial stability and personal and professional fulfillment. I live comfortably in a home that I own, have traveled the world, enjoy fulfilling

social relationships, and now have the privilege of pursuing a terminal degree in education. “This can happen only in America,” some might say.

Recently I have come to better understand and appreciate the systemic factors that worked in my favor to spawn and support my aspirations. I consider that I am a child of immigrants who commenced postsecondary education in Jamaica and, due to favorable U.S. immigration policies in the late 1960s, chose to migrate to Washington, DC, to complete college and earn advanced degrees. The pursuit of educational attainment, even in the face of great cost and sacrifice, was woven into the fabric of my existence. As a result of the social and ethnic capital I gained in my family and church community, I developed a sense of cultural pride and was primed to succeed despite growing up in a larger social system that regarded White middle-class values as the norm. I benefited from school systems that were structured to support the skills and ambitions of a smart, quiet, and compliant girl and discount those students who were labeled as “loud,” “unruly,” and “lazy.”

As a social justice educator, I increasingly recognize and investigate the structures and inequities that impact education broadly and college access more specifically. Yet, I also believe in the power of human agency. That is, I hold the assumption that people have the capability to direct their own lives and attain the outcomes they desire. In other words, at the core of any socioecological model lies the individual—one’s personality, goals, and aspirations—who shapes their own engagement with the environment. One’s agency is often leveraged to make choices and decisions within the context of their circumstances. Our challenge as social justice educators is to change structures that open doors for all students, no matter their circumstances. When hearing stories of students who “beat the odds,” one’s psychological resilience, grit, and self-awareness tend to emerge as internal assets relied upon to succeed. Although I hold the

assumption of agency, I remain curious about the social factors that foster these, and other psychological characteristics, in some students and extinguish them in others. For example, what external conditions engender resilience in one child while constraining the development of resilience in another? I am challenged to take a more critical approach to my research: to consider the role of power and privilege in K-16 systems, shift discussions of social and cultural capital to center assets held by marginalized groups, and interrogate my own assumptions about educational achievement and who gets to go to college.

Reflexivity

Critical reflexivity, an ongoing process of “interrogat[ing] our own positionality and social location, power, and privilege,” is central to any research using a critical approach (Mao et al., 2016, p. 6). The questions that frame my work are largely based on my personal experiences as well as my 13-year tenure as a college access counselor for a multiethnic population of high school students. As I reflect on my own narrative, in many ways, I realize I have bought into the myth of the “American Dream.” Like a camera lens, my view foregrounds experiences that align with meritocratic ideals fulfilled in my personal life and in the lives of many of the students I served. Yet, without depth of field, my camera lens may overlook the experiences of fellow Caribbean immigrants from my neighborhood whose life trajectory differs from my own. When I think about the students I serve, I tend to remember those who earned their diplomas and went on to graduate from college and forget those who did not. Through my review of literature, I was challenged to deconstruct the myth of immigrant exceptionalism and attend to the broader social factors that position immigrants of color as extraordinary yet ignore the reality of systemic racism and classism that People of Color experience in the U.S. education system. Though I am drawn to asset-based research with immigrant students of color and marginalized populations

more broadly, I commit to examining and reanalyzing my assumptions throughout this research process to ensure the stories told are those of my participants—not my own or a version that further perpetuates a simplified understanding of the experiences of precollege immigrant youth.

As a constructivist, it was also important for me to explore and critically reflect on the social identities I hold in relation to the research topic and how my identities may affect the research process (Chavez, 2008; Mao et al., 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In some ways, I might be considered an “insider” to the world within which the participants in this study exist, an individual who shares one or multiple identities or experiences with their participants (Chavez, 2008). For example, participants came from immigrant households, represented the first generation in their family to attend college in the United States, identified as students of color, and came from families with limited household income. Yet, in other ways, I am an “outsider” (Chavez, 2008). As a U.S.-born citizen who grew up in an era of generally favorable attitudes toward immigrants, I am naïve to the experiences of first-generation immigrants who came of age in present times—in a social climate of heightened anti-immigrant attitudes, political rhetoric, and policies (Card et al., 2022). Participants also held an ethnic identity different from my own. Additionally, although I experienced poverty as a child, I now enjoy a middle-class lifestyle and have adopted certain tastes and values associated with a privileged social class. As a qualitative researcher, I must attend to the “shifting sands” that emerge in my research, that is, being an insider in some regard and an outsider in other ways (Chavez, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

In the context of anthropological research, Johnson-Bailey (2004) advised that “the experience of the researcher as an insider or outsider cannot be a fixed one . . . the perspectives of the researcher can be multifaceted and can be susceptible to shifts influenced by interactions

with others, the changing research context, time, and other unpredictable factors” (p. 129). This quote reminds me of the complexity that my race, nativity, and socioeconomic status brought to the research relationship. Chavez (2008) reminded researchers of the advantages and complications that come with one’s positionality as an “insider” and advocated for critical self-awareness and reflection when engaging with participants. As such, I approached my work from the position of being a “partial insider,” one who may share several identities with a participant yet seeks to understand a participant’s lived experience from a degree of distance and detachment akin to an “external outsider” (Chavez, 2008). In this regard, a narrative study is ideal because it drives the researcher to attend to their positionalities while partnering with participants to coconstruct narratives that represent their lived experiences.

Methods

My investigation commenced in July 2021 after I obtained research study approval from the University of Maryland’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Recruitment activities started shortly thereafter, yielding my first participant interview in August. Recruitment and data collection continued through January 2022. Throughout this data collection period, I engaged in the following research activities: recruitment, journaling, data cleaning, memoing, and member checking. I describe these activities in detail next. In the section that follows, I describe my preinvestigation interview protocol practice and how this practice informed my subsequent data collection.

Pilot Interviews

Conducting pilot interviews is a practical small-scale exercise that allows a researcher to test questions, form insights, and make modifications prior to embarking on full-scale data collection (Majid et al., 2017). As a novice researcher, I chose to conduct pilot interviews for

these reasons. I used convenience sampling to identify three college students (i.e., two women and one man) to practice my interview protocol with me. As advised by Majid and colleagues (2017), I ensured students shared demographic characteristics similar to participants in my intended research sample. Specifically, each student identified as Latinx, was raised in a low-to-moderate income immigrant household, and was currently enrolled in a 4-year university.

Prior to their first interview, each student completed a pilot version of the demographic questionnaire using the Qualtrics online survey platform. I obtained their feedback on the questionnaire's accessibility, clarity, and ease of use. I conducted two interviews with each student using a pilot version of the protocol. Interviews were conducted using the Zoom videoconference platform. Students provided helpful feedback on question comprehension and appropriateness, as well as the flow and timing of the interview. As a result of their feedback, I rephrased a few questions and added a question suggested by one participant. I also gained confidence in my interview skills, increased my comfort in facilitating and recording virtual interviews on Zoom, and felt assured the questionnaire and interview protocol were sound and tightly aligned with the purpose of my study.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

A general guideline in narrative research is to engage a small number of participants. This small number best allows the researcher and participant to coconstruct a detailed and rich narrative that portrays the complexity of their experiences while also addressing the research question (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through purposeful sampling strategies, I identified and interviewed 10 participants who each shared detailed stories about their migration and resettlement in the United States, early college aspirations, and experiences navigating college research, applications, and decision making (Patton, 2002).

After obtaining IRB approval in July 2021, I reached out to colleagues in my professional network who had access to 2021 high school graduates. These key gatekeepers included high school counselors and college access program personnel. I explained my dissertation research and personal and professional connection with the topic of college pathways for immigrant youth, and I asked for their support. I followed up by sending an email message (see Appendix A) to these key gatekeepers that further explained the research study's purpose and participant eligibility criteria, and I asked them to share an email message and flyer (see Appendix B and C respectively) with their 2021 high school graduates. I also asked gatekeepers to share the recruitment email and flyer with their network of colleagues. Additionally, I contacted 2021 high school graduates I counseled as 10th graders and asked them to share the recruitment flyer with their graduating cohort via email and social media.

As recruitment progressed into the fall semester, I widened my outreach to include university colleagues at institutions in Maryland, Washington, DC, and Virginia. For example, I contacted first-year orientation instructors, living-learning community administrators, and other student affairs personnel. Additionally, I emailed recruitment materials to leaders of student organizations that centered the identities of immigrant students of color. In January 2022, I exceeded the minimum number of participants for this investigation, and data saturation became evident as participants' interview responses began to sound similar (Jones et al., 2014). At this stage, I also considered the time and resource limitations of my investigation and made the decision to conclude recruitment and interviews.

I used three purposeful sampling strategies to identify and recruit study participants: criterion, maximum variation, and snowball. Criterion sampling involves selecting participants

based on a specific and predetermined set of characteristics (Patton, 2002). The following characteristics served as eligibility criteria for this investigation:

- Participants must be 1.5-generation immigrants, meaning they migrated to the United States before the age of 13 and thus experienced most of their secondary education in U.S. schools (Rumbaut, 2004).
- Participants must identify as Black, Asian, or Latinx, given my focus on immigrants of color and interest in capital, such as community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).
- Participants must come from low-income households, which was determined by eligibility for a federal Pell grant or free and reduced meals (FARMS) at any point during high school
- Participants must be 18 years of age or older and enrolled in their first semester at a 4-year institution. My rationale for this requirement was that students attending a 4-year institution would have likely navigated a complex multistep process involving research, application, financial planning, and decision-making, experiences that are central to this study's research question.

I also used a maximum variation approach as a sampling strategy. Maximum variation allows researchers to examine “important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity” (Patton, 2002, p. 235). My study examines whether there are shared patterns in the college search and choice experiences of diverse ethnic immigrants. Therefore, I recruited a sample of participants who represented different nationalities and racial or ethnic backgrounds. Finally, at the end of each interview, I asked participants to recommend peers who fit the sampling criteria and may want to participate in this study, a technique referred to as snowball sampling (Patton, 2002).

These sampling strategies yielded 10 participants: four students who identified as Latinx, three who identified as Black, and three who identified as Asian. The sample included two students who identified as men and eight students who identified as women. Table 2 provides an overview of relevant participant characteristics, including whether they were ever enrolled in ESOL, if they completed the FAFSA, and their current postsecondary institution (PSI pseudonym). A coconstructed narrative for each participant is provided in Chapter 4.

Table 2

Overview of Student-Participant Demographic Information

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Country of Birth</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Age at Migration</i>	<i>Parents' Highest Level of Education</i>	<i>ESOL</i>	<i>Complete FAFSA?</i>	<i>PSI</i>
<i>Alex</i>	Woman	Mexico	Hispanic/ Latina	7 years	Elementary	Yes	Yes	LR1
<i>Amanuel</i>	Man	Eritrea	Tigrinya	8 years	Elementary	Yes	Yes	LR1
<i>Azalia</i>	Woman	El Salvador	Hispanic	2 years	College	No	No	LR1
<i>Chioma</i>	Woman	Nigeria	African American	6 years	Trade School	Yes	Yes	LR1
<i>Jasmine</i>	Woman	Philippines	Cebuano	5 years	Doctoral	Yes	Yes	LR1
<i>Kassandra</i>	Woman	Cameroon	Banso	6 years	Secondary	Yes	Yes	LSU
<i>Mercedes</i>	Woman	Mexico	Mexican	12 years	College	No	Yes	LR1
<i>Rico</i>	Man	El Salvador	Hispanic	8 months	Elementary	Yes	No	SSU
<i>Thidar</i>	Woman	India	Burmese	6 years	College	Yes	Yes	LR1
<i>Trixie</i>	Woman	China	Chinese	5 years	Secondary	Yes	Yes	LR1

Although study participation was not limited by state of residence, the sampling strategy yielded survey respondents who lived and completed high school in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC, and Baltimore. This geographic similarity enabled exploration of the unique social context of central Maryland and how it shaped participants' experiences. Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory posits that the characteristics of a migrant's receiving community greatly influence their resettlement and adaptation. For example, government policies, attitudes toward immigrants, and the presence and characteristics of a co-ethnic community largely affect the economic and educational opportunities for migrants and their children. Given these assumptions, the Washington-Baltimore corridor of central Maryland is a critical backdrop to the precollege experiences of immigrant youth in this study. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of central Maryland to situate participants' precollege experiences within specific characteristics of this region.

Setting

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, immigrants make up approximately 14.2% of the U.S. population, which is the highest percentage recorded in over 100 years (Camarota & Zeigler, 2022). Comparatively, in 2019, 15.4% of Maryland's population was foreign born, with the highest number of immigrants residing in the central part of the state (George Mason University, 2019; Migration Policy Institute, 2019). Maryland ranks ninth among U.S. states in terms of immigrants as a percentage of the state's population (George Mason University, 2019). As reported by the American Immigration Council (2020), the top countries of origin for Maryland immigrants are El Salvador (11%), India (6%), China (5%), Nigeria (5%), and the Philippines (4%).

Most immigrants in Maryland are college-educated, with 19% completing some college and 43% holding a college degree or higher (American Immigration Council, 2020). Immigrant entrepreneurship is considered a strength of the Maryland economy (Negro, 2012; New American Economy, n.d.; Suda & Mühlberg, 2022). In 2018, immigrant-owned businesses accounted for 23% of all self-employed residents (American Immigration Council, 2020).

Notably, central Maryland neighbors Washington, DC, and northern Virginia. This area collectively forms a diverse regional metropolis that includes multiple vibrant ethnic enclaves, immigrant-serving faith organizations and social services, and local governments with policies that support the integration of immigrants and their families (New American Economy Cities Index, n.d.; Suda & Mühlberg, 2022). Higher Ed Immigration Portal (2022) classifies Maryland, Washington, DC, and Virginia as “Comprehensive Access” states, in which institutions of higher education support tuition and financial aid policies inclusive to undocumented and other immigrant students.

Participants in this study graduated from Maryland public high schools in Montgomery, Prince George’s, Howard, and Baltimore Counties. Data show that between 1990 and 2006, the population of children from immigrant families doubled in the state, and these counties were most impacted by that growth (Fortuny et al., 2010). As the population of immigrant-origin students increased, non-Latinx White enrollment has declined significantly (Maryland Department of Planning, 2021). As a result, foreign immigration has been an important driver of racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity in Maryland’s public schools (Fortuny et al., 2010; Maryland Department of Planning, 2021).

Central Maryland also includes the state’s flagship institution and several notable public and private colleges and universities. Many of these institutions partner with local school

systems to provide college access services to students underrepresented in higher education. For example, all participants in this study attended a high school with one or more college access or early college programs, such as Upward Bound, AVID, or dual enrollment (concurrent enrollment in college or university courses). Additionally, participants lived in communities that offered cultural youth development programs, such as Asian American Youth Leadership Empowerment and Development, Maryland Multicultural Youth Center, ¡Adelante Latina!, Liberty's Promise, and Institute of East African Council on Higher Education. All but one participant was enrolled in either a youth development, college access, or early college program, and several participated in more than one program during their middle and high school years.

Despite central Maryland's wealth of higher education institutions and college access programs, long-standing college enrollment gaps persist for Maryland students of color, English language learners, and low-income students (Maryland State Board of Education, 2022). Maryland State Board of Education (2022) statistics from 2019 show disparities in the postsecondary enrollment (within 1 year of graduation) of Asian (86%), White (80%), Black (62%), and Latinx (47%) students. Additionally, data indicate that of the students who enrolled in college in 2019, 42% were "economically disadvantaged," and 19% were English language learners. Emblematic of national statistics, immigrant-origin students in central Maryland are likely to come from low-to-moderate income households, identify as non-White, and speak a language other than English at home (Fortuny et al., 2010). These intersecting experiences potentially heighten the disadvantage for immigrant youth.

Yet, participants in this study were able to enroll in a 4-year university and they are in good company. According to the Higher Ed Immigration Portal (2022), 28% of all higher education students in Maryland are from immigrant families. Given the educational and social

landscape of central Maryland, this region provides a unique context to explore how low-income immigrant students of color draw upon various forms of capital within their lived experiences and communities to enroll in 4-year institutions.

Data Collection

Narrative research typically involves gathering a participant's story via multiple data sources and actively involving the participant in retelling, reliving, and rewriting stories that reflect their lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013). Narrative research may involve oral storytelling as well as written narratives, pictures, or observations collected to enhance the richness of the narrative (Bold, 2012). I collected data from four sources for this study: (a) a demographic questionnaire, (b) two semistructured interviews, (c) a college essay, and (d) a high school resumé or activity list.

Data collection commenced as interested students clicked on a hyperlink in the recruitment flyer to access the study's consent form (see Appendix D) on Qualtrics, a web-based survey platform available to researchers at the University of Maryland. Once a potential participant electronically signed the consent form, they were presented with a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix E) intended to confirm eligibility for the study and obtain relevant participant data. Respondents were asked questions such as age, gender, race, place of birth, age at migration, high school graduation date, and name of college. To determine income status, I asked potential participants whether they were currently eligible for the Federal Pell grant or were eligible for FARMS at any point during their high school tenure. Survey respondents were able to select "Not sure" for these questions, and I followed up via email to inquire further about their family income status. The demographic questionnaire also asked whether participants would be willing to submit their college essay and resumé or high school activity list. These

questions previewed additional components of participation to ensure that respondents were willing to comply fully. Finally, survey respondents selected a research pseudonym or indicated their willingness to have me choose a pseudonym for them.

Between July 2021 and January 2022, 29 respondents provided consent to participate in the study and completed a demographic questionnaire. After each potential participant completed their questionnaire, I reviewed their responses to determine eligibility for the study. In addition to meeting the eligibility criteria, I considered race, ethnicity, and national origin to ensure a diverse sample of participants. Recruiting a diverse sample of participants was critical to my exploration of the extent to which immigrants from varied racial backgrounds shared similar precollege experiences. I contacted select eligible participants to inquire about any missing survey information, address preliminary questions or concerns about the study, and invite them to schedule their first interview. Appendix F includes an email message sent to students selected for the study.

Due to the pervasive COVID-19 health crisis and public health recommendations in place during Fall and Winter 2021, I conducted and recorded interviews using the Zoom videoconference application. The consent form disclosed the mode of interview and my intention to record. I invited participants to keep their cameras on during the interview so that I could attend to their nonverbal expressions and gestures, body language, and demeanor. Additionally, my intention was to enhance rapport through face-to-face virtual communication. In previous years, high school students might have been unfamiliar with or hesitant to engage in a virtual interview. However, in April 2020, all public school systems in Maryland transitioned to remote learning. For this reason, participants were familiar with Zoom, and all seemed at ease during the

interview. To express appreciation for their study participation, I emailed each participant a \$35 gift card to Amazon within 48 hours of completing their second interview.

Semistructured Interviews

Semistructured interviews are commonly used to elicit narrative data (Bold, 2012). Researchers use a preset list of questions or prompts crafted to address the purpose of the study; prompts follow a specific theme or line of interest (Bold, 2012). Though prompts are preplanned, semistructured interviews also allow flexibility for a researcher to ask follow-up questions for clarification or to probe further, a technique that “allows for new insights to emerge” during data collection (Bold, 2012, p. 98). Due to the in-depth and exploratory nature of this inquiry, I decided to conduct two 45–60-minute interviews with each participant.

Interview I. To start the interview, I introduced myself to each participant by sharing my personal and professional interest in the precollege experiences of immigrant youth. I reminded each participant of the research study’s purpose, sent them a copy of the consent form via Zoom chat, and asked them to silently review the consent form to be reminded of the study guidelines. After each participant reviewed the consent form, I addressed their questions (if any) and obtained verbal consent to proceed.

Central to the first interview (see Appendix G) were questions regarding the participant’s background, family, transition to the United States, and initial development of college aspirations. Participants were prompted to describe significant moments or turning points that marked their experiences, such as when they first thought about going to college. Follow-up questions, or probes, invited reflection on how they remember feeling in those moments. In this manner, the interview foregrounded students’ lived experiences and their thoughts and emotions about moments they identified as significant (Bold, 2012).

Before the first interview, I reviewed each participant's demographic survey and noted key details that might require me to modify the interview protocol. For example, one participant moved to the United States as an infant, so instead of asking about his memories of growing up in El Salvador, I asked him to recall family members' stories about the place where he was born. At the end of the first interview, I reminded each participant to email me their resumé and one of their college or scholarship essays before their second interview.

As Creswell (2013) noted, in qualitative research, data collection is intertwined with analysis in that collecting data and thinking about data often occur simultaneously. To capture these thoughts, I used a research journal to write procedural notes and analytical memos to capture ideas and possible themes reflected in the data. Additionally, I reflected on problems or dilemmas with my interview protocol and considered adjustments I might need to make before the next interview. I recorded any protocol changes in my research journal. My use of journaling and memoing is described in more detail in the Trustworthiness section of this chapter.

Interview II. The second interview (see Appendix H) inquired about the participant's approach to researching colleges and creating a list of colleges to apply. The second interview also explored each participant's experience with college and financial aid applications, the resources they used to complete their applications, and how they made their college decision. Additionally, I asked questions that prompted participants' reflection on their entire precollege journey, from setting early college aspirations to enrolling and starting classes. I concluded the interview by asking participants what they imagined their life would have been like if they had not migrated to the United States. This question was intended to prompt a dual frame of reference, defined as a comparison of opportunities for educational attainment in their home country and the United States (Ogbu, 1991; Suárez-Orozco, 1987).

College Essay. Written narratives can offer a first-person description of one's attitudes, beliefs, and views of the world and thereby reflect a participant's perspective on situations and events (Bold, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, incorporating review of written narratives in qualitative research is a unique way to engage participants in making meaning of personal experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, written narratives shift the point of view from the researcher (through interview questioning, for example) to the participant (Bold, 2012). For this purpose, I incorporated one of each participant's college or scholarship application essays in data collection. Most 4-year colleges and scholarship organizations require applicants to submit an essay (also called a personal statement) as part of the application process. Typically, the college or organization will provide a set of questions or prompts and ask the applicant to choose one and reply. Prompts usually ask students to describe their personality and talents, background, or life experiences that shaped their values and character (e.g., Anderson, 2021). As a result, essays are often deeply personal narratives in which applicants disclose insightful reflections or life-changing experiences (Warren, 2013).

All participants provided me with an essay that addressed their family, culture, or background. During the second interview, I asked each participant to reflect on this piece of personal writing. My intention here was three-fold: (a) to invite reflection on their own written narrative as well as the experience of writing the essay (an assignment many college applicants find emotionally and academically challenging), (b) to incorporate a data source that can provide evidence to corroborate other forms of data and enhance credibility, and (c) to gain insight on aspects of the participant's life story that might not be mentioned during the interview.

Resumé/Activity List. Each participant was able to provide me with a resumé they submitted as part of their college applications. The exception was Rico, who indicated that he

could not locate his resumé in his electronic files. Instead, Rico provided me with a list of activities he participated in during high school to his best recollection. During the second interview, I referred to each participant's resumé or activity list to formulate probes about how teachers, club sponsors, mentors, or community agents might have assisted their college search and application activities. If a participant listed a college access program on their resumé, I asked how program staff or resources aided their search, applications, and decision making. I also used resumé data to confirm their GPA and the academic programs they were a part of, such as magnet or dual enrollment. Finally, the resumé gave me a fuller picture of each participant's hobbies and interests, volunteer service, formative high school experiences, languages spoken, and special talents and skills—aspects of their lives they were proud of and wanted to be considered as part of their college admission application review.

All interviews were digitally recorded using Zoom and saved in the University of Maryland's password-protected account. Audio files were automatically transcribed by Zoom and saved as a VTT file. All audio and video files were subsequently transferred to the university's Box-secured online cloud storage, where they will be archived for 5 years with the other research files, such as consent forms and participant essays and resúmes.

Data Analysis

Although preliminary analysis and memoing occurred throughout data collection, data analysis primarily occurred in three stages: data cleaning, crafting participant profiles, and cross-participant coding and thematic analysis. I review each stage next.

Data Cleaning

Within 1 hour of each interview, Zoom's automated transcription feature generated a complete transcript of the interview. I cleaned the data by reviewing the transcript, detecting

errors, such as typos or words that were inaccurately recorded, and making corrections. These steps ensured I had an accurate transcript for data coding and analysis (Chu & Ilyas, 2016).

I cleaned each participant's first interview transcript before their second interview. In addition to correcting errors, this step allowed me to note any unclear statements and prepare a clarification question to ask in the second interview. Additionally, after listening to the first interview, I often thought of follow-up questions for the participant. For example, during our first interview, Thidar relayed a humorous and memorable account of a college campus visit with her father. When cleaning the transcript, I realized that I did not ask how old she was in that story, which I was able to clarify at the start of our second interview.

To clean the transcript, I read it line-by-line while watching the interview's video recording. This process allowed me to read the participant's lips to ensure accuracy of words or phrases spoken. I also noted nonverbal communication on the transcript, such as nodding or shaking one's head for emphasis and eye gazing upward to indicate hard thinking. Additionally, I noted moments where a participant's emotional expression was particularly strong, such as tears forming in their eyes or boisterous laughter. At this stage, I chose not to delete most of the participant's filler sounds, words, and phrases, such as "uhms," "likes," "you knows." Instead, I addressed those edits at a later stage after I spent more time with the data and became familiar with the participant's style of discourse.

While cleaning each transcript, I memoed my thoughts about the data, including commonalities, differences, connections between experiences, and surprises. After cleaning each participant's two interview transcripts, I combined transcripts into one document and uploaded it to the NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis platform for further review.

Crafting Participant Narratives

Central to narrative inquiry is a rich analysis of the stories participants tell about their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Analysis involves a collaborative relationship between the participant and the researcher to coconstruct each participant's narrative (Bold, 2012; Creswell, 2013). This process of coconstruction began with a flexible, broad, and open-ended semistructured interview protocol (Jones et al., 2014), continued with careful crafting of each participant profile (Seidman, 2013), and ended with participant member checking and feedback (Seidman, 2013). As Seidman (2013) advised, I approached each transcript and essay with an open attitude, ready to see what emerged from the text as interesting, illustrative of the participant's worldview and lived experience, and relevant to the purpose of my study. I read, analyzed, and arranged the data chronologically, a process called re-storying (Reissman, 2008), using the following steps:

1. Read transcript and mark passages of interest, for example, excerpts about a participant's family life before migration, their first experiences in a U.S. school, or their first understandings of "college."
2. Selected marked passages and compiled them as a single separate transcript.
3. Re-storied marked passages according to life stage and themes.
4. Edited profile to limit discourse markers (i.e., extraneous words that did not add meaning to the passage); for example, "uhms," "likes," "you knows."
5. Edited profile using ellipses and brackets to condense quotations and feature participant language that is most relevant to the passage and theme.

Excerpts were marked and organized in NVivo, exported to Microsoft Word, then read, restoried, and edited. I intended to "share the coherence the participant expressed" (Seidman,

2013, p. 123) by crafting a constitutive narrative that portrayed their early lived experiences and sense-making within their home country and new community. As a result, each participant's narrative centers childhood and adolescent memories of their homeland, migration to the United States, adjustment to U.S. schools, and how these experiences shaped their early predisposition toward college.

Chapter 4 presents each participant's profile using their own words almost exclusively. I chose to present profiles in this manner for three reasons. One, using first-person voice throughout the profile aims to draw the reader "closer to" the participant, thereby bringing the individual "alive" to the reader (Seidman, 2013). Two, by foregrounding the participant's own words, I center their knowledge and stories, as opposed to my interpretation of the knowledge and stories they shared with me. In some ways, the participant's words serve as an open window to their consciousness, ways of knowing, and understanding of the world around them (Seidman, 2013) which is an important element of narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Wertz, 2011). Three, I crafted a profile that elevates each participant's natural flow of speech; original, artful, and collaboratively restoried to elevate salient parts of their life story and precollege narrative (Seidman, 2013).

To ensure accuracy and credibility, I engaged in a process of member checking, whereby I shared my version of each participant's narrative with them for their review and feedback. This process is further described in the Trustworthiness section.

Coding and Thematic Analysis

My thematic analysis was informed by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional approach in which "the person in context" (p. 32) is the focus of inquiry. The three dimensions of inquiry are (a) personal and social (interaction), (b) past, present, and future

(continuity), and (c) place (situation). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further explained the personal and social dimension of inquiry using the concepts “inward and outward” (p. 50). The inward direction of inquiry addresses a person’s emotions and experiences, such as feelings, hopes, and moral dispositions, and the outward direction considers a person’s environment and social context. The authors assert that “to do research into an experience is to experience it simultaneously” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) in multiple ways throughout all aspects of inquiry, from asking questions to reviewing notes, to forming interpretations and writing conclusions. Clandinin and Connelly’s approach guided a three-stage thematic analysis that included reading, organizing, describing, and interpreting data and ultimately classifying data into themes.

At Stage 1, I read each participant’s transcript and conducted open inductive coding. That is, I applied descriptive labels to statements I found interesting, relevant, or compelling without focusing on the research question or theoretical framework (Miles et al., 2020). Guided by Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) inward-outward dimensions of inquiry, I used three types of coding methods: (a) emotion, which explores mood, affect, and other intrapersonal experiences both recalled by the participant and inferred by the researcher, (b) values, which identifies participant’s insights into their own lived experiences, cultural attitudes, and beliefs, and (c) process, which explores action, dynamics of time, and interpersonal experiences (Miles et al., 2020). Finally, I used in vivo coding by applying participants’ own words or phrases as labels for interesting statements and concepts (Miles et al., 2020).

At Stage 2, I reviewed excerpts coded inductively and used axial coding to relate concepts and excerpts to each other (Jones et al., 2014). For example, I categorized excerpts based on similarities, differences, and other connections that emerged between codes. At this

stage, I also began to describe these connections as overarching ideas that explained what I was learning from the data. Additionally, I began to synthesize codes into themes and created new codes with thematic titles. For example, “Everyone Pushed College” was an in vivo code used to label excerpts where participants indicated that multiple people in their lives encouraged them to pursue a college education.

Although my analytical approach was largely inductive, I also sought to go beyond the data and connect emerging themes to more generalizable contexts (Miles et al., 2020). At Stage 3, I reviewed excerpts coded and themed inductively and used deductive analysis to identify those that mapped to a priori concepts found in extant literature and the study’s theoretical frameworks. For example, I identified excerpts that were coded and themed as “College Search Advice from Older Siblings” and “Parent Finding College Prep Resources” and added an additional code of “Familial Capital” to reflect the connection with Yosso’s (2005) concept. In this manner, my overall analytical approach was largely inductive, but I also analyzed data and themes through the lens of extant literature and theory.

Throughout this process, I used NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis software to store, organize, and retrieve interview data; create and track codes; memo; and create themes (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). For example, after uploading transcripts to NVivo, I read and marked excerpts using the software’s highlight coding feature. In NVivo, I created a code book and assigned highlighted excerpts to folders, or nodes, based on emerging codes. During thematic analysis, I ran queries to find words or phrases contained across multiple participants’ transcripts, essays, and resumés. I also used NVivo’s memo and annotation tools to record my thoughts about salient and interesting quotes. I referred to memos stored in NVivo throughout data analysis. It is important to note that though computer programs may automate tedious aspects of data storage

and management, computer software cannot “creatively observe the possible links and connections among different aspects of data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 223). NVivo assisted my iterative analytical process; however, only I could ultimately generate new understandings of participants’ data and construct themes. In Chapter 5, I outline themes developed from the aforementioned analysis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a term used in qualitative research to describe the extent to which research is credible, rigorous, and of high quality (Jones et al., 2014). Trustworthiness is also associated with terms such as authenticity and validation and describes the confidence one can have in the researcher’s findings (Jones et al., 2014). To ensure trustworthiness in data collection and analysis, I employed techniques generally accepted as elements of sound qualitative research: memoing, triangulation, member checking, and peer review (Creswell, 2013).

Memoing

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted the importance of deep and consistent researcher reflection throughout data collection and analysis. They stated that researchers “need to be alert to the possible tensions between their [own] narrative history and the narrative research they undertake” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 46). Similarly, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that being aware of one’s subjectivities or biases allows researchers to monitor their assumptions and make clear how those assumptions may influence data interpretation. Clandinin and Connelly encouraged the routine and rigorous recording of research notes that capture the dual experience of the researcher.

Throughout data collection and analysis, I maintained a research journal of memos, defined as “brief or extended narratives that documents the researcher’s reflections and thinking

processes about the data” (Miles et al., 2020, p. 88). I memoed before and after each participant interview using a series of questions to prompt reflections, such as “How am I feeling going into this interview?” “To what extent do I personally relate to this participant?” and “What are my general thoughts about this interview?” These memos helped me identify my reactions to participants’ stories, explore my feelings about the participant, and reveal biases and assumptions that might affect my understanding of their experiences. When coding in NVivo, I used the memo and annotation features to record my thoughts about specific excerpts. I also captured procedural memos in my research journal. These memos detailed my steps as I collected, organized, and analyzed data. I also wrote about problems or ethical dilemmas I encountered and the resolutions implemented as a result. This process ensured I had a written record, or audit trail, of each methodological decision I made and why (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This careful attention was implemented to enhance confirmability and confidence in the research findings (Jones et al., 2014).

Triangulation

Triangulation is a strategy used to develop a comprehensive and valid understanding of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 1999). Triangulation involves using multiple methods or data sources to determine whether there is convergence of information across sources (Patton, 1999). I used data from five sources (i.e., questionnaire, essay, resumé, first interview, and second interview) to determine consistency in how participants described themselves, their families and backgrounds, and their high school experiences. I noted areas of agreement and areas of divergence between these five data sources and followed up with participants if clarification was needed. Through triangulation, I aim to portray each participant’s precollege

experiences accurately and more fully by illuminating relevant themes that emerged from multiple sources of their narrative (Creswell, 2013).

Member Checking

A central feature of narrative inquiry is participant-researcher collaboration to coconstruct the participant's narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To align with this approach, I conducted member checking by inviting each participant's feedback on their profile. I incorporated this step to facilitate transparency in the research process and enhance trustworthiness (Bold, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the spring of 2022, I emailed each participant a request (see Appendix I) to review a draft of their profile. Specifically, I asked them to ensure that their profile draft accurately reflected their experiences and style of discourse. I explained that I chose certain passages from their transcript because they were compelling, illustrative of their life story, and aligned with the study's purpose. However, I emphasized my desire to collaborate in preparing their final profile for the study (Miles & Huberman, 1984). I further explained that though I would not be able to include their entire transcript in their profile, my goal was to include anecdotes and stories they found most interesting, salient to their precollege experiences, and important to their overall narrative. I invited each participant to read the profile I crafted and offer feedback and edits based on their review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Eight of the 10 participants responded, and their feedback is reflected in excerpts and analyses presented in subsequent chapters. Despite two email reminders, two participants did not respond to member checking.

Peer Debrief and Review

My research process was guided by an assumption that the researcher and research are intimately intertwined (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, it was important for me to

incorporate reflexivity by exploring and critically reflect on the social identities I held and how my identities may affect the research process (Chavez, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Peer debriefing and review were two methods used to achieve this aim. Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight two roles for peer reviewers: to critically explore and discuss methodological choices, analysis, and interpretations and to serve as a “sounding board” or sympathetic listener as a researcher continuously processes their feelings about the research process. During data collection, coding, and analysis, I conducted ongoing correspondence and review with three qualitative researchers with extensive experience in higher education and student affairs. Each person helped me explore my thoughts and feelings about this study, critically reviewed my methods and analysis, and offered impartial counsel. For example, I sought advice from a researcher when a participant who was a undocumented expressed concern for her anonymity. This researcher, who has expertise in qualitative ethics and undocumented student research, helped me explore my concerns about minimizing harm during the research process. She offered sound advice that informed a later conversation with the participant about limitations to confidentiality and additional steps we could both take to protect her anonymity.

Throughout thematic analysis, I sought feedback from one researcher, a qualitative methods instructor who has conducted research on Black immigrants. I provided her with several participant interview excerpts and the preliminary themes I had drawn from these excerpts. We met on two occasions to discuss how I came up with my preliminary themes. We also discussed to what extent my interpretations were grounded in the data and if she identified themes that diverged from my own (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a result of our conversations, my thinking about the data evolved. I recorded notes from peer debrief and review sessions in my research journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By using peer review, along with memoing, triangulation, and

member checking, I aimed to enhance the quality of this investigation and engender confidence in this study's findings.

Scope and Limitations

The advantage of qualitative research is to provide a detailed and comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of individuals and phenomena not always included in the literature (Creswell, 2013). This study amplifies the experiences of low-income immigrant youth of color who, despite facing multiple barriers within pervasive systems of oppression, have achieved their stated goal of matriculating to a 4-year university. By engaging a small sample size in detailed inquiry, more can be known about these participants and their precollege experiences (Bold, 2012). Additionally, I hope researchers and practitioners can find meaning and value in participants' narratives and the complexities within (Jones et al., 2014), raising awareness about the experiences, assets, and needs of other immigrant students of color. In this regard, this investigation aims to be transferable, in that findings hold significance for research and practice with other immigrant precollege students beyond the context of this study (Bold, 2012). To this effort, it is important to fully outline the scope, or boundaries of this research project, as findings reflect these participants' experiences within their distinct social context.

Data collection occurred as the world was grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 public health restrictions included self-quarantine orders in all 50 states that began in March 2020. As a result, all U.S. residents experienced changes to their everyday lives, ranging from the tragic loss of loved ones, unemployment and financial instability, and social isolation and disengagement. Immigrant households were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, which exacerbated existing health and socioeconomic inequities (Clark et al., 2020). For

example, immigrants are overrepresented in essential industries, like food service and health care, that require face-to-face social interaction or on-site work (Clark et al., 2020; Sajjanhar & Mohammed, 2021). As schools across K–16 systems shifted to online instruction, many immigrant families relied on older siblings to care for younger relatives while their parents worked (Amandolare, 2020; Breiseth, 2020), heightening the already difficult adjustment to remote learning (Santiago et al., 2021).

Students across all socioeconomic strata faced a college planning process that was more complex than in previous years. For example, students were challenged to complete their college search and application processes without access to a full range of resources, causing uncertainty, stress, and anxiety (Anand & Bhatia, 2021). Another source of anxiety was the pandemic's impact on family finances and the extent to which students would be eligible for financial aid (Anand & Bhatia, 2021). However, the college enrollment of low-income students took the biggest hit. According to 2021 data, the enrollment of high school graduates from high-poverty, high-minority schools dropped 29% versus 17% for graduates from higher income schools (Hoover, 2020). The unique sociocultural experience of college search and choice in 2020–2021 (when participants were juniors and seniors) may limit the transferability of my study to populations going through this process in a nonpandemic era. Yet, this research study offers a unique opportunity to capture the lived experiences of precollege students as they grappled with multiple and unprecedented challenges on their path to college.

To enhance trust in a researcher's findings, it is important to be transparent about limitations, or constraints beyond the researcher's control that may have impacted the investigation (Terrell, 2016). Three elements of this study's sampling may influence the interpretation of findings. First, this study is limited by an overrepresentation of women.

Although women generally outnumber men in U.S. colleges (Parker, 2021), this study's sample may not represent the gender diversity of precollege immigrant students of color. Second, this study's sample includes one participant who met all eligibility criteria except for low income. When we discussed her interest in this study, she described her family as "middle-class" and "not rich." However, she was eager to participate in this study, emphatically indicating that she had "a lot to say" about going through the college planning process as an immigrant. After consultation with my dissertation chair, I decided to interview her. This participant's narrative was indeed detailed, nuanced, and compelling. Additionally, her narrative allowed me to explore and analyze experiences of immigrant students that might be shared across income levels or social classes. Third, the residency status of this study's sample is mixed. Specifically, the sample included eight participants who were U.S. citizens and eligible noncitizens, and two participants who were undocumented (one with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, also known as DACA³). Like income level, this feature presented an opportunity to explore precollege experiences that might be shared by participants of different residency statuses.

Another potential methodological limitation is recall bias, or the difficulty participants may experience remembering past events completely and accurately. Participants were interviewed in their first semester of college about experiences that occurred over a decade prior, for example, their transition to U.S. schools. Additionally, the focus of this study explored the intricacies of college search, preparation, and application activities—tasks students typically complete in their sophomore or junior years of high school. In some instances, during interviews, a few participants remarked that they could not remember certain details. For example, they

³ DACA is an immigration policy that allows certain people who came to the United States as children to be granted temporary relief from deportation (deferred action) and work authorization. DACA does not provide permanent lawful status and must be renewed every two years.

could not recall websites they used to research college information. However, embedded in narrative inquiry is an assumption that participants' life stories as they remember them and the meaning these stories hold for them are more important than an accurate and complete retelling of events (Bold, 2012). Although a participant might have forgotten a website they used, participants readily told vivid stories of significant moments in their precollege journey, such as how a conversation with a friend motivated them to accept a competitive scholarship opportunity. These stories were often shared with great detail that informed a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Finally, this study captured the experiences of immigrant youth who researched, applied, were admitted, and matriculated to a 4-year institution. However, this study did not include the experiences of students who successfully gained admission but did not enroll in the fall of 2021; a trend that is not unusual for minoritized students (National College Attainment Network, 2021) but that may have been heightened due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic (Jaschik, 2020). As a result, the experiences of admitted but not enrolled students will not be captured. Despite the limitations, I believe that participants' experiences navigating their path to college are transferrable to other low-income immigrant students of color and provide novel insights and implications for college access research, practice, and policy. In Chapter 6, I present recommendations for future research to address this study's limitations.

Summary of Methodology

To gain an understanding of how low-income immigrant students of color navigate the college choice process, focused attention on their college planning and decision making is critical. Narrative research is a qualitative method well-suited to understand this process effectively. This approach enabled me to focus on the significant moments and turning points

that occurred during this process, explore how participants made sense of college information and their perceived college options, and understand how their perceptions influenced their college application behaviors. Narrative inquiry also informed data collection, which included conducting two semi structured interviews exploring participants' upbringing in their homeland, move to the United States, adjustment within U.S. society and schools, and the development of early aspirations for college. This line of inquiry elicited detailed stories that highlighted various forms of capital within participants' homes and communities that shaped their educational aspirations and college planning behaviors. Narrative inquiry informed the methods of data analysis and interpretation, as well as methods to enhance credibility.

In the next two chapters, I present my findings. Chapter 4 includes a profile of each participant, and Chapter 5 presents cross-participant themes capturing precollege experiences. The goal of these chapters is to convey the lived experiences of students who are often underrepresented in college choice literature yet comprise a growing population of students seeking postsecondary education.

CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

To understand how immigrant students reach higher education, it is important consider their family background, migration and resettlement experiences, and family attitudes and communication about school (Daoud et al, 2018; Griffin et al, 2012; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Romo et al., 2019). Research shows that these factors influence the school achievement, college aspirations, and college search and choice behaviors of immigrant youth (Imaogene, 2017; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Pong & Zeiser, 2012; Tang et al., 2013), uniquely positioning them on a path to higher education (Louie, 2012).

For this narrative study, I explored these factors in two interviews with 10 immigrant students of color. The first interview encouraged reflection and storytelling about their childhood experiences in their homeland, transition to U.S. society and schools, early messages they received about education from parents and teachers, and their first thoughts about continuing their education in college. The second interview continued to emphasize storytelling and focused on participants' experiences researching and applying to college, making sense of college decision and financial award letters, and making their college decision.

In the next two chapters, I present my findings. Chapter 4 provides each participant's narrative about their childhood experiences conveyed in their own words. Chapter 5 presents a cross-participant analysis of their college search and choice experiences, specifically exploring their research and application activities and decision making. The overall goal of both chapters is to explore the college choice process of these ten participants and contribute to the emerging body of literature on precollege immigrant-origin youth, a rapidly growing segment of the college student population (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020).

I begin each profile with an introduction to the participant that provides general details about where they are from and their family, their high school activities and achievements, the

college they now attend and why they chose that college, and their intended major and career goal. Then, I present each participant's restoried narrative in their own voice, that is, exclusively using quotes from their interviews or college essays. I order the narrative data chronologically and according to themes, for example, Family Migration, Transition to the United States, and Early College Aspirations. In keeping with narrative inquiry's emphasis on storytelling, each theme is identified by a chapter title. Additionally, I include quotes that convey each participant's thoughts about being an immigrant or experiences that relate to their immigrant identity. Each profile ends with the participant's reflection on what they imagine their life would be like if they had not migrated to the United States. I conclude this chapter with a summary of participants' experiences and highlight commonalities and differences across family backgrounds and early college predisposition.

Description of Participants

The participants in this study are all graduates of public high schools in central Maryland and first-year students at one of three public 4-year institutions in the state: eight attend Large R1 State University (LR1), one attends Large State University (LSU), and one attends Small State University (SSU)⁴. The sample includes eight women and two men, all age 18 or 19 at the time of their interviews. Participants' high school GPAs range from 2.7 to 4.8. Nine participants were either Pell grant recipients or were enrolled in a free and reduced meal program (FARMS) in high school, indicators of being raised in a low-income household. One participant (Mercedes) indicated that she was not a Pell grant recipient or enrolled in FARMS. However, she described

⁴ According to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, a Large 4-year institution's enrollment is at least 10,000 degree-seeking students, a Medium 4-year institution's enrollment is between 3,000-9,999, and a Small 4-year institution's enrollment is between 1,000-2,999. R1 denotes an institution with "very high" research activity and this distinction is used in this study primarily to differentiate between two Large R1 State universities.

her family income status as “not rich.” Two students (Azalia and Rico) did not complete the FAFSA because they did not meet U.S. residency criteria for eligibility. All participants were admitted to multiple 4-year institutions; five received a partial or full merit institutional scholarship. They all ultimately prioritized affordability when choosing a college. In other words, all participants enrolled in the school that offered a financial package that covered the greatest percentage of college costs.

Alex

Alex is an 18-year-old woman who identifies her race as American Indian/Alaska Native and White and her ethnicity as Hispanic and Latina. She was born in Mexico to parents who were farmers. Alex moved to Maryland with her mother and older sister when she was 7 years old. Alex’s father previously established permanent residency in the United States, and he lived and worked in the United States for most of the year. However, he traveled back to Mexico often, for holidays, birthdays, and school events. During that time, he was also preparing residency documents so that his wife and children could migrate. Currently, her father works in the construction industry and her mother is a housekeeper. Alex’s sister is a college sophomore.

Alex graduated from high school with a 4.7 GPA. During high school, Alex was dually enrolled at the county’s community college. Alex was also enrolled in her high school’s engineering academy, and she participated in robotics, Science Olympiad, SGA, honor societies, and a Latino student group. Alex applied to 13 colleges. After receiving a full scholarship and an honors college invitation, Alex chose to enroll at Large R1 State University (LR1) due to the financial relief offered to her and her family. LR1 also met Alex’s other preferences: a top-ranked computer science program and close to proximity to home (a characteristic that became

more important to her toward the end of 12th grade). Alex lives on campus. She plans to earn her bachelor's degree in computer science and possibly go to graduate school.

Chapter 1: Family Background

So I was born in a rural area of Mexico...it was about a 40-minute drive from the closest city. My family owned a big land area which we farmed. And we also owned animals like sheep and chicken, and we sold those animals or we used them for food.

Me and my sister (she's like two years older than me) we would often help my mom with taking care of the house and the animals and stuff, since around eight months or so [out of the year] it was just us three. My dad lived and worked in the U.S. most of the time, and he usually came home in the summer.

I don't want to say he was distant which [his absence] can give the illusion of that. We were actually super close as a family. While we were [in Mexico]...he was in the process of getting us our residency.... the only reason we [stayed in Mexico] is because he was putting in all this effort to bring us here.

I really [had] a lot of freedom in terms of playing outside, and there were a lot of people my age at that time...so I played with a lot of people... I remember walking home at like midnight with just the moon. I loved it. It was very liberating.

Chapter 2: Transition to the United States

So my dad, since he's from a big family, when he was younger he just kind of wanted to work and send money to his family. I don't exactly know if there was a deep need for money or if there were any sick people, but I do know that they all kind of lived in poverty...so he just wanted to send money to them, and a lot of his own siblings were doing it. So he also came here [to work], and then as for my mom, she really came here just to be with him because she was also poor. She had her life in Mexico - like she was able to work and everything, so yeah [her migration] was for him.

I'm going to be blunt and say I really hated it [first home in the U.S.]. At the time my dad brought us, he was living with essentially three other couples and their children... My aunt and uncle were the main owners of the house, and they had two daughters the same age as me and my sister and a newborn. The house was two stories with a basement that was pretty big. In the basement is where we lived...with my [other] aunt and uncle [and] their daughters. And there was one couple who...didn't have any kids at the time. So it was pretty packed. Honestly the neighborhood was nice. We had a nice yard and everything, but there was like a lot of conflict between the families. It kind of really made me dislike it, so yeah I really just hated it.

Chapter 3: Transition to U.S. Schools

We arrived in...June, so actually we had a lot of time to adjust to living here before actually

starting school. When I started school, I made friends with a girl in my class who was pretty good about translating stuff for me, so it was really nice.

[My sister and I] cried a lot, especially in the first year [in the U.S.] because we didn't know English. When we would say that we want to give up, they would kind of threaten us: If we didn't want to go to school, we can just go clean toilets like my mom. And you know, we really didn't like to clean. And yeah, that was the big threat. They still kind of say it as more of a joke. That always made us [think], "No, I'll continue. I can do it."

I was [in ESOL]. I usually got taken out of a class like two times a day. It was really helpful. I remember there were two women who were my teachers... The teachers I had were so awesome; they really made the whole experience better. And there was also an Asian girl who accompanied me for one of the [classes], and we actually eventually became friends.

Chapter 4: Early College Aspirations

I've always had in mind that I was going to college. My parents really emphasized higher education and just education in general, so even in Mexico I was always a pretty focused kid. My mom kinda made us like that because she values education. Even though my parents had up to a sixth-grade education, they both understand the importance of school and taught us about that. So I always kind of knew I was going to go to college, or at least some kind of education beyond high school.

[My parents] didn't want us to have like the same life as them - with hard labor. And my mom did some college in Mexico - um she's really smart - so she actually took a test and did some college, but she eventually had to drop out, but she really enjoyed everything.

Having my sister within the same age range as me [was helpful]. We are only two years apart and one grade apart, so our educational goals always kind of aligned... I feel like she's part of the reason why I'm what you call "a good student." We always kind of challenged each other...she would get straight A's, I would get straight A's. She would play instruments; I will also play instruments, then I would join the choir... I wouldn't say she really pushed me to college, because like I said we both had the same goal. But having that connection, that person that was like right next to me, definitely kept it on track at least. I feel like if she hadn't been there, it would have definitely turned out differently.

I made a lot of White friends and other ethnicities... A lot of them had college-educated parents. So they always kind of knew they were going to college, and I just kind of fit in with that... I guess having them know a similar path to their life it kinda normalized it for me... When I did start talking to more Hispanics [during high school], I found that a lot of them actually weren't going to go to college. If I would have hung out with them when I was younger, it definitely would have been different if they weren't going to go [to college] and I was. I feel like it would have definitely made it stranger [to be on a path to college].

Chapter 5: Immigrant/Ethnic Identity: Excerpt from Alex's Scholarship Application Essay

I live in the bubble of assured education.

My whole life, I have been able to go from one grade to the next without worrying about anything. This is all due to my parents who understand the value of education and wanted to give my sister and I what they never had. It is because of my parents that I have been raised with the idea that something like a college education is entirely possible and attainable for me. It was not until much later that I realized how impossible a college degree was to many people of my own ethnicity. I saw many other Hispanics give up on the idea of college because of the challenges they faced and the sight of all of their friends and family giving up.

I hope that when I finish my formal college education, I can be involved in activities to encourage more Hispanics to seek higher education. I think that a big part of the problem to which many people decide to give up or not try to seek something higher is because of their surroundings. I, myself, have experienced how hard it is to keep fighting for something when everything around you is fighting against you. This is why I want to be involved in reaching out to Hispanic students and their parents to help them get resources early on to put them on the path to college, trade school, or some other career path they want.

While I have always worried about how I would pay for college, I realize that other students worry if they will even go to college. This is heavily in part to my parents who made sure I had all the resources accessible to know what I wanted to do and where. Many others do not have that support which makes me want to be there for them and help them surpass themselves instead of feeding into the vicious cycle of poverty and unhappiness many Hispanic students fall into.

Chapter 6: If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?

This is very hit or miss, because I want to say I would still be involved with education... I would have graduated high school... I would have probably gone to a small college in the city or just around it... I definitely would have gone to one of those to you know get a degree... And I'm going to say it's hit or miss, because where I lived teenage pregnancy is a big thing, so I don't know if I would have been influenced by the peers around me. But taking them out of the equation, I want to say [I would have gone to college] just because of my parents' values and my values, I would have still gone to pursue further education. Maybe my major would have been different, simply because I think I would have been more interested in something like farming or like agriculture, because that's what my family did back there... I think I still would have gone to college, though.

Amanuel

Amanuel is a 19-year-old man who was born in Eritrea. He identifies his race as Black/African American and his ethnicity as Tigrinya. Amanuel lived with his mother, paternal grandparents, an older sister, and two older brothers in Eritrea until he was 8 years. His mother

was a housewife, and his father was a soldier. Amanuel's father migrated from Eritrea to the United States when Amanuel was an infant, and later arranged for Amanuel, his mother, and his siblings to be smuggled across the border to [east African country]. They lived there 10 months before Amanuel's father was able to arrange documents permitting the family to migrate to the United States.

Currently, his father works as a rideshare driver and his mother is a housewife. Amanuel's older siblings are now in their twenties. Two have graduated from college, and one is a junior at LR1. Amanuel is no longer the youngest in his family. He has 7-year-old brother who was born in the United States.

Amanuel graduated from high school with a 4.22 GPA. During his high school years, Amanuel was a member of the school's soccer team, chess club, and Black Student Union. He also interned with the fire department, taught children to speak Tigrinya, and was active in his local East African immigrant church. Amanuel was enrolled in a school-based college access program from 10th to 12th grade. During the summer between junior and senior year, Amanuel's family enrolled him in a for-profit program for East African youth that prepared students to apply and access competitive universities. Amanuel applied to 16 colleges, and he was a finalist for a prestigious national scholarship program. However, the scholarship program covered only tuition at a partner private college in the northeast. Therefore, after comparing his financial awards, Amanuel determined that LR1 would be the better financial option and ultimately chose to withdraw from the scholarship program. Amanuel now attends LR1, lives on campus, and plans to major in public health sciences. He is considering a career as a physician assistant.

Chapter 1: Family Background

I was born in [big city] Eritrea, [but we lived] in a little town... We had a house. I lived with my siblings. I had one sister and two brothers and then also lived with my mom and my two

grandparents [on] my dad's side.

A typical day for me would be to go to school and then...come back, do some homework, and [play] soccer or some type of sport outside... My dad didn't live with us because he initially left Eritrea in 2003...before I turned one. So I didn't really see much [of him] until I first got here [to the U.S.].... So it was just my mom taking care of us most of the time and my grandparents as well.

[Growing up] I think I spent the most time with my older brother - the one that's right above me. He's 21 now. I always did everything with him... We didn't go to the same school; we went to different schools initially because I went to a private school and then he went to a public one... My dad wanted me to go to a private school for some reason.

So every time I'd come back from [school] I'm always hanging out with [my siblings] and then also my mom. I enjoyed spending time with her and my grandparents as well.

[The reason why my family left Eritrea] is a mix of stuff. Initially mainly my dad left because he was in the service, and once you're in the service in Eritrea it's like indefinite. He was there for – I forget how many years – it was over a decade... But they'll keep you in service, and if you don't serve, they'll just put you in jail... That's how it is. And so even with me, I would have gone into service after high school - there's like mandatory military training that they do, so right after high school I'd go into that. It's not good...if you want education, that is not what you want, so my parents thought of that and my dad wanted to leave mainly because of that, and he saw the political climate in the country was going down. So yeah, I think those are the major factors that led him to leaving, and then eventually he wanted us to come as well. Like just everything, especially education-wise everything is much better here, and so that was definitely the main reason.

Chapter 2: Migration Story: Excerpt from College Essay

It was the last checkpoint. The last hurdle before my family escaped to the other side. I could hear the soldiers asking the smuggler for his ID while I was in the trunk. My sister and I were split from my mother since we couldn't all fit in the trunk, which we used to hide through the checkpoint. These checkpoints were set up to limit people's movements and especially keep anyone from fleeing our country, such as people like us.

I kept telling myself that I wasn't going to go to jail that day as attempting to leave my home country, Eritrea, was an offense that would take you straight into jail. The car started to move again, and I let out a big sigh as I knew that we were through.

My sister and I were reunited with the rest of the family a couple hours later. We immediately left to go across the border and within a day we were in [east African country] and reunited with my father who I hadn't seen since I was born. I arrived in the U.S. from my home country Eritrea in 2011. During the travel time it took my family and I to come to the United States, a whole school year had passed. As soon as I arrived, I had to play catch up, adjust to the new culture, and try to help my family all at the same time. Since my father had spent most of his life's

savings bringing my family to the U.S., shortly after our arrival, he immediately went back to working as a private construction worker. When he took contracts, he needed more people to help him. He would be losing money if he hired other construction workers, so I decided to help. I knew if I supported my father, I was going to help keep our family financially stable. It didn't matter if it was cold or hot, whether it was during winter break or summer break, I was alongside him throughout elementary school and middle school.

During this time, I was still doing the same amount of schoolwork as my peers while still trying to learn the language and assimilate to the culture. When in elementary school, I remember having so many questions. What will they think of my accent? Do all the students speak English? I would avoid interactions with other students in fear of being judged.

Over time, I started to break out of my comfort zone. I made the effort to talk to my teachers and classmates which improved my English. After 10 years in the U.S., I have taken 8 AP courses including AP Literature and AP Language and Composition. The change was gradual and difficult, but I slowly started to adapt to the culture...

My journey showed me that it only takes one moment for everything in my life to change completely. The lessons I learned while fleeing Eritrea proved useful on a daily basis in the U.S. Patience has served me well in overcoming many of the obstacles that came my way in learning the English language. I discovered I am adaptable, resilient and open-minded in the face of difficult circumstances, such as the cultural and academic barriers I have encountered in the U.S. Most meaningful of all, although my journey is full of painful memories, it has challenged me to become the best I can be and motivated me to secure a better future for myself.

Chapter 3: Transition to the United States

We first moved to [county]...we couldn't find a place in the city, so we went...to my uncle's house...and then we eventually got our own place in [small city].

[My uncle had] a wife and...three kids, but only one of the kids lived there because they're already old enough. They had graduated. We were in the basement, so it was us, and then it was...my cousin too. He just graduated from LRI.

[Differences] just like casual running water and stuff like that...surprised me - how water was available everywhere - you can just open the tap... Sometimes [in Eritrea] you would have to wait a couple days or something for the water to work there. And oh, showers were surprising to me as well. I knew that you could take showers with the overhead and everything, but we never did that in Eritrea because the [water system] was not good, but here...it was just casual... everywhere, you can find it. So, I thought that was amazing.

I was also surprised at how green everything was initially when we came from the airport. We were on the highway, and I just...thought [we were] in the middle of the woods, but it was just that on the highway there were trees everywhere...and grass. You typically wouldn't see that in Eritrea, so I was just surprised.

Ever since I came here, I went to church almost every week, so that was definitely a big part of my life... It's an Orthodox Tewahedo Church, so it's mainly made up of Eritrean [people] – anybody is welcome, but the majority of people that go there are Eritrean.

Going there was good because people knew how to speak to me. I did not speak English...so just going there and making American friends that speak good English (but also they knew what I was saying) was a good feeling. I was like, "I can talk to these people" ...after being in school all week and not really knowing what to say and then coming on Sunday, and we see people [we] could talk to was nice.

And there is a big population of Habesha⁵ people in [small city], so there was that sense of [when you] went outside you would usually see somebody like that. And then there was a recreation center near me, and so when I did go there, I would see a lot of Habesha people, so that was nice. I just felt much more comfortable. We [played soccer], so that's how I made friends... And those kids that were around me that are Habesha usually went to my elementary school, so we basically grew up together... I know this kid from third grade, and I still know him now (he goes to [college]) and we still talk a little bit. So it's been a big part of my life just being in the rec.

Chapter 4: Transition to U.S. Schools

In the beginning, I would say it was pretty hard for me. Initially, I didn't know any English, so over the summer I'd be like trying to read books and stuff. Eventually, I would know how to read, but sometimes I had a hard time understanding what I'm reading, and that would really get to me. I would be so annoy[ed] in classes trying to read, but I just couldn't do it. One memory that does stick out is I was in English class [in third grade] and I just could not understand what I was reading, and so I started crying. It was just because of annoyance.

But other than that, it was pretty fine. I went to ESOL...in third and fourth grade, so that definitely helped, just being around other people...that were in the same situation as me. That was nice.

I started making more friends, so that just made some things a lot better. And then there was this one guy that I'm telling you about (the guy that goes to Towson now)... I remember meeting him at lunch, and he was the only guy that actually...his parents are both Eritrean [but] he didn't really know how to speak it, but he understood it, so I would talk to him a lot. He was my main friend in third grade [and] ever since then.

*I remember Miss W from third grade. I specifically remember her because she did a great job of making sure that [I understood] what I doing... And my siblings too. I think my sister also helped me out a lot just with...the schoolwork and just knowing what to expect. And my cousins as well. The uncle that I stayed with... his daughter. She'd...sometimes take us to get ice cream or she [would be] very nice. She wanted to be involved... I remember reading *The Magic School Bus* over summer because of her. She would take us to the library and be like "Okay, just pick out any book you want to start reading," so it was multiple people that definitely helped me out just*

⁵ Pan-ethnic identifier for people from Ethiopia and Eritrea

transitioning into the life here.

Chapter 5: Early College Aspirations

[Going to college] was always in the back of my mind, just because my parents [were] always saying, "You came here for education," and so college was just always...the next thing after high school.

I have an uncle who [is] a computer scientist...When I was in eighth to tenth grade...he would come every couple weeks and like [my brothers and I] would do some type of project... He was very adamant about being ready for college and stuff.

The first time [it] hit me that I need to like work [to get into college], I would say...middle school - seventh, eighth grade. I'm seeing my siblings go to college. I'm seeing them do all these applications; I'm seeing them...seriously talking about [their] grades...so that was definitely when it hit me initially. I was like, "I need to focus and try to do well in school."

The two main colleges I'd always hear about were LR1 and [state university]... When my sister initially started applying (and that's when I realized that there was an entire process)...she always mentioned [state university] and LR1 and [other] in-state schools, so I always remember hearing that, and eventually she went to [state university]... And just anytime I would go to family gatherings [I would hear about] different colleges.

Chapter 6: If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?

A lot different. I'm trying to imagine where I'd be. I think I'd most likely be in the service in Eritrea - probably still living in [city]... Life in Eritrea - the political climate there - is so weird, so you don't know what will happen to your family at certain stages... People usually around my age - if you're like 18 or 19 would go off [to the service]... That's all I saw around me was like my cousins after high school [going to the service], and then they'd come back after a year, [but] you're in there indefinitely. Like I wouldn't be surprised if I was in jail, just because if you stop the service, they'll come for you.

Azalia

Azalia is an 18-year-old woman enrolled at LR1. Azalia is considering psychiatry as her future career; her intended major is psychology. Born in El Salvador, Azalia moved to Maryland with her mother as a toddler. Azalia's biological father died in El Salvador. Azalia's mother met and married Azalia's stepfather in the United States. In El Salvador, her mother worked as a grade school teacher. Currently, her mother works as a nanny and previously worked cleaning homes. Her stepfather works as truck driver.

Azalia lives with her mother, stepfather, aunt, grandmother, and two adult cousins. Azalia graduated from high school with a 4.1 GPA. Azalia was enrolled in her school district's science and technology magnet program and was a member of two honor societies, the Hispanic Student Union, and a pre-business careers organization. She also participated in band and was a varsity soccer player. Azalia applied to eight colleges and received application support from a mentor she met through an organization she learned about at her high school. Azalia's first choice college was in the northeastern United States, but since she was unable to qualify for federal funding and most scholarships based on her DACA status she eventually narrowed her search to in-state public schools. Ultimately, Azalia decided to enroll at LR1, an institution five miles from her home. Although LR1 was not her first-choice school, it was high on her list of desired schools because she was familiar with the campus and the school's good academic reputation.

Chapter 1: Family Background

I'm from El Salvador, but I actually don't remember anything about it. From the stories [I've been told] I do know that I'm from a very small poor town... it's like no road, mostly dirt, and they talk a lot about houses that aren't even made out of brick...and that don't have floors.

I'm an only child... My biological father passed away in El Salvador when I was younger - that's mostly why my mom decided to move here.

My mom and I are the only two people...in our family...that ever actually went to school. She understands the struggle of going to school and then coming back home [when] everybody else is working. I feel like she's different than other Hispanic parents that I've seen because she actually places a lot of importance on my education. I've seen my aunts or other Hispanic parents that we know of - they would be like, "Oh [the teenagers are] not working. They're useless." But my mom doesn't really put that much pressure on me... I kind of looked at education [as] my job...because I felt so useless, [since] I'm the only one here not working. I'm not providing. What am I supposed to contribute? So then, I just made education my job, and that was really stressed in my household. Everybody was like, "School is your job...school is your job... focus on school." So I'm focusing on school.

Since my dad didn't go to school, I guess he doesn't understand how hard it is. He's just kind of like, "Oh, working is so much harder. If only you knew how easy you have it." So, then I feel like that puts pressure on our relationship. We're not that close.

I [have] always helped my family as much as I can, ever since I was little... I'm not really a money driven person... I don't feel like an emotional attachment to money. But I have to help my [family], so [that] is driving me. I'm just like "Oh, I need to finish school and do something, so I can help out."

Chapter 2: Transition to the United States

[We moved to] my uncle's house... He had a nice house, and I remember it being fun because he also had two children...so we would have fun as kids, even though I was younger. I do remember that everybody was like, "She [Azalia] talks so much!" and I picked up English really fast.

My uncle and my cousins provided shelter for us, and my older cousins were born here, so that's how my English got so good so fast. Since they were always speaking in English, I was always speaking in English to them.

Chapter 3: Early College Aspirations

So it's funny, [going to college] was never really even questioned for me. My aunt...is a janitor at LRI, and we would go to LRI Day every year... And it was always in the back of my mind, "Oh, there's this place called college and that's LRI."... I thought that "college" was "LRI"

I was probably around 13 [when I started thinking about actual colleges to apply to], and the idea of becoming a lawyer was suddenly really interesting to me. And my dad was like, "Oh, then you're going to want to go to Yale!" And I was like "Yale?" And I started associating Yale with lawyers, but that was it. I didn't really put much thought into it, and no other schools really came up because most of my family didn't go to school, so I didn't even know of the other ones.

School [was] my number one priority always. I [saw] it as my job, like I kind of made school like a part of my personality. I was like, "Well, this is what I'm going to do - what I have to do - to get my family on another level." I would look at our situation - our poverty - and I would be like, "Well, there has to be a way to get out of this," and everybody always emphasized the fact that education was that stairway, and I was going to be the one to bring everybody up. My aunt was like, "Well Azalia, you're going to be the one to bring us up" or something like that... We were comparing a different situation [with another family]. We were like, "Oh, how are they going to get on because their child isn't going to school?" But my aunt specifically said, "Well, thank goodness we have you..." But that was always my motivation, you know...everybody else was kind of thinking the same thing that I'm [thinking]. I'm gonna elevate us as a whole.

[It's] weird to think about, but in my extended family none of my cousins actually went to college, even though all of my other cousins were born here - my uncle's children... Even my cousins younger than me. One of them I've been pushing and pushing her to try to convince her to go to school because that's the cousin [whose] mom works at LRI, so she would actually get a discount. And I was like "Please, you have to realize the importance of this situation!" But I don't think she's gonna go to college. She graduates this year, and my aunt was questioning if she was even going to graduate high school, and it's so disappointing.

[Going to college] wasn't really a thing in our community... It was like I was an exception, so maybe seeing other people's experiences with not getting their education probably pushed me a little forward... But it put me in an awkward situation, because it was just like "I don't know how to tell you. I'm actually going to go to school."

Chapter 4: Immigrant Identity and Experiences: Excerpt from Azalia's College Essay

Our whole childhood we are asked what we want to be when we grow up. Some of us answered immediately, while others simply never knew. I always found myself somewhere in the middle. Eventually, I just decided to pick a profession that I thought people would be okay with hearing. I researched just enough for it to appear as though I had it all planned. I curated an answer, so well-constructed that it left people no choice but to take me seriously. I never had to sit in awkward silence after replying, "I don't know," and, most importantly, it made my parents look good. Everyone was happy; that is, until it was time for me to actually have an idea of what I wanted to do. I convinced everyone, including myself, that I wanted to become a corporate lawyer. But now, looking back, I wonder, Did I even like law? Why did I pick this? I realized I focused on this profession for all of the wrong reasons. I wasn't as interested in the occupation so much as the advantages associated with it.

What I really wanted to be was privileged. I fantasized about living in a large house and having kids that had everything they desired... I wanted my children to have a normal childhood where they could liberally visit their grandparents and not serve as pro-bono translators for their parents. I wanted them to have a family they could relate to. I wanted them to have everything I didn't. But then I asked myself why. Why did I want them to experience a life so different from my own?

What I truly desired was to save them from my undesirable experiences. Now, I know in my heart that my struggles were pivotal in shaping me into the young woman I am today. It took me time to realize that assisting as a translator, feeling like an outsider within my own family, and fearing the consequences that come with lacking citizenship had positive outcomes. They all showcased my ability to adapt, my determination and perseverance, and my faith and beliefs that suddenly made my domestic desires unimportant. No, I didn't have all of the benefits that come from wealth and high social status, but I wouldn't be as strong, assertive, or hard-working as I am today if I did. Transforming my means of thinking has allowed me to accept and appreciate the aspects of my life that I always found bothersome and confining. In doing so, I have declared to no longer dwell on the way things could have been if my life was different. After all, a smooth sea never made a skilled sailor. I'm grateful for my experiences because, without them, I would not possess the skills and mindset needed to tackle anything that comes my way.

Chapter 5: If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?

Well, what immediately came to mind was poverty, but actually thinking about it my mom was a teacher in El Salvador, so she would have [had] a steady income compared to other people in our community. And my late biological father was also a professional, so I know that they...they like had money, well for just us three.

I don't know, because there would be so many factors coming into play - like if we moved to the city or the country because that would be like two different lives, but I would also be happy to see my grandma. Actually, I thought about that with my mom the other day. I mentioned my two cousins that migrated about seven years ago. I was probably going to be growing up with them...or in a similar situation as them. And at some point El Salvador got extremely dangerous... And since so much of our family is here already, I feel like my mom would [have taken] the initiative to make the decision of coming here at some point...and it would've been more complicated.

Yeah, definitely [I would have pursued higher education]. I like school and...I feel lucky to like school because if not everything would be harder with all of the pressure from my family - like if I didn't want to do anything on my part - if I didn't have that motivation... But at the same time, I don't know if my upbringing had anything to do with it. What if everyone hadn't placed importance on education? Would I have placed that importance on education?

I think of it this way. I'm who I am because of everything I've lived here, so its like what would I have lived in El Salvador if I stayed there – Would I still want to get that education? But I feel like no matter where you are you always want to put your family in a better situation. Even if we were millionaires, I would be the one to be like, “Well, I'll make us billionaires!” You know, wherever you are you want to get better. I've seen posts about always wanting your children to have a better situation than you, like you always want it to get better and better. So, I think I would.

Chioma

Chioma is an 18-year-old woman who graduated from high school with a 4.8 GPA and an International Baccalaureate Diploma⁶. While in high school, Chioma held leadership roles in the African Student Association, a minority scholars' program, and an empowerment program for young women. During junior and senior year, Chioma participated in a school-based college access program. Chioma applied to eight colleges; she did not have a top choice school and kept an open mind about which school she would ultimately attend. Chioma chose LR1 after being invited to the honors college and receiving a full scholarship. She plans to major in government and politics.

Chioma was born in Nigeria and identifies her race as Black and her ethnicity as African American. Chioma moved to Maryland at the age of 7 with her parents and two sisters: one older

⁶ Academically rigorous internationally recognized high school program

and one younger. Her parents had their 4th daughter in Maryland. In Nigeria, her parents both completed postsecondary coursework. Her mother worked as a dental assistant and her father worked as an accountant. Currently, her mother's occupation is geriatric nurse assistant, and her father works in a business-related position in the county government. Her older sister is currently a junior in college.

Chapter 1: Family Background

I was born in [a large city] in Nigeria...it was always family around in my childhood. We had a lot of family living with us. We had my cousins who were going to university living with us...and my uncles living with us... My older sister, we were always together... We were always flower girls - you know someone was always getting married. We were always at parties. I remember our mom used to dress us the same. We used to always have on the same outfit, hairstyle, everything.

So the way the family structure is back home, it's a lot of the-man-is-the-head type of stuff...[women are] submissive. And in my particular family, it's extreme. You know, my mom only had girls, so she was pushing us to not basically believe that just because we weren't boys we couldn't do what we wanted to do... it made me think I can do basically anything. I'm like, "Why can't I go to college just because I'm a girl?!"

Overall education was very important, but it was just like as a girl you can relax - you don't have to [work that hard in school]. But as a guy, they expected you to [work hard and] do more, so... the expectations were very different.

My parents [emphasized] school, school, school, school. Like even in Nigeria, my sister and I used to get first place, which is how the school the system works: It was first place, second place, third place. We used to get tutors sometimes. They were very strict about school. If they had a parent night, my mom was always there [asking] "What was my score? What could she improve on?" I remember one [experience] - I didn't know how to spell my last name correctly. And my mom made me write it like 1,000 times. So yeah, now I know how to spell it correctly... She would always be supportive. She would always tell us we could do it. If we needed help, she would help us in any capacity that she could.

It also made me love learning from an early age... My mom made it very [clear], "It's good to learn. Look it's fun. If you know a fun fact, then you can tell your uncles," kind of [showing us] this is what learning can do for you. So since then, I've always been interested and loved learning.

Chapter 2: Transition to the United States

My family decided to migrate to the U.S. because [they] needed a change in environment. We were also seeking better educational pursuits here.

I first moved to Maryland...with my mom, my dad, and all my sisters...and I've been here ever since. When we first came, we stayed with my uncle on my dad's side... 'Cuz the way it works - you know, like everyone's your cousin. The uncle we stayed with was like my dad's second cousin. They were related, but it was [through] grandparents somewhere.

We went to a Nigerian church... There were other types of Africans there, but you know we met a lot of Nigerians there and Yoruba specifically because our tribe is Yoruba... In that aspect we had a lot of community – Nigerians. And when...we started knowing people all around, like when we went to the...African market, we would meet Nigerians there.

A lot of family members [helped us make the transition]. People would come and drive us places. And we'd go to visit this mall and go to visit Baltimore... Extended family members [would say] "Yeah, let's go here. Let's go see this. Let's go do that. Or let's talk about this. And you know that here we have a holiday for that." And I was like, "Oh, okay, that's interesting."

Chapter 3: Transition to U.S. Schools

[Starting school] wasn't the best. I frankly didn't like it because there were a lot of cultural differences and shocks. Back home I could be blunt, and no one would get offended because that's how we talk. We can be straightforward and straight to the point. And if I spoke to kids like that here it's just like, "What are you saying? Like that's rude." And we kind of like...play around... my cousin would pull pranks on us, and it was fine. Here they...wouldn't understand. It was no fun when I was younger. I was like, "You guys are so sensitive."

I was placed in an ESOL program despite knowing how to speak English. It was mostly a waste of time. I would often get pulled out of regular class to go to ESOL when we were doing really fun things.

When we first came,... we knew how to speak English, but we had an accent... We would get a lot of micro aggressions and people perceiving us as unintelligent. "Oh, why do you talk funny? Why do you talk like that?" - you know, kind of how people perceive you, and that kind of does a lot. "Well, I do know English. An accent doesn't determine anything."

Chapter 4: Early College Aspirations

I don't think there was a specific event [that led to my early college goals]. I feel like it was always, "Yes, you're going to do that."

[I first started really thinking about college] when my sister entered high school, and I thought, "After this she's going to go to college," and I was like, "Oh, college is really close by." Because you know when you're younger, it's like [college is] ages away - I don't even have to

think about it. But when my sister [started] high school I was like “Oh, wow!” [Since we are close in age] if something was happening to her, I was like, “Oh my gosh, mine is right next door”. So I’d be like, “Oh, my goodness, I am going to be in that next chapter [soon].

So like a negative experience [that motivated me to go to college] was expecting a girl to just you know after a while...stop school, get married, and focus on family life. It’s motivated me to do opposite. You don’t want me to go to college? You’d prefer me to stop here?... Now I want to go further...I want to go to school. I wanna see how you’re going to react when I do get this degree.

Chapter 5: Immigrant Identity and Experiences

I feel like [there were] a lot of obstacles, especially you know not being born here. And my parents as well immigrating here - there’s a lot of things we had to learn or kind of learn over - a lot of things we knew, but we knew it from a Nigerian perspective... Like if I needed help [my parents] not being able to help because they had a different experience or they learned it differently. Things like that were very annoying at times, and them not really knowing the college process in the U.S., because you know college in Nigeria is a bit different...and like financially the way it costs is very different as well, so things like that were often annoying. There were a lot of cultural differences that I had to put up with, you know with accents and just like socially... A lot of that impacted my overall academic experience.

Chapter 6: If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?

I thought about this in the last couple of weeks. I would definitely be in college right now, because a lot of my friends are in college already (just the way the system works...there). I don’t think it would be the best environment for me, since I’ve changed so much, and I’ve noticed that when we went back [to Nigeria] ... I can’t even imagine still being there and the type of person I would have been if I lived there.

A lot of my interests [have changed] ...and the type of people that I met that really had a great impact on my [thinking], and my identity, and what I think of the world, and my perception of the world. Because you know really thinking about it, when I was in Nigeria I didn’t know there were so many people from so many different countries. Now I understand [there are] hundreds of countries, but back then everyone around me looked like me. Everyone was not much different; [there wasn’t] much compromising, ‘cuz now you know [there are] micro aggressions and counter micro aggressions – there’s always something different. Something you have to change - something you have to relearn or something you have to encounter, but I feel like while that can be bad, its good sometimes, because you’re always on your feet - always changing and evolving. But when you’re in an environment where everything is the same - everyone looks like you - it’s not bad, but it doesn’t interest me, which is one of the things I’m interested in: meeting new people, different people, different backgrounds. Imagine if I hadn’t been in a region where there were different people, different backgrounds. That interest would have never developed.

Jasmine

Jasmine is an 18-year-old woman enrolled at LR1. At the time of our interviews, Jasmine is undecided about her major and career goals. Jasmine applied to four colleges. LR1 was not her top choice out of the schools that admitted her. However, because LR1 was near her home, it offered the option to reduce her college expenses by living at home. She chose LR1 primarily for affordability.

Jasmine was born in the Philippines and identifies her race as Asian and her ethnicity as Cebuano. She has a twin sister who is also enrolled at LR1. Her parents graduated from college in the Philippines. Before migrating, her father was employed as a mechanical engineer and her mother worked as a teacher. Currently, Jasmine's parents are secondary school teachers. When Jasmine was very young, her mother moved to the United States as part of an "overseas Filipino worker" program that recruited and trained teachers. While her mother was in the United States, Jasmine remained in the Philippines with her father, sister, and extended family and attended preschool. When she was 5, Jasmine, her sister, and her father joined her mother in Maryland.

Jasmine graduated with a 4.04 GPA from a high school/early college dual-enrollment program. This program, based at the county's community college, blends high school and college courses to ultimately award graduates with a diploma and associate degree in health sciences in four years. During her high school years, Jasmine participated in tennis, ice skating, and a Korean music and culture club. In middle school, Jasmine was in AVID⁷, a school-based college access program.

Chapter 1: Family Background

I was born in [town] Philippines... If I had to describe it, it was kind of like a mixture between city and country. The house that I grew up in was like a collective of my whole family. My aunt

⁷ AVID is a school-based academic program that provides college and career readiness to middle and high school students, specifically targeting students whose identities are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

and my uncle and my grandparents would be on the other side of the house...and we would visit them regularly.

It was a pretty big house, and we had like a gated mansion - not mansion, but it was pretty big. We also had some animals, like goats, and we also had a farm... There were some properties that we owned [as well].

We would always [go to] church... [At school], we had uniforms...a white shirt and a green plaid skirt...I do miss those uniforms. [We were in] a concrete classroom... but the desk and chairs were plastic, and the teacher would sit at the front... I did have some friends. I don't know if they remember me from now, but I think it was a good time back then.

I spent most of my time with my aunt from my mother's side - she was my mom's sister. She would always be the one who took care of us, even though we had (I think in English translations) a "nanny" sorta - who was just someone to take care of us, [but] we would always look to our aunt instead.

Chapter 2: Transition to the United States

It wasn't my mom's choice to live in America. Now, this gets a bit personal, so I'll try to explain in an overall perspective. My dad registered my mom for a program to work in America. I think it's what you call an overseas Filipino worker. Given that she was qualified to do so, she got accepted. She was only supposed to work overseas for a few years.

It's still confusing – the story – to me. I think she basically was accepted to work in America, and she was first stationed in [northeastern city] ...with other people who also got accepted. And I think they went through some training to be teachers... After some time, she moved to Maryland, and she found an apartment and that was the apartment that we grew up in... We came in December of 2008, so it was me, my sister, and my father who came after she did.

I remember it since it was December it was my first time seeing snow and for it to be really, really cold, so our mom gave us winter jackets. And then I think when we first came to the apartment, I don't think I realized it was an apartment. It was just like, "Oh, it's our new home, and we're finally with our mother," so I think that was also exciting. Although there [were] sometimes when I think...my parents would have conflicts, because apparently sometimes we - me and my sister - hadn't realized that she was our mother, because all that time we were separated. So that was kind of like a difficult challenge for my mom when we were growing up... I remember she would visit us in the Philippines, but like sometimes we wouldn't recognize her, so I think that kind of hurt her.

In the apartment that we lived in, there were other Filipinos and my mom befriended them... A lot of people moved out, [but] we kept in touch with them...but the thing is most of them were elderly people...that we didn't really have a connection with - like people our age... I probably didn't get to meet another Filipino [child] until elementary school...I'm still friends with [her].

Chapter 3: Transition to U.S. Schools

I'm not sure really [who helped me adjust]. Maybe my parents? But they also didn't really know. Probably my mom, since she had experienced [the U.S.] for some time, since then she worked in a high school... I would also probably think some people in the school, like probably the teachers or the school staff. But I don't really remember much from my early and elementary years.

I have to say, as a child I kind of developed like a sense to always run away. I think it's sort of like my anxiety around a lot of people and compared to now, it was very hard to talk to people - I would always be soft spoken, and I kind of didn't like the way I talked I suppose, so I would never really talk... [It started] probably somewhere in elementary school.

Since English...is the official language in the Philippines, we kind of already knew how to speak it, and we learned how to speak it more in ESOL, but I don't think [my difficulty talking around others] was that. I guess it was just my social interactions and how I kind of perceived myself [as] a whole I guess.

Chapter 4: Early College Aspirations

I think there were some influences in middle school, since I was in AVID and we discussed [college] in our classes, [and we were] going on field trips to different universities and like finding out [what] we were interested in, but I never really thought that that would be a real thing to happen. I just thought, "Oh, this is something we needed to do for this class." But in high school...we [took] college classes with our high school classes, and in the end we would get like our associate degree. I never probably thought about having to continue after that. Like I just kept thinking, "If I keep doing this [dual enrollment program], maybe I'll be one step closer to being free from it."

My parents, they sometimes talk about their experience in college. My dad specifically, we would talk about like how he...majored in I think mechanical engineering, so he had to...work hard and actually [study] for stuff. I think what really impacted my view in life was how much people are willing to work hard for something that they wanted. My dad wanted to become a mechanical engineer so bad, but now he's a math teacher. I think sometimes he...mentions how he misses [being] an engineer, but he also...didn't want to go through another set of circumstances [to become an engineer in the U.S.]

In the [college prep] class, we always had...assignments where we would research different universities or colleges, and the one university that I had stuck to was Yale... I just chose Yale out of the blue... I think I just kind of liked the name of Yale. And when I did research, I saw that it was a liberal arts college. At the time I didn't know what that was, but I was interested in it... And after my field trip to LRI I also had it in mind... I liked the way LRI presented information...and I also got to see how the buildings looked, and I think that was pretty fun.

Chapter 5: If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?

I always think about this. A lot, actually. It's always like the "what ifs." I guess, I probably wouldn't be this...introverted or just like this reserved. I would probably (because I had my family, well most of my family there), I would be able to connect with people more and [since I know them] I wouldn't be as self-conscious I guess, compared to now. The thing is, there are those moments where I think like if I hadn't come here, I wouldn't know what...my experience being here could have been like... Just a lot of things are better here, compared to probably being there, although I do miss my hometown. Like there's just some pros and cons to actually being here.

Even before I applied to colleges and enrolled in UMD, my dad said that if my sister and I didn't get accepted to colleges in the U.S., we could go to the Philippines for college like our parents did. That's because college is free there. Though, I didn't want that because I would have to adjust to being back in the Philippines. Not that I didn't want to go back, but I would find it difficult to adjust since I haven't lived there in a while. However, if we would have never left the Philippines, I'm not really sure if I would have gone to college. Maybe yes, because I would know more people there that could guide me and tell me how college is from their experience... maybe also have friends that go to the same college and be more connected with my culture, but I'm not really sure. Since the lifestyle in Philippines is much different, I think I would've gotten a job or helped out with my extended family. I probably would've done more community work and connected more with my family if I didn't attend college. Then again, I'm not so sure since this is what I can only imagine from a hypothetical standpoint.

Kassandra

Kassandra is an 18-year-old woman enrolled at Large State University (LSU), where she intends to major in biology. She plans to pursue a career as a pediatric orthopedic surgeon.

Kassandra was born in Cameroon. She identifies her race as Black and her ethnicity as Cameroonian/Banso. She migrated to Maryland when she was 6 years old with her mother and younger brother. Prior to migrating, her mother completed secondary education, took a few classes, and worked different jobs, including hairdressing. Currently, her mother works as a security guard. Kassandra does not know what kind of work her father did previously; she does not have a current relationship with him.

Kassandra earned a 3.4 weighted GPA in high school. Kassandra was a member of two honor societies and the ecology club. She also worked as a manager for the track and field team

She participated in AVID during middle school, and she enrolled in two college access programs during high school. Cassandra applied to 16 colleges and ultimately had a difficult time choosing a school to enroll. She chose LSU because it was in a region of Maryland that was unfamiliar to her (approximately an hour from her home) and would take her out of her geographic “bubble.”

Chapter 1: Family Background

I was born in...one of the bigger cities [in Cameroon]. It was really busy in the sense like - compared to here where it's kind of like everybody on their own - it's really...festive and social. That's what I like about it. You can just go out and you could just meet somebody.

I lived with my entire family, so we were all together... Because I'm the first born on both sides of my mom and dad, but I lived with my mom, and my two grandparents, and her four brothers. And we also lived in this big area where there [were] other families around us. On my dad's side, because my dad lived with his mom and his dad, he lived with three sisters and three brothers, so it's kind of like a big family on both sides. And we didn't live that far from each other, so I could just go back and forth to visit.

We decided to emigrate to the U.S. for better educational and economic opportunities. My grandfather had already been in Maryland since 2003, so we just joined him here. And most of our family members and friends from back home lived in this area.

Chapter 2: Transition to the United States

[Our first home in the U.S.] was nice. It was an apartment, and where we lived didn't really have apartments - everybody just had their own houses, so [at first] I didn't know that the whole building wasn't ours... We had that one door, and I was just like, “Oh, what's the other door?” I didn't know other people really lived there until I had friends, and they would live in the other doors.

I lived in that apartment complex for 14 years... I still try to go back; it's kind of nostalgic, but it was really nice because that's where I met all my friends I have now...so I've had the same friends for 18 years basically.

Where we lived was like 50% Hispanic and then 50% other minorities. My mom knows all their parents... It's really a strong bond. And that's really nice, us all being minorities; it kind of gives us something else to talk about. When we're in school, we compare like, “Oh, we had the same food or we have different names for the same food.” ... I went to my friend's graduation party and when I was eating the food they said, “Oh, how do you know what [it is]?”

Chapter 3: Transition to U.S. Schools

I think the most [thing] I disliked is the fact I didn't know the American school system was so

different from foreign countries, because when I came here...I was six, but in Cameroon the class I was in went up to like third grade, so [when] we came here I already knew what they [were learning] ... They put me back in first grade. We were kind of confused. I was in class, and I already learned all of this, and then my mom was like, "We just have to...it's according to age." So I was a little bit mad because...I understood it... In first and second grade, I was just letting time fly by, in my opinion, because I already knew the majority of the material.

Another thing was when I first came, they put me in ESOL...but I spoke English because Cameroon has two parts - it has an English and a French side, but I was from the English side... They would always be like, "English as a second language", but I was like English is the only language I knew. I quickly realized [my placement] was because I had a really thick accent, so my English didn't sound the same as their English. So I was in [ESOL] for two years.

I would honestly say myself and maybe like my friends [helped me adjust to new school]. My mom...was very new to the idea of field trips...and stuff like school lunches. She was used to packing [our lunches]. [It] was kind of funny because I think after a while, she did stop packing lunches...I don't think I ever got bullied, but I just kind of felt like people were always looking at the kind of food I [brought] for lunch, and I think she kind of realized [she could] stop packing lunches. And stuff like movie night, she [would] take us, but she didn't really understand, so [I'd] have to explain it to her. [There were a lot of school things] I had to figure out for myself... I learned things on my own...it was a lot to figure out at like [age] seven.

Chapter 4: Early College Aspirations

We started doing college trips in like fourth grade, because [at] my school we always talked about [college]. We had College Day, and we would have people coming for Career Day, and they would follow up with information about colleges. I remember in fourth grade all my friends knew - if somebody asked me, they'd just tell them for me, "Oh you know she wants to go to Howard."

I kept hearing the name [of Howard University], and I researched it... When I worked with the college advisor [in high school] the most important thing was I wanted to go to an HBCU. And I already had Howard in mind since like middle school or elementary school.

In middle school I joined AVID, and my [teacher was] very intent on talking about colleges. Our end of year activity [was to] do a presentation on a college, and [we had to write] a formal letter asking them for information, and a lot of people would get information sent back. I know one of my friends wrote to a school in Michigan, and the school sent him a T-shirt and pennants. I was always told college should be at the forefront [of my mind].

I don't think my mom was really strict on going to college... She wouldn't really know about after school programs and college programs. I'd have to tell her, and as soon as she hear[d] "college" she would just sign up and just take me... I think my whole family was like that. My grandpa wasn't going to drive me anywhere if it was not school-related... We would go to this thrift store because he wanted to buy electronics. I'm walking out with like four books - every single time. So anything I did for school they wouldn't really mind at all. They would actually

encourage it.

My friends play[ed] a really, really, really, really big part in [me going to college] ... I don't think there's...one person who's not either going to community college or a big university. Ever since elementary school, me and my friends were just always at the top of the class. If it wasn't me, it was JT, or MJ, or Dee-Dee. JT was salutatorian of his high school. Dee-Dee was in the top 10%, so it was always like we all pushed ourselves.

Chapter 5: If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?

I honestly think I still would be going to college. I think I still would, because my family (all my uncles) have like done something past the regular required school, and my grandpa was a police officer...he was also really pushing school. So I think I still would have been in college...just like in a different situation. When it comes to schooling and stuff, like all the pushing is coming from myself, not from really any outside sources, so I still think I would have wanted to go to college. I don't think [there would be] like a really big difference.

Mercedes

Mercedes is a 19-year-old woman enrolled at LR1. Mercedes was born in Europe. Her parents, both college graduates, moved from Mexico to Europe and then to a mid-Atlantic U.S. city because of her father's job. They moved back to Mexico when Mercedes was a toddler. Mercedes spent most of her childhood in Mexico and identifies as Mexican. In Mexico, Mercedes's father worked in the business sector and her mother worked part-time as an educator. When Mercedes was 12 years old, the family migrated to a large metropolitan area in [southern state] to pursue a "better life". When Mercedes was 17, her family left [southern state] so that her father could pursue a job opportunity in Maryland. Her father continues to work in the business sector, and her mother is a COVID-19 tracker. Mercedes has a younger brother and sister who were born in Mexico; they are now both teenagers.

When asked about her family's income level, Mercedes indicated that her parents were "not rich" and "more middle income". Although Mercedes did not meet the operational definition I used for "low-income," she met the other eligibility criteria and was very eager to

talk about her immigrant experience and path to college. After consulting with my dissertation chair, we agreed that I should interview Mercedes.

During her high school years in [southern state] and in Maryland, Mercedes was involved in clubs and activities focused on pre-business careers, international studies, French language and culture, dance, and school government. Mercedes also worked as a babysitter, dog walker, business intern, and as a sales assistant at a clothing store. Mercedes enrolled in a for-profit college access program in 9th grade that primarily served Latinx students. After moving to Maryland, she continued to participate remotely. Mercedes graduated from high school with a 3.4 GPA.

Mercedes applied to eight colleges, including colleges in Indiana, Texas, and Florida. However, while waiting for college decision letters to arrive, Mercedes realized that she wanted to attend college close to home and her family. LRI became her top choice college because of its proximity to her family and affordability. She intends to major in business and lives on campus.

Chapter 1: Family Background

In Mexico, family culture is very big. We would see [my grandparents] every single week, and every single Sunday our whole extended family - cousins and parents and everyone - would reunite and have a family dinner... I have ten cousins on one side of my family, and I have seven on the other one, [and] I am the oldest girl in both of them... And basically our cousins were [our] best friends also...they would come hang out. My family has been really important to me throughout my whole entire life. We've always been really close.

In Mexico, [my dad] had a good job but it was really hard to find opportunities, and he wanted the best for us. So he decided when we were finally starting to grow up that he was going to quit his job and get one with a worse income in the U.S. just so we could grow up and have more opportunities and better life. It also had to do a lot with security, because Mexico is not the most secure place. The communities are all gated; you need a lot of security there. And he actually got really lucky because his...boss was like, "Oh, you've been working [with us] for a really long time. You've helped us start this company... We're going to start a new project. We're going to send you to [southern state], and you're going to start up our company [there]...and you're gonna build connections between the Mexican companies we're representing and U.S. companies."

Chapter 2: Transition to the United States

When I found out I was moving, I was extremely angry with my parents. I did not even want to look at them. I would tell them, “You’re ruining my life!” over and over again, ‘cuz I didn’t know any differently. I loved my family and didn’t want to leave them... I loved my friends, I loved my school, my community. Mexico has really insecure parts and not many opportunities for people, and it’s just hard to grow up there. And that’s something I did not realize back then. So I was very angry, because it was all I knew and it was just my normal.

[In my new community] there were some Hispanic people - not really from Mexico... definitely mostly White, but there was every culture there. Not many Mexicans at all, especially since you may think in [southern state] a lot of Hispanic people are Mexicans. But no, there weren’t many Mexicans that much at my school. It was more like Hispanic people from other cultures... I actually kinda struggled with that because it was right when Trump was trying to become president, and in [southern state] everyone’s really Republican and really open with their feelings, so that’s something that made me a little bit insecure back then... And I pushed my culture away a little bit when I first moved, because it was just like - I don’t know, I was at a new school and all these things, so I did do that [to fit in].

Chapter 3: Transition to U.S. Schools

So I took a test to see if I needed English classes before going to school. They said I was right at the line, so they told me that it was up to me. So I decided not to [take English classes] just so I would push myself a little bit harder.

I was really excited to start school... In Mexico, you don’t get a good education, if you do public school...the teachers don’t show up. It’s really bad. So in Mexico, if you actually want a good education you have to go to private school. And I was at a private school in Mexico and going into a public school in the United States, and my friends in Mexico, were like, “Oh, eww, you’re doing public school!” So I was really confused on what that was going to be like, but I was interested... and when I got there, I liked it. It was really weird, because I...dressed up in this outfit that I really liked, and in Mexico [the outfit was] very popular, and I [realized that] no one had any of the things I had there... It was intimidating.

Also, the language thing was a barrier in the beginning... So my school in Mexico was a British school where they taught us English, but my English was not that good. My teachers were British, so we were taught in a British way. And I hated speaking because [of] my accent... in the U.S., everyone had a perfectly beautiful American accent... And it was hard for me to really transfer things, because usually...I didn’t have to speak out of the blue in English, and [in the U.S. school] it wasn’t like that, so it was really hard for me. I had to think about it in my head like 10 times before even saying something. I would practice whispering, “Can I go to the bathroom?” before asking my teacher.

Chapter 4: Early College Aspirations

I always assumed I would attend university in Mexico because it’s the path my parents took. I

didn't know of any other way.

The college process in Mexico is just completely different... You barely even need to apply. Your grades really don't matter that much. All you need to have is the money for the university and you're in. So my parents didn't really stress me about it or pressure me...because that's all they knew also.

People talk a lot about colleges and universities here in the U.S., but I would just kind of ignore it, because I didn't really understand it... I don't think I realized that I actually had to go to college in the U.S. until late sophomore year of high school or even the beginning of junior year. I realized late... I feel like [I] would have looked at [my] GPA in a different way or worked harder for it or tried different things, and I just didn't, and that's what stressed me out so much... You just don't go into college like that. There's a whole process to it that I was completely blind to.

My parents were also blind to the process, but...people would tell them...that college is coming up. So my parents actually were referred to this [program] called In4College that they heard about [from their Hispanic friends], and they were like, "Oh, we're gonna sign you up..." They signed me up my sophomore year of high school... I remember the first day I went I was literally crying - telling my parents I didn't want to go and that it was a waste of time... They just made me go. And [the instructors] would make us start looking at colleges, but I would look at [schools] and they wouldn't mean anything to me. So I would get a little bit of work done in that class but [after] class was over, I didn't think about it.

Chapter 5: Immigrant Identity and Experiences: Excerpt from Mercedes's College Essay

In the summer of 2015, Donald Trump launched his bid for the U.S. presidency by criticizing Mexican immigrants. His words reignited an ongoing debate over Latin American immigration. At the same time, I was a [12-year-old] girl preparing to move from my beloved home in [large city, Mexico] to suburban [southern state]. When Trump referenced the people Mexico was sending, I had to worry... was he talking about me?

I had lived in [Europe], [mid-Atlantic city], and Mexico City, yet this change felt different. As the plane in Mexico took off, I felt clouded with anxiety thinking of the life awaiting me in [southern state]... I was leaving the nation that shaped me for a country where my nationality seemed to be under attack. My brother sat quietly next to me on the plane as I turned to him and said, "It's for the best, it's America." I was not sure who needed to hear that more, him or me.

Moving to [southern state] meant acclimating to a different language, environment, and school system. I thought it was crucial to make local friends to adapt to the American lifestyle, nevertheless I worried that cultural differences would interfere... Some of my new classmates had strong opinions on immigration. Trump's statements villified Mexican immigrants, insinuating that we were all undocumented criminals. My friends often made jokes about me being "illegal." I would laugh the jokes off, yet their words reinforced the idea that there was something inherently illegitimate about being a Mexican in America.

One day my family decided to throw a traditional Mexican Christmas party known as a posada. I reluctantly invited my best friend... I was unsure about [her] reaction, but as soon as she arrived and saw the spread my mother prepared, her eyes filled with delight. "These are tamales, tortillas, pozole, and guacamole," I explained as the aroma woke our senses. She smiled when she noticed the backyard was lit up and filled with prayer candles, Nochebuena plants, and a piñata. Guests danced spiritedly while the mariachi songs drowned in their laughter.

Peering through the eyes of my friends elucidated the beauty of my own culture. Sharing my lifestyle with my friends helped me become closer to them and adapt to [southern state]... During these past four years, I have learned responsibility, competitiveness, and discipline through American culture. The combination of both cultures continues to enrich me with resilience and a multicultural perspective. Diversity is my strength, yet it wasn't always. Many people struggle socially with prejudice like me, while others also experience economic and legal consequences. I now know no one should feel ashamed or dehumanized due to their origin, so the pride I have in my heritage and the assets it brings to my personality are unshakable.

Chapter 6: If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?

I think I would be more ignorant. I think that it's helped me...learn a lot of things. First, the application process I never would have had to go through. [In Mexico] it's just your parents pay money [and] you go to a good school. And if they can't, then you don't. So I would have ended up going to the same school that my cousins are going to right now... [In the U.S.] I learned a lot about hard work and how it truly does pay off. So I wouldn't have learned that.

And I also wouldn't have learned -- there's not much diversity [in Mexico]. It's almost all Mexicans. So that's something else about the U.S. [that I like]... the U.S. really appreciates that [diversity]... The U.S. has developed so much faster than other countries have, and... here it's just like so much more diverse... I feel like everyone learns from personal experiences, and [the U.S.] just brings so many people with all these different experiences and backgrounds together, and I feel like you can just learn from one another so much more that way.

Rico

Rico is a 19-year-old student at Small State University (SSU). Rico graduated from high school with a 2.7 GPA. While in high school, Rico was a school store employee, a tutor, and played lacrosse and soccer. Rico applied to eight colleges and was awarded a full scholarship to attend SSU, a school he previously knew very little about but to which he was encouraged to apply by his former school counselor, Ms. B. SSU is approximately 90 minutes from Rico's home and family. Rico lives on campus. Rico intends to major in Spanish Language and Culture

and pursue a career as a translator.

Rico was born in El Salvador and identifies his race as White and his ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino. Since Rico left El Salvador when he was eight months old, he has no memories of his birth country. His father migrated to the United States first. Later Rico, his two older brothers, and his mother joined his father in [southern state]. Rico's family moved from [southern state] to Maryland when Rico was a child.

Rico's parents went to high school in El Salvador but did not graduate. He is unsure of his parents' occupations in El Salvador. Rico's father is currently a carpenter, and his mother is unemployed; however, when Rico was a child his mother worked in fast food restaurants. His older brothers are now 24 and 20 years old. The eldest brother attended a community college then transferred to an Ivy League university in the northeast where he is now a senior. The middle brother completed one year at a community college, decided to leave higher education, and now works in construction.

Chapter 1: Family Background and Relationship

I was born in... a small town in El Salvador... We lived in a pretty small house. It was me, my two older brothers, my mother and father, and we also lived with my grandmother on my father's side, and her daughters and sons were also there in the house.

[When I think about family] I definitely think about my parents and my two older brothers, just because my parents have [done] so much for me – pretty much everything they do is just to benefit me and my brothers... I just love them so much... [Growing up] I'd definitely say [I was closest to] my brothers, because we just had a pretty good bond. We did a lot together and...I followed in their footsteps – like, they would lead the way.

I feel like other families don't have [as close a] relationship and being able to [spend time] with my parents and my brothers really makes me happy. I know it makes them happy, and it just makes me feel good. Talking about my family...is really a positive thing for me and for them, so that's why I ultimately ended up writing [my college essay] about that topic.

Chapter 2: School Transition

In elementary school, I was in living in apartments, and it was really diverse...a pretty good mix

of different races. So I hung out with a lot of African American kids, Asian kids, White kids...that's pretty much my whole community. And the same thing for school; it was really diverse there too.

Actually, I do remember a lot from when I first started school. It was a really challenging time for me because I grew up speaking Spanish, and then [went to] an elementary school that was all English. It was definitely really hard to get used to that. Like going to class, I would hear the teacher speaking, but I had no clue what she was saying.

I would get pulled out during class to do this program called ESOL... Because of that, I was actually really falling behind on classwork, because as kids were moving forward with writing [and] math subjects, I was getting pulled out during those crucial times for ESOL... So that was definitely a really hard adjustment I had to get used to.

I could play catch up, but even when I caught up, they would still like move ahead... It was definitely stressful and, like in a way, kind of embarrassing, 'cuz I kind of thought of it as maybe I'm not like smart enough or I'm not at the same level as these kids; that's probably the reason I'm getting pulled out. But yeah that's definitely what my feelings were...definitely stressful [and] really embarrassing.

I would definitely say it was those ESOL teachers I had for elementary school [who helped me adjust]. I pretty much knew nothing about the language – nothing about the culture – and they would kind of...they would definitely educate me on what was going on, how to do this, how to do that, and make sure I was doing good and properly adapting to the school system and everything around [it].

Chapter 3: Early College Aspirations

My parents definitely pushed me to go...to college, because they told us, "The reason we're here is for you guys – for you guys to get the education we never got and to get those benefits that we never got." So college was definitely one of those things that they wanted us to go into and succeed in life, and that definitely shaped my mindset about going there.

I would say in middle school, there was a lot of...ideas going [around] about college – [that it] isn't always the thing you have to do. There's always other options like trade [school] – [being a] mechanic, building homes, and stuff like that... But no one really convinced me...that there's a better option than college.

[When I was a kid] there were actually a few [colleges] I heard a lot about, like Ivy League, and that really caught my attention because I heard [they were] top schools – definitely schools you want to shoot for. And I heard about schools in California, like Stanford and University of Southern California – that they were really good schools. Those were the main schools that caught my attention at that time.

Chapter 4: Immigrant Identity and Experience: Excerpt from Rico’s College Essay

Hiking on trails through the forest that once you reach the end you are rewarded with a view of the Potomac River and rock formations is how I spend most weekends. I don’t do this alone. I go on these hikes with my entire family. For as long as I can remember, my brothers and I, along with our parents use nature as a way to connect and bond as a family and get away from our schoolwork, jobs, and responsibilities. Being outdoors and exploring natural landscapes in Maryland and the surrounding area is what I have grown accustomed to. Places like [government parks] where we can camp, fish, bike ride, and swim have helped to define my childhood and who I am today. Different from most of my friends who spend the weekends watching sporting events or doing online gaming with friends or participating in extracurricular activities like club sports, I didn’t have the same opportunities. My parents are undocumented, and my father was the only one in our family who could work. Trying to raise a family of five on one income was extremely hard. So money could only be spent on necessities not recreation. Ever since my father was a teenager growing up in El Salvador, he would find great interest and passion for what nature had to offer. It was how he spent his time with his friends and wanted us to value nature in the same way. So instead of my parents working or doing things with other adults, they spend their weekends with me and my brothers outdoors, exploring the nature trails around our house, or driving to places to hike, or go camping or fishing.

Chapter 5: If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?

Oh, it’d be really different! Just because if I stayed over there – like I said, my parents, they didn’t graduate high school, so I don’t think I would have graduated high school. I think I would have done the same thing as they did – just like... Whatever job they did I’d probably be doing that same job, and higher education was definitely not a thing over there, so I probably wouldn’t be doing that. My life would have been really different. I wouldn’t know English, I wouldn’t know a lot of the friends I have here, for sure. It would just be a completely different life if I [had stayed] over there.

Thidar

Thidar is an 18-year-old woman enrolled at LR1. She intends to major in international relations and pursue a career in law or humanitarian aid. She was born in India and identifies her race as Asian and her ethnicity as Burmese. Thidar and her parents moved to the United States when Thidar was 6 years old. They first moved to a northern state as part of a refugee resettlement program, then her father got a job in Washington DC. Her father established a residence in Maryland; Thidar and her mom joined her father in Maryland where Thidar started second grade. Pre-migration, her father completed some college in Burma and worked as a

journalist. Her mother went to school until 5th grade in Burma and has taken English classes in the United States. Currently, her father continues to work as a journalist and mother works as sushi chef. Thidar has no siblings, and most of her extended family is in Burma.

Thidar earned a 4.46 weighted GPA in high school. During her high school years, Thidar cofounded an Asian American student organization, interned at a congressman's district office, and mentored and coached elementary school girls. Thidar applied to eight colleges; she was awarded a full scholarship to LR1 which led her to choose this institution. She lives on campus.

Chapter 1: Family Migration

I was born in [small city] India, but my parents moved to [large city in India] when I was a couple months old...I attended this private school [there], and I was very fortunate, because I know a lot of...Burmese refugee kids didn't have the same opportunities as I did, but growing up, I would say, I had a pretty good education. The school that I attended not only taught in Hindi, but they also really heavily incorporated English, which eased my transition when I moved to America later. My parents really valued education. That was always their number one priority.

My dad [went] to college, but he didn't graduate...my dad was always heavily involved in student activis[m] and I guess rising up against the military, so he joined thousands of students and protest leading groups, and it just got really dangerous for him especially after the 1988 massacre that happened to monks and other students that challenged the military party. My dad just knew that it wouldn't be safe for him to stay [in Burma]. So when he was 19 he fled to [small city] which is in India, but it's very close to Burma...he joined this rebel group that helps refugees cross into Burma and resettle, so he basically lived out in the woods for while....My mom fled Burma, not because of her safety. It was just that she only attended school until fifth grade, so she just didn't have the opportunity to get proper schooling.

So my mom and dad they decided that, rather than just staying in India, it would be better to just apply as a refugee status to another improved nation. Although I was getting a really good education [in India] they just worried that...I wouldn't be able to attend good colleges, so they decided that while I'm still young they might as well just move....[Their choice for relocation] was between [European country] and [northern state], and so my dad was worried that European country would just be very inconvenient, because you have to learn an entirely new language and my dad was pretty good with English...so he decided that [northern U.S. state] would probably be better.

Chapter 2: Transition to the United States

We got placed in this townhome and right next door were these three American girls, who I quickly became friends with....I grew up in an environment in India where kids...(I guess it's just

different cultural expectations) that kids really followed and listened to their parents....I just remember being very shocked in first grade when our neighbors' mom yelled at them...and like [my] friends yelled back at their mom! ...I remember telling my mom about that. And my mom was like also a bit shocked, but she was like, "Don't let them influence you!"

The Burmese community in [northern state] is very, very warm and [they are] genuine people that just want the very best for you...perhaps because there's just a few of us out there, so we had to look out for each other, but [in Maryland] I found that people are very competitive. I don't know, I was very shocked by the difference, just because [in Maryland] it's like this Asian stereotype of, "Oh, what school did your kid get into?" ... just always making things very competitive. And I feel like as a [Burmese] community, we should be...less compete[tive] and just be more happy for one another, but [in Maryland] I would say that we're not as connected as much [as the Burmese community in northern state].

I wouldn't say that I had a language barrier...like obviously there were some issues of communication here and there....I know there's like I guess a stereotype that immigrant kids that come always have to go through ESOL, but actually due to India just heavily emphasizing English because it is sort of their second language, just because of their colonial history...the communication barriers were a little funny because it wasn't like I couldn't totally understand them. It was more...because I was taught British English so the pronunciations and the letters and all that was a little challenging at first, but I got acclimated to that very quickly.

The main person that helped really eased the transition was this ESOL teacher...she was Burmese, but she taught ESOL specifically for students coming from Asia...so she helped me out with a lot of stuff and my mom got really close to her. She also provided advice for my mom and my mom and her would have these weekend dinners, and so it was interesting seeing my teacher come to my house Saturday nights. They would just be talking about everything, and she would tell my mom all these ways to help me get adjusted to school and also how my mom can get adjusted to the culture [in northern state] as well. Through her influence I just really understood American school life better, and my mom got a better sense of the difference between [private school in India] and the school that I attended in [northern state], so I guess that teacher really helped both me and my mom.

My mom was also taking night English classes, so what she would do is she would assign me her own version of homework, so it was like one hour at the kitchen table just doing math...So my mom since she only attended until fifth grade, she always talks about how she regrets leaving school early even though [it was a] financial burden...She regrets it, but also in some way she had no choice. I guess that's one of the big reasons why she always makes sure I get the best education possible.

Chapter 3: Early College Aspirations

I don't think I like ever had that moment [when I decided I wanted to go to college]. I just always knew that I would go. There was that understanding ever since I went to school between my parents and I that I would be going to college. I guess like one of my memories of just the discussions and all would be when I was actually in India and my [parents] and I...went to this

all-girls college. I think they had like a meeting or something there, and they brought me there. It was also where Aung San Suu Kyi, who was the State counselor for Burma and the head of the [National League for Democracy] party, attended. So my mom was telling me about how [Aung San Suu Kyi] attended this all-girls college, and then they were also talking about this close family friend who is thinking of enrolling here, and I just remember thinking, “Oh, this is really cool I want to do something like this.” I think I’ve always known that I would go to college; it’s just I didn’t know where.

My parents [would] tell me to always have a target of what I want to do. I just remember on a car ride with our family friends, they asked what I wanted to do, and I think by that time I said I wanted to be a lawyer, so my dad was like, “Then you better go to college.”

Even though [my dad] didn’t know much about college here, he would talk to his coworkers who did get diplomas here and just always make sure he could provide me with the best assistance. I just remember him and I going to Georgetown University and him opening doors to a random building and acting like a tour guide, and I’m like, “You can’t do that!”.... I’m really grateful for everything that my parents have done to really make sure I have all the knowledge...about college.

Chapter 4: If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?

I think I still would have gone to college – whether that’s in India or somewhere else. I think that’s always been part of what my parents expected for me....They’ve invested too much into my academics for all to go to waste, but I think as for what I would be studying, I think my mom would have pushed me into the STEM route if I’m being totally honest....In India, STEM education is really prioritized, and I think I was very surprised by other options beyond being a doctor when I got here, because in India they really, really focused on mathematics and science.

I did change my major from history to studying government and politics [with a] concentration in international relations, but I also recently just added journalism, so I guess I’m a little bit in some ways closer to my dad. I think [I’m]choosing those two [concentrations] as a way to bring me closer, not only to my parents, but also to being Burmese, because with everything that’s going on in Burma right now, I do have a strong desire to use my education to go back to Burma and help, whatever that type of help may be. But I do want to understand global politics to one day go back and help my own country.

Trixie

Trixie is an 18-year-old woman enrolled at LR1. Trixie’s intended major is computer science, and she plans to pursue a career in the technology sector. Trixie was born in China and identifies her race as Asian and her ethnicity as Chinese. Her father moved to the United States to pursue employment opportunities when Trixie was an infant. She is not sure what kind of

work her father did in China, but she knows her mother worked as a teacher and later started a fashion business. When Trixie was 5 years old, she and her mom joined her father in [northeast state]. The family then moved to a [southern state] for a short stay, then moved to Maryland when Trixie was entering 5th grade. Currently, her mother is a nail technician, and her father is a chef. Trixie has an U.S.-born sister who is 9 years old.

Trixie earned a 3.96 GPA in high school. During her high school years, Trixie was involved in the Asian club, environmental club, and two honor societies. Trixie applied to seven colleges and enrolled at LR1 where she was accepted into the honors college and awarded a partial scholarship. Prior to her acceptance, LR1 was a top choice for Trixie because of their highly ranked computer science program. LR1 was also preferred because her parents had a high regard for LR1; their friends had children who graduated from LR1, and they heard good things about the school. Trixie lives on campus.

Chapter 1: Family Background

I [lived in]...a small village where in my memories everything was super big, and I would run around in different places... I think the most memorable...memory I have when I was a kid is that I hated to go to kindergarten... They threatened us... On the first day I was like super excited for school... I loved school when it first started, and they were going to give you immunization because that is good for the child, but as a kid [I] hated needle. So from that moment the first day, it's ruined for me.

I mostly lived with my grandparents as a child. I know my mom was around on and off because she was working, and my dad was in America. [He left China] because of job search. He talks about back in the days there wasn't a good job to support a family, so he had to come here when I was like one [year old] because he couldn't find a good paying job.

I don't think my dad [initially] planned to migrate. He just went [to get] a good job and earn enough money and just come back, but then after that I guess like he found its better off for the whole family to come here with him... Maybe he just missed the family too much.

Chapter 2: Transition to the United States

My parents had to go to work, so I...mostly stayed with my babysitter, and there's a lot of people who were also children of immigrants so we would like stay together... The babysitter would

take care of us until our parents [came] back.

[We were] in [northern city] until fourth grade, and then [we] moved to [southern state] [for eight months] ... The job that my parents got was not such a high paying job to support a family, so they decided to move again [to Maryland] ... [I was] at the end of fifth grade, I think.

It was a very nice community. Everyone was super nice and friendly toward me, but the thing was that I didn't go out as often, and I'm more of an introvert or a nerd, I would say... But my neighbors were super nice.... There's definitely different races [in the community]. One of my [distant] relatives also lived there. He was in high school back then, and I was in fifth grade... [My relatives] they're super smart. They just make you feel like you should work harder... When I first moved here, I was left in their house until my parents came back... My cousin babysat me for three years.

Chapter 3: Transition to U.S. Schools

I liked the school... The first day when I came back home it was like three or something, and I asked my mom, "Do I have to go back to school again?" because in China the students will come back home at 12 for lunch, and they would go back to school again.

I don't think I have an issue with adjusting as much, because when I moved [to northern city] I was in Chinatown... and school was like more of a Chinese school...and most of the teachers were also Chinese, so I don't really have a problem with not knowing the language, which left me with a longer issue because I'm speaking Chinese in school too. So it actually took me longer to learn English... I didn't pass [ESOL] until fifth grade... At the end of the school year, you're given a package where you can take the ESOL test. I don't think I ever passed it because I was always in the program.... How I passed it...I didn't take a test.... I was moving [to Maryland] and starting school in fifth grade and the [elementary school teacher] had a talk with me, and she's like, "She's good. She don't need ESOL." We just had a small talk, and she's like, "This girl is fine."

Chapter 4: Immigrant Identity and Experience: Trixie's College Essay

A soft sobbing voice was coming out from a child sitting in the hallways all alone, holding a book in front of her. The book she was holding was a book with the letter "L" written on the upper left corner of the cover. The wall behind her back was full of laughter and joy. That child knows that she doesn't belong there, or at least it will be hard for her to fit in. But there was nothing she could do at that moment besides to figure out those alien texts written in the book that she held; the more she stared into it, the more sweat came out of her small hands. Finally, the bell rang, and the children rushed out of the classroom, filling up the hallway. At that moment the little girl had lost track of how long she has been in the hallway, 10 minutes or half an hour, but to her, it felt like an eternity.

That child was me, 7 years ago, when I transferred to a different elementary school where there were no Chinese teachers or faculty. It was the first time that I had realized how left behind I was compared to kids of my age. Near the end of my first day in this new school, my homeroom

teacher asked me out to the hallway and gave me a thin book labeled "L" and told me to read it to him. It took me forever to even read the first couple of sentences of the book, and I was afraid the more I stared into the text the higher chance I would burst into tears. The teacher must have read my mind and told me that I could have as many times as I wanted and to tell him when I was done. I was glad that the teacher wouldn't be standing next to me but at the same time, I knew I couldn't finish reading the book.

I sat there holding back my tears and trying to understand each word before I realized that the hallway was no longer quiet. I don't remember what happened after that, I might have talked with my new teacher, or maybe went straight back home. Whatever the case is, I knew at that moment I wanted a change and a chance to catch up.

Now recalling the memory, I am grateful that I sat there in the hallway for the rest of the day. I know it was better than walking back in the classroom and telling the teacher that I couldn't do I – that I am not ready for this level yet. If I did that the outcome would have been different; I might still be living in my little world hoping that one day a miracle would happen. Hoping that I would be smarter, hoping that I would get better grades than Cs and Ds. But I didn't [and] because of this incident I decided to work harder toward a better grade. The As and Bs I am getting now are not because of a miracle. They are what I got from working hard.

Chapter 5: Early College Aspirations

The idea of [going to] college first came to me in middle school when my parents started talking about it more... I think it was in 7th or 8th grade.... My parents were like, "You have to go to college." I guess that's one of the reasons [I thought about college]. And my babysitters' daughters were in high school [when I was a kid], and I heard them talking about college and stuff, and in my brain I was like, "You go to college and you can get a job." And I think that just like implanted in me that I have to go to college if I want a job... Sadly, they didn't go to college. They dropped out... Going back to the job thing, because they dropped out they don't have a good job right now. And it was making me know more that I needed to do good. I need to better prepare for my future. I feel sorry for them.

[When I think about me choosing to go to college, it's like] I need to come here, instead of like I wanted to come here, because instead of like normal people where [going to college] is not necessary, I feel like it's a necessary thing to do if I want a better job and living in this society.

Chapter 6: If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?

To be honest, I don't know. My mom definitely said that I might not be able to go to college – or not as good of a college – because of my family situation... [The cost of] tuition is definitely one of [her reasons], but it's not as expensive as [tuition] in United States. [Also] in China, there is a placement test and colleges [only look at] your placement test. They don't look at your essay or your activities or teacher recommendations. Maybe I don't believe her. I'm not that good of a test taker, so maybe [I would not attend] so good of a college. [But] I'm smart, so maybe I could make it in.

Summary of Profiles

This chapter provides a narrative profile of each participant, emphasizing their family background, move to the United States, transition and adjustment experiences, and their early thoughts about going to college. Most participants arrived at age 5 years or older and shared vivid memories of their life pre-migration, for example, their family home; presence of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins; and school experiences. Two participants (Azalia and Rico) left their home country when they were infants. As a result, they did not have memories of their birth country but heard stories about their family home and community from their parents and other family members. Participants indicated that their parent's migrated to pursue either employment opportunities or opportunities for their children's well-being or education. For example, participants spoke of their parents' desire to seek "a better life," to offer "the best for us," or to ensure that their children received "the education we never got." Alex, Azalia, Jasmine, Rico, and Thidar all referenced their parents or grandparents as sources of motivation to do well in school or seek a college education. They expressed a desire to "mak[e] my parents proud," "honor [grandparents]," or offer "payment toward everything they did for me." Azalia spoke about being "insanely appreciative" of her family's efforts and feeling "a little obligated to give back to them," even though she also finds intrinsic value in pursuing higher education.

For most participants, early thoughts about college-going occurred in middle school and were prompted by seeing older siblings apply to college, hearing teachers talking about the benefits of higher education, or visiting college campuses with teachers or with family. Two participants, Cassandra and Thidar, indicated that their first thoughts about college occurred during early childhood. Cassandra recalls first thinking about college while participating in her elementary schools' College or Career Day activities. Thidar remembers a college visit with her

parents when she lived in India; at that time, she was about 5 years old. Most participants referenced familial/ethnic capital that supported their early college aspirations and academic success, such as older siblings, extended family members, coethnic peers, and church members. Two participants, Amanuel and Mercedes, participated in cultural identity-based college access programs that offered college preparation and guidance in a coethnic context. Eight participants were enrolled in either a college access, academic magnet, or dual enrollment program that strengthened their early aspirations for higher education.

In addition to parents, extended family members, and school personnel, participants' predisposition toward higher education was shaped by resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). For example, Chioma, Azalia, and Alex described a desire to counter race and gender stereotypes by developing a positive academic and college-going identity. Chioma spoke about her determination to go to college as a way to prove wrong those who hold sexist attitudes: "I want to do it because you said I can't do it." Two participants (Trixie and Azalia) were also influenced by the experiences of negative role models (Lockwood et al., 2002), that is, people they knew who did not go to college. Trixie and Azalia attributed those individuals' subsequent socioeconomic challenges to their limited education which further motivated their own college goals. Finally, some participants (Alex, Rico, and Trixie) perceived college-going as critical to attaining future success. They identified higher education as the only or the best mechanism to get a "better job," "succeed in life," or to "build generational wealth."

Participants articulated how their experiences as an immigrant have influenced their identities, shaped their personalities and perspectives, and shaped their college predisposition. Their experiences as immigrants helped foster faith, resilience, a strong work ethic and determination, family bonds, a value for education, an appreciation for diversity and

multiculturalism. Thidar and Alex also spoke about how their experiences as immigrants have also influenced their career and civic goals. For example, Thidar has chosen to study international relations and journalism “as a way to bring me closer” to her Burmese heritage and “help my own country.” Alex wants to “encourage more Hispanics to seek higher education.”

Each participant also imagined what their life would be like had they not migrated to the United States. Most of the women stated without doubt that they would now be in college, referencing family expectations, values, parental investment, and their own love for learning as reasons. In contrast, Rico and Amanuel, the only men interviewed, felt that they would have followed the path of their fathers. Rico would have left high school and entered the workforce, and Amanuel would be in the military or possibly in jail for resisting conscription.

Using participant profiles as a backdrop, the next chapter will focus on their collective experiences with college research, college applications, financial planning, making sense of college decision letters, and choosing a college to enroll. I present a cross-participant thematic analysis of the 10 participants’ experiences to explore how immigrant students of color engage in these activities, make sense of significant moments and turning points, and utilize various resources to navigate their path to college.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of participants' paths to college by addressing the following research questions:

- (1) How do low-income, first-generation immigrant students of color engage in the college search and choice process (e.g., “go about” accessing college information, developing their choice set, completing college applications, and making the college decision)?
 - a) What tools and resources do students use?
 - b) Who assists them and in what ways?
 - c) How are they making sense of their experiences, significant moments, and turning points and strategizing in this process?
- (2) How do various forms of capital and community resources shape students' college choice process?

I examined data across narratives to find experiences that were common across multiple participants, as well as those that were divergent and unique. To address Research Question 1, I present themes that explore how participants first learned about specific colleges, developed a list of colleges to consider, and determined which institutions to apply to. Themes also address how participants navigated entrance exams and the college and financial aid application process. Finally, I present themes that capture how (after receiving college decisions) participants made sense of their options, weighed costs and other factors, and ultimately decided to enroll in their current institution.

It is important to note participants were in March of their junior year when the COVID-19 global pandemic emerged, and the United States went into mass quarantine and lockdown. This sociohistorical event impacted every aspect of participants' lives. Though no participant

reported experiencing the death of a loved one or other COVID-19-related trauma, their narratives capture the psychological toll that social isolation took on participants' mental health. The pandemic also influenced their college planning in significant ways, which will also be addressed in this chapter.

Although this study's primary focus was on college search, application, and decision-making, this chapter begins with how various forms of capital shaped participants' predisposition toward college, which Hossler and Gallagher (1987) regard as the first stage of the college choice process. Themes are presented in the following three sections: (a) Predisposition: I Always Knew I Would Go to College, (b) College Search, Entrance Exams, and Navigating Applications, and (c) College Decisions. In each section, I convey the range of external resources used in participants' precollege experiences, including the role of parents and family members, friends, educators, and web-based tools.

Predisposition: I Always Knew I Would Go to College

Family Expectations: Education as the Reason for Migration

When asked, "When did you first know you wanted to go to college?" most participants could not recall a specific and noteworthy moment. Instead, they indicated they "always knew," "never thought otherwise," or "it wasn't questioned." As Trixie explained, "You're growing up, and college is just the next step." When probed further, it was evident that participants' aspirations were grounded within their immigrant family's experiences, namely parental expectations for school achievement and college-going, parental involvement and investment in their education, and nonparental family expectations for higher education.

Parental Expectations

All participants indicated that, from a young age, their parents communicated a clear expectation for doing well in school. For the majority, these expectations explicitly named higher education as the goal. Parental expectations were often nested within tales of pre-migration family life and educational pursuits. Amanuel heard stories from his father, who grew up in a farming family in Eritrea. Amanuel's grandfather insisted that his sons go to college instead of following the farming tradition because it would bring greater freedom and more job options. As a result, Amanuel's father and uncle were of the first generation in their family to pursue higher education. According to Amanuel, "The whole point of the story was to just get educated and your life will be that much better, so that thought was always in the back of my head." Azalia's mother, who grew up in a poor community El Salvador, talked candidly about the struggles she faced being the first of her generation to go to college. However, within these stories of struggle, Azalia's mom emphasized her motivation to pursue a different path through advanced education and ultimately achieve her credentials to become a teacher.

Five of the 10 participants had parents who, before migration, had either taken college classes or earned a postsecondary credential; however, only three participants' parents were able to leverage their credentials to obtain related positions in the United States. Thidar's father worked as a journalist, Jasmine's parents were high school teachers, and Mercedes's father was employed in the business sector. Except for Mercedes, participants came from low-income households⁸. Therefore, even participants with college-educated parents were unable to reap full financial and occupational benefits of credentials. Parents may have experienced downward mobility in income or occupational status but not in their academic expectations for their

⁸ determined by eligibility for the Pell grant or free or reduced meals in high school

children. Parents spoke almost exclusively about their children's college futures and made early and frequent investments in their education.

Family narratives also included tales of poverty and limited opportunity, even for those whose parents with college experience. Thidar's father's education in Burma was disrupted by political instability and violence, making it unsafe for him to live there. Thidar's mother was also affected by the economic instability in Burma, and she told stories about how life circumstances led her to drop out of school:

My mom . . . only attended [school] until fifth grade. She always talks about how she regrets leaving school early, even though [it was a] financial burden. . . . I guess that's one of the big reasons why she always makes sure I get the best education possible.

Nested within her mom's story of regret is a desire for Thidar to complete what she was unable to achieve: a quality education beyond primary school. Similarly, Alex, Trixie, Rico, and Amanuel heard family narratives of missed or limited educational opportunities in their homeland. These experiences seemed to fuel their parents' hopes for their children's education in the United States.

Family stories about education fostered participants' early predisposition for college. Thidar described having an "understanding" with her parents that she would go to college. One of her earliest memories was a visit with her parents to an all-girls college in India, sharing:

My mom was [saying] how she expects me to one day go to college. My dad was also talking about how the [all-girls] school is so great and how a lot of his friends' daughters would try to apply but it's competitive. He also told me to never be dissuaded by competition. . . . I should never give up. So I think my parents have always really encouraged me to go to college ever since I was little.

Thidar's parents not only communicated their expectations early on (clearly and with certainty); they also described college admissions as a competitive process, especially if she wanted to go to a reputable school. Furthermore, Thidar's parents explained that going to college would take determination and hard work and encouraged her to never give up. Similarly, Azalia expressed that there was an unquestioned "understanding" in her family that she would go to college, "The messages were mostly subliminal. 'Oh, when you go to college, when you get a job, when you provide.' It wasn't 'if', it was 'when.'" In Azalia's case, this expectation was framed within a narrative of mobility. Azalia's family expressed certainty that her college education would not only help secure Azalia's future but also put Azalia in a position to "elevate her family" to "the next level."

Other participants' family members expressed similar ideas, believing that education would translate to socioeconomic mobility for the family. They framed college-going as a way to live a better life, achieve employment and financial security, and support their relatives. As Alex stated, "[My parents] always taught us that since we're poor our education is really what's going to make us stand out . . . [it's] one of the only ways we can build some generational wealth for our family."

Six participants recalled their parents explicitly stating they moved to the United States for their children's education. Rico recalled his parents saying, "The reason we're here is for you to get the education we never got." Similarly, Amanuel's parents often told him, "You came here for education," which kept the idea of college "in the back of my mind." For this reason, he grew up knowing that "college was just always a next thing after high school."

Two participants recalled their parents specifically linking college attendance with occupational interests, namely becoming a lawyer. Thidar remembered a conversation when her

father asked her what job she wanted for her future. When she replied that she wanted to be a lawyer, he responded, “then you better go to college.” When Azalia shared her goal of becoming a lawyer with her father, he not only emphasized the need for higher education, but he also advised her to attend a particular university:

I was probably around 13, and the idea of becoming a lawyer was suddenly really interesting to me. And my dad was like, “Oh then you’re going to want to go to Yale” and I was like “Yale?” And I started associating Yale with lawyers.

In a later conversation, Azalia’s father also mentioned Princeton as a good option for her. Azalia guessed that her father, who was a truck driver, probably heard about these schools from his supervisors because they went there. These early ideas stuck with her, and when she was in ninth grade, she recalled searching for information about Princeton.

Parental Involvement

Beyond holding college expectations, participants spoke of specific ways their parents were involved in their education. Parents fostered early learning skills at home, attended school meetings, paid for tutoring, and monitored her grades. For example, Thidar recalled having a private tutor who was fluent in Burmese, Hindi, and English when they lived in India. She described tutoring as an investment her parents made so she could have the “best education possible.” Chioma recalled her parents “being very strict about school” and told a story about misspelling her name when she was a child in Nigeria. “My mom made me write it like 1,000 times. . . . That’s why I’m really good at spelling,” she explained. After moving to the United States, Azalia’s mother did what she could to give young Azalia a head start on school learning. Azalia shared:

She was trying to get me integrated into the American society as soon as possible, so I wouldn't have to be behind. And so my mom, even though they were from the dollar store, we would get vocabulary cards, and I would have my weekly vocab, and I knew all my ABCs and numbers. So that put me ahead of the rest of the students in the class.

Azalia regarded her mother's home tutorials as giving her an advantage in the classroom and setting her on an early path for school achievement and college readiness.

Kassandra was the only participant whose parent did not specifically name college as an expectation. Instead, Kassandra's mom broadly encouraged her daughter to set goals for her future and diligently work toward them. Kassandra shared:

I don't think my mom was really strict on going to college. She really emphasized . . . hav[ing] a plan. [She said] "If you don't go to college, what are you going to do? You can't just not do anything."

Her mother encouraged Kassandra to be an active agent in determining her own future. As Kassandra was exposed to career and college readiness activities in elementary and middle school, she began to see a future for herself in higher education. Her mother approved of and supported her interest. For example, when Kassandra asked permission to enroll in college prep programs, her mother would agree and complete the necessary paperwork: "As soon as [my mom] heard the word 'college,' she would sign up and take me." Even though Kassandra's mom did not explicitly communicate an expectation for higher education, she facilitated Kassandra's participation in college prep activities throughout her precollege schooling.

Non-Parental Relatives' Expectations and Support

Most participants' family members spoke positively about going to college and normalized college aspirations. When asked about her early thoughts about going to college,

Alex indicated her older sister played an important role starting at a young age. Alex's sister was 2 years older and one grade ahead of her in school. They had a close relationship, and as early as elementary school, they challenged each other to get good grades. Alex shared,

I wouldn't say she really pushed me to college . . . but having that connection, that person that was like right next to me definitely kept [me] on track. Because I feel like if she hadn't been there, it would have definitely turned out differently. But we both had the same idea engrained from our parents and the same goal regarding them. You know, like make them proud.

Alex and her sister, who was a university sophomore at the time of this study, had a shared goal of pleasing their parents by doing well in school and ultimately pursuing a college education.

In addition to Alex, three other participants had older siblings who went to college and, early on, modeled college-going behaviors. From a young age, Amanuel, Rico, and Chioma observed and noted the steps their older siblings took to put themselves on a college path. Rico explained how his brothers' course-taking prompted his early interest in taking advanced classes:

[My brothers] would always be going into high-level classes and programs. I'd see that and think, "Okay, if they're doing it, that means I should definitely look into that and do that as well. They're like role models for me."

As early as middle school, Rico was motivated to seek academic challenges based on his brothers' examples. Amanuel shared that even though he was aware of what college was at a young age, he did not realize that going to college required careful planning and preparation until his sister, who is 6 years older, began applying: "That's when I realized, there's a whole process, so it was always in the back of my head." Both Amanuel's and Alex's older sisters also proved to be impactful role models and advisors throughout their college choice process.

Participants also mentioned other relatives and family friends who emphasized college as a desirable future goal. Uncles, aunts, and parents' friends would often ask about school, grades, and what colleges they were interested in or highlight important tasks that could help them prepare for college. Azalia's aunt, who worked in building services at LR1, took Azalia to campus each year for their annual community festival. These memorable experiences heightened Azalia's early college awareness, offering direct interaction with a vibrant campus environment. In Rico's case, going to college was a shared goal among his cousins, one that they would talk about and encourage. He shared:

A lot of my cousins and uncles and aunts would give us that idea that "Oh yeah, you guys need to go to college. That's such a good thing for you guys." [My cousins and I] would always have these talks like, "College is definitely something we want to do . . . for our parents." College was a big goal for us.

Multiple members of Rico's family viewed college-going as an opportunity of which Rico and his cousins should take advantage. In turn, Rico and his cousins set an early commitment to higher education as a way to fulfill their parents' dreams. Participants' early aspirations fostered in a familial context were later affirmed by educators and other community members, strengthening their early college mindset.

Role of Educators and Peers in Predisposition

All participants recalled having teachers who spoke positively about college. Alex's teachers "always phrased it as a positive," and Thidar's teachers "went off the assumption that we'll go." Teachers highlighted college-going as a worthwhile goal important to future success. Although most participants remember college-affirming statements from their middle and high school teachers, Rico was one of the few participants who recalled a conversation with an

elementary school teacher that convinced him college was important. Rico shared the following exchange that occurred during an assembly where fifth graders were registering for middle school classes:

They gave us a sheet, and it showed honors classes, like honors English or honors U.S. history. And I asked the teacher, “What does honors mean?” “Oh, if you take this honors class it [will] look good for your middle school records and your high school records and eventually good for your college records too.” And then when I heard the word “college,” I asked for more details about it. And that’s when they filled me in. “Oh yeah, college is a big thing you definitely want to do.” They’d tell me all the benefits . . . and all the positive reasons I [would] want to go to college. They told me that “College is the thing that without it you’re gonna . . . struggle with your life” When I first heard that, I thought, “College is definitely the thing for me.”

This interaction persuaded Rico that going to college was beneficial and important to his future success. Even though college enrollment was years away, the teacher explicitly connected middle school and high school achievement with college opportunity. His parents already lauded college-going as a worthwhile goal, and by emphasizing that middle school achievement was an important step on the path to college, the teacher’s explanation added more detail to the plan Rico had formulated within his family.

Similarly, Kassandra and Jasmine recalled significant school moments that enhanced their college awareness. When asked about their earliest thoughts about college, Kassandra and Jasmine recalled middle school visits to college campuses with their school’s AVID program⁹. As a result of these visits, they were able to associate college with a physical place and not just

⁹ AVID is a school-based academic program that provides college and career readiness to middle and high school students, specifically targeting students whose identities are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

an idea. In fact, impactful memories of these early visits later influenced their decisions to apply to specific institutions. Jasmine and Kassandra's AVID assignments also fostered an early understanding of college costs, geographic locations, and academic programs.

Alex came to understand that college was a “tangible place and location”—not based on a campus visit but by watching movies that depicted college life. “Seeing college portrayed, it all seemed super exciting to be there having fun with friends,” she stated. Azalia also became excited about college life by watching movies where it seemed like students were having the “time of their lives.” These media portrayals allowed Alex and Azalia to visualize the social aspects of college, which broadened their college awareness and heightened their interest in campus life. By the time participants entered high school, most seemed to hold a positive image of college life (based on campus visits or the media), and most knew the names of a few institutions, most commonly Ivy League schools and LR1 (the state's flagship public institution).

As participants transitioned to high school, they indicated their high school teachers also communicated clear expectations for students to pursue a college education. Chioma explained that her high school teachers “cultivated her interests” by offering career and college advice and building confidence in her abilities: “[my teachers had] the most impact with getting my head into the college [mindset], like ‘I’m going to college. I can do this.’”

Another resource that strengthened participants' college mindset was their interactions with peers and upper-level students. They emphasized the importance of getting good grades, joining clubs and organizations, and putting forth concerted effort in their studies if they truly wanted to go to college. For example, in ninth grade, Amanuel learned about a school-based college prep program from upper-level students. They encouraged him to attend lunchtime meetings and join the program when he was eligible to do so. Azalia, who was admitted to a

competitive magnet program in ninth grade, was in classes with high-achieving, college-aspiring peers. Because of the program's college-going culture, Azalia "did not even consider" options other than higher education. However, she also recognized there was a big difference between her classmates and her, namely, race, class, and residency status. She perceived her classmates as coming from "mostly White privileged families." Azalia stated, "There wasn't anybody there that was undocumented, so there was just no question [about whether they would go to college]." In ninth and 10th grade, Azalia stated that it was "pretty easy" for her to hold herself to the same college expectations as her magnet peers. However, she later realized how her social identities, especially her DACA status, would greatly constrain her college aspirations.

The Role of Church in Predisposition

From an early age, some participants were also embedded within faith-based networks that further affirmed their family's college expectations and strengthened their college mindset. Chioma attended a West African church where her older friends described college as a place to become more independent from one's parents and to meet new friends. Therefore, in addition to the academic benefits of higher education, Chioma learned about the personal and social aspects of going to college from coethnic peers in her congregation.

Alex's family was not heavily involved in church, but they periodically attended mass. She recalled the priests encouraging families to promote education in their households:

I do remember the priests saying, "Push your children toward education," since it's a Hispanic church, so it's all in Spanish, and a lot of the people who go there are like immigrants or children of immigrants. They kind of do emphasize education and making your children be better than you. I wouldn't really say [church] had a giant impact on me

though, since it always aligned with my own [college] goals. So it's not like it really shifted my mindset; it just kinda reinforced it.

Similar to Chioma, Alex heard positive messages about going to college in her church, a colingual immigrant community. The priests emphasized education as a tool for success and mobility, which further affirmed the messages she heard from her parents.

When he was in eighth grade, Amanuel learned about a summer college prep program for East African students at his Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Even though he was too young to apply at the time, he made note of the program and shared, "I already had friends that were a part of it . . . so I [thought] I'll apply and see if they accept me." In this regard, participants not only received messages in their coethnic faith community that aligned with their family's value for higher education, they were also exposed to role models and resources that also supported their predisposition.

As participants reflected on their childhood years, they each recognized multiple individuals who encouraged higher education: parents, aunts and uncles, educators, peers, and church members. Thidar's statement reflects most participants' experiences: "I don't think anyone ever really discouraged me. I think everyone in my life who had had a key influence has all just pushed the idea of college and its importance."

Attitudes Anchoring College-Going Within Greater Purpose

As a result of their family and social environment, participants developed positive attitudes and excitement for college at a young age, as evidenced by a love of learning, determination, resilience, and an internal motivation for college. For example, peers or extended family members sometimes questioned Rico and Alex about their interest in going to college. Alex expressed that these inquiries did not affect her because she had her "path set."

Rico stated that “no one convinced me that there’s a better option than college.” These attitudes were anchored by a greater purpose for pursuing a college education, which I describe in the following themes: (a) college as mobility mechanism, (b) college as a way to honor parents, and (c) resisting stereotypes and overcoming barriers.

College as Mobility Mechanism

From an early age, participants drew a connection between doing well in school, going to college, and later success. This connection was either explicitly stated by parents and teachers or embedded in family stories and messages. This connection may have also been made by observing the experiences of others and attributing their life challenges to limited access to education. For example, as a young girl, Trixie heard her babysitter’s daughters talk about the importance of college for future employment. It was a conversation that “implanted” in Trixie that college was a “necessary thing to do” if she wanted a job. When Trixie was older, she observed that her babysitter’s daughters did not have “good jobs.” Trixie attributed this to the fact that they “dropped out of college,” which she described as “kinda sad.” She felt sorry for them, and she began to view college completion as a way for her to avoid the same fate. Trixie shared that the daughters’ situations “made me know that I need to do good. I need to better prepare for my future.”

Similarly, Alex’s parents expressed that a college education would lead to “good” jobs. Alex’s parents told their daughters they did not want them to do hard, manual labor. Alex’s parents threatened that if she and her sister did not take their studies seriously, they might end up cleaning toilets like her mother, and she shared, “We didn’t really like to clean. We still don’t,” she said with a quiet laugh. “But that was the big threat. And it always made us think, ‘No, we’ll

continue. We can do it.” Alex came to view education as a tool to access “good” jobs, livable wages, and work that she might enjoy.

Azalia viewed her college education as a long-term investment that would allow her to assist her family financially in the future. From an early age, she wanted to work to help her mother earn income that could support the family. Azalia remembered helping her mother clean houses and care for her client’s children. In these moments, she felt compelled to help her mother in whatever way she could. Azalia shared:

I couldn’t really reach to do certain things, but I could vacuum, I could clean up the toys, or I could help her take care of the children. That had a lot to do with that feeling of being useless in my house. . . . I feel like the driving motivation for me was helping my mom. I just needed to have money to help her out and my grandma in El Salvador. She’s so poor and I [wanted to] send money.

Young Azalia could not work like her parents and adult cousins, so she began to feel useless in contributing to the family and household. “I was the only one not working. I’m not providing,” she observed. Azalia’s feelings of guilt prompted her to think about her educational pursuits as her “job” and embrace “school as a part of my personality.” “This is what I have to do to kind of get my family on another level,” she thought.

Azalia’s predisposition toward college was also influenced by her view that college was an opportunity she was uniquely positioned to seize. As a DACA recipient in a mixed status family, Azalia recognized college-going as a privilege. Azalia mentioned her frustration hearing her cousin, who is undocumented, talk about wanting to go to college: “My cousin literally wanted to get a future for herself and isn’t able to. I have the opportunity. I have to seize it.” Azalia felt like she offered a “glimpse of hope” to her adult cousin. Because of her DACA status

and her early proclivity toward academics, Azalia's family identified her at a young age as "the one" to use her education to "bring everybody up."

College to Honor Parents

Several participants' college goals were explicitly motivated by a desire to follow their parents' wishes and make them proud, honor their families, show appreciation, and pay their parents back for their sacrifices. For example, when reflecting on her first thoughts about wanting to go to college, Alex realized that her initial interest came from a desire to please her parents:

Up until high school, I didn't actually know what I [wanted to study]. Going to college was kind of just about getting a degree and about proving myself and making them proud—doing what [my parents] always led us to do.

Even though Alex later identified computer science and engineering as potential college majors, her early aspirations were to simply go to college and earn a degree in something to prove she could fulfill her parents' vision for her future. Relatedly, Jasmine felt that following her parents' expectations was "the right thing to do." She trusted their advice because her parents had more life experience than she did. Jasmine also felt that if she did not go to college, she would worry her parents and grandparents, as she explained:

I think I was always stressed or felt the pressure of needing to go to college, since that was like the kind of the expectation built, and I didn't really want to bring [my parents] down. . . . And I guess my grandparents, in a way. Well, they didn't really talk about college (or not that I recall), but I kind of want to honor them in a way. . . . They probably didn't have much expectations for me, but . . . I think in my conscience I want to not make them worried.

Even though Jasmine's grandparents did not communicate clear expectations for her to go to college, she cared about what they thought of her and viewed college-going as a way to honor them.

Amanuel, Rico, Thidar, and Azalia seemed to view college enrollment as a way to show appreciation for their parents' hard work, resources, and sacrifice. At several points in her narrative, Thidar described her parents as making "investments" in her education, from applying for refugee status so she could go to a good college in an "improved nation" to financing tutors and private school tuition. Thidar's language suggests a belief that her college degree would be the payoff her parents hoped for. In fact, she stated that her parents "invested too much into my academics for all to go to waste" and expressed gratitude for all her parents did to ensure she went to college.

Azalia expressed being "insanely appreciative" of everything her family has done. When discussing her motivation for college, she emphasized that though she felt higher education was beneficial for her future, she hoped to leverage her degree to support her family as a form of repayment: "I feel not necessarily obligated, because I know that I want to do it, but a little obligated to give back to them, but at the same time it's going to make me happy."

Rico, who has two college-educated brothers, fervently talked about his parents' commitment to making sure their sons had opportunities for education beyond what was available in El Salvador:

The reason my parents are here is because of us, and everything they do is for our benefit. I always felt like going to college would kind of be like my payment toward everything they did for me, and I always felt like if I didn't [go to college] I kind of like failed them

in a way, or didn't meet their expectations, because they did all this just for us and never for them.

Participants were expressive, passionate, and even tearful when speaking about their parents' migrations and dreams for their futures, indicating deep respect for their parents and the opportunities their parents' migration and childrearing provided them. Participants' emotional expressions suggest their college goals were more than just part of a practical plan for an interesting career and a high salary. Pursuing a college education was a deeply personal choice firmly grounded in their family's migration experiences and hopes for their futures.

Resisting Stereotypes and Overcoming Barriers

Alex, Azalia, and Chioma spoke about developing their college aspirations despite gender or ethnic stereotypes that imply otherwise. Azalia stated that higher education "wasn't really a thing" in her Latinx community, so when she shared her college goals with others, it put her in "an awkward situation." However, she would respond with conviction that she was going to go to college. She also realized that a part of her drive comes from seeing people in her community struggle: "seeing other people's experiences not getting their education probably pushed me forward."

Alex noticed that a lot of the "Hispanic" kids in her high school were not planning to go to college. She attributed that trend to college "not being pushed" in many Latinx households. Alex wrote in her college essay,

It was not until much later that I realized how impossible a college degree was to many people of my own ethnicity. I saw many other Hispanics give up on the idea of college because of the challenges they faced and the sight of all their friends and family giving up.

Alex recognized the societal barriers that made getting a college education seem out of reach for her Latinx peers. She stated in her essay a desire to encourage more Hispanics to seek higher education.

Chioma also wrote her college essay about societal barriers that disadvantage women in Nigerian culture, a culture “that values men more than women.” During our interview, she elaborated on her essay by explaining some Nigerians hold expectations for young girls to focus on their education, but only up to a point and then shift their focus to getting married. This gendered expectation has pushed her to do the opposite and make education her priority, as she explained:

You [know when] someone tells you to do something and then you don't want to do it? It's kind of like the forbidden fruit analogy. I want to do it because you said I can't do it. I've always been like that. I've always wanted to do stuff because people told me not to do it. Just because I wanted to prove people wrong and it's not been the path that people wanted me to take, so it's motivating me in that aspect. You don't want me to go to college? You'd prefer me to stop here? That's really interesting . . . now I want to go further . . . I want to go to school. I wanna see how you're going to react when I do get this degree, when I don't focus on family life, and I'm not stopping here.

Alex, Azalia, and Chioma's motivation is in part, a form of resistance to stereotypes and social norms that, for many talented precollege students, limit their visions for their futures. These participants leveraged their resistance to set high aspirations and ultimately achieve their college goals.

Pressure to Succeed in a Foreign System

Although participants' predisposition toward college was largely experienced as a positive, participants also experienced stress, anxiety, and pressure from an early age to achieve their long-term goals. For instance, although Amanuel felt going to college was the best choice for him, he worried about disappointing his parents by not getting into a "good" college or being able to pay for it. Similarly, Jasmine felt the pressure of needing to go to college because that was what her parents expected, and she did not want to "bring them down." Thidar also experienced some early anxiety because she knew the U.S. system was more complicated than the education system her father experienced in Burma and shared:

[Thinking about college] got me extremely nervous and pressured, because both my parents never went through the American college process. My dad literally just submitted his name to the application and got in on the same day. [The U.S. process] is definitely much, much more competitive, intense, and just more complicated than what my dad had to go through.

Thidar realized that although her parents had high expectations for her to attend college, they might not be aware of how hard the process might be for her. Mercedes expressed similar concerns. Even though their parents attended college in Burma and Mexico, respectively, Thidar and Mercedes became increasingly aware they would have to navigate a more competitive process than their parents, one that was unfamiliar to them because they were immigrants. Their anxiety heightened as they researched colleges, prepared for college entrance exams, and completed applications.

Summary

All participants grew up in family environments where their parents set high expectations for their education—specifically, expectations for them to attend college. Parental expectations were framed within the context of pre-migration family history and missed or constrained educational opportunities. Parental expectations were reinforced by instrumental behaviors and involvement such as monitoring grades, visiting college campuses, and enrolling their children in college prep programs. Parental expectations were reinforced by older siblings, uncles, aunts, and cousins, as well as educators, peers, and church members who highlighted college-going as a positive aspiration. Collectively, these experiences sparked participants' predispositions, nurtured an early college mindset, and promoted college-going behaviors, such as doing well in school and seeking advanced courses.

As participants received overwhelming positive messages affirming college aspirations, they developed internal and external motivation for higher education that anchored college-going to a greater purpose. Most participants viewed college as the *best* or *only* way to achieve “success,” which was perceived as getting a nonmanual labor job, earning a “good” salary, and helping their families financially. Several participants' college aspirations were also explicitly motivated by a desire to make their parents proud or pay them back for their investments. Other participants viewed earning a college degree as an act of resistance: a way to push back against negative racial and gendered stereotypes or a way to seize opportunity in a system that blocks access for noncitizens. Although all participants developed a strong early predisposition based on one or more of these motivations, some began feeling pressure and anxiety about meeting their family's expectations. As the time to apply to colleges grew closer, most participants

experienced anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty that was amplified within the context of a global pandemic.

College Search, Entrance Exams, and Navigating Applications

Going From Fantasy to Reality

During elementary and middle school, most participants first learned the names of “fancy sounding colleges,” such as Ivy League institutions. Alex explained, “Like obviously I think everyone probably thought ‘Oh, I’ll go there,’ but [they were] just like placeholders in my mind, I guess.” As participants entered high school, they heard about more colleges from siblings, teachers, and peers. Participants also began to assess their academic and career interests, where they might want to live while in college, and their economic circumstances. They compared these factors to college “fantasies,” and some participants realized that certain college dreams might be out of reach for them. In this study, three participants shared pivotal moments that occurred early in their college search. These moments revealed disadvantages that were previously unknown to them, circumstances that would dramatically influence their college plans.

Azalia and Rico’s early college goals were to attend an institution out of state, a vision that Azalia described as her “fairy tale.” However, they were both noncitizens, and as they began to search for college information and learned more about costs and funding, they realized the limitations their residency status presented. As Azalia explained, eventually, she had to come to terms with letting go of her “fairy tale”:

I would see in the movies – everybody packs up their bags, went to another state, and had the time of their lives. And I was like “just let me have this fantasy.” ...Realistically, I wouldn’t have been able to afford it. And it was going to be so inconvenient because a lot

of my family can't travel. And I [wondered] how am I going to get [home] if there's a family emergency—if something happens with my documents. I [realized] this isn't going to work out. But in the back of my mind, I was like, "This is my fairy tale dream school," You know? It was just nice to have.

As a DACA recipient and Maryland resident, Azalia was eligible for in-state tuition and state grants. However, Azalia realized that because she was a noncitizen, she would not be eligible for federal student aid, money that could be used at out-of-state schools. Additionally, because her family members were undocumented, they would be at risk if they traveled out of state to take her to campus. For these reasons, Azalia deemed going out of state as unrealistic. Even with DACA, her college options would be constrained.

Rico dreamed of going to college in California, sharing, "just because I thought California would be a really cool place to be, far from home so I can do my own thing." But in junior year, he realized he would not be able to afford the cost without the assistance of federal student aid. However, Rico did not express the same disappointment that Azalia did. Rico had older brothers who were undocumented and enrolled in community college. His oldest brother later transferred to an out-of-state Ivy League institution where (at the time of this study) he was in his senior year and preparing to graduate. Even though Rico narrowed his focus to more affordable schools, perhaps based on his brother's example, he was able to see a path to an out-of-state college in the future. On the other hand, Azalia, who was an only child, did not have a model to follow, making her "fairy tale" seem unattainable. This caused Azalia to reflect on her early commitment to school success, and she began to feel that her efforts were all in vain. She shared:

My whole life revolved around school. That was going to be the stairway. And everybody was talking about this thing called “scholarships.” I thought, “That’s perfect! I’m gonna do amazing in school. I’m gonna be the best student. That way I can get free money to go to school.” And then I couldn’t because of my document status. Like LR1 doesn’t offer merit scholarships for DACA—and a lot of the schools I was applying to didn’t. I was like, “So my hard work was for nothing?” Devastating.

Not only were her options for out-of-state colleges limited based on her residency status, Azalia learned she would not be eligible for most institutional scholarships at public state schools either. Her dreams of earning a scholarship, a goal she had worked hard for her entire life, were dashed. Azalia also experienced confusion and frustration that, in the eyes of the federal government, she was a foreigner, not deserving of the type of assistance citizens had by birthright. Her voice started to tremble as she shared:

I came here when I was 2, I feel mostly American, you know? I have [American] viewpoints. So, it was just hard to face. This one thing in my life.... If you were to write all my qualities on a paper, this one thing [my status] has all this power?

Azalia struggled to make sense of her identity as an American and the legal liminality (Menjívar, 2006) of her DACA status. She realized that even though she had certain advantages (e.g., temporary protection from deportation) as a DACA recipient, her status as a noncitizen would still limit her power and agency to attain the “fairy tale dream school” experience she fantasized about. At several points in her search and choice process, Azalia experienced discouragement and frustration as she contended with structural limitations of her status.

During her junior year, Mercedes also experienced a pivotal moment that made her feel underprepared for the reality of her college future. Mercedes, who moved from Mexico to the

United States when she was 12, was under the impression that she would return to Mexico for college. Her parents graduated from college in Mexico, so she just assumed that she would return to Mexico for college “because it’s the path that my parents took . . . I didn’t know of any other way.” When she realized her parents planned for her to attend college in the United States, she began to worry. She compared the complexities of the U.S. college admissions process to the process her parents and cousins experienced in Mexico:

The college process in Mexico is just completely different. You barely even need to apply. Your grades really don’t matter that much. All you need is the money for the university, and you’re in. So my parents didn’t really stress me about [college preparation] because that’s all they knew also.

Mercedes expressed feeling like her immigrant family was at a disadvantage because they did not know how the U.S. system worked. She also felt regret for not working harder in ninth and 10th grade and taking college planning seriously. In fact, Mercedes shared that when she heard people talk about U.S. colleges and the process to apply, she found it confusing and ultimately ignored these conversations. Although Mercedes’s perceived lack of preparation caused her great stress during her junior and senior years, she was also determined to figure out the steps to follow to put herself in a good position for U.S. college admissions. As a result of these pivotal moments, Azalia, Rico, and Mercedes realized that they were at an early disadvantage due to their residency status, family income, or limited understanding of the U.S. college admissions process. They had to let go of what they thought their college future might look like and face great uncertainty. As participants began researching colleges, they altered their vision quite a bit to accommodate their new reality.

Identifying Priorities, Preferences, and Narrowing to Choice Set

In this study, most participants began actively searching for college information in their junior year. Jasmine and Kassandra were the exceptions. As part of the AVID middle school curriculum, they researched careers, majors, and colleges and visited campuses in middle school. As a result, both participants had an early college knowledge and choice set (list of colleges of interest) that they drew upon throughout their college search and application process.

When researching colleges, most participants seemed to have a clear priority that guided their search. Alex, Amanuel, Jasmine, Rico, and Trixie prioritized affordability. This led Trixie, Amanuel, and Jasmine to focus their search on public universities in the state because they learned that, as residents, they would be eligible for reduced tuition. Jasmine explained her thought process: “In my mind, I had to be close to home because out-of-state colleges would be expensive, and I didn’t want my family to pay that much.” Alex and Amanuel also prioritized affordability and had a preference to live close to home. However, they did not limit their search to state institutions. Alex reasoned that her search should include “schools that give the most financial aid,” even if they were out-of-state. Similarly, Amanuel learned from his college prep program that, in some cases, private and out-of-state schools might offer funding that might make it possible for low-income students to attend. His strategy was to consider applying to these schools knowing that if admitted, he would compare award letters and determine affordability at that point.

Though all participants were aware affordability was important, some participants focused their search on other characteristics, such as campus environment, majors, and student life. Chioma explained that she looked at whether schools had a program she was interested in: “I wanted to major in international relations, and most schools didn’t even have that in the first

place so it kind of made it easy to pick which schools to [consider].” Jasmine, who spoke candidly during interviews about having social anxiety, tried to assess what she called a school’s “mental costs.” She described “mental costs” as how stressful a college’s environment might be and her ability to manage her mental health in that environment. Kassandra’s preference for attending a historically Black college or university (HBCU) influenced her search activities. She recalled a significant moment that solidified her preference. In ninth grade, Kassandra enrolled in a precollege program at LR1, a historically White university near her home. As part of the program, she spent the summer before her sophomore year living on campus and taking college prep classes. Kassandra, whose high school was predominantly Black and Latinx, recalled a moment when she entered the campus dining hall. “It was really kinda scary,” she explained. This experience seemed to be her first being in a predominantly White environment—an experience that made her know she wanted the “familiar” feel of an HBCU. As participants’ search evolved, they identified other preferences like campus size, student-teacher ratio, and cocurricular programs and resources.

Azalia was the only participant who did not have a definitive priority in mind as she commenced her college search activities. However, while using a database to search for colleges, she began to explore, set, and refine her interests, as she explained:

College Board has a little system where . . . you kind of filter the colleges you’d be interested in with different stuff—like if you wanted to go to a big school or a little school, so I got some ideas from there. And then I realized that I wanted to be in state, so I started looking strictly at schools in Maryland.

Azalia, who came to understand that out-of-state colleges might not be realistic considering her circumstances, relied on College Board’s searchable database to explore her preferences and find

state universities that matched her preferences. In this manner, the filtered presentation of various college characteristics guided Azalia's assessment of her needs and priorities.

Financing College: Learning About Costs and Considering Affordability

When asked at what point they first learned about college costs, participants indicated that they always knew it would be expensive. However, most did not realize how much college actually cost until they started seeking college information online. As participants saw prices for tuition, room, and board, they were "blown away." "How do people afford this?" thought Thidar. Kassandra noticed a \$20,000 difference in tuition between a school in Maryland and a school out-of-state. This observation prompted her to narrow her choice set to save money. "I always knew that I was going to stay in Maryland," she explained.

Azalia experienced a pivotal moment of insight during a college workshop that further chipped away at her college fairy tale. During the workshop, a current college student, who identified herself as low income, shared the following advice: "Before getting your hopes up about an expensive school, consider whether your family can actually afford that college." Azalia was certainly aware her family could not pay all her college costs, but the student's advice hit home, and she started looking for information on tuition, room, and board. The numbers shocked her into reality and she shared, "It was devastating. I was so sad. I was like 'No way! You mean even if I get in, I can't actually go?' Horrible!" This realization was sobering, but it also prompted her to prioritize affordability in her college search.

When thinking about how they might finance college costs, all participants were aware (at a young age) that scholarships or financial aid could help them pay for college. As early as elementary school, Amanuel remembered his parents linking school achievement with college funding by telling him, "You gotta' get good grades so you can get a scholarship." Most

participants were also confident their parents would assist them with financing college and they would ultimately have the total funding they needed. However, some participants were hesitant to include loans as part of their financing plan. Cassandra's and Mercedes's parents warned them to avoid taking out loans unless they "have no other options." Mercedes's father told her that taking out a loan is "the worst thing" a student can do, because "you will be in debt for your whole life." To reduce need for parental contributions or loans, participants planned to apply for scholarships and government aid when they were eligible.

Web-Based Resources Used During College Search

Most participants expressed comfort with accessing college information online and identified a few websites as helpful in developing their choice sets. They used Google searches to find information on college majors, costs, and acceptance rates. Though "Googling it" was a popular strategy to find college information, Cassandra found that Google could only help so much and shared:

Everyone always says "Oh Google is there, and Google's free," but you can't use it if you don't know what you're searching for. So if you search "SAT requirements," you're going to get SAT requirements, but you don't know for which school for which program.

This quote shows the limitations of an internet research. Though Google searches yield a long list of links to sites with a wealth of information, the value of the information received is highly dependent on the user's search and processing skills. In Cassandra's case, she did not always know the most effective phrases or search strategies to find the information she desired, and at times she found it hard to relate the information she did find to her own needs. At several points in her college search and application process, Cassandra lamented that "just Google it" was not as effective a solution as people made it out to be.

Participants also used interactive, searchable college databases like College Vine, College Board, Niche, and College Review. These databases were used to filter schools based on student characteristics (GPA, SAT) and preferences (geographic location, diversity, and acceptance rate). When seeking school-specific and “official” information, like tuition and housing costs, majors, clubs, and “what they’re really proud of,” participants visited the college’s website. Through the college’s website, they were also able to access online campus tours and virtual admission sessions. As participants reviewed college information with their preferences in mind, they collected and organized information using binders, lists, and charts.

Websites, such as Naviance and College Board, allowed them to input their GPA and see which colleges typically accepted students with similar credentials. Based on this comparison, participants assessed their admissibility and constructed a ranking system for their choice set, identifying each institution as a “reach,” “match,” or “safety.”¹⁰ Thidar found GPA data helpful but also “humbling” because it gave her an idea of her chances of getting into the highly selective colleges she was considering. When comparing his GPA and SAT scores to those of admitted students, Amanuel worried that his credentials were not good enough to make certain schools a realistic option. In fact, several participants worried they would not measure up based on data they saw online and removed schools from their choice set. For example, Jasmine, who was interested in Yale in middle school, decided to take Yale off her list. She explained: “I didn’t want to apply to Yale anymore because I didn’t feel qualified for it [based on] my grades.” This

¹⁰ A way for a precollege student to assess their likelihood of admission to a college by comparing their high school GPA and college entrance exam scores with the college’s average GPA or score range for previous cohorts of admitted students. A “reach” school typically admits students with a higher GPA or score than the interested student, thus making admission unlikely. A “match” school typically admits students with a similar GPA or score, thus making it reasonable to expect admission. A “safety” school typically admits students with a lower GPA or score, thus making admission very likely.

approach prompted Jasmine and other participants to rule out the “fantasy” or “placeholder” colleges that were on their early college lists.

In addition to web-based resources, participants were also influenced by campus visits. The COVID-19 pandemic and public safety restrictions greatly limited the opportunity for participants to take in-person campus tours. However, several participants visited campuses prior to COVID-19, either for formal tours, campus events, or to visit their siblings. Recollections of these visits sparked participants’ interest in certain colleges. Additionally, early visits exposed participants to college knowledge they remembered and considered. For example, on a middle school campus visit, Jasmine learned the college offered specialized advising for students who were exploring majors and needed assistance to decide. As she developed her choice set, she remembered this college and added it to her list, thinking she might need that type of guidance in the future.

The only participant who seemed to lack a clear strategy for college search was Rico. In junior year, as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Rico struggled with motivation for remote learning. His interest in school dropped, and so did his grades. At the start of senior year, Rico changed his plan to apply to 4-year schools and instead registered for community college. This remained the only college in his choice set until his former school counselor, Ms. B, got involved. In a later section, I explain how Ms. B dramatically changed Rico’s college plans.

Family and Peer Support with College Search

All participants described their parents as “supportive” of their college search activities. Support ranged from suggesting colleges to serving as a “sounding board” as they talked about their interests. Most participants stated their parents advised them to consider affordable colleges and reminded them to apply for scholarships and financial aid. Rico’s parents clearly stated, “we

will [financially] support you, but up to a certain point,” which set financial parameters for his choice set that made community college a viable option. Trixie, Azalia, and Thidar’s parents suggested specific colleges for them to consider—colleges they heard about from their friends with college-aged children as well as coworkers and supervisors who earned U.S. degrees. Parents also suggested that participants seek information from informed educators, such as their school counselor. Amanuel and Mercedes’s parents paid for their enrollment in community-based college prep services so they would have assistance with their college search.

Even though participants’ parents offered support, they generally expressed doubt in their parents’ ability to assist their search. Because their parents were immigrants, participants felt that their parents did not understand the U.S. system and what they were going through and did not readily seek their advice. For example, as she was searching for colleges, Mercedes felt lost and confused but decided not to ask her parents for assistance, sharing, “I just really had no idea, and I couldn’t ask my parents for help, because they didn’t know anything.” Instead, Mercedes, like most participants, relied on others for assistance. Four participants had older siblings who were either currently enrolled in college or had recently graduated. These participants sought their siblings’ advice, and they encouraged participants to visit campuses and suggested colleges for them to investigate.

All participants mentioned peers and friends who advised them. Friends shared information about colleges and majors, and Kassandra accompanied her friends on campus visits. Although they had different majors of interest, Kassandra and her friends were considering some of the same colleges because of cost. She shared, “We’re all first generation, so all of the colleges we were looking at were affordable.”

Participants also used their friends as a standard, comparing GPAs to figure out if their grades were “good enough” for college. In Mercedes’s case, this comparison heightened her anxiety. Mercedes was the only participant to change school districts while she was in high school; her family moved from a southern state to Maryland. This move was a turning point for her—one that influenced her college expectations and planning in several ways. First, she went from an environment where, from her perspective, many of her peers prioritized their social lives over school. Second, at her former school, a 3.0 GPA was the norm, but at her new school, “everyone was so smart; the average GPA was a 4.3.” Third, Mercedes’s new peers “had much higher standards for their future,” which she described as aiming for Ivy League and other highly selective universities. These factors initially made her feel not as smart as her peers, but later motivated her effort. Mercedes shared:

My grades were not even comparable to all of my friends. My boyfriend had like a 4.6 GPA somehow—He’s like the smartest kid in the world—and then I have like a 3.3. So it was like “Oh my God, I need to get my things together!”

Mercedes “started paying attention” to her new peers’ conversations, noted the colleges they talked about, and later researched those colleges to consider if she should also apply.

Educator Support with College Search

In addition to family members and peers, school personnel and college access program staff helped participants develop their choice sets. Teachers offered support and guidance, sharing their personal insights about colleges and majors and including college search tasks in the curriculum. When remote learning shifted most interactions from in-person to online, most participants received college guidance from their school counselors via virtual meetings, classroom presentations, and email communication. Counselors also gave personalized advice to

a few participants and suggested colleges they should research based on their intended majors and other preferences.

Rico was the only participant who experienced “little to no communication” from his school counselor. He attributes this to her having “too many students coming at her.” Rico shared, “I don’t blame her for not reaching out to me . . . but she didn’t help me out as much as I wanted her to.”

Although Rico did not receive adequate support and communication from his assigned counselor, his currently retired former school counselor Ms. B, contacted him unexpectedly at the start of senior year to check on him. When Rico revealed his plan to register for community college, Ms. B told him, “You have way more potential than [that].” From that point forward, Ms. B served as Rico’s college advisor and suggested colleges that might be a good fit for Rico’s interests. Additionally, Ms. B was aware Rico was undocumented, so she suggested schools that were “undocu-friendly,” a term used to describe institutions welcoming to undocumented students and likely to offer them funding (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Even if he had not heard of the college, he trusted Ms. B’s advice.

In addition to receiving assistance from school staff, five out of the 10 participants were also involved in school- or community-based college access programs (CAP). These programs served students from low-income backgrounds and students who would be of the first generation in their families to attend college. Two participants (i.e., Amanuel and Mercedes) attended programs that centered the needs and experiences of ethnically minoritized students. Program activities, like career self-assessments and individualized coaching, helped students gain an awareness of their college preferences and how those preferences might inform their choice set.

Amanuel's program guided him to research private schools (many out of state) that were known for offering lucrative scholarships and financial awards. At the same time, program staff were also aware of cultural values that might limit a family's interest in their child going away for college. "In the Eritrean community, a lot of the parents don't want [their children] to go far from home," Amanuel explained. However, if a student in the program was accepted to an out-of-state college and awarded significant funding, the program manager, who was also East African, would be willing to talk with the parents to try to address their concerns. Although Amanuel ultimately chose to remain in state for college, he seemed to appreciate the program manager's offer to advocate for him if he needed it.

Overall, CAP participants described staff as resourceful, responsive, and as being there "every step of the way." Chioma explained, "If I couldn't find information myself, I could go to someone who I knew could help me find it." Like Chioma, each participant seemed to have the support, advice, and guidance of a trusted educator (whether at school or in the community) throughout their junior and senior years.

COVID-19 Cancellations and Test-Optional Policy—To Test or Not to Test?

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns occurred at a critical time for study participants: the spring of junior year when most were heavily involved in college search and planning. For example, participants knew that earning As in the second semester of junior year could boost their cumulative GPA in time for college application season. Additionally, participants planned to enhance their resumes by participating in spring or summer extracurricular activities and internships. Their most common concern as COVID-19 emerged was SAT testing. Before COVID-19, participants planned to take the SAT and ACT multiple times and to do heavy test prep to get the best score. Although Azalia and Cassandra took their

first SAT prior to lockdowns, most participants were expecting to take their first test in the spring of 2020. Participants registered for exams that were ultimately cancelled, causing uncertainty and great angst about a crucial element of their application profile.

As the pandemic lockdowns continued into August 2020, universities that typically required SAT or ACT scores as part of their application announced that their admission process would be “test-optional.”¹¹ When test sites finally became available in Fall 2020, participants who had not taken the SAT considered the new test-optional policy and whether they should register for the exam. Some participants followed the advice of peers, family members, and educators who explained that taking the SAT, even if it was not required, would be to their benefit. For example, Alex’s older sister advised her to take the exam, see how she scored, and then decide if her scores were high enough to enhance her overall application. Despite her SAT registration being canceled on four occasions, Mercedes’s father insisted she continue to register. He advised Mercedes that because her grades were “not the best,” a good SAT score would show colleges she was college ready. Mercedes was finally able to test at a site in a neighboring state. Her dad drove 4 hours and stayed at a hotel with Mercedes so she could take the exam. Ultimately, nine of 10 participants completed at least one SAT exam.

After receiving their SAT scores, participants thought about whether they should submit their scores to colleges. They assessed how much submitting scores would help or hurt their admission chances or their opportunities for merit scholarships. To help them decide, participants used multiple resources, tools, and strategies. For example, students used web-based tools to compare their scores with previous years’ cohorts to determine how they measured up. They also

¹¹ In 2020, university officials recognized that most applicants’ college entrance exam plans would be disrupted and many would not have any scores to submit at all. Their test-optional policy would not penalize students for this. Instead, applicants would have the option of submitting exam scores as part of their application. Those who did not submit scores would still be given full consideration for admission.

compared their scores with their friends. Azalia shared that initially, she did not know if her score was “good enough,” but when her peers shared their scores with her, she thought, “Oh. Maybe I’m ok. I’m better than I thought.” Her peers scored in the same above-average range as she did, which provided some reassurance.

Participants also sought guidance from educators and mentors. However, because this was the first time colleges writ large adopted a test-optional policy, there was no clear guidance for how an applicant should decide whether to submit their scores. In one case, when Azalia asked her mentor for advice, she replied with neutrality, stating that because these were “unprecedented times,” the decision to submit scores was Azalia’s to make. This confused and frustrated Azalia even more, and she shared:

Everybody used this phrase all throughout COVID: “these unprecedented times.” These unprecedented times impacted everybody’s opinions. Nobody knew what to think. I didn’t know what to think. I wouldn’t have known what to think even if it was a “regular time.”

Azalia’s frustration highlights the added stress faced by college applicants during the sociohistorical context of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially students like Azalia, who would be the first in their family to go to college. These students typically rely on educators to provide guidance, and in Azalia’s case, her mentor’s uncertainty was especially discouraging. Azalia later found advice on the Internet and shared:

And then I read (you know, I was always Googling) I read that it was better to submit your score even if it wasn’t an amazing SAT score. It could help my application because I’m like putting myself out there. . . . I just kinda went for it.

Participants used multiple decision-making strategies to determine whether to submit their scores. Amanuel reasoned it would be best not to send scores to his “reach” schools—schools that he “probably had no chance getting into.” He perceived his scores as below their standard, but if they saw his high GPA and resumé without his test scores, perhaps he would have a better chance of admission. Chioma, Trixie, and Thidar decided not to send their SAT scores to any colleges. Trixie was not able to take the exam until December, which was after she had submitted all her applications. Because her score was not “super high,” she thought that submitting it might actually hurt her chances for admission or merit scholarships. Thidar reasoned that because all college applicants were likely impacted by pandemic-related testing constraints, most would choose not to send scores and apply test-optional. Therefore, it would be acceptable for her to do the same. Chioma shared a similar perspective:

Schools were test-optional, and I have a big mentality of working smart, not hard. So I researched “if it’s test-optional does it affect you anyway?” It doesn’t. People don’t get priority because of test scores. So, I said perfect! That’s fine with me. I didn’t send them. Once Chioma found advice online that high SAT scores would not give her an advantage for test-optional schools, she decided to simplify her application process by not submitting her scores.

Jasmine was the only participant who decided not to take the SAT. She registered to take the SAT in the spring of her junior year, but the exam was canceled. When schools announced their test-optional policy, her friends decided they no longer planned to test, which influenced her decision. Because she was in a dual enrollment program¹², Jasmine reasoned that her college

¹² A program where high school students are concurrently enrolled in community college such that they will earn a high school diploma and an associate’s degree within the same year

credits and pending associate degree would increase her admissibility even without having SAT scores on file.

Though most participants expressed feeling stressed, confused, and frustrated with the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on college preparation, most stayed focused on their plan to apply to 4-year colleges. Rico was an exception. As previously mentioned, Rico's motivation for school waned, and he questioned whether it made sense for him to apply to a 4-year college. Rico shared:

I was preparing myself to say, “You know what, I don't think that college is the right choice for me. I don't think I should continue this pathway because of the price. And do I really see myself going to school for like 4 more years?” . . . I thought to myself there's really not much of a point for looking for schools. I would graduate, go community college for 2 years, and then just try to get a job after that, because that's what my oldest brother did.

Rico knew his local community college did not require SAT scores for admission, so he decided not to take the exam. His plans quickly changed when Ms. B entered the picture. Ms. B explicitly stated her expectation for him to test, gave him clear registration instructions, and provided him with a calculator to use on test day.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and resulting test-optional policy, had a significant impact on participants' approaches to testing. Though at first, SAT cancellations and the test-optional policy caused participants great stress and confusion, students sought advice and looked online to figure out how to best navigate this unprecedented situation. Ultimately, participants—even those with above-average scores—seemed to view the test-optional policy favorably because it reduced their anxiety and allowed them to choose whether to send their scores. Additionally,

some participants expanded their college list to include schools that—in a typical year—would have relied heavily on test scores to determine admission.

Narrowing Choice Set to Application Set

Most 4-year colleges launch their applications for first-year students in August using an online application platform. As applications open, students narrow down their list of colleges of interest (choice set) to those they will actually apply to (application set; Chapman, 1986).

Participants prioritized affordability, proximity to home, and academic programs as they were developing their choice set; additional factors influenced whether they submitted an application, such as time, effort, money, their SAT scores or lack thereof, and development of their priorities and preferences. For example, Azalia was shocked to find out how much it cost to simply apply to each school, sharing: “This is insane. I’m racking up this huge bill just to try to see if I can get in!” Alex and Azalia carefully considered the amount of time, effort, and money it would take to apply to some of the more selective schools on their list, applications that required multiple essays or had expensive application fees. Alex described her reasoning as follows: “[There were] schools that had like 12 essays, [but] the possibilities of me getting in were low-ish. . . . I would rather focus on schools that I had a higher chance of getting into.” Although Alex previously determined that schools in her choice set fit her interests, at this point, she focused on applying to schools she perceived as likely to accept her based on her GPA and SAT scores. Her application set also included schools she was not really interested in attending. However, because she was eligible for fee waivers to these schools, she reasoned that she should apply anyway and, if accepted, see how much financial aid they offered her.

Those who did not have access to application fee waivers decided to restrict their application set to save money. Mercedes explained: “I ended up cutting [schools] or taking a lot

of them out, because I ended up realizing they each cost like \$95. I had a huge list before, and then I narrowed it down.” Similarly, application fees prompted Jasmine to apply to only those schools she had extensively researched and in which she had a strong interest.

Azalia eliminated colleges on her list because she did not have the time or energy to apply to them all. Azalia’s magnet program required students to complete a research project that she was working on while applying to schools. During this time, Azalia described herself as sleep-deprived and “a mess.” She also realized she was putting pressure on herself to apply to prestigious schools she was not interested in just to have the chance to say that she got in. She decided pushing herself to apply to these schools when she was already tired and stressed would bring “more harm than good.” This reasoning helped her narrow her application set and focus her time on schools of high interest. One exception was a private school that offered a fee waiver and a simplified application process. “The application practically had nothing to it. What do I have to lose?” she said, and for that reason, she subsequently applied.

As students began to work on their college and financial aid applications, friends helped them the most. They shared information about scholarships and reminded each other about deadlines. Jasmine described how her friends would keep each other on track: “We were always asking each other ‘How do you do this?’ or ‘Did you do this already?’” which helped guide her steps.

Trixie and Thidar spoke about how their friends encouraged them to “go for it” and apply to schools without worrying about rejection. This support was comforting to Thidar, who had heard stories about seniors’ competitiveness getting in the way of their friendships.

I was very fortunate to have this tight knit group of friends who aren’t really competitive, because I have heard from other friends about how [their] friends would tell them to not

apply to a school because they wanted to get in. I'm very glad that I didn't go through that.

Thidar, who from a young age learned that college admissions could be competitive, was grateful she had a trusted friend group she could lean on for support throughout her process.

Friends were especially helpful to participants who were only children or the first of their siblings to go to college. Cassandra, an oldest child, noticed that her friends with older siblings had an advantage she did not have and shared: "A lot of my friends are first-generation immigrants, but their brothers and sisters have already gone to college, so they had help . . . with the crucial parts, like FAFSA and reviewing essays." Although Cassandra did not have familial support with the application process, she highly valued and relied upon her friends, a tight-knit group of college-aspiring students she had known since elementary school. She emphasized that they played a "pretty big role" throughout the entire search and application process by recommending colleges and reviewing application essays. Similarly, Thidar, an only child, and Mercedes, an oldest child, sought advice from their high school peers and friends who were already in college.

Friends were named most helpful during the college application process, but participants continued to receive valuable support from family members—especially older siblings, school personnel, and college access program staff. Siblings and teachers advised participants on colleges to apply to, helped them narrow their college list, gave feedback on college essays and resumé, and made themselves available for questions or concerns. Chioma spoke highly of her teachers' personalized assistance, sharing:

They supported me when I needed it knowing that no one in my family has gone to college in the United States or college in general. They helped me, and often the help felt personal, so it was very nice.

Chioma appreciated the personal touch that recognized the challenges she faced as a first-generation student and an immigrant. Similarly, Ms. B continued her hands-on approach with Rico. She sent him clear instructions on which schools and scholarships he should apply to, helped him brainstorm his college essay, and reviewed his final draft. In essence, Ms. B seemed to take a personal and vested interest in Rico's college-going, ultimately steering his entire application process from start to finish.

Coping With Fear and Pressure

As deadlines approached, Thidar and Azalia dealt with a fear of not getting into any schools. As a result, Azalia applied to a lot of "safeties" because she was "paranoid" that she would not get in anywhere. While Thidar and Azalia were worried about getting into colleges, Amanuel and Jasmine expected they would get some rejections but ultimately get accepted somewhere. Amanuel applied to a few highly selective colleges rationalizing that he "might as well apply" and see what happens. Jasmine stated very simply, "If I got rejected, then that would be okay since I won't be going there. I'd just go to the school that I got accepted in. That was my thinking." Jasmine was confident that she would be admitted to most of the schools she applied and that the rejections would not be so bad because they would automatically eliminate options and lead her to a decision.

Even though Amanuel expected some rejections, he felt pressure to apply to Ivy League colleges and to choose a "good college" eventually. This pressure came from the staff of the community-based CAP he attended the summer before senior year. CAP was a paid program that

served East African precollege students through summer and year-round programming, and they touted the success of students who, with their guidance, had been admitted to Ivy League colleges. They encouraged Amanuel to consider several highly selective institutions¹³ even though he “knew he wouldn’t get in.” Amanuel also felt pressure from his uncles, aunts, and cousins, who would inquire about his college interests during family visits. He shared:

Everything you hear when you visit is “How’s school? How are your grades? What colleges did you apply to?” . . . And then obviously those that get into good colleges, they’re like “Oh, this [person] got into this college, or your cousin went to this college. You should do better.” So yeah . . . the most pressure was definitely from the family.

Although he did not feel like he was a strong candidate, Amanuel ultimately applied to several highly selective schools because of the pressure he felt from CAP and his family.

College Financing, Application Set, and FAFSA

As a result of their research, participants were aware of how much college costs, which influenced the schools to which participants ultimately applied. For example, all participants applied to at least one in-state public school, knowing they would be eligible for in-state tuition. Most participants’ parents encouraged them to prioritize affordable colleges—in other words, in-state; Mercedes’s and Thidar’s parents insisted they keep their options open and not limit their application set because of cost. Their parents expressed a willingness to take out loans or sell their house so their daughters could “get the best education” possible. Mercedes and Thidar both applied to at least one out-of-state or private college hoping they would qualify for enough government aid or scholarships to reduce their parents’ costs if admitted.

¹³ Admissions selectivity is described as the percentage of student who are admitted from the pool of students who apply. The lower the percentage, the higher the selectivity.

Amanuel, whose parents were concerned about costs, decided to apply to out-of-state and private colleges to see “what money they would give me.” Similarly, Alex cast a wide net. Alex assumed that because her grades were “pretty good,” she might be offered scholarships that would make these higher-cost colleges affordable. Alex developed a financing plan for these institutions:

Let’s say the initial price was like \$80,000 [per year]. I didn’t actually count on paying more than like \$20,000 [after using my] financial aid and outside scholarship. . . . I really didn’t want to [have] more than \$5,000 in debt. That was my breakdown in my head.

Alex compared the college’s annual cost of attendance to her estimated financial aid to determine the range of student loan debt she might need to incur. Alex’s plan was to strongly consider schools where she would incur the least amount of debt, even if that school were out-of-state.

Eight participants completed the FAFSA. (Two were not eligible to complete the FAFSA based on their residency status. Instead, they completed a state need-based aid application for children of undocumented immigrants.) Some participants described completing the FAFSA independently, while others had help from their older siblings or educators. Kassandra and Thidar described completing the FAFSA as “nerve-wracking” and “scary.” They both worried about inadvertently submitting false information because, to them, the FAFSA was an intimidating and confusing form—one that would ultimately go to the government. Kassandra explained her frustration with the FAFSA here: “I don’t understand the question, and if my mom doesn’t understand the question then we’re both lost. And there’s nobody else to help us because no one else has ever done FAFSA.” Fortunately, Kassandra received assistance from her friend’s mother, a college counselor, and she was very relieved. “Thankfully, I had [my friend’s] mom to help me do certain questions, but if I didn’t then it [would] just be me, my mom, and Google.

And that wasn't really helping anybody." Similarly, Thidar also received informed advice from her friend's parents, albeit indirectly. "Some of [my friends] would help me with the FAFSA, because their parents went to college and . . . they would give me information based on what their parents told them." Unlike some participants, Cassandra and Thidar did not have older siblings who could guide them. They were relieved to find guidance within their network to help them make sense of the FAFSA and feel at ease with submitting it.

When applying to college, a few participants discussed the process with their parents. Mercedes, for example, shared her application chart with her father, who took a keen interest in the cost of the schools she applied to. In the next excerpt, she described just how involved her father was in understanding college financing:

I made charts of every single college I was applying to. You know, like I'd write the price, and my dad would highlight the price, and I would see him print [the chart] out and take it to his desk and start looking at [it]. I could see he was stressed about it.

As Mercedes was working on her college applications, she carefully organized information about each school's cost of attendance. Her father reviewed her charts very closely, and Mercedes could tell he was worried about finances. At that point, she began to realize some schools on her list were "just too expensive."

Unlike Mercedes, most participants did not go into detail about their application process with their parents or ask for their input. They expressed that their parents would not be able to understand because they did not have prior knowledge. As Rico explained, they "didn't know much about it." Rico shared, "As long as I got into a school—that's what mattered most to them." Alex actually asked her mom why she did not "check in" more:

She said because they really just don't understand the whole process. So they're kind of just trusting us to make the best decision for us since we know more about what we require from a college more than they do.

Interestingly, when they spoke about their college application process, Alex and Amanuel expressed a desire to have their parents more involved. When asked to name challenges or obstacles he faced on his path to college, Amanuel mentioned his parents' limited involvement, sharing:

A barrier I would say [is that] my parents didn't know too much about the college process... I wanted to let them know about all the colleges. I would tell them, but they didn't know too much about it. So it would have been nice if they knew more. That's why I mainly went to my sister for everything. . . . It just would have been better. . . . I think that's why they encouraged me to do the CAP program and College Tracks as well. Obviously, they didn't know too much about the process and I can't blame [them] for that—I understood. It's not the biggest obstacle or anything but yeah it would have been better if they were more involved.

All participants accepted that their parents had a limited understanding of the U.S. college application process and, perhaps to replace parent knowledge, engaged social and web-based resources to figure things out. However, Amanuel perceived his parents' limited involvement as a barrier and felt that having his parents involved would have made the process better for him. Although his sister and educators provided support, they did not replace the kind of involvement Amanuel desired from his parents.

Stress and College Essays

Most participants expressed they were under great stress during application season, the first few months of senior year. While participants were juggling rigorous course loads, they were also completing college applications and applying for aid. Cassandra felt that going through this process during a pandemic made the process “10 times as stressful,” and shared:

I had a lot going on that whole first semester. My grades got really bad the first quarter, because I was in between switching classes. I was doing two dual enrollment classes and then five high school classes and then college applications. I’m doing it all by myself, so I just didn’t really take the time for a break. I was in my room 24-7. I wasn’t going outside because of COVID, so I was just in a really confined and stressful place.

The first few months of senior year have implications for completing diploma requirements and graduating on time, getting admitted to college, and figuring out how to pay for college. As Cassandra emphasized here, participants were experiencing what is typically a high-stakes semester in the midst of a global pandemic that, at that time, had no clear end in sight.

Participants were experiencing uncertainty, distress, and social isolation, with little access to the usual leisure activities teenagers enjoy. In Mercedes’s case, her stress was so great that even casual inquiries about college planning from well-intentioned people caused her distress. She shared:

I would tell my boyfriend, “Please tell your parents not to ask me about it.” Not in a rude way or anything, but it stressed me out. I would work so hard on my college applications all day, and then I would want to go chill. . . . [Their questions] would make me want to start crying.

Most participants indicated that writing the college essay was the “worst part” of the application. They did not know what to write, felt “stuck,” and experienced “writer’s block.” Trixie’s English teacher, who assigned a college essay to her class, advised students to “think of something memorable to you, but don’t pick a broad topic like COVID because everyone’s going to [write about that].” Cassandra was advised to read sample application essays to see how others approached sharing personal stories through their writing, but this strategy made her feel worse, sharing:

I’m reading somebody’s essay about like how they saved like 100 people from a burning building, and I haven’t. You can’t really compare yourself to other people, [but] that’s what I was trying to do for a whole month—trying to find out what about me is exciting.

Kassandra realized it was not helpful to compare her life to the valiant heroics she read about, but she struggled to find a topic that was personal, interesting, and relevant to college admissions. Other participants expressed a similar dilemma.

Azalia, Chioma, Cassandra, and Jasmine described random moments when an essay idea just came to them; looming deadlines seemed to be the spark. Most participants ultimately wrote essays about life-changing struggles, family relationships, and how they drew strength or lessons from these experiences. A few participants wrote about a hobby or interest that made them unique. Participants regarded their essays as meaningful because they shared details that were important to their identity and included details not shared widely with others.

In addition to being a meaningful personal piece, Chioma and Thidar aimed to write engaging essays that would make them stand out. As Chioma explained, “I wanted a hook—to entertain. I wanted to catch the admissions team’s eye, but I didn’t want to give too much, so I

kind of struggled finding that balance.” Chioma, who “was not big on oversharing,” reasoned that a certain level of personal disclosure would help her craft an effective essay.

Seven participants wrote essays that spoke of their experiences as immigrants. Chioma, Rico, Thidar, and Alex’s essays focused on their parents and how their parents’ migration and resettlement experiences influenced their values, identities, and educational goals. Thidar, however, wanted to avoid the “immigrant cliché” because she felt it was “overdone.” She stated there was more to her identity than being an immigrant and instead wrote about how her father inspired her love of history.

Although most participants did not seek their parents’ advice and guidance during application season, participants’ immigrant narratives inspired their essays. In this manner, parents seemed to serve a critical role—one that was not stated by participants, but that I noted as the researcher. Inspiring the essay is a particularly helpful feat because most participants stated that figuring out what to write was the most stressful part of applying to college. For some, it was hard to even come up with a topic they thought was interesting. Though this is not the hands-on instrumental support participants received from older siblings, friends, and educators, participants benefitted from their parents’ inspiration by writing a strong, impactful essay that uniquely supplemented their college applications.

The Waiting Game: Managing Expectations and Emotions

Though submitting applications provided some relief, participants managed myriad emotions as they waited for admissions decisions, ranging from excitement and anticipation to trepidation and fear. Some participants received an acceptance letter within days or even a few hours. However, most waited weeks and months to receive decisions, particularly from the institutions they most desired. As they prepared for notifications, participants continued to

manage their expectations for admission based on the information they had learned when researching and applying. They were prepared for less selective schools to offer them admission and that the highly selective schools they most desired might reject their application. Chioma refrained from having a top-choice school because she did not want to be “too sad” if she was rejected. Similarly, to avoid disappointment, Jasmine tried not to get her hopes up for a particular outcome, which helped reduce her anxiety.

Conversely, Mercedes had a clear top-choice school in mind: LR1. Her boyfriend and classmates described LR1 as their “safety,” but she assessed it as a “reach” for her based on her GPA. She was worried that all her friends would be admitted to LR1, and she would be the only one rejected. This fear caused her great stress, especially in the days leading up to the admissions notification release. Her parents knew how much she wanted to be admitted to LR1. They encouraged her, but also advised her to be realistic. Mercedes recounted, “I really wanted to go so badly. . . . I still had my hopes.” Once Thidar had submitted her applications, she also began to feel anxious about getting admitted. She expressed that she was “constantly in a state of nervousness and worry,” which prevented her from enjoying other activities.

Amanuel, who applied to 16 colleges, including several highly selective institutions, felt pressure not just to get admitted but to get into a “good” college, one his family would be proud of. “I was just trying not to disappoint others, especially my parents,” he explained. As Kassandra waited for notifications, she agonized over the possible outcomes so much that she thought about altering her university plans altogether and shared:

I really underestimated how stressful the process was. [And] we were in a pandemic, so it was like 10 times as stressful. At some point, I was like, “Is it really all worth it?”

Suffering for 2 months, just to get one decision. . . . I was thinking about going to community college . . . I was really just tired of the waiting.

Kassandra's quote illustrates that while waiting for decisions is typically a stressful time for applicants, participants in this study were already dealing with mental health challenges due to the pandemic and related disruptions to their lives. Kassandra's stress was heightened tenfold, prompting her to reconsider her childhood dream of matriculating to a 4-year university. To cope, participants managed their expectations by not getting their hopes up, acknowledging that rejections were a part of the process, emotionally preparing themselves for all outcomes, and thinking about alternate college plans.

Summary

Immigrant students face unique challenges on their path to college as they research various postsecondary institutions, take entrance exams, and complete college and financial aid applications (Kim & Díaz, 2013). In this sample, participants were navigating this process with strong encouragement from their parents, who maintained their college expectations. However, participants perceived their parents as having limited knowledge about the U.S. college application process. As a result, most participants did not seek their parents' assistance and instead relied on the assistance of siblings, friends, and educators. One parental contribution was inspiring participants' college essays. Some participants' essays reflected a deep regard and appreciation for their parents' migration story and the values their parents instilled in them. Essays uniquely supported their college applications by conveying how their family experiences as immigrants shaped their values, work ethic, and motivation for higher education.

It is important to note the COVID-19 pandemic emerged when participants were in their second semester of junior year. State mandates closed school buildings, canceled SAT and ACT

test dates, and limited in-person access to college campuses. These unprecedented experiences compounded participants' anxieties as they learned more about the high costs of tuition, room, and board and wondered how they might be able to finance these costs. Noncitizen participants contended with constrained options due to their residency status and eligibility for federal student aid.

To manage these and other challenges, participants used a range of strategies to research colleges, narrow their list of desired schools, and complete their applications. These strategies include: (a) identifying and reassessing their personal and academic priorities and preferences for their future school; (b) comparing their GPA and SAT scores to admitted student data found online; (c) relying on the advice of older siblings and friends, college-bound peers, and educators; and (d) "Googling it," in other words using their Internet research skills to find information and guidance on their own. Participants used a range of web-based college databases like College Board and Naviance. They also took advantage of the test-optional policy most colleges and universities adopted by carefully weighing the cost and benefits of taking or submitting their SAT scores. As students waited for college decisions, most felt a high level of anxiety. They managed their anxiety in several ways, including avoiding discussions about college, holding realistic expectations, and not getting their hopes up for any one outcome school. Although participants ultimately received the exciting news they had been waiting for, data emphasized that the waiting period can elicit great worry and self-doubt.

College Decisions

Getting Accepted: Fulfilling the Migration Narrative

All participants were ultimately accepted to multiple universities. Although the first school to accept them was often not their top choice school, most participants experienced

excitement, happiness, surprise, and relief at getting in somewhere. Receiving “giant envelopes,” confetti-laced emails, and candy with their admissions letters made these moments memorable and special. Cassandra’s first college acceptance was to a school she forgot she had applied to. However, she was still ecstatic and relieved. She recounted, “This was the moment I built up for like 12 years. I got into a school, and for the whole day I was like ‘I got into a college!’ It was just a really, really good moment.” Chioma’s first acceptance was not a surprise; based on her high GPA, she assumed she would be admitted. However, she recognized this acceptance as a milestone marking a significant transition and shared, “It felt good. When I got in, it started getting real. College is happening and a new chapter will be starting.” Rico did not have a top-choice school. He applied only to the colleges his counselor recommended, and some were schools previously unknown to him. As a result, Rico was equally excited for each acceptance letter “just because it was a college.” Each letter was a big deal, especially considering that a few months prior, his intention was not to apply to any universities at all.

Azalia, Alex, and Mercedes were excited to receive acceptances to highly selective “reach” universities. Even if they were not planning to enroll, these acceptances validated their hard work and made them feel proud. For example, when Alex was admitted to a “flashy” private school, she explained that her excitement was less about really wanting to go there and more that she received one of a few coveted spots in the incoming class. Similarly, Azalia screamed when she got into her top choice school, a university out of state she had previously fantasized about attending. Even though she decided that staying in state was her best option, she described this as her “Harvard moment.” Mercedes, who felt her GPA was inadequate compared to her high-achieving friends, was surprised she was actually the first in her friend group to receive a college acceptance. Her first admission was to one of her “reach” schools, which made

her happy and boosted her confidence. All participants vividly and excitedly recounted their first acceptance as a significant moment; one that was immediately followed by sharing the news with their parents.

As stated previously, all participants' parents expected them to do well in school and viewed higher education as a tool for future success. In some ways, participants' college acceptances fulfilled the hopes and dreams that prompted their family's migration to the United States. Most participants first shared their acceptances with their parents and vividly described their reactions as happy, excited, incredulous, and congratulatory. With clear detail, Rico recalled the moment he told his mother:

The first thing I did was . . . run downstairs and show my mom the email, and she can't read English so she sees the confetti and she's like "What's going on?" And I tell her and [she gave me] the biggest hug I've ever gotten and . . . we were just both filled with joy.

For most participants, telling their parents added immense excitement to a much-anticipated moment of getting accepted.

Interestingly, although Alex and Azalia expressed that they knew their parents were happy, they were disappointed by their parents' reactions. Alex described the moment she shared her first acceptance with her parents:

I was trying to show it off like "Oh look at me. I got in. Congratulate me." But my parents weren't super hype for it. . . . It's not that my parents weren't excited, I just think they just didn't really understand what it takes for a college to want you.

She described her father's reaction as "stoic" and guessed he did not show the excitement she hoped for because he did not know how much work it took for her to gain admission. Similarly,

months later, when Alex announced that she was awarded a full scholarship to LR1, she tearfully described telling her parents:

Remember I said earlier that my dad was like super worried about the financial thing? . . . I know part of him was excited just because he really worried about paying for college, especially for me and my sister, so knowing that he didn't have to pay for me [was] pretty nice for him. So yeah, [my parents] were excited in the sense that it was the best thing for me, but I'm still kind of salty that they didn't jump for joy.

With the pressure of financing college for two children, Alex thought her scholarship news would be received with outward expressions of happiness, relief, and joy from her parents, but her expectations were not met. Although Alex was recalling a conversation that occurred several months before our interview, her tears suggested she still felt deep hurt about her parents' reaction.

When Azalia was admitted to her top choice school, she mimicked her father's reaction with a flat unenthusiastic tone: "He just kinda gave me a hug and said, 'Wow you did it . . . good job,' like it was a participation medal or something to him." She went on to explain that his lukewarm response was not unusual. Even though she got high grades throughout her school career, her parents rarely showed they were proud of her. She shared:

I know that's just their way of showing love, you know. And in a sense it has worked out because them not showing how proud they are has led to my stellar academic accomplishments. They got what they wanted, at the fault of my mental health.

Azalia rationalized her parents' behaviors while laughing sarcastically, as if her parents' behaviors were humorous, but in reality, they were hurtful to her. Azalia and Alex appreciated

how hard they worked to reach this anticipated milestone and were disappointed that their parents, particularly their fathers, reacted with little excitement and enthusiasm.

Coping with Rejection

Participants who received rejection notifications expressed feelings of disappointment, regret, and sadness. They used a variety of coping strategies to process their thoughts and feelings, such as taking a critical look at their admissibility and why they might have been denied and finding a silver lining. Rico received a rejection letter from the Ivy League institution his brother attends. Although it was a slim chance, Rico was excited by the possibility of attending school with his brother. However, Rico previously prepared himself for rejection and did not get his hopes up. He shared:

Honestly, it wasn't as big of a shock as I expected it to be, just because I knew it's an Ivy League school, and I think it's like an 11% acceptance rate. . . . I knew it wasn't a big possibility for me to go to that school.

Although the rejection “kind of hurt,” Rico seemed to find comfort in the fact that most applicants were denied like him.

Thidar received rejection letters from three highly selective institutions, including the private university her father took her to visit when she was a child. Thidar knew this was a “reach” school for her, so she was prepared for a rejection and took it in stride. Nonetheless, she sensed her father was disappointed. Ultimately, she reasoned that even if she had been admitted, it would have been too expensive for her to attend anyway. Chioma also received a rejection from a highly selective university. However, she did not get her hopes up for any one school, so Chioma accepted the decision without sadness and simply crossed it off her list. She also found a

positive aspect in the rejection. Her friend was admitted to the university, so Chioma expressed excitement about the prospect of visiting her friend on campus should she enroll.

Kassandra, on the other hand, was devastated by rejection from her top choice school: an HBCU she had aspired to attend since she was a child. She shared:

I think like the whole day I didn't talk to anybody. I was just really sad. I've been building everything toward this one college. I was already kind of planning [how my] dorm would look. It was just a lot.

Unlike Chioma, Kassandra was optimistic about being admitted to her dream school, so much so that she began to envision her life on campus. This disappointment was especially hard for her. She later reasoned that she was rejected because she did not apply early action¹⁴ and expressed deep regret for that decision. Similarly, when Amanuel and Trixie received rejections from highly selective private schools, they expressed regret and reflected on what they could have done differently to enhance their applications. Trixie shared:

I applied to one of the Ivy League Schools . . . but I didn't do my essay quite well, because I forgot the deadline and they have an extra essay . . . so I did it on the night it was due. So when they rejected me, I knew [it was coming] because I didn't have my essay revised. . . . I feel like I could have been accepted if I actually spent more time on it. So I was regretful.

Ultimately, even if they were disappointed, participants found ways to make sense of, rationalize, and accept their rejections and then focus on their remaining options—the schools that offered them admission.

¹⁴ An admissions plan in which students apply ahead of the general college application deadline. Applying early action indicates to colleges that students have a high level of interest in their institution, and many colleges admit their greatest percentage of students from the pool of applicants who apply early. Applicants usually receive an admission decision in the winter and have until May 1 to choose to enroll.

Alex, Jasmine, Mercedes, and Azalia did not receive any college rejections, and they explained this outcome in a few ways. Alex regarded this outcome as a technicality. She was wait-listed by a private school, but not rejected, so she considered this as “not an outward rejection.” Mercedes explained her acceptances by stating that she “got lucky,” while Azalia explained that she “aimed pretty low” by applying to mostly “match” and “safety” schools. Jasmine applied to a small number of institutions which is why she thinks she received no rejections. No matter how they made sense of this outcome, each participant expressed a sense of pride in receiving no college rejections.

Making Sense of Award Letters and Analyzing Costs

Typically, within several weeks of receiving a college’s acceptance decision, admitted students receive a financial award letter that outlines their individualized cost of attendance (Burd et al., 2018). The award letter lists the school’s projected tuition, fees, and room and board for the upcoming year, then deducts the amount of each scholarship, grant, and loan offered by the institution. The amount that remains is called *unmet need* and represents the amount left to be paid by the student. College applicants often find these letters confusing (Burd et al., 2018), and participants in this study were no exception. Five out of 10 participants relied on people in their family, peer, and school network to help them understand their award letters. Mercedes, Thidar, and Azalia reviewed their letters with their parents, Amanuel sought his older sister’s advice, and Rico relied on his former school counselor to explain each letter he received. In fact, early on, Ms. B instructed him as follows: “Anytime you get those [award letters], call me as soon as you can because we’ll go over what it means.” She also offered to help him look for scholarships to cover his unmet need.

Alex, Jasmine, Kassandra, Chioma, and Trixie reviewed their letters independently, with little assistance from others. They described reading each letter line-by-line, calculating costs, and considering ways to cover unmet needs. When asked how she made sense of her award letters, Kassandra replied that she asked her mom to explain the concepts she did not understand. In most instances, her mom was also confused and unsure, so she shared that she relied on Internet searches to find answers: “A lot of stuff I had to Google on my own, and I would have to make sense of it.” However, Kassandra quickly experienced some of the same limitations with Internet research as she did when looking up college information. She realized that Googling was not the best solution and shared: “I can only Google so much that I understand. And then it is just stuff I don’t understand.” Fortunately, she received some assistance from a college student she met through a free online college prep program, sharing: “If I didn’t make sense of [my award letters], I would ask her, but she would respond like eight times out of 10, so the rest of time was it was falling [on] me to find out what it meant.”

Chioma was the only student who sought assistance from university agents. She described “blow[ing] up the school’s phone” to ask questions so she could fully understand what was being offered to her. On the other hand, Trixie seemed to adeptly “figure it out” herself. As she spoke about her process for reviewing award letters, she used terms correctly and explained a sound step-by-step approach to assessing cost of attendance, expected family contribution, and unmet need. When asked how she came to understand a process that many students find confusing, she laughed and said, “I’m just smart.” Trixie went on to explain she found helpful information within federal student aid email messages and other resources she found online.

As they reviewed their financial award letters, participants quickly noticed that grants and scholarships did not cover every dollar. The unmet need did not deter Chioma. She had a strong

desire to finance her college expenses independently of her parents by using her own money and earning scholarships. She reasoned:

I could pay for some of it. My mom would pay for some of it if need be, but I didn't want her too. I wanted to do it myself and just kind of keep [my parents] out of it. I wasn't worried about the money. I know it's crazy. I just kind of went with the flow. . . . I knew not to make a decision [at that time]. I was basically closing my eyes to the aspect of money for a long time. I was just focusing on applying for scholarships.

Chioma confidently expressed that she could “make it work.” Although every participant was not quite as assured about funding as Chioma, they all seemed determined to figure out a way to finance unmet needs by applying for private scholarships or taking out a student loan as a last resort.

In Jasmine's case, reviewing her award letter helped her rule out a college she deemed too expensive. She was excited to receive a \$120,000 institutional scholarship from a private school out of state. However, when she read the scholarship award would be dispersed over 4 years, she did the math. The school's annual cost of attendance was \$60,000, so her parents would need to finance \$30,000 per year after the scholarship was applied. Based on her calculations and assessment of her family's finances, she decided her unmet need was too high and declined the school's offer.

Mercedes experienced a turning point when, despite her parents' insistence that they would pay for her to attend any college she chose, she realized some schools were just too expensive. She was admitted early decision¹⁵ to a private university and set on attending. Then,

¹⁵ An admissions plan in which students apply ahead of the general college application deadline and make a binding commitment that if admitted they definitely will enroll and withdraw all applications to other colleges.

she received the financial aid award letter that outlined a cost of almost \$70,000 for her first year.

My parents always tried to be the most supportive [parents] as possible, and they always told me “Money doesn’t matter. If we have to sell the house, we will.” But that’s when I realized . . . this is way too much money.

With her father’s intervention, the university agreed to lift Mercedes’s contractual obligation to enroll. From that point forward, as Mercedes received her award letters, she paid closer attention to the affordability of each school.

Similarly, Rico’s initial excitement about getting college acceptances wore off after he received financial award letters. Although he was offered state aid and partial scholarships, he realized his unmet need was more money than his parents could pay for and shared:

I knew from [that point] that I’m going to have to look for scholarships. . . . I saw that big number and I knew my parents—I didn’t want them to pay that much. I didn’t want them going into debt. That’s the last thing I wanted for them.

Rico made a commitment to himself to do what he could to reduce his parents’ financial burden and secure additional college funding by applying for outside scholarships.

Overall, participants’ narratives illustrate the complex, confusing, and high-stakes nature of college choice, which is often the first major financial decision young adults will make. Although half of participants sought guidance from family members and educators, half looked for advice and guidance online to help them make sense of their financial options. As they reviewed their letters, participants considered their family’s budget, assessed their parent’s ability to cover unmet needs, and considered their own ability to contribute through student loans, savings, or scholarships. Participants ruled out certain colleges based on their assessment

because they did not want their college costs to be a burden on their parents. As May 1 approached, participants looked for scholarships that could help reduce their out-of-pocket costs.

Weighing Options

May 1 is an important day for college-bound seniors. By this date, most universities ask that accepted students inform them of their enrollment decision. As the date grew closer, participants carefully weighed their options, reconsidered costs, revisited their initial preferences, and consulted with family, friends, and educators. To narrow down their options, most participants described using a process of elimination to make a “logical” and “sensible” decision.

At this point, each participant had received financial award letters from their admitted schools and was now in a better position to assess affordability. With this information, participants were able to compare costs across institutions and formulate a budget for their college expenses. For example, Alex asked her father how much her parents would be comfortable contributing to her school costs. She used that amount to determine how much money in student loans she would need to borrow to afford each school she was considering. Any school whose cost exceeded her amount of comfort was “thrown out,” which helped her narrow her options. Amanuel was offered a full-tuition scholarship at a private university in a northern state, but the scholarship did not include room and board. Amanuel calculated costs for housing and meals at the private school and factored in transportation expenses. He then compared the private school’s cost with the cost of attending the state schools on his admitted list. Amanuel determined that the private school offer was not worth the investment. Therefore, he turned down the scholarship.

In addition to affordability, participants considered the pros and cons of each institution, revisited the priorities they first outlined when researching colleges, and determined to what

extent each institution aligned with their priorities. Some participants now had new information to consider, like invitations to an admitted school's honors college. Also, throughout this process, a few participants changed their minds about certain early preferences. For example, Alex realized that she no longer wanted to attend college far from home, even if she earned a lucrative scholarship.

As they weighed their options, participants used web-based tools to learn more about student life at their colleges of interest. Thidar liked that Niche offered "honest reviews" about colleges from students currently enrolled and shared, "You know colleges only tell you the good parts, but like you have to really know the bad parts also, so just reading through the reviews really helped me out." Mercedes and Jasmine also wanted to see students' points of view about their schools of interest, so they looked for YouTube and Tik Tok videos that featured "a day in the life" of an enrolled student. When making her college choice, Jasmine recalled the students she saw in the videos and "took their experiences into consideration."

During this time, most participants informed their parents of the colleges they were considering. All participants were aware that high cost was their parents' biggest concern, followed by their children going out of state for school. Parents reminded their children of their concerns and preferences while also encouraging them to make their own decision or "go with your best option." When it came to paying for college, most participants felt assured parents would contribute what they could to their bills, whether by taking out a loan or contributing money from their savings.

Although Mercedes's parents had always encouraged her to pick the school of her dreams, Mercedes was anxious about her parents' ability to pay. When she reviewed the costs

with her father, she also saw the toll her anxiety had on her father and assumed he felt inadequate compared to other parents. Mercedes shared:

I think my dad was also really stressed out and he felt bad because he saw the stress in me. He really just wanted the best for me, and he was a little bit worried about the process just like I was. He felt really bad that he couldn't help me in ways that other parents could help their kids.

This quote suggests that Mercedes's father was actually experiencing two layers of stress: stress of seeing his daughter worry and stress of not being able to assist her fully.

Participants described various ways their parents assisted them with decision making, including reviewing award letters, discussing their budget, or listening and acting as sounding boards. After receiving each award letter, Azalia and Thidar updated their parents and discussed their options. Thidar explained her family's approach:

So what we decided was to . . . put all those letters right next to each other and just go through each one and break it down. I mean obviously after every letter I got we would talk about it, but we decided that we would just wait for all the offers to arrive and just see which one is best for me and the family.

Thidar and her parents were in regular communication about each financial award, and they made a plan to discuss all her options as a family. Thidar stated her parents were the "most helpful" people to her decision-making process because the family maintained open communication throughout the semester. Thidar felt certain that, ultimately, they would identify "the perfect match" that would satisfy both her and her parents.

Five participants indicated their parents played a limited or no role in their college financial planning or decision making. Chioma's mother did not push her toward a particular

option; when it came to making a decision, Chioma stated that she was “calling all the shots” and shared:

So my mom was like, “Whatever you want to do” because at the point where it was [LR1] and [private university] . . . she didn’t want to impact my decision, because maybe I would feel like [her advice] was financially motivated. She was like, “Whatever you decide. We’ll make it work.”

Amanuel sought his older sister’s guidance to compare award letters. His sister graduated from one of the universities that admitted Amanuel, and she was familiar with the others, so she also helped Amanuel weigh the pros and cons of each institution based on her own experiences.

A few participants indicated they asked friends and older peers for advice about cost, budgeting, and making their college decision. Azalia, Jasmine, and Thidar consulted with friends in college to ask about campus life and financial aid. A few participants indicated their friends were very influential in their college decision. For example, Thidar appreciated her college-aged friends’ candid perspectives about the schools they attended, especially their opinions about the colleges she was considering. Their discussions touched on whether the lack of campus diversity was an issue for them, if they felt welcomed at their schools, or if they were just attending that school because it was affordable. When she asked them what they liked about their schools, she described them as being “up front” about their experiences and shared:

They didn’t try to sell it as this dream-like place. They just told me up front what they absolutely despised about the school, what they liked about it, and any regrets they have. Them being transparent really helped me figure out what I really wanted for [my] school and what would be the best environment for me to thrive in.

Thidar felt that “all colleges only show the good things” to prospective students and found these conversations to be helpful and important to her decision making.

As Cassandra weighed her college options, her friends helped her deal with her indecision by encouraging her to visualize her future on both campuses, asking, “Where do you see yourself fitting in? Where do you see yourself walking around and liking the campus?” They reminded her of the negative impression she had about one of her admitted schools (LR1) after spending a summer in residential program there. Her friends also pointed out that her face “lights up” when she talked about LSU. These conversations ultimately helped Cassandra make her final decision.

Similarly, Alex explained that a friend’s encouragement was “one of the biggest deciding factors” in her college decision. Alex received an invitation to LR1’s honors college that came with a full scholarship. Alex was hesitant to commit because she worried she might not be able to maintain the GPA required to keep her scholarship. Her friend was the only one she talked to about her fears. She helped Alex explore the source of her anxiety and told her that she could do anything she set her mind to. With her friend’s encouragement, Alex felt more confident about accepting the scholarship

Narratives indicate the unique roles that parents, older siblings, and friends played in decision making. Half of the participants indicated their parents played a limited role in their decision making, and the other half regularly sought their parents’ feedback and advice. Participants who were only children or the oldest sibling seemed to rely on their friend group to a greater degree than those who had older siblings in college, particularly as they considered factors such as campus life and academic programs. Participants also spoke candidly with friends

about their anxieties. Friends knew them well and were trusted to help participants process their anxieties and make sound decisions.

Ultimately, participants took great care to compare their admitted school options with their interests and needs. Some sought online student reviews of campus life and spoke with family members and friends to help them make their decision. Cassandra, who did not get accepted to her top-choice college, was the only participant to decide based on a coin toss. She was eligible for enough federal and state grants to afford the cost of two public universities. Both offered her major and “checked all the boxes.” However, Cassandra viewed LR1 as a “safe” choice. It was the school nearest to her home, where most of her friends were going. LSU represented the “unknown zone”—a school an hour from her house whose campus she fell in love with when she visited with her friend. Cassandra went back and forth on her options and toyed with chance: “I did a coin toss. I used an eight-ball. I Googled it—Pick a Choice, Either-Or. I was so indecisive.” Eventually, all participants made their decisions and enrolled in a 4-year university by May 1. However, even at the time of our interview (i.e., 2 weeks before moving into her residence hall), Cassandra wondered if she made the right choice.

Decision Making

All participants indicated that choosing a college was ultimately their decision. However, most participants either took their parent’s opinions and finances into account or ended up choosing the college their parents preferred.

Most chose to enroll in the college that offered them the best financial award, the one with the least out-of-pocket cost. In late April, four participants received astounding news that strongly influenced their decision. Alex, Chioma, Rico, and Thidar ultimately received renewable institutional scholarships that amounted to “full-ride” funding, which covers the entire

cost of attendance through graduation. These awards were considered game changers that spawned moments of shock and surprise and brought great excitement and relief from financial worry. When asked to describe the moment she told her parents about her scholarship, Thidar gave a big smile and said:

We were all really happy, because I guess like this worry of how we're going to finance college was addressed, and for me at least, I was very relieved that I wouldn't have to force my parents to take on all these debts and loans just for my undergrad, so it was a really nice feeling.

Thidar's parents had previously told her, "Don't let the costs determine what school you want to go to," and it seemed they would figure out a way to make sure she went to a "good" college, even if it meant taking on unmanageable debt. Thidar described earning the scholarship as if a great weight was lifted off their shoulders. Similarly, Alex, Chioma, and Rico expressed happiness and relief that they would be able to go to college without "burdening" their parents with their college expenses. They each ultimately enrolled in the school that offered them the full scholarship.

Rico attributed earning his scholarship award to the work of Ms. B. He regarded Ms. B as the most influential person in his decision to go to SSU and the reason he was in college. Rico first learned about SSU and their scholarship program from Ms. B, and at her suggestion, he scrambled to apply with short notice. When he was notified that he received the scholarship, the first person he called was Ms. B. He excitedly reflected on his decision to go to SSU:

That's what it came down to—they giving me the scholarship and the additional financial aid the school was going to offer me. That's why I chose the school. You know, it's crazy because this was such a last-minute school. I didn't even know it existed until

Ms. B. told me about the scholarship and the school. That's why I find it pretty crazy that I ended up going here.

Rico's experience emphasizes the critical role educators play in linking college-aspiring students with opportunities of which they may be unaware. This was especially important in Rico's case because, as an undocumented student, his funding opportunities were extremely restricted.

Similarly, Azalia regarded her mentor as "the reason" she is in college, sharing:

I had no idea what I was doing. . . . I didn't know anybody who had any idea what they were doing. And it wasn't like I could. . . . I mentioned the elitism in [my magnet school] and everyone was kind of hesitant to offer help. And at the same time, it was embarrassing because like "who doesn't know?" I was the only one—one of the only first-gens. It was awkward. . . . My mentor was gracious and kind. . . . She was really nice enough to check in, like take it to a more personal level. . . . And then I've passed on her information and her tips to anybody else who asked me—anybody that I know that's applying.

Like Rico, Azalia's mentor offered specific guidance she was not getting at her school, guidance that ultimately helped her make an informed college decision. Furthermore, her mentor ensured that her advice fit Azalia's needs as a DACA recipient. Without these educators going above and beyond their expectations, Rico and Azalia felt they would have had very different outcomes.

With federal and state aid, Cassandra's financial award greatly reduced her out-of-pocket expenses until they were close to zero. Cassandra, who was wary of incurring unmanageable debt, considered her no-loan financial award a "blessing." Her federal and state aid essentially amounted to enough money for her to live on campus at the school of her choice, a preference that she was worried she might not be able to afford. As a result, Cassandra left her choice up to

chance (i.e., a coin toss) and decided to go to the school whose campus she fell in love with on a tour.

Although they did not receive full college funding, Mercedes, Jasmine, Trixie, and Azalia ultimately enrolled in a top-choice college that was also affordable. Even Mercedes, whose parents encouraged her not to limit her college dreams because of finances, decided with her parents' budget in mind. Mercedes was relieved her decision worked out best for the family, as she explained:

This is gonna sound stupid, but in Mexico . . . you grew up with cleaning ladies in your house. . . . In the U.S., we still had [a cleaning lady], but my dad knew we needed to save money for college, so we let her go. I felt really bad because [college] was so expensive. LR1 worked out perfectly because it was a school that I wanted to go to so bad and the money situation was the best [for my family].

Even though Mercedes's family experienced economic privilege, she recognized steps taken by her family to cut household expenses so they could afford her college fees. Though she was grateful, she also expressed guilt for their sacrifice. Ultimately, she was happy that her most desired school was also the most affordable one.

Azalia was the only participant who did not choose the least expensive option she was considering—community college. Azalia was aware her family had been saving for her college expenses, and when she received her financial award letter from LR1 she reviewed it with her mother to see what she thought. To reduce costs, they decided for Azalia to live at home. Azalia also identified other benefits for enrolling in LR1 instead of the community college: she would not have to worry about transferability of credits, and she would save on transportation costs (LR1's campus was actually closer to her home than the community college's campus). For these

reasons, she determined that LR1 was “best that I can do with my resources” and worth the investment.

Although Azalia was happy with her college choice, she also expressed disappointment that she did not have as many options as she had hoped. She felt “robbed” of her fantasy to go to her dream school out of state, to have multiple colleges to choose from, and to live on campus.

Azalia explained:

I just felt frustrated, you know, because I was devastated to find out that I could have this amazing resume and still not get enough money. So it felt like all the opportunities that I grew up seeing—everything started zeroing in on one [college] that I had to go to now. Like I didn’t really have that many options in the first place. But I was still grateful. I struggled a lot with the comparison of my experience versus the experience of my peers, because everybody was stressing over what really good school to go to because they were offered money or they had the money to live there. And I know people that live like 5 minutes away from LR1 and live on campus. They have the opportunity, and I’m so happy for them . . . but I couldn’t. I felt paralyzed.

Even though Azalia enrolled in 4-year school, her dreams were greatly limited by the complexities of her residency status. Although she was appreciative to be able to go to college, Azalia still felt cheated out of the same opportunities her peers with citizenship received.

Summary

Participants in this study were all accepted to multiple colleges, a testament to their early family predisposition and their determination and resilience through several obstacles, including a global pandemic. Receiving acceptance letters brought great joy, excitement, and pride to participants and their parents. In many ways, participants’ acceptance letters represented the

fulfilled hopes of their parents, who migrated to the United States for better opportunities for their families.

Previous research has suggested low-income students typically choose their college based on affordability (Burd et al., 2018), and study participants were no exception. However, this study revealed how participants carefully weighed costs, institutional characteristics, and personal needs before making their college decision. Fortunately, four of 10 participants earned a renewable, full-ride scholarship to a school that met their preferences. One participant, who dreamed of living on campus, qualified for enough federal and state aid to make that happen. The other five participants selected a college they desired and that their families could afford. Although all participants selected a college their parents approved of, they indicated their college choice was ultimately their decision. In fact, several participants recalled conversations when their parents explicitly stated that their college choice would be solely up to them.

To make their college decision, most participants sought support and guidance from their friends, peers, and older siblings. A few participants indicated that they reviewed letters and discussed budgets with their parents. Conversely, a few others said they reviewed their financial award letters on their own and, if needed, sought guidance from web-based resources or university agents. Ultimately, each participant identified one or more individuals who assisted them throughout their college choice process: from searching for schools and testing to applying and making their college decision. A few participants identified educators who went well above their expectations to assist them. Rico and Azalia, who were noncitizens, strongly emphasized that they might not be in college now if not for educators who were personally invested in their success and provided resources that addressed their unique needs.

Summary of Findings

The themes presented in this chapter offer insight into the precollege experiences of immigrant students of color who, despite facing multiple and layered barriers, achieved their stated goal of going to college. Participants set early aspirations to go to college and expectations that were first and foremost fostered by their parents. Participants' motivations for college were influenced by a sense that their education was part of a greater family story. For some, they were continuing a pre-migration legacy of college attendance in a U.S. context. For others, they were taking advantage of opportunities their parents did not have in their home countries. Most participants learned from their parents that an education, and a college degree specifically, was the ticket to success for themselves and for their families. As a result, parents fostered a college-going mindset that was reinforced by siblings and extended family as well as in their schools, communities, and among their peers.

Participants experienced significant moments or turning points on their path to higher education. As they commenced their college search, participants not only learned more about various types of institutions and costs, but they also assessed their interests, needs, academic credentials, and family circumstances. Participants who were noncitizens or who migrated as an adolescent described hard realities that influenced their confidence and motivations for college and narrowed their choice set. Despite these hard realities, participants found ways to cope with their emotions, gather information and guidance from web-based resources and individuals, reassess their college goals, and develop strategies to navigate college applications. In addition to hard realities, participants also described uplifting moments, for example, receiving acceptance letters and prestigious scholarship awards they were not expecting. Each participant expressed gratitude to multiple people in their network, attributing their encouragement, support, and

guidance to their success. When the time came to make their college decision, each participant had multiple options, and their parents let them decide. Parents communicated clear parameters for cost and location, and they seemed to trust their child's ability to take these factors into consideration and make a sound decision. Ultimately, all participants enrolled in a college that (a) took their family's financial situation into account and (b) met their parents' approval.

Participants also developed perspectives and mindsets that buoyed their determination to persist, in the era of COVID-19, on their path to higher education. Although these participants applied to college during "unprecedented times," their experiences can heighten awareness about how low-income immigrant students of color ultimately leverage capital developed within their immigrant experiences, families, and communities to enroll in higher education despite multiple interconnected layers of social and economic disadvantage.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION

This dissertation examines the college choice process for low-income Asian, Black, and Latinx immigrants. Specifically, this study considers how much immigrant youth, across race and ethnicity, draw upon resources connected to their immigrant identity and experiences to set aspirations for college, access information, navigate the application process, and make an enrollment decision. This narrative inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How do low-income, first-generation immigrant students of color engage in the college search and choice process?
 - a. What tools and resources do students use?
 - b. Who assists them and in what ways?
 - c. How are they making sense of their experiences, significant moments and turning points and strategizing in this process?
- (2) How do various forms of capital and community resources shape students' college choice process?

Findings illustrate that participants' early aspirations for college developed within their family, primarily stemming from their parents' expectations for school success and their older siblings' academic and college role modeling. Participants' teachers, as early as elementary school, strengthened their early college mindset by speaking positively about higher education and fostering college knowledge. As a result, participants developed both internal and external motivation for college-going. For example, participants developed a love for learning and an interest in the academic and social aspects of college. They also viewed college as a way to honor and repay their parents for their hard work and sacrifice and the best way to attain an interesting career with a good salary in the future. During high school, participants transitioned

from holding aspirations to active college search, and relied on web-based resources and a network of family members, peers, and educators to enhance their college knowledge. Participants continued to rely on their Internet research skills and social networks to complete applications, make sense of their options, and enroll in an institution that met their financial and academic needs. Along the way, participants faced many challenges, including a global pandemic, public health lockdowns, and an abrupt transition to remote learning. These experiences caused participants great uncertainty and stress and impacted how they engaged with the college search and choice process. Ultimately, all participants enrolled in a 4-year institution in the fall after high school graduation. In essence, participants fulfilled not only their lifelong goal of going to college, but they also fulfilled their parents' migration hopes for their children to take advantage of educational opportunities in the United States.

This final chapter presents a summary of this study, addresses the guiding research questions, and outlines key conclusions and implications for research, practice, and policy. I first summarize the study's background, theoretical frameworks, and extant literature about precollege immigrant-origin youth. Then, I briefly describe the methods used to address the research questions. Next, I review major findings in alignment with each research question, with attention to extant literature and this study's theoretical framework. I conclude this chapter by acknowledging the limitations of this investigation and present implications for future research, practice, and policy.

Overview of Study

This investigation was inspired by my personal experiences as a child of Black West Indian immigrants and my experiences as a school counselor in Silver Spring, Maryland, the fifth most diverse city in the United States (McCann, 2022). In this role, I connected and found

solidarity with immigrant youth and families from all over the world. Though our traditions and heritage languages were often different, I noticed similarities in our upbringings (e.g., the straddling of two cultures, stern messages that education was the reason we moved to the United States, and a close-knit trusted community of coethnic families). I also recognized ways our experiences diverged and my privilege as a U.S. citizen and native English speaker with college-educated parents. I considered how factors like these determined family's migration and resettlement experiences. I also wondered if there was something common operating within immigrant families that influenced the educational trajectories of their children, specifically their path to higher education.

To address my curiosity, I embarked on an investigation of the precollege experiences of first- and second-generation immigrant youth. Immigrant-origin students are one of the fastest growing groups in the K–12 system. Data from the 2015 American Community Survey show 23% of public school students are from an immigrant household, up from 7% in 1980 (Camarota et al., 2017). Data also show population growth has been occurring in both traditional immigrant destinations, like Miami and Washington, DC, and regions that until recently had little to no experience with immigration. Between 2000 and 2009, these emerging destinations, like South Carolina, Delaware, and Nevada, experienced an inflow of immigrants at or above twice the national rate (Terrazas, 2011).

As a result of this growth, the national P–16 landscape is more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. As reflected in a 2020 article in *The New York Times*, children from immigrant families are becoming the face of U.S. higher education (Jordan, 2020). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020), in 2018, more than 5.3 million immigrant-origin students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. This share represents 28%

of the college population, up from 20% in 2000. The increasing presence of youth from immigrant-households in education systems calls for a greater understanding of the characteristics represented within this population (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020).

Increased immigrant college enrollment has been occurring during a sociohistorical period marked by heightened anti-immigrant attitudes (Anti-Defamation League, 2018; Esses & Hamilton, 2021). Although xenophobic attitudes and nativist appeals are not new phenomena in U.S. history and culture (Hirschman et al., 1999), the election of Donald Trump and the racist rhetoric of his campaign activated an underlying anti-immigrant sentiment in citizens who fear being displaced by foreigners, people of color, and those who represent other marginalized identities (Konrad, 2018; Newman et al., 2018). The Biden administration reversed several Trump-era immigration restrictions in its first year and has promised to build a fair, orderly immigration system (The White House, 2021). However, immigration has continued to be a contentious topic in news and politics (e.g., 2022 bussing of migrants from Texas to sanctuary cities), and immigrant advocates demand meaningful immigration reform that includes federal policies expanding access to education and opportunity for youth from immigrant families in the United States (Higher Education Immigration Portal, n.d.; Strauss, 2022).

Immigrant students are likely to hold multiple marginalized identities and face systematic disadvantage that blocks access to college education (Baum & Flores, 2007; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011). For example, immigrant youth are likely to be students of color, low-income, and have parents that did not complete college (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020; Baum & Flores, 2011; Enchautegui, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Erisman & Looney, 2007). First-generation immigrants must also adjust to U.S. cultural norms while transitioning to and navigating unfamiliar primary and secondary school systems to get to higher education (Kim & Díaz, 2013).

Immigrant youth are likely to enter the United States with limited English proficiency (Bleakley & Chin, 2004) and may hold an immigration status that limits their eligibility for financial aid (Gonzales, 2012).

As a result of these and other factors, first-generation immigrant youth generally enroll in and complete college at a lower rate than second- and later-generation peers (Kim & Díaz, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Yet, research has also shown an immigrant advantage in college enrollment, particularly for students from Asia and Africa (Erisman & Looney, 2007); naturalized U.S. citizens (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005); and students who arrived as young children (Kim & Díaz, 2013). Although demographic characteristics complicate the notion of a universal immigrant advantage, research has suggested that parents' optimistic views about opportunities in the United States drive their children's academic performance and precollege disposition (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Louie, 2004). In this manner, parental optimism may be a form of capital immigrant youth leverage to access higher education (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016).

The disparity in college enrollment based on nationality and other characteristics shows the complexities of college access for immigrant youth and illustrates a need for greater understanding in this area. By conducting this research project, I (a) gained an understanding of how low-income immigrant students of color, across race and national origin, navigated their path to college, (b) focused on an understudied aspect of college planning—college search, described as developmental stage (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) when students rule in (and rule out) postsecondary institutions prior to application, and (c) countered traditional deficit approaches by considering the various forms of capital (e.g., community cultural wealth) immigrant students draw upon along their journey to higher education.

This narrative inquiry study offers a detailed analysis of how participants, foreign-born Asian, Black, and Latinx college students, navigated college search and decision making. Although participants faced myriad challenges on their path to college, the focus of this study is on the assets and strategies participants used to access higher education. Findings highlight participants' lived experiences and needs, and how their needs were met (or not met), and how they leveraged both social and psychological capital to enroll in college. The implications of this study hold relevance for K–16 educators, researchers, and policy makers who embrace a strengths-based, anti-deficit approach to effectively serve the growing population of immigrant youth and position youth to contribute to society.

Theoretical Frameworks

I chose two frameworks to guide this investigation: (a) Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) student college choice model and (b) Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework. Hossler and Gallagher's model describes a three-stage student-centered developmental approach to college choice: predisposition (i.e., setting early aspirations for postsecondary education), search (i.e., researching colleges and developing a choice set), and choice (i.e., completing applications and selecting and enrolling in college; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989). Yosso's model, rooted in critical race theory, offers an asset-based approach to understanding the cultural wealth that People of Color possess, nurture, and use within their families and communities. Community cultural wealth is leveraged toward survival in social systems that center White middle-class experiences. Yosso's model asserts that Communities of Color nurture cultural wealth through at least six forms of capital: aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, resistant, and social. Inspired by Yosso's model, I introduced and defined the concept of *immigrant capital*: a term that captures tangible and intangible assets

leveraged by immigrant families to cope with, counter, and overcome marginalization and oppressive structures in their new environment. Forms of immigrant capital include the following: migration narrative, immigrant optimism, dual frame of reference, premigration habitus, obligation ethos, narrow success frame, and ethnic capital. Collectively, these concepts offer this research study a perspective that centers the assets of immigrant students as they navigate a path from predisposition to college enrollment.

Summary of Literature Review

The review of literature that framed this investigation includes scholarship on both first- and second-generation immigrants and generally conveys three findings: (a) a key pull factor for immigrant adults is educational opportunity for their children, (b) immigrant parents' optimism drives their children's early academic outcomes and college aspirations, (c) multiple forms of capital are leveraged toward college search, application, and decisions making.

Immigrant families face myriad financial, social, and psychological challenges as they migrate and resettle in the United States. Some immigrants arrive after enduring difficult circumstances in their home country, such as economic instability and community conflict (Krishnakumar & Indumathi, 2014). All immigrants experience the stress of a major life change, leaving behind loved ones, familiar social institutions, and cultural traditions (Casado et al., 2010). Upon arrival, immigrants often struggle to learn U.S. norms and customs and how to access and navigate basic resources, such as social services, transportation, and education (Garrett, 2006; Singer, 2012). Additionally, foreign-born residents often face social discrimination and racist and xenophobic attitudes in their new environments (Morey et al., 2018; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). A key pull factor for foreigners is hope to achieve the "American

Dream,” which often includes upward mobility and opportunities for their children’s education (Buriel, 2012; He et al., 2017; Lopez et al., 2018; Knight et al., 2016).

Because of their hope in the American Dream, immigrant parents may be more likely than nonimmigrant parents to hold high educational aspirations and more optimistic views about their children’s opportunities to succeed in the U.S. education system (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Hirschman, 2001; Kao & Tienda, 1995). Research demonstrates that parental optimism and aspirations drive the academic performance and college enrollment of their children (Baum & Flores, 2011; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016; Callahan & Humphries, 2016; Hofferth & Moon, 2016; Lauderdale & Heckman, 2017; Louie, 2004; Raleigh & Kao, 2010). Parental optimism appears consistent across immigrant families despite differences between and within ethnic groups and the economic disadvantage many immigrants face postmigration (Louie, 2005).

In addition to parental optimism, scholars (e.g., Fuligni, 2012; Pong & Zeiser, 2012) highlight other resources and assets that immigrant students make use of that lend to their success. These resources include (a) premigration habitus and ethnic pride (Louie, 2005), (b) strong family and community ties (Hofferth & Moon, 2016; Pang et al., 2010), and (c) community resources that align with the family’s values and aspirations (Hofferth & Moon, 2016). These assets represent a form of capital that operates in diverse immigrant populations. In this research study, I conceptualized these assets as *immigrant capital* that promotes and supports high occupational and educational aspirations in immigrant-origin students.

The body of literature (e.g., Carey, 2016; Hernández, 2015; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Pérez, 2010; Romo et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2013) on precollege immigrant students reveals that they use multiple forms of capital, including community cultural wealth and immigrant capital, throughout the college choice process. Students’ aspirations for college are often embedded

within the family's narrative of migration, sacrifice, hope, and collective achievement (Burrell-McRae, 2009; Fernández-Kelly, 2008; He et al., 2017; Kang & Raffaelli, 2016; Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Kao, 2004; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). Family predisposition, in turn, fosters internal and external motivation for college-going (George Mwangi et al., 2020; Romo et al., 2018; Surla & Poon, 2015). As students engage in racist, sexist, and nativist social systems operating within the U.S. context, they may also develop college aspirations to counter and resist marginalization, prejudice, and discrimination (Burrell-McRae, 2009; Daoud et al., 2018; George Mwangi et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2012; Imaogene, 2017; Kebede, 2017; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Motivation, cultural pride, and resistance can be viewed as individual traits, or psychological capital, that help students aspire to, enroll in, and succeed in higher education (Imaogene, 2017; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2014).

As immigrant students begin to research and apply to colleges, they rely on familial and nonfamilial capital to identify colleges to apply to and navigate the multistep college and financial aid application process (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Surla & Poon, 2015). Research has suggested students' choices are often shaped by their family's narrow definition of success that prioritizes not just going to college but attending a "good" (e.g., prestigious) college (e.g., Imaogene, 2017; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Lee & Zhou, 2015; Surla & Poon, 2015). The literature (Allen et al., 2020; Surla & Poon, 2015) has also suggested immigrant youth may rely on the opinion of family members and extended kin more than their native counterparts and feel a sense of obligation to incorporate familial needs throughout the search and choice process (Flores, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2010; Hernández, 2015; Surla & Poon, 2015). Finally, immigrant youth may uniquely benefit from familial and social networks that include

members who speak the same language, ascribe to familiar cultural traditions, and share resources within a closed inter-generational community (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Louie, 2005; Oropeza et al., 2010; Park, 2012; Ryan & Ream, 2016).

Although research (e.g., Romo et al., 2019; Surla & Poon, 2015; Tang et al., 2013; Welton & Martinez, 2014) has applied an asset-based approach to understanding the college choice experiences of immigrant students of color, the confluence of literature engages participants who share a racial or ethnic identity. It is important to center the racialized experiences of precollege immigrants, but these studies do not explain whether immigrant youth, across racial groups, draw from similar forms of capital to access college. This gap in scholarship presents an opportunity to consider similarities across race and ethnicity and the multiple forms of capital (e.g., tools, strategies, and resources) immigrants use to access a college education.

Summary of Methods

This research project was conducted as a narrative study, an approach that is “best for capturing detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Creswell, 2013, pp. 73–74). I invited 10 immigrant students enrolled in their first semester of college to share detailed accounts of their path to college and defining moments in their journey, such as when they first decided to pursue a college education or when they received their first college acceptance. I also reviewed one college or scholarship essay written by each participant—a first-person narrative that reflected how aspects of their personality, background, or life experiences influenced their college and career goals. Using these methods, I gained a sense of participants’ characteristics, emotions, motivations, and values (Wertz et al.,

2011), how participants integrated significant moments in the larger narratives of their lives, and how they used multiple forms of capital on their path to college.

Data analysis primarily occurred in three stages: data cleaning, crafting participant profiles, and cross-participant coding and thematic analysis. Coding included open inductive methods, axial coding, and deductive analysis to identify themes that mapped to the theoretical frameworks and extant literature. To ensure accuracy and credibility, I engaged in a process of member checking, whereby I shared my version of each participant's profile with them for their review and feedback. I also employed additional techniques generally accepted as elements of sound qualitative research, such as memoing, triangulation, and peer review.

Review of Findings

Chapter 5 summarizes participants' precollege experiences in three sections: predisposition, search and applications, and college decisions. These sections convey themes that describe how (a) participants first developed and nurtured their college aspirations; (b) they navigated college search, SAT testing, and the college and financial aid application process during a global pandemic; and (c) they weighed their admissions options and ultimately decided where to enroll.

Participants first developed and nurtured college aspirations within their immigrant families, who, as early as elementary school, held them to high standards for achievement. Going to college served as an extension of these high standards, as most parents explicitly communicated college expectations from a young age. Parental expectations were framed within the context of premigration family history. College-experienced parents told stories about attending college in their homeland; parents who did not attend college spoke of missed or constrained opportunities in their home country and their hopes for their children to take full

advantage of the education they never got. Parental expectations were reinforced by instrumental behaviors and involvement such as monitoring grades, visiting college campuses, and enrolling their children in private schools and college prep programs. Parental expectations were also reinforced by a larger family, school, and church network in which most people spoke positively about college and encouraged participants' aspirations.

As a result, participants developed both internal and external motivation for college. From a young age, most participants enjoyed school and developed a love for learning. They also viewed college as the best or only way to achieve "success," which was perceived as getting a nonmanual labor job, earning a "good" salary, and helping their families financially. Several participants' aspirations were grounded by a desire to honor their parents, make them proud, or pay them back for their investments and sacrifices. Other participants viewed earning a college degree as an act of resistance—a way to seize opportunity in systems that blocked access for women, People of Color, and immigrants.

Collectively, these experiences sparked participants' predispositions toward college, nurtured an early college mindset, and promoted early college-going behaviors, such as getting good grades and seeking advanced courses. Although all participants developed a strong early predisposition, it also came with pressure to succeed and anxiety about navigating a college application process that was foreign to them and their parents.

The U.S. college application process can be daunting, confusing, and stressful, even for nonimmigrant college-experienced families. In the context of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic added a complicated and unprecedented layer to participants' processes. Participants were high school juniors in March 2020 when the pandemic emerged, and the country entered lockdown. As a result, participants faced uncertainty, stress, social isolation, and a decrease in

motivation. Yet, participants drew on their psychological resources (e.g., goal setting, navigation skills, determination) to figure out test-optional policies, make testing decisions, and complete applications. Participants also developed strategies to identify and assess their personal and academic priorities and compare them to college information. Participants relied on their own Internet research skills to find guidance in articles and videos. Participants also used searchable college databases (e.g., College Board, Naviance) to compare their GPA and SAT scores to admitted student data. In a time of unprecedented challenges, these actions helped students create their choice set (i.e., colleges of interest).

When they were young, participants heard that college was expensive. However, as they researched colleges, they learned the actual prices for college tuition and room and board, and they were “blown away” by the reality of college funding. A few participants experienced additional and especially “hard realities” when they had to let go of their fantasy colleges and set realistic options due to limitations of their residency status or family situation. High costs caused several participants to prioritize affordability (i.e., Maryland public colleges and universities) in their college search. Although all participants applied to at least one public institution in the state, some prioritized other factors in creating their choice sets, such as college major and campus environment.

As participants transitioned to senior year, they determined which colleges and universities they would actually apply to by revisiting their choice sets and personal preferences. Participants, who were busy juggling rigorous courses and senior year projects, also considered the time it would take to complete the application and application fees. All participants experienced a moderate to high level of stress and anxiety, particularly concerning college essays and FAFSA. As participants waited for college decisions, a few continued to feel a high level of

anxiety. They managed their anxiety in several ways, including avoiding discussions about college, holding realistic expectations, and not getting their hopes up for any one outcome or school.

Although participants' parents continued to encourage college-going in high school, most participants did not name their parents as "most helpful" to their college search and choice process. Participants perceived their parents as unable to help because they did not know about the U.S. college application process nor understand the stress and pressures they experienced. Most participants relied on older siblings, friends, and educators or figured things out independently using Internet resources for guidance. One underrecognized parental contribution evident in participants' narratives was inspiring their college essays. Participants' essays uniquely supplemented their college applications by conveying how their parents' migration and resettlement experiences shaped their values, work ethic, and motivation for higher education.

All participants ultimately received acceptance letters from multiple schools. Participants carefully weighed their admissions offers by comparing the out-of-pocket costs outlined in their financial award letter. In addition to affordability, participants considered the pros and cons of each institution, revisited the priorities they first outlined when researching colleges, and determined to what extent each admitted institution aligned with their priorities and needs.

To make their college decision, most participants sought support and guidance from their friends, peers, and older siblings. Half reviewed letters and discussed budgets with their parents. Conversely, others reviewed their financial award letters on their own and, if needed, sought guidance from web-based resources or university agents. Ultimately, each participant identified one or more individuals who assisted them throughout their college choice process: from searching for schools and testing to applying and making their college decision. A few

participants identified educators who went well above their expectations to assist them and indicated they might not be in college now if it were not for that individual.

Although all participants selected a college their parents approved of, they all indicated their college choice was ultimately their decision. In fact, several participants recalled conversations when their parents explicitly stated that their college choice would be solely up to them. However, most participants took their parents' opinions and finances into account and ended up choosing the college their parents preferred.

Discussion of Findings

Participants' narratives support and extend existing literature on the precollege experiences of immigrant-origin students. This section addresses the study's research questions, connecting findings to the extant literature as well as this study's theoretical frameworks.

One of the most distinctive features of this study is its focus on activities typically subsumed under the broad category of "college search and choice" (e.g., Hossler & Gallaher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989). Ultimately, the findings lend credence to scholars' (e.g., Iloh, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018) critique that the student college choice model does not adequately account for the multiple and complex steps in college search and choice. For example, the model largely omits college entrance exam preparation, testing, and score review. Yet, SAT and ACT scores greatly affect college admissions (even in a test-optional context) and present barriers for students traditionally underrepresented in higher education (Klasik et al., 2018). However, for the purpose of this section, note that I use the phrase "college search and choice" to include the following: searching for college information; assessing one's priorities, preferences, and interests; developing a choice set (list of colleges of interest); registering, preparing for, and taking college entrance exams; developing the application set (list of colleges to apply to),

completing college applications; completing financial aid applications (e.g., FAFSA, state grants, or scholarships); reviewing college decision and financial award letters; making a college decision; and enrolling in college.

Addressing Research Question 1: How Do Low-Income, First-Generation Immigrant Students of Color Engage in the College Search and Choice Process?

I will address the first research question in three sections: (a) tools and resources used, (b) individuals who assisted them, and (c) sensemaking and strategizing.

1a. What Tools and Resources Do Students Use?

Participants first learned the names of colleges (e.g., most commonly, Ivy League institutions or LR1) when they were children, usually from parents and other family members. These names served as “placeholders” by temporarily representing the college they might attend in the future. Consistent with the student college choice model and later research (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989; Terenzini et al., 2001), most participants went from having college placeholders in middle school to actively looking for college information in their junior year. However, data reveal that participants who enrolled in AVID in middle school began their college search early. Their AVID curriculum prompted participants to engage in an in-depth exploration of their academic and career interests, college majors, college locations and campus life, and college costs 2–3 years before the other participants. Through this curriculum, participants identified colleges they actually applied to as seniors. This finding suggests that middle school assignments can hold meaning and value for college-aspiring students, strengthening early college knowledge and influencing later college application behaviors (Smith et al., 2022).

The student college choice model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) asserts students have limited credible information about postsecondary options when they begin college searches. As a result, students may erroneously eliminate a good-fit college from their early search and choice sets (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Given their access to the Internet, participants' early research was not hindered by a lack of access to credible information. Data reveal that participants used a broad range of web-based resources, including searchable college databases (e.g., College Board, College Review, and Naviance), institutional websites, centralized application systems, social media, and search engines. Participants used these web-based tools to learn about a wide range of institutions, including their early placeholder colleges. As they reviewed college information online, they simultaneously learned more about relevant college characteristics, such as academic programs, campus facilities, and campus life, that would inform their choices (Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996). Data reveal participants also compared their application credentials (e.g., GPA, SAT score) to admitted student data found online, which helped them decide whether to add a school to their choice set (Kim & Gasman, 2011). Most participants conducted sophisticated and efficient searches to gain information, assess their fit, and ultimately craft a choice and application set of colleges aligned with their academic profile, personal needs, and preferences.

Similar to Addington's (2012) study, participants frequently visited college websites and found them helpful. Participants generally viewed websites to gather school-specific and "official" information, like tuition and housing costs, majors, and clubs. Participants also visited college websites to get a sense of what makes a school stand out (e.g., "what they're really proud of"). Through the college's website, participants accessed online campus tours and virtual admission sessions. Once the pandemic emerged and closed physical campuses, participants

relied on virtual opportunities to engage with admissions personnel (Srivasta & Weeks, 2021). However, most participants had visited campuses prior to COVID-19 (e.g., on official tours or with older siblings) and these visits were recalled and considered during college research and decision-making (Allen et al., 2020; Surla & Poon, 2015). Finally, participants engaged with college websites to access the online application. Most colleges provided a link to take students to a centralized application system (e.g., Common Application or Coalition). Participants used these centralized systems to create one application that could be sent to multiple institutions. Research has shown the convenience of these systems encourages students to apply to more schools than perhaps they would have otherwise (Bauer-Wolf, 2022). This study did not assess intended versus actual number of schools participants applied to. However, most participants applied to 6–10 institutions, and one participant applied to more than 16.

Throughout college search and choice, several participants specifically sought student reviews on social media to ensure they would get a fuller picture of life at a particular campus. Participants watched YouTube and TikTok videos highlighting “a day in the life” of students at their colleges of interest. They also sought “honest” reviews on websites like College Niche. When making their enrollment choice, participants took these student reviews into consideration.

Googling was the most common activity participants used to find college information. Google was free and easily accessible on their computers or phones. Googling yielded links to searchable databases and college websites. By “Googling it,” participants also accessed sample college essays and articles on a range of topics, such as reviewing a financial aid award letter. Participants also Googled questions like “Should I apply test-optional?” to consider whether to take the SAT/ACT during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, Googling did not always answer participants’ questions to their satisfaction, and one participant expressed great

frustration with online information throughout college search and choice. At times, Kassandra did not understand what she read online or know how to apply general information to her unique circumstances. Although only one participant expressed this sentiment, Kassandra's narrative suggests that web-based tools cannot replace other forms of social capital, such as individualized guidance from a family member or school counselor, in the college search and choice process.

These findings partially support the limited research (Addington, 2012; Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013) on information-seeking behaviors of precollege students. Daun-Barnett and Das's (2013) research examined the content and presentation of web-based comprehensive college access resources, including College Board. They conclude that low-income or first-generation-in-college students might be less comfortable navigating web-based resources and, therefore, may be at a disadvantage in accessing college information. In this study, participants seemed at ease with and effectively used a wide range of web-based resources, and they used each type of resource for a different purpose (e.g., college websites for verified school-specific information, social media for candid student testimonials). Daun-Barnett and Das (2013) also concluded that the amount of information students have is only as good as their ability to use it. I extend their point to include *use*, *accurately assess*, and *apply* information to their unique circumstances. With a plethora of web-based resources that vary in style and substance (Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013), students need access plus support from informed others to integrate these resources effectively into their college planning.

1b. Who Assists Them and in What Ways?

Each participant had the assistance of multiple individuals who supported their college search and choice. This network included parents, older siblings, peers and friends, and educators.

Parents. Consistent with student college choice theory (Hossler et al., 1989) and the literature (Hernández, 2015; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Poon & Byrd, 2015; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012) parents continued to encourage college aspirations and set and communicate parameters (e.g., proximity to home and affordability) that guided participants' search and choice. However, previous research (e.g., Erisman & Looney, 2007; Gonzalez, 2017; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012) has indicated that because immigrant parents tend to have a limited knowledge of the higher education system and application process, they do not have a high level of involvement in their children's search and choice activities. This study provides partial support to prior research. Though some participants described their parents as not involved, other participants' parents had a high level of involvement. For example, all participants' parents recommended colleges they learned about from friends and coworkers or colleges their older children attended. All parents communicated their preferences for a low-cost school close to home, which ultimately guided participants' application set and final decisions. Parents who were highly involved called schools for information and advocated for their child's needs, discussed the family budget and availability of college funds, and reviewed financial award letters as a family.

Participants in this study indicated that their parents left their college choice up to them, as found in previous scholarship (Hernández, 2015). Five participants said their parents played little or no role in their decision making, while the other five indicated that their parents were involved but wanted them to make their own choice. Similar to high-achieving first- and later-generation Latinas in Hernández's (2015) study, even when parents presented college as the participants' choice, participants carefully considered how their choice would affect their ability to stay connected with family and impact their family's finances. Even though no parent made

their child's college decision, all participants' search and choice activities were influenced by parental preferences and family finances. Ultimately, all participants made a college decision that (a) took their family's financial situation into account and (b) would meet their parents' approval. In this regard, immigrant parents may have a strong influence, albeit indirect or unrecognized, on their child's decision making.

Even though most participants named specific ways their parents influenced and supported their college search and choice, participants generally expressed doubt in their parents' ability to assist them. This finding is consistent with research on immigrant students (Allen et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2016). Participants felt that because their parents were immigrants, they were unable to truly understand the complicated process they had to go through and provide informed guidance. As a result, most participants seemed to overlook the ways their parents supported them and did not readily seek their parents' advice. Parents also seemed to believe they had limited ability to guide their children's activities and encouraged participants to seek counsel from older siblings and informed educators. Although school and community agents provide valuable college knowledge to immigrant families (Auerbach, 2004; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011), findings suggest immigrant students and parents may overlook important and impactful parental behaviors that support college search and choice.

Siblings. Studies with immigrant youth show that siblings who have attended college serve an important role during search and choice (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Alvarez, 2010; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Pierre-Louis, 2020; Surla & Poon, 2015). Four of 10 participants had older college-experienced siblings. Not only did these participants have familial college role models to observe and emulate, they also benefitted from instrumental support with activities such as college research, SAT prep, application essay review, and financial planning (Carey, 2016;

Hernández, 2015; Surla & Poon, 2015). As relatives, older siblings were uniquely positioned to offer advice that incorporated family needs and was contextualized within the family's culture and values (Flores, 2018; Surla & Poon). This research suggests that participants with older siblings have a college-going advantage compared to those who do not (Kim & Gasman, 2011). Similar to the Haitian immigrants in Pierre-Louis' (2020) research, participants in this study viewed the support of older siblings as a valuable commodity and used this support throughout college search and choice.

Peers and Friends. Previous literature describes the benefits of students' college-aspiring peer network in college search and choice (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Collins et al., 2016; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Martinez, 2012; Pérez, 2010). As reflected in Savitz-Romer and Bouffard's (2012) work, peers can establish a norm of college-going, influence the types of colleges students are interested in, and work together to complete applications. Participants' narratives indicate that the college-going culture within their peer groups set norms not just for 4-year schools but for highly selective institutions.

In this study, the majority of participants named friends as the "most helpful" individuals who assisted their college search and choice (Alvarez, 2010; Neimeyer, 2009; Surla & Poon, 2015). Similar to previous research, friends were described as sharing college and scholarship information, reminders about deadlines, and tips on SAT preparation and financial aid (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Pérez, 2010). Friends also provided invaluable emotional support by helping process fears and anxieties about making the "right" college decision. As found in Pérez's (2010) research with Latinx undocumented college students, participants in this study found great value in the advice of older friends who were in college. Older friends used their own search and choice experiences to offer advice on navigating college financing and

living and learning in majority White campus environments. Older friends also gave candid reviews of their college experience, including their level of satisfaction.

Participants' networks were tight-knit, collaborative, noncompetitive, and trusting, which reflects the kind of lateral and near-peer mentorship experienced by Latinx participants in research (e.g., Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Alvarez, 2010; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Pérez, 2010). Friends were especially helpful to participants who were only children or the first of their siblings to go to college. In some ways, friends who were often coethnic immigrants themselves, replicated the familial assistance that participants with siblings enjoyed. In fact, although all participants valued peer support, data suggest peer support is most critical for participants who do not have older college-experienced siblings.

Educators. Research informing the student college choice model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) suggests that minoritized students, namely Black, low-income, and first-generation-college-bound, rely on high school counselors for advice. Extant research with low-income immigrant students of color extends this finding, as educators often play a critical role in supporting a population of students who face multiple intersectional barriers to college (Allen et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2016; Hernández, 2015; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Surla & Poon, 2015). Consistent with studies on immigrant college students (Allen et al., 2020; Hernández, 2015), each participant in this study had the support, advice, and guidance of at least one trusted educator, and four participants indicated that these educators' assistance went above and beyond their expectations. Teachers helped participants expand their college knowledge by sharing their personal insights about majors or including college search and application tasks in the curriculum. School counselors offered general guidance and personalized advice through virtual meetings and email communication. College access program staff also

offered personalized advice and support with college essays, financial planning, and weighing college options. As a result, most participants drew knowledge and support from a wide network of teachers, counselors, college coaches, and mentors.

Research (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Pérez, 2010) has shown the impact that meaningful relationships with school-based personnel can have on the college search and choice experiences of undocumented students, in particular. Even one educator who is knowledgeable about resources for undocumented students can make an impactful difference (Allen et al., 2020; Romo et al., 2018). A notable relationship is the one Rico had with his former school counselor, Ms. B. Rico was the only participant who expressed a lack of guidance from school staff, and Rico was not enrolled in a CAP, so he did not have the benefit of a small college prep community. Over a 9-month period, Ms. B shepherded every step of Rico's college search and choice process, insisting he follow through and holding him accountable. Ms. B knew Rico was undocumented and guided his application process with this status in mind.

Though Ms. B and Rico's relationship is noteworthy, it reveals a critical gap in service for highly motivated college-aspiring students who happen to be undocumented. Data suggest that undocumented students, in particular, need targeted outreach, tailored and intrusive advising, and a smaller college-going network to help them navigate their path to college. Access to these resources ensures all students are empowered with information and support, so they do not have to depend solely on chance encounters from trusted educators to fulfill their college dreams.

To summarize, parents set parameters for college search, suggested colleges for their children to consider, and a few were highly involved with college financial planning. Additionally, parents influenced the application set and participants' college decisions. Siblings offered instrumental support with search and applications and family-based advice. Peers set

norms for college-going (e.g., institutions and institutional types); provided lateral mentorship and college search and application support; and provided emotional support. Educators gave general information and advice and advice tailored to students' residency status.

1c. How Are Low-Income Immigrant Students of Color Making Sense of Their Experiences, Significant Moments, and Turning Points and Strategizing in This Process?

To conceptualize sense-making, I draw from Savitz-Romer and Bouffard's (2012) book *Ready, Willing, and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success*. Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012) asserted that college-going is largely determined by social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of adolescent development. These aspects include the meaning students make of their precollege experiences, their emotions and how they attribute negative and positive outcomes, and how their interpretations of events influence their motivation and decision-making. Participants' narratives convey these critical but often overlooked developmental aspects of college search and choice.

Going From Fantasy to Reality to Choice Set. When participants first visualized their college futures, some dreamed of a "fairy tale" or a "fantasy" of going out of state to fancy-sounding colleges where they lived carefree lives away from their families. Although participants learned at a young age that college costs money and might be expensive, their early fantasies were not limited by finances, and most assumed they would earn scholarships that would cover the price of college.

Participants' early aspirations align with the student college choice model in that initial search activities are often uninformed and unrealistic (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). As participants moved from early aspirations to active college research, they gained knowledge that altered and constrained their early visions. Though most participants seemed to easily adjust their

college vision to fit the reality of their family budget, for example, others experienced unanticipated challenges and “hard realities” that revealed that they were at a great disadvantage due to residency status or lack of preparation. After experiencing shock, devastation, and regret at these turning points, participants eventually accepted the limitations of their circumstances, realized their original vision might not work out, recommitted to college-going, and created a different vision. This finding further reveals participants’ psychological traits like determination, resilience, and self-regulation that helped them overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers.

College choice theory (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) posits that students do not always use information in a completely rational and logical manner during college search. However, narratives generally contradict this assumption. As participants learned more about college options and considered their needs and preferences, they engaged in a continuous and cyclical process of information gathering, reflection, self-assessment, and strategizing (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996). For example, when comparing their GPA with admitted student data found online, some participants were “humbled” because their GPA was much lower. This information prompted participants to think critically and strategically about the number of “reach,” “match,” and “safety” schools they were considering. As a result, participants added or deleted schools from their choice set, thus refining their interests.

As their college search progressed, most participants prioritized affordability, which prompted them to narrow their search to in-state public schools (Allen et al., 2020) or research private schools that offered lucrative scholarships and financial awards. Participants also planned to apply for scholarships and financial aid, and most expected that their parents would help cover some costs. As a result, even though the experience of letting go of their early college fantasies was distressing to some, participants remained determined to pursue their college aspirations and

rationally created a choice set from a realistic assessment of their financial circumstances, academic credentials, and options for higher education.

COVID-19, Test-Optional, and Unprecedented Times. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns introduced great uncertainty in participants' college search and choice. Eleventh grade is an important year in college admissions, and pre-COVID-19 participants were already stressed about boosting their cumulative GPA and strengthening their resumé in time for college application season. As the pandemic emerged, participants experienced major life disruptions that heightened anxiety, including home confinement, an abrupt switch to remote learning, and uncertainty about SAT/ACT testing.

In the summer of 2020, colleges writ large adopted test-optional admission policies in light of COVID-19 and widespread SAT and ACT test center closures. Most participants viewed the test-optional policy favorably because it reduced their anxiety about earning high scores and gave them control over whether to test or submit their scores. As a result, participants engaged in multiple strategies to assess whether or not they should send their scores. For each school, they determined whether submitting scores would work in their favor or hurt their admissions chances.

Participant narratives also touch on the pandemic's impact on mental health, particularly social isolation, motivation, and anxiety (Jones et al., 2021). However, findings suggest participants found ways to manage their mental health, access support from their networks, and navigate uncertainties effectively to submit applications to 4-year institutions. A noteworthy distinction is that undocumented participants were the only students who strongly considered attending a community college instead of a 4-year institution on the fall of 2021.

Applying is a Complex Process. Researchers (e.g., Iloh, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018) note that applying to college is a complex multistep process and highlight the need for studies examining how minoritized youth move through this process. Findings contribute to the scholarship by demonstrating intricacies in college choice that are often overlooked, such as how participants develop strategies reflective of their meaning-making to make application decisions.

Narrowing Choice Set to Application Set and Applying. For college-bound seniors, the first semester is typically a high-stakes period when, in addition to college applications, students are taking high-level classes, completing service-learning hours, and balancing increased responsibilities at school or at home (Olson, 2015). Participants in this study were experiencing these stressors during a global pandemic that, in Fall 2020, had no clear end in sight without the full benefit of the activities and outlets in which they might usually engage to cope. Findings reveal the mental, emotional, and financial aspects of crafting one's application set. As students were revisiting their list of priorities and preferences for college majors, location, and affordability, they were also assessing their school responsibilities, stress level, and mental health to determine if they had the time and mental and emotional bandwidth to actually submit each college application. Similar to Haitian immigrants in Pierre-Louis' (2020) study, participants' choice to apply to each institution hinged on their perceptions of whether each college was worth their time and energy. As college application deadlines loom, data reveal that these factors may become more important than institutional fit and interest in determining whether a student actually submits an application.

College Essays and Migration Narrative. The college application involves several elements, such as completing a demographic form, submitting a resumé or list of high school activities, and requesting one's transcript and letters of recommendation from high school

personnel (Klasik, 2012). Participants seemed to navigate these elements of the process with ease but regarded the application's essay requirement as the "worst part." They struggled to figure out what to write, what topic would make them seem interesting, and how to make themselves stand out among other applicants. With deadlines looming, participants described aha moments that inspired their writing. Most participants wrote thoughtful, reflective, and emotional essays that centered their immigrant identities—pieces that captured the emotions of being a newcomer or seeing how hard their parents worked for their benefit. Data reveal the salience of participants' immigrant identities and their family's migration narrative within the context of their educational aspirations.

Strategies to Ensure Affordability. Low-income students' application choices are often narrowed based on their assessment of affordability (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Findings of this study shed light on how participants made sense of their college options, assessed their family's ability to pay, and made small decisions throughout the college search and application process. Participants completed college and financial aid applications with clear goals in mind. For example, some participants wanted to avoid loans. Others intended to cast a wide net to see what each college would offer them. Some participants considered it would be their responsibility to pay for college, and others felt assured their parents would help them and that they should not limit their vision based on finances. These perspectives influenced the strategies participants used to ensure they would have the best option for funding: (a) apply to at least one in-state public school where they would be eligible for residency tuition; (b) apply to select out-of-state or private institutions known for offering lucrative financial aid to low-income students; (c) consider how much debt they were willing to take on; apply for scholarships; and (d) those who were eligible complete the FAFSA.

The Waiting Game: Managing Expectations and Emotions. The period between submitting applications and receiving decisions ushered in myriad emotions for participants: from relief, excitement, and anticipation to pressure, agony, and fear. Participants seemed to regard their college decisions as the dramatic culmination of a long process of hoping, achieving, planning, preparing, and executing. They found ways to cope with their emotions by managing their expectations, namely maintaining realistic hopes based on admission data found online, preparing for rejections, and considering community college if their university options did not pan out. Participants' experiences and sensemaking during this waiting period convey a heightened state of anxiety. Though these participants found healthy ways to cope, findings also suggest a need for emotional support during this time.

Getting Accepted: Fulfilling the Migration Narrative. From an early age, all participants indicated certainty they would go to college because their parents and other family members, teachers, and community members expected them to do so. This study reinforces prior immigrant research (e.g., Burrell-McRae, 2009; Hill & Torres, 2010; Kao, 2004; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Tang et al., 2013) by demonstrating that participants' college-going was framed within a larger story of family migration and sacrifice for collective advancement and educational opportunity. This socialization prompted participants to view college-going as necessary for success, a way to honor their parents and pay them back for their sacrifices, and in resistance to the social factors that operated against them (Imaogene, 2017; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Surla & Poon, 2015; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Despite facing major life changes, such as leaving their homeland and transitioning to a new school system, all students ultimately received multiple admission offers from 4-year institutions.

Data show that getting into college marked a special and memorable occasion that marked a long-anticipated milestone for participants and their parents. Students expressed excitement, happiness, surprise, and relief at getting in somewhere and a sense of pride in the hard work they put into their years of schooling. Sharing the news with their parents was an extension of these significant moments, and most parents responded with excitement, joy, and celebration.

In stark contrast, two participants (i.e., Alex and Azalia) experienced disappointment and hurt feelings when sharing their acceptances with their fathers. They described their fathers' reactions as "stoic" and lukewarm, as if getting into college was like earning a "participation medal." Findings show how Alex and Azalia tried to make sense of their father's reactions to cope with their hurt feelings, rationalizing that perhaps their fathers did not realize how much effort they put into this process. Azalia reflected on many moments of school success dating back to childhood and noticed a pattern of unenthusiastic responses and withholding praise. She reasoned that perhaps this was her parents' "way of showing love," and that their response led to her good grades—even if her mental health suffered. Perhaps Alex's and Azalia's experiences with their fathers were a product of the gendered and raced complexities of their identities (Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2020). These findings also suggest that parents' responses to academic achievement might be received as indifferent or "withholding love" and suggests perhaps a dark side of immigrant childrearing.

Six of 10 participants experienced at least one college rejection, and findings shed light on the role of psychological factors in coping with feelings of disappointment, regret, and sadness. Participants rationalized their rejections by finding a logical reason why they were not admitted (e.g., "The school had an 11% acceptance rate."), finding a silver lining (e.g., "My

friend got accepted, and I'll visit her on campus.”), and highlighting that getting in might not have worked out anyway (e.g., “We wouldn't have been able to afford it.”). This sensemaking helped to shift their attention and excitement to the colleges that admitted them.

Determining Affordability, Then Weighing Other Factors. After students receive decisions, they typically have a narrower set of schools to consider (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). They also receive a financial award letter that offers an individualized projection of their cost of attendance at each college. This increasingly specific information greatly aids a student's ability to make an informed enrollment decision (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

The first major financial decision precollege students typically make is how they will pay for their college education (Cull & Whitton, 2011). Though all participants took ownership of their financial decision making (e.g., by carefully reviewing and calculating expenses), data reveal two distinct approaches used to make sense of their options. Half of participants sought the advice of parents, older siblings, or educators. The other half relied on their own skills to figure out funding for themselves, either because they felt their parent would not be able to assist or were comfortable figuring it out on their own. This approach speaks to participants' ability to figure out confusing financial information; they were, in essence, making high-stakes decisions about their family's finances, determining what they could afford and eliminating colleges without their parents' input (e.g., deciding some schools were just too expensive even when their parents insisted the family would find a way to afford it).

Although the financial aid package greatly influences college choice for low-income, high-need students, it is not the only variable that matters in decision making (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). As students select an institution to attend, the preferences of the applicant, attributes of the college, perception of quality, and college “courtship” behaviors (e.g., offering

admission to special programs) also help determine enrollment (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The results of this study support the student college choice theory. Although affordability was the major factor driving their college decisions, participants took a careful and calculated approach to make a “logical” and “sensible” choice. They narrowed their options to those that were affordable, then diligently weighed nonfinancial pros and cons of each institution to assess to what extent each institution was a good fit to their preferences. They reflected on their early list of priorities (must-haves) and re-evaluated early preferences (e.g., now wanting to be close to home). Data indicate that participants’ logical and rational approach to college search and choice paid off. Most participants prioritized affordability in their early college search and ended up with at least one admitted college that met their financial needs.

Decision Making. Research (Kim & Gasman, 2011; Pierre-Louis, 2020) with immigrant youth indicate that participants seek their parents’ validation and approval in decision making. Participant narratives in this study extend and offer nuance to this finding. All participants indicated choosing a college was ultimately their decision. Half consulted with their parents for guidance with decision making; the other half did not and made their enrollment choice without seeking parental guidance. However, all participants seemed to carefully consider their family’s finances so as not to burden their parents with their college costs. This finding corroborates research (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Flores, 2018; Hernández, 2015; Sanchez et al., 2010) that has suggested even when immigrant parents present college choice as their child’s decision, parents may have great influence. In this regard, students may think they are making their college choice independently but actually are making a family decision.

In nine out of 10 cases, participants enrolled in the college that covered the greatest percentage of their unmet need. In Azalia’s case, however, the 4-year college she chose was not

the least expensive. Instead, when she compared the benefits of attending LR1 with community college, she deemed LR1 as a better investment of her family's resources. This finding supports other research (e.g., Burrell-McRae, 2009; Griffin et al., 2012; Hernández, 2015) that indicates when immigrant students weigh their options for college enrollment and financing; they balance prestige with affordability and practicality.

Four out of 10 participants earned full-ride renewable scholarships, which they were shocked and excited to receive. This news brought great relief that their parents would not have to cover their college costs. Rico attributes his scholarship award to the work of Ms. B, who expertly guided him through college search and choice. Similarly, Azalia regarded her mentor as “the reason” she is now in college. Even though Rico and Azalia enrolled in a 4-year school, the complexities of their residency status greatly limited their dreams. Although Azalia was appreciative to be able to go to college, Azalia still felt cheated out of the same opportunities her peers with citizenship received. Rico and Azalia's experiences highlight the critical role educators play in helping noncitizen students access higher education (Allen et al., 2020; Romo et al., 2019; Welton & Martinez, 2014).

Addressing Research Question 2: How Do Various Forms of Capital and Community Resources Shape Students' College Choice Process?

The student college choice model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989) asserts that the college choice process begins with predisposition (i.e., when students make a tentative decision to pursue higher education) and ends with choice (i.e., college enrollment). Throughout this developmental process, research shows that precollege immigrant students engage various forms of capital and community resources, including community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). I

will address the second research question in three sections: (a) familial capital drives college-going, (b) social capital: everybody pushed college, and (c) psychological capital.

This section will address the second research question in three themes: (a) Familial Capital Drives College-Going, (b) Social Capital: Everybody Pushed College, (c) Psychological Capital.

Familial Capital Drives College-Going

Familial capital includes “cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Previous research with immigrant youth has found that cultural knowledge in immigrant families is often drawn from the family’s premigration experiences (Fuligni, 2012; Louie, 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996), transferred to the new society (Fernandez-Kelly, 2008), and shared with children through childrearing and socialization (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Kao & Tienda, 1995). Familial capital is also fostered within the new society through relationships with nuclear and extended relatives and fictive kin (Foner, 1997; George Mwangi et al., 2017; Landale et al., 2011). Familial capital also operates transnationally, as immigrants often maintain relationships with family members back home, thus continuing to engage familial support and encouragement and traditions from the homeland (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010; Louie, 2005; Yazykova & McLeigh, 2015).

In this study, cultural knowledge was shared through storytelling. Family narratives included tales of poverty and limited opportunity in participants’ homeland, even for those whose parents had college experience. They also included stories of ambition and pioneering, for example, parents who were the first in their family to pursue a college education or left their homeland to seek stable employment to support family back home. Through storytelling, parents framed their children’s higher educational goals within the larger family narrative of

premigration, migration, resettlement, and mobility. This finding supports previous research that immigrant parents talk about college-going as not just a means to survive (Pierre-Louis, 2020) but also as the best or only mechanism for the family to achieve success in the United States (Hao & Ma, 2012; Knight et al., 2016, Portes, 2000). In this study, several participants recalled their parents stating they moved to the United States for their children's education, thus positioning them to fulfill their migration hopes and expectations (He et al., 2017; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Perreira et al., 2006).

Cultural knowledge was also evident in parents' worldviews or habitus, which influenced the way they raised their children. Five of the 10 participants had parents who, before migration, had either taken college classes or earned a postsecondary credential. When compared with those who did not migrate, these parents occupied a privileged social class premigration by virtue of their educational attainment. Even though their parents experienced a loss of privileged status as they migrated and resettled in the United States, the class-based knowledge learned because of their former status was applied in the U.S. context and guided how they raised their children which affirms prior research (Buriel, 2012; Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Griffin et al., 2012; Portes, 2000). Participants' aspirations were further affirmed, supported, or modeled by nonparental family members, another source of family capital used to access college. Four participants had older siblings in college, and as they transitioned to search and choice, they benefitted from their siblings' modeling, guidance, and instrumental support. This finding is consistent with the literature (Flores, 2018; Pierre-Louis, 2020), which suggests that older brothers and sisters occupy a uniquely influential and critical role in supporting their younger siblings' college search and choice.

Social Capital: Everybody Pushed College

Social capital is defined as “networks of people and community resources. . . . that provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso, p. 79). Previous research (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Louie, 2012; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Martinez, 2012) with precollege immigrants has found that youth who enroll in college often attribute their success to family encouragement and the support of nonfamilial networks that include school personnel, community mentors, and faith community members. Data reveal that participants, from an early age, were embedded in multiple social networks that influenced their predisposition, search, and choice. These networks provided valuable social capital: a college-going culture of educators and college-aspiring peers. Through these networks, participants gained early college awareness and a fuller understanding of the benefits of higher education, which strengthened their internal and external motivation for college. As participants transitioned to search and choice, they received group guidance and individualized coaching from educators in their schools and college access programs. Findings also reveal that participants were embedded in peer groups that shared college and scholarship information; reminded each other about deadlines; and helped each other process their indecision, anxiety, and uncertainty.

In many immigrant communities, faith-based organizations counter pervasive underinvestment by offering practical and important information and resources to their members (Fuligni, 2012; Louie, 2005; Park et al., 2019; Portes & Zhou, 1993). In this study, participants were embedded in coethnic and colingual churches where their heritage language was spoken, and church members promoted education and college-going. This ethnic capital strengthened

participants' college mindset and provided information in a coethnic space that aligned with their heritage, language, and values.

When asked if anyone discouraged their college goals, participants had to think long and hard before responding, and most stated that no one discouraged their college goals. Ultimately, participants' college choice process was not only influenced by the presence of college-going messages; participants' goals were also shaped by the relative absence of messages that discouraged college attendance.

Psychological Capital (Aspirational, Navigational, Resistant)

Yosso's framework defines three types of capital that stem from intrapersonal experiences and skills: aspirational, navigational, and resistant. Aspirational capital references "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Participants were raised in immigrant households that fostered aspirational capital through parental hopes and optimism for their children's future. In fact, the definition of aspirational capital exemplifies the hope and optimism immigrants draw on in pursuit of the "American Dream" (Louie, 2004). As low-income immigrants, participants faced multiple challenges along their educational journey, including a global pandemic that impacted every aspect of their lives at a critical time in college search and choice. However, participants were steadfast in their college goals. This sense of hope and optimism was also found in Martinez's (2012) study, where Mexican American immigrant-origin students maintained college aspirations despite immense social challenges. Aspirations contributed to participants' effort and persistence as they figured out how to access college information online and get the help they needed during uncertain times. Similar to participants in Rivera's (2022) study, findings reveal that undocumented participants displayed "radical hope" despite the limitations

placed on them because of their status.

Navigational capital encompasses “skills associated with maneuvering through social institutions. . . . not created with Communities of Color in mind” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Research (Romo et al., 2019; Welton & Martinez, 2014) has shown that when faced with institutional and structural obstacles that stand in the way of their college goals, immigrant youth will often find creative ways to figure out who to talk to and get the information they need. Kim and Gasman’s (2011) research with Asian-American immigrants shows that participants relied on their own skills to acquire college knowledge and navigate their college search process independently. In this study, participants engaged in a similar process of self-management to find information online, get their questions answered, and develop strategies to manage their college search and choice independently.

Resistant capital is defined as “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Previous research (Allen et al., 2020; George Mwangi et al., 2020; Jayakumar et al., 2013) has indicated students of color may seek academic success and pursue a college education as a way to reject negative racial stereotypes. Similarly, participants in this study viewed college-going as an act of resistance: a way to push back against negative racial and gendered stereotypes. Azalia articulated that her college-going was a way to seize opportunity in a system that blocks access for noncitizens, like her undocumented older cousin who wanted to go to college but felt she could not. The manner in which Azalia viewed her college education is echoed in the literature (Rivera, 2022; Welton & Martinez, 2014), which finds that as students become more aware of systemic barriers, they develop an “oppositional consciousness.”

Throughout their college choice process, participants’ narratives highlight these three

forms of community cultural wealth: aspirational, navigational, and resistant. Narratives also indicate other psychological factors that influenced college-going. As explained by Southerland (2006), psychological factors shape college-going attitudes, sensemaking, and decision-making. Psychological factors include motivation, individual response to environmental demands, adaptability, self-efficacy, coping mechanisms, resilience, and delayed gratification. For example, Azalia felt pressure to find student employment because she wanted to help her family financially. However, she reasoned that investing her time and effort into higher education would put her in a better position to earn more money eventually to help her family. She embraced the mentality “school is my job” and prioritized her educational activities as a result.

Allen and colleagues (2020) explored similar internal assets, called *ganas*, that motivated undocumented Mexican American students to set and achieve their college goals. *Ganas* included a strong desire to learn, honor and respect their parents, repay their parents for their hard work, sacrifices, resilience, and willingness to persevere. Despite adversity, participants used *ganas* to navigate unexpected obstacles and remain focused on their college goals. In a similar manner, participants in this study possessed internal assets that influenced the goals they set, helped them interpret their experiences and process their thoughts and emotions, and drove their decision making.

Findings indicate that participants developed both internal and external motivation for higher education that anchored college-going to a greater purpose. Participants’ narratives also suggest a third type of motivation called *internalized regulation*, which “occurs when people value and pursue activities they do not find intrinsically interesting, but they believe will help them reach their ultimate goals” (Savitz-Romer and Bouffard, 2012, p. 120). In this manner, even if participants did not have a strong internal motivation for college-going, they internalized

the external rewards in ways that allowed them to feel ownership of the goal of going to college. Collectively, participants' college motivation served as a form of psychological capital that shaped their effort, persistence, and resourcefulness on their path to college.

Research with immigrant students shows that negative emotions, like stress, pressure, and obligation, may also serve to motivate immigrant achievement. For example, students may experience overwhelming pressure to earn high grades or choose a lucrative or prestigious major (Lee & Zhou, 2015; Tang et al., 2013) or experience a sense of burden or indebtedness to their parents for their hardships (Kang & Raffaelli, 2016; Tang et al., 2013). Data from this study support previous research in that participants felt pressure to meet their family's expectations (e.g., get into a "good" college, not be a disappointment to the family, find their own funding for college, be "the one to elevate" the family). This pressure was amplified because they were navigating a foreign system and felt their parents could not help them or did not understand what they were going through. In Azalia's case, she viewed her parents' tendency to withhold praise for doing well in school as perhaps the reason she was successful, even if her mental health suffered. Though this might convey a dark side to the immigrant experience of precollege students, it may also be leveraged as a resource that motivates their achievement.

To summarize, research question two considered how various forms of capital shape the college choice process for low-income immigrant students of color. Findings indicate three types of capital at work: familial, social, and psychological. These forms of capital worked together to shape participants' college choice process, and findings suggest a sequential process. First, familial capital (including assets developed premigration) fostered high educational expectations that, in most cases, explicitly named higher education as a goal for the immigrant participants. As a result, students developed a college predisposition within their family as early as

elementary school and were primed to engage with college-going networks outside the family. Social capital outside the home strengthened participants' early college mindset and provided valuable college preparation skills and planning resources. These social networks included college-aspiring peers and educators in school and community programs and faith communities and included a strong presence of coethnic immigrant children and families. Within the family and nonfamily networks, students developed psychological traits (e.g., hope, resilience, self-regulation, delayed gratification, and motivation) that fostered persistence through a college search and choice process that was foreign to them and their parents—one that, due to COVID-19, included unprecedented challenges. Despite these challenges, participants' determination to go to college never wavered. Even those who faced considerable economic and academic challenges did not express doubt that they would enroll in higher education even if they enrolled in community college instead of a senior institution. As a result of their determination and single focus on higher education and the support of multiple individuals in their network, participants in this study successfully navigated the college choice process in that they were able to achieve their stated goal of matriculating to a 4-year institution.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

As with any research study, limitations were foreseen and acknowledged at the conceptualization of this project. As the study progressed, limitations arose in data collection and analysis. In this section, I will note four limitations and suggest ways that future research might account for them.

First, this study's focus on how immigrant students navigated the college search and choice process included only immigrant students successful in enrolling in a 4-year institution in the fall semester after high school graduation. As a result, this study did not include students who

applied to 4-year colleges but did not enroll in Fall 2021, thereby leaving out college-admitted graduating seniors who might have deferred enrollment to a 4-year institution, enrolled in a 2-year college, or chose a noncollege option after high school. Research (Howell et al., 2022) has shown that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more students than usual did not enroll in college as planned. According to 2021 data (U.S. Department of Education, 2021), there was a disproportionate impact on the college enrollment of high school graduates from high poverty, high minority high schools. In this year, perhaps more than any other year, there was likely a higher number of 4-year-college-aspiring immigrant youth who were not enrolled in the fall semester. Future researchers should examine how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced college planning and enrollment for immigrant students from 2020 to 2022.

Second, my intention was to explore the intricacies of college search, preparation, and application activities—activities that students typically complete in their sophomore or junior years of high school. I was aware that participants' (who were interviewed in their first year of college) might have difficulty remembering the details about their search and choice process because they were a year or two removed from those experiences. Future research might address this type of recall bias with a longitudinal study that captures students' college planning activities as they progress through their junior and senior years of high school.

Delimitations are put into place by the researcher to focus more specifically on a topic of interest (Terrell, 2016). An important delimitation of this study was to not narrow the sample of immigrant students based on race, ethnicity, or residency status. In this manner, I was able to explore to what extent immigrant students, who represented diverse ethnicities and residency statuses, had similar precollege experiences and used similar forms of capital to enroll in college. Findings show that the two undocumented participants had experiences that were distinct and

illustrated the need for more tailored and individualized support. As a result, future research exploring immigrant identity across race within the context of college access may want to control for residency status or FAFSA eligibility.

Finally, all participants were residents of central Maryland, which has been classified as an immigrant-friendly state (Suda & Mülberg, 2022). Additionally, participants grew up in cities and towns that were ethnically diverse (George Mason University, 2019; Migration Policy Institute, 2019) and where over 43% of immigrants hold a college degree or higher (American Immigration Council, 2020). Participants lived in a region with over 10 universities (including the state's flagship institution) within 20–60 minutes of their home and attended schools that housed dual enrollment and college access programs. Given the educational and social landscape of central Maryland, this region provided a unique context to explore how low-income immigrant students of color draw upon various forms of capital within their lived experiences, schools, and communities. Though immigrants continue to migrate to traditional destination regions like Maryland, immigrant populations are rapidly growing in new destination communities (Terrazas, 2011). Future research might consider exploring the precollege experiences of immigrant students in these communities.

Implications and Recommendations: Theory, Practice, and Policy

The findings from this study reveal many factors that contributed to the achievements and educational goals of low-income immigrant students of color attending a 4-year university. These factors inform recommendations that can reduce the inequities that block access to higher education for immigrant youth. The following section outlines my recommendations for theory, practice, and policy.

Theory

The student college choice model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) offers a useful starting point to examine a multifaceted, complex process that often spans from childhood to emerging adulthood. A limitation of this theory is that several key experiences are subsumed within the three phases of predisposition, search, and choice. Results of this and other studies (e.g., Pierre-Louis, 2020) highlight parental expectations as a key determinant of students' predisposition, suggesting there could be two stages of predisposition: parent and child. Secondly, although predisposition might develop within the family, social networks strengthen predisposition and foster an early college mindset through readiness activities, like College and Career Days, college for all curriculum, and a college-going culture. Additionally, as theorized, college search and choice seem to overlook college entrance exam testing and the act of completing and submitting college and financial aid applications. I recommend expanding the theory to explicitly name these steps, as seen in Klasik and colleagues' (2018) reconceptualized model of college choice, which includes six elements: expectations, academic preparation, information seeking, college knowledge, application, and enrollment. The findings of this study lend credence to Klasik and colleagues' assertion that critical elements of the college choice process are overlooked by educators, scholars, and policy makers. I also recommend a less linear model (e.g., Iloh, 2018) that accommodates for overlapping stages and students moving between stages.

By applying the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) to the college choice process of immigrant youth, this study revealed forms of cultural wealth specific to an immigrant experience and used to access higher education. Linguistic capital, for example, includes family storytelling that recounts history, parables, and lessons that foster a sense of culture and tradition (Yosso, 2005). One form of immigrant linguistic capital is a family's

migration narrative, or the collection of stories told about their homeland, relocation, resettlement, and aspirations for the future. Though family storytelling operates in diverse cultures and contexts, research (e.g., Fernández-Kelly, 2008) has alluded to the distinct nature and function of the migration narrative. Migrant storytelling not only passes on information about one's homeland and family history. This narrative also conveys an important message to immigrant children: the responsibility for collective intergenerational success is on *their* shoulders. In the case of study participants, their parents' migration narrative not only communicated this message; it also communicated *how* they should pursue this lofty goal. Parents explicitly named education as the mechanism they would need to advance their socioeconomic standing and the status of the family.

Yosso's model purports that People of Color engage community cultural wealth to resist marginalization and survive within oppressive social systems. This research suggests that immigrant capital operates in a similar fashion. In this study, participants drew upon multiple forms of capital, including immigrant capital, fostered in their families and communities to successfully navigate a complex and foreign process to achieve their educational goals ultimately. A unique interplay of both individual (e.g., aspirational, resistant, and navigational) and social (e.g., college-going peer networks; precollege programs) factors were leveraged toward their success. It is this interplay of mechanisms that I now turn to as I consider the implications of this study for furthering the immigrant capital concept.

A Case for Immigrant Capital

I began this research exploring the idea of an "immigrant advantage" in college enrollment and quickly uncovered the complexities of this notion in extant literature. Research (e.g., Coll & Marks, 2012; Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017) generally

indicates that an immigrant advantage is not universal; instead, scholars explain immigrant educational attainment outcomes in two ways. The first explanation is that migrant adults—often positively selected from their country of origin—bring personal characteristics (e.g., a high value for education, dual frame of reference, and occupational skills) from their homeland to the United States. These personal characteristics operate as human capital and tend to be conducive to migrants’ advancement in a U.S. context. The second explanation purports that migrants’ outcomes (and the outcomes of their children) are largely determined by the demographic and attitudinal makeup of the communities that receive them. These explanations add nuance to the discourse regarding immigrant success. In contrast to earlier research (e.g., Louie, 2005; Portes, 2000) that refers to human capital and mode of incorporation as cultural mechanisms or orientations (Portes, 2000), I link these assets to an immigrant experience. I offer the term *immigrant capital* to capture the multiple and distinct assets found in immigrant communities across race and national origin—assets nurtured within families and communities and leveraged toward resettlement, adaptation, and success in the new society.

Immigrant capital appears as a term in extant literature (e.g., Samar, 2020; Sundararajan & Sundararajan, 2015) to describe assets developed as migrants selectively adopt attributes of the new country’s culture while retaining premigration values from their homeland. In this manner, foreigners develop a distinct asset: a dual cultural perspective that facilitates access to diverse information, social networks, and opportunities that may be overlooked by natives. Building on the literature within the scope of immigrant families, I define immigrant capital as “skills, assets, and perspectives possessed by migrants, transferred to their children through socialization, and leveraged toward success and intergenerational mobility in the new society.” I referenced educational research with immigrant families (e.g., Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017;

Hofferth & Moon, 2016; Kao & Tienda, 1995, Louie, 2005) to advance this concept and identified several assets that operate within the frame of immigrant experiences, such as parental optimism and belief in the “American Dream,” children’s obligation ethos, and ethnic, social networks.

These and other forms of immigrant capital were evident in this study’s ethnically diverse sample of 1.5-generation immigrant college students. Participant narratives show parental optimism and belief in U.S. meritocracy were primarily leveraged to foster a family-based predisposition for higher education. This predisposition framed college-going firmly within the context of the family’s migration narrative of pride, hope, sacrifice, and the pursuit of intergenerational achievement. This framing influenced the way immigrant parents raised their children, positioning them to use their education to be the ones to “make good” on the parents’ sacrifices. The value of a college education was also echoed in the systems that students engaged in, for example, school- and community-based programs and coethnic church congregations. In these spaces, participants also developed valuable skills that supported positive adaptation in a U.S. context, such as bilingualism, knowledge of U.S. school norms, and a positive ethnic identity. These skills contributed to the development of a bicultural college-going identity. As students transitioned to high school, they drew on their family values and resources, bicultural experiences, and social networks to navigate their path to college, ultimately fulfilling their educational goals and their parents’ hope for intergenerational advancement. The findings of this study align with Portes and Zhou’s (1993) segmented assimilation theory, whereby students forged a path to college and intergenerational mobility by retaining family ties and a positive ethnic identity while selectively adopting certain practices from the new culture and using resources within their diverse college-going networks. Narratives also suggest participants were

able to make the most of their immigrant capital because this capital was recognized, accepted, and held value in the social settings (e.g., schools) in which they existed.

I chose to adopt an anti-deficit lens to this research study to focus less on what immigrant students and their families lack to the cultural wealth they possess and employ along their path to college. My goal was to reveal sources and forms of capital that may be overlooked with White-middle-class centered college choice frameworks. Therefore, a delimitation of this study was that data were confined to the lived experiences of immigrants who were successful in achieving their goal of 4-year college enrollment. As stated previously, the sampling strategy omitted the experiences of college-aspiring immigrants who might have been admitted but did not enroll in a 4-year institution by August of 2021. Another key group omitted from this study was immigrant youth who set noncollege goals (e.g., military or employment) for their post high school years. Though the experiences captured in this work cannot be generalized to all immigrant youth, this work suggests several avenues of inquiry that could advance the concept of immigrant capital.

Future research might ask to what extent immigrant capital operates in families with diverse premigration histories, aspirations for mobility, attitudes toward the opportunity structure in the United States, and social context of receiving community. Based on this work, I suggest that immigrant capital is likely present in, for example, noncollege aspiring families; it just might look different or operate differently depending on characteristics of the new society. For example, though many immigrant parents want their children to do well in school, not all immigrant parents define “success” as earning a college degree (Lee & Zhou, 2015). Additionally, the extent to which immigrant parents socialize their children to believe in the “American Dream” and a system of meritocracy may also vary. Research suggests that the longer immigrants are in the United States and experience systemic discrimination, the less likely

they are to believe that their hard work will lead to advancement (Jackson et al., 2006; Ogbu, 1991); in some cases, the motivating power of American Dream myth seems to disappear in the second and later generations (Haller et al., 2011; Waters, 1999).

I also recognize that even those rich in family-based immigrant capital may experience distinct paths of adaptation and downward mobility based on the social context of reception in their receiving community. Racist, classist, and xenophobic attitudes or weak or absent ethnic community networks may block educational aspirations and shatter even the highest hopes for collective upward mobility (Haller et al., 2011; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). As a result, immigrant capital, which may develop in resistance to discrimination, may not be enough to overcome the oppressive social systems (e.g., educationally underserved neighborhoods) in which many migrant families settle. As mentioned previously, all participants in this study migrated and settled in central Maryland, a diverse suburban region adjacent to the capital of the United States, Washington, DC. This region boasts a strong representation of college-educated immigrant adults, multiple diverse ethnic communities, and a large network of college access initiatives compared to other regions in the United States. Future research might explore forms of immigrant capital present in the narratives of students who live in other geographic settings, such as urban/inner-city neighborhoods, rural communities, and nontraditional (i.e., emerging) immigrant destinations.

Practice

In this section, I provide recommendations for educators, including teachers, school counselors, college access personnel, and administrators. Certain recommendations might be appropriate for a school district or single school setting, and others might be more appropriate for college access initiatives, such as a community-based program.

First, educators should implement a comprehensive K–12 college and career readiness program in their schools. Participants in this study explicitly identified elementary and middle school experiences (e.g., Career Day, AVID) that not only affirmed the college-going messages they heard at home, but these experiences also provided valuable college information and resources that strengthened their family-based predisposition. All students across each level of education should have access to similar early college and career programming in their schools, and meaningful family engagement must be an integrated component of all efforts.

College and career programming must be coherently sequenced to facilitate learning, self-discovery, values clarification, and goal setting. I offer a few broad themes that could serve as a foundation for each level. The elementary program’s objective might center on developing awareness of a wide range of careers and postsecondary options, including college. In middle school, college and career objectives might include career and college exploration, goal setting, short- and long-term planning, and college- and career-ready course taking. The high school program builds on these objectives and emphasizes college- and career-ready course taking (including programs like AP, IB, and dual enrollment courses), financial literacy that includes college financing, and individualized and group college and career guidance. Throughout the K–12 experience, educators should consider including the following activities:

- Elementary School: college/career days, campus visits, family college awareness events
- Middle School: college/career days, campus visits, career exploration lessons, precollege course-taking, college admissions visits; family college planning events
- High School: college/career days, campus visits, career exploration lessons, precollege course-taking, college admissions visits; family college planning events

college/career counseling (individual and group), college application and FAFSA completion events

As illustrated in the findings, immigrant parents expect their children to excel academically and many explicitly state their expectation for college enrollment. However, immigrant parents are often disadvantaged by their limited understanding of the nuanced, prolonged, and complex U.S. college application process. Even parents with non-U.S. college degrees may be uninformed and unprepared to guide their child through a planning process that, ideally, begins as early as middle school. Comprehensive K–12 programs must include family engagement efforts that equip immigrant parents and caregivers with knowledge about the U.S. system of higher education and how to guide their child’s path. Educators can also encourage and perhaps train immigrant caregivers to share college information within their ethnic network, using their heritage language or linguistic style and within a culture-centered perspective.

Second, educators should seek to foster both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for college. In this study, several participants’ interest in college originated from a desire to please their parents or a belief that college was the only path to a high salary and career. Extrinsic motivation can be a powerful tool leveraged toward higher education, but it may not be enough to sustain effort and persistence (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Educators should help students identify intrinsic value and efficacy in the learning and mastery process, reflect their interests in the curriculum, and outline how they can continue to develop their interests in higher education. Additionally, educators can help students explore their external motivators (e.g., a high salary) by incorporating assignments highlighting how investing in their college education also provides nonmonetary benefits (e.g., a career that they find interesting). Educators would also find value in implementing class assignments and activities that invite students to talk about

their families (e.g., history, cultural traditions, stories, and lessons passed down to them), how their family has influenced their college goals, and to what extent they have internalized family expectations. In this manner, externally motivated students might gain insight into the internal motivators that drive their college ambition and perhaps develop a greater sense of ownership of their goal (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012).

Third, participants' narratives show the value of immigrant students building trusting relationships with at least one educator, especially for students who are noncitizens and face a more complex college search and application process. As illustrated in the narratives, each noncitizen student worked closely with an educator who went above and beyond their expectations to provide tailored advice and accountability. Azalia and Rico had an educator who they identified as "the reason" they are in college today, which is great for them, but it should not take one person to be the reason a student goes to college. All school counselors should receive ongoing training to be able to offer clear guidance to undocumented students or connect with a resource that can provide that clear guidance.

Findings also imply that every high school junior should have access to at least one college "mentor" who gets to know their students' social identities and college and career interests. Mentors can then provide tailored resources relevant to their student's characteristics and needs, and work with their students to determine how to best engage with these resources. Because high school counselors often have large caseloads that limit individual advising, I proposed that high school administrators engage other educators (e.g., teachers, coaches, administrative staff), community members, and college-experienced older peers to serve as mentors. All mentors must be trained on college planning, and this training should include resources and policies for low-income students and noncitizens. Training should also include

when to refer students to their school counselor. In this study, participants experienced myriad emotions as they faced hard realities in their college search process. Though mentors might be equipped with the skills to help students process their emotions, they must also know when to refer for more support.

Fourth, college access programs with limited enrollments should prioritize applications from students who are the oldest child or only child in their family. Participant narratives show those with older siblings were uniquely advantaged by their role modeling and college knowledge. Participants leveraged this familial capital to strengthen their early college mindset and access instrumental assistance with college search, applications, and decision-making. I acknowledge that just because a student has an older sibling, it does not mean that sibling is college-experienced or willing or able to assist them. However, with limited resources for student enrollment, program staff should assess the extent to which applicants have college-experienced siblings or other college-going role models (e.g., cousins) in their family and the strength of those relationships and prioritize enrolling students who might not have familial college support.

Finally, educators must ground their college readiness and planning within adolescent development. Although multiple diverse Internet-based resources aid college search and decision making (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996), participant narratives show the limitations of Internet research. High school students, even students who are high-achieving, are making sense of a lot of information and making complex life decisions with an adolescent brain—one that is still maturing. Neuroscientific research (e.g., Arain et al., 2013) has shown the brain does not reach full maturity until the mid-to-late 20s, and one of the last areas to mature is the prefrontal cortex. This region regulates cognition and behaviors, such as problem solving, forming strategies and

planning, impulse control, and delayed gratification, managing multiple streams of complex and challenging information, adjusting behavior when situations change, and modulation of intense emotions. These are all aspects of adolescent development that have important implications for college search, applications, and decision-making (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Therefore, educators must resist the urge to simply provide college information to adolescents who may not have the full capacity to make sense of it and effectively apply it to their circumstances (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Similar to academic courses, college access and readiness curricula must incorporate the evidence-based pedagogy that best aligns with adolescent learning. One way to ensure that students have access to a developmentally informed college and career planning curriculum is to offer a credit-bearing course that includes college and career planning, test prep, and financial literacy.

Policy

State and federal policy makers have an important role to play in providing equitable access to higher education for students who hold multiple marginalized identities. Immigrant students are likely to also be low-income, a student of color, and a student whose parent did not complete college in the United States. Immigrant youth often enter school systems with familial aspirational capital that drives their optimism and motivation to find a path to success through education. Policy makers should implement initiatives that clear their path, and I make three recommendations to this effort.

First, increase funding for elementary and middle school college awareness programming like those outlined in the previous section. Two participants in this study participated in AVID and gained valuable information that shaped their later college search and choice activities. Most importantly, they developed a sense of self-efficacy and a college-going mindset that normalized

college as the next step. As immigrants who were also the oldest children in their family, they did not have familial models of U.S. college-going to draw upon. Yet, like their peers with college-experienced siblings, they were embedded in an impactful college-going culture as early as sixth grade. If students do not hear positive college-going messages at home, awareness as early as elementary and middle school matters. Prioritizing funding for high school programming is warranted, but high school exposure may be too late to make a difference in developing a college-going mindset.

Second, state higher education systems should consider going test-optional, permanently, and follow the trend of the Iowa Board of Regents, who, in January 2022, decided their state universities will no longer require the SAT or ACT for admissions (Jaschik, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic challenged university admission personnel to make admissions decisions without exams that have been shown to be racist, classist, and a gatekeeper for academically talented students who hold marginalized identities. Under the test-optional policy, immigrant students were able to make informed decisions on whether to pursue testing and submit scores if they were actually able to take an exam. Some students opted not to test or submit scores and instead relied on the strengths of other parts of their application, like their high GPA or advanced dual enrollment curriculum. Universities that remove the test score requirement for public universities will put the onus on students to determine whether to test and empower them to make an informed decision on whether to submit their scores should they test.

Third, state higher education systems should expand partnerships with immigrant-serving organizations, like churches, to target a population that is often college-aspiring but has limited access to college knowledge. Partnerships could involve outreach, for example, facilitating college workshops or FAFSA completion events on-site. As mentioned earlier, partnerships

could also incorporate a train-the-trainer model, where state agents would equip community leaders (e.g., youth pastors) to provide information and counsel to students and families in their network. As evident in participant narratives, churches were a rich source of social ethnic capital that encouraged high aspirations, provided a peer network of college-aspiring and college-experienced students, and provided information about college access programs. Partnerships that link state agencies with immigrant-serving organizations can greatly reduce barriers for immigrant families to access a vast network of opportunities.

Finally, school counselor education programs should require that all students complete a college access course as part of their curriculum and offer this course to nonschool counseling educators as well. This course should explore the college-going process from a social justice perspective and include a critical analysis of the policies, practices, and programs that constrain postsecondary opportunities for students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds. Additionally, this course would equip future school counselors and other educators with theoretical knowledge and practical skills to challenge and disrupt racist, nativist, and anti-immigrant educational gatekeeping and instead dismantle bias and promote equitable postsecondary preparation and access for all students.

Conclusion

This study captures the experiences of 10 immigrant students of color who set early aspirations for higher education, navigated college search and choice during a global pandemic, and ultimately matriculated to 4-year institutions. Participants' narratives convey how being an immigrant in the United States shaped their path to college and highlight multiple forms of capital leveraged toward their educational goals.

From their narratives, I offer the following conclusions. Participants' college

predisposition toward higher education was firmly grounded within the family's migration narrative, that is, the collection of stories told about the family homeland, migration and resettlement, and hopes and dreams for life in America. In this manner, family-based aspirational capital was leveraged to communicate expectations for academic achievement explicitly. Going to college was participants' contribution to the fulfillment of this narrative.

Additionally, participants' experiences as immigrants fostered a set of bi- or multicultural skills, psychological traits and perspectives, and social networks that students used to navigate the complexities of college search and choice, a process that was foreign to both them and their parents. I regard these skills, traits, and networks as immigrant capital: resources that appear to be consistent across participant narratives despite race, ethnicity, nationality, language, and residency status. As participants researched, applied for, and made decisions about college, they drew on immigrant capital to cope with disadvantage, resisted negative stereotypes, processed their emotions during critical turning points, and maintained hope in the face of unprecedented challenges (i.e., a global pandemic).

When I began this research study, I reflected on my own family and educational experiences. I found similarities between my narrative and the experiences of the racially and ethnically diverse students I served. I wondered: Is there something about being an immigrant, irrespective of race and ethnicity, language or accent, residency status, or gender, that contributes to their academic success? My answer is Yes. And there is much more to learn. This study provides a framework for future research and understanding of the lived experiences of immigrant youth and their families who may enter the United States with an optimistic belief in the American Dream. I believe the current generation of immigrant youth will be the ones who demand that American institutions live up to their promise.

Appendix A: Recruitment Email to Gatekeepers

SUBJECT LINE: Immigrant College Choice - Research Study Recruitment

Dear [Gatekeeper],

My name is Moya Malcolm, and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at University of Maryland. Under the supervision of my dissertation chair, Dr. Kimberly Griffin, I am conducting research that seeks to explore the college choice process for immigrant students. More specifically, I aim to examine how college-bound immigrant students of color make decisions about where to apply to college, how they navigate the college and financial aid application process, and how they ultimately make their college decision. As a current staff member at [insert institution name], I hope you might be willing to assist me in identifying participants for this research study.

To participate in this study, an individual must meet the following criteria:

- At least 18 years old at the time of study
- Born abroad and moved to the United States before the age of 13 years
- Self-identify as Black, Asian, or Latina/o/x
- Eligible for the Federal Pell grant or high school free/reduced meal program
- Enrolled in a 4-year college or university in the fall of 2021

Interested individuals will be asked to review and sign a consent form, complete a short demographic questionnaire, and complete two interviews with me, the researcher, via a video conference platform, such as Zoom. Each interview will be about 60 minutes, and all interviews will be digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. Pseudonyms will be used in place of actual names to protect each participant's identity. Additionally, participants will be asked to submit a copy of one of their college or scholarship application essays and a resumé or list of activities.

Each study participant will receive a \$35 Amazon gift card after completing both interviews.

Those interested in participating can visit go.umd.edu/immigrantcollege to access the research consent form and a secure demographic questionnaire. Questions or concerns about this study can be directed to mmalcolm@umd.edu or my dissertation chair, Dr. Kimberly Griffin, at kgriff29@umd.edu.

Thank you in advance for considering this request.

Warm regards,

Moya Malcolm
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education
University of Maryland

Appendix B: Recruitment Email to First-Year Students

Subject Line: Freshmen Students - Opportunity to Participate in Immigrant College Choice Research Study

Greetings,

My name is Moya Malcolm, and I am a doctoral student whose research centers the voices and precollege (college preparation) experiences of immigrant youth. I am also a child of immigrants whose parents dreamed big for my future, but who just simply didn't understand all the steps involved in applying to college and financing costs. I was fortunate to make it to college and graduate, and I see many immigrant youth overcoming similar challenges to also succeed. My research aims to tell their stories.

My dissertation research project is called Navigating College Search and Choice: How Immigrant Capital Paves a Path to College for First Generation Immigrant Students of Color.

I am looking for **first-year (freshmen) students** to interview for my study. Students must meet the following criteria:

- At least 18 years old at the time of study
- Born abroad and moved to the United States before the age of 13 years
- Self-identify as Asian, Black, or Latina/o/x
- Eligible for the Federal Pell grant OR high school free/reduced meal program
- Graduated from high school in the spring or summer of 2021
- Enrolled in a 4-year college or university in the fall of 2021

Each study participant will receive a \$35 Amazon gift card after completing two one-hour interviews.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please visit go.umd.edu/immigrantcollege to access the research consent form and a secure demographic questionnaire.

Thank you in advance for considering this request.

Warm regards,

Moya Malcolm
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education
University of Maryland

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyers

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

STUDY PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

IMMIGRANT YOUTH NAVIGATING PATH TO COLLEGE

- Are you a **2021 high school grad** currently enrolled as a freshman at a 4-year university?
- Were you **born outside of the U.S.** and do you identify as a **student of color**?
- Are you **18 years old or older**?
- Would you be willing to talk about your **college planning and decision making** experiences?

IF SO, VISIT [GO.UMD.EDU/IMMIGRANTCOLLEGE](https://go.umd.edu/immigrantcollege) TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS STUDY AND SIGN UP.

PARTICIPANTS WHO COMPLETE STUDY WILL RECEIVE A \$35 AMAZON GIFT CARD.

QUESTIONS? CONTACT MMALCOLM@UMD.EDU

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

IMMIGRANT YOUTH NAVIGATING PATH TO COLLEGE

[GO.UMD.EDU/IMMIGRANTCOLLEGE](https://go.umd.edu/immigrantcollege)
QUESTIONS? CONTACT MMALCOLM@UMD.EDU

To be eligible for this study, an individual must meet the following criteria:

- At least 18 years old at the time of study
- Born abroad and moved to the U.S. before the age of 13 years
- Self-identify as Black, Asian, or Latina/o/x
- Eligible for the Federal Pell grant **OR** high school free/reduced meal program
- Graduated from high school in the spring or summer of 2021
- Enrolled in a 4-year college or university in the fall of 2021

Participants will be asked to complete:

- Demographic Questionnaire
- Interview 1
- Submit copy of (already written) college essay and resumé/activity list.
- Interview 2



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Research Study: Immigrant Youth Navigating Path to College

ARE YOU A 2021 HS GRAD ENROLLED AT A 4-YEAR COLLEGE THIS FALL?

WERE YOU BORN OUTSIDE U.S.?

WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO TALK ABOUT YOUR COLLEGE PLANNING AND DECISION MAKING EXPERIENCES?

IF YES, CONSIDER PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH STUDY. PARTICIPANTS WILL EARN A \$35 AMAZON GIFT CARD UPON STUDY COMPLETION.

VISIT [GO.UMD.EDU/IMMIGRANTCOLLEGE](https://go.umd.edu/immigrantcollege)



Appendix D: Consent Form



Institutional Review Board

1204 Marie Mount Hall • 7814 Regents Drive • College Park, MD 20742 • 301-405-4212 • irb@umd.edu

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Project Title	Navigating College Search and Choice: How Immigrant Capital Paves a Path to Postsecondary Education for First-Generation Students of Color
Purpose of the Study	<p>This research is being conducted by Moya Malcolm at the University of Maryland, College Park. You are invited to participate in this research project because you meet the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are a May/June 2021 high school graduate • You were born outside the United States and moved to the United States before the age of 13 years • You identify as a student of color (e.g., Black, Asian, or Latina/o/x) • You are eligible for the Federal Pell grant OR you were eligible for free/reduced meal program at any point during high school • You are currently enrolled as a freshman in a 4-year college/university (Fall 2021) <p>The purpose of this study is to understand the college planning and decision-making experiences of immigrant high school students of color. This research focuses specifically on how a student’s identity, culture, and community influence their experiences. I will also explore to what extent being an immigrant in the United States shapes college goals and planning.</p>
Procedures	<p>The procedure involves the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion of a demographic questionnaire to determine eligibility • If you are eligible, you will be invited to participate in two 45-60-minute interviews conducted via video conference (e.g., Zoom). • Both interviews will be video recorded. • You will be asked to submit a resumé and an essay or personal statement that you previously used to apply to a college or scholarship opportunity. • After your second interview, you will be asked to review a

	<p>written summary of your interview responses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upon completion of the second interview, you will receive a \$35 Amazon gift card via email. <p>Participation is completely voluntary. You can withdraw from this study at any time for any reason.</p>
Potential Risks and Discomforts	<p>There may be some risks associated with participating in this research study. For example, you may possibly feel uncomfortable reflecting or sharing your family/background experiences or your experiences with college planning and college decision making. Note that I will not share personal identifiable information during the research process.</p>
Potential Benefits	<p>There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, possible benefits include providing useful information to educators about students who share backgrounds and experiences similar to yours. Your efforts may help improve future practices and policies.</p>
Confidentiality	<p>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing all data in a secured password-protected file that only the Principal Investigator, Moya Malcolm, will have access to. If you are selected to participate in the interviews, you will be able to choose a pseudonym that will be used throughout the interview process. Any identifiable information, such as your email address, will not appear in interview data or in potential future reports, articles, and publications. The Principal Investigator is the only person with access to the survey responses, interview transcript, and recordings. The interview data will be destroyed once it is no longer needed, but not before a minimum of five years after data is collected.</p>
Compensation	<p>You will receive a \$35 Amazon e-gift card for completing both interviews.</p>
Right to Withdraw and Questions	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Moya Malcolm, Principal Investigator mmalcolm@umd.edu (301) 367-8453</p>
Participant Rights	<p>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall</p>

	<p style="text-align: center;">College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678</p> <p>For more information regarding participant rights, please visit: https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants</p> <p>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</p>	
Statement of Consent	<p>By clicking I AGREE below, you indicate the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • you are at least 18 years of age • you have read this consent form or have had it read to you • your questions have been answered to your satisfaction • you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study <p><input type="checkbox"/> I AGREE <input type="checkbox"/> I am unsure. I have questions for the Principal Investigator. Please contact me at the following email address: _____.</p> <p>You may print a copy of this consent form for your records.</p>	
Electronic Signature and Date	NAME OF PARTICIPANT [Please type name in lieu of signature.]	
	DATE	

Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

Instructions: To determine whether you are eligible for this study and to provide preliminary information about you and your background, please complete the following questionnaire.

1. Email Address
2. Age (in years)
3. To which gender identity do you most identify?
Multiple Choice: Man, Woman, Non-binary, Other (please specify)
4. Intended college major(s)
5. Career goal(s)
6. In what country were you born?
7. Parent(s)' occupation in home country
8. Parent(s)' current occupation
9. At what age did you move to the United States?
10. Are you of Hispanic, Latina/o/x, or of Spanish origin?
Multiple Choice: Yes, No
11. How would you best describe your race? Mark all that apply.
Multiple Choice: American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White, Other (please specify)
12. How would you describe your ethnicity?
13. What high school will you/did you graduate from?
14. In what month and year did you graduate from high school?
Multiple Choice: May 2021, June 2021, July 2021, August 2021
15. Were you ever eligible for free or reduced meals during high school?
Multiple Choice: Yes, No, Not Sure
16. Were you ever enrolled in a college preparation program, like ACES, AVID, Upward Bound, or Talent Search? If so, please name the program(s) you were a part of.
Multiple Choice: Yes, No, Not Sure
17. How many colleges did you apply to?
Multiple Choice: 1-5; 6-10; 10-15; More than 16
18. At what college are you enrolled (Fall 2021)?
19. Did you complete the FAFSA?
Multiple Choice: Yes, No, Not Sure
20. Are you eligible for the Federal Pell grant?
Multiple Choice: Yes, No, Not Sure
21. Are you willing to participate in two interviews via video conference?
Multiple Choice: Yes, No, Not Sure
22. To ensure your anonymity during the interview, you will be referred to using a pseudonym (a fake name). Would you like to select a pseudonym or would you like the researcher to select one for you?
Multiple Choice: Select my own. My pseudonym will be ____; Researcher can select one.
23. Are you willing to share your resumé or a list of your school/community activities with me?
Multiple Choice: Yes, No, Maybe

24. Are you willing to share one of your college or scholarship application essays that describes your personality, background, or social/cultural identity?

Multiple Choice: Yes, No, Maybe

Note: If so, you will be asked to submit a copy of both your resumé and essay at the end of the first interview.

25. How did you hear about this study?

Multiple Choice: High school teacher/counselor, College/university staff, College prep organization, Community organization, Friend/Peer, Social media, Other (please specify)

Appendix F: Selection Email

Subject Line: Immigrant College Choice Study: Schedule Your First Interview

Hello,

Thank you for expressing interest in the study: Navigating College Search and Choice - How Immigrant Capital Paves a Path to Postsecondary Education for First-Generation Students of Color

As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to explore the college planning and decision-making experiences of immigrant high school students of color. This research focuses specifically on how a student's identity, culture, and community influence their experiences. I will also explore to what extent being an immigrant in the United States shapes college goals and planning.

I received and reviewed your survey responses, and I have verified that you meet the participant qualifications. I am eager to meet with you and hear more about your path to college.

As a reminder, you will be asked to complete the following tasks.

1. Complete Interview #1: This interview will focus on your childhood experiences, migration and adjustment to the United States, and your early thoughts about going to college.
2. After the first interview, please email me a copy of the following:
 - one of your already written college or scholarship application essays, preferably one that discusses your background, culture, or family
 - a copy of your resumé or list of high school/extracurricular activities
3. Complete Interview #2: This interview will focus on your experiences researching colleges, completing applications, and making your college decision.

A few things to know

- Each interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes.
- You do not need to do anything to prepare for the interview. I am most interested in learning about your experiences as you recall them.
- Within 48 hours of completing Interview #2, I will email you a \$35 gift card to Amazon as a token of appreciation for your time.
- Later this semester, I will contact you to review a 2–3-page summary of your interview. (This is to make sure I have captured your experiences accurately.)

Next steps

- Please schedule your first interview here: go.umd.edu/moyacalendar. If you would like to go ahead and schedule your second interview as well, you can do so using the same calendar link. Select any available appointment that says "ImmCollChoice Interview". Once you save/submit the appointment(s), you will receive a confirmation message, and I

will also be alerted. At least 24 hours in advance of each interview, I will email you the Zoom meeting link. NOTE: If none of the times on my calendar work for you, please email me your availability so we can find a mutually convenient time.

- If you know anyone else who might fit the criteria of this study and might be interested, please feel free to share my information, the flyer below, or the link to the survey: go.umd.edu/immigrantcollege

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

I look forward to meeting with you soon!

Warm regards,

Moya Malcolm
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education
University of Maryland

Appendix G: First Interview Protocol

Hello, and thank you for your willingness to participate in my study. First, do you recall the consent form that you completed online? I have a copy of it to share with you.

[Upload a copy of the consent form to the Chat.]

Please take a moment to review the form. Then, let me know if you have any questions about the form or the research process in general. While you review the form, I will go off camera. When you are done, let me know and I will turn my camera back on.

[While participant is reviewing consent form, interviewer turns off camera and mutes audio.]

Do you have any questions I can answer for you?

[Interviewer addresses questions. When the participant indicates they are ready to proceed, continue with script.]

As you read in the consent form, the purpose of my research is to gain a better understanding of how immigrant students of color navigate the college research and decision-making process. I was inspired to explore this topic for two reasons. One, I personally identify with the immigrant community. My parents are from Jamaica, and I was raised in an immigrant household and community. Two, I worked as a counselor and college advisor for high school students, and I had the pleasure of working with immigrants and families from all over the world. I hope that this research can help other counselors and educators understand the precollege journey and needs of immigrant students as they prepare for life after high school.

Part of this study includes conducting one-on-one interviews with students like you to learn about your experiences. As mentioned in the consent form, this interview will be video recorded. During the interview, I will refer to you by your pseudonym to ensure your anonymity. You may also want to change your Zoom name to your pseudonym for consistency. I also want to remind you that your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may skip a question or choose to withdraw from the study at any time.

Today's interview will focus on your childhood experiences. For example, I will ask about your life in your home country and family background. I will also ask about your move and adjustment to the United States and your early thoughts about going to college.

As you respond, I invite you to reply as fully and openly as you would like. There are no right or wrong answers. I am most interested in your background and moments in your journey as you experienced them. I encourage you to share examples or "stories" in your response; sometimes a story about a significant event can help illustrate your thoughts, feelings, and experiences as you reflect on that moment. This interview should last about 45-60 minutes.

Before we begin, are there any questions I can answer for you?

[Interviewer addresses questions. When the participant indicates they are ready to proceed, continue with script.]

I will now begin recording.

[BEGIN RECORDING]

[Interviewer states the following information before beginning questions: interviewer name, participant pseudonym, date/time of interview.]

Prompts

Family Background/Childhood Experiences/Migration

- 1a. If the participant moved to the United States as a child/adolescent: *I see on your survey that you were born in [country of birth]. Tell me about the place where you were born and spent your early years.*
- 1b. If the participant moved as an infant/toddler: *I see on your survey that you were born in [country of birth]. What do you know about the place where you were born?*
Probe: *How have family members described this place? Have you visited?*
2. *Describe your family. Who did you spend the most time with growing up?*
Probes: *What kind of work did your parents do? What was their level of education at that time? Were their extended family members whom you were close to?*
3. *Where in the United States did you first move to? Did you stay in this area or move to other cities or towns?*
4. *Who migrated with you? [Probe: Did you migrate with your parents?]*
5. *Has your family ever shared with you why they decided to leave [country of birth] to migrate to the United States?*
6. *What do you remember about your first home in the United States? With whom did you live?*
7. *Describe the community you grew up in. Were there relatives or other people from your country of birth in your community?*
8. *What was it like to begin school in the United States? Tell me a story about a significant moment or event you remember.*
9. *What or who helped you make the transition from [country of birth] to the United States?*

College Predisposition

1. *Think back to when you first knew you wanted to go to college. Can you recall a significant event or moment when you first knew? How did you know?*
[Probes: *What age or grade were you in when you started thinking about college?]*
2. *In what ways did your childhood experiences at home, at school, or in your community help shape your aspirations to attend college?*
3. *Growing up, what stories or messages did family members share with you about going college?*
4. *When you were young, what did people outside your family (like teachers, mentors, or people at your church) tell you about going to college?*
5. *When you were little, were there people who discouraged you from going to college or who thought you should do something else after high school?*

6. *How did these messages make you feel about attending college?*
7. *We are nearing the end of our first interview. Is there anything else you think I should know about your childhood or early thoughts about going to college?*

[STOP RECORDING]

Thank you for your time today. Our second interview will focus on your experiences researching colleges, completing college and financial aid applications, and making your college decision.

A few things before we end for today:

As a reminder, I would like to review your resumé (or activity list) to get a sense of the activities you participated in during your high school years. I would also like to incorporate one of your college or scholarship application essays in your second interview. I am most interested in an essay that discusses your background, culture, or family. Would you be willing to share these documents with me before our second interview?

I am also looking for additional study participants: immigrant students who identify as either Asian, Latinx, or Black who enrolled at a 4-year college or university this fall. Do you know anyone who might meet the qualifications and be interested in sharing their experiences with me? If you think of anyone, please share the research study flyer or give them my email address.

Finally, if you are still willing and available to meet with me for a second interview, let's look at our calendars and schedule the second interview.

POST-INTERVIEW

Send a reminder email requesting the following:

- College or scholarship application essay
- Resumé or list of activities
- [if not already scheduled] Link to schedule second interview

Appendix H: Second Interview Protocol

Hello. Thank you for joining me for final interview. As you may recall, the purpose of my research is to gain a better understanding of how immigrant students of color navigate the college research and decision-making process. Our previous interview focused on your background and how you developed your early aspirations for college. Today's interview will focus on your experiences researching colleges, completing college and financial aid applications, and making your college decision. We will also reflect on your college or scholarship application essay which I have a copy of here. Thank you for sending your essay and your resumé in advance.

Before we begin, please allow me to share a few important reminders. This interview will be video recorded. During the interview, I will refer to you by your pseudonym. (You may want to change your Zoom name to match your pseudonym for the recording.) I also want to remind you that your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may skip a question or choose to withdraw from the study at any time.

This interview should last about 60 minutes. Like our first interview, I will ask you a series of questions, and I invite you to reply as fully and openly as you would like. I encourage you to share examples or "stories" in your response. As we discussed before, sometimes a story about a significant event can help illustrate your thoughts, feelings, and experiences in that moment.

I will also note that some of the questions will seem repetitious although they may be slightly different. When asking students to recall an event from one or more years ago, I find that presenting questions in this manner can aid recall.

Before we begin, are there any questions I can answer for you?

[Interviewer addresses questions. When the participant indicates they are ready to proceed, continue with script.]

I will now begin recording.

[BEGIN RECORDING]

[Interviewer states the following information before beginning questions: interviewer name, participant pseudonym, date/time of interview.]

Prompts

[If there are any follow-up questions from the first interview, the interviewer asks them before proceeding with prepared questions.]

College Search

1. *In our previous interview, we focused on your early thoughts about going to college. As a kid, were there specific colleges you thought about at that stage? When did you first start actively researching colleges? [Probes: If yes, what colleges? Why those colleges?]*
2. *Out of the many college options in the United States, how did you figure out which schools you wanted to apply to? [Probes: What were the top things you were looking for in college? What made those characteristics important to you?]*
3. *At what point did you learn about how much college costs? How did you think you or your family would be able to finance college costs?*
4. *Some students receive support from one, a few, or multiple people when researching colleges, for example family members, teachers, friends, or mentors. Who were the people most helpful to you as you decided which colleges to apply to? In what ways were they helpful? [Probes: If not mentioned: What role did your family play? How were your peers involved? Review resumé for hints to potential school staff, extracurricular activity advisors, or community mentors that may have aided college search. Were their educators or mentors who assisted you?]*
5. *Were you discouraged from applying to certain colleges or universities? If so, why? By whom?*
6. *How did you find out information about the colleges you applied to? What websites or resources, if any, did you use to research colleges?*
7. *Did you take the SAT or ACT?*
 - a. *If no: How did you decide not to take an exam? Who were the people most helpful to you as you thought about whether to take an exam? [Probes: If not mentioned: What role did your family play? How were your peers involved? Did you receive advice from school staff or mentors?] How did you think not taking an exam would impact your admission chances?*
 - b. *If yes: Which exam did you take? What made you decide to take the exam(s)? Tell me about your experience taking it/them? Describe the moment you got your results. How did you think your results would impact your admission chances? Who were the people most helpful to you as you prepared for and reviewed your exam results? [Probes: If not mentioned: What role did your family play? How were your peers involved? Did you receive advice from school staff or mentors?]*
8. *Were there any other individuals or resources that influenced your choice to apply to certain colleges? [Probes: If not mentioned: What role did your family play? How were your peers involved? Did you receive advice from school staff or mentors?]*

College Choice

1. *I want to know more about the [college or scholarship] application essay you submitted. How did you decide what to write? Tell me why what you wrote is meaningful to you.*
2. *Tell me a story that describes the moment when you received your first college acceptance. [Probes: How did you feel? Who was the first person you told about your acceptance? How did this person respond?]*
3. *Describe the moment when you received the acceptance letter to your top choice school. [Probes: How did you feel? Who was the first person you told about your acceptance? How did this person respond?]*
4. *Did you receive any college rejections? If so, what was that like for you?*
5. *After you received your financial aid awards letters, how did you make sense of the*

numbers/costs that were outlined in those letters? At that stage, where did you think the money would come from to pay for college?

6. *After you received decisions from the schools you applied to, how did you approach making your college choice?*
7. *Some students receive support from one, a few, or multiple people when researching colleges, for example family members, teachers, friends, or mentors. Who were the people most helpful to you as you decided which colleges to apply to? In what ways were they helpful? [Probes: If not mentioned: What role did your family play? How were your peers involved? Review resumé for hints to potential school staff, extracurricular activity advisors, or community mentors that may have aided college decision-making. Were their educators or mentors who assisted you?]*
8. *Were you discouraged from selecting certain colleges or universities? If so, why?*
9. *Were there any other individuals or resources that influenced your college decision? [Probes: If not mentioned: What role did your family play? How were your peers involved? Did you receive advice from school staff or mentors?]*

Concluding Questions

1. *I invite you to reflect on your entire precollege journey, from first setting your sights on going to college, to applying to colleges and for financial aid, to committing a college/university. What obstacles would you say you encountered? How did you overcome those obstacles to arrive at this point?*
2. *Knowing what you now know about researching, applying for, and selecting colleges, if you could go back and do this process over, what would you do differently?*
3. *What advice would you offer high school students about researching and choosing colleges?*
4. *If you had not moved to the United States, what do you imagine your life would be like now?*
5. *Is there anything else you think I should know?*

STOP RECORDING

In my dissertation, it is important to me that I share your story as you would like it to be told. I will email you a copy of my summary of your experiences. I would like you to review the summary and tell me if there is anything inaccurate or if there is anything you might want me to exclude from my dissertation. For example, if there are certain details that would make you uncomfortable if you saw it in my final dissertation, please let me know. I would exclude that from my report.

I will likely continue interviewing participants throughout the fall semester: immigrant students who identify as either Asian, Latinx, or Black who are enrolled in a 4-year college or university. In the near future, if you think of anyone who might meet the qualifications and be interested in sharing their experiences, please share the research study flyer or give them my email address.

Within 48 hours, you will receive your Amazon e-gift card for \$35 as a token of appreciation for participating in this study. I wish you the best as you conclude your semester, and thanks again!

Appendix I: Member Checking Email Message to Participants

Hello,

I hope this email message finds you and your loved ones doing well.

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me in January and share your experiences navigating your path to college. As I previewed in your last interview, I am reaching out to you to ask you to review your student-participant profile (i.e., a summary of your narrative). Please take some time to read your profile carefully. The document attached is 6 pages; it includes an introduction in which I explain my approach to crafting your profile and the steps I followed to select passages from your transcripts. Then, I present your profile using your pseudonym throughout. I also took care to anonymize details, such as the name of your birthplace, to protect your identity.

After reviewing this draft, please reply to let me know if you approved the profile as written or have edits/updates that you'd like me to make to your profile. It is most important to me that I represent your experiences with accuracy, so please don't hesitate to reach out with updates or questions or concerns.

If I do not hear from you by March 31, I will assume your profile as I have drafted it is satisfactory. If you need more time to review, please let me know. I will be happy to work with your schedule.

With appreciation,

Moya Malcolm
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education
University of Maryland

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