

ACCESS NOW: EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF
COLLEGE ACCESS FOR TODAY'S YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

ACCESS NOW: EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE ACCESS FOR TODAY'S YOUTH

Eleanor Julia Burke Daugherty

Over the past several decades, there has been a great deal of discussion on the creation and maintenance of affirmative action programs for under-represented students in higher education. There is ample literature of the development of these programs, the role of state and federal agencies, and the ultimate resulting diversification of American institutions of higher education. This exploratory study seeks to improve our understanding of how access to higher education is perceived and experienced by African American students attending college in the 21st century.

The exploratory study is a case study with a phenomenological perspective involving students entering college, K-12 and higher education administrators, and experts in the field of higher education. The researcher utilized individual interviews, group interviews, reflections, and a review of archival data and relevant theories. The study demonstrates how African American students (a) perceive and experience higher education, (b) develop a sense of agency and identity that impacts how they believe themselves to be perceived by their community, and (c) utilize that sense of agency and

identity to influence college selection, as well as (d) how their academic and social transition to college is influenced by education officials and community.

Students in this study had a challenging transition to higher education. They had attended a predominantly African American high school that was highly focused on supporting student access to college. However, the students were not prepared to experience a diverse campus for the first time without the individualized attention they had received in their high school.

This study demonstrates that access and persistence within higher education is highly influenced by the support students received within their academic, social, and familial communities. It also indicates the significant financial pressure of affording higher education, a stressor throughout the college experience of these students.

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DEDICATION

To Grandpop and Budz Always loved, never forgotten

“proud of you”

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It's hard to imagine that I am here. Hard to imagine, perhaps, because it is simply impossible to define all of those people who inspired and enabled me to complete this work. I must thank my family first for believing in me and my desire to make a difference. That has often meant crazed moments as I burned the candle at both ends working in a career I loved but also seeking to create new knowledge and awareness that would allow our support for students to be even greater and stronger than it is now. My mother, father, sister, brother, husband, son, and daughter have been an inspiration and source of strength and motivation every day and I am deeply thankful for all of you in my life. In particular, my husband, Steve, has always been my rock and tolerated a great deal to support my career and this work. This work is as much theirs as it is mine. Thank you, all, for believing in me.

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I have been truly blessed to work with institutions, staff, faculty, and students who have driven me to pursue this path of scholarship. There is much to be said about our strengths and challenges and the work that we do for students who are currently feeling quite alone on our college and university campuses. Their story would not have been told without the support and influence of a number of individuals in my life. I give great

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I – PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The principle issue this study will explore is how under-represented minority students perceive and experience higher education. This study is exploratory and probes farther than the ongoing debate surrounding affirmative action programs has by examining who is welcomed into our elite schools of higher education and who is marginalized. In light of the research led by Duster (1993), Steele (1999), and Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer (2003) the study explores how African American students who have been raised in disadvantaged backgrounds perceive, experience, and take meaning from their time at college. In order to view that experience effectively, this study is rooted in a conceptual framework that is based in liberal education theory (Nussbaum, 1997; Kenefelkamp and Schneider, 1997; Bok, 2013) and complemented by the need to be attentive to the impact of cultural identity and environmental influence upon the cultivation of student agency (Abes, Jones, and McEwen, 2007; Clausen, 1991; Duster, 1993; Gurin, 2004; Henretta, 2003; Hill and Magolda, 2007; Hitlin and Elder, 2007; Horn, 2007; Magolda, 1999; Marshall, 2005; Mortimer, 1988; Sorenson, 1986; Steele, 1999).

Designed as a case study with a phenomenological perspective, this exploratory study attempts to both explore the depth of the experience of a select number of students over the course of their transition to college while also providing the perspective of a second cohort of educational professionals that express both the challenges and strengths of the broader educational climate that supports—or inhibits—these students' journey into and through the first year of college.

Research Problem

This study is intended to continue the conversation where many conversations of affirmative action's role in supporting access to college for under-represented students have left off. This is not a study of affirmative action practices or policies. Rather, this is a study of the consequences of affirmative action. As Duster (1997) suggests, it pursues the question of how a college and university community engages with students of color: "Issues of access are quite different than issues of engagement. To put it another way, 'just because you have a ticket to the theater is...no guarantee that you will enjoy the show'" (277, Duster).

This concept of the "ticket" conveys a complex understanding of access to higher education as a solution to post-secondary opportunities for students that cannot solely be resolved by receiving an acceptance letter to college. This ticket is no ordinary ticket. In fact, it can be argued that the true ticket these students received was access to Sevans and Owles High School. Sevans and Owles is dedicated to ensuring students are exposed to an environment that demands excellence and enrollment in a four-year colleges. In this study, all the students graduating from Sevans and Owles High School were admitted to a college or university. Yet just over 20% of those students choose to not enroll in college. This ticket that appears as though it will transform the lives of the recipients does not guarantee transformation. Engagement in college indicates one's ability to take that ticket, gain admission to the show, and fully engage in the performance. The experience of actual college attendance and persistence is transformational if one is able to engage and

experience the performance fully. This ability to immerse fully and engage one's self with the experience is what is examined in this study.

Access is not exclusively defined by admission to a college or university. Rather, this study suggests that concerns for access should equally apply to a student's experience in college with the ultimate goal of increasing graduation rates among under-represented students of color. There is a growing achievement gap between African American and Caucasian males (NCES, 2005, 2010). Given the persuasiveness of the *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) rulings and the need for a significant number of under-represented students of color on college and university campuses, this study selected students who were admitted to selective colleges. This allowed an opportunity to see how under-represented students perceive being a part of college and university communities that was originally discussed by Gurin (2004) and her colleagues in light of the *Grutter* and *Gratz* cases. Gurin's persuasive argument for the role under-represented students play in a diverse learning environment for all students demonstrates that a diverse learning environment "enables more students to have actual experience with diverse peers...because with diversity in backgrounds students are exposed to a broader range of viewpoints based on their different experiences in life" (116-7, Gurin). This heterogeneous learning environment creates an experience for students that broadens perspective and invites exploration of different viewpoints that, particularly for students coming from more homogeneous backgrounds, invites a significant degree of personal reflection and growth.

This study will provide a unique perspective into identifying a) what, if any, disparities exist between how under-represented students of color perceive access to

college and how it is actually experienced over the course of the first semester, b) what, if any, obstacles under-represented students of color are experiencing that inhibit their success, and c) what, if any, assets exist within the college and secondary environment that maximize their opportunities for success. Finally, it is with the goal of ultimately recommending areas to enhance and create programs that will improve the graduation rate of under-represented students of color that this study hopes to offer a positive contribution to the continuing conversation on access and achievement for under-represented students of color in higher education.

Research Purpose and Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college?

Research Question 2: How does that sense of agency and identity impact how students believe themselves to be perceived within their community?

Research Question 3: How does students' sense of agency and identity influence how they choose a college and how they engage with their college community?

Research Question 4: What influence do education officials and community based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support student's academic and social transition to college?

Research Design Overview

This study focused upon a series of interviews with African American students attending high school with notable percentages of students going on to attend 4-year colleges. For the sake of further definition, the students selected for the study are African American since there is already a clear indication of an achievement gap, although the findings may be applicable more broadly among students entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds (NCES, 2005, 2010). The study began in the spring of the students' senior year and continued through the conclusion of their first semester in college. During that time, interviews of all subjects occurred at or around the following points:

- at home during the summer prior to enrollment in college or university;
- at the college or university campus, during midterms of the first semester of college; and
- during the return home following the conclusion of the first semester.

The group of individually interviewed students, the student group, was supplemented by the creation of a second group of professionals. The second group, the professional group, consisted of educators and administrators whose career path and experience focus on assisting students with college preparation and retention. Members of the second cohort included a senior university administrator, a provost, a higher educational consultant, and leadership at the K–12 public school level from two major cities. The professional group was distinct from the student group. Interviews with the second group occurred in the late fall and at the start of the calendar year. Both

interviews were conducted as a group and the professional group was utilized to review transcripts, determine inter-reliability of data, and serve as a data source given their combined experience in education.

The two groups were utilized separately to establish inter-reliability of data, establish broader connections between the initial findings and larger national and regional trends, and provide a confidential opportunity to discuss and review preliminary findings.

Researcher Perspectives

When I started my job in undergraduate admissions at the University of Michigan in 1999, I believed, along with many others, that race was an issue of the past. I felt quite strongly that *inequity* had not been surpassed as an obstacle preventing access to higher education and, in turn, to futures with greater opportunities. Race, I thought, was OK. If we moved to a class based system of admission to college, surely that would meet all needs. This is what I believed when I entered my job as a White female in her early twenties at the University of Michigan.

I spent the next two years with boots on the ground realizing how wrong I was. How many admissions information sessions did I give in high schools around the state when I was interrupted by a White father standing up and shouting, “Are you telling me that you are not going to admit my son to college because he’s White??!?” How many times did I look around that room filled with hundreds of families and hope that someone would jump up and object to that father’s comment? Yet no one did. I imagine now this is

largely because those rooms were filled with predominantly White middle and upper middle class individuals who only wanted the best for their children. Mothers, like myself, who can see only as far as the future their child deserves and the dreams their child has.

And yet there were so many children, deserving of admission, who were not there.

Those are the children that motivated me in this work. What is their story? As someone who has been in the field of higher education well over a decade, I have witnessed a tremendous range in the behaviors of students and their success in college. I have found that students come to college with the greatest of hopes for their success but that, ultimately, the ability to realize that success may be dependent upon the individuals, advocacy, and resources these students encounter along the way. It is my curiosity and concern for these issues surrounding access and success within higher education that has influenced my interest in this topic. Further, I worked in undergraduate admissions at the University of Michigan during the course of the cases brought against its affirmative action policies. That had a very pronounced effect upon my own interest in these policies. Namely, the debate surrounding the continued justification for affirmative action programs and why the commitment to access should not end when admissions letters are mailed. Over the past six years, my career has expanded to take on the responsibility of examining the student life experience as a whole. This has invited my own commitment to establishing college as an opportunity for students to be *uncomfortable* and accept that inquiry, discovery, and failure are all acceptable parts that form the whole of the college experience. As Hill and Magolda (2007) and Helms (1992) indicate, college is an opportunity for students to engage with difficult issues of race and class. In creating

opportunities for discussion and debate throughout the diversity of the student body and the campus community, a university is able to create an environment that Hill and Magolda term “accepting rather than repressing conflict and negotiating differences [in order to] form multicultural democratic discourse by maximizing public participation” (p. 253).

Assumptions of the Study

One of the potentially harmful assumptions of this study is that there is inherently a problem in how students of color are provided resources to transition to college from high school. There needs to be an openness on behalf of the researcher to learn what resources and avenues of support currently exist for students who are at risk of feeling marginalized by the campus community. As a result, the study and research questions evolved to include interviews with administrators in K–12 education who assist with the transition of students to college. Second, this study focuses upon African American students. In doing so, one should not assume that this is the only population of students to which this study is relevant. It is important that the needs of other under-represented minorities such as Hispanic, Latina/o, and Native American students not be ignored and that the conclusions drawn from research of African American students not be assumed to be synonymous with other under-represented populations. One of the ways that I have tried to mitigate this is through the creation of the group of professionals. This group of educational professionals seeks to contextualize and interpret the experiences shared by the individual students interviewed in this study.

Rationale and Significance

The outcome of this exploratory study has the potential to provide additional chapters to the discussion of access to higher education that is informed by the lived experience of students and educators. This study provides added insight into the question of college access for under-represented populations by looking at retention and persistence in college, the influence of environment, and the potential of graduation from a 4-year college or university. The debate that began with affirmative action continues as students from under-represented backgrounds enter college without appropriate support. In failing to provide for the needs of these students, we perpetuate the inequities that Duster (1993) and Steele (1999, 2010) demonstrate in their own research. This study adds to the significance of this work by focusing upon the experiences of under-represented student not just in gaining access to college but in how those students perceive and experience access to higher education over the course of the end of their high school years and the beginning of their college years.

Definition of Terms

Affirmative Action: A product of the Civil Rights movement, affirmative action programs were federally created in order to require equal opportunities for under-represented populations. This study reflects upon the benefit of affirmative action programs upon providing access to higher education for African American students.

Co-curricular: A term used to define those experiences occurring outside of the classroom that influence student development and achievement in an educational setting.

College: An institution that offers only undergraduate academic programs and does not offer graduate programs or degrees.

Critical Mass: A term generally accredited with the work of Patricia Gurin. Critical mass demonstrates the concept that, in order for under-represented minorities to avoid being overly stereotyped, a critical mass of under-represented students is necessary to allow for a classroom experience in which all backgrounds and perspectives are freely shared in order to enhance the learning experience for all students.

Persistence: Similar to retention, this is the capacity of the student to persevere in college and maintain a level of engagement in their college experience.

Retention: A student's ability to return to college. Colleges and universities often measure the rate of retention among the entering first year or freshman cohort to the second year as well as the 6-year graduation rate to demonstrate the sum retention of students from their point of entry into college, to the second year, and, ultimately, to graduation.

Under-represented student of color: A term that reflects the under-representation of a particular community from the educational environment. This term is distinguished from minority students in that it allows a focus upon populations that are not only minorities but under-represented in the existing college bound population.

University: Different from a college, a university is an institution that offers both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. This study includes students who enrolled in colleges and universities with the goal of receiving a bachelor degree.

II – LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study will examine how the transition into college for African American students influences their development and sense of agency within the college community. This assertion is based on the work of scholars such as Nussbaum (1997), Kenefelkamp and Schneider (1997), and Duster (1993, 1997) who call upon colleges to cultivate within students and campus communities a sense of engagement among all students from all backgrounds. The college experience is one where students interact within a microcosmic global community that demands the active participation of every member within that community. What this study strives to explore further is the degree to which that sense of engagement is cultivated among under-represented students of color. For the purposes of this study, the term under-represented is used to mean those racial and ethnic identities that are not proportionately represented on college and university campuses as they are in the national population. More specifically, the 2010 census indicates that 14% of the overall population is African American. Yet, within highly selective institutions, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* reports the African American population is often 10% or less; therefore it is an under-represented minority. In order to best understand the influence of identity and culture upon how under-represented students develop their own sense of belonging within college and university campuses, I have relied upon the life course theory and identity development models (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Clausen, 1991; Harper, 2014; Harper and Hurtado, 2007; Helms, 1992; 1995; Henretta, 2003; Marshall, 2005; Mortimer, 1988; Sørensen, 1986; Tierney, 1993) to describe how under-represented students navigate and respond to different influences in the college environment including race, class, and family.

Graduation rates reflect underrepresentation as well. As NCES reports, African American students have repeatedly graduated in lower numbers than their White peers (2005, 2010). For those students coming from racial and ethnic backgrounds that have not been as successful in their ability to gain access to higher education and graduate from those institutions, this study attempts to identify, during the first semester of college, how under-represented students grow to identify and engage with their campus community. In doing so, it will also identify what those challenges are that prevent students from gaining a sense of belonging and agency within their campus community.

This literature review informs the development of a conceptual framework that I intend to utilize for the purpose of this study. First, however, it is important to provide an overview of the affirmative action debate that establishes the context in which the students in this study will experience college. While this study is not one of access, it is, as Duster (1993, 1997) would suggest, a study of the engagement of under-represented students of color in higher education. The overview of the history of affirmative action and the challenges that have been faced by the courts reveal the impact of diversity upon the learning environment for all students. Specifically, this overview differentiates between the isolation experienced by isolated under-represented students versus the enriched educational environment that is provided when under-represented student enrollment is increased through the implementation of affirmative action programs.

Second, I will expand the concept of engagement to include the developing sense of how **environment impacts the development of student agency and identity** that occurs during the college or university experience by relying on life course theorists such as Hitlin and Elder (2007), Mortimer (1988), Sorenson (1986), Clausen (1991), Henretta

(2003), and Marshall (2005). In particular, this expanded view of identity, agency, and environment will include the work of Duster (1993), Steele (1999), Gurin (2004), Horn (2007) and Abes, Jones and McEwen (2007) to illustrate the impact of race and ethnicity on how under-represented students experience and succeed in college. Collectively, these views of liberal education, agency, and environment and the role of racial identity will provide a framework for examining how students of color experience access to higher education.

Finally, I will rely on the perspective of Chiang (2007), Hill and Magolda (2007), Harper and Hurtado (2007), and Tierney (1993) to explore nuances that **race, gender, and class specifically impose** when institutions seek to encourage students to develop a sense of awareness and engagement with experiences that may be quite different from their current sense of identity. As Helms (1992) argues, “becoming an intercultural collaborator requires a willingness to trade spaces, engage in authentic learning, and (re) negotiate one’s sense of self and place in the world” (p. 73). This is a formidable task that highlights the vulnerability associated with the “willingness” that Helms refers to that is required for identity development and the need to account for the complexity and vulnerability associated with individual development of agency and identity.

Affirmative Action: An Overview

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations made significant progress in recognizing the need for individuals of color to receive equal opportunities that were protected by federal law. The creation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 took measures to federally protect those individuals from discriminatory practices established by state and

local government. Specifically, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbids intentional discriminatory practices in employment and Title VI prohibited discrimination on the basis of race by institutions receiving federal funds, including colleges and universities. These two tenets became significant tools in assisting the Civil Rights Movement, yet enforcement was uneven in the White House. Halpern (1995) notes that:

Forty-four school districts had had their funding terminated during the 1968-69 school year, almost exclusively as the result of administrative proceedings commenced by the Johnson administration. There was only one cut-off ordered in the 1969-70 academic school year, and none ordered from that time to the date of [Judge] Pratt's initial order in November 1972. (p. 72)

The Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) relied upon assorted court rulings to either grant legitimacy to or limit their enforcement proceedings. Weak and varying presidential support of HEW places the department in a position where “judges and not agency officials are determining critical administrative policies” (Halpern, 1995, p. 134). The assertion of federal authority in state institutions and inconsistent Title VI enforcement led to persistent litigation and heightened ill will between state and federal authorities. Halpern (1995) notes that this became particularly acute over the course of several rulings delivered by Judge Pratt of the federal district court for the District of Columbia. Beginning on November of 1972, Judge Pratt issued orders that, as Halpern notes, “established the agenda for the legal and political fights over Title VI for the next fifteen years.” (pp. 97-98). He demanded that higher education institutions within his district be desegregated, enforcement proceedings and compliance monitoring for Title VI violations commence, and that they make regular reports to him summarizing compliance and enforcement of his order. The Pratt order was a dramatic ruling enabling more aggressive enforcement of Title VI, yet it was met with resistance

from the states it affected. During enforcement proceedings over a ruling delivered by Judge Pratt against the University of North Carolina, the Chairman of the University's board of governors stated that this "University does not belong to the HEW or to Judge Pratt and the District Court over which he presides in Washington D.C. It is the university of this state and it belongs to the people of the state of North Carolina" (Halpern, 1995, p. 172).

Starting in 1978 with the Supreme Court ruling in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, legal and legislative challenges have been brought in a number of states including the *Hopwood v. State of Texas* ruling in 1996. *Hopwood* opened the door for the elimination of affirmative action programs and served as a foreboding sign for the future of affirmative action until the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003). These 2003 rulings affirmed the need for affirmative action programs that acknowledged the benefit of diversity on college campuses but outlawed admissions processes that were not "narrowly tailored" enough to provide equal protection to all applicants. This ruling and the behavior among many states created two different perceptions of the role of affirmative action policies. Most notable was Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's final note in the ruling that "we expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today" (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 244).

Most of the argumentation presented in the legal debate surrounding affirmative action programs grew from Justice Powell's decision in the *Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke* (1978). In that ruling, the Court deemed the use of racial quotas unconstitutional yet Justice Powell's opinion stressed that race conscious policies could

be used to “obtain the education benefits that flow from an ethnically diverse student body” (438 U.S. 265). This aspect of the *Bakke* ruling was seized upon by attorneys for the University of Michigan as justification for the use of non-quota, yet racially sensitive admissions processes in two separate cases, *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003). These two cases involved two White applicants suing the University of Michigan Law School (*Gratz*) and the College of Arts and Science (*Grutter*) for violation of equal protection resulting in the failure of the university to admit them alongside similarly qualified students of color. These cases foregrounded the question of the value of diversity in an educational community and placed it upon the national stage. Greater than the past discrimination issues raised by the 1996 *Hopwood* case, *Grutter* and *Gratz* ask whether diversity itself is valued enough by higher education to be a compelling factor in admissions, rather than describing policies as an attempt to remedy the wrongs caused by years of discrimination as argued in the *Hopwood* ruling. While *Hopwood* prompted the idea of admitting the top 10% of each high school to top state schools, most states failed to implement similar programs. *Grutter* failed for not being narrowly tailored enough. *Gratz*, however, succeeded by arguing that a critical mass of under-represented students was essential for the success of higher education as a diverse community and was deemed constitutional by the Supreme Court.

For advocates of affirmative action programs, the *Gratz* ruling was seen as a cautionary “win” for the use of affirmative action programs in the college and universities admissions process. O’Connor’s pronouncement at the end of the ruling that questions whether affirmative action programs will be necessary in 25 years can be interpreted as a clock that has been set for the future elimination of affirmative action programs in the not

too distant future. Both before and after the ruling, several states— notably California and Michigan—took steps to introduce legislation that sought to eliminate affirmative action programs at state institutions via the ballot box. Chief among those efforts was former University of California Regent Ward Connerly’s public support initiatives, like Proposition 209 removing the capacity of public institutions in the state of California to consider race, sex, or ethnicity. Following the *Gratz* ruling, Connerly also led an initiative in Michigan in 2006 labeled the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative that specifically indicated that the:

University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Wayne State University, and any other public college or university, community college, or school district shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting. (Mich. Const. art. I, § 26)

As a result of compliance with the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, the University of Michigan admitted 7% fewer under-represented minority students in the Fall of 2008 than the previous fall (Kaufmann, 2008). The recent 2013 Supreme Court ruling in *Fischer v. University of Texas at Austin*, et al. notably reversed and remanded to the Fifth Circuit ruling because the court did not meet the narrowly tailored standard provided in the *Grutter* ruling:

Narrow tailoring also requires a reviewing court to verify that it is “necessary” for the university to use race to achieve the educational benefits of diversity.... The reviewing court must ultimately be satisfied that no workable race-neutral alternatives would produce the educational benefits of diversity. (570 U.S.133 S. Ct. 2411 2013).

This emphasis upon both the strict scrutiny standard applied by *Bakke* and the narrowly tailored standard applied under *Grutter* appears to serve as a warning from the Court that universities must be able to demonstrate to the courts that are no possible race

neutral measures available that will allow colleges and universities to fulfill their commitment to diversity in the student body. Ten years after the *Gratz* ruling, it was Justice Ginsberg's opinion that noted "I have said before and reiterate here that only an ostrich could regard the supposedly neutral alternatives as race conscious" (570 U.S. 133 S. Ct. 2411, 2013). These ongoing debates occurring in the courtroom and the ballot box indicate that affirmative action programs have been hotly contested for decades. Simultaneously, under-represented students of color continue to be minimally represented in our most selective four-year colleges and universities. For those students who are present on these campuses, some of whom are discussed in this study, the obligation to provide the benefit so clearly described in both the *Gratz* ruling and Gurin's related research can be overwhelming. As Harper and Hurtado (2007), Tierney (1993), and Baxter Magolda (1999) reveal, students of color can feel marginalized and perceived as an "other" and retreat into self-isolating behaviors.

Forging an Identity: Developing a Sense of Self in Higher Education

Life course theory is able to illustrate the relationship of individuals to their environment and how social structures may impact individual agency. The relationship of the individual to the environment is a concept explored by Mortimer (1988), Sørensen (1986), Clausen (1991), Henretta (2003), Baxter Magolda (1999), Helms (1992, 1995), Harper and Hurtado (2007), Tierney (1993), and Marshall (2005). Mortimer clearly describes a "reciprocal relationship between people and their job environment" (p. 268). The relationship is affected by the constraints that exist either through established

hierarchies or social behaviors. Sørensen (1986) defines the need to identify the role of environment in the form of social structure as an influencing factor upon development by

identifying properties of social structure that will share the life course not through changes in structure but by providing opportunities and constraints for individual achievement and by defining the mechanism by which achievement goals are maintained. (p. 195)

It is with an understanding of individual and environment that the influence of education both in the form of the classroom and the lived experience of entry into the job force that one is able to see the impact of social structure upon an individual life course. Hitlin and Elder (2007) further build upon this by introducing the impact of social and historical context; “agency represents a human capacity to influence one’s own life within socially structured opportunities” (p. 57). As a result, one’s ability to act in spite of restrictions presented by historical and social contexts represents the use of agency within the life course.

Access to higher education changed dramatically following World War II; Duster (1997) notes that “the GI educational grants after World War II and the Korean War constituted a quantum leap in broadening higher education as an instrument of secondary social enfranchisement” (p. 281). No longer a privilege for the wealthy elite, college and university campuses rapidly experienced racial and socioeconomic diversification. With the presence of a more diverse population, the curriculum and community have been continually encouraged to include a greater diversity of scholars and be more inclusive of multicultural affairs (Duster, 1997). Under-represented populations have continually called upon institutions of higher education to expand the canon and embrace the diversity of individuals now composing our colleges and universities (Harper and Hurtado, 2007). While these changes have been slow in coming, Knefelkamp and Schneider (1997)

suggest that, by embracing the principles of liberal education within this more diversified college and university,

our colleges and universities can literally become experiential learning centers where all members of the community are learning and practicing the capacities basic to the making of a just and equitable democracy. (p. 304)

As such, the purpose of the liberal academy becomes one that enables the diverse members of its community to grow and learn from one another in order to become more active and engaged citizens in an increasingly global community.

Having a multitude of diverse perspectives is both a challenge and an opportunity for higher education. As Tierney (1993) notes, “when we enable other[s] to speak from their personal experiences we bring into question organizational norms and values and open up the possibility for significant changes in how we interact with one another” (p. 147). This presents an opportunity for higher education to embrace the diversity associated with the value of education. However, this must be done with an understanding that supporting different identities within higher education requires an awareness of the individual’s identity development (Abes, Jones, and McEwen, 2007)) and the capacity of college and university campuses to provide a welcoming and inclusive space (Hill Collins, 1986; Reason and Evans, 2007; Tierney, 1993,).

Agency and Belonging Within the Institutional Community

The term “agency” is one that, according to Marshall, has been broadly used by life course scholars and has come to identify a number of conditions in the life course. Hitlin and Elder (2007) provide some added definition by defining agency as “a human capacity to influence one’s own life within socially structured opportunities” (pp. 56-57).

Further, Hitlin and Elder seek to look at agency in relation to a number of variables which they define as planfulness, self-efficacy, and optimism (p. 60). According to Hitlin and Elder (2007), these factors influence the ability of an individual to exercise agency:

Our model indicates how the sense of agency among individuals stems from, and interprets, their structural positions in meaningful ways. Social actors understand their own skills as well as their life chances, and take both into account as they construct their life course in constrained situations. (p. 60)

Hitlin and Elder place clear parameters around the definition of agency and how agency is expressed within structure. In doing so, the individual is perceived by the surrounding structure as having the ability to construct their life course but only with an awareness of the greater constraints and the ability to act purposefully.

The choice to practice one's agency and invoke change is not inherent. As Reason and Evans (2007) note, "a diverse student body does not guarantee that White students will engage across racial differences or assume a racially cognizant understanding of self" (p. 71). It is therefore up to the institutional community to ensure that students are engaging in communities of difference and broadening their sense of agency and institutional citizenship. The use of agency is dependent upon the factors described by Hitlin and Elder (2007) and an awareness of greater constraints that surround those choices and actions. This lens of agency and the surrounding context of social realities provide an important means for viewing the paths of these students coming from backgrounds that are infused with constraints that have prevented successful access to and completion of graduation. This perspective is further enhanced by the work of Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007), who look at how individuals make meaning of their world by examining it through a myriad of lenses or filters that includes race, class, gender, religion, etc.

This study intentionally examines African American students because, despite the efforts of affirmative action, students from these backgrounds continue to graduate from college at a rate substantially below White and Asian/Pacific Islanders (NCES, 2005, 2010). Moreover, African American students continue to attend highly selective colleges and universities at rates that are not proportional to the percentage of these populations in the populace (Anderson, Daugherty, and Corrigan, 2005). Further, Horn (2007) indicates in her study of graduation rates among institutions that the size and selectivity an institution also have bearing upon graduation rates of low income students and students of color. A notable counter-trend to this is the impact historically Black college and universities have had upon graduating the majority of their students and the rate of those students in pursuing higher degrees at the master's and even the doctoral level (Allen, 2002; Allen and Jewell, 2002). As Steele and Duster have emphasized, there are conditions at predominantly White institutions that inhibit the academic success of minority students (Steele, 1999) and their ability to feel welcome on campus (Duster, 1993).

Patricia Gurin at the University of Michigan has been able to document the positive impact of diversity upon how students treat and engage one another over time (Gurin, Lehman, Lewis, et al, 2004). This argument was raised as a compelling argument utilized by the University of Michigan to uphold the value of a critical mass of under-represented students in higher education. As part of the *Gratz* defense, Gurin (2004) has been able to effectively demonstrate the positive impact of diverse learning environments upon the worldview of both majority and minority students. Gurin (2004) suggests that a learning environment must contain a "critical mass" of students from under-represented

backgrounds. This advantage of a critical mass of under-represented students in the learning environment allows students from minority backgrounds to participate and influence the learning environment effectively for all students without feeling as though they must represent an entire cultural experience. Without the presence of a critical mass, Gurin's work demonstrates that

there is clear evidence that implicit prejudice and stereotypes become exaggerated for token minorities in groups. That is the reason that the University of Michigan has stressed the importance of having a "critical mass" of students of color. (p. 140)

A critical mass of students of color is essential to enhance student's awareness of diversity in the classroom and to ensure majority and minority students can participate in the learning experience comfortably. Duster (1993) further illustrates the benefits of critical mass as being the

transformation of the politics of identity ... [that] challenges the institution too in terms of gender and ethnic/racial composition of the faculty; and the importation and integration of curricula that address issues of gender and ethnic and racial stratification. (278)

Duster is able to demonstrate that critical mass theory is not solely for the purpose of promoting access to under-represented populations but also serves to challenge and reconstruct the learning environment to reflect not only the diversity of the global community but the existing tensions and social stratification.

Harper and Antonio (2008) and Tierney (1993) pursue in greater detail the role diverse backgrounds and viewpoints can have in shaping the educational experience for all students in colleges and universities. Tierney (1993) speaks to the significance of the "other" in influencing the authenticity and inclusiveness of the classroom environment;

“in our understanding of the Other, we must strive not to essentialize an individual as if a gay male or an Asian female speaks for all gay males or all Asian females” (Tierney, 156). Rather, he calls for a classroom environment where the diversity of perspectives and experiences of *all* students are valued and incorporated within the classroom experience, thereby—like Duster (1993) and Gurin (2004)—acknowledging the complexity of the classroom environment and calling for an inclusiveness that challenges stereotyping of any one student as representing the entirety of a perspective or identity.

Harper and Antonio (2008) challenge this inclusiveness of the learning environment to extend beyond the classroom and into the student experience throughout the student’s time in college or university. Indeed, Harper and Antonio (2008) strongly suggest that “conversations regarding the role of student affairs educators in creating rich diversity-related learning opportunities” (2) has been a neglected part of the conversation. They aptly name the importance of the college experience as being one where students are uniquely introduced to a diverse society. It is, then, the role of the entire campus to create an educational experience for students—inside and outside of the classroom—that effectively prepares students to be active citizens in a global world. Like Nussbaum, Harper and Antonio (2008) echo the significance and the uniqueness of the university environment but emphasize the importance of campuses working together to educate students effectively to be meaningful citizens in a greater world: “Simply enrolling a diverse student body is not enough. Scattering the campus with assorted diversity programs is also insufficient. Inattention to the entire campus effort is likely to yield, at best, mixed results” (p. 9).

Financial hardship and affordability of education is a burden that is particularly acute among under-represented students of color of lower socioeconomic status. There are two significant factors that actively discourage students with low socioeconomic status from attending or even applying to the highly selective colleges and universities where they are academically qualified. First, the “price tag” presented by some of the more elite colleges and universities is financially intimidating to families who are not aware of the financial resources available to students with need. As Bok (2013) notes,

The reason why so many capable students from low-income families do not apply to a selective college is that they are poorly informed. They tend to exaggerate the cost of attending and do not realize how much financial aid they could receive. Because they do not know that most selective colleges routinely waive the \$50 or the \$100 application fee, many of them feel that they cannot even afford to apply. (134)

This misunderstanding of the capacity of selective institutions is both perceived and actual. Carnevale and Rose (2004) argue low-income families tend to have “higher financial threshold requirements for enrolling in four-year colleges, especially the most selective colleges. They face greater loan burdens and are more “debt averse” (155). The cost of college education has had the most substantial impact upon poorer families. As Kahlenberg (2004) notes, “the average price of attending a public four-year college represents nearly 60 percent of annual income for low-income families, 16 percent for middle-income families, and 5 percent for high-income families” (3). This perceived and actual sense of the financial impact of the cost of a college education lead to what Carnevale and Strohl (2010) refer to as “undermatching” among academically qualified low-income families; “there are lots of working-class students who ‘undermatched’ and could do the work of selective colleges, but do not go” (179).

Second, while students receive access to higher education writ large, a stratification results that causes diminished opportunities for those students compared to the opportunities they could have received at more selective institutions. Carnevale and Strohl (2010) refer to this process as “fragmentation” of access to higher education.

Fragmentation results in a

very high correlation between educational spending, and student family income, resulting in a higher concentration of students who are at least prepared for college work and who do not enroll in college or who become enrolled in institutions with the least resources to help them. (76)

This results in reduced access to selective colleges for low-income students. The quality of the university that a student attends has a significant impact upon the opportunities the future presents. As Carnevale and Rose (2004) further argue, this leads to an increasing polarization between selective colleges and less selective institutions;

the choices offered are the lavish, full service degrees offered by the pricey brand-name colleges that come with a graduation, graduate school, and good jobs warranty, or the bargain-basement alternatives offered on the cheap with no guarantees of completion of long-term value in the labor market (94).

These two factors combine to present the reality of academically qualified low-income students electing to attend less selective colleges with fewer resources to support their students. As a result, students attending less selective institutions are presented with a lower probability of graduating than if they attended the more selective institutions they were academically qualified to attend. Further, the additional resources available at more selective institutions provide a pathway to increased opportunities in graduate school and employment. As a result, the college application and selection process becomes financially foreboding to low-income families who are seeking the best opportunities for their children but are poorly informed about how to access education in more selective

institutions. This foreboding quality is reminiscent of the arguments offered by Carnevale and Rose (2004), Carnevale and Strohl (2010), Kahlenberg (2004) and Bok (2013) that suggest that the cost of higher education and the perception of access has resulted in increased stratification among students, with low-income students more inclined to attend less selective institutions with fewer resources and high-income students more likely to attend selective institutions with more resources. This is troublesome and reveals a developing irony in access to higher education. While low-income students and students of color may be enrolling in college at a greater rate than the previous generation, their opportunities for social mobility and increased future opportunities are diminished by the tendency for them to be undermatched and attend institutions that do not reflect their academic capabilities to attend more selective institutions.

The significance of diversity on our college and university campuses is not solely found in representation. Rather, this exploratory study seeks to identify what diversity means to under-represented students during a time when our classrooms and campuses are being challenged to defend the value of diversity in American higher education, yet are struggling to see truly diverse interactions among students (Harper and Hurtado, 2007) demonstrated in their work on campus climates.

Conceptual Framework: An Interpretive Summary

Duster (1993) argues that our campus communities must evolve from a position of tolerance towards a position of multicultural engagement. In doing so, higher education seeks to understand the differences among all members of that community. This conceptual framework does not include much of the literature surrounding affirmative

action. Yet the history of affirmative action and the lived experience of the few under-represented students who have entered college and university are deeply entwined.

Without affirmative action and the subsequent casework, the “ticket” would not have been provided to the students who were followed in this study. This conceptual framework and subsequent study focuses upon what happens *after* access is granted to students of color.

How do students of color interact and engage with the institution and the learning community following their acceptance to college? What can our institutions and communities do to embrace the goals of liberal education while recognizing the concerns and fears expressed in the work of Steele (1999, 2010), Harper (2014), Duster (1993), and Gurin (2004)? What is the current lived experience of students who are benefitting from affirmative action programs that are widely contested as being inequitable and unnecessary?

While past research has explored the academic and co-curricular implications of diversity upon student learning environments (Gurin, 2004; Holland and Eisenhart, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1995), less work has been done looking at how the academic and co-curricular participation of students complement one another and influence student perception of success and belonging within their campus community. As Harper and Antonio (2008) argue, “Putting the onus on students ultimately renders many insufficiently prepared for participation in an increasingly diverse workforce and society” (2). It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that colleges and universities utilize the strength of the educational environment located both within and without the classroom to create inclusive and welcoming environments and depend solely on the interactions between students:

Our position is that many student affairs educators fail to prepare students for participation in a diverse democracy, and neglect to capitalize on the diversity of their campuses in educationally meaningful ways. Simply dumping 1,500 students into a residence hall and concluding they will “magically” learn from each others’ differences represents both naiveté and educational negligence in student affairs practice. (Harper and Antonio, 12)

At the heart of this issue rests the student sense of certainty upon their ability to function as active citizens within their environment. In other words, the issue of self-doubt and a survival mechanism combine to establish a powerful resilience that was identified by Milem and Allen (2006) that enables individuals to persevere. How colleges and universities seek to empower student voices on both the academic and co-curricular front must be examined together. The environment provided by the classroom and beyond is mutually dependent upon one another to provide a diverse and inclusive environment for students. As Ladson-Billings (1995), Steele (1999), Harper (2008), Milem and Umbach (2007), and Duster (1993) argue, there is a direct relationship between the actions of the classroom and the bearing it has upon the student’s ability, particularly among students of color, to feel as though they are a welcome participant in a learning community that includes the classroom and co-curricular experience. Ladson-Billings (1995) illustrates this through the concept of *culturally relevant pedagogy*. This approach to education builds a bridge between the curriculum and the present day by encouraging educators to incorporate the unique cultural identities of each student into the curriculum and speaks to the broader principles of liberal education discussed above. Yet Gurin (2004) and Harper and Hurtado (2007) demonstrate the need for intentional interaction among students in order for students to truly actively engage with and among others from diverse backgrounds. When this does not occur, students need to associate only with

others who share their background (Baxter Magolda,1999), (Gurin,2004), (Harper and antonio,2008), (Harper and Hurtado,2007).

With these factors in mind and the influence of the scholarship described above, this exploratory study endeavors to pursue the questions of how the institutional structure and environment contribute to the success of under-represented students of color by examining institutional structures and resources as well as the very experiences of the students themselves. This study will provide added dimension to the conversation surrounding under-represented populations and their ability to transition and ultimately succeed within a demanding college environment. Reaching this constituency of under-represented students and identifying the issues that impact their transition and sense of agency is imperative if the educational experience is viewed as an intentional and holistic integration of curricular and co-curricular experiences designed to provide an inclusive atmosphere of growth and discovery for all students.

III – METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study explores, through the experiences of individuals perceiving and attending college, how those experiences speak to a broader phenomenological interest in how under-represented students of color experience access to higher education. This study is intended to be exploratory by suggesting that, through the lived experiences of the few students that are followed in this study, there is more to be examined about the experiences of the many under-represented students of color who enroll in four-year institutions. This is particularly meaningful for the study of higher education since the population identified for this study, African American students, are notably under-represented among our most prestigious and highly selective institutions despite decades of affirmative action programs. To pursue this study, the research design is rooted in the following research questions:

- How do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college?
- How does the sense of agency and identity influence how students believe themselves to be perceived within their community?
- How does students' sense of agency and identity influence how they choose a college and how they engage with their college community?

- What influence do education officials and community-based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support students' academic and social transition to college?

I have designed this project as a case study with a phenomenological perspective and developed methods and research protocol guided by literature in both case study and phenomenological research methodologies. Creswell (1998) defines a phenomenological study as being one that “described the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals within the concept of the phenomenon” (p. 51). In his discussion of the case study research methods, Yin (2003) describes case study method as being able to respond to “the desire to understand complex social phenomenon...case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (pp. 1–2). Pulling from the influence of these two research methods, this study endeavors to combine the integrity of individual stories with the context of the perspective provided by the greater phenomena of how a population struggling to achieve access to higher education makes meaning of the experience of going to college. As a result, I have designed this case study to be one of mixed methods that utilizes the influence of phenomenological methods to explore the greater phenomena through the use of a cohort of practitioners in the fields of secondary and higher education as well as utilizing case-study methods to learn from the experiences of those individuals being followed over the course of this study.

This study approach will make meaning of the lived experiences of students of color as they experience access to college. Tens of thousands of college students have similar experiences in any given year. Yet, within the context of being a racial minority, the intensity of this experience is increased and the need to learn from the experiences of

these students (Gurin, 2004; Steele, 1999) will inform the ability of higher education administrators to respond to these students effectively.

Comprehensive interviews with student participants during various points in their transition to college or university enabled this study to provide a longitudinal assessment of how the perception and experience of access to higher education evolve among those students who are under-represented on so many of our colleges and universities. In addition, the interpretation of those results was contextualized through group interviews with administrators and educators whose professional roles are focused upon student transition and success. This professional group of administrators served as a second aspect of the study and source of data collection. By serving as both a source of data and advisement, the second group was able to act as a control group that contextualized the data discovered through interviews with the student group.

Two groups, one of students individually followed and another of education and higher education professionals, were used for data collection purposes. The student group consists of six students who are college-bound and contain racial and class-based characteristics of under-representation. Under-representation is a term used to identify qualities that are not present in large concentrations among college-bound populations and include factors such as race and socioeconomic status. The second professional group consists of five educators and administrators whose career path and experience focus on assisting students with college preparation and access to selective institutions of higher education. The professional experience of the second group, in combination with the personal reflections and observations provided by the student group, provide

opportunities to explore inter-reliability of the data and interpret the relevancy of the findings to broader populations of students.

The student group was interviewed individually over the course of the summer and the fall of their first semester in college. The professional group was interviewed as a group in the late fall and in January following the conclusion of the fall semester. This professional group served as both a data source of individuals with extensive experience in education and access and a means of testing the inter-reliability of the data gathered from the student group. Further, the professional group often served as advisors who reviewed transcripts of the student interviews as well as preliminary findings to determine their validity within the broader context and experiences that the professional group provided to the study.

Utilizing methods demonstrated by Knapp (1997), Eisenhart (1989), Yin (2003), and Massey, et al. (2003), individual interviews were conducted at three different points in time with African American students, whose progress through their first academic terms in college I monitored as part of this study. Finally, data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) was utilized to establish a national landscape for the graduation rates of under-represented students of color attending institutions of higher education.

Overview of Research Design

This study relies on a case study approach focusing on student transition to college. The purpose of this case study was to examine how African American students perceive and experience access into college and how that transition influences their sense

of belonging and agency within the campus community. Data collection occurred through two groups including individual conversations with students and administrators.

The student group interviewed and followed throughout this study was examined through the lens of their racial and cultural identity and how that identity influences their transition to higher education from their home communities. How do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college? How does one's sense of agency/identity influence how one chooses a college and how one engages with one's college community? How does that sense of agency and identity impact how students believe themselves to be perceived within their community? What influence do education officials and community based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support student's academic and social transition to college? It is through this lens that the previous research questions are posed, interpreted, and assessed.

The case study interview protocol includes a series of questions that ask students how they are responding to their college transition at specific points in time. For example, students were asked to reflect on what their home life was like before coming to college and how their experiences prior to coming to college informed their decision to attend a certain institution. In subsequent interviews, students were asked how their sense of self in the campus community changed from their point of entry to the conclusion of the academic term. Questions were repeated at different points in the process to determine any areas of variance. Finally, the interview protocol invited students to reflect and share advice for other students who do not have the benefit of their experiences to date.

These combined methods allow the individual interviews to relate to broader trends or characteristics demonstrated through the findings gained from the two cohorts. The student group serves to identify themes or behaviors that influence the experience and sense of meaning that individuals are gaining as they experience access to higher education. At the same time, the professional group of educators and administrators provides a context based on professional expertise and knowledge of national trends in their respective fields. Together, these two groups provide context to make meaning of the experiences shared in the individual interviews.

Study Design

For this study, I pursued a case study approach focusing on how under-represented student cohorts and individual students of color transition to college and make meaning from that experience. The purpose of this study is to examine how African American students perceive and experience access to college and how that transition to college influences their sense of belonging within the campus community. In doing so, I incorporated a case study method illustrated by Eisenhart (1989) and Knapp (1997) that allows for the creation of new revised theory through a case study construct that is both selective in how students are selected for the study and provides room for the researcher to be adaptive to the climate of the conversation and receptive to, as Knapp (1997) describes, some fortuitous “serendipity”. The students interviewed will be examined through the lens of their racial and cultural identity, and interview protocol was designed to be sensitive to the role of race in identity development (Abes, Jones and McEwen, 2007; Massey, et al., 2003). This lens adds perspective to the way in which these case

studies were approached and the questions that are asked during the course of the transition to higher education that is being explored in the study. I have also drawn quite intentionally from the protocols Massey, et al. (2003) use to explore the degree of self-awareness students have and how that influences their ability to be successful in college. The interviews occurred during three different points throughout the course of the year as they prepare to leave for college during the summer, midway through the first academic term, and during the return home at the close of the academic term.

Use of Individual Subjects and Groups to Identify Larger Trends

The study's protocol included the perspectives of two groups: one smaller group of students who were individually interviewed at significant stages in their college transition and a second professional group of educational professionals that provide a broader context to interpret the findings. As a case study, this approach is being utilized to provide both for the contribution of the individual's relationship to the phenomena (i.e., the actual individual narratives of those students entering college) and a bridge to the broader knowledge base of the second professional group who are able to contextualize the student's experiences within their knowledge of the phenomena itself (professional accrual of knowledge working with students and colleges).

The first group of six students will explore how under-represented college-bound students prepare for college, perceive access to college, and transition to college from their home environments. Specific interview protocols, influenced by Massey et al. (2003), Maxwell (2005), Yin (2003), Eisenhart (1989), and Knapp (1997), have been designed for the student cohort that focus upon how they experienced certain phases of

their transition to college. For example, students were asked to reflect upon what their home life was like before coming to college and how their experiences prior to coming to college informed their decision to choose a certain institution. Students were asked how their sense of self in the campus community changed from their point of arrival to the point that they are at the end of the study at the conclusion of their first semester.

Finally, the interview protocol will ask students to reflect back to the people they were at the beginning of the study and ask what advice they would give other students entering college. Through a series of questions designed to promote reflection, data resulted that provides a longitudinal narrative of how under-represented students experience the transition to college during a number of important development stages.

The second group will include the administrators and educators from a range of organizations contributing to work related to providing under-represented students' access to higher education. This includes administrators within two of the largest public school systems in the United States, senior higher education administrators and academics, and higher education consultants. The objective of the professional group was to determine how the national and local educational climate influences the experiences the students in the first cohort reported. For example, given the collective experience of the professional group, how can one assess the opportunities for completion of baccalaureate studies? The use of NCES data will also assist in contextualizing the climate for the students in the first group. As in the student group, these conversations with the professional group included individual conversations with administrators and educators whose perspectives were needed for further discovery and inclusion in data collection.

Areas of Information Needed

This study required information from three different areas. First, it required personal information from the individual subject participants. This serves as the greatest source of data in the study. Second, it required contextual background from educators who seek to assist with transition to college for under-represented students and continued support once those students have entered college. These resources are available through community-based organizations, school-based organizations, and the more informal influence of family and friends. Third, NCES provides an additional context of comparative data among a larger number of participants to assist with contextualizing the behaviors of the individual participants on a national landscape.

Subject Data

Individual students participating in the study provide primary sources of data that assist with understanding how one's racial and cultural identity contributes to how a student perceives themselves within a community. The value of interviews occurring during various stages of that transition allow for comparative points of data to assess how that identity evolves and provide markers of factors within the community that influence the development of participant identity during their transition to college.

Educators and Community Members

As the proposal for the pilot evolved, it became increasingly apparent that the study would be remiss in not reaching out to institutional and community members who hold leadership roles and senior perspectives on the topic of transition and support for under-represented students. What was challenging was defining the limit of the scope to which those members were engaged. The influence of families will also be discussed in the interviews with the participants in both the student group and the professional group. The influence of organizations both within and outside of college campuses was addressed through protocol established for use in the interviews with the professional group. The professional group convened on two occasions, during the midpoint in the first academic term that the students were in college and at the end of the calendar year. The professional group was designed to be somewhat fluid in its membership so additional members could be added or removed throughout the course of the study.

The National Center for Educational Statistics

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) is an effective resource for including national trends as well as providing a greater context to assess the findings of the individual interviews and focus groups. One limitation of the study is longitudinal: the study occurs only over the course of the final semester of high school and the first semester of college. It does not occur over the course of the entire college career. NCES provides ample and sufficient data to at least provide comparative data points regarding, for example, national graduation rates of under-represented students.

Discussion of the Sample

A pilot study was conducted in the Spring and Summer of 2010 with limited success under the supervision of Lyle York, EdD. The greatest challenge was retention of participants. Three students were selected for the pilot study at the recommendation of administrators with the Double Discovery Center of Columbia University. Administrators were provided with a project overview in oral and written form and they selected participants based upon the project overview. The researcher did not have contact with participants until after participants had been selected by members of the Double Discovery Center.

For the larger study, the investigator spoke to several classes of students at Evans and Owles High School and invited students to volunteer in the study. The research questions for this study are based upon students coming from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds. To determine conditions of “disadvantage,” the poverty thresholds determined by the U.S. Census Bureau for 2010 provided conditions of “disadvantage”. These thresholds did not mandate eligibility, but only advised eligibility for participation in the study.

Methods for Assuring Protection of Human Subjects

All collected data was considered confidential and primarily viewed by the researcher and primary thesis advisor. Portions of the research were shared with the cohort of educators and administrators. All shared results were presented anonymously with unique identifiers removed.

Participants received no financial compensation. Interviews were recorded and participants were informed, at the beginning of each interview, that this information would be held confidentially and would serve to inform future research efforts for the researcher's dissertation.

Every effort was taken to preserve confidentiality of the participants. Coding and transcription of data shared with Professor Anderson and Professor Yorks did not include institutional information or information on the specific name of the student. Rather, information will be generalized with students referred to by a coded reference. Finally, research design and protocol are in accordance with Teachers College IRB.

Methods for Data Collection

Within the student group, students were interviewed at three different points: 1) at the end of the summer prior to their enrollment in college; 2) halfway through the first semester and 3) at the conclusion of the first academic term after students had returned home. All interviews were recorded and conducted in comfortable, neutral environments (i.e., campus coffee shop, student union, etc.). Personal notes were also taken during the course of the interviews and compared with transcript results following the interviews.

Finally, a reflection journal was maintained by the researcher to record any reactions or perspectives that may influence interpretation of the data.

Within the professional group of administrators and educators, interviews will occur 1) during the first break in the terms when students return home and 2) at the end of the first academic term. While the interview protocol will strongly inform the direction of the interview, the professional group interviews were scheduled to occur following the

student interviews. This is intentional and deliberate to allow for follow-up questions that allowed the researcher to make connections based on the previous student interviews and the content knowledge of the educators in the second cohort. In addition to gathering data on their professional sense of student's progress, campus climate, and access challenges students are facing, the professional group served as a means of ensuring the inter-reliability of the data gathered from the students (Massey, et al., 2003). The professional group of administrators was presented with transcripts of student interviews and invited to respond to the findings, offer their own insight on findings, and inform the conclusions being reached by the researcher. Unique identifiers, such as name and schools, were removed from transcripts to ensure confidentiality. For example, the professional group was invited to review interviews with students describing the challenges they are facing at college and invited to share their insights on how these reactions are on par or differ from information students have shared over the course of their careers. Interviews occurred through conference calls with cohort members joining in person when geography permitted.

Methods for Data Analysis

Several reviews of transcripts occurred. Transcripts of the interviews were reviewed individually to confirm accuracy of the transcription by comparing the recorded interview, notes taken during the interview, and actual transcription. As part of that review, the researcher coded and identified themes using the NVIVO software that related to the student's academic confidence, participation in class, interaction with faculty, co-curricular activities, roommate relations, and continued connectivity with their family and

friends from home. These coded themes were reviewed in terms of their degree of change over time along with any additional themes that result. Finally, results among other students were compared to identify points of uniqueness and commonality. The resulting data analysis revealed the degree to which African American students in the sample transition to selective colleges and universities as well as how those students in the sample become active members within the academic and social communities found on their campuses.

In addition, the professional group of administrators reviewed student interview transcripts as part of their group dialogue. These conversations included review of transcripts during which the members of the professional group were invited to react to preliminary findings and conclusions. During these reviews, the professional group were invited to share their insight based on their professional experiences and knowledge of the field to determine the uniqueness of the findings or if they speak to broader trends identified for under-represented students entering highly selective colleges.

Literature to Support Design and Data Collection Methods

The research design for this study relies upon a case study method illustrated by Eisenhart (1989) and Knapp (1997) that allows for the advent of new or revised theory through a case study construct that is both selective in how students are selected for this study and the room the protocol allows for the researcher to be adaptive to the climate of the conversation and receptive to, as Knapp (1997) describes, fortuitous “serendipity.”

The cultural and racial lens through which the responses to the researcher questions are viewed is derived from Ladson-Billings’ view of “culturally relevant

pedagogy” (1995) and the revised identity development model of Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007). This perspective acknowledges and encourages the cultivation of learning environments that honor the unique cultural backgrounds presented by students. While culturally relevant pedagogy was not derived as a case study method, it does provide a justification and means for reviewing participant data through a lens that is enriched by how race and culture influence one’s sense of self within a community.

This case study approach is also designed to avoid the critique of single case studies that Yin (2003) describes as being vulnerable to “fears about the uniqueness or artifactual condition surrounding the case” (p. 54). As a result, the case deliberately utilizes a multiple case design with replication to provide areas of discovery that reveal areas of consistency and discrepancy from the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter II.

Finally, this study has specific consideration for the methodology utilized by Massey, et al. in *The Source of the River* (2003). Their methodology was particularly sensitive to obtaining data on cultural identity and sensitivity of under-represented students. While they included a broader section of under-represented students, they used methods to obtain data on cultural identity, self-awareness, and perception of education that were particularly influential to this study design.

Validity/Reliability

Some validity threats or alternative explanations that I encountered are caused by the individuals involved. This is a study of several subjects that is rooted in people’s *experiences* and how those experiences relate to the greater phenomena of under-

represented students who transition to college and the national trends observed and shared through dialogue with the second cohort. Experiences and the interpretation of those experiences can mean a multitude of things. The life stories of my subjects contain elements that influence their sense of self within a college community.

As a student affairs administrator, it was also important to control for the professional lens with which I interpreted the data and thereby challenge the interpretation of the results. I made some adjustments in accordance with this by not pulling subjects from schools or regions of the country where I have a large degree of familiarity, but the concern persists.

To control for these concerns, I established the professional group to provide a means of evaluating the interview data that provides a broader context and level of objective assessment that will temper any personal reaction. In addition, I used the professional group continually throughout the study as a data source and, to assist in advising about data analysis and writing of the dissertation. This ended up being a real value of the study as the professional group either individually or as a group became almost a second advisor to the researcher that allowed testing for researcher bias and effectively assessing findings.

Finally, it's important to acknowledge the reality that as the lead researcher conducting this research, I am not African American. Yet African American students are the focus of this study. Creating an atmosphere that generates trust and openness on the part of subjects was initially challenging on both sides for someone who does not share this racial identity. For example, during an initial classroom visit to recruit individuals to participate in the study, I had a clear feeling of "other" in the space. As a White woman,

dropping in from my own job at an elite university, I entered a high school in a neighborhood with significant crime and poverty. I entered overconfident. I felt that given my own experiences with college students, I would be able to relate and communicate with these students easily. I was wrong and was quickly met with glassy eyes. To my relief, the teacher jumped in and began pointing out individual students and describing her knowledge of their life experiences; I heard about frequent stops and profiling by the police, single parent families, poverty, and living in neighborhoods with significant gang presence. The teacher recounted the students' personal stories, reminded them they were going to college, and ended with encouraging them to participate in the study so "your story will be told." I left with a sheet of notebook paper full of names of student volunteers.

Learning from my classroom experience, I conducted the interviews with individual subjects in a manner that provided comfort and openness by using an interview protocol that has open ended questions and allows the subject to choose a meeting area that is comfortable to them. I conducted interviews in neighborhood cafés, student unions, and parks. At the suggestion of my committee, I provided opportunities for reflection on process between the subject and myself and had colleagues available to participate in the research process with me who shared subjects' racial and gender identities.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are immediately apparent in the small sample size and limited duration. It is difficult to provide broad research implications from the study and, as a result this study is characterized as an exploratory study. The geographic diversity of

locations where the participants elected to attend college, limited resources prevent the study from markedly increasing the sample size. The small sample size also meant that if a subject withdrew or was not responsive it had a substantial impact.

Attrition of subjects did occur. In an attempt to control that, I selected a larger sample size and combined some interviews to make the best use of subject availability. Time constraints prevent the study from lasting beyond the first semester for the participant's first year of college. More meaningful data could be collected if the study was able to continue through the duration of the participant's college experience.

IV – PRESENTATION OF DATA

Introduction

This chapter will provide a summary of the data findings as they relate to the research questions. To begin, this chapter will provide an overview of the high school, colleges, and universities the students attended. In doing so, it will explore the complexity of the identity development of these students (Abes, Jones and McEwen, 2007) within the college and university environment. In the collection of data relating to research question 1, how do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college, students demonstrated varying degrees of confidence engaging in an environment that was significantly more diverse than their home and school environment. As the data in the overview of schools will indicate, all students involved in this study transitioned from a predominantly African American high school to predominantly White colleges and universities. The data collected from subjects indicated the role of home and school environment in establishing how students experienced the transition to college. The student subjects in this study were all located in predominantly African American neighborhoods with notable crime and hardship. All students attended Sevans and Owles High School, a predominantly African American charter school with a significantly high rate of college placement. These two environments provided notable influences in determining how students perceived and experienced higher education.

Grace, Marvyn, Braxzen, Jeuelle, Rosa, and Clem are graduates of Sevans and Owles High School. Together they formed the student group followed in this study. In

addition to this student group there was a professional group that served as a control group providing both data and advice on the data produced by the student group. From high school graduation to the conclusion of the first semester of college, this study explores how this student group experience the transition from high school to college. A summary of each group follows in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2.

Table 4.1 Individual Student Profiles

Student Name	1 st	Financial Hardship	Treedale	Shorey	College Attended
Grace	N	✓✓		✓✓	LU
Maryn	Y	✓✓	✓✓		SRU
Clem	Y	✓✓	✓✓		Linber
Jeuelle	-	✓✓	-	-	RPU
Braxen	Y	✓✓		✓✓	DeYa
Rosa	Y	✓✓	✓✓		RPU

Table 4.2 Individual Students and Relationship to Research Questions

Student Name	Influence of Institution and Community	Community Environment	Family Influence	Peer Influence	Relationship w/ the Self
Grace	HS expectation of excellence Little formal support in college	Large university in rural environment	Strong support from father, grandmother, and sister	"G Boss" strong support	Questioning but developing sense of agency in college community
Maryn	HS expectation of excellence Mentorship in HS	Mid---size school in rural environment	Challenging family environment	Peers attending SRU	Questioning and curious

Clem	HS expectation of excellence Faculty mentorship	Small college population in rural environment	Strong family support from mother and extended family	Strong relationships with HS friends and development of new friendships	Developing sense of agency and engagement
Juelle	HS expectation of excellence Challenging relationship with faculty	Mid-size school in rural environment	Moderate family support	Highly engaged with Rosa and new friendships	Developing sense of agency and increased peer engagement
Braxzen	HS expectation of excellence	Large university in urban environment	Challenging family environment	Minimal peer engagement	Internally focused with development highly internal and reflective
Rosa	HS expectation of excellence Strong advising mentor	Midsize school in rural environment	Challenging family environment	Minimal peer engagement	Isolated and minimal engagement

Data collection focused on four research questions and was collected through a series of interviews spanning from June 2013 through January 2014. Specifically, the research questions asked: How do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college? How does that sense of agency and identity impact how students believe themselves to be perceived within their community? How does it influence how they choose a college and how they engage with their college community? What influence do education officials and community based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support student's academic and social transition to college?

To explore research question 1, how do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college, the

study design provided multiple points of data collection over the course of several months. The resource of the professional group provided the means of evaluating the case study through the perspective of the broader phenomenon access to higher education for under-represented students. A summary of the professional group is represented in Table 4.3:

Table 4.3 Individual Professional Profiles

Name	Higher Education	K-12	Public	Private	Consultant	Higher Ed Administration	Academic	Ethnicity
Rolland	✓✓			✓✓		✓✓	✓✓	W
Kia	✓✓			✓✓	✓✓	✓✓		B
Rick	✓✓		✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓		W
Anthony		✓✓	✓✓					H
Mr. Marvel		✓✓	✓✓					B

To explore research question 2, how does that sense of agency impact how students believe themselves to be perceived within the community, students demonstrated a range of opinions in how their peers and faculty perceived them in their college and university environment. Peers from a multitude of racial and ethnic backgrounds influenced how students were willing to explore their racial identity and engage with others. How faculty responded to student's academic concerns and developing academic interests was also a significant influence upon how the students in this study perceived themselves within the community.

To explore research question 3, how does a sense of agency and identity influence how students choose a college and how they engage with their college community, data from student and staff interviews revealed the influence of trusted peers, family members,

and education officials in advising students on their choice of college or university. In all cases, individuals were highlighted by the students in this study who had a direct impact in influencing areas such as college selection or retention and persistence in college.

Finally, the fourth research question, what influence do education officials and community based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support student's academic and social transition to college, revealed through interviews with students the ongoing and combined influence college faculty and staff, high school staff and faculty, peers, and family played in providing a framework that informed student transition and retention within a college or university. Whether the influence was positive or negative, every student in the study was able to identify unique individuals among faculty, staff, and family who had a direct influence upon their desire to enroll and continue in college or university.

The following chapter reviews the data as it relates to each of the research questions discussed in the first chapter. Before exploring the research questions, an overview of each institution will be presented. All of the data was gathered through a series of ongoing interviews over the course of several months. The protocol for the subject interviews are based on the research questions and guided by the work of Yin (2003), Massey, et al. (2003), Creswell (1998), Rubin and Rubin (2005), and Maxwell (2005).

Overview of Student Educational Environment in High School and University

Sevans and Owles High School

The students in this study are part of a large, public, urban K–12 system composed of over 400,000 students. At the close of the academic year 2012, 41.6% of the population in the city-wide school system was African American and 44.1% of the population was Latino. While the school system has been dedicated to improving graduation rates, only 8% of students who entered the systems public high schools as freshmen graduate with a bachelor's degree by age 25.

Sevans and Owles High School is a charter school located in the Treedale section of the south side of the city. The school opened in 2006 and graduated its first class of 51 students 4 years later in 2010. Admission to Sevans and Owles High School is by lottery with preference being given to students who attend affiliated elementary and junior high charter schools, geographic location, and applicants who have siblings at the school.

There are no academic requirements for admission into Sevans and Owles High School. The sample discussed here are graduates of either the class of 2012 or 2013. Sevans and Owles High School set records in 2012 and 2013 when 100% of the graduates were admitted to college. Of that percentage 83% of the class of 2012 enrolled in college.

The realities faced by the students attending Sevans and Owles High School include financial hardship and the realities of the high crime area where the school was located included gang activity and shootings. Of the 77 neighborhoods in the city, Treedale and the adjacent Shorey neighborhood lie within a precinct that reported having the fourth highest violent crime rate in the city in 2013. The students studied in this cohort

attending Sevens and Owles High School grew up within the communities of Treedale and Shorey. In early conversations with students they indicated their daily lives include being frequently stopped by police, having family members who are incarcerated, and staying at home alone to avoid the risk presented by their neighborhoods. When describing their home environment, Mr. Marvel acknowledges the impact of students' neighborhoods:

the safety neighborhood conversation is huge. So many of our kids just don't go outside. Right? They can't go outside because it's just...it's not so likely that they'll get shot randomly, it's just but what you do outside? No one is playing. (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1)

DeYa University

Braxzen is a student at DeYa University. DeYa is located in a large urban environment close to where Braxzen was raised. It is a large university with nearly 25,000 students, 16,500 of which are undergraduates. Among the entering undergraduates at DeYa University, 95% of entering first year student received financial aid in the 2012–13 academic year (NCES, 2014b). Among all students, 73% of undergraduates receive financial aid with the average award for the 2012-13 academic years was \$15,332 (NCES, 2014b). The campus at DeYa is far more diverse than the school and home environment where Braxzen was raised. Among the predominant identities on campus, 56% of students at DeYa identify as White, 17% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 8% identify as African American, and 7% identify as Asian (NCESa, 2014).

The majority of undergraduate students are traditionally aged (79% are age 24 or younger). Admission to the university is selective with 60% of students who apply to DeYa being admitted in the 2012–13 academic year (NCES, 2014a). Seventy percent of

students graduate in 6 years with 61% of African American students graduating in 6 years (NCES, 2014a).

Regional Public University (RPU)

Rosa and Jeuelle attend a regional public university, RPU. RPU is a 4-year university with over 13,600 students. RPU presented Rosa and Jeuelle with the opportunity to live in a rural environment nearly 4 hours from their home. Like Jeuelle and Rosa, most students, 93%, are residents of the state (NCES, 2014a). However, unlike their high school environment that is predominantly African American, 68% of students at RPU identify as White (NCES, 2014a). In addition to the White population, 16% of students identify as Black or African American, 7% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 1% identify as Asian, 6% identify as either two or more races or unknown, and 1% identify as non-resident alien (NCES, 2014a). The student population is traditionally aged with 87% of undergraduate students are age 24 or under (NCES, 2014a).

Admission to the university is selective with 59% of students being admitted who applied. Students entering RPU are supported with financial aid, with 82% of beginning undergraduates receive financial aid during the 2012–13 academic year (NCES, 2014b). This number drops to 66% of the total undergraduate population receiving aid with the average award being \$7,051.00 during the 2012–13 academic year (NCES, 2014b). The 6-year graduation rate for all students at RPU is 56%, with 39% of African American students graduating in 6 years (NCES, 2014a).

Southern Regional University (SRU)

Marvyn decided to enroll in Southern Regional University, SRU. SRU is a public research university with over 18,000 students and is located in a rural area of the state.

Within the population of entering undergraduate students, 88% received student aid during the 2012–13 academic year (NCES, 2014b). Overall, 66% of all undergraduate students receive financial aid during the 2012–13 academic year, with the average award being \$8,797.00 (NCES, 2014b). As at RPU, students from Evans and Owles High School experience a level of diversity at SRU in their school environment that is different from their home and school environment. Sixty-four percent of students at SRU identify as White, 22% identify as African American, 6% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 3% identify with two or more ethnicities, 3% identify as non-resident alien, and 2% identify as Asian (NCES, 2014a).

The undergraduate student population is predominantly traditionally aged with 78% aged 24 or younger (NCES, 2014a). Eighty-nine percent of students are in-state residents with only a very small population attending from out of state or internationally (NCES, 2014a). Admission to the university is selective with 79% of applicants being admitted to the university (NCES, 2014a). Forty-three percent of undergraduates graduate within 6 years and 30% of students who are African American graduate in 6 years (NCES, 2014a).

Large University (LU)

Grace chose to attend Large University, LU, a large, public research university in a neighboring state. With over 30,000 students coming from 50 states and over 100

different countries, LU is a sizable institution. Further, it is the flagship institution for the state and pride in the university runs deep among its students and alumni. Eighty-four percent of beginning undergraduate students receive financial aid with 61% of all undergraduate students receiving aid during the 2012–13 academic years (NCES, 2014b). The average award received by undergraduates in the 2013–14 academic year is \$6,968 (NCES, 2014b). At LU, Grace is a notable minority with only 8% of the student body being African American (NCES, 2014a). Eighty percent of students identify as White, 3% identify as Hispanic/Latino, and 2% identify as Asian (NCES, 2014a).

Admission to LU is selective with 70% of students being admitted to the university who apply (NCES, 2014a). Eighty-four percent of students choose to return for their second year and 70% of students graduate in 6 years (NCES, 2014a). Of that population, 54% of students identifying as African American graduate in six years (NCES, 2014a).

Linber College

Clem attends Linber College, a rural private college that is a five hour drive from his home. Linber is a small, highly selective college with just under 3,000 students.

Linber is a nationally recognized college and is ranked among the top 25 liberal arts colleges in the country. The academic environment at Linber is quite rigorous and Clem estimates that he spends about 50 hours a week studying or doing homework. As a student at Linber, Clem's student cohort is also significantly well resourced. Compared to the other public universities attended by the student cohort, Linber is an expensive institution with the annual FY 14 tuition reported as just over \$46,000 a year. Linber

supports 88% of entering undergraduate students with financial aid funding in the 2012-13 academic year (NCES, 2014b). During that same year, 84% of all undergraduates received financial aid with the average award being \$22,801 (NCES, 2014b).

Admission to Linber is highly selective with only 30% of applicants being admitted for entry in the Fall of 2013 (NCES, 2014a). Linber is 71% White with 7% of the student population identifying as Hispanic/Latino, 5% identifying as African American, and 4% as Asian (NCES, 2014a). Students attend Linber from all over the world with 86% of the population attending from out of state and 8% of the student population being foreign. Ninety-four percent of Linber students return for their second year (NCES, 2014a). Eighty-nine percent of students graduate in 6 years with 80% of African American students graduating in 6 years (NCES, 2014a).

Research Question 1: How do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college?

Rosa, a 2013 graduate of Sevans and Owles, reflected that “I’ve been there [Sevans and Owles] since sixth grade and we talked about college more than we talked about high school. I don’t think that I would even be thinking about college if I didn’t go there.” Sevans and Owles High Schools provided an environment that attempts to contradict the belief that its, as Mr. Marvel indicates, “not cool to be smart” (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1). Kia, a member of the professional group, also mentioned the policy of not openly reflecting your intelligence in higher education. As a senior administrator at a highly selective university, Kia noted that students of color in the classroom

might've of spoken up in class when they were in high school but then they start out [in college] speaking up and then they start not speaking up somewhere in the second or third week when they realize that their education may have been different. (Kia, Interview 1)

As Kia notes, environment plays an important part in encouraging academic participation among students of color.

Mr. Marvel is responsible for oversight of three charter schools which includes Sevans and Owles High School. The three schools are part of a privately funded initiative designed to improve access to high education with a focus on administration of the three schools, research, and teacher education. As a lottery based school for admission, Sevans and Owles serves a student body that does not necessarily live in an adjoining neighborhood. The three schools offer K–12 education and work begins early on to “create pride, self-esteem, and empowerment” (Mr. Marvel, interview 1) among the students. The necessity of doing this work early in the elementary years is clear. Mr. Marvel notes “a change in academic behaviors, both outcomes, and even just turning homework in, raising their hand in class, and feeling positive about school” starts among African American male students as early as the second grade (interview 1). Early on, students are combating a sense that being smart and being an African American male are incongruent:

I think that our young Black males are picking up on the fact that maybe they're not considered smart, that it's not cool to be smart, that maybe people don't expect them to be smart. And all of a sudden, if I don't raise my hand as much, it's not a problem. I can pass by...if I'm well behaved and I don't cause any trouble...I'm a C/B student. (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1).

Sevans and Owles is surrounded by the Treedale and Shorey neighborhoods. In 2011, the average income of Treedale residents was \$28,131—almost half that of a resident in the City writ large. Shorey residents present a similar profile with the average

income \$28,943 dollars. As a result, students graduating from Sevans and Owles face college with an academic environment focused on access to college but a life outside of the classroom that presents financial hardship and criminal activity.

Family Influence on How Students Perceive and Experience Access to College

Not all of the students' parents had attended college themselves. Clem, Rosa and Marvyn come from families where they were the first to attend college. Rosa, Braxzen, and Marvyn's parents focused on expense in relation to their decision to attend college. As a result, their selection of college was almost entirely driven by cost concerns. For Rosa, this meant withdrawing from her "dream school" shortly before the start of the term and enrolling in a regional college that offered an instate tuition.

Rosa. Rosa describes her dream school as being the "best school ever. The best of the best because they are one of the best film programs" (Interview 1). Shortly before our interview, Rosa decided to withdraw "because my mother said that if I don't figure out where the money's coming from, then I won't be able to go" (Rosa, Interview 1). Both of Rosa's parents are unemployed and the pressure for her to not add to the financial hardship of the family is significant. Rosa had received financial support from her dream school but the remaining tuition cost was insurmountable for her and her family. Ignoring daily phone calls from the school, Rosa ultimately decided to cancel her application.

Now enrolled in RPU with her friend Jeuelle, Rosa has appreciated that college has provided her some distance from home and the complexity of her home environment. Rosa's parents are unemployed and her sister is mentally disabled. When Rosa is home for break she keeps to herself and "misses" her friends—particularly those that she is not

in contact with during the break. She describes her sister as being “annoying” and the relief that she feels when at RPU that she “doesn’t have to deal with that anymore” (Final interview).

Grace. Grace was raised in Shorey with her uncle, her elderly father, and grandmother. Her father and grandmother are clearly dear to her and have been very supportive of her choice to attend a 4-year college that is many hours away from home. Both are elderly and Grace worries about their care while she is away. During her return home at the end of the first semester, Grace notes that she feels responsible for “monitoring them, because they’ll ultimately get out of hand” (Final Interview).

When Grace reflects that the best thing her father has done for her was to emphasize the importance of education: “And my dad is like, I don’t know, he’s big on like school and stuff, so I couldn’t like do poorly” (Final interview). Grace’s mother is not present in the home but she has received a great deal of support from her grandmother, father, and her older sister. Grace describes her older sister as being “like a mom in my life. She always made sure that my grades were good, that everything at school was just great” (Grace, Final Interview). Her older sister is now enrolled in college as well and the “GPA challenge” has begun—the two sisters compete to achieve the highest GPA. With a GPA of 3.0 at the close of the first semester, Grace is behind her older sister.

Clem. When Clem was admitted to Evans and Owles High School, his mother purchased him a set of suitcases. Clem, a Posse recipient now attending Linber College, describes that moment:

She got the luggage when I made it into [Sevans and Owles] and she started packing it when I got the [Posse] scholarship and I was like, “okay.” Because I’ve

been the same size since the eighth grade, so she never actually had to change out the clothes that she had in there. They were all pressed and crisp and I'm like, "okay, okay.: Let's calm down. I haven't left yet. (Clem, Interview 1)

Being able to leave the community and attend college was a goal that Clem and his mother aggressively pursued throughout his childhood. The mentorship provided by his mother combined with the financial support of organizations such as Posse allowed Clem to pursue not only his own dream but the dream of his family. The Posse Foundation recruits talented high schools students and provides college and career advice. These resources provide infrastructure and community for Posse program participants. Posse alumni achieve a 90% persistence and graduation rate.

Research Question 2: How does that sense of agency and identity impact how students believe themselves to be perceived within their community?

Sevans and Owles High School admission is by lottery and students attend the school from all over the city. In an environment where Black students may feel isolated by their academic aspirations, a degree of resiliency may contrast with the influence of their immediate environment. Mr. Marvel describes an environment at Sevans and Owles that provides "a sense of finding yourself in the world as a Black male and as a Black male college student, as a Black male intellectual. You know, the narrative around Black men is not college" (Interview1). He says:

the narrative is a bunch of other things, but it's not your academic ability. And when you're in high school and then you're in college, you're really starting to become a man. You know, this is a lot of your development and you have to feel, I think...we want to encourage our young men to find ways for them to feel confident in that sense of "I'm on a college campus," not just I'm probably really interested in engineering but what I might tell my friends is oh, the parties are great and there's a whole bunch of girls here. (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1)

At Sevans and Owles High School the hallways are lined with college banners and the teachers speak constantly of attending college, but families are often left learning about the possibility of their child attending college or university when they themselves did not or were unable to complete their studies.

The environment at Sevans and Owles High School includes an oath that all students will learn. On one occasion when I was touring the school, I was invited into a classroom. As I entered, the students were asked to recite the school code. Without hesitation, the students proceeded to recite a code that begins “I am the torch bearer. I control my future with strength and integrity” and ends “for I am a scholar who is college bound and I am a leader, committed to making the world a better place for all.” This code is memorized by all students in Sevans and Owles and printed in the school manual. All students are required to recite the code upon request.

A graduate of Sevans and Owles, Clem was the first member of his family to go to college. He describes numerous moments where the pride and commitment his family has for him and his educational path are evident. His first trip home for break was met with a feast: “When I got home, [my grandma] cooked the hugest dinner I have ever seen her cook and I was like I can’t eat this much. She was like, oh, well, your uncles are coming too.... My uncles are really obsessively proud of me” (Clem, Interview 1). Clem later described one uncle as having Clem’s high school graduation photo as the screen saver on his phone. During his time with his uncle,

I’m all he talked about. I’m like Unc, it’s kind of embarrassing when you just talk about me, like oh, he’s in college and stuff like that and he’s going to get out of the ‘hood and stuff. And I’m like, well, I feel good. (Clem, Interview 1)

As a Posse recipient, Clem is a source of great pride not just to his family but to his school as well. He finds photos of himself—quite literally—pasted on public transit buses as an advertisement for college access among under-represented populations. One day, when he is home from break, Clem receives a picture from Mr. Marvel with his face as part of an advertisement for Sevans and Owles High School that is being displayed on over 20 bus routes across the city. Clem responds with pride and a little confusion as he describes the situation:

It's a little weird because when I came home, that exact same day I came home and got off the Greyhound, my friend texted me and she was like I just saw you on the bus and I'm like hey, you should come by and pick me up because it's cold outside. And she's like what are you talking about? I just saw your face on a 71st Street bus and I was like I just got off the Greyhound. She's like no, I saw your face on the bus.... And I'm like wait, what? So I'm thinking she's just like mistaking me for somebody else and my uncle was like I just saw you on a bus and I'm like I'm in a car. So I'm like okay, okay, okay. Then my friends posted up this picture and he's like I just saw [Clem] on a bus and I'm like okay, let me see this picture. And it's just me in my graduation thing on a CTA bus and I'm like hmm, I should've shaved. I don't know how to feel about it, actually. I mean, I'm proud of it and it's fun to say. (Clem, Interview 1)

Within his family and high school environment, Clem is clearly a source of pride. This is both off-putting to him (“it’s a little weird”) but also a source of developing pride as he responds to the attention that he is receiving from friends, family, and even the head of his high school.

Isolation at Home

Life at home often presents a type of voluntary self-isolation. Particularly among the male students, free time was often spent at home watching television, playing video games, or supporting the family. Marvyn described his routine once home from school as

being “Sleep, Twitter, eat, play” (Interview 1). Braxzen keeps to himself at home playing video games. When asked why he spends so much time at home, Braxzen says, “It’s home. I got nowhere else to be. Me and my friends don’t really hang out as much. I see them at school, so hey, that’s enough” (Interview 1). While home on vacation between breaks, students continue to keep to themselves. When I asked Brittany what she has been doing during her time home from school, she describes tension with her parents over her self-isolation:

Q: So tell me more about [what you have been doing during your break]? Do you spend a lot of time with your family?

A: Sometimes. They usually get mad because I stay in my room a lot. . . . Like my mom will say, “did you come back to visit your room?” (Final Interview)

Staying home and not being involved in activities outside of school was noticed by Anthony, a member of the professional group and an educational administrator for a large public urban K–12 school system. Anthony observed that his academic “shining stars” were often

young ladies and they have very often come from very diverse backgrounds and they have been quite assertive in the way that they have been academically successful. I use the term academically successful because very often they may not have been involved in a great deal of sports or other things and also they are very often immigrants when they had come on into this culture and they were the ones who were very often the most successful students that I had. (Anthony, Interview 1)

Isolative behaviors resulted in students having minimal involvement outside of their academic work. Time at home was spent online, watching TV, or doing homework. Being “smart”, Mr. Marvel argued, was contradictory to the norms of their community and may have invited behaviors where students were more inclined to stay home and not become involved in their community.

Individual Identity Development and the Influence of Diverse Peers on Campus

Students in the study indicated different ways of engaging with peers who they were encountering for the first time in college or university settings. For all of these students, their college or university presented an environment far more diverse than they were accustomed to in their predominantly African American community and school.

Rosa. Students such as Rosa noted that their university introduced her to an environment where she “never really had a diverse [*sic*] of friends before” (Rosa, Interview 2). As a result, students were also made more aware of their race and were highly aware of negative student interaction that they felt were racially motivated. Rosa described a few situations including one time when White students did not hold the elevator door for her in the residence hall. Each of these instances she viewed as being “big deal” because they appeared to be racially motivated or influenced (Final Interview).

Jeuelle. Rosa’s roommate, Jeuelle, describes feeling very aware of the commodities she does not have that her classmates do. When asked about whether she feels self-conscious about how other African American students view her she responds affirmatively and describes:

I would say sometimes with what I wear, because I see people around campus, it’s like they have on a new everything every day and sometimes what I wear. I don’t have the new jeans or the new shoes so. You know when I first came here I felt like I was wearing the same thing every day, because that is how it gets. When you don’t really have the money to like really buy new things. Yeah, you just have to work with what you have. So sometimes I might feel like, oh somebody’s really paying attention to what I’m wearing and they will know that I wore these jeans the other day (Laughing). So sometimes I get self-conscious with that but I have to realize that I’m not here for fashion. I’m here to really make something of myself. (Jeuelle, Interview 1).

This new experience of realizing on a daily basis that she has less than others living on her floor in something that Jeuelle and Rosa often mention during interviews.

Grace. At LU, Grace describes her intentional efforts to introduce herself to students she would pass around campus:

I walk past people frequently, okay, so that is my thing. If I see this like one person, it doesn't matter. If I see them all the time that I find that we have to speak to each other now, because we've seen each other so much. Because it's kind of awkward all the time to never say anything. So I guess I kind of force people to be my friends [laughs] (Grace, Interview 2).

As a result of these efforts, Grace has met “a lot” of new people and made a number of friendships. Through her interactions and developing friendships, Grace has learned about different areas of the country and regional rivalries and has enjoyed learning and exploring the different accents of her classmates and new friends. She describes at length the difference between students who come from various areas of the country. In describing the differences between students from Chicago and students from St. Louis, she launches into a description of various accents:

So they say that [students from Chicago] have like a lot of .. They say we don't say “r,” so they say we don't say “car” or “hair”. They saw we say “ca” or “hai”. And we say that they say “r” really, really strongly, so they say “overrr therre”. Or what else do they say?

Q: Is this a topic of conversation?

A: All the time. All the time. I'm like, so if I meet somebody I'm like when they say and “r” really [hard], I'm like “Are you from St. Louis?” (Grace, Interview 2)

These conversations are with individuals who are “definitely friends” who add to the group of girls from home called the “G-Boss” that Grace was already friends with prior to coming to college.

Grace would often find herself intimidated by her classmates:

People are way smarter than I thought. They will be like “Where are you from? Like what high school did you go to?... Like, oh yeah, I went to such and such

high school. My ACT score was this. I took all these AP courses. I've been around the world."... It's like people are selling themselves to you in like five minutes. (Grace, Interview 3)

Peers from high school have provided Grace with a great deal of support during her first semester in college. "G-Boss" consists of five of her friends from high school, two of whom attend LU with her. Three of the "G-Boss," one of which is Grace, currently attend LU. Each friend helps Grace in her own way. One helps with papers, the other for "support, like if I feel stressed about something or something is bothering me", the other for a good laugh "so if I'm ever in a funk, I just go hang out with [her]" (Grace, Interview 2).

Clem. At Linber College, 5.9% of the population is African American. Clem had a number of experiences over the course of his first year where other classmates stereotyped him due to his race. In his entire residence hall, as Clem describes having only four other African American students. In the entire school, Clem identifies maybe 20 or 30 African American students on the entire campus. Contrary to his high school experience, Clem is now clearly a member of a population that is a minority on campus. Clem described the following encounter:

One person actually asked me if I was in a gang before, and I'm like, no, why would you say that? He's like well, Black people are usually in gangs. And I kind of wanted to punch him and I was like, mmmm, you're lucky I'm in school. But, yeah, it's kind of like stereotypes like that. (Clem, Interview 1)

Students would approach Clem throughout his first year and make assumptions about his race or even be afraid: "My friend's roommate, she's from China and before then, she'd never met a Black person in her life. And she was kind of scared of us" (Clem, Interview 1).

Clem did not punch his classmate in the face. Nor did he confront his friend's roommate from China for assuming that as a Black person Clem was dangerous. Rather, Clem took a different approach with his peers:

It kind of bothers me but then I explain to them. In an honest part, they aren't trying to be like that. They aren't trying to be stereotypical and stuff but they just really don't know. A lot of my friends ask me some really...if I didn't know them better, I would think they were really racist comments but they were actually just curious about what was going on because they didn't know, which is okay with me. It's like okay, no, just let me inform you about it because otherwise, you will just have this stigma about us that you don't really realize. (Clem, Interview 1).

Braxzen. During their time in school, some subjects expressed an unwillingness to be with others or make new friends in college. Braxzen is a commuter student at DeYa University and describes having a very limited number of friends. When asked where he usually meets people on campus, he responds: "Usually just in class. Because I mean the fact that I am a commuter I kind of have like this...sense of, once I'm out of class it's, you know, I'm ready to go home. [Q: Really?] Yeah, so I really don't try to make time to meet anybody else, you know" (midsemester interview). As a result, Braxzen has few friends at DeYa University and largely keeps to himself.

Research Question 3: How does one's sense of agency and identity influence how one chooses a college and how they engage with their college community?

The faculty and staff of Sevans and Owles are often cited by graduates as strongly influencing their decision to go to college:

The person I realized over my high school [*sic*] that had a very large impact on my academic career would be my freshman counselor, Mr. N. It was only because I related to him and he, he started taking us on college tours my freshman year. So we would actually be able to go on college campus and see how the students were,

how they lived and functioned. And that, that's what really sparked my want and desire to go to a college. (Marvyn, Interview 1)

Yet before classes could even begin for the academic year of 2012–13, nearly 20% of those Sevans and Owles High School students admitted to college choose not to attend.

Rosa. Rosa and Jeuelle were friends prior to enrolling in RPU and agreed to be roommates together for the first year. For Rosa, the decision to attend RPU was difficult. Rosa had been admitted to her dream school but the financial package was lacking.

Under pressure from her family, Rosa elected to withdraw from her first choice school and applied frantically during the summer to attend RPU, the college her close friend was attending. During one of her interviews, Rosa shared, “I really wanted to go to [the dream school], but I think what stopped me was that I got accepted to RPU and my friends were going and I didn't know how much exactly [the dream school] was going to cost me” (Interview 2). Throughout her interview, Rosa acknowledged the influence of Jeuelle in motivating her to go to class and socialize with new friends at RPU and concluded “I just kind of feel grateful that I'm rooming with her” (Interview 2).

Marvyn. Like Rosa, Marvyn chose to attend a regional university where he would know other students who were attending. Marvyn's selection of a college waivered significantly during the spring and summer. In the spring, Marvyn had been admitted to a local private college in the city and was excited to study music and fashion. He decided to attend SRU after speaking with one of his mentors at the school and a few current students at SRU who had attended his high school. Through the mentorship and the support of one of his teachers, Marvyn said he was “Inspired..to do engineering, because at first I didn't know what I was going to college for” (Interview 1). Despite being known by Marvyn as a “ghetto school” with “loud people who party all the time and drink and

smoke” (Interview 1), he decided to attend SRU because of the academic programs the school offers and the fact that his friends are attending or are already in attendance at the school. If he graduates, Marvyn will be the first in his family to receive a college degree and he is eager to perform well: “I feel good and I will be able to say, ‘I did this [complete college]’. And they often tell me that they need me to do this [finish college] and I feel like I have to show my brothers there’s a different way” (Interview 1).

Grace. The decision to attend for Grace was almost entirely financial. Grace had been admitted to a number of schools that met her criteria for being academically rigorous and diverse and would have attended an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) if they had provided more funding. LU offered the largest financial aid package and was significantly far enough away to ensure, Grace believed, an experience that avoided any similarity to high school:

Q: So you wanted to go to a place that wasn’t the norm, that wasn’t where everyone was going.

A: Definitely. And I really didn’t want to be [in state] either...I don’t really consider [state university] because everyone goes there. It’s like it will be high school all over again. I don’t want that.

Grace’s commitment to attending a school that is both different from where most of her classmates are going and far away has created a literal and figurative distance between herself and her home environment.

Braxzen. Regardless of past educational experience, families and environment strongly influenced the willingness and ability of these students to apply and ultimately enroll in a college. When I met with Braxzen during the first semester of college, he noted that he thought about money often and it was clearly a source of stress during our conversations (Braxzen, Interview 2). Braxzen attends a private urban nationally

recognized university, lives at home, and works at the local movie theater. Braxzen chose DeYa University because of the individualized attention he received as an applicant. He received a birthday card from the school; he noted, “I was like, these people sending me birthday cards? I don’t even know who you are. I mean, I must be important to you so obviously, I’ll look into you” (Interview 1). Attending a school that was personally aware and invested in him was an important factor in choosing to attend DeYa University.

Clem. Clem learned about Linber through his affiliation with the Posse program and an aggressive recruitment program led by Linber College. Similar to Braxzen, Linber College recruited Clem heavily: “They sent me packages, a lot of pamphlets and magazines. They sent my mom a magazine every month and she’s like, your mail is here, and I’m like that has your name on it” (Interview 1). As a student at Linber, Clem finds the classroom environment both welcoming and intimidating:

I got intimidated by a lot of the course work, if that’s an example, but that’s just about it. [Linber] is a pretty great place to go to. It’s really open and expressive in a lot of its ways. So there’s not much to get intimidated by besides the actual fact that you’re in college and you’ve just moved away from your home. But besides that, it’s a really great place to be. (Clem, Interview 1).

Linber is providing Clem with an atmosphere that supports the intellectual rigor of the college and Clem’s ability to be comfortably engaged with the curriculum.

Research Question 4: What influence do education officials and community based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support students academic and social transition to college?

Mr. Marvel runs his schools with a drive for excellence, as he describes: “I said that you were supremely intelligent and that you were supposed to make it through

college. There's a lot of pressure that people feel on that" (Interview 1). He seeks to leverage the resources in the high school towards promoting college access and providing ample counseling for college. For example, Sevans and Owles High School has five college counselors, which is 80 students to every counselor. By contrast, other public high schools in the city have 250 students for each college counselor. During his interview, Mr. Marvel shares that Sevans and Owles High School has also recently created and obtained funding for a position of Chief College Officer (CCO). This single individual is responsible for educating colleges and universities about the school, advocating for graduating students, and engaging young alumni of Sevans and Owles High School who are currently in college. The CCO is developing a program for the top 12 graduating students to advocate for their placement at some of the nation's best colleges. The role is intended to be a strategic choice that enables the school to be noteworthy among admissions offices at some of the most prestigious schools in the country.

At Sevans and Owles, one factor in college advising is ensuring that the colleges or universities offer support for students of color. During my conversation with Mr. Marvel, he notes: "I think that there's a sense of match and fit. If it's a struggling student and they're going to a school that has several preemptive programs that really get kids comfortable and excited about the schools, I think that says a lot about our students in general and I think it also says a lot to our students who would be on the borderline of maybe not making it" (Interview 1). The knowledgeable college advising at Sevans and Owles High School is designed to identify programs that can increase the likelihood of success from Sevans and Owles students in college.

Mentorship also has a strong influence on how students aspire to apply, attend, and graduate from college. Anthony was a member of the professional group and is an administrator at a large public urban school system in a city different from where Sevans and Owles High School is located. During my conversation with the professional group, Anthony recounts a mentoring relationship he had with a student:

I kind of adopted her through the entire process of going to school and I mentored her while she was in college.... But it really took somebody and it could have been anybody. I just happen to be there to really cause an impact on her, I believe, and to see her come out of the dumps. Her father died of cancer. She was one of five children and each of the five had a different father and she just wanted a little more for herself and she often questioned that and said why does life have to be like this for me. None of my sisters have gone on to college. My mother hasn't gone on the college. My father hasn't gone on to college. My father passed away now I have a stepfather. Should I call my stepfather dad now since my dad is not alive? It was just a constant list of questions of life almost incredible to deal with. She had something inside of her.

There was a certain type of spark; a wanting, something that just questioned what do I want and I put her in touch, when she was in college...with one of my college fraternity brothers who was a higher ed. administrator. And he really pushed her the way I had asked him to. I said I don't want you giving up on her. Treat her like she is our own sister and he really pushed her. (Anthony, Interview 1)

While not as intentional as the advising applied at Sevans and Owles High School, Anthony's support of this student over several years had a positive outcome. She is now a graduate, a mother, and an individual who continued in college and graduate school influenced by the strong support of her mentor. The influence of these roles that the students experienced in high schools continues in varying forms in each of the colleges and universities the students attended.

Clem. At Linder College, a significantly smaller school, Clem describes approaching a faculty member when he was struggling with his paper topic in a

class focused on Japanese literature. After consulting with his professor, Clem's paper topic was dramatically changed only a week before the paper was due:

And I'm like a week in and I'm like (whispering) oh my God, oh my God. So she gave me a couple of other topics, which was a woman's role in marriage in the Heian period and even then, I found four books on it. And then I asked her for help and she gave me three books but three of those books were out of the four books that I already found. So I had to write a ten-page paper with a four-book bibliography, not including the actual tale. And it was pretty good. (Clem, Interview 1)

After substantial work with his assigned faculty member, Clem received a B+ on the paper. Clem smiles proudly after describing how he saved the paper and softly says; "I did it" (Interview 1).

Braxzen. During his first semester in college, Braxzen struggled in nearly all of his classes but found the faculty sought him out and challenged him to engage more through his work. When Braxzen turned in a report that was short of the page limit, he hoped he would be able "get away with" procrastinating and writing a shorter paper. Instead, his professor followed up with him directly and pushed him to do more. Braxzen said: "I mean, he was a writer himself so he gave me a bunch of edits and a bunch of stuff to like talk about and put in. So much that I actually went back and did it. I felt better about myself" (Interview 3). Following a math midterm that seemed to be particularly difficult for the class, Braxzen was struck by how the faculty member approached the class: "He was just kind of worried about whether or not everybody was going to pass successfully. You know, he was trying to figure out how he could, you know, help us out" (Interview 2). The responsibility Braxzen's faculty felt in encouraging his academic work was a source of support for him during his first semester in college.

Marvyn. Marvyn describes himself as being a student in high school who was viewed by teachers as “lazy.” Academically, Marvyn was performing at a B and C level in his high school classes. Two different responses from teachers and staff met him. During high school he felt as though he was persistently directed to conform and not explore ideas in what he believed to be an unconventional way:

I’m getting a lot of nos and I feel like it’s because the teachers, they feel, I don’t know, necessarily, challenged by me.... But they are not trying to mold me into the potential that I have, the greatness I can be. I feel like they want me to be as normal as they are...I don’t know, I feel like I can achieve something greater than that” (Marvyn, Interview 1).

Yet other teachers and administrators reach out to Marvyn to encourage his creativity and ensure that he was indeed on a path that led to college. Marvyn was particularly struck by the principal’s demonstrated support of his interest in fashion when she agreed to fund the creation of a school hoodie that he designed.

Marvyn had a historically tense relationship with his school counselor that evolved during the course of his senior year. He ultimately named her as someone he planned to stay in contact with after leaving high school. He shared, “At first, I was working against her, because I didn’t think she was trying to help me. And now I see that she actually had goals in mind, trying to help me” (Interview 1). Marvyn ultimately choose both the college and the academic field of study his mentors advised him to select.

Jeuelle and Rosa. For a larger school, RPU presented Jeuelle and Rosa with opportunities to have meaningful and challenging interactions with staff and faculty at the University. Both students were required to meet with the academic advisors eight times over the course of the first semester of college. Rosa’s academic advisor made her feel “special” and engaged her in class selection, advised her on time management, and even

invited her to attend church. While Jeuelle's advisor provided similar support, Jeuelle did not develop as close a relationship with her advisor.

Jeuelle came to RPU eager to major in psychology. However, her involvement with the faculty was quite limited. Despite her genuine interest in the subject matter, Jeuelle had minimal exposure to the faculty member teaching her psychology class. When she met with him shortly after doing poorly on a quiz, her professor told her "that he doesn't really see me getting an A or a B out of the class, which is really saddening for me, just to have a teacher tell you that" (Jeuelle, Interview 2). Further, the faculty member was only available before a class that conflicted with her Sociology class, which eliminated any possibility for her to have continued access to her professor. Despite Jeuelle's experience with her professor, she remains committed to her success in the class; "I'm trying to get an A out of, yeah an A or a B in Psychology. So I'm going to strive for that. And if it doesn't happen for me, I'll just know that I'll still pass it regardless" (Jeuelle, Interview 2).

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter the relevance of the research questions to the data have been explored. Within the exploration of the research questions, data related to the students who served as subjects within this study was applied. Each student's identity development was subject to the influences of their community environment, family, educational environment, and peers. These combined factors motivated how students ultimately choose to engage in their college and university environment.

Chapter V will explore how the data reveals the development of trends that influences behaviors exhibited by these students. The students followed in this study were influenced by the realities of their home communities. Those realities include financial hardships that caused these students to enter college and university with less resources than their peers and, in some cases, less academic preparation than their peers who attended stronger high schools in the country. These factors will challenge the capacity of students included in this study to make new friends, feel confident in the classroom, and even ask for help. With the ability to make new friends and gain intellectual and social confidence challenged, the students in this study will experience more difficulty having a meaningful college experience.

Colleges are inherently complex structures that require students to be resourceful in providing for their academic and personal needs Baxter Magolda (1999), Chang (2007), Harper and Hurtado (2007). When students used to keeping to themselves meet that complexity, it becomes challenging to ask for help and seek support. For example, not being able to obtain affordable books can determine whether a student like Rosa will attend class and complete her homework assignments. If their personal growth in college is curtailed by reducing access to the many resources and avenues to learn from their peers and faculty, students like Rosa will find their ability to succeed in college stymied by their inability to become actively involved in their college experience.

V – ANALYSIS

As the research questions for this study were explored, it became clear that they focused largely on the questions relating to the *perception* of the experience of attending college through the views of the research subject, the family of the research subject, peers of the subject from high schools and college, and school administrators. To understand the role of perception, the themes of **influence of educational institutions, community environment and influence, family influence, peer influence, and relationship with the self** were identified as being critical areas of focus and analysis for the study. The following chapter will review the data findings and their relationship to the individual research questions and development of themes between the research questions.

Relationship of Data to the Research Questions

These themes are an important product of the data discovered in response to the research questions. The data found in response to research question 1 was responsive to how students from under-represented backgrounds perceive and experience access to college. The data tied to this question revealed that a student's perception of access to college was influenced by how students saw themselves in relationship to the college experience. In many cases, students approached college with an awareness of being "different" as they experienced being a visible minority for the first time. Braxzen, for example, was less willing to raise his hand in class by virtue of his heightened awareness that he "stands out" (Braxzen, Interview 2). Students were also, for the first time, experiencing an environment where other students came to college with far more

resources and material objects. Clem noted being overwhelmed in classes where other students were already familiar with the material based on the curriculum in their high schools:

I went to [Linber], because it would push me a lot further. But I think it is kind of true that it's not geared towards students, like me for a general...because like [Sevans and Owles High School], we really don't have that well of a education system (Clem, Interview 1).

Students like Jeuelle noted the abundance of materials goods that her classmates had: "I see people around campus, it's like they have on a new everything every day and sometimes what I wear. I don't have the new jeans or the new shoes" (Jeuelle, Interview 2). The role of school environment (both in high school and in college), the influence of peer groups, and the relationship with the self emerged from the data gained in student interviews in response to Research Question 1.

The data found in relation to research question 2 reflected students' developing sense of agency and identity, which influenced how they believed themselves to be perceived within their community. This research question is notably complex, a complexity rooted in a multi-layered perspective. First, the question focused on an individual's relationship with themselves through an evolving sense of agency and identity. Second, the question looks at how the influence of peers, family, and school influenced the individual student's developing sense of identity and agency. These combined aspects of the second research question produced data related to how the role of environment (both from family, community, and high school) contributed to how students developed their own sense of agency and identity. For example, by growing with a predominantly African American environment in an area of the city with higher rates of crime and low-income levels per household, students who attended college were

developing an identity that occurred *in spite of* the city and national wide statistics that indicated the majority of students did not graduate from college (NCES). Students acquired what Mr. Marvel referred to as “grit” that enabled them to focus on school and attend college. Once in college, this sense of identity and agency was influenced again by how students interacted and learned from other peers who came from different racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. How a student’s sense of identity interacted with the themes of peer influence, community environment, and influence of educational institutions, and family influence contributed to how the data tied to Research Question 2 was analyzed.

The data found in relation to Research Question 3 reflected how the sense of agency and identity students included in this study carried influenced how they choose a college or university and how they ultimately choose to engage with the college or university community. As discussed in Chapter IV, Sevans and Owles High School provides students with an environment that focuses on attending college. Students attending Sevans and Owles High School included in this study remarked that the conversation about going to college or university began during their first year in the school, and the hallway displayed college and university banners. The influence of the school environment provided students with the expectation of attending college or university. The influence of peers within Sevans and Owles High School supported that sense of expectation as well. With students like Jeuelle supporting Rosa, she decided over the course of the summer not to attend her “dream school” but to attend RPU, the school that Jeuelle was attending, instead. The influence of the family environments provided

both support to attend college or university and the added pressure of financial concerns as the cost of higher education seemed prohibitive, if not luxurious, to most families.

Research question 4 focuses on the role of education officials and community based organizations in providing support and resources to assist students in their transition to college. Here too, the role of family, school, and peers, became an important area for students to first envision themselves attending college or university and ultimately to face the challenges of leaving home and entering a college or university environment that is so significantly different from where they were raised and attended high school. The addition of staff like the CCO at Sevans and Owles improves upon the college advising that occurs through the influences of teacher and advisors throughout the high school. Students like Marvyn were significantly influenced by the trusted guidance of teachers and administrators at the high school. External programs like the Posse program were influential in for Clem; it provided financial support, a peer cohort, and advisement for Linber College. Finally, peers in high school and in college or university provided a community of friends that students like Grace could turn to for friendship and support during difficult times at LU.

The data collected in response to these four research questions established five themes that provided an added understanding of the complexity of the experience of entering college or university for the individuals who were followed in this study.

Educational institutions, community environment and influence, family influence, peer influence, and relationship with the self influence those five themes. The remainder of this chapter will explore each of those themes and the interrelation of the data with the greater context of the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter II.

Influence of Educational Institutions

As discussed in Chapter IV, Sevans and Owles High School is an urban public charter school whose recent graduates were admitted to college at a rate of 100%. While it is notable that not all of these students ultimately enroll in college for the fall term following their senior year of high school, the college enrollment rate remains greater than other public schools in the city. In 2012, Sevans and Owles High School graduates had a 78% enrollment rate in college in comparison to 60% of the public schools in the city. This indicates there is much more influencing the capacity of a student to attend college than simply having the necessary prerequisites to be admitted to a college or university. But Evans and Owles High School provides an environment where the concept of going to college was not a dream but a reality expected of all students. While this is significant and speaks to Treisman's work (1992) that setting high standards yields appropriate ambition from students, there are other realities surrounding the high school experience of these students that limits their capacity to attend, enroll, and graduate from college.

As reviewed in Chapter IV, Mr. Marvel established a norm of expectations for his students at Sevans and Owles High School. The difference between establishing an atmosphere of high expectations versus an assumption of intellectual inadequacy is not unusual for this population of students. As Tierney (1993) indicates, creating an "education for excellence" (133) means the experience of these racially under-represented populations must influence, if not drive, a reconceptualization of learning that is centered on those populations who are so often excluded from being part of the learning experience. This is equally true for higher education as it is for K-12. Empowering

students to be active participants in their learning experience is critical for the progression through elementary, secondary and ultimately higher education.

Given the increased hiring of staff to focus on college advising and placement, administrators at Sevans and Owles High School hope colleges and universities will come to recognize the school's name. As discussed in Chapter IV, the creation of a CCO role is a focused effort to enroll the school's best and brightest students in the nation's strongest colleges and universities. However, this strategic choice comes at some cost to the remaining students in the graduating class of Sevans and Owles High School.

Providing these additional resources is costly and Sevans and Owles High School has both solicited substantial philanthropic support as well as made cuts to other programs in order to provide lower ratios and increased access to college counseling. The support in college counseling alone costs Sevans and Owles High School nearly \$400,000 that is not provided by the city. Yet, access to higher education is an imperative at Sevans and Owles High School. As Mr. Marvel indicates, "we just don't do something else because we do this" (Interview 1).

Even for the students of Sevans and Owles High School being admitted to college does not ensure access to college. Going to college is the standard, not the exception, that is presented by Sevans and Owles High School to every student. In any given day, students are provided an academic environment that is constantly focused upon access to college and on investing students with the personal and intellectual self-confidence to envision a future that includes attending college. Mr. Marvel oversees three schools that provide K-12 education to the students of the Treedale and Shorey neighborhoods. He describes the commitment of all of these schools as "taking a lot of hands on":

Because it takes a lot of hands on [we are] trying to create what we call this Pre-K to 12th college graduation culture, so that not only do we have pennants and banners at [Sevans and Owles High School], which you've seen, but want to have pennants and banners..in second grade. And then we want to say well, it's not just pennants and banners, but it's also just are we always being intentional about what the soft skills are that are going to get kids into college? (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1)

From banners to elementary school writing to the individual commitment demonstrated by the teachers, Mr. Marvel's schools provide an environment that saturates all students and demands excellence not only of the students but of the staff and teachers that make up the school. It is with this school's commitment to its students and their futures deep in their memories that each student starts every day and imagines their future with the support of Evans and Owles High School.

Grace, Braxzen, Rosa, Jeuelle, Marvyn, and Clem attended colleges of varying types. These schools are large, small, public, private, urban, and rural. As such, they provide a wide range of college experiences and a very different context within which to view the journey of students through the first semester of college. What is immediately apparent is how students are faced with what Harris and Bensimon (2007) call the "hidden curriculum" found within higher education. This "hidden curriculum" provides students with the skills for navigating the classroom, seeking resources, and knowing where to turn for help. As Mr. Marvel notes, seeking help in an unusual environment is very much a challenging quest for these students:

There's a lot of pressure that people feel on that. You know, so I think some self- doubt can creep in. Those kind of self-isolative factors, to me, can also be like man, I'm overwhelmed and I don't know how to do this. I'm scared. I don't know how to reach out. And I could use probably... I could use some assistance. (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1)

However, their success during the first year will largely depend on their capacity to adapt to this different environment of new experiences and develop increased resiliency

(Griffin & Allen, 2006) and finds ways of breaking out of what Mr. Marvel terms “self-isolative” behaviors.

Role of Educators in Influencing College Selection and Retention Among Study Cohort

Both in high school and in college, adults play a meaningful role in providing a mentoring relationship with students as they considered the potential of going to college, enrolling in college, and ultimately choose to continue with their academic work (Goff-Crews, 2014). The most meaningful engagements with adults tend to occur in more informal settings that provided opportunities for mentorship and guidance. As Goff-Crews (2014) argues in her work on faculty and students of color, “When students feel that they are a valued part of the community...they are more vested in their education and are more likely to succeed” (13). Conversely, individuals in high school and college were adversely influenced by their interactions with adults in position of power and influence on the staff or faculty. As Jeuelle shared regarding her discouraging interaction with her psychology professor, not to have a faculty member available to develop her interest in psychology “put me down a lot” (Jeuelle, Interview 2). Through the support of her academic advisor, not her faculty members, Jeuelle developed a plan to improve her grade in the class because she “really want[ed] to prove him wrong and show him, like you know, I can pass this course” (Interview 2). The capacity for interactions with students to influence their sense of self-worth and ability to attend and achieve in college so strongly cannot be emphasized enough and was demonstrated both positively and

negatively through the relationships members of the student cohort had with faculty and staff.

Marvyn's feelings towards those who he initially did not feel were his advocates also evolved. As discussed in Chapter IV, the mentorship of one of his teachers introduced him to the field of engineering and developed his interest in majoring in engineering at SRU. That same mentor provided Marvyn the opportunity to teach a class session at Sevans and Owles on a topic related to engineering, which further developed his interest in the field. Marvyn occasionally had distrust of the advice of some the teachers and staff at Sevans and Owles High School.

As Marvyn progressed throughout his senior year of high school he felt his relationship to his teacher and mentors changing. He described his relationship with a teacher he used to one be in opposition with as changing and developing mutual respect: "I feel like I understand her. I don't know like, I understand her differently. But I think she also understands me differently." (Marvyn, Interview 1). On another occasion when reflecting on the teacher who ultimately strongly influenced his decision to attend SRU over a local college, Marvyn acknowledged how much he had evolved by initially "working against" those who encouraged him to attend SRU and later realizing the sincerity of their advice and concern for his well-being in college.

Among the schools attended by the student group, only one, Linber College, provided a small enough setting to support an environment that could provide individualized attention for each student. LU, RPU, SRU, and DeYa University are large universities with complex structures that can be difficult for students to navigate. For some students, orientation programs were the first and only opportunity to be guided

throughout the university. Grace, for example, attended an orientation session during the summer on the LU campus. During that time, she met with an academic advisor and selected her courses. Following that, Grace says the academic advising experience is really “up to you...Like they’re not going to be like ‘Oh okay, just wanted to know how your classes are going?’ Or ‘Did you need help with this?’ It’s really just like up to you” (Interview 2).

Community Environment and Influence

As a smaller school, Linber was able to provide more individualized access to resources for Clem. However, being at larger institutions did not necessarily preclude students from having individualized attention. Some of the larger schools were able to make efforts through the faculty and staff that provided encouragement and support for students. At DeYa University, a school nearly twice the size of RPU, Braxzen felt significant support from faculty. He described classes at DeYa University as wanting “to push your thinking instead of just you relying on, you know, the professors and whatnot. And then also it’s like you’re free to say your opinion so much as however you wish as long as, you know, you address the question” (Interview 2). Braxzen was still very conscious of his presence in the classroom as the sole African American student: “I’m not trying to, you know, be the first one whose hand is up for everything or ask questions all the time...cause I already stand out” (Interview 2).

The academic environment found in college was challenging for all students included in this study. How these challenges were met by these students was often determined by their own persistence and the influence of the staff and faculty. Being able

to develop positive individual relationships with faculty members provided students with a confidence that could not be gained in the formal classroom environment. Finding an opportunity to have one on one encounters with faculty enabled students like Clem and Braxzen to increase their sense of confidence and, in turn, further develop their commitment to learning. When Braxzen received a D on a midterm, he faced the remainder of the class thinking of his capacity for improvement and was pleased by the commitment the faculty member was demonstrating for his continued improvement in the class. When Jeuelle faced the discouraging news from her faculty member that it was unlikely she would receive a strong grade in psychology and that his limited office hours provided little opportunity for her to work directly with him to improve her grade, Jeuelle turned to her academic advisor for support. He placed her in a tutoring group and advised her to drop a class. Jeuelle faced the remainder of the semester determined to succeed in spite of the lack of support from her faculty: “That put me down a lot, because I was like you know, I have a teacher that thinks that I can’t really do it but I really want to prove him wrong and show him” (Jeuelle, Interview 2).

Clem enrolled in a curriculum that was highly demanding for him and he felt unprepared compared to his peers. As the product of an urban public school system, Clem found his education was focused on completion of high school rather than exposure to a “good education”. He described the education environment at Linber as follows: “at [Linber], they kind of just say you had good teachers, you had good education, now here’s more good education while here at [Sevans and Owles High School], it’s like you’re here at school; we just want you to graduate” (Clem, Interview 1).

While struggling in his Japanese class, Clem seeks out his faculty member for office hours. He develops a love of the topic and continues to take classes in Japanese: “my favorite class was Japanese...it was my most difficult class and my hardest class. I enjoyed that class a lot because it was really just something I wanted to learn and I had a good interest in” (Interview 1). Eventually, Clem’s love of Japanese led to a strong relationship with the instructor, who he visited often both inside and outside of office hours: “I went to her office even when she didn’t have office hours just to see if I could have office hours with her. She was like, I see you more than I see my coworkers” (Clem, Interview 1). The relationship that Clem developed with this faculty member bolstered his confidence and allowed him to develop a love of learning even in a subject that was significantly challenging to him. As indicated by Clem and Braxzen’s experience, informal relationships with faculty strengthen both the student’s intellectual curiosity and their personal confidence with engaging with the curriculum.

Braxzen and Jeulle’s perception of themselves in the classroom echoes the literature (Harper (2008), Tierney (1993, and Chiang (2007) and the observations of Mr. Marvel. As a clearly visible minority, Braxzen is experiencing being what Harper (2014) terms “only” in the classroom. As a result, he is highly aware of his engagement in the classroom and intentionally seeks to not stand out. This is a troubling, yet not unusual dynamic in the classroom. This speaks to Tierney’s call for an “education for excellence [that] must include those individuals at the margins not simply as another group to be added into a melting pot, but as a way to re-conceptualize how we think about academic communities” (133, Tierney). Braxzen, Jeulle, Rosa, Grace, and Clem are all students who Tierney would consider “at the margins.” Providing students with the inclusive

heterogeneous learning environment that Tierney describes is critical in order to mitigate the feeling of “standing out” that is already apparent in the experience of these students. Further, it is significant that within these nurturing one on one environments that the students describe with faculty, neither Braxzen nor Clem describe a feeling of standing out of being intellectually intimidated. On the contrary, these points of direct and personal contact with the faculty provide a sense of confidence that challenges them to persist and achieve in their academic work.

As lifelong residents of the city, the students included in this study have been heavily influenced by the confidence Sevans and Owles High School provided them on the expectation of attending college. For many, this is a new influence that enables them to be the first in their families going to college. Their upbringing has been both challenging and invested with love and support from their families and communities.

Family Influence

Students in this study experienced a family environment that included any one of the following attributes: low income, minimal parent exposure to higher education, unemployment, and single parent families. Students followed in this study like Grace, Braxzen, and Rosa were also largely expected to contribute to the family income or the cost of college. They did so by working outside of the home at movie theaters, community centers, babysitting, etc. Financial hardship is also a reality for individuals living in the communities of Treedale and Shorey. For these students, life outside of the classroom is apparent in the daily news headlines. In my reflection journal early in the study, I observed that the scenery on the way to their homes often involved boarded up buildings

with local bodegas and dime stores along the main streets. Yet inside waiting for these students was a warm home with a loving family. How these environments within and outside of the home intersect to influence the outlook and hope these students had for the future is significant.

Students included in this study felt a strong connection and obligation to their families. For Grace, the combined support from her father and sister has clearly proven beneficial. Yet, the age of her father and grandmother is clearly a cause of concern to her. As Mr. Marvel observes among his students, “there are some students that cannot separate themselves or find it hard to separate themselves from their families for a host of different reasons.” Grace describes herself as being “like the police” in her family (Interview 3). She often cares for her family members including driving her elderly grandmother to water aerobics at the community center or taking her to doctor’s appointments. Grace worries about who will provide for her grandmother and father while she is away at school: “They play cards. They like to gamble. They drink and stuff. And I’m like ‘no, that’s not ok’” (Interview 3). Acting in this protecting role among those she lives with at home causes Grace concern for who will take care of her father and grandmother when she is far away at college. Because of this, Grace has considered transferring to a local college that is closer to home. It is clear that this concern is not abating and will continue throughout her time in college.

As discussed earlier in Chapter IV, Clem’s family is enormously proud of his enrollment in Linber and his selection into the Posse program. From elaborate home cooked meals during his trips home to the pre-packed suitcases months before the start of college, the pride his family and community have in him presents Clem with an obvious

joy and great responsibility. It is now in Clem's hands to meet the expectations of those around him and, as he shared with respect to his experience in the Japanese class, he has worked exceedingly hard in his classes to be successful. This appears to be a source of strength for Clem. Buoyed by the support of his family, Clem was looking forward to his next semester of college and, ultimately, being the first in his family to graduate college.

Role of Financial Pressure on Family Influence in Supporting Student Access and Retention in College

The students in this study enter college with a great deal of concern about how to afford the cost of their education. When asked how often they thought about finances in the interviews, nearly all of the students name this as a daily thought or worry they consider. All of the students followed in this study are recipients of some form of merit aid or scholarships in addition to taking on personal and family loans. Many of them attend schools with significant resources for financial aid. For example, Linber has the financial means to provide tuition support for students unable to afford the cost of the education. However, just under half of the students enrolling at Linber have the available resources to pay the cost of education. For students like Clem, who are fully funded, this presents an interesting divide on the campus between those who are well resourced and those requiring financial support in order to attend college.

At RPU, Jeuelle is very aware of the resources she does not have and notes how other students on her floor have closets that are stocked with clothes while she relies on a few pairs of jeans. While Jeuelle is conscious of her limited resources, she is also reminded of her commitment to success in college:

Sometimes I might feel like, oh somebody's really paying attention to what I'm wearing and they will know that I wore these jeans the other day (Laughing). So sometimes I get self-conscious with that but I have to realize that I'm not here for fashion. I'm here to really make something of myself. (Jeuelle, Interview 2).

Despite being a fulltime student, Braxzen is living at home, commuting to school, and working at the nearby movie theater for 30 hours a week to contribute to the cost of his education and reduce costs by living at home. Both Grace and Rosa are not attending their first choice institution but choose their current school because of greater financial support being offered at LU and RPU. These choices provide different experiences in college for these students who are very much aware that they do not have the same financial resources, free time, or material belongings of their peers who attend school with them.

College was, to some families, an incomprehensible financial luxury. With community college seeming far more cost effective, families like Rosa's and Braxzen's were inclined to support a choice to attend community college or attend a local institution. While this might seem more financially viable, the realities presented in NCES data are that community colleges produce a significantly lower percentage of graduating students than four year public universities. In 2009, around 31% of students nationally graduated in 3 years from community colleges that entered in 2008 (NCES) while 57% of students graduated with a bachelors degree who attended public 4-year institutions. Over the course of the year, Braxzen struggled in his ability to immerse himself fully in the college experience and respond to his parents' financial concerns that he get a job and commute from home:

Well my Mom's the main one pushing for it [getting a job]. And I mean it kind of bugs me because at first I figured I was going to be in the, you know, I figured

everything was taken care of. . . . ‘Cause even putting myself aside, a lot of people change colleges because of the fact that, you know, the money wasn’t there, the money was too high. And even with me, I figured if I couldn’t go here, if I couldn’t go to [DeYa,] I honestly didn’t feel like going anywhere. Because of the fact that it bothers me that a couple of thousand could change exactly where you see your life going, you know. [So my Mom] keep steady pushing to get a job. And I’m like, well. . . and I had to tell her one day. . . . “What do you value more, me getting like a dead end job, not to say that it is dead end as far as like you’re not going to anywhere else, but as far as like that’s all you’re going to be doing right now is just this.” And I was like, “As far as me getting a job, and then me just getting an education, you know, what’s really more important?” Because, of course, I mean once you get the job or once you get out of school, yeah, you’re going to have work ‘til you die. That’s how my professor said. He was like, “You got 4 years to be all this and then you get 40 more years to just work.” (Braxzen, Interview 2)

By the end of his first semester, Braxen was commuting from home and working 30 hours a week at a local movie theater.

The reality of being the first in one’s family to go to college or be the first to attend a residential 4-year institution is often an anomaly when compared to the past experiences of their parents. In some cases this can create a degree of tension within the family as well. There is always the question of whether the family truly values the idea of their child attending college. Yet as Mr. Marvel notes in our conversation, there is a rarer, yet significant fear that, by attending college, the student may be perceived by the family as demonstrating that they are “better than” their parents:

And then to take a really interesting or difficult turn is to say that maybe in very rare cases, there is a sense of the student going to college is somehow validation that the student is better than the parent. That the parent hasn’t perhaps gone. This is in really rare cases; I’m going to be really careful when I say that. I’m just saying I think there are some cases, albeit limited, that there is a sense of. . . but you know, why would you be going to so-and-so? So there would be some just academic history and my own sense of self-worth as a student, that I think gets into the way. (Mr., Marvel, Interview 1)

While certainly not true in all cases, the influence of the newfound rigor of the college environment combined with a type of resistance from the family can be over-

powering to the students and discourage their desire to remain in school. At one point, Braxzen began to doubt his ability to continue in college due to the financial burden of tuition: “I was wondering like one day like what would be the point of me even trying to pass the math class, you know, if I’m not going to be here” because of costs (Interview 2). Braxzen’s experience echoes Mr. Marvel’s observations. For some families, a student’s desire to attend a college away from home with costly fees appears selfish and inconsiderate. This concern is repeatedly conveyed to the student and the resulting frustration and guilt of the student’s choice to go to college becomes a daily reality for students like Braxzen that may encourage dropping out or transferring to colleges that may be more affordable but have demonstrated graduation rates occurring at a significantly lower rate than the schools they originally entered.

Peer Influence

Being around other students within varying degrees of personal and academic confidence certainly impacted the experiences of students in the cohort. Students within the cohort included in the study demonstrated a varying degree of effort in reaching out and making new friends. Those experiences ranged from students like Rosa who choose to not “really talk to people. I don’t know. I’m shy and quiet” (Rosa, mid-semester interview) to students like Grace who introduced themselves to strangers on campus (Grace, Interview 2). Students like Braxzen keep to themselves, choosing, as discussed earlier, not to speak up in class and having few friends in college.

At the other end of spectrum, students like Grace and Jeuelle actively sought new friends. Jeuelle described herself as being “friends with a lot of people on my floor as

well as a lot of people in my class. They have been easy to get along with. A lot of the times they come in our room, they hang out for hours and hours of the night” (Jeuelle, Interview 2). Grace is both reliant on her old circle of friends, the “G-Boss” and actively seeks out new friends. The change in environment that LU has provided has been largely motivating to Grace. When I visit her on campus during the mid-semester interview, she is pleased with herself and her transition to LU:

Just being here, I’m on my own but not really. Like I have a lot of people around me, like I made a lot of new friends here. People like to be surrounded by positive individuals, just like I like being around that, and so it’s refreshing. (Grace, Interview 2).

Exposure to students from different backgrounds in college and university can be a daunting experience to many under-represented students entering college from communities like the city where my respondents live. At Sevans and Owles High School, 97.6% of the population is African American and 84% of the student body receives free or reduced price lunch. In the colleges and universities that these students choose to attend, the percentage of African American students in the population ranges from 5% (Linber College) to 22% (SRU) and the financial resources of the entire student body vary tremendously, from students receiving full aid to students paying over \$40,000 annually for tuition. These statistics both discussed here and in Chapter IV produce a diverse student body within each of these institutions that is rich with opportunities and exposure to difference perspectives. Students like Clem and Grace clearly indicate the benefit of these environments. Yet these students also indicate being placed in difficult environments with little capacity to navigate or knowledge of who to seek guidance from when presented with academic and social challenges. This difficulty is noted by Harper and Hurtado (2007) among peers and within the fabric of the institution by Chiang

(2007). Harper and Hurtado (2007) note the challenge among peer groups and the resulting *lack* of diverse interactions among peer groups in colleges and universities:

Beyond observational segregation trends on these campuses, most students we interviewed personally confessed to having few (if any) friends from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Several White participants expressed an interest in building friendships with others but said they did not know how. (17)

Despite her forthrightness in meeting new people from different backgrounds, even Grace acknowledges a circle of friends that is “I guess I really hang out with like a lot of people [from my hometown].... Like generally like all Black. But that doesn’t really bother me” (Grace, Interview 2).

This lack of opportunity to have meaningful interactions among diverse peer groups is a reflection, Chiang (2007) argues, of the “racial stratification in the educational system” (p. 32). Chiang goes on to argue that “significant differences in precollege opportunities contribute not only to whether students from certain racial groups enroll in college but also to where they will likely enroll” (p. 32). Chiang’s argument is reflective of Clem’s concern about his academic success in school given his background at Sevans and Owles High School and his concern that public school students don’t perform as well as students from more elite high schools (Interview 1). Despite Grace’s confidence and excitement about being a student at LU, it also reflects Grace’s apprehension about being successful in a large institution and her need for guidance and support from a trusted group of peers, the “G-Boss,” who have known her since high school.

In a large school with little personal contact of staff or faculty in her experience, the “G-Boss” provide Grace with the tools to successfully navigate college and complete her first semester with a 3.0 GPA. When Grace received her first C, it was a “G-Boss” member who lifted her spirits by telling her, “I know you’re upset about it, but just

remembers Cs get degrees too” (Interview 2). When Grace was trying to identify a major, it was a friend who sat down with the course catalog and introduce her to international studies: “He just started looking up degrees that would be like awesome for that [being a diplomat]” (Interview 2). Back at home, Grace and her older sister have engaged in a competition to determine who will end the year with the strongest GPA. Her older sister returned to college when Grace entered LU and they have been in “competition” throughout the semester; “She’s like ‘My little sister can’t beat me, it’s not okay.’ So we have like a GPA challenge. She’s totally creaming me right now” (Grace, Interview 3).

When asked who has had the most influence during her first semester of college, she immediately names her older sister. It is clear that her older sister’s support has provided Grace motivation and the ability to persist and renew the competition next semester.

Given the size and complexity of LU, faculty and staff advisement and support are largely absent from Grace’s experience. It’s hard to imagine if Grace would still be sitting proudly in her school sweatshirt describing her developing confidence without the support and guidance of her friends in college and at home.

Students described a willingness to speak up in class but often felt hesitant to do so unless it was to ask for clarification or if they were absolutely certain of the response. Mr. Marvel alludes to this as “getting by” for students who wish to pass through classes without calling too much attention to themselves:

I think that our young Black males are picking up on the fact that maybe they’re not considered smart, that it’s not cool to be smart, that maybe people don’t expect them to be smart. And all of a sudden, if I don’t raise my hand as much, it’s not a problem. I can pass by without...if I’m well behaved and I don’t cause any trouble, all of a sudden, I’m a C/B student.... I’m getting by. Right? And my shirt’s tucked in. I raise my hand once a class period, maybe

that's enough. I speak to that because two things—one, it doesn't develop the academic habits around perseverance. Like they have grit, but it hasn't translated over into the academic setting. And then two, what they don't have is that sense of belief that when they face a tough academic challenge, that they have the history of being able to be successful with it. So then they begin possibly to start shutting down and well, why would I go to class? I'm probably not going to go.... I'm not going to do well anyway. (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1)

Mr. Marvel sought through his leadership of Sevans and Owles High School to challenge this “getting by” notion that he believed served as a tactic for many Black males in particular to avoid being called out by their peers for their intellectual ability. Being removed from the comfort of the high school classroom was significant and created feelings of self-doubt. Students like Grace commented, “I mean there's a lot of smart people, so it's like a competition of who can answer the most questions” (Interview 3). The intellectual intimidation of being among some of the brightest individuals in the country was also coupled with an awareness of the uniqueness of their own racial identity. Braxzen describes looking around the class and realizing “wow, I actually am the only Black guy here” (Interview 3). Leaving Sevans and Owles High School and entering a college and university environment that called more attention to their race as well as some deficiencies in their academic preparation was a significant challenge to students included in this study.

Role of College and University Peer Group in Providing Opportunities for Individual Growth and Identity Development

For the students in this study, it was critical to their success on campus to be able to transcribe race based encounters into opportunities for growth and increased awareness for the campus community. Yet as Harper (2008) points out, these encounters often occur

between peers. Harper's observations had important bearing when, for example, Clem was asked by another classmate if he had been in a gang and when students of a different racial identity looked uncomfortable and left a room he entered. As peer to peer interactions occur, students like Clem are left choosing between choosing between wanting to "punch" a fellow student for asking about gang membership (Clem, Interview)

1) or serving as an ambassador of their racial and cultural identity among their peers. For Grace, the lifelong friends of the "G-Boss" and her own adventurous spirit have nurtured her own journey through the large and impersonal LU. The "G-Boss" provide Grace with a sense of security in a new environment. She ended the semester in strong academic standing with a 3.0 GPA and was looking forward to returning to LU for the second semester. She was applying to be a resident advisor and had learned that she has been selected into the "ambassadors" program.

Being accepted into this program is quite meaningful to Grace. She describes "I was thinking about transferring but I don't know...when I joined the [ambassadors], and they were all like 'Yeah, I love LU'.... And it's like, I don't know, they seem to be happy about it. And I can see myself like being here 3 years later and just be happy about graduating from here" (Interview 2). Grace has been able to find a home for herself at LU that is rooted both in lifelong friendships and in the adventure and opportunity that life at LU presents. Through the influence of peers and her own initiative, Grace has discovered her major, found a new community of friends, continued to maintain high school friendships, and explored organizations and activities on campus. She happily walks around campus and introduces me to various facets of the campus and looks forward to her graduation day.

At RPU, Jeuelle and Rosa are also engaging in an experience that was shaped both by the closeness of their own preexisting friendship in high school and the developing friendships with other girls on the floor. Jeuelle and Rosa live within a residential community where Jeuelle is particularly engaged with the other women who lived on the floor. Following her roommate's lead, Rosa will often socialize with other members on the floor but is frequently quiet in class and prefers to stay in her dorm room resting during her free time. Rosa is deeply dependent upon Jeuelle. She does not speak up in class or make friends in class. She describes her time in class being spent sitting quietly: "I don't really talk to people...because I am shy and quiet" (Interview 2). During one of our interviews Rosa indicates how much she relies on Jeuelle to wake her up and ensure that she attends class. Jeuelle immediately added, "I'm always going to help her when she feels discouraged about a class or about going to class. I try to be a good friend to her and help her.... I tell her like, look, you need to get it together, or you need to go to class. You need to do this" (Interview 2).

Jeuelle, however, appears to have made a number of good friends on the floor. She comments on the diversity of her friends and how easily she has met people: "I'm friends with a lot of people of my floor as well as a lot of people in my class. They have been easy to get along with. A lot of the times come into our room, they hang out for hours and hours of the night" (Jeuelle, Interview 2). It's striking to note Rosa's dependence on Jeuelle and Jeuelle's desire to be true to her friend. Without Jeuelle, Rosa will likely not get out of bed and attend class. Rosa certainly has minimal involvement in campus activities due to the added expenses associated with joining student organizations at RPU. Yet through Jeuelle's influence, Rosa is able to benefit from exposure to the diversity of

students that attend RPU who are, quite literally, brought into the room for late night socializing. This is how Jeuelle and Rosa make a home for themselves in college. At their most engaged, the surety of past friendships and the support of family enable students to engage fully in their new collegiate community and make new friends and new experiences.

Over the course of their first semester in college, a few factors emerge which became indicators of the quality of respondents' experience and their willingness to continue in college for an additional semester. As Harper and Hurtado (2007) illustrate, these factors include the pervasiveness of White students on campus and the resulting feelings of being different in the classroom, the residence halls, and around the campus. In addition, Harper and Hurtado (2007) identify a sentiment on campuses that stigmatizes racial awareness as a topic of development and growth for students. As a result, students tend to segregate themselves and feel ill equipped for sensitive conversations on the topic of racial identity and stereotypes. These factors influence the ability to make friends, have cross-cultural peer-to-peer relationships, have faculty and staff mentors, and fully engage with the campus community both intellectually and socially.

Choosing to educate and engage peers whose observations and actions can appear racist and hurtful indicates a degree of self-awareness that Clem is developing through his interaction with his environment. As Baxter Magolda (1999) argues, a degree of self-authorship is developing in students like Clem that is influenced by a number of contextual influences that shape both his own identity and how we define and develop his sense of self vis-à-vis his peers and the environment provided through his college. This concept of "self-authorship" reveals what Baxter Magolda (1999) define as occurring

through a student like Clem's ability to "construct knowledge in a contextual world, and ability to construct an internal identity separate from external influences, and an ability to engage in relationships without losing one's internal identity" (Baxter Magolda, 1999b, p 38).

Relationship With Self

Particularly during their time in high school, students included in the study spent a great deal of time home alone when not in school. The student life that Marvyn referred to his after school routine as being "Sleep. Twitter. Eat. Play" (Interview 1) was a norm for many students. When Rosa was home for the semester break, she noted spending 4 hours or more a day in her room watching movies on her Kindle (Final Interview). Mr. Marvel described a type of "self-isolative factors" that result from a reluctance of students to want to fully engage in their academic environment. This tendency to want to spend time alone was continued in college and upon the return home for winter break.

As I drive Braxzen home to Shorey following one of our interviews, I begin to understand why. In addition to Mr. Marvel's observation of the reluctance of the Black male intellect to emerge fully within a social environment that does not reward one wanting to "geek out," there is a also a danger present within the realities found within their home communities. Given the crime rates in the city, time spent socializing with friends presents risks. Since Jan 1, 2007, there have been over 140 homicides—most by gun violence—in Braxzen's community. A simple web search of the community in the past year indicate the shooting of a deacon at a local church and another shooting killing a local musician occurring within days of one another. Both of these crimes occurred within

blocks of where Braxzen and Grace live. When your neighborhood is ranked fourth in the city for violent crimes, there isn't much motivation to go outside and play.

What results among these students is a voluntary self-isolation that insulates them from the threats presented by their community. That, however, is not the sole cause for the isolation. As previously discussed, admission to Sevans and Knowles High School is determined by lottery. It is not necessarily the case that the other children in the neighborhood are also attending Sevans and Owles High School. As a result, there are not necessarily peers in the neighborhood who one can talk to about their homework or developing interests. There is, as Mr. Marvel aptly states, no place for the students to “geek out” (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1). As Mr. Marvel notes, the established norm by peer groups and the social community results is “our young Black males are picking up on the fact that maybe they're not considered smart, that it's not cool to be smart, that maybe people don't expect them to be smart” (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1). In other words, being openly intelligent among peers is not a relatable norm for these students. As a result, students tend to keep to themselves and utilize social media (i.e., texting and Tweeting) to talk among their true peers at Sevans and Owles High School. The high school is also very aware of the growing friendships among peers at the school. Sevans and Owles High School deliberately seeks to keep a small cohort of students together as they enter college. This effort intentionally seeks to keep a peer group in place as these students enter college that will help continue to push these students forward. As Mr. Marvel describes during his interview, the value of having someone immediately present during these student's college experience is critical and provides a pathway for trusted friends to help drive one to study, take a break, work out, or socialize with others (Interview 1).

These behaviors seem to indicate a degree of individual resilience developing among students that is designed to resist the influence of their physical environments in their home communities, maintain healthy friendships with high school classmates living throughout the city via social media, and meet the high expectations that are being set through the high school. This is, however, a difficult path for a student to navigate. The influence of peers who share similar expectations of attending college is significant and serves as a strong point of motivation for students whose families may not accept or encourage college attendance. In their study of 17 Black high school juniors and seniors in two different high schools, Griffin and Allen (2006) noted “college oriented peers, especially African Americans, were a significant source of support for students’ resiliency and desire to achieve college goals” (491, Griffin and Allen). In an environment where attending college is not a normalized behavior within either the family or the surrounding community, students are often left to struggle alone or develop peer groups that enhance their resiliency and normalize college attendance. In my discussion with Mr. Marvel, he described this behavior in the following way:

There is that sense of family pressure and [Sevans and Owles] pressure. Like I said that you were extremely intelligent and that you were supposed to make it through college. There’s a lot of pressure that people feel on that. You know, so I think some self-doubt can creep in. Those kind of self isolative factors, to me, can also be like man, I’m overwhelmed and I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to reach out. And I could probably. I could use some assistance. (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1)

Yet asking for help—or even knowing who to ask—is a challenge for these students that will be repeated in their college experience. The “self-isolating” behaviors that influence the resiliency or what Mr. Marvel terms as “grit” that is developing within these students in high school can have a negative impact as they refrain from becoming

involved by making new friends, seeking support from staff and faculty, or attending campus events during their college experience.

Entering a larger more diverse community necessitates a degree of personal identity development for all individuals living within these communities (Abes, Jones, and McEwen, 2007; Hitlin and Elder, 2007). For every student in the study, their racial identity became a salient factor in determining how they would make meaning of themselves and their environment in college. Sevans and Owles High School's enrollment is predominantly African American. None of the colleges or universities attended by these students were predominantly African American. As a result, the students in this cohort experienced, at one time or another, the uniqueness of their racial identity in a community that was significantly more diverse than the environment in which they were raised.

Conclusion

For many of the students in the cohort, college presented a series of new beginnings as well as new challenges. As discussed in Chapter II, the advent of college provides an opportunity for student to develop a sense of agency and define themselves vis-à-vis the influence of the college environment (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Hitlin and Elder, 2007). All of the students were eager to get out of the city and create a new life for themselves independent of the city and their families. College presented a path to the future that each of these students were eager to embark on; they were excited to accept the responsibility that came with that journey. Students often mentioned a commitment to getting good grades and doing well in college. Some, like Marvyn and Clem, realized they

would be the first in their families to ultimately graduate from college and were eager to graduate not just for themselves but for those who were supporting them.

These aspirations were met with the influence of peers, family, school faculty, and staff both in high school and in college, and the student's own evolving sense of individual identity and agency. Entering college or university was influenced by behaviors and relationships that determined how these students would engage in college and university. As Mr. Marvel notes, students brought with them an acquired sense from their community that being openly intelligent could be a liability in an environment where they clearly "stood out" in class as being different from the majority populations present on campus. Students demonstrated both a reluctance and a willingness to engage in new friendships as issues of socio-economic status, race, and intellectual confidence became apparent in informal and frequent interactions with other students. Finally, college and high school officials had significant impact in determining the level of confidence with which students choose to pursue challenging academic interest areas.

This was exhibited by how Jeuelle's interest in psychology and Clem's developing interest in Japanese were received by the faculty they interacted with in their colleges and universities.

The assurance provided by academic advisors, faculty, peers, teachers, and staff provided students with a willingness to pursue areas that enriched their college experience. Finally, the role of family and resources was a daily motivation and concern for students. All of the students felt compelled to be successful in college or university to acknowledge the investment that had been made in them attending college or university. That being said, the financial pressure of paying for the cost of education was unrelenting

and led students to consider transferring, working, and taking on additional debt through student loans. This is consistent with the literature on low-income students and their capacity to persist in college. As Bok (2013) notes, “surveys found that [low-income] students are six times less likely to graduate with a bachelor’s degree than high-income students” (7). The burden of the financial need that is unmet by financial aid programs provided to students -particularly those of low-income households- served to further depress student engagement and retention. As Carnevale and Strohl (2010) argue, “inadequate financing and loan burdens discourage even the most qualified working-class and low-income students from enrolling and persistence” (176). The burden of the cost of education for low-income students is not relieved by federal and merit based funds provided by the school. As a result, there are notable lower graduation rates among low-income students and their more affluent peers. While finances do not solely account for this difference in graduation rates—inappropriate K-12 education and resulting remediation in college is another influencing factor (Carnevale and Strohl (2010)— it is an influential factor uniquely inhibiting the progress of low-income students.

As Hill and Magolda (2008) argue, “many of these students arrive on campus with two temporary phobias: a fear of failing...and a fear of not fitting in” (247). It is critical that college and universities provide environments that are inclusive and allow ample opportunity for these phobias to be addressed and dissolved. The challenge to higher education, then, is clear. If schools like Sevens and Owles High School are providing daily messages that their students are “supremely intelligent” (Mr. Marvel, Interview 1) that, in turn, influences a 100% acceptance rate to college and university, how, then, does higher education carry this message on throughout the college experience of these

students? This cannot happen without institutions welcoming new students with a comparable level of confidence and support from what their high schools were able to provide. Whether literally or figuratively, colleges and universities need to open the door and usher in the experiences of college only when the recipient stands in a place of confidence and has the capacity to engage with the “other” (Tierney, 1993) that classes, friends, and community present.

VI – CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION OF IMPLICATIONS

This study was developed as a means of exploring how under-represented students perceive and experience access to college or university. By doing so, the intent was to expand upon the conversation regarding access to higher education for African American students and the role of affirmative action. The role of the affirmative action debate that has been presented in the court system (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Fischer v. University of Texas at Austin*, 2013, etc.) and state legislation passed in states like Michigan and California, literature found in identity development theory, students of color's access to higher education, and life course theory (Clausen, 1991; Henretta, 2003; Hitlin and Elder, 2007; Marshall, 2005; Mortimer, 1988 ; and Sørensen, 1986), combined to provide a framework for interpreting the experiences of these students over the course of their graduation from high school and matriculation into college or university.

The research questions guiding this study focused on the development of the identity and agency of these students as they graduated from high school and enrolled in college. They also allowed for the influence of community upon how students ultimately selected a college or university to attend and how that community influenced the experience of the student at their institution. As data was collected in response to these research questions, a number of themes emerged. Specifically, it became clear that family, community environment, educational environment, and peers provided influences that impacted how the students in this study saw themselves and how they choose to engage with the campus community as well as the home environment. For example, students in the study became increasingly aware of their race when entering colleges and universities

that had a significantly smaller African American community (between 5% and 22% of campus population) than their predominantly African American high school (97.6%). Students were also influenced by the ability of staff and faculty to develop individual relationships that motivated their college selection during high school or encouraged their interest in an academic area of study in college.

The themes resulting from these research questions and the data collected during the course of the interviews with these students inform the conclusions and discussion of this chapter. These themes are also examined within the framework of the scholarship of Gurin (2004), Harper and Hurtado (2007), Tierney (1993), Baxter Magolda (1999), and Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) in order to determine the consistency of these conclusions with the notion of critical mass, the need for diverse student engagement, burden of financial hardship, and developing agency that was discussed in Chapter II. This chapter will focus on three unique conclusions resulting from this research, identify some limitations of the research, and conclude with a discussion on implications for future research and practice.

1. Persistence and Access Are Not Synonymous: The Need to Look Beyond Admission and Toward Collective Institutional Action to Achieve Improved Persistence and Graduation Rates Among Under-Represented Students of Color

The students followed in this study came from a position of relative advantage when compared with their peers in the citywide public schools system. As discussed in Chapter IV, students graduating from Sevans and Owles High School had a significantly greater percentage of college enrollment than the average presented in the public system

with 83% of Sevans and Owles students enrolling in college compared to 60% among all public schools in the city. More striking is that 100% of the students graduating from Sevans and Owles High School were admitted to college yet only 83% of those students enrolled within two semesters of completing high school.

Students attending Sevans and Owles High School clearly had an increased likelihood of attending a four-year college given the demonstrated success of the school. A success that was specifically notable given the significantly lower college placement rates found in other public schools in the same city. For students graduating from Sevans and Owles High School, access to college was not the issue. As a relatively well-resourced charter school that has received philanthropic support, Sevans and Owles High School has inserted throughout the student experience—from the classroom, to the college advising process, to the creation of a school creed—that all students should expect to attend college. At Sevans and Owles, student expectations were set early in the high school experience to normalize attending college. This is a significant effort and reflects how significant it is to have an entire school believe in the capacity and future of every child. Yet access to college is not synonymous with persistence or graduation from college.

The students in this study came to college with the belief that they deserved to be there but without the understanding of how to succeed in college. In Sevans and Owles High School, they experienced support and guidance from teachers, administrators, and staff throughout the school. In college and university, they received support from the institution in a variety of ways ranging from absence of formal institutional involvement to a highly engaged staff and faculty developing individual relationships with students.

For example, Grace independently relied on advice from friends and the “G-Boss” for reassurance and guidance. When asked how she selected and heard about her major of international relations, she acknowledged her friend: “Because I told him I wanted to do law school and I guess I want to do it in an international scale and he was like you should totally do international business” (Interview 1). Meanwhile, Rosa saw her college advisor several times during the course of the semester and was encouraged by her advisor’s commitment to keep her focused on her academic progress after she was placed on academic probation at the end of her first semester: “She said, like in the beginning she said like ‘I’m here to help you.’ And she felt like, she says she saw something in me and she felt like she needed to help me” (Rosa, Final interview).

A college environment that lacked the cohesive support that was provided by their high school depressed the quality of their experience. Students like Rosa spent over a month going from office to office to determine how to afford books needed for classes.

Students like Grace saw their college advisor once during orientation and were then left on their own armed solely with a course catalog and the advice of friends to determine the appropriate classes to ensure a timely graduation and selection of a major. For the students in this study who came from an environment that was already what Mr. Marvel viewed as “self-isolative” with days spent alone indoors playing video games and texting, learning to live and learn in a diverse and intellectually enriched environment is challenging. When students in the study were asked which staff had the greatest influence on their college experience, it was those staff and teachers who took the time to have informal and individual interaction with students.

Informal Advising and Mentorship Are Uniquely Valuable

The value of this informal advising and mentoring provides students with a resiliency that enables them to develop a degree of resourcefulness and independence while facing the challenge of feeling intellectually and social unprepared for the institutional environment that each of these students faced. The institutions included in this study did not, necessarily, provide these mentors nor did they provide an environment that was holistically supportive of the success of under-represented students. The faculty, staff, and students who are so strongly influencing the experience of these students are largely the product of coincidences. This is what Harper (2014) refers to as a “directionless campaign” that is being exhibited by many institutions who are supportive of the need to support persistence and graduation rates for their under-represented students but lack an organized and holistic strategy for doing so. As Harper (2014) describes, institutional efforts over the past 15 years were

launched in stand-alone and fragmented ways; they had not emerged from substantive, collaborative conversation and planning among cabinet-level leaders, academic deans and faculty, student affairs professionals, coaches and athletics administrators, and Black male students and alumni (p. 126).

These “fragments” are apparent at all of the institutions included in this study. For example, LU provided Grace a “diversity” scholarship but felt that her experience in college “was really all left to me” (Interview 1) as it related to course and major selection.

As Harper (2014), Gurin (2004), Harper and Hurtado (2007), Tierney (1993), Baxter Magolda (1999) observe, institutions must provide an overarching system of support and inclusion for those populations that have historically been left in what Tierney (1993) refers to as the “margins”. As Baxter Magolda (1999) argues, “validating students as knowers supports their constructions and supports them in exercising their

structures” (211). This act of “mutually constructing meaning” (211) empowers students to be active agents in the learning experience whose individual experiences and backgrounds are validated by the educational environment whether that is through peer relationships, the classroom, or interactions with staff. Gurin (2004) further demonstrates the benefits of this diverse environment in enhancing the worldview of all students. This is a critical spirit to learning what is necessary for students of color to experience throughout their educational journey. Without feeling like valid and active contributors in their own educational journey, these students, like Braxzen, are prone to feeling like they are “the only” and sit quietly in class not actively engaged in the learning experience.

Little Awareness of Campus Resources and Support

Each of the students included in this study experienced a varying degree of support and validation that echoed what they had been provided in high school. None of these students appeared fully aware of the range of the formal support their college or university could provide in navigating college and ultimately ensuring a timely graduation. For example, when students were asked in the mid-semester interview about their knowledge of campus offices like multicultural affairs, students were not always aware of the multicultural affairs office or resources beyond those provided by the academic advisors. What was clear was the faculty, staff, and students played a tremendous role—both positively and negatively—in providing a support network that would enable these students to succeed in college.

The students followed in this study were and are journeying through with little formal support from the institution. As a result, Rosa is on academic probation with a 2.45

GPA and her scholarship and loans are in jeopardy (Rosa, Interview 3). Braxzen is wondering why he should go to class when he isn't certain he can afford the next semester (Braxzen, Interview 3). As Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) indicate, complex identity development cannot occur unless the individual is able to actively interact and negotiate with numerous identities including race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and culture. Without exposure to multiple viewpoints and identities, the complex personal identity development of these students is limited. Without the ability to question, reexamine, and define themselves within the environment that higher education provides, these individuals are both unable to grow and, perhaps more fundamentally, unable to identify themselves within their community.

Institutional Commitment to Diverse and Inclusive Engagement

As Harper (2007), Hurtado (2008) and Gurin (2005) note, without opportunities for meaningful interactions among different races, students draw conclusions that are inaccurate, racial tensions are elevated, and student of color feel isolated and dissatisfied with the college experience. As Hurtado (2008) argues, meaningful interaction cannot occur without “incorporating diversity into all aspects of learning inside and outside the classroom (p. x). Gurin also argues that it is critical that students of color attend college and university in enough of a density, or a critical mass, to combat marginality, stereotyping, and isolation. Sevans and Owles has worked to encourage students to attend schools together. As Mr. Marvel discussed, Sevans and Owles High School intentionally advises students to attend colleges and universities with other graduates of the school. This intentional placement of students provides a cohort of relatable peers who

can support students during difficult times in college. As Rosa notes, the influence and support of friends influences why she stays at RPU with her roommate and former high school classmates; “I know it’s better like knowing people. It’s better being at a school with people that you know” (Interview 3).

The significance of institutional commitment to support inclusive and welcoming learning environments for members of the campus community has been emphasized through the leadership of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Through the LEAP initiative, AAC&U has established that institutions of higher education should focus on principles of liberal education that enable students to explore a diverse range of perspectives and identities. This commitment to the learning environment and capacity of institutions of higher education is unusual and may contradict norms to which students are accustomed. For example, students raised in largely homogenous learning environments might resist critically examining their “own social identities and privileges they seek (knowingly or not) to maintain their former selves in new environments, including college, and resist any perceived changes” (Jones, 2008, p. 72.). Establishing learning environments that invite tension and exploration of different identities and perspectives changes the culture of learning found within higher education. This is not, as Chang (2007) suggests, comfortable or easy. Rather, institutions should expect “to experience aggravated tensions between competing interests and confront critically long held assumptions, values, ideals, expectations, and practices” (Chang, 2007, p. 31). This is the reality of liberal education and a necessary reality and responsibility for institutions to face in order to educate, empower, and retain a diverse student body.

2. Individuals Within the College Environment Strongly Influence the College Experience and the Likelihood of Retention or Attrition

In the midst of their college experience, each student was seeking to define themselves and their success in college and university. As discussed in Chapters IV and V, peers, faculty, staff, and the collegiate environment were all influencing factors that contributed to the identity development of the students and, ultimately, their sense of belonging in the campus community. Interpreting these numerous factors and determining a method for success is critical for the retention and graduation of these students from college. This emphasizes the work of a number of scholars including Tierney (1993), Hurtado (2008), and Harper and Antonio (2008) who insist upon the need for the formal and informal learning environments to be one that is widely inclusive of the diversity of backgrounds that comprise the campus community. In doing so, Tierney (1993) argues higher education will become “united in a community and culture through a mutual desire to understand one another’s differences” (77). From that understanding, colleges and universities are strongest when the curiosity demonstrated by their community seeks to welcome and grow from the difference that is reflected in their diversity.

The individual’s quest for self-authorship is largely the product of their capacity to successfully juggle what one colleague in the professional group, Rick, defined as the “triple life” that these students are living in college. Rick is an independent higher education consultant who has worked with more than 500 institutions and organizations in the United States and Canada over nearly 25 years of practice. During one of our interviews, he observed:

There is a lot of this sort of making it up behavior to appear to be cool, appear to be interesting, and then coming to college and discovering that that was no longer either valued or necessary was quite an adjustment for them and at the same time, several students said to me that they still felt that within their own specific subgroups, which were sometimes racial, ethnic, sometime social economics, and sometime city of origin, that back in their own groups they still had to do some of this pretending whereas with the larger student population, it was more acceptable, obviously for them to be engaged. [They] described living this kind of double life which one of them...and he said it's not a double life, it's a triple life because I have to say one thing to my parents, something else to my friends and something else to the other students in the university. I have to appear to be three different things at the same time. (Cohort 2, Interview 1)

Navigating this triple life becomes the responsibility of the individual students and how they make meaning of themselves and their environment. When successful, students are able to see themselves as active, contributing members of multiple communities. Clem, for example, was able to engage actively and ultimately make friendships with other African American students, students of other races who had never encountered an African American before, and a faculty member who nurtured his developing love of Japanese culture despite his lack of exposure to the language prior to college. When unsuccessful, students tend to retreat to one facet of the triple life. For Braxzen, this meant having minimal involvement and friends in college and spending most of his time at home with his family or commuting to school. For Rosa, this meant spending nearly all of her time in college with her friend from high school and not developing many friendships in class or exploring activities on campus.

Influence of Faculty and Staff

The positive influence of faculty and staff provided students with a sense of intellectual and personal confidence that encourages persistence in college (Goff Crews,

2014; Harper, 2014; Harper and Hurtado, 2007; Harris and Bensimon, 2007; Steele, 1999; and Tierney, 1993). Despite being placed on academic probation, Rosa's frequent meetings with her academic advisor provided her with the tools to manage her time better and ask for help (Interview 2 and 3). Her academic advisor has become an ally and mentor who "saw something in me" and makes her feel "special" (Interview 3).

This classroom presents a critical dynamic to either validate or suppress diverse viewpoints and identities. This is particularly significant when discussing the perspectives offered by students of color at predominantly White institutions such as those attended by the students in this cohort. Students in this study were experiencing an environment dramatically different from their predominantly African American high school and community. Braxzen's reaction to being the only African American student in the classroom is not unique. Further, as Goff-Crews (2014) indicates, faculty are making incorrect assumptions about the academic preparation of their students. As demonstrated both by Goff-Crews (2014) and Braxzen's experience of DeYa's faculty, there is a significant impact when faculty choose to accept responsibility for the academic success of their students. This means inviting and encouraging students to attend office hours, noticing who is and is not participating in class, and leading the classroom with a focus on inclusivity and being intellectually adventurous in the classroom.

Influence of Family and Friends

The support of family and friends create an intergenerational anchor that built a bridge for students between their homes and the opportunities that college and the future

present. Clem could not have gotten to Linber College without the luggage set his mother bought him in eighth grade sitting in the hallway throughout his high school years.

Rosa's return to college for the second semester is largely based on the support of her best friend from home who is also her roommate in college. Rosa is also aware of "a number of other people" who have not fared as well as she has after the first semester and have not been invited back to campus for the second semester including "a girl on my floor, she had to leave" (Final Interview). Grace, who was once apprehensive about being openly smart, smiles during our second interview, and says,

I don't know, it's kind of weird. Just being here, I'm on my own but not really. Like I have a lot of people around me, like, I made of lot of new friends here. People like to be surrounded by positive individuals, just like I like being around that, and so it's refreshing. (Grace, Interview 2)

Established in 2006, Sevans and Owles is still young as a high school and data is still being gathered regarding the long-term college retention and graduation rate of their students. What is clear is that Mr. Marvel is very familiar with both the difficulty students will face in college and the need for the support of the home environment within the school and family. All students in this study acknowledged the important influence that staff had upon their decision to attend college. The home environment was both supportive and a constant reminder of the financial pressure the family was experiencing to send this child away to college. Students felt a strong desire to contribute financially and stay connected with their families. This was demonstrated by Grace's dilemma of needing to return home and care for her family or the financial burden Braxzen feels by the cost his college education causes his family, and is not unique to them. The obligation these students feel towards their families and off-setting the disruption their college attendance is causing is acute and influenced how they were able to engage on campus.

3. The Concern Over Financing College Was a Constant Pressure in the Lives of Students and Impacted How Students in the Study Were Able to Engage on Campus

The cost of a college education is clearly an intimidating factor for many students attending college in the United States. In many cases, the cost of a year's tuition and fees in a 4-year public (\$21,000) or private college (\$41,420) is often an incomprehensible expense when compared with what the Social Security Administration reports as the 2012 national average wage of \$44,321.67. As Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, Moeller, and Roddie (2008) identify in their research, simply completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form for federal financial aid presents a disadvantage to college enrollment with students who completed the FAFSA by May being "50% more likely to enroll than students who had not completed the FAFSA" (4). As a result, the financial hardship of attending college quickly saturates the family environment and presents an added burden on students' ability to enroll in college who has not received adequate financial support for the cost of education.

Roderick's observations are reminiscent of the perspective discussed in Chapter 2 that is held by Bok (2013) and Carnevale and Rose (2004). The cost of a college education and the proficiency required to complete forms like the FAFSA are paralyzing to low-income families and reduce the likelihood of those children enrolling in selective colleges. As a result, Bok (2013) demonstrates that "children of wealthy families are much more likely to go to college and likelier still to graduate than children from poor families" (133). More specifically, Bok (2013) demonstrated that of the "32,416 [low-

income] students who had scored in the top 10% of all taking the SAT/ACT, only 5,445 applied to a selective school and 4,775 enrolled” (133). The decreased access low-income students experience to some on the nation’s most prestigious universities is, in part, motivated by families that are risk averse and fear the high tuition of selective public and private universities. Gladieux (2004) notes that “for low-income families, the average annual bill for attending a public four-year institution represented nearly 60 percent of income in 2001-2002, up from 42 percent in 1971-1972” (26). For low-income families uninformed in financial aid practices, this tuition amount is unimaginable and they, in turn, guide their children to attend institutions with lower tuitions such as community colleges. Among low-income families, Carnevale and Rose (2004) note an undermatching of students with less selective institutions that indicate “diminished education expectations are especially prevalent in families of low-income status.” (129).

The role of the family and the college environment in adding to the pressure experienced by students is significant. As Braxzen describes in Chapter IV, the enormity of the pressure of paying for college causes him to question if he will be able to continue. Braxzen describes thinking about money often and wondering how to reconcile the difference between a tuition that seems “high in the sky” and a family that is “scraping ends together to hold the foundation” (Interview 2). On another campus, Rosa describes spending a month to acquire highly expensive textbooks and the reality of how far behind she is in course work:

We have homework online and you have to have the book with the access code. You have to buy that together, and I didn’t have the access code to do the homework. So I couldn’t do the homework (Interview 2).

Rosa and her friend, Jeuelle, both talk at length about the expense of extra curricular activities and events on campus while looking longingly at the designer clothes in the closets of their friends in the residence hall:

I haven't gotten any money until I actually went home and the only money my mother could give me was \$25. So I try not to go places, go to things that I would like to go to, because I have to pay for them. (Rosa, Interview 2)

Finally, Rosa's current position on academic probation is endangering her ability to finance college through merit based aid that requires a minimum GPA. Both of Rosa's parents are unemployed and Rosa is not fully aware of campus resources that could offer her help in financing her education.

The burden of financing college is stressful for both families and students. As Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, Moeller, and Roddie (2008) note, simply completing and submitting the FAFSA can serve as the primary obstacle for applying and enrolling in college. This obstacle is not eliminated when scholarships and admission letters come pouring in. Rather, as the students in the study revealed, the severity of the transition to college and adjusting to a new environment can add concern as grades, fees, and feelings of inequity mount during the first semester of college. The thought of finances was consistently on the minds of students in this study. It caused worry and fear and pushed some students, like Braxzen and Rosa, further out of campus life and into part time jobs and employment.

Study Limitations

One of the greatest limitations of the study was the sample size and time period of the study. This study included a small number of students and ended at the close of the

first semester of college. Increasing the sample size and the length of the study to capture the remainder of the college experience would have corrected this.

As Harper (2014) notes, a noted weakness in the research on African American students and other under-represented students is the qualitative studies over the past 15 years “tend not to offer sufficient cross-sectional insights to ignite institutional change and policy formation” (p. 130). In some form, this study shares this problem by not having the capacity within the design to support one researcher conducting a long term study over a greater period of time that would enable more in depth analysis and awareness of developing trends.

Another limitation of the study was the lack of college faculty and administrators.

While a second cohort was formed that included high school administrators, a provost, senior administrators and a national consultant in higher education, that cohort did not include administrators from any of the colleges or universities attended by the students. It would have further benefited the study to speak with campus administrators and faculty while visiting the college and university campuses that the students attended.

As a study composed of several interviews with subjects over a longer period of time, it was a challenge to schedule the interview at certain points during the study. As a result, some interviews were compressed and combined with some subjects.

Implications for Future Practice

In many ways, the struggle I experienced with the small sample size in the student group for this study is emblematic of the substantial under-representation of African American students in selective four-year institutions. Every student included in this study

described experiences where they felt themselves to be one of a few students of color on their college campuses. This is a telling reality decades after the passage of affirmative action policies designed to provide increased access to higher education for under-represented populations. The *Gratz* ruling of 2003 indicates a more recent understanding of both the value of diversity in higher education for all individuals and the still small numbers of students of color on our college campuses. As Tierney (1993) and Baxter Magolda (1999) argue there is still a feeling of “other” on campus. This feeling among under-represented students of color establishes what Tierney (1993) refers to as “essentializ[ing] an individual” as if they were to speak for all individuals with their background. This remains true on our campuses today and in the stories shared by students like Clem and Braxzen who were keenly aware of their difference on campus and the lack of others who shared their racial identity.

Access remains, then, too narrow for students of color. Under-represented students of color are not present in the “critical masses” that Gurin argues so intently for in her scholarship defending affirmative action programs like the ones developed and challenged at the University of Michigan. Without the critical mass that Gurin describes, students are left to feel alone and marginalized as both Tierney (1993) and Steele (1999, 2010) argue. When this marginalization occurs and sense of identity of “other” is affirmed with students such as those followed in this study, a trend of self-isolating behaviors emerges that challenges their ability to fully engage in their campus community. This is particularly expressed by students like Rosa and Braxzen who choose to stay in their rooms, not speak with others in class, and have minimal involvement on campus. These experiences necessitate continued research in the troublesome trend of

continued low college enrollment, persistence, and graduation among students of color *despite* the institution of affirmative action programs and research that demonstrates the educational benefit of diverse learning environments that include significant densities of students with diverse backgrounds. Without significant representation in the student body, feelings of marginalization and self-isolative behaviors emerge, and the likelihood of college completion among under-represented students of color is reduced.

This study was intentionally designed as an exploratory study. More specifically, the case study methodology executed in this study revealed the journey of a few. The perspective of the professional group also included in this study suggests a connection between the experience of the student group –admittedly small in size – and the larger phenomenon of how access to higher education is perceived by African American students of color in college and universities across the country.

Harper's (2014) recent observations about the "directionless" focus of higher education upon supporting diversity on college and universities campuses is an important call to practitioners in higher education. It reveals that the struggles of my own research are not isolated. Past and future research dedicated to discovering the journey for under-represented students of color enrolled in colleges and universities across the country must be connected if we are able to speak the most accurately to this trend. What is also needed in future research is, to paraphrase from Skrentny's (1996) book, *The Ironies of Affirmative Action* title, is a deeper exploration of the ironies of affirmative action. Given the validity of the research produced by Gurin and others that was successfully utilized to defend the value of affirmative action, there are still not enough African American students of color accessing and succeeding in four-year colleges and universities. The

depth of this continued irony and whatever limitations have been placed upon students in accessing higher education must be critically examined. This examination must not simply include the senior year of high school as this study did but look deeply and critically at the messages conveyed by the K-12 system, family, and community.

This study demonstrated that colleges and universities of large and small sizes are capable of providing that support. For example, DeYa University is a large campus with over 20,000 students. Yet Braxzen was still able to receive support from multiple offices on campus throughout his college selection process and as a student at DeYa. The very individualized attention that Clem received at a small liberal arts college was also provided by the faculty at DeYa as well as by individuals like the academic advisor at RPU that worked with Rosa. As Duster (1993) and Harper (2014) suggest, a holistic approach from senior leaders in higher education that both supports students of color on college and university campuses and advances diversity as a goal for the entire institution is an important opportunity for higher education.

In order to support an institutional initiative that provides holistic and comprehensive support of diversity on campus, administrators from across the campus should come together to develop a strategy for both increasing student of color rates of graduation and institutionalizing diversity as a campus value. To think strategically and comprehensively across the University, representation from academic affairs, students affairs, campus police, and faculty would need to develop a collective strategy for diversity and inclusion that would provide a “roadmap” for staff and faculty to develop programs, policies, and advisement models for students. Finally, and most importantly,

this work needs to be endorsed and publicly supported by members of the senior administration of the institution.

Opportunities for Future Research

Bok (2013) presents an interesting analysis of the skills students acquire during their undergraduate experience. He indicates that when you “ask seniors to name the college experience that contributed most to their personal growth and they will usually mention something that took place outside of class” (177). If the most meaningful experiences for students are occurring outside of the classroom, this provides an interesting opportunity to examine extra-curricular activities as a potential vehicle for students from different backgrounds to explore diversity in a different context. It would be meaningful to explore how extra-curricular activities influence inter-cultural opportunities for students to explore and understand individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives. For example, if Braxzen is unwilling to raise his hand in class, would he be more willing to openly participate on the debate team? How does the classroom environment contribute to the feeling of being “the only” to someone who is a racial minority on campus? Are extra-curricular activities an opportunity for students of color to engage with majority students and not feel like “the only”? What is the meaning of liberal education outside of the classroom and does that impact some identities differently?

Second, gender became an interesting trend that emerged in this work. Much of the literature on African American students has focused on the male population. Yet, as Harper (2014) notes, Black women are more successful academically and socially as undergraduates. During the course of this study, while not uniformly true, it was the

African American women like Grace and Jeuelle who appeared the most focused in their work and sought out others to engage with during their experience on campus. It would be meaningful to look at the question of access and persistence in college and university through the lens of African American women and compare the findings with the current research on African American men.

Finally, this study was limited in the sample size and in the duration of the study. There is much more to be gained by looking at a larger sample size over a greater period of time. The experience of students throughout college or university, and how this ultimately informs whether these students graduate, is an important extension of this work that would benefit the field.

Conclusion

Several years after the seminal affirmative action rulings in the *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) rulings the question remains as to whether affirmative action is a relic of the past and no longer necessary to ensure diversity and access throughout higher education. Bok (2013) explores this topic and suggests that “arguments about affirmative action cannot be proved or disproved by logic alone” (p. 132). What is clear is that through affirmative action programs at selective schools a “larger cohort of Black and Hispanic students who began graduating from major universities thirty five years ago have helped bring about appreciable increases” (Bok, 2013, p. 131) in the number of minorities represented in leadership roles throughout the employment sector. Whether these programs are still needed in providing opportunities for under-represented students to access higher education remains a highly sensitive and

relevant question for today. This study supports the need for students to be exposed to diverse views and experiences as well as the need for those under-represented students to encounter an institutional environment that is committed to their own success and graduation.

One of the strongest current arguments for affirmative action that was recognized by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor is the need for majority students to experience diverse environments (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2013). This argument has been interpreted by colleges and universities to mean that bringing minority students to campus through affirmative action based admission programs alone creates a diverse living and learning environment. Yet it is unclear how institutions have extended that commitment beyond admission into college. This study supports the argument advanced in the literature that there is a need for institutions to advance a pervasive commitment to diversity among all students; “pervasiveness indicates that change is felt across the institution in the assumptions and daily work of the faculty, staff, and administrators” (Harper and Hurtado, 2007, p. 20).

As Hill and Magolda (2008) argue, in order to “enact multicultural democratic ideals, subcultures must cross borders...to negotiate realms of meaning, social relations, knowledge, and values through substantive dialogue with other subcultures” (p. 257). Inter-racial engagement is beneficial for all students when colleges and universities commit to establish learning environments inside and outside of the classroom that truly embrace global identities and perspective (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Chiang, 2007; Gurin 2004; Helms, 1992; 1995; Hill and Magolda, 2008; Milem and Umbach, 2008; and Tierney, 1993). These global identities and perspectives are consistent with the American

Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) LEAP initiative for liberal education that has been embraced by a number of colleges and universities in 10 different states. As the LEAP initiative suggests, the responsibility for creating and maintaining these environments cannot lie solely in Clem's ability when asked by a peer if he is in a gang to choose to not respond in anger or Grace's dependence on the "G-Boss" to support her when she is feeling challenged academically.

Few of the students in this study utilized areas like campus cultural centers. Their struggles were found in the classroom, the residence halls, and in student organizations. In none of these places was an institutional commitment to diversity referenced during their interviews. As Harper (2007) notes, institutions must create meaningful places for cross-cultural engagement. Those points of engagement cannot be relegated to an office of multicultural affairs nor can it be assumed that under-represented students of color utilize these offices. Rather, the ability to facilitate and encourage difficult dialogues that speak to racial identity and cultural diversity need to be pervasive throughout the classroom, the residence hall, and beyond.

In 1993, one of Duster's students noted, "I feel like I have affirmative action stamped on my forehead". In 2013, the African American students in the sample of colleges and universities discussed in this study still walk into classrooms and dorm rooms feeling like they carry a label on their head. This label precedes their identity as individuals and provides added responsibilities for their college experience. Twenty years later, students like Grace encounter friends whose introductions provide lengthy credentialing when talking with students about their SAT or ACT score and academic strengths: "It's like the small conversations you can have with people, you know a lot

about them very quickly. It's like people are selling themselves to you in like 5 minutes" (Grace, Interview 3). Clem is left to challenge stereotypes about himself without institutional support. Braxzen looks around a classroom and realizes he is the only Black student in the room. This is the environment provided by our colleges and universities as the 25 years cited by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in the *Grutter* ruling continue to wear away.

College and universities must also provide an academic environment that enables students of color to become more active in the classroom and more adventurous in their own intellectual development without feeling as though they are serving as a spokesperson for their race. Providing a nurturing and inclusive environment is not solely a luxury for smaller colleges but speaks to the rights that Title VI is intended to protect. Despite its large size and limited resources, Braxzen was able to experience faculty with a deep commitment to his academic success at DeYa University. The support of faculty in particular is critical to showing students of color that success in the classroom is an expectation that students and faculty will seek together. In addition, utilizing diversity education models (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Chiang, 2007; Helms, 2008; Magolda, 1999; Quaye and Magolda, 2007; and Reason and Evans, 2007) to support peer to peer interaction ensures that students are intentionally experiencing cross-cultural environments.

Finally, college is not cheap. Reducing the stress of affording college is essential particularly for low income, first generation families who are likely to consider community colleges as a more affordable option. If the student is admissible, then renewable funding is essential to ensure graduation. Families need to be continually advised on financial resources and the affordability of a quality education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Subject Interview 1: Summer

Subject interview: Summer Introduction:

- Thank you for coming.
- As you know, I'm conducting a study to learn from you and other students about their experiences as they transition to college. Today will be the first of four interviews that we will have over the next several months.
 - It's easier for me to pay attention to you if I do not have to take too many notes. Do you mind if I record this conversation? Only myself and others working with my on the study will have access to this information.

_____ YES _____NO

Research Question: How do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college?

From 1-10 with 1 being the least interested and 10 being the most interested, what are you looking forward to the most about college?

Clubs Sports

Community service Housing

Experimenting with drugs and alcohol Research

Working with faculty

Arts (theatre, music, art, dance) The community outside of school Living on my

own

Making new friends Partying

Meeting people who are different than myself

Research Question: How does one's sense of agency/identity influence how one chooses a college and how they engage with their college community?

Have you attended Orientation? Have you visited campus?

If so, what did you do during your time on campus?

What materials have you received in the mail about your college?

In our last interview, you said the following things were important factors [review response from interview 1] in choosing to attend_____. Is that still the case?

Do you feel more confident, less confident, or the same in your choice of college?

What factors have influenced your level of confidence in going to_____?

Research Question: How does that sense of agency/identity impact how students believe themselves to be perceived within their community?

How have you spent your summer before college?

What percentage of your friends are going to college who you attended school with last year?

What percentage of your friends did not complete high school who you went to school with last year?

How often do you speak with your friends about college? (all the time, sometime, rarely, never)

—your family?

Research Question: What influence do education officials and community based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support students' academic and social transition to college?

Have you been in contact with anyone from the school? Did they reach out to you or did you speak with them?

Who were they? What did they do on the campus?

Have other classmates reached out to you from the school? Did you know them already? What questions have you had? Have you reached out to the school?

Review contact people and their contact information.

It would help my research if I could see your college application to ____. Would you give me your consent to see a copy of your application? Again, while I may use some of the information I learn from your college application, your name and identity will be kept confidential.

Appendix B

Subject Interview 2: Midterm

Subject interview 2: Midterm Introduction:

- Thank you for coming.
- As you know, I'm conducting a study to learn from you and other students about their experiences as they transition to college. Today will be the first of four interviews that we will have over the next several months.
 - It's easier for me to pay attention to you if I do not have to take too many notes. Do you mind if I record this conversation? Only myself and others working with my on the study will have access to this information.

_____ YES _____NO

Research Question: How do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college?

When we last spoke, you said you were interested in getting involved in____? How did that go?

Can you give me a sense of how many hours you spend doing the following things? Eating in the dining halls

Hanging out in housing common areas Hanging out alone

Studying

Meeting with faculty

Going off campus with friends Sleeping

Visiting non-campus friends or family

Other:

Research Question: How does one's sense of agency/identity influence how one chooses a college and how they engage with their college community?

Self-esteem [from Massey, et al., 2003]: This next question is about how you feel about yourself. Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the following statements [strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree]

- I feel that I am a person of worth, equal to others.
- I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
- All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
- I am able to do things as well as most people. ➤➤ I feel that I do not have much to be proud of. ➤➤ I take a positive attitude toward myself.
- On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
- I wish I could have more respect for myself.
- I feel useless at times.
- At times, I think I'm no good at all.

Self-efficacy [from Massey, et al., 2003] Thinking about your life at the moment, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements [strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, strongly disagree]

- I don't have control over the direction my life is taking.
- In life, good luck is more important than hard work for success. ➤➤ Every time I try to get ahead something or somebody stops me. ➤➤ When I make plans, I am almost certain I can make them work. ➤➤ I feel left out of things going on around me.
- If I work hard, I can do well.

What classes are you taking?

What do you like about your classes?

What is the most challenging part of your classes?

Can you take a guess and share with me what grades think you will be getting in your classes?

Research Question: How does that sense of agency/identity impact how students believe themselves to be perceived within their community?

Would you view your transition to college as being hard, a little hard, kind of easy, easy? Have often have you been in contact with your family?

How many new friends have you met since starting college? Of your new friends, can you give me a sense of:

-What percentage are White?

-What percentage are African American?

-What percentage are Asian?

-What percentage are Hispanic/Latino?

-What percentage are male?

-What percentage are female?

-What percentage have enough money to buy whatever they want?

[self-consciousness questions from Massey, et al., 2003] On a scale of 1 to 10, how self-conscious are you about how other African American students perceive you, with 0 meaning you were not self-conscious at all and 10 meaning that you are extremely self-conscious? Feel free to use any number between 0 and 10.

How self-conscious are you about the way Hispanic or Latino students perceive you, with 0 meaning you were not self-conscious at all and 10 meaning that you are extremely self-conscious? Feel free to use any number between 0 and 10.

How self-conscious were you about the way Asian students perceive you? How about the way that White students perceive you?

Finally, how self-conscious are you about the way your teachers perceive you?

Research Question: What influence do education officials and community-based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support student's academic and social transition to college?

On a scale of 1 to 10, with one being the least helpful and 10 being the most helpful, how helpful have these areas of the campus been in supporting you during the course of your first semester?

Housing Academic advisor

Student affairs staff Faculty

Multicultural affairs office College friends

Family back home

Staff or faculty from my old school

Community groups at home? Or at college? Which ones? Among those, can you rate their helpfulness from 1 to 10?

Coach

Anything that I missed?

Review contact people and contact information.

It would be helpful if I could have access to your transcript for my research. Would you mind giving me permission to see your transcript at the end of the semester? As you know, I will make every effort to protect your identity if I were to use this information in my research.

Appendix C

Subject Interview 3: Return Home

Subject interview 3: Return Home Introduction:

- Thank you for coming.
- As you know, I'm conducting a study to learn from you and other students about their experiences as they transition to college. Today will be the second of four interviews that we will have over the next several months.
 - It's easier for me to pay attention to you if I do not have to take too many notes. Do you mind if I record this conversation? Only myself and others working with my on the study will have access to this information.

_____ YES _____ NO

Research Question: How do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college?

Congratulations! You finished your first semester of college. When we spoke last Spring, you were the most interested in__ and the least interested in_____. Do you feel the same way today? What has changed?

I'd like to learn a bit more about your experience in college. You may remember we had a similar conversation about this earlier about your feelings on high school. [From Massey, et al., 2003] Thinking back to your time in college this year, do you think your friends and acquaintances viewed the following behaviors as very uncool, neither cool nor uncool, somewhat cool or very cool, where "cool" refers to behavior that is respected or admired by students?

- Studying hard outside of class?
- Asking challenging questions in class?
- Volunteering information in class?
- Answering teacher's questions in class?
- Solving problems using new and original ideas?

- Helping other students with their homework?

➤➤ Getting good grades in difficult subjects? How was this different than when you were in high school?

Research Question: How does your sense of agency/identity influence how you choose a college and how you engage with your college community?

What was the most important thing you think you accomplished in your first semester? Why?

Did you ever feel uncomfortable or intimidated when you were at school? What happened?

Where were you able to resolve it? Who was able to help you?

What advice would you give about going to college if someone you loved asked you?

Research Question: How does that sense of agency/identity impact how students believe themselves to be perceived within their community?

How long have you been back home? How does it feel to be back home? What is different?

What is the same?

Can you give me a sense how you are spending your time during break in terms of hours a day?

With high school friends

With family

On the internet/texting friends from college

Playing video games or watching television

Reading

Working

Looking at schools to transfer to

Self-esteem [from Massey, et al., 2003]: This next question is about how you feel about yourself. Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the following statements [strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree]

- I feel that I am a person of worth, equal to others
- I feel that I have a number of good qualities
- All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure
- I am able to do things as well as most people
- I feel that I do not have much to be proud of
- I take a positive attitude toward myself
- On the whole, I am satisfied with myself
- I wish I could have more respect for myself
- I feel useless at times
- At times, I think I'm no good at all

Self-efficacy [from Massey, et al., 2003] Thinking about your life at the moment, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements [strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, strongly disagree]

- I don't have control over the direction my life is taking
- In life, good luck is more important than hard work for success.
- Every time I try to get ahead something or somebody stops me.
- When I make plans, I am almost certain I can make them work.
- I feel left out of things going on around me.
- If I work hard, I can do well.

Research Question: What influence do education officials and community based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support students' academic and social transition to college?

When you weren't in class, where did you hang out the most on campus? Why?

Where did you feel at home on campus?

Who were the people who had the most influence on you this first semester?

Appendix D

Professional Group, Interview 1 Professional Group: First interview

Thank you for being a part of this group. As you know, I am conducting a research project that is exploring how under-represented students perceive and experience access to higher education. This study is occurring over the course of 6 months and involved individual students as well as this group. My goal for this group is to understand the landscape that each of you work within in supporting the success of these students and receive your feedback on some trends that I am noticing in the data as I collect it. We will meet two times over the course of these 6 months: now, in November, and at the end of the calendar year. The composition of our group may change over time and grow to include some college administrators and faculty as well. For the purposes of ensuring accuracy of information, I will be recording our conversation. These records will be securely stored and every effort will be made to protect confidentiality. Okay? Any questions? Okay, let's get started.

Research Question: How does students' sense of agency/identity influence how they choose a college and how they engage with their college community?

The students I'm focusing on are largely African Americans students who are college bound but come from urban environments. What, do you find, over the course of your career, are the primary barriers that prevent students from graduating college?

Research Question: What influence do education officials and community based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support student's academic and social transition to college?

What programs are effective in meeting these challenges? What is ineffective at meeting these challenges?

What are the primary factors that influence a student in choosing a college?

Research Question: How do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college?

Is there a difference between how these students perceive college and how they experience college?

What are some of the differences?

In your professional roles, what are your primary concerns for students at this point?

Research Question: How does that sense of agency/identity impact how students believe themselves to be perceived within their community?

I'd like to discuss a number of areas that are part of the regular interactions of these students to determine how influential you believe them to be in determining these students sense of self-confidence particularly as that confidence relates to choosing to go to college:

Family Friends Teachers

Community organizations

Leave room to discuss or raise questions arising from any parts of the data collection.

Appendix E

Professional Group, Interview 2

Final group interview December/January 2012–13

Research Question: How does that sense of agency/identity impact how students believe themselves to be perceived within their community?

So now our students are going home for the first period of time since school started. What do you find to be the role of the family now that students are back from their first semester?

What is the effect of the community? Childhood friends?

School? Mentors?

Is this a change in roles from when the student initially left? What has changed?

Research Question: How do under-represented students of color entering college from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive and experience college?

On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being most closely connected to home and family and 10 being the most closely connected to the college community, where do you find the student feels the most comfortable?

Research Question: How does one's sense of agency/identity influence how one chooses a college and how they engage with their college community?

I want to go back to the conversation on expectations that we had a while back. Now that student's have completed their first academic term, what do you think their expectations are of college and the college experience?

Research Question: What influence do education officials and community based organizations have in providing helpful and adequate resources to support student's academic and social transition to college?

What are your primary concerns for students at this stage?

How do you address those concerns through your line of work?

Leave room to discuss or raise questions arising from any parts of the data collection.