

**College-Ready Urban Black, Hispanic, or Biracial Students:  
Why are they not applying to College?**

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## **College-Ready Urban Black, Hispanic, or Biracial Students:**

### **Why are they not applying to College?**

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was to explore obstacles to college enrollment for college-ready, first generation Black, Hispanic, or Biracial senior high school students who wish to attend college but have not applied. Phase I of the study collected quantitative data using questions designed to measure: participants' understanding of college processes, knowledge of financial aid, and in and out of school support systems accessed from seniors from two high schools in New England. Phase II utilized focus groups to provide deeper understanding for a holistic profile of participants' perspectives on obstacles to higher education, how information about college is obtained, and levels of counselor engagement for students and parents in college processes. The researchers attended to participants' reported ethnic variations across Black, Hispanic, or Biracial diasporas, so as not to assume generalization of cultural perspectives.

#### **Research Questions**

Research questions explored how parental actions, counselors, and internal and external environments influenced students' transitions to higher education. The three research questions were:

1. Why do Black, Hispanic, or Biracial urban high school seniors, with demonstrated academic success and desire to pursue higher education, not apply for enrollment in higher education?
2. How do these students referenced in RQ 1, perceive high school and community environmental factors as (positively or negatively) influencing their ability to successfully enroll in higher education?
3. What aspects of knowledge of college admissions, financial aid, and other processes are lacking that hinder the higher education pursuits of students referenced in RQ 1?

Further study of the problems can lead to more constructive ways of assisting students and their families in pursuit of gaining access to higher education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Research was conducted through the lens of social capital acquired through resources internal and external to school environments. According to Putnam and Goss (2002), Judson Hanifan coined the phrase “social capital” to explain how to mitigate conditions of extreme poverty through intangible substances in the lives of impoverished people. Hanifan reasoned that one way to help address social issues of impoverished communities was to “strengthen the network of solidarity among citizens” (Putnam & Goss, 2002, p. 4), by reversing the effects of isolation of families and communities that were at the core of the strength of poor community’s “democracy and social development” (p. 4). Hanifan reasoned that the accumulation of social capital through “fellowship, sympathy, and social discourse among families and individuals” (p. 4) could help to improve living conditions through cooperative efforts and for the benefit of all community members.

For the purposes of this study, social capital relates to social networks that facilitate access to and the exchange of information regarding resources (Farmer-Hinton &

Holland, 2008), and assets or resources embedded in social relationships which can be used to improve one's life outcomes (Portes, 1998). Burleson, Hallett, and Park (2008) offered that low-income students did not have the social capital acquired through community, family, and school resources that middle class students acquire through social networks, and were therefore less likely to develop the social, cultural, and academic skill sets necessary to ensure successful completion of their academic careers.

## **Background**

Many believed that financial constraints were the most crucial hurdle to college for ethnic students; however, Forster (2006) reported that college readiness kept students from enrolling in college – not finances. Long (2007) offered that the end of affirmative action programs negatively influenced numbers of ethnic students in higher education pursuits. Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) credited personal relationships between students and counselors in providing adequate levels of support to ethnic students in college planning, organizing college tours, and providing student advocacy for first generation students characterized as at risk. Holcomb-McCoy (2010) postulated that students with high levels of parental involvement in their education and college aspirations had a greater likelihood of attending college than students whose parents had little or no counselor/parent involvement. Venegas and Tierney (2005) advocated for peer learning as a form of social capital could benefit students who hold similar aspirations for their futures

Venegas and Hallett (2008) contended that low-income families of first-generation college bound students need personal attention in understanding the complexities of financial aid and college application processes, commonly referred to as college knowledge. Perna (2002), Bergin, Cook, and Bergin (2007) explored the effectiveness of outreach programs/college readiness programs which are designed to assist students and families with the acquisition of knowledge needed to successfully negotiate college enrollment and financial aid processes.

### **Lack of Readiness**

Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009) offered that many students from urban high schools do not achieve academic success that will enable them to become successful in college, and that policies should be instituted that focus on “content knowledge and basic skills, core academic skills, non-cognitive behavioral, and college knowledge which is the ability to search for and apply to college” (p.185). According to Forster (2006), the Department of Education’s 1998 data revealed that only 34% of students who graduated from American high schools were college ready. Forster (2006) cautioned that ethnic groups such as Blacks and Hispanics had lower college readiness rates, so the perception was that for groups in lower income levels finances were the major hurdle when that was not necessarily the case.

### **Affirmative Action**

Long (2007), suggested that the discontinuation of affirmative action programs had a negative impact on the numbers of qualified ethnic students accessing higher education due to negative perceptions about campus climates, welcoming environment,

and quotas. Long (2007) concluded that despite alternative strategies employed by state institutions in California, Texas, Florida, and Washington (states that eliminated affirmative action programs), none were able to maintain the enrollment rates that affirmative action offered; although some states experienced gains due to an increase in diversity in some high school populations. Moore's (2005) perspective on affirmative action emphasized the difference between ethnicity and preference, positing that most institutions do not look at admissions through the lens of eligibility without examining race as a factor when affirmative action is discussed.

### **Counselors**

Counselors were generally viewed as the primary in-school source of help with accessing college information and the primary source of social capital. Fiscal constraints, practices, and policies of both school districts and higher education commissions determined levels of counseling services in public schools where college was not the norm and where students with the greatest needs for college assistance faced the structural barriers to college access in schools (Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, & Bell, 2008).

The American School Counselor Association's (2008-09) considered an ideal student to counselor ratio was 250 to 1. Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, and Bell (2008) reported ratios of 500- 600 to 1 at large urban high schools. Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, and Colyar (2004) argued that large urban schools with high numbers of minority students tended to be overcrowded, tier tracked, and rife with administrative structures that hindered counselors and marginalized counseling efforts. Perna et al.

(2008) added that limited counselor to student interactions, overloads of counselors' responsibilities, and barriers to trusting relationships with ethnic populations were challenges to effective counseling.

## **Parents**

Kim and Schneider's (2005) position was that social capital can be amassed through parent relationships with school personnel. In 2006, data from National Assessment of Educational Progress indicated a point scale differential of 30 on standardized tests between students with parents engaged in their educational processes and students whose parents were not engaged (Dietel, 2006). The benefits for family/parent involvement in educational processes showed positive influence on college enrollment, but Black, Hispanic/Latino, or Biracial students were significantly more likely to enroll in four year institutions when their families were actively engaged in their educational process (Wadenya & Lopez, 2008). Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy (2011) found students whose parents were involved with parent teacher organizations (PTOs) or volunteerism more likely to apply to college while students whose parents' school involvement was attributed to behavioral or academic problems less likely to apply.

Smith and Zhang (2009) offered that for Black students, mothers were more important sources of help, while fathers were authority figures. Smith (2008) cited data from the 2007 U.S. Census Bureau that Black families were 2.5 times more likely to be headed by single mothers; women were the most important support for Latino males (Garrett, Antrop-Gonzalez, & Velez, 2010).

Auerbach (2007) addressed perceptions held by counselors that Black or Latino parents, or those of Biracial students did not care about their children's education; a perception rooted in Anglo-American mindsets of counselors who saw parents of color with little or no college knowledge of mainstream values, attitudes, and philosophies (Smith, 2008) through a lens of deficiencies (Valdes, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002), and as not valuing higher education for their offspring.

### **Peers**

Kenny and Bledsoe's (2005) research found indications that the more students perceived their peers as valuing education, the more likely students were to value education and educational outcomes. Smith and Zhang (2009) acknowledged that positive peer influence can aid in the transition from high school to college, but that peer support could also have a negative impact on study habits.

### **College Knowledge**

Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines (2009) pointed to a lack of college knowledge as a primary reason why low income students do not apply for college admissions. According to Holcomb-McCoy (2010) there is a variance in financial aid knowledge based on race and ethnicity. Burleson, Hallett and Parks (2008) contended that applying to college and completing financial aid forms alone is insufficient readiness; developing college knowledge is crucially important to ensure students' success. Misunderstand options for college financing was a common problem for Black mothers (Smith, 2008).

**Federal Aid.** Financial aid's purpose should be to provide access and enrollment for those for whom college would otherwise not be possible, increase retention, help students with the most need for financial assistance to graduate, and keep the burden of debt low (Burgdorf and Kostka, n.d.). The researchers assessed that programmatic structures of aid processes are inconsistent, redundant, not user friendly, and discourages families from applying for much needed aid. One strategy students used to avoid borrowing money for college was failing to submit a FAFSA due to the complexity of those forms (Cunningham & Santiago, 2008). Long and Riley (2007) suggested that the formulae that determine that amount of aid awarded, the amount of unmet need, and costs that families are expected to contribute are critical factors that leave those at the lowest income levels further disadvantaged.

**Loans.** Kim (2007) discussed the trend of increasing reliance on student loans to fund educational pursuits which results in lower probabilities of degree completion for low income, black students. The National Center for Education Statistics (2007) reported that the amount of money loaned to students to fund higher education rose from \$791 million in 1970 to \$67 billion dollars in 2007 (NCES 2007, Table 360). Kim put forth that low income black students and their institutions suffer financially when students secure loans they cannot afford to finance their educations. Colleges are left with balances they cannot collect, students are left with debt they cannot repay, and degree completion is not achieved.

Callender and Jackson (2005) found the highest rate of aversion to debt among low-income families. Perna (2008) found that some Asian parents placed cultural values in front of borrowing and expressed that their culture discouraged incurring debt to pay for

what you cannot afford. Cunningham and Santiago (2008) reported Asians and Hispanics as less likely to borrow than Blacks and Whites, and immigrants less likely to borrow than native born students.

**Grants.** The U. S. General Accounting Office (1995) found grants positively associated with African American and Hispanic students' persistence in college, whereas loans were not. During the 2005-06 academic year, loans made up more than half of all aid for nearly 5 million undergraduate students, and the amount of loans to cover college costs has increasingly outpaced grants awarded since 2001-2002 (College Board, 2006). The Education Resources Institute and the Institute for Higher Education Policy (1995) reported that a \$1,000 increase in aid in the form of a loan was associated with a 3% increase in the college dropout rate, whereas the same amount in the form of a grant was associated with a 14% decrease in the dropout rate.

**College Support Programs.** Venegas and Tierney (2005) suggested that college programs provide peer support through group projects, and opportunities for engagement with advisors and group leaders. Calaff (2008) suggested that college support programs help to bridge the gaps in knowledge of college processes for students and their families.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

The study employed the sequential explanatory strategy with a double layer focus group design (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Phase I collected and analyzed quantitative data using a questionnaire containing 25 dichotomous, multiple-choice with Likert scale

values, and short answer questions. Phase II collected qualitative data from two focus groups using nine open-ended focus group questions. These questions were developed from the quantitative data results as probes to provide a deeper understanding of the quantitative data, and to build a holistic profile of the participant's perspectives.

The researchers proceeded from a social capital perspective in attempting to seek how participants accessed (or failed to access) resources in their environments for assistance with college processes. The moderator used a guide developed by the researchers based on a Kreuger and Casey (2009) model.

## **Participants**

Principals at both high schools assigned guidance counselors to select students to receive consent forms and to administer the survey. Participants for Phase I were ( $N = 12$ ) Black, Hispanic, or Biracial high school seniors from two New England high schools, who agreed to participate in the study; the schools served as data collection sites. Participants for Phase II ( $N = 11$ ) were a sample of Phase I participants who agreed to participate in focus group sessions, expressed some desire to attend college, and self-identified as potential first generation college students. Focus group demographics for High School 1 ( $n = 5$ ) were: Black ( $n = 2$ ), Biracial ( $n = 3$ ). Focus group demographics for High School 2 ( $n = 6$ ) were: Black ( $n = 3$ ), Hispanic ( $n = 2$ ), and Biracial ( $n = 1$ ).

## **Instrumentation**

### **Questionnaire**

The Phase I survey instrument (available from the first author) collected quantitative data and contained 25 dichotomous, multiple-choice, and short answer questions designed to measure: participants' understanding of college processes, financial aid knowledge, and in and out of school support systems accessed. A 4-point Likert-type scale yielded values for *No or None or Never* (0), *Yes or Very little* (1), *Somewhat* (2), and *Definitely, Frequently or Extensive* (3). The survey instrument also served to select participants for the Phase II focus group as students who reported that their parent(s) graduated from college, or that they did not wish to attend college were eliminated from the focus group pool.

### **Focus Groups**

Phase II focus group questions were designed to help the researcher to confirm or corroborate resulting interpretations from the survey instrument by soliciting detailed and descriptive responses to the research questions. Krueger and Casey (2009) recommended that questions be sequenced as initially easy to answer, then narrowed "to more specific and important questions" (p. 38). The introductory question was designed to afford a level of comfort with fellow participants, followed by transition questions addressing parental concerns, obstacles to college, how college information is gathered, perceptions of peers about college, and interactions between participants and counselors; other areas of concern at the end of sessions. The moderator was debriefed after each session, and those observations were digitally recorded; the researcher did not serve as moderator for focus group sessions. Member checking was facilitated through school counselors who selected participants to corroborate, correct, or clarify accuracy of data interpretations.

## Data Analysis

**Quantitative.** Data from the survey instrument was transferred to SPSS software for descriptive analysis of frequencies, percents, means, and standard deviations to assess participants' awareness of college processes and financial aid terminology (i.e., grants, scholarships, loans, EFC), enrollment application information, extra-curricular activities, and sources of assistance for college information. Questions 1 and 2 were for elimination of participants from the focus group pool and were not measured. Content validity of the survey questions was supported through the literature (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009; Burleson, Hallett, & Park, 2008), and review by two counselors and two school principals.

**Qualitative.** The researchers employed Krueger and Casey's (2009) classic analysis strategy. Raw data were analyzed using the long table method with color coded paper, and numbered lines for text for categorizing participant's responses. Data from participant responses, field notes, and moderator debriefing comments were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. All data were systematically categorized and analyzed to identify emerging themes, subcategories and patterns, and to discover relationships between ideas. Krueger and Casey (2009) recommended that first time researchers use the classic analysis strategy because it is visual, concrete, systematic, sequentially and logically organized, and entails a continuous process of comparison and decision making. Credibility was addressed through member checking with three participants to ensure that focus group data results were accurately conveyed through the report generated by the researcher.

## Discussion

### Quantitative results

**Counselors.** Quantitative data confirmed the literature that counselors and counselor activities were the most referred to school sources of college assistance (78% to 100%), followed by Others (33%); teachers (17%); the Internet (17%); some students sought no help with college information (61%). The problem of inability to accessing counselors was not reported by any participant, with many reporting that their counselors were helpful, students and counselors shared positive relationships and that counselor were positive influences on their college aspirations.

**Parents.** Parents did not take the lead in assisting their children with accessing college assistance. Lack of parent involvement was evident as 39% of students reported that their parents were involved with their schools, and 22% of parents had attended college information sessions. Most parents reportedly received information about college through counselor generated calendars of events (78%), calls to schools for college information (33%), and other sources (33%). That 33% of students also reported receiving help from friends, mentors, the church, the library, a neighbor, and community centers raised the possibility that parents initiated these requests for help in lieu of or on behalf of their children; 78% of parents did not attend college information sessions. Parents reportedly had concerns about their children's ability to focus and enjoy successful outcomes but were supportive of their children's higher education endeavors; most students (89%) reported that their parents wanted them to attend college.

**Peers.** The percentage of students seeking help from friends (17%) could indicate that those students who had no one else to turn to for college help turned to peers for guidance.

**College knowledge.** Burleson, Hallett, and Park (2008) contended that urban Black, Latino, or Biracial students did not account for costs other than tuition and books, and could not interpret aid award information. Quantitative data indicated that 61% of participants possessed moderate levels of knowledge of the college application processes, and that the same percent had not sought help with college processes or visited a college campus for information. A large percentage of students (83%) believed that they could complete the admissions application on their own; 44% believed they should complete the application with a parent/guardian; 39% believed that a guidance counselor could/should complete the application; and 11% believed that their parent/guardian could/should complete the application.

**Financial aid.** Despite Forster's (2006) notion that finances were not considered the primary obstacle to college enrollment for these populations, college financing and lack of awareness of enrollment and financial aid processes were real concerns for participants. Quantitative data confirmed that students lacked knowledge of financial aid processes and looked to several available sources for help with these processes including: counselors (100%), teachers (39%), relatives (56%), and friends (17%). Further evidence was that only 44% of participants correctly identified that tuition pays for "Classes" only. Familiarity of financial aid terminology indicated that the majority of students could define loans (83%) and scholarships (83%); while awareness of grants (44%), work study (39%), and EFC (22%) were less familiar terms.

**Support Programs.** Participants reported low levels of participation in college prep programs (22%), low rates of visits to college campuses (39%), high “somewhat” knowledge levels of the application process (61%), and more than half of students did not seek help with college process (61%). Churches, the library, a neighbor, and community centers were additional sources for college assistance (33%).

### **Qualitative results**

Five themes emerged from the qualitative data in participants’ own words:

- **Parents and College readiness** - students expressed concerns of themselves and their parents about readiness; focusing on grades required for college admission, past academic mistakes made, and the ability to stay focused on academics.
  - ❖ “I think my parents would be most concerned about me staying focused because I have a short attention span and I kind of forget things quickly, so...”
  - ❖ “Not paying attention in my past that leads to all my bad grades that I ever got and because I can’t go into any big schools because all my grades are bad”
  - ❖ “I think my parents would be concerned about how I use my time – like what I would do; you know would I be partying or skip my homework to go to a party.”
  - ❖ “They probably would wonder if I could get through college on time, and like if I prepare myself well.”
  
- **Guidance counselors** - the primary source of help for those who sought assistance were counselors; family members, community members, or self-reliance.
  - ❖ “I talk to my counselor about if my grades are good enough to get into top colleges. Yes – my counselor was very helpful”

- ❖ “I talk to my guidance counselor about what schools would best fit me for the major I’m going in and how much it would cost with all my financial aid.”
  - ❖ “I didn’t really talk to my counselor about it – my mom really helped me. The only thing I use my counselor for was my transcript release form, but I did it for myself.”
  - ❖ “I haven’t talked to my counselor about college at all, I just want to do everything on my own ’cause I don’t like asking people for help all the time.”
- **Financial aid and the FAFSA** - issues pertained to college financing, difficulties of completing the FAFSA, finding scholarship information, and loan debt were a constant theme.
    - ❖ “The FAFSA form was very difficult to navigate on line and what specifically was needed, when you were filling out applications.”
    - ❖ “About the financial aid, that’s like the main problem for most people going to colleges and paying back their dues.”
    - ❖ “I appreciate that they don’t want to waste or want be in debt. If you go to college and not work our hardest and waste our money, that’s probably like the biggest fear.”
- **Peers** – qualitative data did not indicate negative peer influence to degrees that would be perceived as dissuading college hopefuls from pursuing higher education.
    - ❖ “Really most of my friends want to go to college because they want a future. The only trouble is that they can’t decide – they don’t know what college is right for them. But pretty much everyone if you’re a senior in high school. So you know not really so easy deciding on the right college so that’s why we have guidance counselors in the school to get help.”
    - ❖ “My friends talk about like where they want to go really bad and then some of them have gotten their acceptance letters so they’re all talking about how they’re all excited and

they're getting ready to go. Some of my friends, they don't want to go at all, some of my friends they can't go 'cause of money, so they just don't talk about it at all. They're, whenever that topic comes up they just kind of leave or sit there and say something else or something. And then there's just a mix of stuff."

- ❖ "I don't want to talk to my friends because they don't take it seriously and I will be the first in my family."
- **Additional support systems** – Students expressed the desire to have participated in college support programs, college visits, and opportunities to query students and professors about student life, dormitory living, classes, time management, and other related topics.
    - ❖ "The things is like the money, how much it is and the living there." I would include a financial aid area, just to make sure that your FAFSA went through and to make sure that money and everything was taken care of."
    - ❖ "I would take the students on a tour of the whole entire school, because when seniors go to a college, some are not really sure what they want to do in college so it would be better for them to see everything that the college has as a class so they get a feeling of what they want to do, they get a better understanding."
    - ❖ "I would include having the students sit through a class so they can experience what a class is like so they know what to expect when they start in the fall."

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The study revealed participants as primary agents in securing information about their higher education endeavors, despite their lack of experience in negotiating complex enrollment and financial aid processes; and admitted reservations about their academic readiness. School personnel (especially guidance counselors), family members, and the community were supplemental sources of help. The lack of

familiarity with financial aid processes and terminology appeared to have had a negative influence on students' ability to search for additional financial aid information such as scholarships, did not seem to discourage students from wanting to pursue higher education. That students held the same reservation as their parents regarding readiness could be an indication that concerns about staying focused were reflections on academic challenges from their children's earlier middle and high school careers. The issue of focus was also raised by concerns by peers and parents who expressed fears of participants being victims of college party cultures. Peers who had similar aspirations to attend college were supportive, and conversations focused on college majors, maintaining friendships, and transitioning to new environments. Peers who did not aspire to college did not appear to be a negative influence, to the contrary, peers who were not college bound encouraged college bound peers to stay focused and "not mess up."

Limited parental involvement with school personnel for college information was evidenced, although that the vast majority of parents wanted their children to attend college could indicate the need for community based assistance programs; students had strong desires to participate in college readiness activities and experiential learning opportunities as additional sources for college information. The same percentage of participants (61%) reported being responsible for family members after school, having sought no help with college information, possessed moderate levels of knowledge of the college application processes, and had never visited a college campus for information. This percentage could represent disadvantages of low-income families with younger children or elders residing in households that prevent levels of engagement with schools

or other agencies after school or on weekends; rather than disengagement due to lack of interest on the part of some parents to assist their children in accessing help with college processes.

Results pointed to a definite need for financial seminars both pre-college and post enrollment, as there was the matter of funding throughout one's college career, college affordability, and persistence through degree completion. This researcher has experience with families of first-year students who lose money due to misunderstandings about types of available aid, Expected Family Contributions (EFC), and the timeliness of balances being paid. With cultural competence at the core of many issues related to the acquisition of college knowledge for low-income ethnic students and families in need of assistance with college planning, this study will provide additional information on critical areas that indicate where more attention is needed in helping these populations to successfully gain access to and be prepared for higher education. Future demographics forecast an increase of ethnic populations (the least educated and most economically disadvantaged) occupying college classrooms as White populations begin to undergo modest declines (Epstein & Parrott, 2009). Perhaps now is the time for a new generation of opportunities that begin to address issues of access and commence efforts at closing the college achievement gap for bright, motivated people of color who wish to attend college.

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