

**From Access to Intervention:
Defying Undermatch Only to Mismatch and Reverse Transfer**

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Abstract

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This dissertation includes three stand-alone papers. Its broad purpose is to investigate how youth relational developmental support systems provide students from historically underrepresented backgrounds with the type of college-promoting social and cultural capital they need to limit their chances of undermatch, mismatch, and reverse transfer. The dissertation also examines the resulting college-participation experiences of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, as it is important to understand the consequences of match or undermatch, as well as to grasp the choice processes leading up to the matching of students with postsecondary opportunities.

Conceptually, the three papers taken together further our understanding of the phenomena of undermatch, mismatch, and reverse transfer in relation to cultural and social capital development for first-generation college students from historically underrepresented groups.

They contribute to the existing college choice and undermatch literature, as well as the persistence/transfer and mismatch literature.

The qualitative design of each study helps to reveal how dyadic relationships (e.g., student-counselor, student-peer, student-professor) are embedded within a broader context of relationships, supports, opportunities, and barriers—that is, a web of support within a school, organization, or institution that provides a student with the social and cultural capital needed to get ahead toward the American dream. The first study explores the phenomenon of undermatch in the high school web of support, examining college-ready, low-income students who often apply to and enroll in less competitive higher education institutions than their academic qualifications might permit. This shows that information about a wide range of possible four-year colleges and universities is not always available to underrepresented students or their high school advisors, resulting in undermatch.

The second study examines organizations designed to fill that gap. It explores the role of college-promoting community-based organizations (CBO), focusing in on one organization and two student participants. This study shows the ways the CBO can support high school students in the college choice process and limit the chance of undermatch. The third study, however, raises questions about what “college match” might mean. It follows the trajectories of two students from the first two studies after they leave high school for college. It seeks to understand how low-income, first-generation college students experience unwelcoming campus climates and the reverse transfer process.

Finally, the dissertation’s conclusion discusses the implications for high schools, CBOs, and higher educational institutions concerning match and undermatch from the three papers.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my sister, Shamara Garnett, and her best boy, K'Vonte Garnett-Dowe; to the participants in these studies; to all of the significant adults who have supported me throughout my life; and to all of the youth who still need significant adults in their lives.

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I.

INTRODUCTION: FROM ACCESS TO INTERVENTION

I did some research on the school's mission....I really liked... their core values. They talked about how they really value the development of a person, which really stood out to me ... Of course, college, the main purpose is to get your degree, but I don't think it's all about the degree. I do believe that it's about the development of a person. –Arya, as a high school senior

I had no clue what I was getting myself into...I just thought that I was going to be a part of new clubs and meeting a lot of new people, but really ...I wasn't meeting a lot of people like I thought I would.... I wanted to put myself out there, you know, I wanted to make connections and network with a lot of different professors. ...I feel like the connections that I did make, they're very real, so I'm really grateful for that. But yeah, I had the expectation that I was going to be a lot more involved. –Arya, as a college sophomore leaving college

The two quotations above illustrate the change in a student's perception of what she thought college would be. A first-generation, low income student of color, Arya had high expectations for her college experience: she would make a lot of friends, connect with professors, and figure out who she wanted to become. But her actual experience involved none of those things. Instead, she found herself struggling to make connections, dealing with anxiety, and unsure of whether she really belonged. College was not the place where she blossomed; it was the place where her confidence in herself was shaken.

For some students, college is a foregone conclusion. Their grandparents went to college; their parents went to college; their older siblings went to college; and there's no question that they will go to college too. For first-generation students like Arya, the path from high school to university is not so straightforward. They don't have a well-trodden road clearly marked by

generations before them; they have to forge their own way. For those who do find their way to college, it often comes at great financial and psychological expense.

In order to provide insight into the ways in which institutions might better serve first-generation, low-income students of color, this dissertation uses a small sample of such students to examine how institutions work to match them with colleges and universities. In addition, it raises questions about the idea of match and undermatch by tracking two students through their experiences with selective colleges.

In the United States, the PK-12 public education system has had great difficulty with differences in race, social class, and gender, to mention the most prominent social markers in play. These demographic markers have been treated by many educators and educational stakeholders, not to mention members of the larger society, as indicators of differential ability and status (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). The system bestows on a dominant group (White, male, upper/middle class, native English learner) pervasive advantages, while the others are disadvantaged to various degrees (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).¹

In such a system, differences are easily seen by dominant group members and many others as deficits (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). The treatment of these differences is deeply institutionalized and also internalized by all participants (Ogbu, 2011), and the dynamics play out at all phases of the college choice process—i.e., predisposition, application, enrollment. The net result is systematic disparities in students' college planning and completing the various steps in the college admissions process, access to information about college and financial aid, and the encouragement needed to convert aspirations into college enrollment (Bowen et al., 2009;

¹According to Carnevale & Strohl (2013, p. 41), “the stratification continues within institutions in the distribution of college majors with white males disproportionately enrolled in fields with the highest labor market value relative to African Americans, Hispanics, and women (see Carnevale, et al., *What’s It Worth? The Economic Value of College Majors*, 2011).”

Roderick et al., 2011, 2009; Roderick et al., 2008). These disparities in the college choice system have intergenerational implications for students' access to resource-rich schools. It is linked cyclically (and, thus, intergenerationally) to economically unequal neighborhoods, where investment in school resources—such as the structure/organization of academic preparation, college guidance, parental involvement, and college-going climate—constrain the intergenerational development of social and cultural capital. Thus, students' choices of application and enrollment are limited, in the context of a history of discrimination (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

While neo-differential cognitive ability researchers like Herrnstein and Murray (1994) might operationalize undermatch rates as “achievement gaps”, those disparities are mainly gaps in access to the resources (academic preparation, college guidance) and structural supports (network of familial, teacher, counselor, and peer relationships within a school) needed to fully participate in the college choice process or compete in selective college admissions and to further enable the development of their college-promoting cultural (attainment value) and social (network & information) capital.

The disparities between the experiences of first generation students and students of color and the experiences of other White students in the college choice process can be found in all areas in the PK-12 system. Disparities in college choice is rooted in differential investment in school resources, which has implications for how students move through the public education system and determines levels of academic success. Race and socioeconomic background are critical factors in how communities access resources. For example, in schools where there are primarily Black students, those students earn lower test scores and are more often tracked than in schools where there is greater diversity (Gadsden, Davis, & Artiles, 2009; Gadsden & Dixon-

Román, 2017). Furthermore, “Blacks and Latinos are systematically disadvantaged by these inequities” (Gadsden et al., 2009, p. 24), often experiencing less rigorous coursework and inexperienced teachers. In addition, schools with fewer resources also tend to have more teachers teaching outside of their endorsement areas, which means these students may not have high quality instruction, even though there is evidence that “instruction mediates the relationship between resources and achievement” (Gadsden et al., 2009, p. 25).

Administrators in schools with fewer resources than others are often enabled to make decisions that negatively impact students with impunity, because parents don’t have the social and cultural capital or the English language skills to speak up and ask for more, so school systems can continue practices that disadvantage the students who are most vulnerable (Espinoza-Herold, 2003). When parents are unable to advocate and don’t engage frequently in school activities, the children’s lack of academic success is often blamed on the deficiencies of family, community, and culture, with no consideration for what school practices or adult decisions are contributing factors (Espinoza-Herald, 2003).

This lack of resources and attitudes can produce students who have access only to unskilled, low-wage jobs in the labor market. Much as it was for their parents, access to colleges for students of color and first-generation students’—and especially to selective colleges—is blocked (Espinoza-Herald, 2003) in a variety of ways by inequalities in society that are echoed in the PK-12 system, and can constrain cultural and social capital development across generations.

Mirroring these trends in PK-12 education, the U.S. postsecondary landscape is increasingly segregated, concentrating affluent White students in the top tiers of education (the most selective 468 colleges), and increasing enrollment of low-income students of color in free- and open- access schools that face decreased funding and reduced capacity (Carnevale & Strohl,

2013). Opportunity is distributed, to some extent, along racial lines, and family background may determine if and where college-ready students attend college. According to Carnevale and Strohl, resource allocation dramatically differs between the 468 most selective colleges and open-access schools, and graduation rates reflect this disparity by double-digit percentage points; for Black students with above-average SAT/ACT scores, the difference is 33% in graduation rate depending on the type of institution attended. Student success at the 82 most selective colleges, where school spending per student is \$27,900 annually, compared to \$6,000 for open-access two- and four- year colleges, demonstrates that resources matter (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

The current enrollment trends of non-White students, a disproportionate amount of whom are first-generation college aspirants from low-income backgrounds, show the interacting and multiplying effect of race and socioeconomic class. Black and Latino males, in particular, are especially prone to ending up on the “wrong side” of a longstanding “achievement gap,” in which their educations, identities, performances, and attainments systematically and persistently lag behind those of their White counterparts and those of young women of any racial and ethnic background (Lee & Ransom, 2011). If access to the top-tier colleges continues to be racially segregated, that segregation represents a systematic obstacle to class mobility (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Undermatching may play a role in this problem.

We know high schools expose students to various college-promoting resources (e.g., academic preparation, delivery of college guidance) and norms (e.g., college-going climate, parental involvement) or structural supports (e.g., network-relationships of parents, peers, teachers, counselors) (Rodriguez, 2013). We know these resources form the basis of the high school context and the “web of support” (Varga & Zaff, 2018) that shape students’ tastes for particular types of postsecondary education (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997). We know that the

college-promoting context varies considerably across high schools. McDonough (1997, p. 2) also reminds us that these schools are part our "opportunity structures"—that is, “our pathways to success in U.S. culture” (also see Marshall, 1994). According to McDonough, culture, via its socialization processes within and across institutions also defines and mediates students’ “individual” or “independent” achievements. And opportunity refers to prospects for mobility to both higher- and lower-level positions. Their own academic achievements, family backgrounds, and high schools' perspectives on desirable college destinations will shape how high school students perceive their higher education opportunities.

Scholarship has been dedicated to understanding the high school environment’s influence on students’ college choices (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; McDonough, 1997; Perna et al., 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005). For example, students in resource-poor urban high schools are more likely than their peers in resource-rich suburban high schools to rely primarily on their schools’ resources to help navigate the college choice process (Hurwitz, Smith, Howell, & Pender, 2012; Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009; Muhammad, 2008; Perna, 2000). However, significantly less is understood about how the interaction of students with these resources and conditions might affect whether or not they might match—that is, find the best higher education fit for their academic profile, as well as their financial, social, and personal needs or preferences (Harris, 2014; Hurwitz et al., 2012).

Just as important, little is known about the phenomenon of undermatch—that is, the all-too-frequent occurrence of capable students choosing colleges that do not offer them learning opportunities commensurate with their academic profiles and potentials (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Hurwitz et al., 2012; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2009; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Allensworth, 2008). Existing studies stop short

of exploring the role that information plays in undermatch, how information is conveyed and by whom, and what gives it meaning and resonance to college-ready students who have few or no real reference points for higher education or the process of seeking appropriate colleges. Access to information is not a mechanical or static thing; rather, it happens in the context of relationships that engage young people's imaginations, hopes, dreams, and sense of selves. In short, how does the high school context or its web of support promote or limit undermatch? And what exactly happens that enables students to persist despite the various informational barriers they encounter? The answer undoubtedly involves their interactions with various people and the high school context.

Furthermore, we know little about how youth relational developmental and socialization systems (e.g., schools, outside organizations, institutions) and their webs of support can be built that would enable greater access to college-promoting network-relationships and information as well as other resources, especially for those students who are in schools that are hard-pressed to serve basic educational needs, as is the case in many historically resource-poor communities. Certain organizations outside the school system (e.g., community-based organizations or CBOs committed to college access and completion) have clear potential to meet this need (Tierney and Jun, 1998; Simon, 2001; Swail, 1999; Bailis et al., 1995). However, scholarship has yet to unpack what they do and how. Finally, once students have selected a college and enrolled, hopefully well matched but often not, we often find instances of mismatch between the dominant norms institutionalized in U.S. universities and the norms in working-class webs of support that first-generation college students are often exposed to before college (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Understanding what leads to this situation and what follows from it is important work for scholars to do.

Because the nature and availability of college-going resources vary greatly across high schools (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Perna et al., 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005), following the college choice process of the student in the context of her or his school environment will better inform our understanding of the undermatch phenomenon. Looking at the ways in which students might mismatch once they start at a university will also add to our understanding (Orbe, 2004; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). This dissertation undertakes these tasks.

The Target for Research

In her review of college choice, Rodriguez (2013) observes how the notion of a student's college "match" or "mismatch" emerged from empirical analyses that tested whether students admitted into selective institutions under affirmative action were as academically qualified as other students (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Bok & Bowen, 1998). To be sure, affirmative action is an action or a policy favoring those who tend to suffer from discrimination in employment and education (Brodkin, 1998; Healey, 2003; Katznelson, 2005; Lipsitz, 1998). However, those studies of match or mismatch focused on students' performance and persistence once they enrolled rather than on the college choice process (Rodriguez, 2013). Other studies conceptualized match as whether or not college-ready students enrolled in higher education or if they decided to attend a two-year institution, a four-year institution, or chose not to attend altogether (Plank & Jordan, 2001).

Over the last decade or so we have also seen a growing interest in examining how well a student is prepared academically and socially compared to the selectivity of the institutions s/he may decide to apply to and enroll in (Roderick et al., 2009). Some of these studies focused on the students who were judged more likely to undermatch than others—Black, Latinx, low-

income students, and first-generation students—with a particular emphasis on how well their high schools prepared them to succeed (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2011). Researchers also noted that the same groups of students are predisposed to find an uncomfortable social and cultural fit on their new campuses (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Bok & Bowen, 1998; Orbe, 2004; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1994; Tinto, 1993). This means that students who defy undermatch in the enrollment phase are likely to mismatch at a predominantly, White resource-rich institution. The students profiled in the third paper in this dissertation are examples of this phenomenon. We know that more selective colleges can boast retention and graduation rates of students from historically underrepresented groups that are higher than the national average for colleges and universities (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Nevertheless, because selective colleges and universities tend to narrowly operate on a set of shared middle- to upper-class norms of independence as the culturally appropriate way to be a college student, working class first-generation college undergraduates often experience stark emotionally taxing feelings of isolation on these predominantly White campuses (Aries & Seider, 2005; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012).

Indeed, in addition to being operationalized as an academic or human capital phenomenon in the college choice and persistence literatures, match or mismatch has also been framed as a cultural phenomenon in the college engagement literature. Fryberg and Markus (2007), for example, note that U.S. colleges and universities emphasize and promote cultural norms of independence (Kim, 2002). In a systematic examination of cultural norms at American universities and colleges, Stephens, et al. (2012) surveyed university leaders (i.e., deans) about their institutions' expectations for students. The deans reported that their institutions primarily promoted norms and expectations that students should pave their own way and be comfortable

expressing themselves. In other words, students were expected to display personal independence.

Although these norms promoting independence seem natural to continuing generation students, who have been socialized mainly in middle- and upper-class environments, they present a cultural mismatch for first-generation students, who are often socialized in working-class or economically disenfranchised environments prior to college that emphasize community. Facing a culturally-mismatched environment can lead to a generally aversive psychological state that can alter biological functioning, resulting in anxiety (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012) and stereotype threat (Steele, 1995, 1997, 2010). Together, these can disrupt a student's academic engagement and performance. Therefore, while all students experience growing pains in the transition to college, the mismatch may be particularly acute for students who have not had the privilege of intergenerational college-going parents and other familial members who have know-how, guidance from well-trained and connected college counselors, and overall experience with higher education.

Like parts of the college retention and persistence literature that have explained mismatch as an academic or human capital phenomenon, the college choice literature has primarily operationalized undermatch in academic terms (Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). But the explanations may be more than merely academic as has been previously argued (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Bok & Bowen, 1998). As noted previously, some college choice and persistence scholars have explained mismatch as a cultural phenomenon (Stephens et al., 2012), finding an especially strong contrast between the experiences of first-generation students and students of color and their peers at historically White, resource-rich institutions. Whether undermatch or mismatch, the college choice-persistence literature points to a limited access to and engagement with the

type of college-promoting resources and structural supports needed to successfully participate in campuses' academic and social lives. Although as yet unexamined, it seems likely that many campuses do offer programmatic resources targeting first-generation and non-White students, but their mere presence is not enough. Institutions may need to do more than they currently are to help students access and engage with these resources. This effort may limit the chances of undermatch or mismatch through equitable access to opportunities, allowing for greater student engagement and a stronger sense of belonging across groups.

Situating Undermatch in a Historical Perspective

To fully understand those phenomena and ensure equitable student experiences we need to situate match in the ongoing context of college choice in the United States. In *Fifty Years of College Choice: Social, political and Institutional influences on the Decision-making Process*, Palmer, et al. (2004) remind us that the students in college in the early 1940s were predominantly White, male, and from middle- and upper-class families. With little informational resources and access to higher education for non-White, resource-poor families, there was less competition for students and less focus on being accepted at a top school. Fewer non-White, female, or low-income students either planned for or enrolled in a college after high school (Palmer et al., 2004).

It was not until the enactment of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act (Public Law 346, 1944), commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights, that we began to see the massification of higher education. The benefits to the millions of WWII veterans were generous: free tuition, college credit for military training, books, fees and monthly allowances (Brodkin, 1998; Healey, 2003; Herbold, 1994; Katznelson, 2005; Turner & Bound, 2003). Taken together, these college-going resources afforded a generation of working-class Americans an unprecedented opportunity to earn college degrees and experience the American dream—the essential element of our

national political ideology and the one concept that many argue has the most potential to hold this country together (Simons, 2003). As those resources increased access to the U.S. middle-class and provided intergenerational college opportunities for the millions of children and grandchildren from those families, many analysts consider the GI Bill to be the best investment the U.S. government has ever made (Brodkin, 1998; Herbold, 1994; Palmer et al., 2004; Turner & Bound, 2003).

However, Brodtkin (1998) and others called the bill a defacto White affirmative action program, arguing that:

Educational and occupational GI benefits really constituted affirmative action program for white males because they were decidedly not extended to African Americans or to women of any race. White male privilege was shaped against the backdrop of wartime racism and postwar sexism.

According to Herbold (1994), although Congress granted the same benefits to both Blacks and Whites, the segregationist principles of the United States were perpetuated by almost every institution of higher learning, effectively disbaring a disproportionate number of Black veterans from earning a college degree and subsequently realizing the American dream. This was particularly true in northern states where few historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) existed. In the Jim Crow south, HBCUs were the only options, and they rested at the bottom of the collegiate academic hierarchy—the resource-poorest colleges in the poorest region of the country (Herbold, 1994). In *Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege*, Carnevale and Strohl (2013) remind us of the legacy of this practice: although in theory the government would pay tuition, that was of little help to Blacks who could not enter college, either because of overcrowding at HBCUs—resulting from disbarment from predominantly White resource-rich institutions—or inadequate preparation for college-level work in the PK-12 school system. Public education for

Blacks was so deplorable that very few had academic qualification for admission to competitive colleges. For Black veterans who, through sheer courage, managed to gain admissions to resource-rich, White institutions or achieve a measure of economic momentum towards the American dream, retaliatory violence was and continues to be a real threat (Herbold, 1994).

Clearly, Herbold continues, the GI Bill cracked the wall of discrimination that had surrounded United States' university system. It provided an unprecedented opportunity for predominantly White institutions to allow a fair number of Blacks to enroll, contributed to a more diverse curriculum at many HBCUs, and helped provide a foundation for the gradual growth of a Black and non-White middle class. The educational and economic benefits of the GI Bill, for Blacks and Whites alike, have been considerable. But at the same time, we must acknowledge the barriers—economic, legal, institutional, intellectual, de facto—that Blacks and other students of color encountered in the pursuit of education and the American dream, and look critically at the results of those barriers since passage of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act (Healey, 2003; Katznelson, 2005). To do otherwise risks gross misrepresentation, not only of the past but of the present and the future as well (Herbold, 1994). Calling this systematic racism—historical discrimination based on the government's view of individual worth, Lipsitz (1998, p. 87) supports his contemporaries' point:

As long as we define social life as the sum total of conscious and deliberative individual [i.e., independent] activities, we will be able to discern as racist only individual manifestations of personal prejudice and hostility. Systemic, collective, and coordinated group behavior consequently drops out of sight.

While demand for higher education was particularly high among Black veterans, they had disproportionately fewer opportunities than their White contemporaries to earn college degrees (Brodkin, 1998; Turner & Bound, 2003) and share in the American dream.

The Ongoing Challenge to Higher Education and PK-12 Schools

Postsecondary access and success remain a significant concern for students and families as well as for policymakers and educators at every level in the United States. In the decade after the GI Bill of Rights and the country's obvious failure to fully honor the commitments implicit in the American dream, *Brown v Board of Education* helped again to set in motion federal pressure on the PK-12 system, prompting PK-12 schools to prepare more students from historically marginalized and isolated backgrounds, particularly first-generation college aspirants, for postsecondary pursuits. These students are graduating with high-grade point averages, completion of multiple advanced courses, and competitive scores on national standardized tests (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Although a growing number of low-income and first-generation college students are participating in higher education, particularly Black and Latinx aspirants, those with academic profiles matching the requirements for the country's most well-funded, selective four-year colleges are disproportionately "tracked" into the least funded, open-access two- and four-year colleges, where they are less likely to persist to graduation (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Many students undermatch and eventually either enroll in less competitive-institutions than one would expect given their academic profiles and drop out (and potentially reverse transfer), or forego college altogether (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2011, 2009; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Aries, 2008).

The undermatching of so many college-ready students from underrepresented backgrounds, (defined as African American, Latinx, Native American, low-income, and first-generation college students in this dissertation), has long-term consequences for these students' futures, as well as for that of the United States (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Higher spending in the most selective colleges allows students to enjoy higher graduation rates, greater access to

graduate and professional schools (Bok & Bowen, 1998; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Rose, 2003), and better careers that bring personal and social empowerment. This stands in contrast to their peers who are equally qualified but attend less competitive schools (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Bok & Bowen, 1998; Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006; Rose, 2003). Because students from historically underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to undermatch than their peers, it follows that the college choice process not only perpetuates systematic disparities in where students choose to apply and enroll but also their disparities in completion and the chance at the American dream. The net result is the furthering of the isolation and perpetual marginalization of these groups and a United States with the least intergenerational educational and income mobility of any advanced nation (Bloome, 2014; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010).

Because undermatch sits at the center of both college access and college completion agendas, it follows that improving the intentionality of college enrollment to matched institutions is likely to improve completion rates (Rodriguez, 2013). The phenomenon of undermatch begs for close, careful research that illuminates the dynamics of college choice in contexts in which undermatching is likely (Hurwitz et al., 2012). Paper 1 of this dissertation reports on one such study: a qualitative investigation of students from one resource-poor urban high school and the interactions with informational networks available to them within the high school environment.

The United States has a long history of conflicting perceptions about the potential of different groups of students. This conflict has borne itself out in ways that mirror the divergent perspectives of its population. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public education is illegal, because it disadvantages Black students, and expanded access to students of color to previously segregated resource-rich, White institutions (Palmer et

al., 2004). However, as late as 1994, an influential book, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) suggested that certain ethnic groups, including Black and Latino students, did not have the same intellectual capacity as their White peers, reflecting a dominant attitude that students of color and students of poverty did not deserve the same access to college-promoting resources.

This argument has accompanied a long-term trend since that time of re-segregation in elementary and secondary education. There are many forces contributing to this trend, but among them is a certain (color)blindness to the resource disparities and inequities, all in the name of “treating people equally” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, 2018; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). As Carnevale and Strohl (2013, p. 7) remind us:

The education system is colorblind in theory. In fact, it operates, at least in part, as a systematic barrier to college...and career opportunities for many African Americans and Hispanics who are well prepared for higher education but tracked into crowded and underfunded colleges where they are less likely to develop fully or to graduate.

The current trends in college access and educational attainment suggest that the pattern of racial segregation is being reinforced over time. Clearly, there is overall growth in college attendance over the past several decades, yet that growth is inequitably distributed among the “levels” of higher education institutions. There were 16.5 million undergraduate students in 2004 (McDonough, 2005). Only 25% of the college-enrolled population fit the “traditional” (i.e., White, male, affluent) mold of undergraduate students. The institutional landscape now must accommodate students who are juggling factors such as financial independence, part-time enrollment, delayed enrollment, and work (McDonough, 1997). As noted earlier by Carnevale and Strohl (2013), although enrollment at the top 468 colleges in the United States increased by 78% between 1995 and 2009, 82% of the new seats went to White students. In contrast, over the same period, open-access schools increased enrollment by 21% but Black and Latino students

represented 82% of the increased seats. The Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) estimates that up to 580,000 college-ready students each year in the top half of their high school classes do not graduate from college (or never attend); for the 111,000 African American and Hispanic students who do not go to college, this represents a 55% loss in college-ready students, in comparison to the loss rate of 37% among white students (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

In spite of some progress in recent years, the United States is facing an educational challenge of great significance (League, 2018; Lee & Ransom, 2013). As Lee and Ransom (2013, p. 2) put it, this crisis is especially acute for young men of color. Regrettably—indeed, shockingly—it is apparent that if current demographic and educational attainment trends continue, the overall educational level of the U.S. workforce will likely decline in the near future. As Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2013) report, estimates suggest that the decline will be most noticeable by the year 2020. While explanations are complex, various internal and external contexts play a large role in this attrition: high school attended, parental education level, access to information about college, socioeconomic status (SES), and other factors continue to play a heavy hand in college enrollment and educational attainment (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Hearn, 1984; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2007).

Among the least well-understood factors in the pattern of inequitable college attendance is the phenomenon of undermatch. Recent studies found that large numbers of college-ready students undermatch (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2011, 2009; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, et al., 2008; Rodriguez, 2013; Smith et al., 2013). Some of these studies have also found that students from historically underrepresented groups in selective colleges and universities (defined by Bowen, et al. as African American/Black, Hispanic/Latinx, low-income students, and first-generation college-bound students) undermatch at higher rates than their counterparts (Bowen et

al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2008), suggesting access to postsecondary institutions continues to be inequitable in terms of where students enroll (Hearn, 1984, 1990; McDonough, 1997; Rodriguez, 2013).

Dissertation Purpose and Overview

The overall purpose of this dissertation, which includes three stand-alone papers, is to investigate how youth relational developmental support systems (i.e., high school, family, CBO, and postsecondary contexts) provide students from historically underrepresented backgrounds (as stated previously, African-American/Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Native American, low-income, and first-generation college aspirants) with the type of college-promoting social and cultural capital (i.e., know-how) needed to access and engage with college choice-persistence processes. I also examine the resulting college-participation experiences of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, as it is just as important to understand the consequences of match or undermatch, as it is to grasp the choice processes leading up to the matching of students with postsecondary opportunities.

Before addressing the purposes of the three papers, it is necessary to understand the traditional process of how a student develops knowledge of how to access and engage with higher education and decide where to enroll. College readiness is considered one of the indicators of student success in transitioning from PK-12 education to higher education. It can be defined as how prepared a student is to enter the rigor of a postsecondary environment and thus graduate with a degree or other post-secondary certification. There are two components to college readiness: students' educational aspirations combined with her or his academic preparation. Academic preparation for college is considered a pillar of projecting student success and refers to the rigor of high school courses. Educational aspirations are shaped by the interaction between student agency and social context of resources and relationships or web of support. Regardless of whether a student is college ready, the student's ability to make the decision to attend college must be understood within external contexts— that is, student

relational developmental support systems that reflect the activities of PK-12 schools, college-promoting community-based organizations (CBOs), and higher education institutions.

Information dissemination is essential in order for students to develop academic aspirations. According to McDonough (1997), student aspirations begin at the predisposition stage when a student begins to develop educational and post-educational aspirations in elementary and middle school (McDonough, 1997). Students must develop aspirations by middle school, as it is these goals that will inform their choices in selecting coursework to plan for college entrance requirements. The search phase follows predisposition, in which students seek out colleges that fulfill their financial and academic needs; and the process culminates in choice(s) of application and enrollment (McDonough, 1997). Using the student as the central unit of analysis requires two layers of contextualization: internal context and external context (Perna, 2006). To solely analyze a student's internal context (e.g., academic aspirations or the process of college choice) independent of a student's external context (e.g. SES, high school attended) provides an incomplete picture of college attendance and subsequent success.

In both the internal and external contexts, we know that network-relationships are the vehicle that propels youth development forward; paradoxically, they are also the foundation upon which all young people development rests (Varga & Zaff, 2018). Young people learn, grow, develop, and get ahead through relationships. Relationships socialize youth and subsequently encourage identity development, and provide social connections that are necessary for all humans (Lieberman, 2013; Varga & Zaff, 2018). We can begin to see how a student might undermatch and mismatch, as we get a clearer picture of the relationships that first-generation college aspirants of color are not able to develop, often because their access to those relationships is limited.

Paper 1: The Role of Informational Networks in Undermatching: A Case Study of College Choice in an Urban High School

Paper 1 is guided by the following research questions:

- What information do high school seniors, families, teachers, and counselors have about the college choice process, particularly how that process may be different for a student with an academic profile fit for a selective college?
- In what ways, if any, does that information inform and enable (or fail to inform) the best matches between students' admissions profiles and the colleges to which they are applying?

In this paper, I am especially interested in understanding the role of high school-based resources including network-relationships and information in promoting or limiting undermatch and ultimately the development of the college-going cultural and social capital needed to successfully engage with and negotiate the college choice process. Specifically, it explores the information high school seniors, families, teachers, and counselors have about the college choice process, with particular attention to how that process plays out for a student with an academic profile fit for a selective college (i.e., predominantly White, resource-rich institutions), as well as the ways that information informs and enables (or fails to inform) the best matches between students' admissions profiles and the colleges to which they are applying and in which they are enrolling. In short, this paper explores students' choices of application and enrollment—and the undermatch phenomenon—within the context of their high school web of support. While inquiries of undermatch provide insight into the power of information, resources, and networks for youth, they have not fully captured how relationships and information and other resources

operate in a relational developmental support system, in this case a resource-poor urban high school.

Paper 2: Undermatch in the College Choice Process and the Role That Community-Based Organizations May Play

Paper 2, similarly, explores the ways membership in a CBO committed to college access and completion can promote or limit undermatch and support students from underserved backgrounds in PK-12, with particular attention to young men of color, in their movement through the college choice process. The research questions Paper 2 addresses are:

- How is a college-promoting CBO able to support college-ready students from historically underrepresented backgrounds in higher education in their movement through the college choice process, and promote or limit undermatch? In particular, what kinds of network-relationships do CBOs help young men of color build during their PK-12 schooling years?
- In what ways (i.e., How), if at all, do the CBO support college aspirations, application, access and choice?

In this paper's focus on CBOs, I am especially interested in examining the social networking relationships the CBO helps students build as they move through the college choice process, and how students who participate in the intervention program consider colleges that are appropriately matched to their profiles. Ultimately, this paper explores students' choices of application and enrollment in the context of their CBO-generated network-relationships of adults and institutions and other college-promoting resources (e.g., college counseling, academic and personal enrichment) and norms (e.g., college-going climate, parental involvement) that develop the cultural and social capital needed for the student to successfully access and engage with the

college choice process and limit the chance of undermatch. Given the settings in Paper 2, the potential support of other agents outside of the formal school system may become vitally important. This second paper argues that students who are able to attain membership in CBOs dedicated to supporting college access and success may be able to receive a variety of resources such as informational, social-emotional, and, in some respects, financial supports that can make all the difference in students' continued movement into college.

Paper 3: Defying Undermatch Only to Mismatch and Reverse Transfer

Paper 3 explores the factors that contribute to underrepresented students' decisions to leave the selective institutions they worked so hard to get into—those colleges that were thought to be good matches. The research question guiding this paper is:

- What factors propel students (i.e., Why do students) from underrepresented backgrounds, particularly first-generation students of color to leave the selective institutions they worked so hard to get into.

Deciding to leave their resource-rich institutions for more diverse community colleges closer to home may have been the right choice for the students in this study; however, students who reverse transfer are at greater risk of never completing their education. Departure from higher education, at any point in the pipeline, creates a wide range of negative consequences for students, schools, institutions, communities, and ultimately the United States.

Braxton (2004) describes student departure as an ill-structured problem that requires a multidisciplinary approach and demands multiple solutions (Herron, 2012). For that reason, I also consider what higher education institutions might do to help these students not merely survive but thrive and persist to graduation. This exploration is an effort toward promoting the future successes of students and their campus and local communities if we are to make a greater

impact on our most vulnerable populations. To bring this broad inquiry into more focus, this paper first explores the college retention and persistence literature to better understand students' experience in their new campus communities.

Common Framing Ideas

Conceptually, the three papers taken together further our understanding of the undermatch phenomenon in relation to the cultural and social capital development for first-generation college students from historically underrepresented groups. They contribute to the existing college choice and undermatch literature, as well as the persistence/transfer and mismatch literature.

In addition, the three studies all draw from a common set of “big ideas” rooted in sociological literature. In brief, the central concepts and their relation to the undermatch or mismatch phenomenon are as follows:

- Students' cultural and social capital will influence their choices of application and enrollment, as well as their levels of engagement and sense of belonging in a campus community. That capital is developed through a series of institutionalized bonding and bridging relationships that have been intentionally and systemically formed in the U.S. education system.
- Students' choices of application and enrollment will make sense within each student's organizational context, particularly the interactions of the resources and the network-relationships of peers, teachers, and counselors, or habitus; in the same fashion, a student's engagement and sense of belonging will make sense within that student's institutional context, particularly the interactions of the resources and network-relationships of peers, professors/advisors, and staff, or habitus.

- A student's know-how to access and engage with college choice-persistence processes will happen as a result of a combination of social, (socio)cultural, (socio)economic, and (socio)psychological resources as well as an understanding of how those resources are accessed and developed within a youth relational developmental support system, such as a school's, a CBO's, or another institution's web of supports (interaction of resources and network-relationships).

The development of cultural capital stems from the inheritance or handing down of class status customs, norms, preferences, knowledge and behaviors from parent to child (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). Status groups are made up of people who interact with each other and share similar characteristics and a sense of unity and belonging. That is, people in schools, college-promoting CBOs, and postsecondary institutions form social collectives and networks that generate distinctive cultural traits and styles among their members as a means to monopolize scarce social and economic resources. Dominant groups have appropriated educational credentials for the intergenerational transmission of social status and power. Bourdieu believes power is culturally and symbolically created, and constantly re-legitimized through an interplay of agency and a multilayered context. Within that web of support, students influence and are being influenced by relationships with people, institutions and the broader environment. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is a symbolic good that is most useful when it is converted into economic capital.

Although all groups have some form of cultural capital, that of dominant groups is institutionalized and thereby internalized by all participants as the most socially and economically valuable (read macro-level socialization). By extension, this inequitable arrangement of cultural capital can also provide dominant group members with psychological advantages. In this way, the system gives dominant group members broad social, cultural,

psychological, and economic advantages, while groups from historically marginalized backgrounds often have less access to such resources.

In college choice and persistence, a student's cultural capital can inform and shape various aspects of the college enrollment and persistence processes including: 1) the expectations, aspirations, and information (or know-how) that students receive from parents, 2) how students prepare for postsecondary education, 3) the manner in which students navigate the college admissions process, and 4) the set of institutions students consider (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; McDonough, 1997; Perna & Titus, 2005), as well as their engagement, sense of belonging, and eventual success in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Schwartz et al., 2017; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In other words, cultural capital not only mediates the relationship between family background (i.e., parent education) and school outcomes (i.e., a student's choices of application and enrollment). Cultural capital also has its greatest impact on educational attainment by directing students towards a certain type of postsecondary institution.

Bourdieu (1977) also discussed the concept of habitus to refer to a deeply internalized, permanent system of outlooks, experiences, and beliefs about the social world that individuals get from their immediate environments (McDonough, 1997). Simply put, these are our socialization processes, which evolve from our shared education and history. According to Bourdieu (1977b), habitus is a common set of perceptions held by most, if not all, members of the same group or class. These perceptions shape an individual's expectations, attitudes, behaviors, and aspirations. To be sure, perception is the organization, identification, and interpretation of information in order to represent and understand the presented information, or the environment.

McDonough (1997) conceptualized “organizational habitus” as an extension of Bourdieu’s construct of habitus. According to McDonough, organizational habitus is the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual’s behavior through an intermediate organization (i.e., a school, college-promoting CBO, college or university) and family habitus that is reasonable or rational behavior in context. This idea of organizational habitus is relevant to the discussion of match and undermatch because the socialized norms or college-going climate in one school may send students to selective colleges, while a school with a different habitus may send students to non-selective colleges. This differential organizational habitus or socialization in PK-12 may also explain the match or mismatch between student expectations and the reality of the institutional environment.

Social capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986) development occurs through the information and other resources acquired through one’s system of social network-relationships. It can be transformed into other types of capital, such as economic capital, and is (inter)dependent upon the cumulative strength of the individuals within one’s social network-relationships. Bourdieu specifically differentiates the presence of resources and the relationships that allow access to engage with them. This differentiation speaks to an intentionality required on behalf of the student in order to develop the necessary college-promoting social capital. In other words, the presence of resources is not enough. Relationships between individuals that foster access and engagement are a prerequisite for anyone to be able benefit from them (Portes, 1998). The dynamics of connection making are central to educational institutions, interactions, and results. Thereby, the lack of connections is inescapably part of inequity.

We can begin to see how match or undermatch or mismatch is a function of dynamic network-relationships between the student and other network members across his or her local

and campus communities. Indeed, we know that student relationships and overall human development are defined by the dynamic relationships between students and the multilayered contexts in which they are embedded (Varga & Zaff, 2018). If the broader system bestows on racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups differing amounts of social capital, it follows that some groups of students are more likely to match, undermatch, or mismatch than other groups of aspirants in the college choice and persistence processes.

Drawing on Bourdieu's framework, Stanton-Salazar (2011) elaborated a social capital framework for understanding the social networks, socialization, and educational attainment of students from economically disenfranchised communities. Empowerment social capital, characterized by the provision of institutional support by critically conscious institutional agents, comes with a socialization agenda aimed at transforming the consciousness of those they support, and at encouraging them to also become moral and caring agents devoted to changing the world. Institutional agents are high-status, non-kin people who occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification system, and who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support. Stanton-Salazar found that institutional agents, such as educators and administrators in PK-12 schools, college-promoting CBOs, or higher education institutions can play an empowering role such that relationships with these agents constitute more "bridging" social capital that provide access to unequally distributed resources, opportunities, or information related to college-readiness (e.g., academic aspirations and preparation), college enrollment (e.g., the degree of match between preparation, aspirations, and choice), college achievement (e.g., performance, persistence).

In that context of inequitable educational opportunities across PK-12 schools, CBO-educators become a primary source of information and direct assistance (i.e., institutional

support) for students from economically disenfranchised communities, including first-generation college aspirants, throughout the college choice process. The CBO can empower students by serving as a bridge to the network of relationships needed to limit the chance of undermatch.

In his examination of group dynamics, Coleman (1988) looked at social capital as a social good. His work with high school students led him to conclude that the complex social structures that bonded the students, school, and community together resulted in the success of both the students and schools (Coleman, 1987). He argued that social capital is embedded within dense social structures, which shape the actions of individuals within the structure (Coleman, 1988). The trustworthiness of the social environment and reciprocity are seen as important elements of Coleman's definition of social capital. He also acknowledged that although individuals do benefit from social capital, his vision of social capital as a construct was more applicable to the "public good" (Enfield, 2008). Coleman believed that because he saw social capital as important in the creation of human capital, which is the lifeblood of human and economic development (United Nations Development Programme, 2016).

In fact, we know if demographic and educational attainment trends continue, especially for men of color, the overall educational level of the American workforce will probably decline. In their study of the long-term consequences of affirmative action, Bowen and Bok (1998) found that Blacks with college degrees (from very selective institutions) were more likely to contribute to their communities through volunteer and leadership activities than were White degree holders from the same institutions. Thus, they made the argument that Black students' opportunities to gain prestigious college degrees served a much higher purpose than simply providing these students with economic advantages. In fact, they contend that the whole society was benefited,

rejecting the individualistic or independent premises that often accompany social capital (Coleman, 1988).

Similar to Coleman's theory, Putnam (2000) conceptualized social capital at the community level. He defined social capital as "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19). He posed his theory after observing what he felt was a decline in community engagement and connection in the United States. Putnam believed that the more engaged the citizens of a community were, the more the overall community (be it the local or campus, organizational or institutional, community) and individuals would benefit—i.e., learn, develop, and get ahead in life toward the American dream.

While all three of these theorists had different understandings of where in society social capital was most present, each references similar components: connections of individuals to networks, resources, trust, and reciprocity (Enfield, 2008). All three theorists present definitions of social capital in which the person or the group having social capital benefits or grows up to live the American dream, while the person or group that does not have social capital stagnates and the American dream becomes deferred yet again. Framing this in a historical context, we know that from the post-WWII years to the present, the income gap between individuals with and without a college education continues to grow. Clearly, parent education level has implications for the economic well-being of everyone living in the household. Children and grandchildren of WWII families who were recipients of their GI Bill of Rights, for instance, are more likely to attend a resource-rich PK-12 system focused on preparing students for college and successful careers. Conversely, children and grandchildren of veterans who were denied their GI

Bill of Rights are more likely to attend resource-poor PK-12 schools and have limited access to the college choice-persistence processes.

Putnam (2000) went one step further in describing two different forms of social capital: bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital (dubbed “getting by”) exists within groups (race, SES) that share a common identity (culture) and functions as psychological support or a psychological safety net to its members as well as engendering reciprocity. That is because bonding social capital is characterized by trusting and authentic interactions between the student and other network members in the campus environment. We can begin to visualize how bonding social capital would engender (multi) cultural integration and encourage the student to engage in the campus community.

To Bourdieu's (1986) point, we can see how the presence or absence of a close and supportive relationship may create a climate of trust and sense of belonging, or an atmosphere of mistrust and feeling of isolation, potentially resulting in a match or mismatch or reverse transfer.

Bridging social capital (dubbed “getting ahead”) develops between people with different identities and is useful for providing links to external resources and spreading information (Putnam, 2000). These forms of capital, although presented by Putnam, are implicitly present in Bourdieu’s and Coleman’s definitions as well. Though bonding capital is seen as critical for psychological well-being and emotional support, bridging capital is seen as more important for information and advancement. Indeed, we know that students’ exposure to information shapes their college choice-persistence processes and whether they match, undermatch, or mismatch.

Exposing youth to adults with higher levels of educational attainment seems like a simple and desirable way to transfer social capital. However, this is missing several key components of social capital that theorists (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Coleman et al., 1966; Putnam,

2000; Stanton-Salazar, 2011) have indicated are important. Namely, the components of bonding social capital, which include trust, connection, and reciprocity, are absent from many conceptualizations or assessments of social capital or are often not intentionally called out.

Regarding Bourdieu's point about intentionality needed on behalf of the student, relationships are required to propel youth development forward and are the foundation upon which all youth development is built (Varga & Zaff, 2018). It follows that student relationships and overall human (socio)development—i.e., overall human socialization—are defined by the dynamic (network-)relationships between a person and her or his context of resources (Varga & Zaff, 2018). Thus, high school and college age students learn, grow, develop, and succeed through their network-relationships, which might help explain how and why an individual student or group of students may or may not have access to the academic preparation as well as the particular college-promoting social and cultural capital needed to get ahead in life.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) point about the presence of potential social capital but not the actual access of that capital by students, I broadly define social and cultural capital as the combined social, (socio)cultural, (socio)economic, and (socio)psychological resources within relational developmental networks that are necessary to navigate the college choice and persistence processes.

In other words, the college-promoting resources that allow for successful college planning and completing the various steps in the college admissions process include access to information about college and financial aid, and the encouragement needed to convert aspirations into college enrollment (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2008; Roderick et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2011). High schools and outside organizations committed to college access and success can promote or limit a student's chances of undermatch through the resources (e.g.,

academic preparation, availability of college guidance), and norms (e.g., college-going climate, parental involvement) or structural supports (networks of parents, peers, teachers, and counselors) that they provide. Similarly, colleges and universities can promote or limit a student's chances of mismatch through the resources (e.g., college advising), and norms (e.g., college climate, parental involvement) or structural supports (networks of parents, peers, professors/advisors, and staff) that they provide.

Network-relationships within a school, CBO, and higher education institutions socialize students and subsequently encourage identity development, expectations, and social connections (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Together, these relationships within relational developmental systems allow for all human socialization (Lieberman, 2013). We can begin to see the power of network-relationships, particularly how they provide access to information and other resources and ultimately to the type of college-promoting cultural and social capital (i.e., the know-how) a student needs to access and engage with the college choice-persistence processes in a way that limits the chance of mismatch. The goal is for all students to feel a similar sense of belonging in their campus environment as they feel in their homes or local communities. Relationships with individuals in social institutions outside their own familial and ethnic network-relationships (such as college-promoting CBOs) may be influential as sources of social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Teachers, professors, and others within the student network-relationships can act as “institutional agents” to provide access to institutional resources and knowledge vital to educational success (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

These ideas are important for understanding the phenomena of match, undermatch, and mismatch. As the three papers will show, the early stages of college seeking, the subsequent stage of making choices and ultimately enrolling, and, finally, the students' ability to navigate

the postsecondary environments in which they find themselves all reflect the students' stock of social and cultural capital, the degree to which they have been able to develop these resources, and their capacity to utilize them. Each paper will present a conceptual argument tailored to the particular questions it pursues, and within that argument will note the specific ways that social and cultural capital development are relevant to those questions.

Common Methodological Approaches

The three studies that comprise this dissertation examine the college-participating experiences of college-ready, first generation college aspirants in their relational developmental or socialization support contexts—a high school, community-based organization, and institutional environments. A key objective was to develop a better understanding of the link between social and cultural capital development and the undermatch or mismatch phenomenon in the college choice-persistence processes. The three studies proceed with linked qualitative interpretive designs that maximize what can be learned from close examination and a fine-grained analysis of a few cases (e.g., the college seeking students) and the individuals they interact and engage with most intimately in the college choice-persistence processes, or as they subsequently move through postsecondary studies.

The studies illuminate the ways in which network-relationships and resources in each context surrounding the student shape the degree of match between preparation, aspirations, choices of application, and enrollment, as well as the level of engagement and sense of belonging in the institutional environment once the student matriculated. I analyze student cultural and social capital development within multilayered webs of support (i.e., public and private schools, a college-promoting local organization), and postsecondary institutions within which students influence and are being influenced by the respective network-relationships with “institutional

agents” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Such agents can be found in schools, outside organizations, institutions, and the broader environment. My choice of methodological approach is one that makes it possible to capture in detail how each student within a particular school, organization, and institution influences and is influenced by relational developmental agents (Varga & Zaff, 2018). The design of each study helps to reveal how dyadic relationships (e.g., student-counselor, student-peer, student-professor) are embedded within a broader context of relationships, supports, opportunities, and barriers—that is, a web of support within a school, organization, or institution that provide a student with the social and cultural capital needed to get ahead toward the American dream.

To arrive at issues of how context influences match, I chose students from groups that have been historically underrepresented in selective institutions, particularly first-generation college-participating students who are most likely to undermatch in their choices of application and enrollment and subsequently mismatch in their respective colleges or universities.

These were studies of students’ cultural and social capital development as it influenced their know-how in accessing and engaging the college-choice and persistence processes. Cultural and social capital were instrumentally, informationally, emotionally, and contextually defined to account for the interaction between social or (socio)cultural, (socio)economic, and (socio)psychological resources within a high school, organization, and institutions. The methodological approach I chose enabled me to explore the concepts of social and cultural capital development, and particularly the way network-relationships and resources interacted within their respective school, organizational, and institutional communities.

Interviews

Over the course of the three studies, I conducted semi-structured, 30-90-minute interviews with seven students and five adult participants (N = 12). Most of these were individual interviews, but because I was interested in the bonding relationships that the CBO (in Paper 2) helps students build, I interviewed young male participants together as a way to observe their interaction with each other. This was important to gain a better understanding of how these students may or may not support each other. Interviews were structured according to an interview guide to ensure consistent lines of inquiry, while allowing for flexibility in probing and further questioning (Seidman, 2013).

Participants in the three studies were college-ready first-generation college aspirants from historically underrepresented backgrounds who were most likely to experience undermatch in their choices of application and enrollment and mismatch after matriculating, within their respective relational developmental support contexts (i.e., a resource-poor urban public high school, a community-based organization committed to college access and completion, and a couple of selective, resource-rich, postsecondary institutions). For Papers 1 and 2, I also interviewed socialization or relational developmental agents (i.e., students, peers, teachers, counselors) in the school and organizational contexts in particular.

As Paper 3 was largely concerned with understanding the factors that influenced two first-generation college students (i.e., 1 African-American/Latina; 1 Latino mismatch and subsequent reverse transfers from their respective resource-rich institutions to open access, two-year colleges in their local communities, I only interviewed the students in this study. Each interview ranged from 30-90 minutes long.

After each interview, I wrote annotated field notes detailing overall environmental and contextual impressions (McDonough, 1997). These included interview summaries, which noted the presence or absence of examples of conceptual categories or anything else particularly noteworthy about the interview. I wrote analytical memos which I used to explore issues related to developing understanding of the conceptual categories derived from the framework. I analyzed the collected data using the constant comparison method, an inductive process that lets themes emerge from students' responses rather than fitting responses into predetermined categories (Merriam, 2009; Merriam, 1998).

Other Data Collection

To supplement what I could learn from interviews, and also to provide further insight into the relational (socio)developmental contexts for these students' choices of application and enrollment and subsequent experiences, I collected various documents. Namely, I took written data from the respective high school, organization, college websites related to their college-promoting structures, resources, policies, and practices intended to inform the college experience. For instance, I collected written data on each institution's mission and the expectations they put forth for students. These documents provided additional information on the organizational and institutional environment—i.e., the structures, resources, policies, and practices intended to inform the college-participating experience. They also often listed the learning goals and objectives of the programs, and described the various program activities in which the students were expected to participate.

Design Rationale and Limitations

Methodologically, my research in these papers uses a qualitative design identified as descriptive/interpretive by Elliot & Timulak (2005). According to the authors, descriptive

approaches center on the nature of certain phenomena and interpretive approaches on how phenomena come about. Such qualitative methods are necessary because this research seeks to expand our understanding of how both the high school and the CBO, along with the college environment, limit and promote undermatch or mismatch phenomena, as well as the ways students experience these processes.

The rationale for using these kinds of designs are several. With such small samples, these studies are meant to be both theoretical and exploratory. They have attempted to go beyond the quantitative studies' emphases on the incidence or frequency of undermatch, or its institutional correlates. Instead, my research approach focuses on how students come to make their decisions about where to go to college and the nature of their college-choice and persistence experiences. I chose a qualitative methodology to provide insights into the student interaction with her or his relational developmental contexts and the resulting experience—to defy undermatch only to mismatch and reverse transfer.

Given the small sample size of the studies, my findings cannot be generalized to wider populations. However, the information and findings of these studies can be used to design further research on influences in the college choice-persistence process for this population of students, as well as the influences on reverse transfer. Small qualitative studies such as this one can be easily scaled up. In addition, by understanding better the meaning of students' college choice and persistence processes, educators and policymakers can devise meaningful and effective policies and practices to address inequitable access, to better enable the development of intergenerational cultural and social capital, and to improve campus climates so that all students can thrive in them to help young people move toward their idea of the American dream.

Design Links and Dissertation Organization

The three study designs are linked, primarily by following the same individuals at multiple time points in the college choice-persistence processes. Paper 1, where I discuss student interaction with the high school context, explores the phenomenon of undermatch, wherein college-ready, low-income students often apply to and enroll in less competitive higher education institutions than their academic qualifications might permit.

In Paper 2, I discuss student interaction with the outside organizational context, examining how membership in a community-based organization (CBO) committed to college access and choice can support high school students in the college choice process. For example, the CBO assisted one student in successfully navigating the college choice process as an undocumented immigrant from Mexico.

Paper 3 explores the phenomena of mismatch and “reverse transfer,” and tells the story of two students who transferred from selective four-year colleges to community colleges (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009). It picks up from where the previous two papers left off, following the trajectories of two students from Paper 1 and Paper 2 after they left high school. It seeks to understand how low-income, first-generation college students experience the reverse transfer process, how it might impact their persistence, and what might have prevented the transfers.

Finally, I end with a brief chapter that draws conclusions about match and undermatch from the three papers and identifies their implications for high schools, CBOs, and higher educational institutions.

Further details about the design for each study can be found in each paper.

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II.

PAPER 1: THE ROLE OF INFORMATIONAL NETWORKS IN UNDERMATCHING: A CASE STUDY OF COLLEGE CHOICE IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

Abstract

Postsecondary access and college completion are significant concerns for communities as well as for policymakers and educators at every level in the United States. Although a student's college choice plays a large role in determining future success, many students undermatch in the college application process; in other words, they either enroll in less competitive institutions than their academic profiles would warrant and increase their likelihood of dropping out, or they forego college altogether. This phenomenon is prevalent among high potential students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, particularly Black and Latinx students, those groups with the fastest and largest growing populations but the lowest levels of educational attainment. Research suggests that social capital plays an instrumental role in the college choice process. Students' social capital includes the information and resources they can gather through a school-system generated network of relationships that helps them decide which college or university to apply to and attend. Relatively little research has explored the link between social capital and the phenomenon of students undermatching in the college choice process, specifically the way information, the lifeblood of social capital formation, flows (or does not flow) in this process. This study examines the role that social capital plays in explaining the undermatch phenomenon and presents findings from a qualitative case study of how high school based college-promoting resources and structures influence the college-seeking experiences of college-ready Black and

Latinx students. It clarifies how these relationships, resources, and resultant experiences may contribute to a student's college choice.

Introduction

Being...first-generation...that's definitely a struggle for all...first-generation students. Not having that role model to ask questions. A lot of students look up to their parents... Those are the biggest role models in their life. They [first-generation college aspirants] are not able to ask the people that make the most... effect on them. They [first-generation college aspirants] are not able to ask them [their parents] what were their experiences like [and] that's definitely a struggle. Not being able to know...how much student loans that you're taking out, just not having that path laid out for you is the biggest struggle.

—Reflections from Arya², a first-generation college student of color on her informational network

Grappling with the challenges facing her and other first-generation college-bound students, high school senior Arya described how her parents' lack of experience with higher education in the United States impacted her own college journey. While family encouragement and financial support can be key factors in student's aspirations and decisions to apply and enroll—as was the case for Arya—barriers to college often begin with limited knowledge at home about the college choice process (Ceja, 2006). In particular, this can limit where students decide to apply. As a result, Black, Latinx, low-income and potential first-generation college students will rely on their high schools' college-promoting resources to provide them with the information they need to find the higher education institution that is the best match with their academic abilities. For better or worse, many students from underrepresented backgrounds look to their guidance counselors and other high school staff to bridge the gap in knowledge and support.

Arya and her classmates are in a situation ripe for what is called “undermatch” in the literature on college choice. Students who undermatch end up at institutions that are less selective than one that would better “match” their academic profile and aspirations. This study

² All names in this document have been changed to protect privacy.

attempts to explore this phenomenon with particular emphasis on how the school context predisposes first generation students of color to undermatch or, conversely, enables better college matches.

The purpose of this study was to contribute to theory-building on college admissions and retention for underrepresented students. Specifically, I am examining the role of college-promoting resources and structures within a high school and the college-seeking experience for students from underrepresented backgrounds. I locate this research in several bodies of literature, including college choice, relationship, social network, social and cultural capital to better understand how relationships, information, and resources operate within an urban high school context to promote or limit undermatch or student choices of application and enrollment.

Research shows that college-ready first-generation college aspirants from urban backgrounds often undermatch due to limited access to information and guidance throughout the college application process (Dillon & Smith, 2013). High schools may be able not only to provide vital informational resources, but also to create networks of support as ways to limit undermatch. However, few existing studies specifically look at this topic. Although there has been a great deal of quantitative research investigating the fact of undermatching (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Dillon & Smith, 2013; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Hurwitz, Smith, Howell, & Pender, 2012; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Allensworth, 2008; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2009), relatively little qualitative research has explored the link between this phenomenon and the informational networks available to first-generation students of color from low-income backgrounds. Specifically, research is needed that traces the way information—the lifeblood of social capital formation—flows (or does not flow) in this process. Aiming to better understand this relationship, I explore these questions:

- What information do first-generation college aspirants, families, teachers, and counselors have about the college choice process, particularly how that process may be different for a student with an academic profile fit for a selective college?
- In what ways, if at all, does that information inform and enable (or fail to inform) the best matches between students' admissions profiles and the colleges to which they are applying?

In what follows, I first present a statement of the problem presented by undermatching. Then I provide a conceptual framework and a research design for answering those questions. Next, my study presents a review of the findings of my research and what they reveal about both undermatching and the role that school-based informational networks plays in that phenomenon. The paper concludes with a discussion of how schools and districts might address this issue of undermatching. My conclusion includes an exploration of which adults in a school community have the greatest influence on students' college decisions, and how, if at all, a school system can partner college-ready first-generation college aspirants with adults who have the information necessary to ensure students' academic profiles match their college choices.

Research Problem: College Choice, Undermatch, and Informational Networks in Urban High Schools

As previously stated in the introductory chapter, the effects of the undermatching of so many college-ready students from underrepresented backgrounds, (defined as African American, Latinx, Native American, low-income, and first-generation college students in this dissertation), touch both these students' futures, along with that of the United States (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Studies of undermatch (Bowen et al., 2009b; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011) show that students from underrepresented backgrounds who enroll in the most selective university they

can get into have higher completion rates and are likely to graduate sooner than comparable students who enroll in less selective institutions. Underrepresented students who attend the most selective colleges also have greater access to graduate and professional colleges and often end up with more satisfying careers than students who go to less-selective colleges (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Bok & Bowen, 1998; Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006). The full result of undermatching, then, is the furthering of the isolation and perpetual marginalization of these groups and a United States with the least intergenerational educational and income mobility of any advanced nation (Bloome, 2014; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010).

What might explain the undermatch phenomenon? To begin, undermatch is situated in the college choice literature, which has revealed how students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, particularly first-generation college aspirants, experience the various components of the college choice process in ways that differ from their college-going peers. When compared to these students, for example, research suggests that underrepresented students, including Black African, Latinx, Native American, low-income, and first-generation college students are less likely to have parents who attended college and thus have experience with the college choice process (Ceja, 2006). These students are more likely to attend resource-poor high schools and, thus, researchers argue, they are less likely to be academically prepared and more likely to attain lower levels of academic achievement (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Oakes, 1992; Oakes & Guiton, 1995). They may also be less likely to understand college costs and the financial aid process (Avery & Kane, 2004; Perna, 2006); and less likely to complete the necessary steps in the application process (Avery & Kane, 2004; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Roderick et al., 2011).

Although the research points to these gaps in students' experience, we need to note that students' ability for self-motivation, self-efficacy, and perseverance are also helpful in providing insight into student success; in addition, goal-oriented behaviors and achievement motivation also positively influence student achievement (Perna, 2006). Furthermore, stereotype threat based on race and gender affect performance, both by way of diverting focus and fear of confirmation bias (Steele, 1997, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

While more Black, Latinx, low-income, and first-generation college students than ever before are participating in the college application and enrollment processes, where undermatch is estimated to most likely to occur (Rodriguez, 2013; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013), many students remain unaware of their options for college and financial aid. This phenomenon is pervasive in high poverty urban districts and resource-poor high schools (Roderick et al., 2011, 2008). The public schools in low-income, urban communities with large numbers of first-generation college-bound students of color often do not have peers, teachers, counselors or other administrators who have knowledge about selective colleges and their admissions processes (Roderick et al., 2011). These public schools are often understaffed, with each counselor typically serving 437 students, which “exceeds the 250-to-1 maximum ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association” (Clinedinst & Koranteng, 2017).³ The consequence of this is that counselors only spend an average of 38 minutes per student annually counseling them about admissions and financial aid (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011). This limited counseling is because in addition to college guidance, these counselors are often also responsible for scheduling and connecting students to social services. Their focus is often on high school

³ Per Clinedinst and Koranteng (2017), “the student-to-college counselor ratio is based on both the total number of counselors who exclusively provide college counseling for students and the total number who provide college counseling among other services for students. As such, it overestimates the focus on college counseling. Both full-time and part-time counselors were included in this calculation” (p. 24).

graduation, not on preparing students for postsecondary opportunities (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2012; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; McDonough, 2005).

There have been countless attempts to improve the dissemination of information, particularly in urban settings, using websites and college access programs. However, information alone has not changed the demographics of students enrolling in selective colleges (Hoxby & Turner, 2013). Colleges and universities are seeking to diversify their student bodies by increasing the number of low-income students and students of color, but there are often assumed to be too few qualified students within urban communities to justify sending admissions recruiters there (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Many of the parents and other adults in these communities have not attended college or have attended open-access colleges (McDonough, 1997; Muhammad, 2008; Perez & McDonough, 2008). As a result of the lack of information available to them, students are left to follow the patterns in their high schools that have been laid out for them—to stay home after graduation and get a job or attend the local open-access college (see Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

We know that a vast array of information associated with applying to college is available (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2013). On the receiving end, students need to both access and process this information in particular ways—from developing sufficient awareness of the wide variety of colleges and universities to determining the coursework and tests that must be taken to qualify and compete for college admissions. Students also need to understand how federal, state, and institutional policies, such as financial aid, might affect their choices, as well as how a college's selectivity may impact their future career and life prospects.

The ability to access and process these disparate threads of information reflects a student's accumulated social capital—that is, his or her combined social, economic, and

psychological resources (Bourdieu, 1986). Students from higher socioeconomic groups who already have a great deal of social capital gathered from their participation in those groups and resource-rich schools with access to the dominant social capital have often been given clear strategies for the kind of education they should seek, giving them a distinct advantage in the college application process (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; McDonough, 1997). In contrast, students from historically marginalized backgrounds must consider whether the investment in the college choice process is worth the perceived financial burden (Avery & Kane, 2004; Perna & Steele, 2011), the possibility of being alienated by their communities, and the mental toll of insecurities about whether they are actually prepared to be successful in college (Bloom, 2008; Coleman, 1987). To be sure, these insecurities are not merely students' own but the mental toll imposed by microaggression and messages of not belonging that they may have heard they might experience there (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014).

For these underrepresented students, applying to college is not as simple as completing the requisite coursework or filling out an application. Coleman (1988) has written about the difficulties students from historically underrepresented backgrounds experience when simply starting to consider college, which often requires challenging the norms and expectations of the larger society and their communities—both at school and at home (Coleman, 1987). They must reconcile the complex set of messages they receive, messages enforced by internal or external sanctions both positive and negative, including the distribution of social support, ostracism, designation of honor and status, conferral of rewards, and expressions of approval and disapproval. The college application process also requires the input and influence of a variety of stakeholder groups in order for students to navigate the web of structural arrangements,

constraints, opportunities, and barriers through which school context (academic preparation, availability of college guidance, college-going climate), social class, and parental educational background together shape the process of college planning and choice (McDonough, 1997).

Indeed, the complexity of the college choice process is significant. Just consider that the goal of this process in resource-poor schools has typically been to get students into “a” college (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). But, as noted previously, research has long shown that the particular college a student attends has implications for society (McDonough, 1997). When college-ready students undermatch by enrolling in less-selective colleges, it perpetuates stereotypes about the number of capable students from different class and racial groups (Bloome, 2014; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). This in turn impacts students’ social and cultural capital development, college graduation rates (Adelman, 2006), professional success, and ultimately the productivity of society (Bloome, 2014; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Fosnacht, 2014). Matching students—that is, finding the best higher education fit for their academic profiles, as well as their financial, social, and personal needs or preferences (Harris, 2014; Hurwitz et al., 2012)—is about more than merely providing access to better or more well-endowed institutions that will more effectively serve students. After all, these resource-rich institutions do not have all the answers. And, as Tierney (1999) reminds us, students from economically disenfranchised communities “are not seen as broken or ‘at risk’ but instead are viewed as valuable resources for their communities and society at large” (p. 87). Still, matching has the potential to disrupt economic realities and the perpetuation of societal discrepancies by providing students and their families, and eventually their communities, with the social capital necessary to change their realities (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; McDonough, 1997).

As it stands in our society, students from historically marginalized backgrounds do not have access to the network of relationships necessary for processing the information about college and financial aid. Kirst and Venezia (2004) suggest that even though there is information available about the college choice process, many—students, high school teachers, and counselors alike—do not have access to the process in its entirety. Although it has been suggested that college attendance is driven purely by academic ability, McDonough (1997) challenges this assumption and asks us to consider other components that may impact students' college choices. She reminds us that these decisions are influenced by several factors, including the inequities in the investment of resources across the educational system, the way schooling is organized as well as in familial college-going cultural and social capital (McDonough, 1997).

Conceptual Framework

The college choice process reflects an intricate mechanism of social capital development. Put simply, the idea of social capital, rooted in seminal work of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988, 1966) is a construct combining social, economic, and psychological resources that are available to individuals through networks of relationships with other people. Individuals can accumulate and make use of these resources to the extent that they can access and participate in these networks as accepted members (Bourdieu, 1986). Individuals' growing capacity to enter into these relational networks and their increasing participation in them reflects the extent of their social capital development.

In this study, I locate information pertinent to college seeking as central to that social capital development. As such, students' social capital includes the information and resources they can gather through their social networks (or the structures of relationships linking social actors or agents—in this case, peers, parents, teachers, counselors and others in a district and

school) to help them achieve their goals—in this case, decide which college or university to apply to and attend (Bourdieu, 1986a; Coleman, 1988; González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Hossler & McDonough, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and McDonough (1997) describe an application process that includes three steps spread out across five or six years. Information dissemination is essential for students to develop postsecondary aspirations. Student aspirations begin at the predisposition stage of the college choice process, when a student begins to develop educational and post-educational aspirations (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler & McDonough, 1998). Students must develop aspirations in elementary/middle school, as it is these early goals that will inform their choices in selecting coursework to plan for college entrance requirements. The search or exploration phase follows predisposition, in which students seek out information about colleges that fulfill their financial and academic needs. The process culminates in choices about application and enrollment (McDonough, 1997)—the phase in which undermatch has been estimated to most likely occur. The point of admission includes application, admission to the university, and culminates in enrollment (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Varga & Zaff (2018) remind us that the presence of relationships is the foundation upon which all student development is built. Students learn, grow, and develop through relationships, which subsequently encourage identity development and provide the social connections that are necessary for future success (Lerner, 2013; Lieberman, 2013; Varga & Zaff, 2018). Social capital is produced at three levels: individual (Bourdieu, 1985), group (Coleman, 1988), and community (Putnam, 2000). Students' social capital is thus developed through a number of different kinds of institutional and adult relationships (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

In addition, Coleman (1988) points out that people's actions are shaped in all ways by their social contexts, by norms, trust in others, social networks, and social organization. When students and their parents don't know how to navigate the college match process because they're the first in their families trying to figure it out, they need support and encouragement. Therefore, high school students' who do not have college selection and attendance in their social environments will rely on the high school's perspective on desirable college choices of application and enrollment. That institution will shape how these students perceive their higher education opportunities. No one first-generation student or student of color perceives the opportunity structure in its entirety, but instead, imagines schools that seem "right" or "appropriate," or schools that seem as though they will feel comfortable.

The perceptions and assumptions of stakeholders about college and about the admissions process have implications for how students seek out colleges (McDonough, 1997). Some students believe they are entitled to a particular kind of collegiate education based on their family's habitus--that is, their educational background and social class (McDonough, 1997). Other students believe they are destined to study at the local community college or that a higher education may be out of their reach altogether. These students often have limited access to resources, particularly those available in their school-generated network of relationships.

Students' abilities to access and process information about the college application process is influenced by the relationships in their social networks. The types of relationships students have are critical to the process, because relationships carry with them access to information. Coleman (1988) discusses the concept that Putnam (2000) later calls "bonding" relationships between people in a social network (i.e., a school) with a common identity (SES, race) or shared norms (e.g., college-going climate). The relationships students have drive the decisions they

make about high school course selection, involvement in school activities, and ultimately college selection. Strong relationships with peers, parents, counselors, and teachers are beneficial for a variety of reasons. However, if these people have limited information and experience related to the college choice process, then that is what these “bonding” relationships will deliver—limited knowledge that leads to misunderstandings about coursework, standardized tests, selective admissions, cost, and financial aid. The consequence of this is that students often undermatch—and do not enroll in colleges that match their academic qualifications.

As previously mentioned, counselors and other educators in resource-poor schools are often focused on ensuring that all students graduate from high school, not on the process of preparing students for postsecondary opportunities (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2012; Kirst & Venezia, 2004), which means these adults often do not possess significant knowledge about the college choice process (McDonough, 1997). The reality is that better knowledge about what is required for college success is needed, and not just by students. Parents, teachers, and counselors need more and better access to college-promoting networks and information that can guide students to the college-going courses, skills, and competencies. This is particularly true for those working with students who occupy historically marginalized positions in society and schooling (Kirst & Venezia, 2004).

Stanton-Salazar (2011) and Dornbusch (1995) found that institutional agents in schools, such as counselors, play a gatekeeper role. Relationships with agents who possess useful knowledge constitute “bridging” social capital (Putnam, 2000) that can provide students access to unequally distributed resources, opportunities, or information related to success in school. Those who engage students in the college choice process can provide critical information about the myriad of U.S. colleges and universities, course selection, standardized testing, admissions,

and financial aid applications. However, if this information merely gets students to any college, rather than to the college that best matches their needs, these college-promoting relationships are insufficient (McDonough, 1997).

An additional complication is that information about the college admissions process is often disjointed and inequitable, depending on the access students have to those who are knowledgeable about the process (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Many colleges are now using technology to share information about the school, such as details about the admissions process and how to submit an application (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2013). However, not all students and families can take advantage of this method of college research due to a limited access to technology or social media. Furthermore, other critical pieces of information are not always available on a selective college's website, particularly the information about admissions and financial aid policies (Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Rodriguez, 1998) and specifics about many scholarships (Perna et al., 2008). Even in cases where this information is available on selective colleges' websites, students may not be able to access the information because they often do not know to look. Not knowing what to look for is also often a result of not having access to a school system that has a history or culture of providing students with the opportunity to attend a selective college, reminding us of the intentionality required on behalf of the student to generate social capital. Bourdieu (1986) specifically differentiates between the mere presence of potential and the network-relationships that allow people to access to them. A person needs to be able to access and engage with resources to benefit from them. Put another way, knowing how (or having the know-how) to take advantage of existing resources is a prerequisite to social capital development (Portes, 1998).

Adding to the challenge of gaining the knowledge of how to apply to selective colleges and universities, admissions plans vary from college to college, and some institutions may have several admissions levels, e.g., regular decision, early action, and early decision (Clinedinst & Koranteng, 2017). Also, “need-blind” admissions policies have been developed in the past several decades by many of the most selective colleges (e.g., Bowdoin College, Brown University) that allow admissions committees to look at students without consideration for their financial situations. These policies also aim to ensure that loans are not a part of the financial aid package for low-income students. Understanding this information helps students to decide which colleges they will apply to and attend. In making the assertion “The polarization of the postsecondary system matters because resources matter,” Carnevale & Strohl (2013, p. 7) inform us:

The 468 most selective colleges spend anywhere from two to almost five times as much per student. Higher spending in the most selective colleges leads to higher graduation rates, greater access to graduate and professional schools, and better economic outcomes in the labor market, when comparing with white, African-American, and Hispanic students who are equally qualified but attend less competitive schools. Greater postsecondary resources and completion rates for white students concentrated in the 468 most selective colleges confer substantial labor market advantages, including more than \$2 million dollars per student in higher lifetime earnings, and access to professional and managerial elite jobs, as well as careers that bring personal and social empowerment [which has implications for students’ intergenerational social capital development].

Taken together, relationships and information are essential to a student’s postsecondary achievement, educational attainment, social capital development, and opportunity to learn. When schools communicate with families early to share information about available resources, they can provide students the time necessary to develop a plan to finance college, particularly for a selective college that may otherwise seem out of reach financially (Hossler & McDonough, 1998). Ultimately, a student’s college choice is the result of a complex web of relationships or

network-relationship between individual agency, family educational background, and the organization of the educational system (McDonough, 1997). If high schools and others having information about colleges cultivated more intentional partnerships with students and families, students may be empowered to understand the benefits of better matching to a college.

Research Methodology

This research examined the college-seeking experiences of college-ready, first-generation college aspirants in the context of their high school environments. Students' college choices were situated in a network of relationships arising from a public school context. A key objective was to develop a better understanding of the link between social capital and the undermatch phenomenon in the college choice process. For that purpose, I used a qualitative case study design, which is valued by scholars as a way to examine complex social interactions involving multiple stakeholders and their interactions (Kahlke, 2014). The interpretive/descriptive design is also a very effective means of exploring practical problems, such as policies in schools and situations or norms arising from everyday practice, as well as for determining how things came to be as they are (Elliot & Timulak, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In short, qualitative methods help us understand complex, messy human interaction and resulting experience because it allows interviewees to explain that experience as they lived it and in their own words.

Given the nature of my research questions, I determined that generic interpretive qualitative case study research, with both the school and the student treated as a "case" and a primary unit of analysis, was the most appropriate design for this study. I employed a variety of data-gathering techniques to collect a wide range of information which allowed for triangulation of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The data come from student-, school-, and district-level interviews, observations, and analysis of relevant documents.

Sample Choices and Rationale

The purpose of this study was not to generalize about the population of college-ready college-seeking students who have participated in the college choice process, but was, instead, a theory-building exercise meant to generate a deeper understanding of the college-promoting resources and structures within a high school and the college-seeking experience for students from underrepresented backgrounds. In a case study with a bounded system (e.g., a school) that includes multiple subjects, participants are purposely sampled to provide strategically differing vantage points on college-ready student experiences, and to enable scholars to mine those school-based resources and norms as well as those student experiences for insights that would help to understand the undermatch phenomenon (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

To address the public school context, which is situated within a nation that ties school funding to real estate taxes and in which opportunity is distributed, to some extent, along color lines, and family background may determine if and where college-ready young people go to college, I purposely sampled a school that had a poorly resourced and structured college guidance support system, as defined by counselor to student ratio (1 to 400; McDonough, 1997). Because large urban high schools where the majority of students are low-income and students of color are more prone than others to undermatch, I was also intentional in selecting a school where more than two-thirds of students were from low-income backgrounds (72% on free-and-reduced lunch) and 68% were students of color (Hurwitz et al., 2012). Focusing on an urban high school, furthermore, provides an important perspective as these students have historically relied primarily on their high schools to select a college (Muhammad, 2008).

There was a high rate of mobility in South Sound, Washington, because of poverty; 72% of Narrows High School (NHS) students qualify for free-and-reduced lunch. Many students in

South Sound attended more than one high school during their PK-12 careers. Students of all races played together in neighborhoods, then sat next to one another in classrooms and at lunch tables. Although there are pockets of students from the same ethnic groups who sat together, the norm at NHS was that students appeared to not see race as a dividing factor. It was not uncommon to hear a student turn to a student on one side and speak English, then turn to a student on the other side and speak another language. Many students were fluent in more than one language, although very few were recent immigrants qualifying for English language services.

Although 68% of the student population were students of color, the same was not true for the staff, who were predominantly Caucasian. Of the 70 staff members, eight were visibly people of color. The rest, including the entire administrative team, were White. The staff also appeared to be mostly veteran teachers. According to the Washington State Report Card (2015), the average teacher at NHS had been teaching for approximately 12 years. Fifty-five percent of the teachers had earned master's degrees. Two of the administrators were new to the building, and one was in his first year as an administrator. One of the original counselors, a veteran in the building, resigned during the first week of school, and the school was left without a counselor for almost 400 students. A new counselor (a college and career specialist) had recently been hired. Approximately 100 students more than those projected to attend NHS the previous spring were in attendance in autumn of 2014, so the administrative team was still in the process of hiring staff. Apparently, two AP teachers were hired just three weeks into the school year. At the time of the study, one to two positions remained unfilled, while the principal looked for qualified candidates.

Because I was interested in a student's social capital development, I focused on the

district and school-based resources—that is, availability and delivery of information and guidance—along with structures or norms—that is, the set of colleges in which students tended to enroll, a measure of peer influence (Roderick et al., 2011). These factors can be indicative of the information and guidance about colleges and universities to which students are exposed in the school context and, subsequently, to which they are encouraged to aspire to apply. These structural supports and resources—that is, the high school’s web of support—can help us understand how a school system might promote undermatch.

Interviews

Because school-based resources and structures can influence students’ postsecondary decisions and promote or limit the chance of undermatch, I interviewed seven people (N = 7), including a district- and a school-level counselor, a teacher, and four first-generation college aspirants (i.e., a focal student network of school-based relationships). Questions focused on participants’ backgrounds, their knowledge of the college application process and opportunities for financial aid, as well as the district and school’s college-promoting college-going climate. These questions were aimed to help me understand the information that a student might receive from her or his relationships arising from the school context (Roderick et al., 2011). I also examined how these relationships—which we know to be the foundation upon which all youth development rests (Lieberman, 2013; Varga & Zaff, 2018)—influenced a student’s college choice process. Interviews were semi-structured, ranged from 30-60 minutes, and were audio recorded.

Counselor interviews. In a 40-minute interview with the district-level counselor, Mr. Isaac, I collected information about his background, as well as information about partnerships and policies being enacted to promote student success in the college choice process. For

example, I noted a support network of local colleges, universities, and college access providers and the various scholarships they made available to students. Among the policies highlighted was “Academic Acceleration,” which was implemented with the goal of disrupting a practice of “tracking” within PK-12 schools (that extends across levels of the educational “pipeline” and the college choice process) and improving student academic preparation (a school-level college-promoting resource). According to the counselor, this policy had increased the number of students taking Advanced Placement courses. This new expectation for rigor put pressure on the staff at NHS to raise the bar. Several teachers had been asked to teach Advanced Placement for the first time and had attended training provided by The College Board in the summer. In 2015 there were 14 teachers teaching 30 AP classes, including a variety of English, history, science, and math classes. Taking four years of each of these academic areas is critical to a student’s competitiveness in the selective college admissions process. I also collected information about the district’s “Plan4College” program. These details helped to illuminate the district- and school-generated network of relationships, resources, policies, and practices that influence students’ application and enrollment decisions (Hossler & McDonough, 1998).

I then conducted a 60-minute interview with the school-level lead guidance counselor, Ms. Samuelson and asked questions about her background and knowledge of college admissions and financial aid, students’ college aspirations, and the nature of the guidance support (or counseling interactions) as well as the school’s college-promoting initiatives. I also recorded information about her caseload, knowledge of the state financial aid program (e.g., College Bound Scholarship), and the influence of different college access providers (e.g., College Success Foundation—CSF; TRIO—Upward Bound; Communities in Schools—CiS). She also mentioned the ASCEND Academy, a program to aid the transition from 8th to 9th grade with the

intention of ensuring that students graduate from high school. She introduced me to the recently-hired school-level college and career (C&C) specialist, identified in this study as Ms. Jones, who, in turn, introduced me to the students and to the teacher whom she described as having “strong relationships” with students.

Teacher interview. In my 40-minute interview with the teacher, identified in this study as Mr. Brown, questions focused on his background, relationships with students, and knowledge of the college application process. For the previous nine years he had been an AP literature teacher, the leadership advisor to ASB (Associated Student Body), and a mentor for the various school-based college access providers (CSF, TRIO, Upward Bound). Along with preparing students in the classroom for college, he accompanied students on field trips to local college and university campuses and college fairs, led personal statement workshops, and wrote countless letters of recommendations for students, a mandate for selective college admissions and financial aid. This interview helped not only to illuminate a teacher’s supportive relationships with students but also how the college-promoting environment within a school system can socialize members of a community and subsequently influence students’ aspirations and decisions regarding which colleges to apply to and attend.

Student interviews. Finally, I conducted 30- to 60-minute interviews with four low-income, potential first-generation college students of color who were middle- to high-range academic performers (GPA range 2.7-3.7/4.0). These students are identified as Arya, Gendry, HotPie, and Shan in this study. Two of the four students were Black (HotPie and Shan), one was Latinx (Gendry), and one was biracial (Arya, who has an African-American father and Mexican American mother). Arya told me that she “identifies as Black because that’s what I look like,

but I equally embrace both my Mexican and African American backgrounds.” With her permission, I refer to Arya as Black in this study.

Of these students, I chose Arya and Gendry to be the focal students, because their combination of academic preparation (i.e., a measure of their developed human capital: 3.5+ GPA with a curriculum of honors and AP courses) and leadership potential (which speaks to the students’ agency and ability to connect with others) suggest they would be the most likely to compete in selective admissions. Arya, who had a 3.8 GPA, was also the executive president of the ASB, and Gendry was an executive senator.

Other Data Collection

To supplement what I could learn from interviews, and also to provide further insight into the context for these students’ college choice making, I conducted observations in the school and collected various documents.

Observations. In five visits to the school, I observed and collected information on interactions between the school-level college and career specialist and students. I also took notes on college and military recruiters who visited the college and career center to meet with the college and career specialist and students. Moreover, I collected observational and written data on the college flyers on the walls of the college and career center and on the background of the C&C specialist.

Documents. I took written data from the district’s and the school’s websites related to their college-promoting structures, resources, policies, and practices. For instance, I collected written data on college access providers—TRIO, a federal program; College Success Foundation, a state-funded program; and Communities in Schools, a local program. These programs support first-generation college students throughout the college choice process by

providing college counseling, mentoring, tutoring, advocacy, and opportunities for field trips to colleges and other cultural centers. All of these programs also have staff and offices at the high school. One of these programs was ASCEND, which was established to provide extra support and nurturing for a select group of students who attend classes in blocks together and are provided with intentional instruction on study skills and goal-setting. The goal of this program is to ensure that more students complete their first year of high school on-target to graduate. In 2015, 70% of Narrows High School students graduated on-time. In previous years, the state's Learning Assistance Program (LAP) had provided resources for after school tutoring services. However, in 2015, those resources were not available, so the school was struggling to provide that kind of support at a time when students were being asked to take more rigorous courses.

Because the Act Six Leadership and Scholarship Initiative—a community-based leadership development and college retention and success program—was mentioned during the interviews, I collected data from its website as well. Drawing on all of these resources, I reviewed the college-promoting resources and norms/structures in the school and district.

Analysis

After transcribing and reviewing each interview, I developed initial codes, drawing upon my proposed research questions and framing concepts (i.e., social and cultural capital). I analyzed the collected data using the constant, comparison method, which allowed me to examine the variation in responses across different participants (Merriam, 1998). These comparisons then allowed me to develop more focused codes (e.g., information, relationships) across the data. Through extensive memoing, I next constructed broader categories based on the recurring patterns that began to show developing theoretical picture (Charmaz & Bryant, 2010). I also drew on my observation notes and collected documents concerning the overall school

context and the college-going climate for triangulation with the interview data, and included these notes into the coding scheme. By sorting the categories into data displays, I was eventually able to synthesize these categories into three themes, which are described in the findings (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Limitations

My position in this research, as the investigator as well as the “research instrument,” both enables and limits the design. Situated in the school context, this study was designed so that I could learn from counselors, teachers, and students who are in the college choice process. As such, the study yielded a provisional picture of how this high school provided support and what effects that support appeared to have. However, setting up the study this way meant that I did not learn much or anything about some other facets of the overall support story. For example, I did not learn about other students in the high school. It is possible that there are multiple “support systems” within the school related to college choice that depend on different individuals and groups of student peers. I only captured one of them, and the others may differ.

Another significant limitation resides in how I learned about the family’s role in undermatching. While clearly part of the story, at least conceptually, the potential influences of family members (e.g., knowledge or lack of knowledge about college going, ability or inability to enable their children’s access to useful social networks) were only visible through what the students said. I didn’t interview family members independently; doing so could have amplified or at least corroborated or corrected what I learned from the students themselves.

Positionality

Particularly with qualitative research, it is important to identify the researcher’s position in relation to the topic under study (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In my case, I am

familiar with the selective college admissions process through my prior employment as an admissions officer at a highly selective four-year liberal arts college. Over the course of several years, I witnessed how the educational system advantaged some students while disadvantaging others. As result, I could be seen as an “insider” with respect to why and how students make decisions about which colleges to apply to and attend. However, in this case I also was able to maintain an “outsider” perspective because I had no prior connection with these particular students, staff, school and district. Since I had no supervisory or evaluative role with the participants, they may have been more forthcoming and less inhibited with their responses.

A further aspect of my positionality as research instrument resides in my own college-seeking background. I, too, am a first-generation college goer, a student of color from a low-income background, though not one who undermatched. While this background probably enhanced my capacity to hear and understand what the students were experiencing, it may also have provided a set of assumptions or provisional answers to my research questions that could have blinded me to certain aspects of the undermatch phenomenon.

Findings

The main purpose of this study was to examine the college-seeking experiences of college-ready first-generation college aspirants within the context of their school to determine how and why they make their college choices. The students examined experienced varied levels of supportive relationships with adults who had different and limited understandings of the college-choice process. Three themes emerged from the data analysis, with respect to how the adults’ intentionality and their knowledge about the college choice process influence students’ college decisions: (1) access to information, (2) relationships, and (3) and structural support of

college-ready, first-generation college aspirants to attend the colleges and universities that best match their academic profiles and interests.

Access to Information

The students and educators interviewed from South Sound Public Schools and Narrows High School had varied levels of access to information about the college process, based on their own backgrounds and experiences and what they themselves have been exposed to in the school environment. Each “stakeholder” in this study had different information about who should go to college, and there was little understanding about what kinds of students should go to which colleges. The information to which the adults in this school environment had access was very limited, evidenced by the college options recommended, the set of institutions graduates traditionally enrolled in, and the degree of guidance offered throughout the college application process.

College choices of application and enrollment. Of the students and adults interviewed, only the focal student, Arya, appeared familiar with colleges outside her home state of Washington. While both the district-level director of counseling, Mr. Isaac and the school’s college and career specialist, Ms. Jones, went to Washington State University, both the lead high school counselor, Ms. Samuelson and the AP literature teacher, Mr. Brown attended Pacific Lutheran University at some point. None of the adults had attended an out-of-state college.

The school itself also had limited contact with out-of-state institutions. For example, when Ms. Samuelson spoke about the colleges her students were exposed to through the district-promoted college fair, she primarily listed local open-access colleges: “TCC [Tacoma Community College], Pierce [College]... pretty much all of the state schools have a

representative here.” Referring to out-of-state colleges, Mr. Isaac informed me that while “they do traveling trips...they didn’t make it to Pierce county.”

In speaking about providing students with information about out-of-state colleges, Ms. Samuelson said that she was concerned that, by the time she connected to students to talk about choosing colleges, “It’s awfully late to start doing the research, or [referring to the students] it’s ‘I don’t want to be too far away from home...especially being that I’ve never left home.’” Most of the 300-plus students she supported “will attend TCC,” located several miles away. Adding to the point, Ms. Samuelson also informed me that:

Narrows High School had the most students attend college planning day at University of Washington-Tacoma (UW-T)...and the highest number of applicants from any one school building... We also had more applications to Wazoo [Washington State University] this year than ever before from Narrows High School.

In addition, Ms. Samuelson wondered if with the College Bound Scholarship, a state-funded scholarship that covers tuition, “there is this push to feed the in-state colleges.” When asked which school students perceived to be the best, Ms. Samuelson said that the University of Washington-Seattle (UW-Seattle) was the best school and added that the valedictorian (also a first-generation college-bound student of color) would attend UW-Seattle. She noted that he only applied to one additional college, a small private university—Seattle Pacific University (SPU).

Mr. Brown also felt that most students from NHS would attend local colleges, primarily Washington State University, University of Puget Sound (UPS), Pacific Lutheran University (PLU), and the University of Washington-Tacoma. He mentioned the UW Husky Promise—a University of Washington financial aid program—and an agreement with UPS, both of which provide low-income students with full tuition support as a way, according to Mr. Brown, “to

encourage college-ready state residents to stay local.” He told of only several students in his career who have ventured outside the state—one with a full-need-based scholarship to Stanford and Arya, who was now considering the University of San Diego. Mr. Brown was only aware of the colleges to which he has been directly exposed and encouraged students to do their own research online about colleges outside Washington state.

Neither Gendry’s nor Arya’s parents had college degrees, although both students had older sisters who attended the UW-Tacoma. Gendry’s college choices at application were limited to Western Washington University and Pacific Lutheran University, Mr. Brown’s undergraduate and graduate school alma maters. As Gendry put it, “PLU, it was my dream school...and the school that felt right in my heart. It also felt right financially.”

Arya, on the other hand, decided to apply to a variety of colleges in- and out-of-state—University of San Diego, Pepperdine University, University of Washington-Seattle, University of Puget Sound, Western Washington University, Seattle University (SU), Seattle Pacific Lutheran, Washington State University, and Pacific Lutheran University. She described most of her college choices as “backup schools,” and Pepperdine, a selective university, as “a reach school.” Arya was aware of the difference between public and independent institutions and knew that she would rather attend an independent college because, in Arya’s words, “I like having a smaller community and being able to have that one-on-one with my teachers, most importantly.” She reported that she had “want[ed] to move to California [her] entire high school career” and was determined to find a college there, which she did in University of San Diego. Unlike Gendry, who had some support throughout the process of applying to local colleges, Arya was left to figure out the pieces on her own.

The college application process. Conversations with the teacher, counselors, and students at Narrows High School suggested that the school did not appear to have a plan for walking all college-ready students through the college application process. Ms. Samuelson, the school counselor, mentioned that the college-access programs in the building seemed to have taken on many of the support responsibilities of the application process for the students they served. When asked how she supported high-performing students, Ms. Samuelson responded, “I have maybe let go too much of the college planning piece to the college access providers [TRIO, College Success Foundation, CiS], but they each have a limited group of students they’re serving.” The part the counseling center did play in the process was to write letters of recommendation and to inform colleges about the achievements for those students applying via the Common Application (or the Common App—an undergraduate college admission application that applicants may use to apply to U.S. colleges and universities in 48 states and the District of Columbia, as well as in Canada, China, and many European countries).⁴

According to the teacher, Mr. Brown, “I made myself available for students throughout the college [application] process... [and] wrote over 20 reference letters this year [2015],” including letters in support of Arya’s and Gendry’s college applications. In fact, he continued, “Most of the letters were for students who applied to [the] Act Six [Leadership and Scholarship Initiative]”, which Herron (2012, p. 3) described as:

...a community-based full-tuition, full-need urban leadership award program... intentionally designed as a partnership between urban community-based nonprofits and private, residential, predominantly White liberal arts colleges that targets high school seniors from historically marginalized urban neighborhoods and schools, particularly students of color, students from low-income families, and first generation college students.

⁴ <http://www.commonapp.org/explore-colleges>.

For fall 2015, according to the organization's website:

Act Six selected approximately 35 of Tacoma-Seattle's most promising urban leaders, including Gendry, for scholarships to Pacific Lutheran University as well as Northwest University, Trinity Lutheran College, Whitworth College, and Gonzaga University" [—a selective college].

The support the students reported receiving from Mr. Brown was primarily in the form of encouragement. Additionally, Gendry raved about the support he received from one advisor from the school-based college access programs, College Success Foundation, to complete the Act Six application. He had other knowledge about the student profile that colleges are looking to accept: "Colleges look at what you're doing... GPAs and SAT scores. They matter."

Similarly, Arya knew that grades and test scores were important. As she noted, "I don't have the highest SAT scores, and I understand that, but I wasn't going to let that stop me from applying to the school I want to go to." Schools are always looking for minority students...[who] are academically inclined and...involved," which she hoped to leverage to her advantage.

Yet, while Arya had a basic understanding of the admissions process for out-of-state institutions, she did not feel confident that her academic profile met the requirements for selective colleges. She said, "I feel like if they [college admissions committees] saw my scores and my [3.8] GPA, [the committees would say that] they are not good enough." Arya, who was in fact the student body president and one of the most visible figures at her school for both her leadership and academics wondered if she had done enough in her community to be recognized as worthy for those universities, because "they're looking for students that are more involved with their community, maybe students who are able to balance...academics and...involvement in school." These insights and others demonstrated that she was aware of some of the critical elements of the application process to selective colleges. For example, she was aware that some colleges required students to write essays during the application process, while others did not.

Her greatest concern about the application process was how she was going to finance her education, and this became the driving factor in her college choice process.

Arya seemed to be more aware than Gendry about the different pieces of the application and about some distinctions between public and independent institutions. Although both students knew of independent pieces, there is little evidence that they were able to take that knowledge and walk through the process with confidence, that they would successfully complete the process, or that they would match to a best-fit college.

Adults' knowledge about financial aid. There was very little evidence that the adults understood how a low-income, first-generation college-ready aspirant might best finance a college education. The school-level lead counselor, Ms. Samuelson, informed me that most of her students, based on the free-and-reduced lunch numbers in the school (which are high at 72%), qualified for the College Bound Scholarship. Her own understanding of the scholarship was that:

It pretty much is just giving students what they would have anyways. It's not necessarily a lot extra, and that may be inaccurate, but it's more just putting a name to create awareness to the money that would probably be available to students and then it's just kind of identified differently.

She also told me that the person who seemed most qualified to help students process information about financial aid was the new college and career counselor, Ms. Jones. Unfortunately, Ms. Jones was hired after students had already completed the application process, so she was unable to assist these students with the larger opportunities that are only available early in the school year. She did, however, offer assistance to them as they sought scholarship information.

Although Mr. Brown did not talk much about finances, he perceived that “students see public colleges as more financially feasible than private ones.” He said that he had encountered

students who were interested in independent colleges, “but oftentimes they won’t go private because of their financial situations, unless the schools are giving them money.”

Students’ knowledge about financial aid. Gendry told the story of his older sister who had a stronger GPA than his 3.6 but did not receive enough financial support to attend anywhere that required room and board, so she remained local and attended UW-Tacoma. This suggests that his sister may have undermatched in her college choice for financial reasons but also due to her limited knowledge of financial assistance that selective colleges might offer.

Gendry also shared a conversation that he had with his peers concerning financial aid, “I asked them what their EFC is, and they don’t know what Estimated Family Contribution is. That obviously means they haven’t filled out their FAFSA.” Arya was also aware of pieces of the financial aid process and shared that she and Ms. Jones had “definitely started discussing each of my financial aid packages.” She understood that the ability to finance a college education can be in direct conflict with the cost of attendance attached to one’s dream college and expressed concern about her older sister’s struggle post-college with repaying loans: “She’s taking out \$800 a month for loans and not even making a dent because of the interest rate.” As Arya put it, she would struggle:

...with choosing a school that’s financially smart or choosing a school that is my dream school that I’ve been working so hard to get to. I’m finally there, but I didn’t get the financial aid package that I wanted.

Both students were familiar with financial aid, and how to get it. They were also aware of some of the problems posed financial aid because of their siblings’ experiences.

Even so, neither Gendry nor Arya was clear about the financial aid package they received. Whereas Arya stated that she did not believe she received enough financial aid to attend USD, her teacher (Mr. Brown) referred to her as having been “almost offered a full ride,”

suggesting that Arya might not understand her financial aid award letter. Gendry shared that PLU costs “a lot of money, almost \$50K, and I was given about \$45K. The rest of that, just scholarships and working.” However, the Act Six website stated that he would receive a full-tuition and a full-need scholarship. The students’ uncertainty about the actual financial aid offers they have been given suggests there was a lack of access to the necessary information for a high potential student at this school.

Relationships

Many adults within the school had strong “bonding” relationships with students that led to conversations about college—the college and career counselor, college-access program advisors (i.e., TRIO, CSF, and CiS), and teachers. Although school guidance counselors are responsible for supporting students, a caseload ratio of 1:400 doesn't allow the counselor to spend enough time with each student to foster a significant relationship (Clinedinst et al., 2011; Clinedinst et al., 2013). The school counselor acknowledged this difficulty when she suggested that relationships around college applications are much stronger between students and the college-access programs’ advisors. In addition, as mentioned previously, the guidance counselor had recently hired the new college and career specialist, Ms. Jones, who was in the process of building stronger relationships with students. For example, Arya had a strong connection to Ms. Jones. Gendry participated in the College Success Foundation, and had developed a strong relationship with one of the advisors in that program. Both Gendry and Arya also had especially strong relationships with Mr. Brown, who wrote more than 20 recommendation letters for them and other students.

Relationships with the college and career counselor. After just a few months at Narrows High School, the new college and career specialist, Ms. Jones, was already “doing amazing work

to increase that awareness” about colleges, according to Ms. Samuelson. She said that Ms. Jones had:

...done some lessons with our ninth grade ASCEND classes...designed to help prepare them for success in high school and start planning for their future...Counselors are partnering with those classes....The intention is to increase awareness and what do you need to do.

Ms. Jones was building relationships and sharing information early in students' high school careers with the hope that they would be better prepared once the formal application process began.

The students were enthusiastic about the new college and career specialist, even though she had arrived after they had completed the application process. Arya developed a strong relationship with Ms. Jones and described her in these words:

...amazing. She does a really good job at keeping that one-on-one relationship with each of her kids. I love that she is always looking at new scholarships and new opportunities that apply to everybody individually. She's not going to hand me a men's scholarship.

Ms. Jones was intentional about considering students' individual needs and providing them with the resources that are most useful. Unfortunately, as she arrived too late in the year to play any role in the college application process, there was no way to know whether she would have played a role in guiding Arya in her choice of which colleges to apply to.

Relationships with the college-access program advisor. As noted previously, there are several school-based college-access providers. Ms. Samuelson described the kind of relationships the college-access program advisors were able to have with students as much different from what she was able to develop:

They have a lot more flexibility, often they will have cellphones that are specifically intended for them to be communicating with [students]...you know, so they're texting kids and they're taking them on field trips.

Students received much more attention and could develop much more significant relationships with these adults, whose sole purpose is to prepare students to attend college.

Unfortunately, there was no evidence that the relationship the student had with the college-access program advisor led to improved college choices. In fact, when Ms. Samuelson was asked whether or not the college-access programs promoted colleges outside of the state of Washington, her recollection of past practice was that most of the students received the College Bound Scholarship, which can only be used at Washington state colleges. Whether these college-access advisors were only promoting state colleges or not, there was no evidence they had any knowledge about colleges outside the state or any awareness that there might be better opportunities elsewhere for college-ready first-generation college aspirants. Gendry said of the College Success Foundation advisor from whom he received support:

She helped me read over my essays for the scholarships that I received. She was really there to push me and help me get to where I'm at, because it's hard for one person... Sometimes you just need that extra person to help believe in you. She was that person...without her, I probably wouldn't have been where I'm at today.

This relationship had a significant influence on Gendry's college choice process, particularly in applying to Act Six and enrolling at PLU, an Act Six partner college. He would also share that he only applied to two colleges—PLU and Western Washington University. There is no suggestion that he was encouraged by the college-access program advisor to pursue opportunities elsewhere in the area or out-of-state.

Relationships with teachers. Mr. Brown had built strong relationships with many students. Arya said he knew her well as both her AP literature teacher and associated student body (ASB) leadership coach, because he was able to see her through her writing. She noted that as her leadership teacher, he saw her outside the classroom and had a better sense of who she was as a whole person than anyone else. Gendry offered similar praises of Mr. Brown:

[He] was my sister's teacher when I was a freshman. I didn't have him until junior year, but I was in contact with him...every single year. Sometimes you can play around with him, you can have a good laugh, but when it comes down to business, he... gets you to the place that you need to be. He's a great teacher, a great advisor, a great mentor.

Arya and Gendry obviously trusted Mr. Brown and valued his opinions greatly.

Mr. Brown described himself as having strong relationships with many students in addition to the students interviewed. He leveraged these relationships to talk about college:

I have kids that come to me on a regular basis. I try to just be there for everyone, so whether it's sometimes I go on field trips with them when they're going to check out colleges, or...doing some kind of workshop, like personal statements...when the kids see me, they know that I'm not only here just in the classroom, but it's beyond the classroom for year 13 and beyond that.

Mr. Brown used his relationships with students to empower them to make their own decisions about their college futures. As the AP literature and the leadership teacher, he had relationships with the students who could most benefit from support to properly match to a college.

Policies and Practices

Creating systems to ensure that students properly match to institutions of higher education requires intentionality. In the case of this study, I define intentionality as the systems and practices that have been put into place to ensure specific results. I consider the intentionality of the policies and practices at the district level, at the building/school level, and at the individual adult level, and how these impact student decisions about college.

District-level policies and practices. At the district level, there were policies and practices that impacted how all buildings and administrators were expected to function. These policies were influenced by the state legislature and the district board of directors. The policy that has had the greatest implications for college access and success in South Sound Public School District is one that was introduced by the state legislature as optional for schools

districts—Academic Acceleration (RCW 28A.320.195). Academic Acceleration is a district policy that was adopted in South Sound in 2014 to increase the number of students who have access to rigorous coursework in the form of advanced programs (Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, College in the High School). The policy states:

Multiple measures will be used for automatic student enrollment in accelerated programs or courses. State assessments in reading, writing, math and science will be used as an initial screener to determine placement. Student performance on the College Board Readiness and PSAT as well as cumulative grade point average will also be utilized in placement into accelerated programs or courses. None of the measures used for automatic enrollment shall preclude or limit any student from self-selection.

This policy creates intentionality by ensuring that more students, particularly those who have been historically underserved, have access to the rigor required to access four-year colleges. Narrows High School had 351 students take 509 AP exams in 2015. Unfortunately, only 45 (about 13%) of the students earned a 3, 4, or 5 on the tests, according to the district and school's College Board results document (2015). Although this district policy allowed more students to access rigorous courses, there is no evidence of intentionality (either in a discussion of instructional practice or outside-of-class support) with regard to helping college-ready students earn the kinds of assessment scores that are commensurate with the expectations of the more selective colleges. Furthermore, there is no evidence from the interviews or from the district's website that there is a plan to make sure students are aware of which AP and which general courses they should take in order to qualify for acceptance into the most selective colleges.

In addition, a practice was adopted in 2013 in South Sound Public Schools to allow all high school students the opportunity to take the SAT and PSAT free of charge and during the

school day. According to the school district, “Every student should see there’s a door open for them after high school and the SAT will help them identify those opportunities,” suggesting there has been some consideration for using the results of the SAT to help students determine which colleges best align with their academic abilities and needs. The district claimed that providing these tests for free during the school day ensures that “promising students who might otherwise face barriers to standard Saturday testing—such as part-time jobs or family responsibilities—do not miss out on a chance at the college-going process.” In addition, by providing the test for free, “the district has also removed any financial challenges.”

This decision is a step in the right direction to eliminate barriers for students. However, there is no evidence that students are provided with any SAT preparation. In fact, according to the lead school counselor, Ms. Samuelson, “our students’ test scores...generally won’t put them in a competitive...place... Our valedictorian has 1000 on the reading and math SAT.” When I asked Arya how she prepared for the SAT, she said, “I did buy a few books and I went over them a little bit.” Therefore, although students do have access to the test, there is no evidence that they have been given opportunities that would allow them to leverage this opportunity to the full extent. This, too, has implications for their access to selective colleges.

An Office of Career and Technical Education at the district-level oversees counseling programs at the high schools. The lead district counselor, Mr. Isaac, described the new district-wide expectation, saying that:

...within the High School and Beyond plan, each senior will apply to colleges. We consider four-year university, technical school, trade school, community college, military, and apprenticeship. The expectation is they’re going to apply, and then they’re going to bring their acceptance letter back to their counselor.

Though students are expected to apply to a college or some form of post-secondary training, there is no evidence of a plan at the district level to help students walk through the application

process or properly match to colleges. A new web page has been created to lay out the post-secondary processes—Plan4College. However, there was no mention of this website in any of the interviews, so it is unclear how or if this site is being used.

School-level policies and practices. As discussed above, from my analysis of the interviews, although Narrows High School had a college and career counseling center, there was little evidence of a coordinated effort to ensure that all students, and specifically college-ready first-generation college aspirants, understood how to complete the college application process and make the best college match. While there were several college access programs, a building counselor and a new college and career counselor, there was no evidence that adults are collaborating to develop clear processes and practices. There was also no evidence of intentionality around ensuring the adults working with students through the college choice process have the information necessary to match students to the colleges that best suit their needs and talents. In fact, the counselor, who is the designated lead for the support of students through the college application process, stated that “a lot of kids that have previously identified as a four-year will probably change to a two-year, either because they didn’t get accepted or they never actually bothered to apply,” suggesting that there was not a plan in place to empower students to make the best decisions. She went on to say that “nobody has mapped out for [students] the steps, and we have not done a good job of that.” She was shocked “with the quality of student who has not started in the [college] application process, and it’s because they...don’t fit into any of [the college access] programs.” She wondered if the College Bound scholarship led students to only apply to local institutions, even though they might have qualified for similar or better financial aid elsewhere.

The lead college counselor also informed me that she does not know very much about colleges that are out-of-state, which meant there is no intentionality in school counseling around helping students make the best college matches. She said that she “make[s] a point to go [to a counseling conference] every year just to hear what information [she] need[s] for [her] students in-state,” but she said that she had not been to the national conference held nearby. She was aware that “being knowledgeable about other colleges” is important, but she was concerned with the “delivery method in the building; that it stretches maybe a little bit farther than [she’s] prepared to go.”

Unsurprisingly, then, the colleges for whom the school saw increases in their students were all state institutions: University of Washington-Tacoma, Washington State University, and Tacoma Community College. This is the set of colleges in which most of the Sound and Narrow High School’s college-going graduates traditionally have enrolled. There did not appear to be a coordinated support system in place at the building level to look beyond these local institutions to support students in making other matches that might better fit their skills, talents, and interests.

Educator-level policies and practices. Although there were individual educators who had strong relationships with students and significant knowledge about the college process, the information these adults had was primarily limited to local institutions, which, in turn, limited the information about the options college-ready students had to a wide variety of institutions, in and out of the state. While Mr. Brown was a sounding board for students, he knew little about schools outside the state, as he, himself, noted:

I don’t really know...schools outside of Washington [aside from] where I might have family in certain places [and] where I looked at schools when I was an undergrad [at Western Washington University] or graduate student [at Pacific Lutheran University]. I sometimes challenge them to come and see me before or after school to help them, whether it’s to hop on a computer and look up information and see what they’re going to do.

While Mr. Brown empowered students to do the investigation themselves, there was still a disconnect between the sharing of information and a depth of understanding about the process for seeking out schools outside of Washington state. Despite the best intentions and efforts of educators, their limited knowledge resulted in a limited transmission of college-going information to their students. In short, there is no guarantee that even with strong educator support, students will be given the information necessary to make the best college matches.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that there are at least three ways in which schools and districts might address the issue of undermatching: (1) ascertain what students and adults know about the college process and about better matching; (2) identify which adult relationships could be leveraged with college-ready students in order to help them make the best college matches; and (3) reconsider what policies and practices could be put in place at the building and district levels to assist students in making the best college matches. The findings suggest that if students are given access to the necessary information about the college process, understand the importance of their respective college choices in their future success, are partnered with adults who can help them navigate the process, and have access to systems at the school and district level to make the process more transparent, students will make better college choices that will lead to higher graduation rates and more and better professional opportunities (McDonough, 1997).

What Students and Adults Do and Don't Know

The findings of this study underscore both the quality and variety of knowledge that can facilitate the college choice process for first-generation students and students of color. At a

minimum, there are important things to know about college selection, about the college application process itself, and about financial aid.

About college selection. There have been suggestions that students make their decisions about college selection based on their academic profiles (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). However, scholars inform us that “college aspirations are influenced not only by individual ability and motivation but also by the imposition of academic standards and the practices of a college-focused high school” (Boyle, 1966, quoted by McDonough, 1997, p. 6). Findings from this study suggest that although students took the kinds of rigorous courses that would lead to enrollment in selective colleges, there did not appear to be a culture of applying to selective colleges in their high school, particularly those colleges and universities outside the state. The adults with whom the students interacted, including those with specific responsibilities or simply the desire to guide the college choice process, knew relatively little about the range of possibilities available to students. Their help, and financial help offered by state and university programs encouraged more students from Narrows High School to attend state open-access colleges.

However, “researchers have shifted their attention away from simply enrolling students in college to the growing realization that where a person attends college is critically important to understanding the links between social class and educational attainment, persistence, and occupational achievement” (Useem & Karabel, 1986, quoted by McDonough 1997, p. 7). The college choice process has the potential to disrupt years of economic realities for students and their families. In other words, attendance at the most selective institutions can move one from poverty into the middle class, which could have long term implications in the development of intergenerational cultural and social capital.

About the college application process. The information students and adults knew concerning the college admissions process was limited at Narrows High School. Although the counselor wanted to be a support to students in the college choice process, with her student caseload, she was unable to meet students' social-emotional needs, make sure each one graduated from high school, and provide others with the assistance and the informational support throughout the college choice and application process. She spoke about students coming to her too late in the game to take full advantage of the many opportunities available to them, which suggests these students are likely not aware of the difference in academic requirements between selective and non-selective colleges. For example, selective colleges usually require foreign language study and often more history, math and science courses (Clinedinst et al., 2013) than do less selective institutions. If students are not made aware of these requirements, they may miss opportunities to access a selective college. More to the point, according to Hoxby and Turner, (2013, p. 6), "if the only reason that the student does not take advantage of his or her full range of college opportunities is that he is unaware of these opportunities or deterred from exploring them...then much of the enormous investment already made is potentially waste.

Narrows High School and Sound South Public School District made huge financial investments in the expansion of AP programs and funding PSAT/SAT for all students. However, if no one helped students make more informed college choices, much of the financial investments made may have been made for nothing. Staff need significant training on how to support students to navigate the college application and enrollment processes to help them find schools—both selective and less selective—that meet their needs and interests and to understand why this is so important to reducing opportunity gaps.

About the financial aid process. Financing college is one of the greatest mysteries for students and is especially important for low-income students, who often are more worried about their ability to pay for college than students who come from wealthier families (Avery & Kane, 2004). Gendry and Arya were not the only ones to witness the financial struggles of family. Other students in their school are likely to know about family and friends who had to take out loans, drop out of college, or find themselves unable to pay loans back (Bloom, 2008).

Furthermore, completion of the FAFSA is so complicated that many families do not do it. Gendry suggested that his friends may not have known what the FAFSA was, which might indicate they had not even attempted to complete the process. Hoxby and Turner's (2013) book, *The Expanding College Opportunities (ECO) for High-Achieving Students*, which provided families with hands-on support to complete the FAFSA, is an example of a project that sought to address supporting students through completion of financial aid. As Hoxby and Turner note, "A result of this study was that the in-person counseling interventions already exhibit benefit-to-cost ratios that are substantially higher than policies that reduce tuition or increase grants. It thus appears that the ECO intervention has a benefit-to-cost ratio many times that of competing policies intended to improve college-going" (p. 38).

The results of this project suggest that financing college will require a much more hands-on approach than currently exists in this school building.

Where Relationships with Adults May Facilitate the College Choice Process

These case accounts underscore the fact that adult relationships can be leveraged for increasing the chances that promising students seek out and get into selective colleges that match their academic profiles.

Counselors. As was stated previously, individual guidance counselors have a direct impact on students, and, more importantly, the counselor is critical to constructing the school's expectations and formal planning for college. The counselor creates and implements the school's organizational worldview that serves to delimit the full universe of possible college choices into a smaller range of manageable considerations. The school and the counselor construct this worldview in response to their perceptions of the parents' and community's expectations for appropriate college destinations, combined with their knowledge and experience base. Each school acts as the mediator of the collective social class consciousness of the community that it serves (McDonough, 2005).

The school counselor has the potential to perpetuate ideas about who should go to college and where they should go, and the counselor also has the potential to disrupt typical patterns. In the case of NHS, the counselor was disengaged from the college process and was focused primarily on the social-emotional needs of students. Although she acknowledged that the new college and career counselor and college-access providers' staff had the potential to have closer relationships to students regarding the college application process, it may also be the case that her limited college counseling interactions (her ability to have better direct, college-service-providing relationships with students) were in response to the way college guidance is structured or to the way schooling is organized within the PK-12 system.

It must be acknowledged, here, that although high school counselors are perfectly placed to help first generation and students of color with the application and match processes, they also have very large caseloads and multiple demands on their time. Asking them to be fully knowledgeable about in-state and out-of-state college opportunities for their students and to be able to help each college aspirant move through the college choice process effectively may be

unrealistic unless districts and states make these processes a priority for themselves. Such prioritizing would likely add counseling staff to high schools and make assistance in this area more possible.

Classroom teachers and college-access staff. In NHS, a teacher and a college-access staff member developed relationships with college-ready students. In Gendry's case, he had the opportunity to build relationships with the college-access staff and with his teacher. Arya did not qualify for the college-access program, but she had developed a strong relationship with the same teacher as Gendry. In the case of both students, it was unclear whether these relationships were the reason each applied to college at all or whether they would have done so independently. Although the relationship Gendry had with his college-access advisor led him to apply and be selected for the Act Six scholarship (a full, need-based scholarship) to one of the local independent colleges, it is possible that had this staff person had more knowledge about other college options outside of the state, Gendry might have had other options. The same is true for Arya's experience. Had her teacher been more aware of current policies, procedures, and general facts about more selective colleges, she might have helped Arya make a more informed decision about college.

However, regarding high school teachers, we need to acknowledge that, like high school counselors, teachers already have multiple demands on their time and energy. It may be unrealistic to expect them to become more knowledgeable about college choices and the application process without their districts and the state taking steps to reduce those demands and provide teachers with training in the area of the college application and matching processes.

How District and School Policies and Practices Can Contribute to the Problem or Solution

Researchers have long noted that school system policies and practices, along with how information about the college process and relationships with adults, may be part of the way students determine their college choices (Hossler & McDonough, 1998). This research points to some specific influences of policy and practice, that may exacerbate the undermatch problem, as well help to solve it.

In South Sound at the district level and at the building level, there were policies and practices that influenced how students engaged in the college process. At the district level, in partnership with a community collaboration, a new initiative was implemented, called “Graduate South Sound,” to get more students to graduate from high school. This initiative has improved the numbers of graduates in all demographic areas in the district. In addition to the graduation policy, South Sound adopted a new policy called “Academic Acceleration” to promote greater involvement for students of all demographic areas in advanced programs. The policy originated in a bordering and demographically similar district, and then it was written into policy at the state level as a recommended practice. Along with formal agreements between the district and several local colleges (University of Puget Sound and the University of Washington-Tacoma) that agreed to allow students automatic enrollment and financial aid when they earned a certain GPA, these practices have changed how students and educators are talking about who should have access to four-year colleges.

These district policies may accelerate college seeking and even college attendance. The counselor’s point about a record number of students applying to the local colleges confirms the assertion that “individual student behavior will be influenced by the flow and content of

information and the school's explicit expectations that highlight or downplay specific options" (Perrow, 1979, quoted by McDonough, 1997, p. 10). However, in her study of high school students with college aspirations, McDonough found no evidence that students had developed "college plans at least by the tenth grade" or that they had "assistance in negotiating an adequate financial aid package," which "are the key determinants to college attendance and choice" (p. 7). Similarly, although the South Sound district and the NHS building practices and policies are improving graduation rates, student participation in rigorous high school coursework, and attendance at local colleges, there was no evidence that any conversations about matching have occurred, which may have been a significant missed opportunity. Improving students' college going is not the same as improving the match between their academic potential and the colleges they attend.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this study, the questions that drove this inquiry were as follows:

- What information do first-generation college aspirants, families, teachers, and counselors have about the college choice process, particularly how that process may be different for a student with an academic profile fit for a selective college?
- In what ways, if at all, does that information inform and enable (or fail to inform) the best matches between students' admissions profiles and the colleges to which they are applying?

Regarding the questions that drove this inquiry, it is striking that in the cases under study, critical information was less available than it could have been or should have been to enable college choices that maximized the students' chances of seeking and selecting a college

destination that matched their capabilities and ultimately their aspirations. What is more, no one source within the informational networks available in the school could provide all the kinds and quality of information that were called for. Different trusted adults had some of what the students needed, but not all. Arya and Gendry did develop relationships with willing individuals within these networks, and they did receive some assistance in so doing. The adults (counselor, teacher, support program staff) may have felt in the cases of Gendry and Arya that they had done their job: two more good students were off to college. But where these students ended up going had less to do with the match between student and the higher educational institution best mapped to their interests, skills, and abilities than would have been optimal.

Matching is critical to the future success of students, their families, and the communities in which they live. Even more critical are the implications that college choice has for the United States as a nation. We can choose to pretend that college choice is merely the matching of talent to opportunity, suggesting that current trends in student college selection appropriately reflect their intellectual and academic abilities (McDonough, 1997), or we can acknowledge with the scholars cited here (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1988; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995) that systems are in place in education that maintain the social and economic status-quo and that empowering students and their families to make the best college choices for their dreams and talents is a matter of social and economic justice. Improving America's educational attainment is critical to disrupting current economic trends. However, just sending more students to college is not enough. Matching is critical for college-ready underrepresented students, because when students do not properly match, but undermatch, these negative outcomes may be instrumental in reproducing inequality and harming America's future economic prospects (Fosnacht, 2014)

The answer to matching is not contained merely in a school building or a district office but will require collaboration among all the stakeholder groups in the college choice process—district and school counseling staff, college-access programs, counselors, teachers, students and families. Intentionality is the key to ensuring all students make the college choices that best match their academic profiles and professional interests, which will guarantee college completion and the disruption of current economic realities.

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III.

PAPER 2: UNDERMATCH

IN THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS AND THE ROLE THAT COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS MAY PLAY

Abstract

This paper uses a qualitative interpretive study to explore the roles that community-based organizations (CBO), committed to college access and success, have played in enrolling and graduating young men of color from college. The investigation focuses on students supported by the program offered in Success Academy (SA). The study shows that information about the college process is transmitted to students through relationships, that those relationships translate into varying types of support, and that the combination of information, relationships, and support provide students with social capital. In so doing, the CBO has not only helped students complete the college-going process, but they have the potential to disrupt economic realities in students' homes and communities.

Introduction

K'Vonte⁵: I just think Success Academy is really what gets you thinking about college on and the future. I mean, without Success Academy, ...I would have never known about independent schools or really been thinking too much about getting into a college or anything because it's just not something that they stress too much in public school. I think Success Academy is just really what gets you thinking, especially at a young age, to start getting on the track...to look at college.

Jon: Yeah...like he said it [Success Academy] really enforces [college] because I know when I was younger, I knew, like, OK, I want to go to college. But at that age you don't really know what's going to happen. I think that Success Academy really helped me out to actually acquire some knowledge of what's going to happen, instilled even more so the idea to go to college and forged that idea and, actually, make it possible.

*—Reflections of first-generation college students of color on their
community-based organizational network relationships*

Success Academy (SA) is a community-based organization (CBO) committed to providing equitable access to the college choice process for students who continue to face systematic barriers to their learning, development and advancement. When they reflected on their experience with SA, K'Vonte and Jon were high school seniors at one of the most selective independent schools in the United States. But unlike the families of many of their fellow students, K'Vonte's and Jon's parents were working-class and had barely finished middle school. Their annual family income was less than the cost of one year's tuition at the college their sons attended, and the young men were only able to attend on full need-based scholarships.

During the summer after fifth grade, K'Vonte and Jon earned membership in Success Academy. The organization also targets students who are most likely to undermatch—i.e., enroll in colleges with less competitive admissions processes than the students are eligible to attend based on their academic performance in high school. By their own description, membership in a

⁵ All names in this document have been changed to protect privacy.

CBO was one of the main reasons these students were able to negotiate the college choice process and limit their chances of undermatching.

The situation facing K’Vonte and Jon represents a challenge to the fundamental purposes of higher education. The economic arguments regarding the benefits of a college degree are accompanied by assertions regarding the importance of higher education for broadening pathways of thinking and producing an educated citizenry. However, the philosophical goals of higher education will fall by the wayside unless we improve college access. According to Carnevale and Strohl (2013), producing an educated citizenry must be accompanied by acknowledgement of the fact that educational attainment at top-tier colleges is shown to even out educational access and raise levels of college success. The sheer numbers of students and increasing numbers of “non-traditional” or students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, taken in conjunction with current trends within higher education, are indicators of a changing educational landscape that brings with it segregation and unequal opportunity. Within these broad trends, the dynamics of the college choice process suggest that part of improving college access concerns the means of finding a proper match between students’ talents and the institutional environments in which they will be educated (Harris, 2014; Hurwitz, Smith, Howell, & Pender, 2012).

In the school settings serving students such as K’Vonte and Jon, the potential support of other agents outside of the formal school system may become vitally important. Students who are able to attain membership in community-based organizations (CBOs) committed to supporting college access and success may receive a variety of resources such as academic help, information, social-emotional support, and, in some respects, financial supports. These supports

can make all the difference in students' college choice process, transition to college, and eventual success in college.

The situation begs for careful scholarship that explores the role of relational developmental support systems both within and outside the school, in the undermatch phenomenon, alongside other lines of research into college access, persistence, and survival. The purpose of this research is to examine the role of the CBO in the match process. Using a qualitative research design, the study looked closely at the college choice process pursued by two first-generation college-bound young men of color, K'Vonte and Jon, who were able to participate in a CBO committed to ensuring their success in pursuing postsecondary education in an institution well-matched to their academic potential. The voices of these young men share the courage, resilience, hopes, and aspirations of their communities with a broader audience.

There has been relatively little, if any, research on the impact that membership in a CBO has on promoting or limiting undermatch among students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Therefore, I have designed this study to investigate:

- In what ways do college-promoting CBO support college-ready students from historically underrepresented backgrounds in higher education in their movement through the college choice process so that they avoid undermatching?
- In particular, what kinds of networks of relationships do CBOs help young men of color build during their PK-12 years?
- In what ways, if at all, do CBOs support college aspirations, application, access and choice?
- What are the CBO's prospects for continuing to support young men of color?

This paper begins with a brief description of the history and purpose of CBOs. It then moves to a discussion of the background and context for the research problem, setting the stage for the movement of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds through the college choice process. Following that, the paper presents a conceptual framework for my own qualitative study on the effect of CBOs on four students. I provide that study's purpose and research design and conclude with a review of the study's findings. Finally, I discuss implications for movement through the college choice process and the role that a community-based organizational network of relationships can play in limiting undermatch for young men color and first-generation college-bound students from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

Potential Models for Progress:

CBOs as an Early Intervention Response

Given the disturbing undermatch rates of underrepresented students who are eligible for admission to some of the nation's most selective institutions—about 41%, according to Smith, Pender, & Howell (2013)—the existing research points toward a potentially important role for college access and success organizations that sit outside the public school system. Like the government-sponsored, school-based college access providers discussed in “The Role of Informational Networks in Undermatching,” the first paper in this set, college-promoting community-based organizations are situated within the field of college access and success, which began to coalesce in late 1990s through 2008. As the result of similar participation rates for students from historically underrepresented groups in the late 1990s (McDonough, 1997), many educators and policymakers turned to early intervention programs to address the disparities in postsecondary participation rates at the time (Swail, 2001). While most school-based programs

begin their intervention at the high school-level, including school-based college access providers, a handful of CBOs began earlier in elementary or middle school in an effort to improve historically underserved youths' access to the college-going resources needed to compete in selective admissions. Program components include college counseling, academic enrichment, parental involvement, leadership development (or personal enrichment and social integration), mentoring, and scholarships.

One such program is University of Southern California's (USC's) *Neighborhood Academic Initiative* (NAI, 1997). For this intensive seven-year pre-college academic enrichment program, students from predominantly resource-poor communities of color in South and East Los Angeles are selected based on the following two criteria: (1) a willingness to learn and (2) a parent or guardian's willingness to remain involved and support the student scholar by attending classes and meetings and ensuring that the student can attend all required activities. Students receive after school tutoring several times a week, as well as participating in counseling sessions that deal both with college preparation activities and socioemotional issues. During the summer, students enroll in additional classes. If they persist through the program, graduate, and meet minimum eligibility criteria, they are awarded a full-ride scholarship to the University of Southern California, a selective college. Since its first graduating class in 1997, nearly 1,040 students have completed the program with 83 % enrollment as freshman at four-year universities, and 35 % enrollment at USC.

A Better Chance (ABC) is another independent CBO, with a mission "to increase substantially the number of well-educated young people of color who are capable of assuming positions of responsibility and leadership in American society." Since its founding in Boston in 1963, ABC has grown greatly, first starting out with 55 students enrolled at nine schools to now

more than 2,000 students enrolled at nearly 350 of the best private schools and public schools, as of the 2015-2016 school year. Its aim is to provide a desegregated experience by placing high-potential, low-income students of color in resource-rich independent and public schools.

Another example is *Prep for Prep*, founded in New York City in 1978 (Simons & Program, 2003). For those 215 students who earn admission annually, the hard work and high expectations start right away. The students' journey begins the summer after fifth grade and culminates with the completion of their first college degrees, which totals 2,992 college graduates to date. In between this time one could observe a number of cultural and social capital development gap-closing practices, from free counseling and social work services for families to address many out of school factors derived from poverty that impact student performance in the classroom, to continuing supplemental academic and social enrichment as well as college counseling opportunities that keep its students college-competitive with their more affluent counterparts. In their "Be The Dream" (Simons & Program, 2003) essays, students and alumni of the CBO from some of New York City's most resource-poor communities of color share stories of how *Prep for Prep* advocated for their acceptance into some of the country's most resource-rich independent high schools and helped them navigate and graduate from the nation's 25 most selective colleges and universities. Echoing Knapp's (1996) critique in "The Assault on Equality," one student recalls being at Harvard when two of the University's professors, Herrnstein and Murray (1994), published *The Bell Curve* and "feeling adequately prepared [by *Prep for Prep*] to withstand and oppose the racist miseducation embodied in the book" (Simons & Program, 2003, p. 53):

During my sophomore year at Harvard, two researchers associated with the university published *The Bell Curve*. Behind the pseudo-research, skewed statistics and invented words like inheritability stood an age-old cause many fellow students with blood of links to Africa to question themselves. Despite their

achievements, they experienced an intense feeling of unworthiness. Stuck in the funk of internal mistrust, they lost interest in classes and extracurricular activities. One even considered transferring to a university “more appropriate” for his ability.

I did not suffer a crisis tragic self-doubt. Neither did the president of the Harvard Black Student Association for the 1994-95 academic year [and a *Prep for Prep* scholar]. We recognized the polemical tract as simply a strategic assault in the psychological war on the value of people of color... There are many organizations that tell young people of color that we are smart, beautiful and worthy as any other people. What sets *Prep for Prep* apart, however, is the way it goes about proving that truth.

Success Academy (SA), which was modeled off of *Prep for Prep*, exists as an intervention to the country’s “opportunity structures,” which promote achievement gaps, such as the undermatch rates observed between social status groups. SA believes that a college degree greatly increases an individual’s chance at economic independence, not to mention the intergenerational impact which results once that educational barrier has been broken in a family. For that reason, SA recruits from groups most underrepresented on college campuses and in leadership positions in the workforce—including Black/African Americans, Hispanic/Latinx, Native Americans, and first-generation Asian Americans. SA reports that more than 80 percent of the SA scholars qualify as low-income. More than 85 percent come from households where they will be the first in their families to earn a college degree and have a chance at the American dream. The CBO serves more than 700 scholars through 17 cohorts with 60-65 new scholars added each year. Approximately 40% of high school scholars attend public schools (Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Honors) and nearly 60% attend private schools (independent, parochial, and boarding). Ninety-nine percent enroll in college, primarily at the country’s most selective colleges.

Prep for Prep and others were founded on the belief that, ultimately, it is an individual’s ability, drive, initiative, spirit and determination that renders success attainable. Notwithstanding

this firm belief, however, the second pillar of the CBO is the conviction that, as things now stand in our society, a great many children, including many of our nation's potentially ablest students, lack access to the type of resources and opportunities that enable the best of a child to come to the fore including a child's cultural and social capital development (Simon & Program, 2003). To that end, CBOs provide students and their families with access to quality college counseling, academic enrichment, parental involvement, leadership development, scholarships/financial aid support in order to ensure their successful navigation of the college choice process.

Clearly these and other CBOs have helped thousands of underrepresented students find their way through the college choice process and the opportunity called higher education. CBOs have improved the lives of many young men of color, and in doing so have changed the discourse in the classrooms and on the quads of many selective colleges and universities. Still, we know relatively little about what exactly is working or not—and exactly how it is working—in the CBOs' process of providing resources to this segment of the college-going population.

Building upon the established models of these CBOs may be the most logical next step. For those working in CBOs that address college access, the small successes are monumental accomplishments. And, in many cases, failure and heartbreak abound, because there is so much that impedes the success of the students and families they are serving. Although the CBOs must acknowledge this reality, that does not mean they must accept current reality as permanent. A key contribution this research can make is to identify, in a more systematic way than the CBO can, what it is they do that makes the difference, particularly for young men of color—a group that is seriously underrepresented in these programs, which is not surprising considering they are projected to be the most disenfranchised, yet among the fastest growing, population in the United States (Lee & Ransom, 2011).

The Research Problem: Undermatch, College Choice, and Support Systems for Underrepresented Students

The undermatch phenomenon, as described in educational literature, occurs when students attend colleges or universities “below the college selectivity to which they had access” (Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). Undermatch is primarily defined by academic achievement in comparison to a school’s admissions selectivity rating, as there is a significant correlation between the competitiveness of admissions with the reputation of the academics at the colleges or universities. In addition, admissions statistics yield metrics with which to measure a student’s likeliness of receiving admission to a particular university. Currently, it is estimated that roughly 40.9% of students undermatch their college projections; and 16.1% “substantially” undermatch, meaning that they enroll in colleges that are two selectivity tiers below their college academic fit (Smith et al., 2013). This is particularly important, because as Smith et al. remind us, “...Light and Strayer (2000) find that students at all academic ability levels have a higher probability of completing a degree if the selectivity level of the college they attend matches their measured academic skill level” (Smith et al., 2013). Thus, the undermatch phenomenon becomes a question of overall college success and educational attainment for an optimal result.

College completion matters for both economic and social reasons. Higher education is quantifiably important to individuals in today’s workforce because it represents a roughly \$2 million increase in earnings over a lifetime (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013, p. 7). Societally, in pure economic terms, according to a 2014 job growth study by Georgetown University, the United States will fall short by 5 million workers with postsecondary education—at the current production rate—by 2020. Also, by 2020, 65% of all jobs in the economy will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2014, p.

2). The economy is shifting to demand professional and managerial jobs and away from manufacturing; as a result, salary follows these qualifications and in turn, entry to higher socioeconomic classes (Carnevale et al., 2010). In addition, the increase in earnings and steadily increasing demand for college-educated workers means that a college education is now a gatekeeper to social mobility. In 2007, 81% of high-earning workers had a post-secondary education (Carnevale, 2010).

The economic arguments regarding the benefits of a college degree are accompanied by arguments regarding the importance of higher education for broadening pathways of thinking and producing an educated citizenry. However, the philosophical goals of higher education will fall by the wayside unless we improve college access. The sheer numbers of students and increasing numbers of non-traditional students, taken in conjunction with current trends within higher education, are indicators of a changing educational landscape that brings with it segregation and unequal opportunity. As it stands, the American post-secondary landscape is increasingly racially segregated, bringing affluent white students into increasing concentrations in the top tiers of education (the most selective 468 colleges), and increasing enrollment of low-income minority students in silos of free- and open- access schools that face decreased funding and number of seats available (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Resource allocation dramatically differs between the 468 most selective colleges and open-access schools and graduation rates reflect this disparity by double-digit percentage points; for African-American students with above-average SAT/ACT scores, the difference is 33% in graduation rate depending on the type of institution attended (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013, p. 27).

Producing an educated citizenry must be accompanied by the fact that educational attainment at top-tier colleges is shown to even out educational access and raise levels of college

success. Student success at the 82 most selective colleges, where school spending is \$27,900 annually, compared to the \$6,000 figure for open-access two- and four- year colleges, demonstrates that resources matter. If access to the top-tier colleges continues to be racially segregated, that segregation represents a systematic block to class mobility.

These numbers show the importance to society of students being matched with colleges that best suit their academic potential and accomplishments. As noted, researchers estimate that nearly 41% of college-going underrepresented students undermatch (Smith, Pender, & Howell 2013). It is important when thinking about the loss to the greater economy and society that these numbers might represent that we do not forget the individuals living through those experiences, who experience more personal undermatch consequences—such as dropping out of school at a higher rate than those who match.

Research on undermatching has been mostly quantitative over the last decade (Smith et al., 2013). Scholars explain undermatching by asserting that students lack the academic preparation as well as the particular college-promoting social and cultural capital—that is, the combined knowledge and social, economic, and psychological resources within organizational networks— necessary to navigate the admissions and financial aid processes (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2009). They discuss deficits in college planning and in completing the various steps in the college admissions process, in access to information about college and financial aid, and in the encouragement needed to convert aspirations into college enrollment (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Roderick et al., 2009; Melissa Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). In addition, we know that high schools can promote or limit a student’s chances of undermatch through the resources (e.g., academic preparation, availability of college guidance), and norms (e.g., college-going climate,

parental involvement) or structural supports (network-relationships of parents, peers, teachers, and counselors) that they provide (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Rodriguez, 2013).

In their effort to better understand the relational network in which students make their decisions, Roderick and colleagues (2011; 2008) found that students were less likely to undermatch at schools where more teachers reported a strong college-going culture. Similarly, students who reported stronger connections with their teachers and having discussions about college planning at school were more likely to enroll at an institution that matched their academic qualifications (Roderick et al., 2008).

Undermatch outcomes are also associated with the structure and delivery of college guidance within a school (Roderick et al., 2011). According to Rochester et al., as measures of college guidance, students who attend a high school that has a high (rather than low) percentage of students attending four-year institutions or high schools that have a high (rather than low) percentage of students completing the FAFSA are more likely, on average, to enroll at institutions that match their academic qualifications. Unexpectedly, the extent to which students reported encountering supportive counselors or receiving structured college-going support from the school was also positively associated with the likelihood of undermatch (Roderick et al., 2011). This suggests that while emotional support may be important for students' aspirations to go to college, the kind of information they receive from their school plays an even greater role in where they eventually apply and enroll.

Although this is not a study of institutional influence, such influence is worth noting as it has relevance to the high school context. In their postsecondary level analysis, Hoxby and Avery (2012) found that colleges often limit recruitment to certain schools, districts and regions. As a consequence, students who do not have face-to-face access to admissions representatives lack

clear information about college affordability. They are left to decipher the information presented on a college's website or in their award letter on their own—a daunting prospect given that only about 40 % of colleges calculate the total cost that students would need to pay and report that figure in their award letters (America & uAspire, 2018). While selective institutions focus most of their recruitment efforts on resource-rich, high-performing high schools, they also often develop close relationships with community-based organizations working to improve college access and success for students from historically underserved backgrounds. Students from these backgrounds who do not have access to college-promoting CBOs like Success Academy may be limited in their access to the information and direct network of communication to admissions enjoyed by students at better-resourced high schools.

These findings are consistent with the work of scholars who have revealed the ways that Black, Latinx, and low-income students' experiences are distinct from those of their counterparts, particularly concerning how they are academically prepared for postsecondary education (Bean, 1992; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Oakes & Guiton, 1995), their understanding and responses to the availability of financial aid (Avery et al., 2006; Avery & Kane, 2004; Heller, 1997; Perna, 2007), and their likelihood of completing various components of the application process (Christopher Avery & Kane, 2004; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Roderick et al., 2011). College choice scholars have also shown that parents of underrepresented students may only be able to provide minimal support in gaining information about higher education options because of their own limited postsecondary experience (Ceja, 2006; Perez & McDonough, 2008). As a result, research suggests that underrepresented students are most likely to depend on high school staff to help them navigate the college choice process (Muhammad, 2008). But however well-intentioned they might be, counselors and others are burdened with heavy caseloads and

competing priorities (McDonough, 2005). Their knowledge and information about college and financial aid is also bounded, which plays into their ability to directly assist students with their choices of application and enrollment.

This lack of information impacts particular groups of students' likelihood to undermatch. Examining high school characteristics, for example, Hurwitz and colleagues (2012) reported that students attending large, resource-poor, urban high schools were more prone to undermatch than their peers at resource-rich suburban high schools. Similarly, in their measure of high school level achievement, Bowen et al. (2009) found high schools that offered fewer Advanced Placement (AP) courses and lower average SAT scores had higher levels of undermatch than high schools that offered more AP courses and had higher average SAT scores.

Affluent segments of society have invested greatly in the personal and academic development of their most promising youth; however, achievers with the highest potential from less advantaged groups—those who are already grossly underrepresented in the country's leadership pool—are rarely the recipients of special attention and access to experiences that would develop their talents. This group of students is not told that it is legitimate to aim for and achieve the American dream (Simons & Program, 2003; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). K'Vonte's and Jon's descriptions at the beginning of this study hinted that the dynamics of connection-making are central to educational institutions, interactions, and results. While the young men do not say so exactly, theirs and other stories like them highlight how a lack of connections is inescapably a part of inequity. Without their relationship to Success Academy and its connection to their high school, these two young men may not have been on the road to a college that matched their abilities.

Educators have a role to play in putting these connections in place, especially for those who are too easily marginalized by life and social circumstances. However, in *Waiting for a Miracle*, Comer (2007) reminds us that schools alone cannot solve the issues facing young males of color and others from historically underrepresented backgrounds (Lee & Ransom, 2011). Comer argues that only through a national focus on supporting students like K’Vonte and Jon, connecting them to college-promoting CBOs, and providing them equitable access to the college choice process, can we limit the ways our society discourages talented and motivated underrepresented students from reaching their goals (Simons, 2003; Tierney & Jun, 1998). Without Success Academy, Jon and K’Vonte might not have seen life’s possibilities or believed these possibilities were applicable to them (Simons, 2003). Schools are often overburdened with too many demands on teachers and staff (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; Mcdonough, 2005; Perna et al., 2008), so the efforts of CBOs may be important in opening paths that connect families and students with possibilities they have yet to even imagine.

Framing Ideas and Informing Literatures

To understand how a CBO can limit or promote the phenomenon of undermatch, we need to situate it first in the theory and research on college choice, which scholars have productively treated as a multi-stage process. The dynamics of each stage contribute to the possibility of undermatching. Second, conceptual tools from sociological research that inform the dynamics of social and cultural capital and how these “capital” resources are (or might be) developed and be utilized in the college choice process by first-generation students of color are helpful in understanding college match. Finally, the literature on the full extent of external contexts at play in the college choice process can clarify the limitations on individual behavior in the student choice process.

Research on Phases of College Choice

Hossler and Gallagher (1987), drawing on Litten's (1982) work and that of others, defines three phases of college choice. The first stage, predisposition, is "a developmental phase in which students determine whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 209). The second phase, information seeking and building a college choice list, occurs when students begin to seek information about potential locations for where they want to go to college—and likely when colleges and universities will also begin to seek out eligible students. Finally, the third phase, application and enrollment, is defined as the actual points of admission—application, admission to the university, and enrollment (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 208). Using this three-phase model helps in quantifying and qualifying the undermatch phenomenon by allowing projections of when interventions should occur—or when students may not have the skills, knowledge, or resources to apply to the colleges for which they are best suited to admission.

For a variety of reasons, socio-economic status correlates strongly with undermatch. Smith's (2013) study (based on the NELS of 1988 and ELS of 2002) provides a thorough overview of the statistical traits of undermatch. As mentioned previously, Smith estimates that 40.9% of students undermatch. This number is significantly skewed by SES background. According to Smith et al, "...students below the median socioeconomic status (lower-SES) undermatch 49.6 % of the time, while their counterparts above the median SES (higher-SES) undermatch 34% of the time" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 247). McDonough (1997), in a study of the interaction between class and higher education attainment, similarly writes, "[s]ocial class status exerts twice as much effect on the selectivity of a student's college choice as does ethnicity or gender (Karen, 1998)" (McDonough, 1997, p. 5). In part, this is because socioeconomic status

(SES) correlates with other indicators of college success—the likelihood of parents to have attended college; the neighborhood where the family lives; the types of schools children attend; the college counseling resources available to students; and the presence of siblings or friends who share college aspirations.

Clearly class is a powerful cross-cutting factor in explaining postsecondary differences among all students. However, Carnevale & Strohl (2013, p. 36) remind us of our long history and the interacting and resulting multiplying effect of SES and race. They note:

...controlling for income, race matters: taken together... [t]he postsecondary system does not treat similarly qualified White and African-American or Hispanic students equally and thereby blunts individual opportunity and wastes valuable talent. Many African Americans and Hispanics are unprepared for college, but Whites who are equally unprepared still get more postsecondary opportunities. Moreover, African-American and Hispanic students who are prepared for college are disproportionately tracked into crowded and underfunded two-year colleges and open-access four-year colleges. The postsecondary system leaves a substantial number of qualified minorities on educational pathways that don't allow them to fulfill their educational and career potential.

Fundamentally, this pattern can be traced to the amount of cultural capital that students have or is present in their families. According to Belasco (2013, p. 783), "...human capital models also suggest that postsecondary choice is not strictly dependent upon accumulated assets or competencies—individual choices of whether and where to attend college will also vary according to the context within which [students] make their college-related decisions." Unfortunately, cultural capital, as Bourdieu (1986) writes, is often passed down, and obtaining it is another matter altogether. According to Bourdieu, social capital transmission in school "ignores the contribution which the educational system makes to the reproduction of social structure by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). Thus, as McDonough writes, "cultural capital is precisely the knowledge that elites value, yet schools do not teach..." (McDonough, 1997, p. 7). If the cultural capital of going to college

is not being passed down, then “[w]ithin the organizational sector of college admissions, the actions of applicants represent more of an enactment of predetermined scripts than of internally directed, autonomous choice complete with motivation and purpose” (McDonough, 1997, p. 12).

While studies that examine SES and other demographic statistics of students are useful, they are contextualized by scholars who do sociological research on neighborhoods and effects of college counseling, which accompany and attempt to explain, a confluence of factors ultimately resulting in undermatch. Using Hossler’s three-phase model, we can largely classify studies by which stage they address. Beginning with predisposition, the phase in which students begin to determine their college aspirations, the influence of community, family, and friends is an important look at college attainment.

Phase 1, Predisposition. A number of college choice studies speak to the first stage of college choice. Ceja’s (2006) research on Chicana students in low-SES communities is particularly useful because he looks at the influence that family and friends have in the college application process. Ceja notes that in research on college choice, parents’ encouragement is the most important element in the predisposition stage. Qualitatively, Ceja’s study emphasizes the informational and advisory support parents give their children. He notes that “[t]he capacity of parents to act as protective agents capable of transmitting valuable college information was made difficult by their lack of ties to the college choice experience as well as their lack of ties to social networks [i.e., schools] capable of informing them about this experience” (Ceja, 2006, p. 100). If parents are unable to transmit the cultural and social capital needed to encourage their children to go to well-matched schools within their academic and economic reach, the college application process may be hindered in phase one for these students.

Ceja's finding is supplemented by McDonough's (1997) qualitative study of female students in California undergoing the college process. McDonough notes that high schools often assume that students will have families they can rely on to give them information on applying to colleges, but that assumption is inaccurate for students who are the first generation in their families to apply to college. Thus, what Ceja found was that, often, older siblings played into the narrative to supplement information and "pave the path" to college. Ceja points out that in the vacuum of college experience and information from within a community, it is especially important for students to be surrounded by siblings or peers who can help navigate the college choice process. The author concludes that regardless of the participants' academic ability, parents were limited to emotional support because they did not possess knowledge of how to prepare for or apply to college (p. 93). In addition to the limited help some parents may be able to give in the college application process because of their own inexperience with the process themselves, Ceja also points to language barriers as a major impediment to parental involvement and their inability to acquire information about the college application process, as many families come from immigrant backgrounds. Furthermore, Engberg & Wolniak (2010) note that when family and friends have such barriers to providing help in the first phase of the process, that "significantly increased the likelihood of two- and four-year college attendance" (p. 145).

In another qualitative study of high-achieving Latino juniors and seniors in California, Perez and McDonough (2008) apply chain migration theory, a concept that describes how migrants leverage networks to facilitate their relocation, to better understand college choice. The authors illustrate the ways that Latino high school students use their networks of current college students in their college decision processes, including siblings, extended family members, and

peers. Similarly, college enrollment is also closely related to the number of friends who are college-bound (Perna and Titus, 2005).

Ceja's research supports McDonough's (1997) discussion regarding two phenomena: habitus and entitlement. According to McDonough, habitus is "a common set of subjective perceptions which individuals receive from their immediate environment and which is shared by all members of the same social class. These common perceptions frame individual aspirations. Habitus is both the combination of the objective probabilities and the subjective assessments of the chances of mobility" (p. 107). Entitlement refers to when students believe they are owed a particular kind of academic institution based on their family's habitus. According to McDonough, when entitlement occurs, students often organize their college searches around a range of specific institutions that they feel they deserve to attend. McDonough uses entitlement to explain the overmatch phenomenon that is found in higher rates for students from higher-SES backgrounds.

Studies have shown that able students from lower-SES perform well when they enter well-matched institutions: According to Hoxby & Avery (2012), high-achieving, low-income students who apply to selective institutions have the same academic outcomes in terms of enrollment and completion, as their high-income counterparts with equivalent test scores and grades. Thus, the importance of having a realistic understanding of the value of a well-matched college—and the understanding of the finances and reality of admission to those colleges—cannot be overemphasized. Without good information, Hossler and Gallagher note that a number of well-matched colleges will be cut from a student's list in this first phase of the application process.

Phase 2, Information Seeking and Building a College Choice List. While the first stage of college choice—predisposition—is disproportionately influenced by a student’s upbringing, parents, and surroundings, research suggests that the next two phases of building a college choice list and ultimately applying to college schools and counselors have a much greater impact on a student’s path. In this phase, the literature addresses three major factors: (1) counselor influence, (2) the quality of information students have about the college options that they have, and (3) personal student choices based on a combination of factors. While these three factors do not exist in a vacuum, nor are they by any means an exhaustive look at factors that play into student choice during the second phase, they are major components that heavily influence outcomes.

Phase 2 is especially important because there is research to support a hypothesis that a majority of undermatch is not caused by college admissions offices, but by the fact that students are not applying to well-matched colleges. That means that undermatch often begins in Phase 2. For example, in a longitudinal survey of students born between 1980 and 1984, Dillon found that among the students who ended up in colleges and universities considered to undermatch their academic abilities (or who did not continue on to college, the vast majority (69%) did not apply to any colleges with which they were well matched. Dillon concludes that mismatch was primarily the result of choices made by students and their families, rather than choices made by college admissions offices,

Beginning with counselor influence, several longitudinal studies have examined this particular area of college choice. Belasco’s (2013) research indicates that a counselor and the school environment can have tremendous impact on this phase noting that disadvantaged students may especially look to counselors, whom they consider experts in the college seeking process, for help. This is also noted in McDonough’s (2005) research, which asserts that high

school counselors are the most important high school professionals in providing information about college to students.

As noted in the research regarding phase one, if a student is not exposed to a habitus or have access to cultural capital to make well-matched college choices, then what Stanton-Salazar (2011) refers to as institutional agents—schools and counselors—can potentially fill the void. However, much of the research shows that students with generally high cultural expectations of college, attending college preparatory schools for example, often have access to the best quality and quantity of counselor advice even though they have the lowest need for it (Avery, 2014). This finding is unsurprising; however, it is highly troubling when combined with data regarding low access to college counselors within resource-poor schools.

Belasco's (2013) summary is instructive. He cites Venezia and Kirst's study (2005) that showed that high school counselors spend most of their time dealing with work that is not related to their professional work as counselors. Belasco goes on to cite Clinedinst et al. (2011) who found that public school counselors spend only 23% of their time on postsecondary counseling. Belasco further notes that McDonough (2005) found that most counselors spend, on average, 38 minutes per year per student offering advice on college-related matters.

Furthermore, Avery et al. (2014) speak about the huge caseload that most high school counselors carry, noting that, on average, counselors have 471 students instead of the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) recommendation of caseload of 250. With the overwhelming nature of guidance counselors' roles in schools today, these scholars suggest there is a real risk for students who are unaware, and uninformed about college to learn from their counselors the full extent of their college potential. Yet, as scholars note, students and their families who have low socioeconomic status rely the most on counselors for information about

college admission (Kim & Schneider, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001, cited in Belasco, 2013). If a student has neither familial nor social support and also lacks a college counselor to navigate college choice and financial aid, then a picture starts to emerge of a student unable to find a best-fit college or even pass the initial stages of application.

Thus, some students are entering the college choice process with little to no accurate information—and for low-SES students, the primary need for information is directed at finances (Avery et al., 2014). Students coming from low-SES backgrounds with educational aspirations want to help their parents—who sometimes have little to no college backgrounds of their own—navigate the financial aid process. McDonough (1997) noted that low-SES students often believe that college costs are their responsibilities, even when parents say they are willing to help out financially. Such misalignment between parents and their college-going children may be a fundamental consequence of a lack of clear directives and information from college counselors and other resources who could help students and their parents learn that often low-income students who can gain admission to selective colleges will pay less to attend one of those colleges than they might spend to attend a non-selective college or university (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Unfortunately, if students are not given appropriate resources, they can undermatch with higher financial cost and lower academic gain.

The evidence found by Hoxby and Avery (2013) and others indicate that barriers to college access—sometimes, false barriers—prevent students from ever even applying to the best match for their academic skills. This is a problem, as McDonough (1997) notes because it contributes to a “reproduction of a social-class-based system of postsecondary opportunity that thwarts meritocratic ideals” (p. 150). Some of these effects, however, as this study explores, can

be alleviated by external college counseling programs, organizations that are entering high schools and attempting to help high schoolers match well to colleges.

Phase 3, Application and Enrollment. Once a student's college list is determined, there is still the application process, rife with its own issues. The college applications themselves are daunting, as are the application costs. The form of the college application itself, in conjunction with a sometimes "prohibitive" college application fee, can prevent students from applying to a number of colleges, or applying to college at all. As Avery (2014) states, for many students, the essay required by college applications is often the biggest challenge to completing them..

There are programs that assist students both with college choice and with application; however, by that stage in the process, the first two phases may have already removed a significant number of applicants who never even applied. As Hoxby and Avery (2012, p.6) state, the number of high-achieving, low-income students applying to selective colleges is small: "For every high-achieving, low-income student who applies, there are about 15 high-achieving, high-income students who apply."

Essentially, scholars agree on the obvious: students' choices of where to apply for college isn't 100% rational. McDonough (1997) points out that the choice is neither the economist's rational choice model nor the policy maker's cost/benefit model. Instead, students' choices to apply to certain colleges are influenced by a confluence of factors including academics, geography, and affordability. Smith et al. (2013) note that even a good academic match might result in a poor "fit" for the student, because a variety of factors make the match work or fail. Scholars recognize that 0% undermatch is not, and shouldn't be, the goal of the process, and that there are any number of factors for a student's decision that are not readily apparent in the

demographic data. But, the potential to enroll students in better-matched colleges—or in college at all—where the desire, resources, and money could exist for success—is a tempting prospect.

Avery, et al. (2014) note that there are many programs in place across the country that are working to improve college application and enrollment for underrepresented students. There is progress to be made in the undermatch phenomenon that will offer access to students who can and should attend the best college or university they can gain admission to.

Framing Social and Cultural Capital and the Movement to—and through—College

As noted previously, the match/undermatch problem can be seen as a social and cultural capital issue, so it makes sense to work with Bourdieu's theory (1977, 1986). Scholars have taken a sociological approach to understanding how an individual's background contributes to her or his decisions (Ceja, 2006; González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; McDonough, 1997), including those related to college choice. Bourdieu uses sociological constructs of social capital, cultural capital, and habitus to explain observed phenomena. Cultural capital is developed from an individual's social class through the transmission of customs, norms, preferences, knowledge and behaviors transferred from parent to child (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Perna, 2000). While all groups have some form of cultural capital, the dominant groups' (middle and upper class) cultural capital is perceived by themselves and others in society as the most valuable (McDonough, 1997). In college choice, students' cultural capital can inform and shape every phase of the college enrollment process including the expectations and information they receive from parents, how they prepare for postsecondary education, and the set of colleges and universities to which they apply (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Perna & Titus, 2005).

According to Bourdieu, social capital is developed by the resources acquired through one's network of relationships that can be transformed into other types of capital (i.e., economic

capital). Social capital depends upon the cumulative influence of the relationships as well as on the resources acquired within one's network (Bourdieu, 1986; Perna, 2006). In college choice, a student's social capital includes the information and resources they can gather through their networks of relationships (which can include parents, teachers, peers, guidance counselors in a school or CBO), which help them decide on a set of colleges to apply to or whether to apply or enroll at all. Habitus is an individual's belief system, including one's embodied perceptions, expectations, tastes, and aspirations, which are developed through one's environment or context (which can include her/his home, school, or CBO) (Bourdieu, 1977; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006).

Using the student as the central unit of analysis requires multiple layers of contextualization: internal context and external contexts (Perna, 2006, p. 10). To solely analyze a student's internal context (e.g., academic aspirations or the process of college choice) independent of a student's external context [e.g. family background (e.g., parental education—or cultural capital; and high school—or social capital) provides an incomplete picture of a college attendance and subsequent success. While personal decisions made during high school and into college, such as course choice and college choice, play a dominating role in a student's success, these decisions are not made in a vacuum. Decisions that students make are shaped both by a student's internal contexts and multiple levels of external context: family, school, and overarching social, economic, and policy contexts, which I suspect might include the institutional context] (Perna, 2006,).

Some scholars believe that a student's internal context is the core of student success, if that context existed in a vacuum. Examining a student's ability for self-motivation, self-efficacy, and perseverance could be helpful in providing insight to student success; in addition, goal-

oriented behaviors and achievement motivation also positively influence student achievement (Perna, 2006,). On the other hand, stereotype threat based on gender, race, and mental illness negatively affects performance, both by way of diverting focus and fear of confirmation bias (Perna, 2006; Steele & Aronson, 2004). Therefore, for underrepresented students especially, but for all students, as well, it is important not to focus only on a student's internal context. Self-motivation and other characteristics attributed to individuals is often profoundly shaped by external and institutional forces.

Outside the internal context are the layers of external context, beginning with a student's most immediate surroundings: their family context. Beyond the home, the school and community have the largest potential to influence the college choice process (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Plank & Jordan, 2001). The family context includes factors such as family characteristics (family wealth, location of home, familial relationships, parental education, and socioeconomic status (Perna, p. 15). Family encouragement plays a large role in academic aspirations; family support and early education plans can be predictors of students making the choice to apply to college (McDonough, 1997; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Families also play a role in the college choice process concerning finances. For many students, financial restrictions act as barriers to entry, and often the barrier begins with lack of knowledge, as parents, particularly those who have not attended college, tend to have little to no knowledge of college costs (McDonough, 1997, p. 11). Students with limited access to resources from the dominant forms of social and cultural capital necessary to successfully navigate the college application process will depend more on their high schools. This dependence on school resources (e.g., college counseling and counselor support) can be particularly disadvantageous if the high schools are underresourced (González et al., 2003; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2007).

School context also must be taken into account in projecting a student's college-readiness and likeliness for success. There is significant research to demonstrate that a student's high school education is related to their college experience (Perna, 2006), and that advising systems are essential to college choice. Few students are given sufficient information regarding coursework for college-readiness. In their study, Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) reported that less than 12% of students knew of the courses required for admissions, and they had generally low knowledge about college logistics, including financial aid, at local public universities (McDonough, 1997; Venezia et al., 2003). College counseling is especially important because it has significant bearing on college access for low-income, urban students of color (McDonough, 1997). In addition, school context is seen as a singularly important factor in increasing rates of college graduation; the quality and rigor of a student's high school curriculum has high influence over college entrance and completion of a degree at a four-year college (Adelman, 2006). As noted, the rigor and variety of math courses offered in high school has been shown to correlate to college achievement; thus, lack of opportunity place students—particularly Latino students and other first-generation college bound students at a disadvantage beginning with lack of offerings (Adelman, 2006, p. 32).

Students face a stack of decisions that cannot be made in a vacuum, which is where scholarship begins to differ on addressing college access and choice. Some argue that external and internal contexts, when taken in conjunction, create an underlying and complex mix of factors that a student has little control over. For instance, high school course offerings stem from a combination of variables including socio-economic status, location, and funding structure of local schools; student agency cannot be the sole center of that particular discussion. Likewise, variables of financial affordability loom in family circumstances factor into familial decision-

making, not just with regards to college choice. The Department of Education, in *The Toolbox Revisited*, argues that “first party intervention,” referring to the sets of decisions a student must make, can make a difference “[O]nce the modest echoes of socioeconomic status are accounted for” (Adelman, 2006, xxiv).

Once students have entered college, there are a slew of other decisions to be made. One significant hindrance is that “college-readiness” to set students up for “success” is an ill-defined term; the lack of a consistent and comprehensive set of goals to define success hamper efforts to improve student performance (Perna, 2006). As a result of an unclear set of goals and inequality inherent in the PK-12 system, students face varying degrees of remediation as they enter their first year of post-secondary education. Credit momentum (taking more than 20 credits over the first year) is hindered by class withdrawal rates, but also by remediation; half of the group of students studied had low first-year credit counts because their courses were tied up in remediation (Adelman, 2006). There is some evidence to suggest that remediation, in fact, increases rates of persistence among college students that counters the idea that remediation hinders overall progress (Adelman, 2006,).

With a number of variables at play, authors separate the term “retention” from the term “persistence,” with the former referring to a college’s ability to maintain a student’s enrollment status and the latter placing the emphasis on a student’s choice to remain enrolled (Adelman, 53). If a student remains enrolled through the first- to second-year transition, the second year yields a new data set with which to project a student’s eventual graduation. Upon completion of a second year, the credit gap between students who will graduate and students who will not will increase to a gap of 25 total credits (Adelman, 2006). Attending college and remaining enrolled is sometimes addressed in a vacuum of student choice; but as noted previously with 75% of first-

year students currently considered “non-traditional” in at least one aspect, continued college enrollment is complicated by a variety of external factors.

The understanding of the various internal and external factors playing roles in every step of education, from educational aspirations through educational attainment, requires programs and policies to address unequal educational opportunities with multi-pronged approaches. Simply treating one issue, e.g., informational access in high school, will not solve the issue of actual financial aid for a student. Likewise, a financial aid program will not mitigate the transition from a PK-12 environment to a post-secondary environment for a student with insufficient college-readiness. Programs that aim to alleviate inequality must address both race- and class-based inequality simultaneously; to separate the two would continue to yield skewed educational results (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Carnevale addresses the “creaming” effect, in which programs that separate students solely by class rank result in “distilling the high school population by socio-economic class” (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013, p. 39). Statistical inequality makes clear that race and class play a role in eventual educational attainment, and thus affirmative action programs, though flawed, remain important. According to Carnevale and Strohl (2013, p. 39) admissions policies must curve to accommodate differences in educational, racial, and socio-economic background in order to truly begin to address social mobility and student diversity:

While politically attractive, the direct substitution of class for race-based preferences does not yield the same numbers of African-American and Hispanic candidates as a more direct reliance on race-based admissions. In general, this is because the pool of white low-income students is so much larger than the pool of African-American and Hispanic students available for selective college admissions.

Carnevale and Strohl (2013) also point out that if race is prohibited in the admissions process, simple metrics of class, based on family income alone, would still make it difficult to maintain current or higher levels of racial diversity because low-income minorities would represent a relatively small share of the lower income pool. Estimates suggest that more than six times the current level of class-based admissions would be necessary to maintain the current racial mix in the most selective colleges (Kane, 1999).

Overall, there is a trend toward understanding that there needs to be less of a PK-12 and college divide and educational institutions need to see themselves as part of a seamless P-16 system (McDonough, 2005). There must be an alignment of PK-12 education and expectations to make transitions easier for students and align educational goals and hopefully therefore lessen need for remediation. For their part, colleges and universities must truly commit to their goals of providing equal access by communicating more comprehensively with parents, schools, and counselors regarding college-readiness and financial aid.

Purpose and Methods

My study on low-income, first-generation college-bound students' college application processes examined the experiences of four students who were members of a community-based organization (CBO) that was committed to college access and success. The purpose of this study was not to generalize to the population of low-income, first-generation students who have membership in a CBO. Instead, it was a theory-building exercise meant to generate an in-depth understanding of the ways a CBO influences the college-going experience for these students. The study focused, in particular, on the network of relationships the CBO helps students develop throughout the college preparation process.

McDonough (1997) suggests that qualitative approaches are best suited for understanding how and why students make decisions about where to apply to and enroll in college, while Merriam (2009) asserts that a qualitative, interpretive approach matches with exploring practices within a bounded system, such as a CBO. Following the tradition of qualitative inquiry, I used a small, purposively chosen sample to understand low-income, first generation students' college-going experiences, and to mine those experiences for insights that would help paint a strong theoretical picture of their CBO experience. I conducted interviews with four people, along with an examination of documents and observations, to answer my research questions concerning the college-promoting network of relationships a CBO helps students develop.

Consistent with this method, I based my analysis on interviews with student participants and the director of college counseling, in-person observations of the CBO's educational enrichment phase, and review of relevant college-promoting documents in order to get different vantage points on the experiences of first-generation college-bound students with membership in a CBO.

Study Participants

Identifying student participants for this study involved purposeful sampling at two levels: (a) the CBO's high school and college counseling support program and (b) the individual student participants (Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Because I examined issues concerning access to the college choice process for students from marginalized communities, particularly first-generation college-bound students, and the undermatch phenomenon, I identified a CBO that provides academic enrichment during the predisposition phase, when students begin to develop postsecondary aspirations, as well as providing individualized college counseling during the college application phase, where undermatch is most likely to occur (Bowen et al., 2009;

Smith et al., 2012). In addition to accounting for those inequitable practices in PK-12, I selected a CBO that enrolled underrepresented students in resource-rich, public and independent schools that serve largely affluent, White students, to provide a desegregated educational experience. As peers are important for nurturing and encouraging each other's postsecondary aspirations, I also identified a CBO with a cohort-based approach. The CBO that met those qualifications was the Success Academy.

To gain access to the CBO, I contacted the assistant executive director (AED) about my research objective, requested her permission to contact and interview the director of college counseling, and asked her to recommend seniors in high school who would provide information-rich cases of significant CBO-membership experiences. I expressed a particular interest in first-generation college-bound, Black and Latino male students—groups with the fast growing populations but lowest levels of educational attainment in the United States (Lee & Ransom, 2011). That is not surprising, according to Carnevale and Strhol (2013), since Black and Latinx are especially vulnerable to class-based economic disadvantages because they are disproportionately concentrated in low-income families and communities (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Based on the study criteria, the AED sent me the names of several first-generation college-bound young men of color who were going through the college application process, to inform them about the study.

Three Black and Latino male students who were interested in participating contacted me directly. I was invited to experience the beginning of the CBO journey—the enrichment phase, beginning the summer after fifth grade—and meet the interested participants who were there working as mentors to the youngest scholars. While all three students were interviewed, one soon left the CBO for reasons I was not privy to. Therefore, only two of the interviews were

used for the final study (N = 2 Latinos). Basic principles of theoretical sampling suggest that this case sample was sufficient for exploratory purposes (Creswell, 2009). One of the students (Jon) was a DREAMer, the son of immigrants who had not yet attained citizenship and who brought him into the U.S. as a child. The student participants attended a resource-rich independent PK-12 school, where the seniors have access to seven college counselors who are focused on the college process. Ninety-nine percent of the school's graduates enrolled in a four-year college, nearly all of which qualified as one of the 468 selective colleges in the United States.

The director of the CBO's college-counseling program was interviewed to gather additional information on this organization's college choice process, as well as general insights and observations. The director of college counseling, who had been with Success Academy for six years at the time of the interview, had previously spent six years as a college counselor at a resource-rich independent day school. Prior to that, she had seven years of experience as an admissions officer. This made her uniquely able to provide information about the college choice process to students in the program.

Data Collection

Intended as a pilot study, this study made use of three qualitative methods to gather information.

Interviews. I conducted a semi-structured, 90-minute interview with the two student participants, K'Vonte and Jon. I decided to speak with them together because, like focus groups, shared interviews give students the opportunity to identify new responses as they react to each other's statements, which, along with providing the researcher more information, indicates how similar participants' experiences are (Stewart, Shamdasani, & W., 2007). Questions focused

primarily on participants' educational backgrounds, feelings and thoughts about their preparation for college, and their CBO experience. Interviews were structured according to an interview guide to ensure consistent lines of inquiry, while allowing for flexibility in probing and further questioning (Seidman, 2013).

I also interviewed the director of the college-counseling program, Brienne, to gather information on program goals and objectives, program design, and observations about the students she has worked with in general and the study participants in particular.

Documents. I reviewed program materials, websites, and participant documents (e.g., college lists) for contextual and triangulation data. These documents provided additional information on the type and content of material intended to promote the college-going experience. The director of counseling also listed the college-promoting goals and objectives of the programs and described the various activities in which the students were expected to participate.

Observations. As was mentioned previously, the student participants were actively working as mentors during the summer enrichment program. In my three visits to the summer enrichment program, I conducted observations of their participation at the program site. I focused on gathering information the student participants shared in reflection about their own experiences as new scholars and mentees in addition to other self-reflected experiences used by the participants to support and encourage new scholars and mentees. I also observed the new students in class sessions, including English Literature with Mr. Biggle, a popular figure at the CBO, as well as the participants' self-reflections on their time in Mr. Biggle's class and other classes. I was also invited by the director of college counseling to observe and participate in college workshops with admissions officers. Site observations enabled me to see the types of

experiences students encountered during their journeys and how they engaged in the CBO-membership experience.

Analysis

After transcribing and reviewing each interview, I developed initial codes, drawing upon my proposed research questions and framing concepts (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I then used the constant, comparison method to examine the variation in responses across different participants (Merriam, 2009). These comparisons allowed me to develop more focused codes (e.g., network-relationships, support) across the data, and through extensive memo-writing, I constructed broader categories based on the recurring patterns that began to saturate the developing theoretical picture (Charmaz & Bryant, 2010). I also took notes during my site observations and examined them and the other documents I had collected for triangulation with the interview data. When possible, I incorporated these notes into the coding scheme. By sorting the categories into grids or data displays, I was eventually able to synthesize these categories into four themes, which are described in the findings (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Positionality

Particularly with qualitative research, it is important to identify the researcher's position in relation to the topic under study (Creswell, 2009). In this case, I am familiar with the college admissions process and the work of CBOs through my prior employment experience. Over the course of several years, I witnessed how CBO representatives, like their colleagues at resource-rich public, parochial, and independent schools, advocated their students' cases during the admissions process. Students very often attributed their success to these organizations in their college essays. In this way, I could be seen as an "insider" with respect to the types of college

CBO intervention programs I studied, which provided me with a baseline understanding of their structures and missions.

On the other hand, I also was able to maintain an “outsider” perspective because I had no prior connection with these particular student participants or this CBO. Since I had no supervisory or evaluative role with the participants, they may have been more forthcoming and less inhibited in their responses.

Finally, my perception of college access and success has been influenced by my own experiences. I am a Black, male, first-generation college who attended large, resource-poor public schools. Due to my own background and previous experience working in selective college admissions and closely with CBOs, I bring certain biases to this study. Although every effort will be made to ensure objectivity, these biases may shape the way I view and understand the data I collected and the way I interpret my experiences (Cresswell, 2009). However, that I enter this study with firsthand experience of the role CBOs play in the movement students from underrepresented backgrounds in higher education enables the design of this study

Findings

While the college choice process for low-income, first-generation college-bound students is indeed constrained, there are clearly ways that movement through this process can be greatly facilitated. CBOs seem to provide a particularly good vehicle for building networks of relationships, translating these into specific supports, and developing social capital in the process. The study helps reveal how many different relationships are part of the networks CBOs build, and suggests how all of them together, as well as each individually, plays a role in guiding first-generation college-bound students through the system. What is happening in this process is

a particular response to an inequitable educational system identified earlier. In effect, the CBOs are modeling and embodying social and cultural capital development practices.

The findings of this study show three main effects of CBOs interactions with first-generation, low-income college-bound students of color who are likely to undermatch. The first finding concerns how information about college and financial aid is transmitted to students through a CBO-generated network of relationships and how those relationships translate into support with exposure and access to particular types of college-going resources (academic preparation and college guidance), norms (college-going climate and parental influence), and ultimately the set of institutions students consider. These relationships are powerful helps in fighting undermatching. Second, the study found that CBOs can offer students strong support as they move through the college search process. Third, the study identifies ways that students developed cultural and social capital through their interactions with the CBO.

Relationships Developed through the CBO

The CBO under study, the Success Academy, developed several kinds of relationships that were important to its success with students. These include the relationships the CBO formed with students' families, high schools, and postsecondary institutions, and by extension, CBO-student with parents, peers, and educators, as well as high school and college peers and educators. These dyadic relationships form the web of support that determine whether students have access to the college-promoting resources (e.g., academic preparation and college counseling) and are able to use information to make effective decisions about where to apply and enroll. It is this CBO-generated multilayered context of relationships that will provide students with the ability to successfully plan for college and complete their applications, access to

information about college and financial aid, and the encouragement needed to convert aspirations into college enrollment.

CBO with Families. The relationship between the CBO and family is critical to the Success Academy's model, because one of its key goals is student admission to colleges and universities, including those that are the most selective. Because of the historic underrepresentation of low-income, Black, and Latino families in those institutions, Success Academy leaders understand the importance of involving the parents and socializing the whole family in order to develop their knowledge about the college choice process. This socialization is especially necessary for families in which neither parent/guardian has a college degree. Working in conjunction with the director of the leadership development program, the director of college counseling, Ms. Brienne, described how the CBO works individually with scholars and their families throughout the college application process, including helping with financial aid paperwork, to ensure students' appropriate match. In her words:

Tianyi Chu, who is the Leadership Development program director...and I came up with a four-year college counseling plan that involves at least two parent meetings a year from ninth grade through twelfth grade. I established some college workshops... There are usually six in the fall for seniors to work on the common application, supplemental essays, as well as essays...

Our parent meetings that [is included] in the four-year college plan starts in 9th grade [when] one of the big messages that we deliver to the ninth grade—and this is delivered every year but it's a hard hitting ninth grade message—is the courses that you choose now and the grades that you earn now will affect the kind of college you are going to be admitted to and ultimately the kind of financial aid that you receive.

There's a very large educational piece that we must have in place here [at Success Academy]. That's why we start in ninth grade to work with our families in making sure that they understand...what's coming down the pipe because [applying to college] can be a very daunting process, and most of our families—85 percent of our families are first-generation college bound so [they] have no idea how to navigate the college choice process. Success Academy is often quote unquote the parent for that process.

Brienne and her colleague in the high school support (College Counseling & Leadership Development) phase of the program have four years (ninth-twelfth grade) to build strong interpersonal relationships with students and their families. Aware that many of the families are new to the United States and that language barriers can often present a major impediment to parental involvement and the ability to acquire information about the college application process (Ceja, 2006), Brienne explained how the CBO further supports these families:

We introduce the parents...to the American college system because many of our families are immigrant families and they [sometimes] don't understand the American college system. We talk a little bit about the application components...just so that they [parents] know it's not just that you write a paragraph essay and fill out an application and then you apply to colleges; it's way more complicated than that. We facilitate workshops where the goal is for parents [to] understand the complexities of the admissions process and how hard it is to determine who gets admitted, who gets waitlisted, and who gets denied.

CBO-student with Peers. According to its website, Success Academy believes that “Developing leadership skills in high school helps bring...scholars one step closer to college and future leadership roles in our community.” In this vein, the CBO helps students develop strong relationships with one another, so they are able to support each other throughout the college choice process. K’Vonte and Jon, the two young men interviewed for this study are students at Independent School, one of the country’s better resourced and academically demanding PK-12 schools. Demonstrating how he and Jon are developing leadership, K’Vonte explained, “We are both leaders of the Latino Club, which we started.” Jon elaborated on their friendship: “We are really great friends, especially since the second summer of Success Academy.”

Although Brienne doesn’t ever explicitly discuss the role of student-to-student relationships, she referenced the cohort model the CBO uses during the academic enrichment phase:

It starts [the] summer going into sixth grade and it’s a 14-month phase. The students are in classes five days a week for about eight hours a day for two

summers in a row, and then during their sixth grade year they're in class every Wednesday afternoon and every Saturday.

Both acknowledging the role of preparation in student college choice and the influence of peers in student development, Brienne noted that the Success Academy designed "This initial phase...to prepare and place scholars in college preparatory settings in independent schools and public schools offering highly capable programs." By sending students through an enrichment program together in elementary school, they had the opportunity to bond. The kind of "bonding" relationship that helps Jon and K'Vonte build the web of support they need in order to successfully complete high school and make the transition to college.

CBO-student with Teachers. In different ways, there is also emphasis placed on developing relationships between students and adults. Classroom teachers are important adults in the program, and the potential for a positive developing relationship with them clearly exists but is not always realized. Reflecting on his Success Academy and independent school experience, Jon appreciated that:

Both of them focus on more one-on-one communication between the student and teacher and... have the small classrooms where you can reach out to teachers more easily. I feel like Success Academy really prepared us to go to private school because they encourage reaching out to teachers whenever you need help.

K'Vonte agreed:

I think Success Academy really taught us all the skills that we now use in high school. I mean, I think...most of the books that we read in [our literature class with Mr. Biggle, the curriculum and instruction director, at] Success Academy, we...read...them in high school again...

CBO-student with counselors. Another group of adults involved in supporting students through the college process is the college counselors at the CBO and the independent school. As noted previously, there are no professionals within a school more important to postsecondary enrollment than high school counselors (McDonough, 1997). K'Vonte described the process this

way, "We have...a college counselor that gives us a list of colleges. After we talk with them and meet with them a couple of times, they give us some colleges that they think we should look into." This coordination is important to ensure students are not confused and have access to the correct information about the college application process.

CBO with PK-12 Schools. Success Academy has strong relationships with different public and private high schools including the independent school that K’Vonte and Jon attended. While the Success Academy program does not take place in a school building, Brienne noted that there are opportunities to “[partner] with the school [to get] support services.” Brienne also “visited students—juniors and seniors—at their high schools to begin the college search and application process.”

The counseling staff at Success Academy also communicated with the counseling staff at the school. According to K’Vonte, “They get along pretty well. They try to talk beforehand just to know what the other one has talked about.” As the Success Academy website states, Success Academy is very intentional about how it builds relationships with high school staff to create strong channels of communication through which support can later be provided:

We share a vision with our school partners to create educational access and opportunity for our scholars. That is why we work in partnership with public, private and independent schools to ensure students have access to college preparatory pathways. During the past 15 years, our scholars have excelled in Highly-Capable, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and Honors programs within local school districts and independent and parochial schools around the country.

CBO with Higher Education Institutions. Success Academy has also been intentional about trying to develop relationships with postsecondary institutions. Its relationship with the nearby selective public four-year flagship university is critical to ensuring that students complete the college choice process and receive the support they need on campus. Currently some 45

Success Academy students are enrolled there. The counselor hoped she could give her students a leg-up by helping the admissions office associate Success Academy students with a set of experiences and supports, which should make them more attractive to the institution.

Furthermore, the director recognized that strong relationships with faculty and administrators within various departments on campuses to provide Success Academy students with information about the admissions process and special programs. In her own words, Brienne described the relationships she has developed with the the offices of undergraduate admissions, academic and student affairs, as well as minority affairs and diversity at a selective public Washington state university:

I have a contact at OMAD [Office of Minority Affairs & Diversity]. I do have several contacts in the office of admissions. I've worked with Ms Merida Datum. She's been my primary source...in the office of admissions. She's done several college application workshops for us. Another person I work with very closely is Dr. John Doe who's in charge of the honors program [within Undergraduate Affairs].I'd say probably for four years we've worked with Dr. Doe to help recruit more students to apply for UW honors. I have also worked with Jane Mendez pretty frequently in the office of admissions and all three of those people have been very responsive and helpful in terms of working with our kids.

I don't think there are any challenges of me working with this selective university. There is often a challenge to help my students understand that they have to identify themselves as a Success Academy Scholar and I don't know if the institution has changed their application or will change their application to reflect working with a community based organization.

Beyond the state flagship university, Brienne has worked to increase Success Academy's visibility with institutions around the country through a partnership with the Common Application—an undergraduate college admission application applicants that applicants may use to apply to any of more than 700 member colleges and universities in 49 states and the District of Columbia, as well as abroad. As Brienne described:

I contacted the Common App [the first year that they decided to pull a drop down menu to say, 'Are you working with an outside organization?'] and said, 'We

need to be a part of this.’ And we are. All of our students know that in that drop down box on the Common App they can put Success Academy but the flagship university we are working with doesn’t have a place for that, at least they didn’t as of last year. Even though I work very closely with my students in their application process it may fall through the cracks that they’re identifying as a Success Academy scholar.

Much like the relationships described earlier, Success Academy builds relationships with individual people on college and university campuses, so students will have access to additional advocates as they progress through the college application process to enrollment—and ultimately, graduation.

My research showed that the CBO K’Vonte and Jon attended helped students develop the relationships they need to access the resources necessary to attend and finance colleges that match their academic profiles and interests. Success Academy takes the information that is available about the college process and delivers that information to students through trusted relationships with adults that influence their decisions about the future. The resulting bonding relationships in students’ lives will replicate whatever information the adult has. In this way, Success Academy makes sure the adult relationships these students have are “bridges” to the information they need to gain entry into and, especially, to ensure students and their families are able to finance college.

Support Provided by CBO

A second finding in this study concerns the high level of support that the Success Academy provided for its participants. Support can generally be considered the informational and social resources perceived to be available or provided to a person by formal and informal relationships (Gottlieb & Bergen 2010). Such support is associated with positive psychosocial and behavioral outcomes for adolescents (Chang et al., 2010; Beam et al., 2002). Support can come from adults, such as parents, teachers, counselors, and other school personnel (Chu et al.,

2010) who can provide social support at home, in school, at a CBO, or at a university. Different kinds of academic and socioemotional support can be deployed in response to different types of problems.

We can begin to see how membership in a youth developmental program, such as a CBO committed to college access and success, can build supportive relationships between students, parents, and CBO agents and aid in effectively communicating the benefits of a college education while understanding the implications of various financial aid decisions. In my research on CBOs, I found that the Success Academy provides support for students in many ways. It provides academic enrichment as well as assistance with college and financial aid applications (e.g., federal and state). Success Academy provides this informational support in a way that many resource-poor high schools cannot due to the way college guidance is structured with large counselor-to-student ratios.

Academic Preparation for Success Academy Students: Support in the PK-12 School. At Success Academy, academic support is the primary focus, in a way that is uncommon for CBOs that support the college choice process. According to Brienne, “A lot of CBOs don’t necessarily get into academic preparation,” which should begin in elementary school during the predisposition or developmental phase of the college choice process. To demonstrate how Success Academy provides this resource, Brienne reemphasized the purpose of the enrichment phase of Success Academy:

The students are in classes five days a week for about eight hours a day for two summers in a row and then during their sixth grade year they’re in class every Wednesday afternoon and every Saturday. [Over that time, scholars] receive more than 700 hours of additional instructional time and more than 300 hours of homework in Science, Math, Literature, and History...to ensure that scholars not only survive but thrive in college preparatory settings [such as the independent school K’Vonte and Jon attended].

The boys reflected on the academic support experience this way:

K'Vonte: Yeah, so, like Frederick Douglass, we read that.

Interviewer: When did you read it? Where did you read it first?

K'Vonte: We read it here [at Success Academy] first, I think, during seventh grade... Yeah, so, I think just what we learned...really prepares us for the experience that we're going to be facing in high school. Especially all the work that we do here at [Success Academy]. I mean, when we were doing it I didn't think that it really had a point to it because it was just a lot of work, but I think it's really similar to what we do in high school now. It's about the same amount of work.

Interviewer: About the same?

K'Vonte: About the same. Actually, Success Academy might be a little harder.
Jon: Yeah. Yeah, I remember, like, during the school year. we were... learning the same stuff that we were learning in [Success Academy] as in our regular school. At points we were behind [in] Success Academy but we were ahead at our school.

Interviewer: When do you do [Success Academy]? I mean, you go to your regular school during the day and then...?

K'Vonte: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

K'Vonte: On Wednesdays and Saturdays, so Wednesdays after school, you come to Success Academy and then on Saturdays it's the whole day at Success Academy.

Success Academy provides academic support throughout the program during students' PK-12 years. There are on-going conversations about the importance of taking the right courses in high school in preparation for the college admissions process. Brienne responded to whether Success Academy is following what students are doing in high school:

We are, and I would say it was on more of an informal basis until about three years ago. Three years ago is when we really started hitting hard with the parents as well as the students but especially the parents about making sure that the student is on the right track... We partner with a tutoring company to support students in math and writing and SAT prep as a supplement to what we offer in-house.

The academic support that Success Academy students get is designed to help them move through the PK-12 system and into college prepared to successfully complete a degree program.

Social-Emotional Support Provided by Success Academy. Apart from direct academic support, Success Academy provides significant support to help students prepare socially and emotionally for the college experience. Beyond the academic enrichment phase of middle school, an academic counselor, according to Brienne, “meets with [students] about once a month to ensure that the student is succeeding academically, socially, emotionally, physically, that they’re taking healthy risks, that they’re participating in class.”

In addition to the academic counselor’s support, K’Vonte described the emotional support he received from his parents and peers in those challenging moments, which he explained were many:

I had those moments a lot, the moments where I wanted to quit, where I cried to my mom and told her that I didn’t want to do it. It was too hard and that I couldn’t do it, but, you know, my mom was always really positive with me and she tried encouraging me and also the support from Success Academy and all the friends that I made [t]here. Whenever I got those feelings where I wanted to quit, you know, my mom would help me think about the future and see how important this really was, so I think that’s what really kept me going through it.

Jon also reported being impacted by the program’s results, particularly by the wisdom—that is, the experiences—of his older peers:

There’s definitely people behind us that they’ve already helped out and they’ve already made a great decision to go to college, so, yeah, hearing about the experience that they have is also really great.

These kinds of support set students up to believe they can be successful in school, especially when things get challenging.

Support throughout the College Application Process. Success Academy supports students in the area of understanding and completing the college application process. As underscored by Brienne, the director of college counseling:

There are very few community-based organizations who have well-trained college counselors, and by well-trained, I mean people who have served either as a college counselor in a high school setting or worked in college admissions.

Having a staff person with extensive experience in the college application, financial aid, and admissions processes is critical to the success of Success Academy. Working with families, Brienne emphasized:

There's always some financial aid component. Whether it's saying you need to memorize expected family contribution, you need to know what the Free Application for Federal Student Aid [FAFSA] is, or what does cost of attendance mean. By the time the spring of junior year and really the fall and winter of senior year, they understand what the CSS profile is and where the FAFSA actually goes—that it doesn't go directly to the college, it's a federal form. The rising seniors and their parents have had the benefit of going to [parent] meetings and understanding a lot about the financial aid process.

Brienne also referenced the WAFSA (Washington Application for State Financial Aid) for DREAMers, such as Jon, and understood the uniqueness of these students' situations as it concerns the financial aid process:

We work with some of [these families] on a one-on-one basis. We have to tread very carefully on where [these] students wish to apply because they can't get any federal aid but our students did [submit the WAFSA] and were recipients of state aid and that is going to greatly impact where they can enroll in the future.

Success Academy was able to help Jon successfully navigate this situation. Jon was especially concerned and also conflicted about the expense of going out of state for college. He noted that "sometimes you have to go out of state but finding the money is pretty hard." Accordingly, he applied to a number of in-state colleges including selective public and private institutions, as well as less selective institutions, such as the University of Washington- Seattle,

University of Washington-Tacoma, Seattle University, Whitworth University, Whitman College, Gonzaga University, Western Washington University, and Washington State University. He eventually enrolled at Whitman College, a selective private college, which Brienne described as “one of the 40 colleges in the United States that promise to meet 100 percent of [the family financial aid] need.”

K’Vonte, at the time of the interview, was also concerned about finances. He said, “I thinking about the University of Washington, both Seattle and Bothell campuses.” And he would eventually enroll at the University of Washington-Bothell. Indeed, state universities are particularly important, because there are often selective flagship state colleges that are affordable for in-state applicants who may not want to leave home. Dillon and Smith (2013) found that having a well-matched public university within 50 miles of a student’s home decreases the probability of mismatch (Dillon & Smith, 2013).

Success Academy works to give students the support they need to complete the college choice process, which begins in the predisposition stage in elementary school with academic enrichment and is emphasized with students and parents at the beginning of high school in preparation for the application phase with this message from Brienne: “The courses that you choose now and the grades that you earn now will affect the kind of college you are going to be admitted to and ultimately the kind of financial aid that you receive.”

CBOs help leverage what students can get through FAFSA or WAFSA completion and encourage students who have the appropriate academic profile to apply to schools where financial support (e.g., Whitman) will not be a problem. The presence of a CBO may be one crucial element in a difficult and poorly understood financial aid situation that often is the greatest barrier to students from underserved populations accessing selective colleges. During

their recruitment trips, admissions officers meet with students at their community-based organizations. Discussions about prospective students are often had with a CBO college counselor. These types of conversations serve to provide students with information and assistance necessary to negotiate the college choice process and limit the chance of undermatch. CBOs have been championing the access conversation, and speaking to the issues of poverty and access to educational opportunities. They continue to be the primary source of information about the college admissions process for many low-income students and families. For these reasons, as I will discuss in the next section, a CBO becomes the prominent source of cultural and social capital for students and families from marginalized communities.

Cultural and Social Capital Developed through Success Academy

The cultural and social capital framing concepts in the section entitled Framing Social and Cultural Capital and the Movement to—and through—College in this study explain how “undermatch” is a form of college choice where students develop postsecondary tastes/preferences and access to information and other college-promoting resources from their network of relationships (Ceja, 2006; McDonough, 1997). Parents transmit college-promoting cultural and social capital through their relationships with their children, school personnel, and the parents of their children’s friends (Perna, 2006). While all individuals have cultural and social capital, students from underrepresented backgrounds are less likely to possess the types of knowledge of the cultural norms and expectations that are valued by the dominant culture and would help them negotiate the college choice process.

Due to their historic underrepresentation in higher education, Black, Latino, low-income and first-generation college-bound students will rely on their high schools’ resources, and primarily guidance counselors, to provide them with the information they need to successfully

negotiate the college choice process (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Muhammad, 2008; Perna, 2000). While in high school, students are exposed to various resources (e.g., academic preparation, the delivery of college guidance) and structural supports (e.g., a network of peers, parents, and school personnel) that shape “tastes for particular types of postsecondary education” (Hill, 2008, p. 67). However, the nature and availability of these resources vary greatly across high schools (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997). At high schools with higher representation of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the availability of high school resources and structural supports often directs students towards different postsecondary options. Students from these high schools had more constrained college search experiences and had fewer resources from which to draw upon. The concentration of social and cultural capital preferred by the dominant culture in high schools attended predominantly by upper middle class students facilitated the transfer of valuable information about college, which less privileged students had less access to. Students at both well-resourced and less well-resourced high schools tended to make decisions based on many sources of information, with much input from their social network of school personnel, parents, and friends—or, in other words, based on their social and cultural resources and relationships.

In the cases of Jon and K’Vonte, both their involvement in the intervention youth development and educational enrichment program as well as attendance at a resource-rich independent PK-12 school provided them access to the cultural and social capital they need to successfully complete the college application and financial aid processes. Unlike affluent students who grow up with college educated parents, and more particularly attend a selective college because of the expectation from every message and model they see, these young men might not have been exposed much less given access to the information they needed from the

adult relationships they had prior to Success Academy, however much their parents cared about their success. In this way, Success Academy thus becomes the “parent” and model for students of what is possible. According to Jon, “Success Academy really helped me out to actually acquire some knowledge of what’s going to happen, instilled even more the idea to go to college and forged that idea and, actually, made it possible.” As a result of Success Academy’s support, two hardworking and highly talented first-generation college-bound students, one of whom is a DREAMer, earned their way to one of the one of the most well-endowed liberal arts colleges and one of the very best research university in the country, which lends to the argument that highly individualized college counseling from a CBO is necessary. Success Academy not only becomes the proxy for the cultural and social capital these young men need to earn admission and finance college. But even more importantly, their CBO gave them the means by which the two could develop increasing social and cultural capital.

Conclusions and Implications

CBOs also have the potential to disrupt institutional racism and segregation and isolation of Black and Latino students and also help students challenge stereotypes about their group that they often internalize based on how the larger society and education institutions represent and treat them. Inequities of familial and school-level cultural and social capital and inequities in PK-12 school context help explain why the disparate undermatch and cultural and social capital exists and what its existence means for society. These theories highlights forces, dynamics and conditions, often intertwined, that are at work in affecting the quality and equality of education in our country. My research suggests that community-based organizations can play a significant role in limiting undermatch by providing our most vulnerable students with access to quality

instruction and rigorous coursework, by providing these students with access to the opportunities their wealthier peers get from family or school environments.

There were three key findings in this case study. My research shows that information about the college process is often only successfully transmitted to students through a network of institutional and adult relationships, which include school and college personnel, peers, and parents. The CBO I studied, Success Academy, developed new adult relationships for these young men, complementing the other adults they have more regular access to, all the while positioning the students in a new institutional network. It fostered ideas, a new sense of self-awareness and aspirations, as well as a certain “savviness” about how to make one’s way in an initially foreign environment. And given its commitment to these students’ successful movement through the college choice process and transition into college, the CBO complements what parents, peers, and school personnel already offer. Although I only studied the role of one CBO in the academic progress of two students, this first key finding suggests that further research into the roles CBOs play in the college paths of underrepresented students would be worthwhile.

The second finding is that relationships are translated into the kinds of support students need to complete the college process. In other words, students require that kind of chain process where the CBO talks to parents who then, with a deeper understanding of how things work encourage their kids to keep going when it gets hard and talks to counselors who work with the kids in high school. The third, and most important finding, is that the combination of information about the college process, relationships between students and adults and their context, and the resulting support are what provide students with the social capital they need to both complete the college process. If scaled up to include a greater number of first generation,

low-income students of color and their families, this increase in social capital might eventually disrupt the economic realities in their communities and, in the long term, ease inequities in society.

While the study helps to get specific about what Success Academy is doing to support low-income, first-generation college-bound students in their pursuit of higher education and successful lives, there are many things the study does not and cannot reveal about the process, the work of other similar intervention programs, and the experiences of students who participate in them. For one thing, I was unable to follow students over time, to learn about their college experiences, and to watch the way social capital develops. Because the CBO's response to the college choice process is such a long term developmental process, it would be important for research to get further inside the process, noting how and where the CBO encounters its own issues and complications and how it resolves them. Also, it would be important to do so for a wider range of students than those I tapped for this research. Because my sample size was so small, I was unable to determine if the CBO had as great an impact for only certain participants or with all of them.

In addition, it is apparent from Success Academy that good leadership is critical. It would be interesting to note whether or not the systems in place depend upon the leader or key staff people or whether the systems in place are embedded enough that even with leadership change, the organization would be able to sustain and even improve upon its success. As the director points out, this CBO's model differs from most others. Are there elements from other CBOs that would benefit Success Academy, or vice versa? How are these intervention programs able to embrace new strategies to be even more successful? Is there a way to learn things from this CBO that could be applied to the public PK-12 system?

This study suggests that the role of CBOs for low-income, first generation students of color might be very important in solving the problem of inappropriate matching—or unmatching—in the college application and enrollment process. Therefore, further research on CBOs is warranted. Longitudinal studies that combine qualitative and quantitative methods would add useful information on the ways that CBOs might help this group of students.

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IV.

PAPER 3: DEFYING UNDERMATCH

ONLY TO MISMATCH AND REVERSE TRANSFER⁶

Abstract

Higher education institutions across the country have paid increasing attention to the need to recruit more first-generation students and students of color to diversify their student bodies. But getting students in the door isn't enough. The campus climate at some predominantly White higher education institutions often lacks an inclusive culture that allows first-generation students of color to thrive and eventually graduate. Some of these students ultimately choose to leave their four-year colleges to attend a community college—a process known as reverse transfer.⁷ This study took an exploratory qualitative approach to understand what factors propel first-generation students of color to leave the selective institutions they worked so hard to get into. In addition, the study considers what higher education institutions can do to help these students not merely survive but thrive and persist to graduation.

⁶ This paper was written with Charlotte West.

⁷ “Reverse transfer” also refers to offering students the opportunity to earn an associate's degree or certificate from a community college after transferring to a four-year institution by transferring credits back to the community college, but in this essay “reverse transfer” refers to movement from a four-year institution to a two-year institution.

Introduction

Even when I read [the racist comments] in my dorm, I would feel uncomfortable because it could have been anyone in my living unit writing those comments.

—Reflection from Arya⁸, a student of color who reverse-transferred from a selective predominantly White college in his freshman year

Arya was a first generation, first-semester student of color at University of San Diego (USD) in November 2015, when message boards on the university's Yik Yak network were rife with racist comments directed at students of color. Yik Yak, which announced its shut down in April 2017, was a viral social networking application that allowed users to see anonymous messages within a five-mile radius of their location.

In response to threats of violence against students of color on other college campuses across the country, USD's Black Student Union (BSU) submitted a list of demands to the university administration that included a request to officially ban Yik Yak on campus. USD was not the first campus where the app had been used to intimidate students of color. Earlier in the month a 19-year-old White computer science major threatened to "to shoot every black person I see" at University of Missouri. Arya said the University of San Diego administration acknowledged the issues related to Yik Yak in a campus-wide email, but did not take any concrete steps to ban the app. In her words:

It was disappointing to see how the Yik Yak situation was handled. USD's president addressed the issue in an e-mail but did nothing to change the problem, for example silencing the voices that used the [Yik Yak] app to push hate and violence towards POC [People of Color] and banning Yik Yak in the USD area. Recognizing the issue via e-mail was not and did not feel like enough. Clubs like Black Student Union, MEChA, GSA, etc., held open dialogues for students that felt uncomfortable with the responses from the USD demands.

⁸ All names in this document have been changed to protect individuals' privacy.

Arya saw anonymous posts that included “We demand a white student union because white students need a safe place to go because of all the hate they have to deal with because of the BSU,” and “Honestly how many black students are at USD [sic]? If I can give out one beer out of a thirty rack to everyone in the BSU, you guys have no reason to complain about anything.”

Arya adds that many of the “yaks” were in response to the Black Student Union’s demands, including one that read “These...demands are hilarious. We go to a PRIVATE, CATHOLIC University. This isn’t Mizzou, homie. Nothing....should change...” While her peer argues that a campus climate that is hostile to Black students and other students of color is somehow OK because USD is a private institution, Arya argues in favor of creating a more inclusive campus “for ALL students”:

I remember posts on Yik Yak saying that they had a problem with the word ‘demand’ [from the BSU]. It makes me wonder if it had been a different club, would the student body have had the same uproar? Are Black students not able to want more for themselves and others? It was extremely disheartening to know that I went to a prestigious college and people still thought very little of what diversity means.

As indicated in the opening quote in this paper, Arya became wary of the larger campus community because she didn’t know who was behind the hurtful posts. Her discomfort related to anonymous Yik Yak posts and other microaggressions, as well as how the incident was handled by the university administration, colored her entire experience at USD—and ultimately contributed to her decision to reverse transfer to a community college after her sophomore year.

As a follow-up to the two previous papers in this dissertation, this present exploratory, qualitative study traces the journeys of two low-income, first-generation college students of color as they began their undergraduate education at private liberal arts colleges. Both were initially excited to start college but ended up reverse transferring to community colleges close to home. Paper 1, where we first meet Arya, explores the phenomenon of undermatch, wherein high-

achieving, low-income students often apply to and enroll in less competitive higher education institutions than their academic qualifications might permit. In that study, I found that the relationships students had with family members and high school staff drove the decisions they ultimately made about college selection. More importantly, the information embedded in those relationships can expand but often constrained the college choices of first-generation students of color. At the time the paper was written, Arya was still undecided about which college she wanted to attend, struggling between choosing “a school that’s financially smart” or her “dream school,” which was USD.

Paper 2, where we first meet Jon, examined how membership in a community-based organization (CBO) committed to college access and choice can support high school students in the college choice process. The CBO assisted Jon in successfully navigating the college choice process as an undocumented immigrant from Mexico. When the initial interviews were conducted, he was planning to attend, but had not yet enrolled at, a selective, private liberal arts college in Washington state on a full need-based scholarship.

The purpose of this present study is to understand how low-income, first-generation students of color experience the reverse transfer process and how it might impact their persistence. We recognize that many students’ educational pathways are nonlinear and that the decision to reverse transfer may provide an opportunity for students to address challenges related to finances, academics, or institutional fit. Similar to Swail, et al. (2003), Kuh, et al. (2006) and Perna and Williams (2008), we take a longitudinal look at what matters in student development and ultimately success, acknowledging that students do not come to postsecondary education *tabula rasa* (Kuh et al., 2006). Rather, they are the products of many years of complex

interactions with their family of origin and cultural, social, political, and educational or organizational environments.

This study includes four sections. First, I provide a research frame for students' movements to and from colleges they choose. The second section focuses on the design for the present longitudinal study, which tracks two students through their reverse transfer experiences. The next section discusses findings from interviews with the two students and other resources. Finally, I present conclusions and suggest interventions. The study makes clear that institutions need to pay greater attention to the factors that might prompt college-ready, first-generation students like Arya and Jon to transfer.

Framing the Students' Movement To, and Away From the Colleges They Initially Chose

Arya's and Jon's stories help to bring into sharp relief a set of dynamics that are as yet poorly understood in the higher education literature. Better understanding sits at the boundary between college choice literature and those dealing with college persistence. The college persistence literature helps to pinpoint common experiences of first-generation students of color in institutional surroundings that are academically demanding and largely populated by intergenerational college-participating White students from affluent backgrounds. In such situations, feelings of isolation and cultural mismatch are especially likely. But surrounding both these emotional responses and the choice processes that led the students to this situation in the first place, are a set of network-based dynamics well informed by theory and research concerning social capital. In particular, both the "bridging" and "bonding" forms of social capital (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Putnam, 2000) offer important insights into the reverse transfer process as a logical and empowering move for many low-income, first-generation students of

color, who initially aspired to a demanding higher education institution. At the same time, these framing ideas help us to see more clearly sources of institutional (color)blindness, inattention, or incomplete service that propel many such students to seek out reverse transfer.

Experiencing a New Educational Environment: Feelings of Isolation

and Cultural Mismatch

Arya's experience at USD is not atypical for first-generation, low-income students of color who enroll at resource-rich, predominantly White institutions. The need to understand the experience of these students has taken on a greater sense of urgency at the current moment in U.S. history when questions of race and citizenship status are arising in divisive and bitterly contested ways. A recent study from San Francisco State University showed that one-quarter of college students experienced symptoms akin to post-traumatic stress disorder following the 2016 presidential elections (Hagan et al 2018). The larger social forces of racism and the tendency for class-based systems to reproduce themselves, inequities and all, are clearly in play. By disaggregating the disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic minorities among first-generation college students and the unique and compounding negative effect of race on college opportunities, Carnevale and Strohl (2013, p. 12) explain how the sense of isolation experienced by Black and Latinx students on resource-rich campuses might be a reflection of their position in society more generally:

African Americans and Hispanics are especially vulnerable to class-based economic disadvantages because they are more concentrated in low-income groups and because they are more isolated both spatially and socially from the general society. As a result, race gives additional power to the negative effects of low-income status and limits the positive effects of income gains, better schools, and... [t]he traditional channel of intergenerational mobility, parental education, [which] is particularly muted for African Americans and Hispanics.

Scholars have found that more selective colleges, like the ones mentioned in this study, can boast retention and graduation rates of students from historically underrepresented groups that are higher than the national average for colleges and universities (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Nevertheless, because selective colleges and universities tend to narrowly operate on a set of shared middle- to upper-class norms of so-called independence as the culturally appropriate way to be a college student, working class first-generation college undergraduates, such as Arya and Jon, often experience emotionally taxing feelings of isolation on predominantly White campuses (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Jack, 2016; Lehmann, 2007; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). As Jack (2016, p. 3) observes in his review of studies on student engagement in a resource-rich campus environment:

The cultural mismatch that working-class undergraduates experience increases stress (Stephens et al., 2012), heightens their sense of isolation (Elizabeth Aries, 2008; Ostrove & Long, 2007), threatens their academic identities (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Tinto, 1987), undercuts academic performance and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005b; Pike & Kuh, 2005), and can prompt them to withdraw from campus life (Bergerson, 2007; Lehmann, 2007).

Jack observes that such withdrawal is important because student engagement is a central factor in a student's sense of belonging at her or his institution. That is, whether they will survive and merely "get by" or thrive and "get ahead" in college is related to the extent to which students participate in educationally effective activities. Examples of these are student-faculty interaction, peer cooperation, active learning, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diversity and inclusion (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1989, 1991). While Jack focuses on academic engagement, much of his analysis is concerned with how students acquire and develop the dominant *cultural capital* (i.e., the know-how") to engage faculty, suggesting that the student experience may be one broad social networking or connection process (Attinasi, 1989, 1992). This view is consistent with a social networks perspective which suggests that college students'

relationships with faculty, staff and peers, as well as family, friends, and mentors contribute to their engagement, sense of belonging, and persistence. Scholars have conceptualized student engagement as a multidimensional construct that includes students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive investments in learning (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Thus, undergraduate engagement is framed as the interactive behaviors, such as collaborative studying and talking with faculty, that are necessary for college success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005).

To bring student engagement into better focus in order to understand how it impacts first-generation undergraduates from working-class backgrounds, we reviewed the college retention and persistence literature to understand the many interacting and multiplying factors influencing students' experiences and outcomes. Given the importance of student success in college, understanding the instructive perspectives to guide scholarship and practice is essential. While no one view is comprehensive enough to account for the complicated set of factors influencing student and institutional performance, there have been several approaches to the study of persistence. According to Swail, et al. (2003) and Kuh, et al. (2006), these include:

1. *Sociological studies*, which analyze the impact of the student's social status (e.g., first-generation college status) and social group on the development of aspirations, expectations, as well as for educational attainment and measure inequities in college choice and persistence.
2. *Cultural studies*, which investigate the extent to which many students from historically marginalized communities encounter challenges when they get to college that make it difficult for them to engage with campus's resources for learning and personal development. Student perceptions of the institutional environment and dominant norms

and values influence student engagement—and the extent to which students participate in campus life.

3. *Psychological studies*, which examine the impact of academic program, campus social climate, cost, location, and influences of others' on student persistence; students sense of belonging or perception of (mis)fit or (mis)match.
4. *Economic studies*, which view student departure decision as weighing the costs and benefits of staying in college and participating in various activities; if a student perceives that the cost of staying in school or becoming involved outweighs the return on investment, they are likely to forgo the opportunity and leave—or (reverse) transfer or stop or drop out of college altogether.

College Persistence and Retention Research

The literature on retention and persistence suggests that students' academic performance and decision to leave college early are linked to both social and academic experiences (Tinto, 1987). Tinto's (1993) longitudinal integration model has been the most dominant sociological perspective for understanding why students might choose to leave. He presents social and academic integration as two complementary but independent factors. Social integration is a measure of how well students connect with the campus environment, including the structural supports (e.g., network of peers, faculty, staff, and others in the broader surrounding community), as indicated by active engagement in activities (e.g., student organization, Greek life, professor office hours). In contrast, academic integration reflects satisfaction with academic performance or choice of major (Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994). One might begin to see how persistence is a function of dynamic network-relationships between the student and other network members across his or her local and campus communities. Indeed, student

relationships and overall human development are defined by the dynamic network-relationships between a person and her or his context (Lerner, 2013; Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015; Lieberman, 2013; Varga & Zaff, 2018).

For Tinto, the more academically and socially integrated students feel, the better they will perform and more likely they are to persist to graduation. On the other hand, students who feel disconnected are those who are unable to effectively distance themselves from their community of family and high school peers and adopt the values and the behavioral norms of the environment of the institution they are attending. These students are likely to step out or drop out of school before completion. To be sure, social networks are structures of relationships connecting social actors (Marsden, 2004; Marsden & Lin, 1982).

The nature of these relationships and the extent to which they support students in their college-based activities, or present obstacles to academic progress, can vary along multiple dimensions. We know, for example, that the students most likely to persist are those whose values, norms and behavior (i.e., sociopsychological or cultural and psychological resources) are shared with the dominant group within the campus community (Lehmann, 2007, 2014). Because Tinto's (1993) model is based on the experiences of traditionally-aged, White, middle-class students attending private residential institutions, his model may be biased. That is, the model does not adequately address the uniquely debilitating issues facing students from historically underrepresented backgrounds in predominantly White, resource-rich institutions. According to Carnevale and Strohl (2013), these institutions are part of a postsecondary system that is ever more complicit as complementary yet independent passive agents in the historical systematic intergenerational marginalization and thus underrepresentation of those groups, which have also

been the most spatially, socially, and economically isolated from the culture of mainstream society.

In that context, scholars have debated how best to operationalize various components of Tinto's model. Suggesting that Tinto's survey items may be culturally biased and thus not able to capture the complexities and subtleties of student-institution interactions that affect persistence, Kuh & Love (2000) argue that Tinto's model artificially separates student experiences that may be part of one broad social integration construct. In other words, the student experience may be part of one long relational developmental and shared cultural integration process within a broader societal network, stemming from students' PK-12 schooling and, hence, their know-how to access and engage with the dominant mainstream socialization agents. That is why scholars overwhelmingly agree that for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, particularly first generation college aspirants, to succeed in college, they must learn to negotiate foreign environments and interact effectively with strangers (Kuh and Love, 2000). In other words, first generation students and students of color do not begin at the same starting line with White middle class students in knowing how to connect themselves with university students, faculty, organizations, or academic norms.

Faculty and staff may be among the most influential individuals within a student's institutional network. In fact, scholars tend to agree that student-faculty interaction is an important factor in student success—i.e., occupational aspirations, academic performance and persistence (Astin, 1993, 2001; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005a). We know that mentoring activities, including faculty interaction outside of class and contact with advisors, are generally positively related to African American student persistence at resource-rich, predominantly White institutions (Himelhoch, Nicholas, Ball, & Black, 1997). This finding

is consistent with what we also know about students' experience at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, where students generally attribute their success to the support and encouragement they received from faculty and staff (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). And, strong relationships with faculty and staff have shown to contribute to Latinx students' sense of belonging and their feeling that they are valued and "matter" in the community (Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez, & Plum, 2004).

Furthermore, we know that the single most powerful influence on college students' cognitive and social development is their peers (Astin, 1993). Peer interactions are especially important for social integration because students are more likely to stay enrolled when they feel comfortable and connected to other students with similar interests and aspirations (Bean, 1981; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 1975). This might explain why fraternity and sorority membership is positively related to persistence (DeBard & Sacks, 2010; DeBard & Sacks, 2011). Institutions with higher levels of student social interaction also have higher levels of student educational aspirations (Pascarella, 1985). According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), college graduation is influenced by the number of close friends students have, their participation in college activities, and the institution's personal involvement and focus on individual students.

As many first generation students and students of color may or may not matriculate with the intergenerational know-how that other students have, what students expect to do in college and what resource-rich postsecondary institutions are able to provide could result in cultural mismatch, leading to psychological distress (e.g., depression, anxiety) and other potentially debilitating conditions (Kuh & Love, 2000). This emotionally taxing mismatch arises because expectations can be a psychological catalyst, an impediment, or even a rejection of certain types of behavior, thus serving as a filter through which students compare what is unfolding with what

they think should happen (Collier & Morgan, 2008). In turn, they decide which activities or behaviors are appropriate, meaningful, and worth their time, and which opportunities to ignore. Expectations, in this way, shape subsequent behaviors and experiences (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Student-faculty and peer-to-peer interactions help illuminate how social networks of relationships can function as psychological safety nets and explain why certain groups of students face more difficulties with social integration (Pescosolido, 1994), while family influence is all the more significant (Chamberlain, 2011). In her psychological contract theory, Rousseau (1995) acknowledges students have certain beliefs about the appropriate nature of relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. A key feature of this contract is an implicit agreement between the student and the institution as to how one is to respond to the other. The student rarely articulates this, although the institution may put forth expectations in mission statements and other organizational codes of conduct. When students perceive the contract to be breached, they may lose trust (e.g., a psychological resource) in the institution as represented by peers or faculty (Howard, 2005). Thus, what students generally expect when they start college shapes their behavior, with implications for their engagement, which in turn impacts their academic performance and social adjustment, and subsequently their decision to persist or withdraw and potentially reverse transfer (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009; Howard, 2005; Lehmann, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012).

Indeed, examining a student's agency can be helpful in providing insight to student success. While scholars argue the importance of self-efficacy, goal-oriented behaviors and achievement motivation as positive influences on student performance (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005), the campus climate is believed to produce historically and structurally

unique performance challenges for first-generation students of color (e.g., stereotype threat, microaggressions). For this population, inclusion into the institution's environment, as well as academic success, can be very difficult, especially at resource-rich, majority White institutions (Aries & Seider, 2005; Binder, 2013; Mullen, 2010; Torres, 2009). Hurtado & Carter (1998) developed the notion of "sense of belonging" to provide an alternative to Tinto's concepts of social integration and membership that would be more applicable to students from diverse backgrounds. Hurtado and Carter show that for many non-White students, the campus climate at predominantly White institutions of higher education is a significant retention factor. They note that there are structural and historical barriers to some students' involvement or engagement—the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to their studies and other educationally purposeful activities (Astin, 1985; G D Kuh, Gonyea, & Williams, 2005). Astin's student involvement model acknowledges that "it is easier to become involved when one can identify with the college environment" (p. 303)—and such identification is easier for some students than for others.

Continuing with the point, similar to Tinto's (1993) study of middle-class White students, Hurtado and Carter's national longitudinal study of college-ready Latinx students explored the relationships between sense of belonging (e.g., psychological resource) and participation in a variety of academic activities and social organizations (i.e., student engagement). They distinguished between students' interactions with the campus and their psychological sense of identification with the campus. They posited that students' perceptions of whether they feel included and comfortable in the campus community is a more helpful measure of their affiliation and identity with the college than Tinto's integration argument—that students first must separate from their communities of the past, such as familial members and high school peers, undergo a

period of transition during which the student begins to interact in new ways with the members of the new group into which membership is sought, and adopt the dominant values and behaviors of the new society of the college (Tinto, 1993, p. 93). Hurtado and Carter found that for Latinx students, external communities (e.g., families, community-based organizations) play an important role in increasing sense of belonging, challenging Tinto's (1993) assumption that a clear separation is necessary for transition to college. Similarly, other research acknowledges the significant role that continuing relationships with off-campus family members play in the psychological well-being of first-year college students, particularly those who are first in their families to experience education at this level (Hernandez, 2001).

In the same vein, Bean's student attrition model posits that beliefs shape attitudes, attitudes shape behaviors, and behaviors signal intents. A student's beliefs are affected by his or her experiences with the institution, which then evolve into attitudes about the institution, which ultimately determine a student's sense of belonging or "fit" with the institution. If students feel they do not belong, this results in a mismatch and potential reverse transfer. Thus, students' perceptions of the fairness of institutional policies and the responsiveness of faculty and staff presumably affect their decisions about whether to persist or leave the institution and or reverse transfer.

The leadership and decision-making approaches favored by senior administrators are also thought to have some effect on engagement and sense of belonging (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Hurtado & Carter, 1998). Messages from senior leadership, thus, can have significant impact on whether a student like Arya feels that the institution is living up to the expectations they set forth and ensuring her well-being, learning, development, and eventual success.

There is also strong evidence that microaggressions also influence the retention and completion rates of students of color (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Solorzano, et al. examine racial microaggressions and how they influence the institutional campus climate. Microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, non-verbal, or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously. An unwelcoming climate is a barrier to students' sense of connection to the academic environment and social lives of campus communities. Whether it comes from fellow students, faculty, administration, staff, or campus policies, the experience of racial microaggression reinforces that barrier—to cohesion, engagement, integration or sense of belonging, and ultimately the processes needed to develop bonding and bridging relationships. These relationships are necessary to move beyond merely surviving to thriving in the society of the college. Exploring Black students' experiences in university life, Solórzano and colleagues illuminate how racial microaggressions in the campus climate play out in both the academic and social spaces. They also demonstrate the ways that racial microaggressions have a negative impact on the campus climate.

Stereotype threat is another interfering pressure, more subtle, perhaps, than microaggressions, but nonetheless profound (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Steele (1997, p. 616) defines stereotype threat as “the event of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs becoming self-relevant, usually as a plausible interpretation for something one is doing, for an experience one is having, or for a situation one is in, that has relevance to one's self-definition.” Being seen or treated stereotypically causes emotional distress and pressure. Disruptive pressures such as test anxiety and token status have long been shown to disrupt performance through a variety of mediating mechanisms including anxiety, distracting thoughts, self-consciousness, and other debilitating factors. That which turns stereotype threat on and

off—the controlling “mechanism” so to speak—is a particular concurrence of whether a negative stereotype about one’s group becomes relevant to interpreting oneself. In this case, students might internalize or perceive messages they receive about their race, gender, or socioeconomic status and start to believe these stereotypes, which, in turn, impacts their behaviors. In extreme cases, stereotypes might become part of their self-identity. In a group setting, Steele argues that stereotype threat can lead to disengagement from academic endeavors as well as depressed performance on tests. Scholars support this theory, finding that disaffected, Black students and others from historically underrepresented groups in higher education rejected the social norms of the society they perceived as having rejected them (MacLeod, 1987, 2014, 2018; Steele, 2010; Willis, 1977, 2017). In this way, one can see why and how students might mismatch and elect to leave their initial four-year college and reverse transfer to a two-year.

To limit the mismatch phenomena, Tierney argues for a cultural approach. He posits an alternative model based on “cultural integrity” and Bourdieu's (1986) and Passeron (1977) notions of cultural capital (Tierney & Jun, 1998), which explain how *social class* influences intergenerational transmission of educational inequality and contributes to mismatch. Referring to Tinto’s (1993) model, Tierney asserts that the widely accepted theory that college participation is a “rite of passage” (see Durkheim, 1951; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1993; Van Genep, 1960), where social and academic integration is required for student persistence, misinterprets anthropological notions of ritual and holds harmful consequences for first-generation students from working-class backgrounds, particularly Black and Latinx students (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). He offers his model of “cultural integrity,” which was developed from the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI), a University of Southern California or USC-sponsored community-based college access and success intervention for students from

historically underrepresented groups. These students are especially likely to experience institutional or interpersonal microaggressions, stereotype threat, disappointment and suppressed or repressed expectations, as well as dissatisfaction, disengagement and isolation. Taken together, these can limit social cohesion, student (social and academic) engagement, sense of belonging, and persistence, among those who are most likely to mismatch and (reverse) transfer or depart from college altogether. In either case, the net result might mean another missed opportunity to build bridges to better understanding and actual (multi) cultural integration.

In its part to limit mismatch, and undermatch, both of which are part of the same continuum, NAI supports more than 1,000 children in college access programs and more than 600 children in pre-school and early literacy programs each year. In addition to a rigorous, seven-year enrichment program, NAI requires parents to attend a biweekly Family Development Institute program to reinforce their children's academic goals and productive study habits.

This approach suggests ways of affirming, honoring, and incorporating the individual's identity into the organization's (i.e., NAI) as well as the institution's (USC's) culture (Tierney, 1999). This level of cohesion—social bonds and (multi) cultural integration—encourages high levels of engagement and supports student cognitive development, as well as student sense of belonging, strong academic performance and persistence. Accomplishing such a high level of cohesion is the responsibility of, and demands effort by, both the individual and institution. We know that students from historically marginalized communities, particularly those who are first in their families to experience education at this level, should not be left or expected to manage and resolve these differences on their own, especially when the college environment's values, conventions and traditions are sometimes perceived by those students to be antithetical to their own (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000).

Rendon, et al. (2000) found that “validation”—an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by faculty and other agents of socialization and development in and out of the classroom—fosters student success. This is particularly true for students from historically marginalized and isolated communities. Validation activities in the teaching and learning context include calling students by name, working one on one with students, praising students, providing encouragement and support, encouraging students to see themselves as capable of learning, and providing cohorts for students to support and encourage each other. These validation actions can induce “transformational changes” in students, accompanied by an increased interest and confidence in their capacity to learn. It is not surprising that student persistence is related to the extent to which students interact with supportive adults on campus, both inside and outside the classroom (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993), supporting the argument that student experiences may be part of one broad social networking connection process.

The college experience itself includes two central features: students’ behaviors and institutional conditions. Student behaviors include such aspects as the time and effort students put into their studies, interaction with faculty, and involvement with peers. Institutional conditions include resources, educational policies, programs and practices, and structural features. At the intersection of student behaviors and institutional conditions is *student engagement*. In considering mismatch and reverse transfer, we focus on student engagement because it represents aspects of student behavior and institutional performance that colleges and universities can proactively influence, whereas many other factors such as precollege characteristics are typically beyond the direct control of either the student or the institution. It is worth noting that high levels of student engagement are associated with a wide range of

educational practices and conditions, including purposeful student-faculty contact, active and collaborative learning among peers, and institutional environments perceived by students as inclusive and affirming, and where expectations for performance and cohesion are clearly communicated and enforced at equitably and reasonably high levels (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). These are also areas that colleges and universities can influence.

Taken together, the different theoretical perspectives on student success and departure provide a holistic accounting of many of the key factors that come into play to shape what students are prepared to do when they get to college and influence the meanings they make of their experiences.

Bridging and Bonding Social Capital in the Students' College Journey

Stepping back from the persistence and retention literatures enables us to see several deeper, enduring processes at work that have been well conceptualized by sociologists (see Bourdieu, 1986, and Coleman, 1988, for seminal work in this regard). In particular, these processes revolve around the idea of social capital and its companion concept of cultural capital. Social capital refers to the set of socially based resources (information, know-how, culturally based ideas) that individuals can access through social networks, while cultural capital entails the valued cultural know-how that, once attained, facilitates individuals' membership and ability to operate effectively in higher-status environments (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). For reasons that are both obvious and subtle, first-generation students are unlikely to have participated in social networks that are rich in information and know-how or in culturally based ideas related to college-going and higher education. This is true for many first-generation students both at the stage of deciding about college attendance and, once matriculated, when they make their way in the college environment.

A further distinction in the social capital literature may have particular relevance to the reverse transfer problem under study here. Conceiving of social capital as “connections among individuals’ social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them,” Putnam (2000, p. 19) discusses two different forms of social capital, bonding and bridging.

Bonding, or exclusive, social capital is the value (e.g., a psychological resource, such as trust) that is produced from connections between people who already know one another or share a common identity (e.g., familial cultural capital, organizational habitus). A college-promoting community-based organization (e.g., NAI, Success Academy; (Tierney, 1999) is an example of an organization that is likely to produce bonding social capital. The value that is produced from interactions with similar individuals can be considered akin to (socio)cultural and (socio)psychological support. Because of this, bonding social capital has been referred to as useful for merely surviving and “getting by” (Putnam, 2000). However, Enfield (2008) also asserts that this type of social capital can maintain a sense of exclusivity. Thus, while bonding social capital networks can be important for psychological support and engendering reciprocity, they are also the mechanism that Bourdieu (1986) was concerned with when discussing social class reproduction. That is, as Enfield noted, bonding social capital in an extreme form might lead to exclusion and isolation of groups that are different from one another and could lead to mismatch and reproduction of current social conditions.

Bridging, or inclusive, social capital expands beyond the shared sense of identity of bonding social capital to include people from different groups. Bridging social capital networks provide links (i.e., social connections) to external economic and social resources. These networks are useful for spreading information across religious, class, and ethnic lines (Putnam,

2000). This form of social capital is likely what comes to mind for most people when thinking about social capital and can be considered useful for thriving and “getting ahead”—for example, in terms of professional advancement, which is often preceded by college success (Putnam, 2000).

It does not take much to see bonding and bridging at work in the reverse transfer phenomenon. At the stage of deciding about college attendance, first-generation students are often helped to expand their “bridging social capital” through various social connections that help them visualize possibilities for themselves in the higher education world—a foreign world characterized in most cases by different social class, race, and ethnicity conditions than what they know. These connections also help them see how to access that world. Once in the college environment, first generation students and students of color often face the challenges of connecting with people and a culture they do not know, and the need to develop “bonding social capital” becomes acute. Whether or not they are helped to do so is the critical issue, and much of the persistence and retention literature documents in some detail how this social capital often fails to *develop* sufficiently, as these students experience isolation and cultural mismatch and often drop out of college at rates that are higher than those of White students. Reciprocally related, the possibility of further developing bridging social capital is there, whereby opportunities are or can be created to expand students’ shared sense of identity with others in the world they are encountering.

Yet these opportunities may also not materialize. In those cases, it should not be surprising that a first-generation student might reach back to the world they know, in which their stock of bonded social capital is much greater, as they attend a community college close to home. As Tinto (1987) notes, an unwelcoming climate is a barrier to students’ sense of connection to

the social and academic lives of colleges and universities and, thus, limits students' abilities to engage with that climate.

Reverse Transfer as a Logical, Potentially Positive Response to Insufficient Social Capital Development

A hostile environment may ultimately propel students to leave the institutions where they feel unwelcome. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), more than one third of all college students transfer at least once during their college careers (Shapiro, Dunder, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015). While there is an abundance of research on the transfer process from two-year institutions to four-year institutions, less attention has been paid to transfer in the other direction. Community colleges are not only entry points to higher education; they also provide stepping stones that allow students to regain their academic footing after struggling academically or socially at a four-year college. Shapiro and colleagues found that two-year public institutions are the top destination for students who transfer out of four-year institutions. Over 40 percent of those who transferred from four-year private institutions headed to community colleges. However, the report does not go into detail about why students choose to transfer from four-year institutions to two-year institutions, thus limiting our understanding of how to support students in their college transition and persistence to graduation.

Another study from the National Student Clearinghouse found that reverse transfer might be more prevalent than expected. The study shows that more than 14 percent of all undergraduate students transferred from a four-year institution to a two-year institution (Hossler et al., 2012). For private institutions, like those mentioned in this study, the number of reverse transfers was more than 11 percent (Hossler et al., 2012). Goldrick-Rab (2015) found that reverse transfer appears to be part of the class stratification of higher education, and is often the

pathways of first-generation and low-income students. Therefore, the educational pathways of the two students this study focuses on—Arya and Jon—are not unusual. Higher education institutions and educational policymakers could benefit from paying closer attention to the factors, such as campus climate, that prompt students like Arya and Jon to leave the institutions they worked so hard to get into.

It is easy to see reverse transfer as a case of institutional failure, and there are some aspects of it that point to practices and programs higher education institutions could design and implement differently and better, on behalf of their first-generation students. It is perhaps also tempting to see this step as a sign of personal failure—as in, the students couldn’t handle the “big time” so “down they go.” But it is also important to understand the reverse transfer process as a potentially sensible and even empowering part of these students’ movement through higher education. To be sure, the decision to reverse transfer may complicate their journeys, but it may also help them ultimately fulfill them in ways that are developmentally appropriate for them.

Tracking Reverse Transfer: Study Design

This present study to track reverse transfer draws on the preceding cases of high school students who were considering and ultimately deciding on colleges to attend. Because both of the students in this study, Arya and Jon, were accepted at selective institutions that were, on the face of it, “well matched” to the students’ academic potential. The first two papers in this dissertation, “The Role of Informational Networks in Undermatching: A Case Study of College Choice in an Urban High School” and “Undermatch in the College Choice Process and the Role That Community-Based Organizations May Play,” provide an ideal foundation for an exploration of the reverse transfer process because both Arya and Jon ultimately reverse transferred.

Sample

Although both Arya and Jon were the first in their families to go to college, the contrasts between the two students are especially useful. The students in question differed from each other in terms of gender, ethnic background, citizenship status, and originating high school context, among other differences. In effect, pursuing the reverse transfer process even with such a small sample enabled the research to be undertaken with a “maximum variation” logic (Merriam, 2009; Merriam, 1998). While setting the stage for tracking two very different trajectories through the higher education world, the analysis of their experiences showed remarkable similarities in their stories despite their individual differences. Such an analytic result underlies strong claims and conclusions about the possible shared dynamics of the reverse transfer process for first-generation students.

Interviews, Email Exchanges, and Other Documents

Data collection for this third study followed in a natural progression from the data gathered for the first two case studies. As rapport had already been established through the first two studies with the participants, it was relatively simple to reconnect with them and explore, using open-ended interviewing strategies what had happened in the intervening space of years since their college decision making episode. These interviews were retrospective and exploratory, taking advantage of the participants’ capacity to look back across a set of experiences and reflect on them, distilling out the most influential factors and conditions prompting their decisions. Retrospective interviews with Arya and Jon were each roughly 90 minutes. To clarify and follow-up on comments made by the participants, we also exchanged emails. To be sure, retrospective interviews can risk individuals reconstructing their pasts and missing some details that were salient at the moment they occurred. However, the overall trade-

off was justified, in light of the capacity of the participants to see the “big picture” of their college-participating experience and where it led them.

To supplement what we could learn from interviews, and also to provide further insight into the context for these students’ mismatching and reverse transferring, we collected various documents. We took written data from the respective institutional websites related to their college-promoting structures, resources, policies, and practices intended to inform the college experience. For instance, we collected written data on the institutional missions and the expectations they put forth for students. These documents provided additional information on the institutional environments.

Analysis

After each interview, we wrote annotated field notes detailing overall environmental and contextual impressions. These included interview summaries, which noted the presence or absence of examples of conceptual categories or anything else particularly noteworthy about the interview. In addition, we reviewed email exchanges that were designed to clarify interview responses. We also wrote analytical memos that we used to explore issues related to developing understandings of the conceptual categories derived from the framework. We analyzed the collected data using the constant, comparative method (Merriam, 1998). That is, we analyzed each interview and specified, modified, affirmed, or rejected conceptual categories in an effort to build theoretical insights from them (McDonough, 1997).

Finally, we analyzed institutional documents for evidence of values and elements of the campus climates.

Limitations

Several limitations are inherent in this kind of design. First and foremost, such a small sample can only be exploratory, maximizing what can be learned from individual cases about a complex process. As such, this research cannot yield conclusions that apply broadly to the full range of first-generation students of color who might have considered or actually engaged in reverse transfer as part of their college-going journey. That said, the study is a source of provocative possibilities about the phenomenon under study, and these possibilities can be examined more fully in other studies with larger samples and different kinds of measures that might corroborate or expand on what is learned here.

In addition, as noted previously, this study relies on retrospective responses to interview questions, which may introduce some biases into the data, as subjects may try to represent their past in a somewhat more favorable light or may not fully remember the reasons for their earlier behavior. The inclusion of data from an earlier time point (before going to college) provides a useful anchor for making sense of the students' current perceptions, but some important detail or nuances about what intervened between time points may still be lost.

Finally, while the differences between the two subjects provides a useful balance, the unique situations of the students—especially the young man who is part of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program—may skew the findings in a direction that would be unlikely to apply to most first-generation students potentially involved in reverse transfer.

Further research on reverse transfer with a varied cases will reveal whether and how the findings here may apply more broadly.

Findings

A brief synopsis of the two cases of reverse transfer on which this study concentrates will set the stage for an analysis of the ways social capital, in interactions with institutional conditions and forces, plays out in these two stories.

Arya's Story

We introduced this paper with a vignette of Arya's experience in University of San Diego and its salience in shaping her experience at college. That set of college-based experiences of racism was far from what she expected of college and for which her high school experiences had not fully prepared her. Arya had attended an extremely diverse high school and as student body president, had been extremely popular. Furthermore, her range of college-going options had not included many in California nor much knowledge of what an institution in that state might feel like when she encountered the racial dynamics and animus that was so apparent at USD.

Arya is a first-generation, low-income student of color. Her mother is an immigrant from Mexico who dropped out of high school in tenth grade. Her father, who is African American, attended a local community college but did not obtain a degree. They were supportive of her college aspirations, but were unable to provide much guidance throughout her college choice process. Arya had strong relationships with her teachers and counselors, although they were limited in the information and direct guidance they were able to provide related to her out-of-state college search. Although Arya thought she wanted to go to college in California, the majority of her college list was in her home state of Washington, which would have allowed her to pay in-state tuition. However, while finances were a concern, her decision-making process was primarily driven by a desire to "get away." As Arya put it, "I didn't care where I was going to go to in California. I just want[ed] to go to school in California."

Even at the decision stage, Arya reported that she struggled between “choosing a school that’s financially smart or choosing ...my dream school [that] I’ve been working so hard to get to.” She eventually matriculated at USD, but after completing her sophomore year there, she returned to Washington to attend a local community college. Arya is currently completing prerequisites for admission to the business school at the state’s flagship research university.

A self-described “social butterfly,” Arya expressed disappointment at her perceived inability to seek connection with her peers at USD once she arrived on campus. As someone who was a student leader in her high school, she expected college to be the place where “you’re making your own decisions and you’re becoming you.” When Arya found that she was unable to live up to her own expectations of what college would be like, she said, “I just started to feel bad about myself.” As she put it:

I didn't connect with a lot of people there...A lot of ...people, I would just...hang out with them just for [the sake of] hanging out, and nothing more than that...I wanted to make my group of college friends, but it didn't work out that way.

But as the opening vignette made clear, the larger institutional context in which she might find friends and feel more connected and settled in the college environment, was distinctly unfriendly. Arya, who arrived at USD with all the hopes in the world of finding like-minded peers, instead began to question her own self-worth and whether or not she had made the right decision in the college choice process.

Jon’s Story

Arya’s story resonates with the experiences of other first-generation students of color attending predominantly White, private liberal arts institutions. While Arya attended a resource-poor public high school, another student, Jon, came from one of the top private, high schools in the country, where 99% of the graduates enroll in college, many of which rank among the most

selective institutions (see Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Jon received a full, need-based scholarship to Whitman College, a private liberal arts college. According to Whitman's website, the college's graduation rate of 96% in a total undergraduate student population of around 1,500. The college's website notes that in fall 2015, when Jon enrolled, around 20 percent of all undergraduates were students of color and approximately 10 percent were degree-seeking first generation students. Around 13 percent of students were eligible for Pell grants.

Jon is a low-income, first generation student whose parents brought him to the United States from Mexico at the age of nine. While his parents are undocumented, Jon was able to apply to the DACA program, a federal immigration policy that grants temporary relief from deportation and eligibility for a work permit to young people who were brought to the United States as children. Through his membership in an educational enrichment program offered by a competitive community-based organization, Success Academy, Jon transferred from a public middle school in the eighth grade to the private highly selective middle/high school he attended.

Jon's immigration status complicated his college application process, though he was still eligible for funding through the Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WAFSA), commonly known as the Dream Act. He applied to in-state public institutions where he was eligible for state funding and to a few private liberal arts institutions such as Whitman College that accepted DACA students. Because Whitman granted him a generous aid package, Jon's decision to enroll there was predominantly financial. As he said:

I ended up realizing like halfway through [my first] semester that the main reason that I decided to go to Whitman was because of the good financial aid that they provided me. It was pretty much [a] full ride... And coming from a low-income family, it was something that I thought I had to take.

However, Jon soon came to realize that his experience at Whitman mirrored some of the same challenges he had faced at the private high school he had attended with assistance from the

CBO. He described both Whitman College and the independent school as “being in [their] own bubbles.” According to Jon, Whitman College seemed insulated and disconnected from the surrounding community —something that echoed his experience at the private high school:

The fact of the diversity not being too big...made me feel like a bit of an outsider. At Whitman, even though the people were nice and everyone was welcoming, I couldn't find people that I could relate with. I could find people that I liked and that I could hang out with, but there was not really anyone that had been through similar experiences that I had. In comparison to my high school, there was a bit more...diversity [at Whitman], but there were also a lot more [students from the CBO] that had been through the same journey that I had and could not only connect through our current journey at the high school, but also the journey of the academic phase of [the CBO].

Jon decided not to return to Whitman College after completing his first semester. He returned home at Christmas break and transferred to a local community college the next academic quarter, where he finished several prerequisites for his major, mechanical engineering. He then applied to and was accepted to the University of Washington-Seattle, where he is currently applying for admission to the College of Engineering.

What Mattered in the High School Choice Process: Family, High School, and “Fly-in” Program Supports

To get a full picture of the reverse transfer process, it is necessary to step back to the point of choosing colleges, and to get a clear picture of the social capital dynamics at work in this stage of the students' college journey, largely concerned with what sociologists call “bridging” social capital. At this stage, access to information, possibilities, and resources that would enable the college application process were essential to students' decision making. Emotional support derived from the students' families and high school advising and counseling sources primarily. Together, the social capital development that occurred at this stage set in motion a set of expectations in the students for what they would find in their destination colleges.

Arya's and Jon's initial decisions to enroll in and attend private liberal arts institutions were related to the level of support that they received at home, in high school and, in Jon's case, through the CBO. Both students come from families that believed in the power of education, but both sets of parents were unable to directly assist their children in the college application process (i.e., provide instrumental support). While family encouragement plays a role in fostering students' academic aspirations and in making the choice to apply to college, many parents cannot provide informational help because they do not possess firsthand knowledge of how to prepare for or apply to college. In particular, students from underrepresented backgrounds, like Arya and Jon, are less likely to possess the types of knowledge of the cultural norms and expectations that are valued by the dominant culture and would help them negotiate the college choice process. For example, most colleges and universities operate on a set of shared middle- to upper-class cultural norms that value independence, such as the importance of individual development, the legitimacy of personal choice, and the value of self-expression. In contrast, many first-generation college students come from working class backgrounds that tend to value interdependence, such as the importance of community and of responding to the needs, preferences and interests of others.

Arya describes the challenges she faced due to her parents' limited experience with higher education:

Being a first-generation student [is] definitely a struggle. A lot of students look up to their parents...Those are their biggest role models...They're not able to ask [their parents] what were their experiences like...Not being able to know...how much student loans that you're taking out, just not having that path laid out for you is the biggest struggle.

As the previous paper ("The Role of Informational Networks in Undermatching") notes, barriers to college often begin with limited know-how at home about the college choice process, in

particular *where* students decide to apply. Because of their parents' limited experience with higher education, Arya's older sister became a prominent source of informational support during Arya's college choice process (Ceja, 2006). Her sister's advice was largely shaped by her own higher education experiences. She too had transferred several times before graduating. She did not want Arya to attend USD, instead advocating for the lower-cost community college route:

When it came to my decision to attend USD...she wasn't unsupportive, but I could just see it on her face that she didn't want me to do it...My parents really didn't have an opinion on it because they were just like, 'As long as you're going to college, that's fine.' My sister...she's really traumatized from her student loans. And she saw how much USD was so that was a huge factor for her.

Jon similarly describes his parents as "the type of people [who believe] education comes first." Neither of Jon's parents finished high school, dropping out during middle school. They immigrated to the United States with Jon and his older sister when he was nine. Jon views their decision to leave Mexico with their two children as an important step towards providing him with access to a better education.

In addition to the support they received at home, both students spoke about the importance of the relationships they developed with their high school teachers and counselors in the college choice process. Arya relied heavily on her high school AP English and leadership teacher as well as the college and career specialist, but their knowledge of colleges and universities was primarily limited to in-state institutions. Although she did meet with her college counselor, her college choice process was largely self-guided. After Arya had applied to several colleges on her own, she and her counselor discussed her financial aid packages. Arya noted: "She [didn't] push anything on me...just [laid] out the pros and cons of each school."

Arya was initially attracted to USD when she started investigating the school's mission. She wanted to find out "what the school's about":

Finally, I came across the University of San Diego, and the core values, and it started talking about the development of the person. That's when I was like, 'I need to do a little bit more research on this school because I think that that sounds like my kind of school.'

For Jon, the CBO and the counseling staff at his private high school provided vital informational support, leaving him confident in his ability to navigate the college choice process. The CBO, in particular, played an important role in sharing information related to his immigration status and which schools guaranteed full financial support for DACA students. While he was supported by high school and CBO staff, he says he felt isolated from his high school peers during the college application process:

It was like [for] any junior, very stressful, college apps ...typical stuff. But ...I felt like there was like a lot more pressure [on me] because...my family had a lot less money than a lot of the students that were going to that high school. So yeah, I was poor compared to them.

While his classmates stressed over whether they would get into their Ivy League institution of choice, Jon was worried about how to pay for college with an uncertain immigration status:

At that time I...kind of just hated being around people because everybody kept talking about...what they had to deal with...[and] I was dealing with a lot more than what other students were dealing with. So like hearing that over and over...I hated being around people at that time.

Both Arya and Jon visited the campuses they ended up attending in the fall through "fly-in" programs, which aim to engender the social capital necessary to successfully transition to college for multicultural and first-generation students. Arya applied to participate in the University of San Diego Multicultural Experience Overnight Program (ME@USD), which covers the cost for admitted students to visit the campus for a three-day program that includes accommodation in the residence halls, classroom visits, and an introduction to campus support services. It also allowed her to connect with other first-generation students and students of color. As Arya said:

“[I] went out there and I fell in love with the campus—so beautiful—and then I just liked the people that I met within that group.”

Similarly, Jon visited Whitman College’s campus in Walla Walla through a fly-in program run through the First-Generation Working Class club, a student organization aimed at meeting the needs of underrepresented students. Like Arya, he was able to see the campus and connect with other students from similar backgrounds. However, according to Jon, “Once school started, we were all kind of spread out,” although he did stay in touch with some of the other students he met through the fly-in program. He says the fly-in program, combined with the generous financial aid package he received, helped him make the decision to enroll at Whitman: “I believe that the finances as well as the initial excitement after visiting the school was what influenced my decision more than any other factor.”

These kinds of family, high school, and institutional supports reflect certain kinds of social capital at work, and also the means by which social capital might develop. Specifically, one can see the presence of “bridging” social capital here, as the students gained access to information, received direct assistance, and were exposed to adult worlds, support, and encouragement (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). These forms of support and assistance built the bridge to a set of resources that these students would otherwise not have been able to use, no less visualize, in the first place. They made it possible for the students to see themselves.

What Students Sought but Did Not Find in Their College Surroundings

The situation changed radically when the students were no longer choosing colleges, surrounded by the family and high school-based support systems that helped them make their choices. Once on campus, a different set of dynamics kicked in, and a different form of social

capital—or its absence—more concerned with bonding than bridging became central to their experiences.

Arya's expectations of her college experience, based on her success in navigating a public high school world, were not realized in the new college environment in which she found herself. In brief, she was expecting to repeat her high school experience, one filled with bonding and bridging relationship opportunities:

I mean South Sound has its problems... I mean I come from a low-income high school, [but] Narrows High School was one of the most diverse schools in South Sound. ...We have like a huge multicultural assembly every year with showing people's cultures... Samoan, Cambodian, Vietnamese, all very different. And then when I went out to San Diego it was horrible because...people didn't even know or care to know the difference within Asian cultures...I have a lot of like Filipino friends, Vietnamese friends, Cambodian friends and they are like what... I don't know...it was just weird to me, and that, was something Narrows High School really prided itself in. And you know I was ASB president, so...I knew a lot of people.

In short, Arya had a good stock of bonded social capital in the diverse environment of Narrows High School. Given her high school success and the University of San Diego mission statement, Arya believed she would enjoy a similar experience at USD. Although she doesn't say so directly, her comment about the mission statement suggests that she believes that USD misrepresented its values in its mission statement.

Neither Jon nor Arya found that their private liberal arts institutions were a good match socially. Arya, who drew strength from the emotional support provided by the encouraging relationships she experienced both at home and at high school, entered college with the expectation that her experience would in many ways replicate the success she enjoyed at Narrows, where she was the student body president and in the top 10 percent of her class. But she had underestimated the rigor of college-level coursework and was unable to find the social connections she sought:

When I was in high school, I was...a really social person...I still am, but I thought that I was going to go out there [to the USD] and would be doing the same things because in high school I was in ASB [associated student body] and ...a whole bunch of extra clubs and sports...And then when I got to college I thought that I was going to be doing the same things, but ...I didn't take ...my academics into consideration.

Arya planned to get involved on campus, but she ended up spending most of her time studying. She was able to maintain good grades her freshman year, but found that she had to prioritize her academics over her ability to get involved. Arya's perceived inability to get involved socially took a psychological toll: "I did join some things, but I found myself never being able to go to the meetings and it would make me so mad and I felt bad about it and then I would feel bad about myself." Arya tried to join MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán), an organization for students of Mexican descent, but was unable to attend the meetings. She explains:

I went to like the first two meetings, but [for meetings during the semester] I would have...a huge exam the next day or I'd have a paper due. So I just had to prioritize. But I wanted to go meet people, so it was just like a constant battle of my time.

Although Arya did meet her best friend, Desiree, on campus and felt an immediate kinship due to their similar cultural backgrounds, that one relationship was not enough to keep her there.

Neither was Arya able to connect with faculty, despite utilizing office hours and asking for help out of class. As she noted: "I wanted to make connections and network with a lot of different professors. But again, I only found myself connecting with one professor."

Additionally, Arya felt that she was unable to live up to her own academic expectations in spite of trying to take advantage of available supports:

At USD, I mean I would be in all of my professors' office hours all of the time. I remember I took this math class [College Algebra] because I [also took it at SSCC]... I kid you not, literally every single day after class I would go to my professor's office hours. I'm not being dramatic. I would go there every day after

class and I still got a C...I was so mad....I wasn't even struggling that bad in the class, well obviously it was because I got a C, but it didn't feel like I was because I was in his office hours every day. I was like, 'how did I still get a C?'

Arya retook College Algebra when she arrived at the community college that she transferred to. She said:

It was the same exact thing, [same subject]. Same pace. It wasn't too hard, not too easy. And I got an A in the class. I was like, 'How did that happen?' I don't know, maybe it was me because I, like I said...I'm more serious about my college work now.

Arya described the general campus climate at USD as "very affluent, a lot of money." Her roommate, for example, talked about taking an Uber to high school, whereas Arya and her high school peers all took public transportation. Likening her experience at USD to "culture shock" (or what we might call cultural mismatch), she did not realize just how different the institutional environment might be from that of her high school in South Sound when making the decision to come to the University of San Diego, where only 16 percent of students were eligible for Pell grants:

I would see Maseratis on campus every day...Clearly it was a predominantly white campus. Predominantly white professors too. I didn't think about it until after I left it. I didn't have one black professor. I only had one Mexican professor and that was the professor whom I really resonated with.

The professor she most identified with was her assigned advisor, who also taught a Chicano literature class, which Arya was interested in because of her own cultural background. Despite Arya's strong personal relationship with her professor, Arya felt that she still did not receive the guidance she needed:

USD assigns advisors, who unfortunately are not trained...advisors but are regular professors. Our Chicana literature professor was our advisor and although a great professor, you could tell she was not equipped nor wanted to be an advisor. USD does not have an advising office so we really struggled with which direction we wanted to go when declaring our majors.

In addition to the social disconnect she felt from her peers, Arya also faced more overt racist incidents than she had experienced in high school. In spring of her sophomore year, she attended a USD fraternity party and was the only African American in attendance. She describes the punch in the gut she felt upon hearing a word that cut to the core of her identity:

While I was having a conversation..., a person across the room was pointing at me and referred to me as a 'Negro'. This was one of my first times ever hearing someone get called this word in person and for it to be me getting called this, I was extremely taken aback. I didn't even know people still had that word in their vocabulary! It made me feel belittled and dehumanized. He could have asked what my name was but instead he used a word that was used (and still is being used) to dehumanize Black people.

Arya was shocked to hear such a derogatory term on a campus that she expected to be welcoming to students such as herself. This incident, as well as the anonymous Yik Yak posts, illustrate the ways in which institutions—and their student bodies—fail to live up to their missions of inclusion and embracing diversity.

Much the same way as Arya, Jon expressed a need to be connected to those who shared common experiences and backgrounds. In high school, Jon found solace in his friendship with K'Vonte, whom he met through the community-based organization and who also attended the high-end private high school that Jon attended. "We come from the exact same background so we...could help each other out. [It was great] having somebody there that had been through ...the exact same thing...you had," Jon said.

While his education in high school, combined with the academic enrichment program from the CBO, prepared him for the academic rigor of Whitman College, Jon felt disconnected socially, which was similar to his experience at his private high school:

I could find like a couple of people that like me had come from a background like mine but most everybody else came from like a wealthier point in life and couldn't share the same experiences that I had," he says. "The community...there was a lot like my high school. Which for one is [a] good thing, everybody is like

tight knit and connected. But in another way I didn't want to have that for four more years. I wanted to try something different.

Although he does not say so directly, Jon seems to suggest that he feels uncomfortable in the mostly White and mostly affluent climate of Whitman just as he did in the mostly White, mostly affluent climate of his private high school.

After the initial excitement of starting his freshman year wore off, he decided the institution wasn't a good fit:

I like exploring, I like learning new stuff. If I get the chance to try something I haven't tried, I usually take it. So I was pretty excited, especially when school started, flying in, being excited to be in my dorm, and stuff like that. I was very excited to meet new people. It was more like when that kind of excitement wore down and I was more back into the regular pace of school and had just regular interactions with people...Once I got to [a more] mundane and typical kind of schedule...I realized that [my financial aid package] was the main reason why I came here and I didn't really look into much else. And that's pretty much what made me choose to leave Whitman.

Despite the differences in their circumstances and personal trajectories, Arya and Jon encountered a similar and, to them, puzzling, social and academic environment, in which they felt estranged. Whether by intention or default, their respective institutions had failed to provide a sufficient or sufficiently attentive “web of support” (Varga & Zaff, 2018). Such a web offers various kinds of supports, for example, instrumental, informational, validation, emotional, and companionship supports that would have bolstered the students' efforts to become more connected and involved or engaged (Wills & Shinar, 2000).

Personal and Social Dynamics in the Students' Decisions to Transfer

The consequence of insufficiently developed social capital resources in their new surroundings can be a difficult internal struggle for first-generation students of color. Both Arya and Jon arrived at this point and engaged in an intense debate with themselves about what they were accomplishing and how to proceed. The timelines for this debate differed in their two

cases, but they confronted the issues they faced and found a resolution that took them away from the selective four-year institutions that had appeared to match their academic abilities and back to two-year institutions closer to home. In each case, they found support within their respective family systems, thereby relocating themselves in social networks where they were known and fully accepted.

While Arya maintained a high GPA her freshman year, she started to struggle academically her sophomore year. Her psychological distress and sense of disconnection were amplified. She said, “My second semester, sophomore year, it got really bad. My anxiety got really bad...I just noticed that I just stopped caring like I was not connected at all. Like I just totally checked out.” Her grades dropped and she started to develop test anxiety, something with which she says she still struggles:

That [had] never happened before [when I took a test]...And then I took another test and the same thing happened. I just totally blanked out. Just, just an overwhelming feeling...I just don't know what other way to describe it. Just super overwhelming. I'd get really nervous and it was really new to me. I was like, ‘What is going on?’

Her test anxiety did not stem from a lack of preparation. She studied together with her friend Desiree, who was also her roommate sophomore year:

I had no clue where it [test anxiety] came from. We had the same classes, so we would study for the test together. We're like, ‘yeah, we got it, we are going to go in there and [kill it].’ We would test each other, we would flash card each other and we both knew it [the material]. I would go in and take the test, she would get an A and I would get a C. I was like, ‘why?’ Like I would go in the test and it would just be blank. I don't know where the disconnect was...I feel like college just kind of triggered something.

Arya eventually went to the doctor for her anxiety and received testing accommodation that allowed her time-and-a-half on exams. At the end of her second year, she moved out of her

dorm and went back home to South Sound for the summer without concrete plans about where she would live in the fall. Over the summer, she decided not to return to USD:

I came back home from school and I was like, 'there's no way I'm going to go back out there'...why would I go back to USD when I know I am not doing good? I ended up for my second semester with a 2.5 [cumulative GPA]. Mind you I was coming from high school with a 3.8... I was like, 'I'm spending thousands of dollars and I don't even know what direction I'm heading in.' Like I literally just felt so confused by the end of the semester. I was like, 'my grades are crappy and I'm not involved in anything'...I just didn't know what my purpose was and what I was. I just really wanted to find something that I connected with...

With the encouragement of her older sister, Arya immediately looked at South Sound Community College, which allowed her to enroll just a few weeks before classes started in September 2017. Her family was supportive of her decision not to return to California as long as she stayed in school:

In high school [my dad] always pushed me, really wanted me to go to college...He didn't care what college it was...And then once I got to college, he was like, 'I'm done. I made sure that she got to college.'..I'm kind of on my own now that I'm in college...Whatever decision I make he [is] just like, 'OK, as long as you're in college.'

Arya is much more positive when she speaks about her experience at the community college:

[At USD], I would be in the professor's office hours every day and I still didn't feel that connection that I [feel] with my professors here....I just find that very odd because students are investing way more into their education money wise, at USD versus a community college and I just found my professors here just investing more time into me.

While Arya remained at USD for two years, Jon recognized by the middle of his first semester that Whitman College was not a good fit. He does not feel that academics contributed to his decision to leave. In fact, he reported that the CBO's academic enrichment program was more challenging than his curriculum in either high school or college. But even though Jon tried

to meet with his academic advisor in the science department at Whitman at least once a month, he didn't forge any deep connections with Whitman's faculty or staff.

When he returned home for Christmas break, Jon had already decided that he was not going to return to school the following semester. He was reluctant to tell the CBO he was involved with in high school because he was worried the staff there would try to persuade him to return to Whitman:

I didn't consult anybody. I made the decision all on my own partly because I knew that if I start talking to other people, they might try to convince me otherwise. Because in my mind I had already made my choice to say this is not a good fit for me. Like I don't want to deal with this for four years.

In Winter Quarter 2016, Jon enrolled at North Sound Community College (NSCC), where he continued taking engineering prerequisites. "I didn't want to get behind in school especially because you've got to... keep [up on] especially the math and science stuff," he says.

Jon says his parents were very supportive of his decision not to return to Whitman. Similar to Arya's parents, they signaled that the important thing was for him to continue his education, regardless of where that was. He put it this way: "They were like, 'If you don't feel comfortable there, it's just fine, as long as you just keep studying.'"

After completing three quarters at NSCC, Jon transferred to University of Washington-Seattle, where he is currently applying to the College of Engineering to study mechanical engineering. According to Jon, the transfer process from NSCC went smoothly because he knew how to handle the application process due to the support he had received from the CBO in high school. "After I had gone through that process [in high school] I was able to pretty much do everything like transferring from North Seattle to UW and [fill out] the applications on my own," he says.

As in the case of Arya, Jon's older sister was influential in his transfer process, although she had not played a significant role in his high school college choice process. She graduated from UW in spring 2017 and was able to connect him to the Office of Minority Affairs & Diversity Academic Counseling Services when he was transferring from North Sound Community College.

Because she worked in one of the offices for minorities...she was able to connect me with someone who helped me with [the transfer process]...after that he connected me with someone in the engineering department.

Jon reports that he feels much more at home on the UW campus. "My experience [at UW] has been a lot better...I feel like I have like a lot more freedom. I'm liking [being on] a bigger campus," he says.

The continuing stories of Arya's and Jon's education, once they had reverse transferred, bears out what the web of support theory would assert (Varga & Zaff, 2017). In this view, as Varga and Zaff put it, all youth are active agents in the development of their own webs. Given the additional social capital each student felt and possessed in their community college environment (and ultimately beyond those schools to more local universities), the process of the students developing their agency within a web of support comes into sharp focus. Jon's comment above not only demonstrates his own agency but also reflects how the CBO scaffolded him to be able to navigate the transfer process on his own, making the CBO an empowerment agent.

Conclusions

While only exploratory, the results of this study have much to say to scholars who seek to understand the movement of first-generation students of color into and through higher education, as well as to those on the front lines who wish to help them succeed in this journey. In brief, the

results of the study illustrate in specific, personal terms what such students may be experiencing in their search for high-quality higher education and what a mismatch between their expectations and experiences looks like. What they are experiencing can apply to many more. There is an urgent need, therefore, to continue to look carefully and critically at what institutions of higher education are doing, along with others in the larger ecology of supports for higher education success, to facilitate the academic persistence of first-generation college students. There is a corresponding need to recognize the many, often complex routes that first-generation students may take to complete their college journey, and to appreciate how and why such complicated journeys may be developmentally appropriate.

Reverse transfer is a common, though largely hidden, occurrence on today's college campuses. Most discussions of transfer assume that students follow the traditional pathway of starting at a two-year institution and then finishing at a four-year institution. This fails to accurately capture the complex trajectories that students like Arya and Jon take.

While students who reverse transfer are at greater risk of not earning a postsecondary credential, reverse transfer also provides students like Arya and Jon an opportunity to address challenges related to finances, academics, or institutional fit. In addition to being an important entry point to higher education, community colleges are thus an essential part of postsecondary pathways, regardless of where the student begins. While some might view reverse transfer as a step backwards, it can also be seen as an example of resilience and self-empowerment. Neither Arya nor Jon felt connected to their four-year institutions, and they chose the pathway that made the most sense for them.

In their National Student Clearinghouse study, Shapiro and colleagues (2015) note that it is valuable to pay attention to “students’ *intentional* strategies to take advantage of a range of

institutional options in order to enhance their progress towards educational goals” (p. 22).

Goldrick-Rab (2015) notes that “while many low-income students may not know how to seek out institutional support, and some campuses may not be equipped to provide it, class stratification arises in part because of a mismatch between what students need from their colleges and what colleges actually offer” (p. 32). She further argues that it’s crucial to understand the thinking behind students’ transfer decisions in order to identify and target interventions that may help them transition more smoothly and make persistence more likely. In addition, Goldrick-Rab challenges institutions to consider what they can do to help low-income and first-generation students take advantage of the informational and advisory resources (i.e., the social capital) that already exist on campuses, as well as how to make these resources more available and accessible (2015).

Returning to Arya’s and Jon’s decisions to leave their selective colleges, from the initial college choice process through their decisions to transfer, Arya and Jon had similar educational trajectories. As first-generation, low-income students from historically marginalized backgrounds, they came from families that valued education. Finances weighed heavily for both in their decisions of where to enroll. Jon, in particular, was limited to schools where he would be eligible for financial support as a DACA student. While Arya reported struggling with academics her second year, Jon felt the academic enrichment he received from the CBO he participated in during high school prepared him academically and facilitated his ability to navigate the college transfer process independently. Attending a private, independent school prepared Jon academically for the rigor of Whitman College, but he too decided to transfer, in spite of a full need-based scholarship. Additionally, both Arya and Jon attended fly-in programs prior to attending the four-year institutions from which they ultimately transferred. Despite the

success of the fly-in program in building connections between first-generation students prior to enrollment, no facilitation to deepen or continue those connections existed beyond the program. This suggests that universities may want to check in on connections made during fly-in programs or provide avenues for those students to actively connect during the academic year. Seen this way, fly-in programs are the *start* of a process that can and must continue over time in the four-year college setting.

But in spite of some key differences in the high schools they attended and the support they received in the college choice process, neither Arya and nor Jon connected with the private liberal arts colleges they attended. While studies suggest that the quality and rigor of a student's high school curriculum has a large influence over degree completion (Adelman, 2006), the fact that two students who attended very different high schools had very similar perceptions of their highly selective college environments suggests that retention of first-generation students of color may be related to other factors than academic preparedness. In fact, we know that the nature and quality of first-year students' experiences in the classroom, with faculty, and with peers are better predictors of desired educational outcomes than precollege characteristics (Gerken & Volkwien, 2000).

Neither student identified with their classmates nor professors. They both described a perception of minimal diversity and a lack of an inclusive culture of support for students like themselves. Arya repeatedly sought out help from professors during their office hours but did not find the support she needed. Jon recognized social and cultural factors, such as a perception that few of his peers shared a similar background, at Whitman that brought back memories from high school—an experience he was sure he did not want to repeat. He expressed a desire to have more opportunity to connect with peers, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds: “Diversity

in the schools would definitely help you. You know, being able to reach out to people from not just, say, different races, but like different economic backgrounds—people who have taken similar pathways.”

Whitman College and University of San Diego both have support systems dedicated to first-generation and low-income students of color. USD has, for example, recently launched an initiative aimed at increasing the visibility of first-generation faculty and staff on campus. However, some students, like Jon and Arya, don’t always connect with these resources. They feel isolated in the social environment, even if support is available on campus. Arya even acknowledged that USD had a variety of clubs and organizations for students of color, even though she never found her niche. In her words:

I still think USD really did try to get people involved because...they did a really good job at getting a lot of students of color at the school. Now how do you keep them there is the problem, but I feel like they really did...try.

This, coupled with the finding from the National Student Clearinghouse (2015) report that 40% of four-year college transfers head back to two-year colleges, suggest that four-year universities may need to consider multiple and innovative strategies for reaching and keeping first-generation students and students of color.

The cases examined in this study tell a complex story about the development and uses of social capital in the movement of first-generation students of color to and through postsecondary education. In one sense, it is a story of resources and access to them—financial resources, social resources, informational resources. Chief among them, are the socially embedded resources that enable a sense of belonging, build trust, and personal connection (i.e., bonding social capital). These need to be available and accessible in the postsecondary learning environment, and, for reasons that are both subtle and obvious, first-generation students and students of color newly

arrived on a campus are unlikely to find or feel the degree of bonding social capital that would enable their smooth progress through undergraduate years. The social arrangements and interactions that expand a shared sense of identity with people from different groups, providing links to external resources (i.e., bridging social capital) are crucial. By enabling first-generation students' to make these connections, institutions help students' bonding social capital to grow.

Higher education institutions are beginning to work on social capital development.

Recognizing the need to help students not merely survive and get by but thrive and get ahead on their campuses, liberal arts colleges have begun to create a single location for students seeking academic, social, and emotional support. The Bowdoin College THRIVE Program, is a good example. Students are either referred to the office or independently seek support. Students meet with the director, who interviews the student regarding his/her needs, introduces the student to the staff members who coordinate support programs, and then tracks the student's progress by remaining in contact with faculty, pre-major/major advisors, and program directors. In this way, the student experience of obtaining academic, social, and emotional support will be less of a hardship and more "customer friendly." This comprehensive approach will also permit leveraging the support provided by each program so that, collectively, they are more effective.

Recognizing the need for rigorous assessment of many support programs, researchers on program effectiveness need to keep in mind the "closing the loop" of student support. At many institutions, many staff members who direct or coordinate support programs receive little to no detailed data on the outcomes of their work. Often, they merely receive "good news" from students who benefit from the programs but relatively little feedback from those who do not. Staff members often don't know whether the benefits students receive are short-term (for instance, specific to a course) or long-term. Colleges could address this need by hiring

consultants who are experts specifically in the field of student support program assessment to work with the college's program directors to develop and implement rigorous program assessment that will close the loop and guide program revision and development. In this way, campuses could weave program assessment into the fabric of student support.

While the anonymous nature of the Yik Yak posts contributed to the hostile climate at USD and other institutions across the country, technology also offers other possibilities for first-generation students and students of color to connect with each other and self-organize. As Landers, Landers, and Berkoff 's(2017) argue in the forward of recent book, *Postsecondary Education for First-Generation and Low-Income Students in the Ivy League*, these students are reaching critical mass on “elite” college campuses and are finding ways to speak out and organize around class (and racial) identity. A recent example of this is the proliferation of “Being Not Rich” guides on U.S. college campuses, beginning with University of Michigan. Aimed at “anyone who has ever felt marginalized on campus,” Michigan’s guide is intended to be “a document in which we can be honest about the barriers lower income and first-gen students face on this campus.” Some campuses are tapping into this unexpected resource. At Princeton, for example, university leadership established a paid student position to maintain and update it.

Other institutions are adopting virtual assistants to help during the admissions process, which has shown promising outcomes in helping first-generation students navigate the financial aid process. While the current use of virtual assistants focuses on helping students during the college choice process, it opens up the possibility of how AI-enabled advising technology might also be deployed to bolster persistence and degree completion, particularly for first-generation and low-income students of color.

In the final analysis, however, the challenge—and problem—is not solely an institutional one. If it were, then the students’ own agency would be lost. The cases examined in this study underscore the latter point, emphasizing that students needed to take control over their own struggles and develop their own resolution to the challenges they face. Both of these students did so. Their reverse transfer stories must be understood in these terms—as an empowered, self-directed step in what is often a long and difficult journey. They will come out of this episode in the journey stronger and their prospects for a successful outcome enhanced, not only with academic credentials established but also their dignity intact. And if the institutions that have served them can learn how to better support such students in their reach for an empowered and prosperous future, so much the better. The results of this study may help point the way.

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V.

CONCLUSION

It was a culture shock for me. Very affluent, a lot of money. It was very different for me. And I didn't take that into consideration, either coming from Tacoma and a low-income high school, and then I moved all the way to USD and it was very, very different from what I was raised in.... At some point in time, culture shock sets in, even in a school in Washington, but then again, Pullman is completely different from South Sound.

—Student who reverse transferred from a selective college to a community college near home

This dissertation reveals how student interactions with contexts (e.g., the historical, relational, organizational, and institutional contexts) play a significant role in how students experience the college choice and persistence processes. It demonstrates how social, organizational, and institutional arrangements, processes, and the linkages between a high school and colleges, as well as between a CBO and colleges, help to limit and promote undermatch. It also shows, through the case studies of two students who were accepted into colleges thought to be well-matched to their academic potentials, that successful academic experiences for first generation students and students of color are complex, relying on more than academic performance and potential. The results of the three studies in this dissertation complement and extend each other, so it makes sense to dwell briefly on their relationship to each other.

The starting point is the phenomenon of undermatch—a widespread situation facing numerous talented adolescents receiving their high school educations in economically depressed communities and often in schools serving large concentrations of low-income students of color. These students may or may not aspire to postsecondary education, and if they do, they are unlikely to have access to sufficient resources, information, and encouragement to explore a range of postsecondary possibilities. They are also unlikely to find several possibilities that are

good matches to their academic profiles and preferences for their futures. Given the resource constraints in their high schools and the communities they serve, first-generation students and students of color usually participate in networks of relationships that are unlikely to impart sufficient social capital for their needs. In some instances, other elements may enrich the support system available to such students, as when community-based organizations dedicated to college access and success are present. As noted in “Undermatch in the College Choice Process and the Role That Community-Based Organizations May Play,” these organizations may greatly enhance the student’s social capital development, and, along with that, increase the odds that the students will not only apply to college but also will not undermatch. Furthermore, the CBO, by engaging with the high schools their students attend, can subtly nudge the existing system to pay closer attention to the needs of first-generation students and students of color, particularly young men, which could have implications far beyond the numbers of students they are currently serving. But these organizations are, in effect, creating a parallel pipeline that bypasses, rather than fixes, the fundamental barriers that exist in the PK-12 system.

In spite of the long odds facing many first-generation students and students of color (especially those who do not have the support of a community-based organization), determined students may persist. Often, their persistence leads them to pursue postsecondary options that are undermatched to their academic profiles and needs. But, it is also possible that they may select colleges that appear at first glance to be better matched to them, as Arya did. Although such choices may look well matched to a student’s academic profile, there is still a potential for mismatch to occur, where the institution and the student do not meet each other’s needs, for any number of reasons. Socially, institutions expect that students will separate from the groups with which they were formerly associated, such as familial members and high school peers, undergo a

period of transition when students start interacting in different ways with the new group they find at their colleges and universities, adopting the values and behaviors of that group (Tinto, 1993). However, such separation may be more difficult for some students than others, particularly for students of color and first-generation students.

Culturally, colleges and universities emphasize and promote the cultural norms of independence (Fryberg & Markus, 2007). In an examination of cultural norms at U.S. universities and colleges, Stephens and colleagues (2012) surveyed high-level university administrators about their institutions' expectations for students. The administrators reported that their institutions promoted primarily independent norms and expectations (e.g., students should pave their own paths, express themselves). Although these independent norms seem natural to intergenerational college-participating students, who have been socialized mainly in middle- and upper-class environments.

However, for first-generation students and students of color, they present a cultural mismatch. These students often feel the burden of having to help provide financial assistance or other help supporting their families (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). The attention of many first-generation students is torn between home and school. Many low-income students, even those whose families can provide some financial assistance, are also constantly worried about the ways in which the cost of their educations might impact their families, while others are physically taking care of family members who face health issues. These external issues combined with facing a culturally-mismatched environment, can lead to an aversive psychological state that can have physical and chemical effects resulting in anxiety. Such anxiety amplifies stereotype threat. Together, these can disrupt a students' academic engagement and performance. The net result of this cultural mismatch between university norms

and student norms is often an economic analysis, where students perceive that the cost of staying in a college outweighs the return on investment for staying there. When they make the decision to forego the opportunities selective colleges offer, they often “reverse transfer,” leaving for a community college close to home. Such was the case with the students in the study of reverse transfer, Arya and Jon.

Once again, social capital development (even with the help of a community-based organization), both prior to college enrollment and after enrollment, may not reflect what the students most need to navigate a challenging new environment. There, a new set of social capital dynamics come into play. Students who have been raised in interdependent communities will be expected or forced to develop new bonding and bridging relationships with people—professors, staff, peers—who have been socialized with independent norms in order to make their way successfully through the society of the new campus community, one that can sometimes feel hostile and unwelcoming.

The decision by students to leave the selective four-year institution and return to a two-year institution, typically closer to home, less expensive, and less taxing as a cultural change, may be risky, as graduation rates for all students at highly selective colleges and universities exceed those at less selective schools. Furthermore, reverse transfer is often viewed as a failure, both of the student and of the original host institution. However, there may be more to the story, as the findings of the third paper in this group suggest. The students made empowering decisions that they thought were in their best interests, and this circuitous route may turn out to be their best pathway toward greater social capital development, along the way contributing to ultimate educational success.

Though the three studies presented here are only exploratory and cannot lead to broad generalizations, they lead us to consider what might be done to improve the college choice and post-secondary experiences for students like Arya and Jon. It is important to note that the challenge spans the PK-12 and postsecondary sectors. Whether the choice or persistence process, many students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, particularly first-generation college aspirants, (especially those without membership in a college-promoting CBO) do not have access to the particular college-promoting or intergenerational cultural and social capital needed to fully engage with either process.

Furthermore, college choice, college entry, and college success are intimately connected with one another. Students' social capital will impact their chances of undermatch, mismatch and reverse transfer. Therefore, a better understanding of the dynamics of the degree of match between preparation, aspirations, and choice, as well as engagement, sense of belonging, and persistence is important. In addition, relational networks are key throughout the movement into and through college, although the make-up of these networks is likely to change—and will need to change—as the student moves through the process.

Finally and perhaps most important, the challenge to students of color and first-generation college goers remains substantial regardless of their support systems because of the unwelcoming climates at most predominantly White institutions. As Arya's case clearly showed, a good match that is based on academic potential and even on financial ease will not be a good match if students do not feel welcomed by the institution or the student body. Therefore, when we think about ways to enhance support systems, we need to remember that they include middle and high schools, non-school organizations, *and* postsecondary institutions.

Longitudinal research conducted with larger samples moving through each point of the college choice and college persistence processes is needed before we can fully understand these relationships and improve them for students like Arya, Jon, and Gendry. This present research is a beginning.

Bibliography—Conclusion

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