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OUTREACH PROGRAMS AND COLLEGE CHOICE

AN EXAMINATION OF NAVIGATING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FROM THE HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE PIPELINE

Tonia Guida

Introduction

According to various studies (Bedsworth et. al, 2006; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2001; Solorzano, 2005; Valadez, 2008; Bloom, 2007; McDonough, 2005), there continues to be a large gap in access to higher education within working-class first-generation college students of color. Less than one percent of low socio-economic status (SES) students, defined as students whose family income is minimally satisfying basic needs, will enroll in a four-year university and only 1 out of 7 low-income students will earn a bachelor's degree (Bedsworth et. al, 2006; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2001). Furthermore, out of every 100 African American, Latino/a, and White elementary school students, 14 African American, 10 Latino/a, and 26 whites will graduate from college with a bachelor's degree (Solorzano, 2005). For this reason, outreach programs heavily focus their attention on working-class high school students of color. Outreach programs have been established nationally to alleviate the unequal school outcomes of working-class first-generation high school students of color. Students from these populations often attend underserved high schools that lack a rigorous curriculum and have poorly trained teachers. For that reason, by providing advisors and mentors at these high school sites, the goal of outreach programs is to provide students with the resources and information they need to achieve college enrollment.

The University of California (UC) created an outreach program, known as the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP). This program was established because policymakers and the University of California wanted to increase the representation of economically disadvantaged and underrepresented students on UC campuses. Therefore, EAOP was established to provide academic development services to educationally disadvantaged students in their public high schools. The program's success has been quite significant. EAOP reports, "since 1991, approximately 60% of EAOP seniors meet UC eligibility each year, 82% attend a postsecondary institution upon high school graduation and 62% attend a 4-year institution, with 25% attending a UC school" ("UCLA Early Academic Outreach Program," 2013). As demonstrated by these statistics, the program has proven to be effective

in matriculating students to pursue higher education. Quigley's (2002) findings demonstrate that students who participate in the EAOP program are twice as likely to complete their high school requirements, formally known as A-G requirements, and be UC eligible. A-G requirements are high school courses deemed by the state of California to prepare students for advanced study ("A-G Subject Requirements," 2013). Although the A-G requirements are not the sole factors that determine UC eligibility, they are one of the largest hurdles that students must overcome. Although this report shows the success of EAOP making students academically eligible, it does not elicit results on whether or not these eligible students actually enroll and attend higher education (Quigley, 2002).

Programs like EAOP need to be reconsidered and re-evaluated to better understand why high achieving high school students that participate in outreach still do not enroll in four-year universities once they are admitted. Thus, the following research question is proposed: what factors contribute to the decision-making process of underserved high school students who participate in outreach programs that prevent them from enrolling in a four-year university once they have been admitted? This being so, this study aims to understand why students who participated in these programs do not enroll in four-year universities even though they are accepted and to offer policy implications that will address resources to gain access to higher education.

Literature Review

Working-class students of color are generally understudied; however, a specific subpopulation within this larger population is academically prepared students of color, whom are also understudied. For the purposes of this study, academically prepared students of color are defined by the EAOP program as students who are competitive and eligible for UC and Cal State universities. Thus, this research will look particularly at first-generation, low-income, students of color who participated in these outreach programs to further understand what other factors after academic preparedness is ac-

counted for prevent these students from pursuing a four-year institution.

Several studies look at the decision-making process of students; however, they are not inclusive. The college choice model is broken down into three stages: predisposition, search, and choice. "Predisposition" is the stage where students begin assessing themselves and thinking about what colleges they are eligible to apply to (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). Next, during the "search" stage, students look for schools they anticipate applying to. Lastly, they gain their admission decisions and decide which college to attend. For that reason, a trend in this body of literature is that most studies assume that, after students have been accepted, their college decision-making process is over. The study underlines that this framework is not inclusive of all student populations because not all students accepted to four-year universities decide to enroll. Therefore, the college choice model must be re-evaluated to include all student populations. The third stage of the college choice model is "choice," which is not guaranteed for working-class students of color who may not enroll in a four-year university after being admitted, due to lack of access to resources and economic barriers. Thus, these factors during the choice stage must be better understood in student's college decision-making process to further explain what barriers this population faces.

Literature on college access and choice (Abrego, 1997; Arnold, Fleming, Castleman, DeAnda, Wartman, and Price, 2008; Bedsworth, Colby, Doctor, 2006; Bloom, 2007; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Ceja, 2001; Hossler and Schmit, 1999; Kurleander, 2006; McDonough, 2006; Stanton Salazar, 2001; Valadez, 2008) argues that there is not one specific reason for students' lack of success in pursuing higher education. Instead, research suggests that there are two specific components that hinder underserved students in their decision making process to pursue higher education: lack of access to resources (Valadez, 2008; Bedsworth et. al., 2006; McDonough, 2005; Ceja, 2001; Stanton Salazar, 2001) and economic influences (Bloom, 2007; McDonough, 2005; Abrego, 2005). Although all of these factors are important to study it is also imperative to recognize that students are not bystanders

in their educational trajectories, but rather are actively combating their oppressive structures to fulfill their educational goals and career plans (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Access to resources through social relationships is a significant barrier for low-income students because most of them tend to be first-generation college students and may not have the social capital that is access to social networks that have value in the educational system who can help them gain tangible resources to pursue higher education (Valadez, 2008; Bloom 2007; McDonough 2005; Cabrera, Lopez, and Saenz, 2012). Valadez (2008) and Arnold et al. (2008), state that social capital is a crucial way that many students navigate their way through the college application process. One form of social capital is the resources available to students at school. Many low-income students report lacking a solid relationship with their college counselors, which not surprisingly leads to a lack of social capital (Valadez, 2008; Bloom, 2007). Counselors are essential in schools because they are often the main resource for first-generation college students going through the college choice model (McDonough, 2005). Cabrera, Lopez, and Saenz (2012) refer to this as students who are "in a double bind: their parents do not possess the background in higher education to help them navigate the system (i.e., knowing the shape of the river), and the people who do have the knowledge (counselors) are constrained with multiple responsibilities and hundreds of students to serve" (p. 235). These key figures in urban public schools are extremely important in students' college choice decisions; however, it should also be noted that this is the dominant discourse in college choice literature. This "master narrative" or story constructed about race is currently embedded with white privilege and illustrates that these are deficiencies students of color carry and are "natural" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). This research is seen as a natural fact taken for granted, without embedded assumptions. Thus, these findings to a certain extent silence the students of color experience. Students also have support networks like older family members and friends who help students navigate their college choice pro-

cess and they ultimately feel responsible for their college decisions and receiving college information (Cabrera, Lopez, & Saenz, 2012). They refer to this phenomenon as students' *ganas,* or their will and desire to pursue a postsecondary education (Cabrera, Lopez, & Saenz, 2012).

Family resources are another form of social capital middle and upper class students have more of compared to their low-income first-generation college counterparts (McDonough, 2005). Unlike upper- and middle-class students who have family members with firsthand experience with college applications, low-income students often state they fill out all college and financial aid applications on their own. Additionally, some parents from working-class communities express feeling less informed regarding their child's college aspirations; therefore, they leave the decision up to their child (McDonough, 2005). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that parents still have an influential role on student's college choice (Nolan et. al, 2012). Parents continuously reinforce and push students to attend college. This is referred to as parental *ganas*. McDonough's (1997) findings demonstrate that across all achievement levels, students from lower socioeconomic status groups are less likely to apply to college and student's aspirations and feelings of entitlement depend on their family and school influences. Ceja (2001), Stanton-Salazar (2001), and McDonough (1997) discuss counselors as "institutional gatekeepers." Although Ceja's (2001) study looked at the counselor as playing the institutional gatekeeper other external agents from outreach programs at the school helped students familiarize themselves with potential institutions they are applying to. Therefore, although the counselor often times played the "gatekeeper" role there are other resources that students utilize at their school.

Similarly, Ceja's (2001) semi-longitudinal study of in-depth interviews with 20 senior Chicanas at an inner city high school in the greater Los Angeles area suggests the importance of protective agents. These are parents and siblings who he finds are the most critical in helping Chicanas develop their motivation to aspire to higher education. However, their limited

experience with education made it difficult for them to help their daughters through the college choice process. Stanton-Salazar (2001) discusses the way schools serve as forms of social and institutional support for U.S Mexican youth and the way they also constrain support through the schools structure and students' help-seeking orientation. Stanton-Salazar (2001) explains that institutional agents can serve as gatekeepers that disseminate information only to students whom they deem worthy. His study exemplifies how *confianza,* or trust, in one's sense of having a personal relationship with school personnel, will ultimately determine whether or not a student feels comfortable asking for help and receiving important information and resources since seeking help has too many psychological risks for students. Stanton-Salazar's findings also demonstrate that the organization of many public high-poverty schools make it difficult for students to seek help when there is a high student-to-counselor ratio.

Economic influences are the second factor identified as a major setback for many low-income first-generation college students (Bloom, 2007; Abrego, 2006; Hossler, 1999; Cabrera et al, 2012). Bloom (2007) expresses that one of the main concerns low-income first-generation college students faces are cost-related factors when deciding whether or not to attend college, while middle-class students explain that their main concerns about starting college are laundry and making friends. Two other cost-related factors that prevent students from pursuing a path to higher education are loans and the monetary family expected contribution to educational costs. Consequently, the types of concerns students face take on a different shape depending on their social class status. Hossler's (1999) nine-year longitudinal report of the college-going and decision-making process of students indicate that although income and level of parental education are not significant factors in earlier phases of the college choice model, they become a large factor whether these students eventually attend and enroll in post-secondary education. Cabrera, Lopez, & Saenz (2012) found that students report a lack of financial aid literacy or college knowledge. Because working-class students

cannot rely on their family for monetary support, their concern for funding becomes an important deciding factor for college choice. This lack of information can drastically change students' college choice decisions.

Kurleander's (2006) study finds that even when SES, academic preparation, degree intention, and state context are controlled, Latino students are still more likely to begin postsecondary education at community colleges. This is because two year-institutions have lower tuition rates and classes that can be scheduled around work and family commitments. Furthermore, Kurleander (2006) found that all working-class students, regardless of race, demonstrated a higher likelihood of attending a community college. Kurleander (2006) suggests that future research should consider things like proximity to home and program flexibility.

Studies like Hossler and Gallagher (1987) analyzed the decision-making process of students; however, their study assumes that all students who get accepted to four-year universities decide to enroll, which is not inclusive. By only having three stages in their college choice model including "predisposition," "search," and "choice," students who change their minds after the choice stage may be left out. During the first stage, "predisposition," students assess themselves and think about what colleges they are eligible to apply to (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). During the second stage, "search," students look for schools that they anticipate applying to (Hossler and Hallagher, 1987). During the last stage, "choice," students receive their admissions decisions and decide which college to attend. Considering the assumptions made from this study, the college choice model must be re-evaluated to include all student populations and the time period after they graduate, especially for working-class students of color who may not automatically enroll in a four-year university after being admitted.

Even though there is existing literature (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987) on college choice and college retention, there seems to be a missing piece that focuses solely on students who have already gained access to the college but fail to enroll. An important time period that researchers look at to

understand what causes attrition for low-income high school seniors is the summer after graduation, which is referred to as the "summer melt." During the summer melt, students do not have access to their guidance counselors and other social support networks, so understanding financial aid packages, dealing with pressures to stay at home, and navigating communication with their future universities can be daunting (Castleman et. al, 2010).

The two most relevant studies addressing this issue were pilot studies that investigated whether summer intervention from colleges and counselors was helpful (Arnold et. al, 2008; Castleman et al. 2010). Their focus groups and in-depth interviews with students, college counselors, and advisors helped find that factors such as family, peers, and finances, have a large impact on a students' college decision-making process. In a similar study, Castleman et al. (2010) assessed existing schools that provided summer outreach to high school seniors and found that there were higher rates of enrollment in the fall semester due to the summer intervention period.

It is important to note that majority of the current existing literature is portrayed as a master narrative, which displays the students as being deficient and places the failure of our schools onto the students themselves. However, current literature also exists, which demonstrates that students are actively resisting to pursue quality education despite their circumstances (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Cabrera, Lopez, & Saenz, 2012). Students are not simply acted upon by educational systems, but rather they negotiate and struggle with these systems to make meaning of their own interactions. Transformational resistance is defined as students who are aware of their oppressive social conditions and are motivated by social justice to improve their conditions and others. These are positive forms of school resistance and research needs to recognize these students' decision-making processes as sites of resistance.

This literature elicits the most prominent factors associated with preventing students from accessing higher education: lack of access to resources and economic influences. However, these are factors that are established

throughout the course of a student's life, not at a particular time period. Therefore, the weakness of the literature is that it is general, not looking at specific populations at particular time frames in their college preparedness. The literature also suggests that although students face barriers to higher education, they will nevertheless eventually pursue higher education—whether it is through a community college or a four-year institution. Clearly, there is a group of students who are being overlooked. This research will look beyond students applying to college and examine the population that has already been accepted. This research will also account for academic preparedness to better explicitly address how academic preparation is still not fully guaranteeing all students the right to higher education by examining what factors influence their decision to not enroll in a four-year university once they have already been admitted.

Methodology

This study attempts to uncover the experiences of first-generation working-class students of color as they make their decisions about college by obtaining their perspectives on college choice and the factors that are influential in that process. Therefore, a qualitative research study design was employed to capture the experiences of these students to analyze the barriers that they face. A Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework was used to challenge the notion that schools are meritocratic institutions of equal opportunity and highlight the structural and individual inequalities these students experience. For the purposes of keeping subjects anonymous, pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant's name.

Theoretical Framework

By employing the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the study's goal was to further the understanding of how the college-choice decision-making process of working-class students of color differs from their more privileged counterparts. CRT was a framework originally developed in the 1970's by legal scholars to examine the role of race and

racism in the law and society and is now being employed in the field of education (Dixson & Rosseau, 2006). The framework was constructed because legal scholars believed none of the existing literature centralized race or racism and they needed a vocabulary to discuss these experiences and ideas. Several years later, education scholars began implementing CRT into the field of education. Therefore, by utilizing critical race theory in education for this study, I will challenge the educational systems claim to objectiveness by uncovering the systematic racist and sexist practices operating within high school settings (Solorzano, 1998). According to Solorzano (1998), there are five tenants of CRT that form the basic perspective of CRT: 1) centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, 2) challenging dominant colorblindness ideologies, 3) to eliminate all forms of subordination through a commitment to social justice, 4) using lived experience of communities of color as legitimate and critical to understanding subordination, and 5) integration of the interdisciplinary perspective (Solorzano, 1998). Therefore, using Critical Race Theory, this study was able to foreground issues of race and racism in its analysis, putting forth the [thesis/hypothesis] that schools and outreach programs are not doing enough to make sure underserved college-bound students pursue higher education. Thus, utilizing CRT can dispel some of the current colorblind myths and give a voice to these students marginalized experience. "CRT in education explores the ways in which "race-neutral" laws and institutional structures, practices, and policies perpetuate racial/ethnic educational inequality (Solorzano et al., 2005, p. 274).

Participant Selection

Student eligibility for this study included two important characteristics: 1) alumni who participated in the EAOP and graduated from Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) high school sites within the years of 2007-2010, and 2) was accepted to a four-year university but decided not to attend. These criteria helped the researcher gain an in-depth understanding regarding what factors students consider when deciding whether or not

to attend a four-year university. By selecting students from various gender groups, a range of different perspectives and narratives helped inform the research question. Due to time constraints, convenience sampling was utilized. 6 participants (5 Latino/a, and 1 Black male) were interviewed. This selection criterion allowed the examination of how race and gender operate in the college decision-making process and whether the experience is different for males, females, African Americans, and Latinos. For the purposes of this study, the student's racial categories will be defined by the racial categories they self identify as.

Data Analysis

The documentation of the interview data first consisted of listening to the interviewee answer questions during the interview. Then, the recorded interview session was replayed without taking notes. Next, interviews were selectively transcribed from a personal laptop computer. Emerging themes were identified and concepts by categorizing different factors on the interview transcription into different ideas as they were relevant to my research. For example, if several different concerns regarding money, finances, or apprehension on how to pay for college were stated in the interviews these hardships would fall under the theme of "Financial Concerns." Other themes that were initially coded consisted of outside influences, timing, resiliency, gender, race/ethnicity, campus climate, undocumented status, timing, and aspirations. Next, concepts were refined through the report-writing phase and re-conceptualized my themes into two large themes, which consisted of a) Complicating the Traditional College Choice Model, and b) Critical Awareness Students have of their Self-Identities. Within each of the two themes the initially coded themes were placed as subthemes. For example, within the theme complicating the traditional college choice model subthemes such as resiliency and timing were included.

Lastly, the understanding of the concepts/themes during the member check were improved by incorporating the informant's opinions of the

researcher's interpretation of their answers after they read over the findings section and provided their feedback. The researcher was transparent with the students and encouraged them to share what parts they agreed, disagreed, or would like reworded.

Findings

Background

Each student that was interviewed was aged between 18 and 22 and was a first-generation student of color who participated in the Early Academic Outreach program (EAOP) at their former high school. Because they were EAOP students, all participants were encouraged to pursue a path to higher education in some shape or form, either directly through institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) from their high school or through other spaces EAOP, and or family members who advocated for them. They were all on a college-going path with grade point averages ranging from a 3.3 to a 3.8 (Appendix: Table 1). The table below gives a snapshot of the student's college choices: including which institutions they applied to, were accepted to, and where they enrolled. Each participant took advanced placement and honors courses in high school. These are notable facts because it demonstrates that these students are academically committed and took advantage of the resources in their high schools. They all had intentions to go directly to a four-year institution from high school. In addition, they were all heavily involved in extracurricular activities within their school and/or communities; some even balanced part-time jobs throughout their high school careers. They all applied to multiple institutions, including highly competitive institutions ranging from private schools to Cal States to UCs, which once again exemplify their academic determination.

Complicating the Traditional College Choice Model

The students interviewed in this study all demonstrated resiliency and agency in their college choice process. Existing literature on the college choice model discusses the model as a very linear straightforward process (Hossler and Gallagher, 1999). However, as demonstrated by the participants, this is not always the case. Therefore, in this section will discuss how these findings complicate the existing literature through the subthemes of 1) resiliency, how student's take agency in their college choice process, and 2) the summer melt phenomenon.

Resiliency

Students were aware of the difficulties they would face attending a community college and despite all the barriers they faced they remained hopeful and have done everything they can to eventually be able to transfer. Two have already transferred to four-year institutions, one is attending a technical school, and the rest anticipate on transferring within the next two years. All six students believe 'no' is not an answer; where there is a will there is a way. This is the message and narrative students shared in their interviews and through their own stories and school trajectories, which they hope other students can use as examples to push forward to reach their own goals as well. Sonia states,

> I applied to the universities. I got in…it was my own decision to go to a two year…I know that many students do drop out of a junior college [but] I'm not going to be part of that percentage because I do want something better for myself. I do. I love school I'm going to push myself as hard as I can because my goal and my ultimate dream is to graduate from a four year university and I'm not going to stop until it actually happens whatever people say, whether they agree or disagree with me. I stand by the decisions I made and I'm just going to move forward with it. (Sonia, Interview 4)

In this powerful statement it is evident that the student, Sonia, is aware of the inequitable and challenging conditions at the community college. She is not blindly deciding to attend the community college by default. She has taken full agency in her college choice process and is committing to her

decision to transfer regardless of the stigma associated with it because she believes in herself. This example of resiliency reaffirms what other scholars like Solorzano & Delgado Bernal (2001) and Cabrera, Lopez, & Saenz (2012) have already stated, which is students are actively resisting to pursue quality education despite their circumstances.

The Summer Melt

Each student made their final college-decision at different time periods during their senior year, ranging from during the academic school year up until summertime after graduation. Four of the students made their decision to attend community colleges even prior to submitting their Statement of Intent to Register (SIR) at their respective institutions. However, two participants, Anna and Michael, did submit their SIR to their prospective four-year institution and decided shortly before classes that they would be attending a community college instead. Anna waited due to the fact that she had intended on getting private loans as an undocumented student, but found out shortly before school was approaching that she could not qualify for these loans without legal documentation (Anna, Interview 6). Michael, another student, decided not to attend his respective four-year university after he attended orientation (Michael, Interview 5). The other four participants, however, all were making their decisions before the May 1st deadline.

These findings relate to the Arnold et al. (2009) study regarding the "summer melt" period, which they argue is the time when first-generation students of color are falling through the cracks of the pipeline. As discussed, two of the students in this study did experience what Arnold et al. (2009) coins as the "summer melt." They explained that the summer transitional period was a time when students did not have a college counselor or other institutional agent to help them through their decision-making process. These findings validate the existing literature regarding the summer melt. However, the four other students did not experience the summer melt phenomenon. These findings, the researcher argue, problematize the existing literature and suggest that students are making these decisions while they still have access to their counselors, teachers, EAOP advisors, etc. Therefore, it should not be assumed that the summer period is the only time when students are choosing a community college route. This leads the researcher to contend that there are certain factors that the institutional agents were not able to assist with and that these could be areas of improvement for high schools, counselors, teachers, and EAOP advisors.

In addition, these findings challenge Hossler and Gallagher's (1999) college choice model. Hossler and Gallagher's college choice model assumes that after the choice phase, which is the time period when students select which college they will attend, they will proceed by enrolling in the respective four-year university they were accepted to. However, as found in this study, for first-generation working-class students of color, this experience is different. Two students made what they intended to be their final choice and went as far as submitting their SIR, but then reshaped their final decision before classes began in the new academic year. Thus, the college choice model Hossler and Gallagher (1999) present is embedded with assumptions, that once a decision is made it is concrete and nonflexible. The two students in this study who made their final college choice after already submitting an SIR suggest the complexity of this process. The model does not account for students who change their mind. Therefore, the researcher proposes that this model should be redesigned to take into consideration all students experiences with the college choice process and include room for waiver or changing of decisions.

Critical Awareness of Self and Identity

Students' social identities, specifically their 1) gender and 2) race had an impact on their college choice process; however, students' levels of awareness differed. Nevertheless, all students used their knowledge of their social identity as a motivating factor to pursue higher education.

Gender

Scholars have suggested that gender is important in college choice (Ceja, 2001). This study complicates these findings. To a certain extent, gender did not play a significant role in students' college-choice experiences. Gender was not "a thing" (Anna, Interview 6). However, one male participant compares his experience to that of his sisters and critiques how historical Mexican family traditions have had an influence on his life plans versus his sisters. David states,

> Because I'm a guy [my father] expects me to follow his steps in the sense of how a guy is, a guy could be able to support a family, a powerful man, that's what he wants to create. The way they use power to abuse it because I'm a guy he expects more [from] me than from my sister. He implies that if you're going to be doing that, your going to get a good education, from my sister, he doesn't really expect anything from her.

It is interesting to note that the only Latino male participant noted this difference in his families' expectations of him, while the Latinas did not. This has implications for women who may have to push themselves to pursue their higher education aspirations.

Students also had a dynamic understanding of gender. An interesting observation is that one female, Megan, discussed her race in conjunction with her gender only when she was asked, "Have you ever been encouraged or discouraged because of your gender to pursue higher education?" This speaks directly to the framework of CRT, which emphasizes the intersectionality of one's social identity. She states, "Well the statistics say they really drop out a lot, so that really motivated me because I don't want to be a part of the statistics…I want to accomplish and show that just because I'm Hispanic I can do it." (Megan, Interview 2). In her response, Megan inherently connects her gender identity with her racial identity, possibly suggesting that she more prominently identifies herself as a Hispanic than as a woman, particularly when referencing her goals to pursue higher education. This notion

of the intersectionality of one's social identities requires further exploration in future studies.

Race/Ethnicity

Each student expressed that as a minority they were positively motivated to pursue higher education. They expressed that various people in their lives, like community members, teachers, parents, cousins and older siblings, emphasized their importance as positive reinforcements to attend higher education because they are underrepresented. Each student had different levels of awareness regarding the oppressive social conditions students' of color face and the disparities of the representation of minority students in higher education. However, they used this information as a driving force to pursue higher education. The interviewees elicited, not only a strong sense of wanting to pursue higher education for individual benefits, but also to improve the societal conditions of their community. This demonstrates that all of these students are practicing some form of resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). For example, Megan says,

> Well, the statistics say [Hispanics] really drop out a lot. So that really motivated me, because I don't want to be a part of the statistics… I want to accomplish and show that just because I'm Hispanic I can do it… Hispanics are supposed to be the dumb ones who work in the fields. . . coming from a Hispanic family it motivates me. (Megan, Interview 2)

Megan is aware of the negative stereotypes her racial identity has and is using this information as a tool to push her to excel in school and achieve her goals. She wants to prove others wrong. In addition, Sonia mentions her aunt again, stating, "You're a Latina; you have to excel in school because you know you have to prove everyone wrong" (Sonia, Interview 4). Once again, this demonstrates the students taking an active stance to improve aspects of their lives, particularly, their own conditions. Lastly, Anna mentions how community members who would visit her at work or at a local grocery store,

and constantly push her to move forward with school so that she can represent their community (Anna, Interview 6). The last example demonstrates Anna's commitment to social justice—her goals to pursue higher education are not solely for her own benefits, but also to improve the conditions of others, defined as transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Thus, Anna's racial identification, as a Latina, empowers her to pursue her educational goals.

How Family and School Influence the College-Decision Making Process

Each student expressed that others played a role in their college-decision making process, but in the end they made their decisions on their own. Importantly, families largely influenced students' initial college aspirations while they were growing up. Additionally, as they transitioned into high school, they took in information and opinions from teachers, friends, parents, counselors and others, which will be discussed further below. The researcher will focus on the influence of family, schoolteachers, and staff and how they impact student's college choice decisions. It should be highlighted that students did not rely on others to make decisions for them; they took agency in their college choice process. They made their own decisions regardless of external pressures.

Aspirations

The students' aspirations to attend college all began at an early age. The majority of the students stated their aspirations to pursue a college degree began with their families that encouraged them, but there were specific pivotal moments each of the students' can recall when their aspirations manifested into concrete goals. As Ceja (2001) finds, protective agents, parents and siblings, are the most critical in helping students develop their motivation to attend higher education. The specific memories participants' shared were examples that resonated as pivotal moments in their lives, which became a motivating factor for them to pursue higher education Espinoza,

2011). For example, Anna expressed that she was one of six siblings, as one of the youngest she was always told by her older siblings, "There's something in you. Go. You have to go. You're the one out of all of us that has to go, so that motivated [me] more to go" (Anna, Interview 6). Specific examples, like the former one, by family members, also known as protective agents, and other influencers in students' lives is what helped shape their academic goals and dreams.

Most students had similar experiences with the exception of one: Michael, who expressed that he did not really think about college until his junior year of high school. The defining moment in his life that placed him on a college trajectory was when he was called out of class from EAOP to participate in a junior assessment, where they told him he was UC eligible and that he could potentially attend a UC school if he applied. He stated that he had no idea going directly to a four-year university was an option for him because he did not think he had the grades, yet he had a GPA of 3.3. This finding also validates McDonough's (1997) findings, which argues that students from different social class backgrounds aspire to different types of colleges, despite academic achievement. However, despite his uncertainties, he (much like the other participants) expressed that, his parents, particularly his mother, pushed him to pursue a higher education. This exemplifies how the source of an institutional agent can vary. For some students an institutional agent (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) is someone directly working within the school. However, for Michael the institutional agent is an EAOP advisor, someone who comes into the school on a weekly basis and advocates for the student. Because Michael's circumstance is quite different than the rest of the participants it leads me to suggest that his uncertainty about his college decision during his junior year may be coming from other messages he is receiving from school. No other student had a similar experience, once again highlighting the importance of EAOP and other outreach programs that mentor first-generation working-class students of color in high school because without that moment Michael said he would not have applied to a

four-year university (Michael, Interview 5).

Family influence

Many students discussed their families and how they had an impact on their college choice. David for example, discusses the large role his cousin had on his college trajectory. His cousin attended UCLA and he relied on him for a majority of his information and knowledge about college. However, his cousin only played a role to a certain extent. He provided him with information and served as a role model, but he did not determine David's final college choice. As David shares, his cousin was a motivating factor for him, a role model, someone he admired and strived to be like. However, when David had to make a decision to attend CSU Long Beach or attend a community college, he chose the community college path independent of his families influence. Similarly, Megan discusses her mother's full support by stating,

> Well, my parents they really wanted me to go to school. They're very supportive when it comes to education; they want [me] to finish school whatever it is. They don't want us to worry about the money. [My mom] doesn't want us to work and go to school because then were going to drop out. She tells me, 'Whatever your decision is I'm going to support you.' (Megan, Interview 2)

Megan's example demonstrates that her family is supportive of her educational goals, but is not pressuring her to make a specific decision regarding which route to take. This is similar to McDonough's (2005) findings regarding social capital. Students are receiving positive messages at home, but because not many family members have first-hand experience with college applications, their advice and or support do not translate into a tangible decision. Isabel's father shared similar sentiments as Megan's mother. As long as Isabel did what was happy for her, her father was supportive. A definable moment for Sonia was when she saw her older cousin transfer to a four-

year university, the University of Southern California (USC). She vividly remembers helping her cousin move in to the dorm. She states, "Oh my god. I want to be like that. Take classes like her. Live in a dorm like her. That was the moment where I pushed myself to work harder" (Sonia, Interview 4). It was in this moment that Sonia felt genuinely invested in pursuing a higher education. This example also demonstrates Ceja's (2001) use of the term "protective agent." Sonia was able to witness her aunt transition from a two-year college to a competitive four-year university. Therefore, her aunt is a concrete example that if she can do it, Sonia can do it too. Many of the students discussed their older siblings and family members as an influence in their college choice process.

However, to further complicate other people's influences on students' college choice, Isabel also believes that her older brother not finishing his degree at CSU Fullerton played a role in her decision-making process. For Isabel, her brother served as an example of someone who was unsure of his college plans. Thus, she wanted to make sure she was going to succeed at the four-year institution she selected before attending—something she believed UC Davis did not offer to her. She states, "What if I go and I want to stop it…I need to think about it really hard before I make that choice" (Isabel, Participant 3). This finding complicates Ceja's (2001) discussion of protective agents. This indicates siblings and parents have a critical role in students' college choice process, but as Stanton-Salazar (2001) mentions certain agents can support and or constrain students' decisions.

These findings illustrate that students felt a strong sense of support from their family, regardless of their college choice and the way in which they pursue their educational goals. Their families were supportive of their decisions. Older cousins and siblings played a role in helping students to align their goals with those of their role models (Ceja, 2001). However, not every relationship and second-hand experience they witnessed was entirely positive, like Isabel mentions. Nonetheless, this is an important experience in her life because it allows her to reflect and realize that the four-year option

she had may not have been the best fit for her. Even though it was a four-year option, it did not mean that she would thrive and do well there. Without the critical example of her brother, she may not have been able to make such an informed decision. Another finding to highlight is the extent to which families had an impact. As Megan mentions, her mother fully supported her decision no matter which institution type she chose, therefore making it easier for her to make a decision between a community college and a four-year college route. Participants did not experience extreme pressures from specific people, which ultimately could push students into making a specific college choice decision.

School Influence

Students also discussed school influences on their decision-making process, including teachers and counselors. Isabel for example expresses that although she received support at home, she received conflicting messages at school. One of her teachers insisted that she should attend UC Davis instead of a community college (somewhere Isabel did not want to attend). Her teacher's reasoning being that she wouldn't be able to do well and succeed at the community college. Despite her teacher's negative commentary, like other participants, Isabel made her decision despite forms of constraint (Stanton Salazar, 2001). Another student, Michael, also discusses how he had positive and supportive mentors at his high school like his counselor and EAOP advisor. However, he also shared his experience with teachers who were not as supportive.

Michael expresses some of the negative experiences he had in some of his high school courses. He shared stories of two teachers who he believed did not like him because they called him the wrong name, made him sit in the back of the class, and did not let him do make up work. Some of the disputes went to the extent of having meetings with his parents, counselors, and the teachers. This conveys the way public high school institutions the participants attend stigmatize community college as an option and how con-

flicting messages within school can affect students perceptions of their academic achievement. Based on the stories Michael shared in his interview it seems as though there is push and pull factors that shaped his college choice process (Stanton Salazar, 2001). His counselor is an example of a push factor, influencing him in a positive direction, for example, she advocated ensuring that he took academically challenging classes. Another example of a positive school influence is his EAOP advisor. She recognized his potential and pushed him to apply to the UC system. However, in addition, he encounters teachers who are pull factors, pushing him away from the direction of pursuing a higher education. For example, he shares that when he was called out of class to the college office for a junior assessment [1] and was recommended to apply to a UC, this was a defining moment in his college choice path. Before this event, he always wanted to go to college, but he did not think he was academically prepared for a four-year university. However, he took mainly Advanced Placement and Honors classes throughout his high school career. Utilizing a critical race theory framework, this causes me to question, why if he was taking advanced courses and doing fairly well in school, did he not believe he was academically capable of attending a University of California institution? The way his teachers treated him suggests an act of institutionalized racism in our public schooling system, where as a black male, Michael is receiving different messages about his academic potential. His varying experiences, positive and negative within his school, informed his college choice and may have deterred him from thinking a four-year path was feasible. These findings reaffirm Stanton-Salazar's (2001) study regarding institutional agents serving as both forms of support and constraint for working-class students of color.

Discussion

After examining working-class, first-generation students of color experiences in the college choice process, it is important to clarify that the process is much more dynamic and complex than is assumed. The themes

that emerged in the findings are: a) Complicating the Traditional College Choice Model b) Critical Awareness Students have of their Self-Identities. Addressing the first theme, the traditional college choice model must be re-designed to accommodate for students like the ones discussed in this study. Not all students have a clear linear decision-making process. Therefore, a better conceptual understanding of underserved students' decision-making processes should be developed. In addition, studies need to value the stories and voices of the students themselves because without hearing their per-spectives it is difficult to make claims that their race, gender, and citizenship status are affecting their college choice process.

Limitations

The purpose of this study was for a more in-depth understanding of a subpopulation of six students of colors' lived experiences in their college decision-making process. Thus, the implications of this research are to bet-ter understand the complex ways in which students of color navigate college decision-making processes and how this differs from other racial groups. Participants were selected based on their demographic characteristics in a purposeful way to capture the depth of their stories. Thus, it should be noted that the objective of the current study was not to draw broad conclusions about students of colors' decision-making processes. Although there are strengths to the qualitative nature of this study, it also has a number of lim-itations, which include, but are not limited to: generalizability of the find-ings, number of participants, limited racial focus, and limited gender focus.

Due to the time constraint of two months to collect and analyze data, the study sample size is not very large, thus findings are not generalizable. The implications of having a small sample size indicate a lack of represen-tativeness and validity, which only captures a small group of students' lived experiences. By interviewing only six students, the researcher limited the ability to see whether or not this is a common experience for many stu-dents of color. In addition, it prevented the researcher from applying their

findings to other populations and other settings. Thus, this research study should only be seen as a pilot and exploratory study, which can be used as a stepping-stone for future research. Also, all participants participated in a specific college outreach program, EAOP; thus other students in other con-texts may have different experiences. Future studies related to college deci-sion-making processes should incorporate a mixed-methods design, which would capture a larger group of students' experiences. For example, future studies could survey a large group of EAOP participants in addition to in-depth interviews, which would capture more breadth and quantitative data to see how many students in EAOP actually change their college-making de-cisions after they have been accepted to four-year universities. Future stud-ies could also survey and interview students from different racial categories, including white and Asian students to help compare the current findings to other students' experiences. Future studies could also include more males, since this study captured a majority of women's experiences. Thus, findings may not be gender-neutral, considering there were only two out of six male participants interviewed. In summary, this research does not reflect every first-generation, working-class student of colors' decision-making process.

Conclusion

Navigating the college choice process for first-generation work-ing-class students of color can be much more complex in comparison with their more privileged counterparts. First-generation college students are often located in low-resourced schools where access to information about college is scarce and the information that is available is only given to stu-dents who counselors deem worthy. Just as well, coming from families who do not have social or cultural capital regarding the college decision-making process makes navigating these decisions and processes even harder. Lastly, the economic factors that contribute to student's decision-making processes also play a significant role in student's decisions.

It is quite paradoxical that students who gain admission to four-year

universities still persist to loose access to the university. That is why this research examines a leak in the high school to college pipeline that has been understudied. Consequently, understanding the experiences and barriers of academically prepared first-generation students of color that get accepted to a four-year university but decide not to attend could be a very efficient way to increase representation of these student populations on university campuses. By giving them agency through this research, the barriers they face can then be used by policy makers and institutions to improve the possibilities for these students to enroll in their respective universities. This study contributes to the college choice and outreach literature by focusing on a particular subpopulation of high achieving high school students. By focusing on first-generation working-class outreach students, this study sheds light on the important influences, which shape how students make decisions about their college opportunities. This study is also vital because it is a step towards to understanding some of the reasons why these students do not enroll in a four-year university. This study also utilizes methodology that values the student's knowledge and experiences, which is very different from the majority of the quantitative studies done. Using CRT as a framework also contributes to the college choice and outreach literature because it provides a critical lens for understanding the institutional and structural barriers underserved students face.

This study has policy implications for issues of educational access and equity. Most notably, students should have access to college counselors and outreach mentors throughout the summer of their senior year to ensure their successful transition to the four-year university. As well, schools should disseminate college information to parents, so that they are better informed for their children's college decisions. Institutional agents are extremely important in the college choice process, therefore there should be an increase in the number of college counselors in under resourced schools.

Future research projects that this research may elicit are: what can policy makers, institutions, and individual counselor/teachers do to in-

crease enrollment to college after acceptance for working-class, first-generation college students? What can universities do to help the students' enroll at their university? Who can be held accountable for this leak in the high school to college pipeline? Also, since this study comparatively looks at males and females of different racial groups, future research that focuses on one group could provide an in-depth examination of these student's particular experiences. Studies that examine and interview counselors and outreach program advisors and their role as potential gatekeepers could also explain whether or not they are using deficit approaches to counseling and how this information can be dispensed.

Notes

1   A workshop EAOP puts on where they summon students who are eligible and competitive to apply to the UC system during their junior year and evaluate their transcripts with them.

Appendix

Table 1.

Participant	Race/ Gender	High School GPA	Applied	Accepted	Enrolled
David	Latino	3.8	CSUF, CSULA, CSULB, Cal Poly, UCLA, UC Davis UCB, UCSD, University of the Pacific	CSUF, CSULA, CSULB Cal Poly, University of the Pacific (waitlisted)	Santa Monica College (CC)
Megan	Latina	3.5	CSUN, CSULA, CSULB, UCSB, LMU, University of Kentucky	CSUN, CSULA, LMU, University of Kentucky	College of the Canyons (CC)
Isabel	Latina	3.8	UCLA, UC Davis, UCB, CSUF, Cal State Poly, CSUN, USC	CSUF, Cal Poly, UC Davis	California Healing College (Trade Tech)
Sonia	Latina	3.8	UCSD, Humboldt, UCR, UCM	Humboldt, UCM	La Valley College (CC)
Michael	Black Male	3.3	UCLA, UCB, Univ. of Nevada Reno, Univ. of Conneticut-New Haven, UCI, UCSB	University of Nevada Reno (enrolled)	PCC and transferred to Azusa Pacific University
Anna	Latina	3.6	UCSD, UCLA, UCSB, CCSULA, CSUN, CS Sacramento, CSULA	UCSD, UCSB, CSULA, CSUN	Mission Valley College and transferred to CSUN

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