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Beyond the Income-Achievement Gap: An Examination of the Conditions that Promote High-Achievement of Low Socioeconomic Status Students in College

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Avery Bridgette Olson

2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Beyond the Income-Achievement Gap:

An Examination of the Conditions that Promote High-Achievement

of Low Socioeconomic Status Students in College

by

Avery Bridgette Olson

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Jane E. Pizzolato, Chair

The benefits of a college degree are greater than ever, yet low-socioeconomic status (SES) students continue to have lower college enrollment and completion rates than their more affluent counterparts. Existing research has focused attention on the major barriers facing low-income and low-socioeconomic status students. Most studies associate the college enrollment and completion disparities as related to a lack of academic preparation, financial barriers, and a lack of social and cultural capital that would otherwise enable students to successfully navigate the college environment. Only a fraction of research has focused on the successes of lower-SES students throughout their educational trajectories, despite the fact that there are nearly a million high-achieving, low-SES students in the United States.

Using an adapted version of critical resilience theory and Harper's (2010; 2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework, this study used an asset-based approach in examining the

educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving students from low-SES backgrounds. This study examined what personal, familial, and institutional factors contributed to the educational success of high-achieving, low-SES students, and how these factors facilitated college opportunities. Employing both a phenomenological and narrative qualitative method, the main sources of data collection were background demographic information surveys, one-on-one interviews with 21 participants, and three focus groups with 12 participants. The sample of participants included high-achieving, low-SES college seniors at UCLA.

Three main findings were derived from this research: (1) three unique familial encouragement types were identified as significant in aspirations, motivation, and the development of participants' strong sense of self; (2) academic preparation and experiences with the college curriculum provided unique challenges that explicitly demonstrated the ways that personal, familial, and institutional factors contributed to the development of resilience that enabled participants to successfully navigate these challenges; and (3) these experiences appeared to be instrumental in providing the means of developing coping strategies that enabled them to avoid negative outcomes. The findings suggest opportunities in K-12 and college administration to identify innovative practices and policies that ensure greater postsecondary access and success amongst low-SES students—including how families are involved, and strategies for addressing prohibitive college costs and types of aid disbursed to students.

The dissertation of Avery Bridgette Olson is approved.

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DEDICATION

To my daughter, Olivia – you have taught me to be strong.

And it is from you that I find the inspiration to promote change

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Income matters in higher education. Income levels influence if an individual goes to college, where they apply and later attend, their ability to pay, and how successful they are during college. Individuals from low-income families are not making the same advances in postsecondary education as their more affluent counterparts as students from low-income families continue to be underrepresented. This gap in college access and completion rates continues to rise between the groups. Students coming from low-income families experience more challenging circumstances and personal adversity leading to limited educational opportunities.

Differences by income level are problematic because educational attainment has long been a cornerstone in the 'American Dream,' as education is seen as the primary means to get ahead regardless of family background. Nonetheless, differences are found in aspirations, persistence, experiences, and attainment based on income level or socioeconomic status[1] (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Walpole, 2007). Research demonstrates socioeconomic status (or SES) is the most consistent factor in shaping a student's educational trajectory (Hossler et al., 1999; McMurrer & Sawhill, 1998; Rank, 2004; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001), even after controlling for race, gender, academic preparation, and high school attended (Terenzini et al., 2001). Far fewer low-SES students are attending and completing college. In fact, low-SES students attend college at a rate of 30 percent less than their

[1]Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners continue to use income, socioeconomic status, and social class interchangeably and often define them differently. Throughout this dissertation I will use the terms that the authors used, but I will be focusing on socioeconomic status in this dissertation as a way to capture broader SES indicators.

higher-SES peers (Walpole, 2007), and are more likely to attend less selective colleges and universities (Hossler et al., 1999).

These growing disparities are troubling given higher education is considered the great equalizer in reducing inequality, ultimately minimizing gaps between the rich and the poor (McMurrer & Sawhill, 1998; Rank, 2004; Sawhill & Morton, 2007). Nonetheless, the differences in educational trajectories between low-income students and their higher-income counterparts are often attributed to differences in academic preparation and ability, as low-SES students are often linked to lower achievement levels (Hossler et al., 1999; McPherson & Schapiro, 2006; Rank, 2004; Wyner et al., 2007). Lower-SES students are less likely to test well on national standardized exams such as SAT and ACT, take advanced classes that have been shown to be related to degree completion, and earn the highest grades among their graduating classes (Berg, 2010; Hossler et al., 1999; Radford, 2013; Solórzano, Datnow, Park, & Watford, 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). This income-achievement gap continues to grow, as recent research demonstrates a parallel between rising income inequality in the past 50 years and a similar increase in the income-achievement gap (Reardon, 2011).

While the income-achievement gap is true, it is an overgeneralization of the academic abilities of low-SES students. This discourse fails to capture those low-income, or low-socioeconomic status (SES) students who are achieving at the highest levels in college, meaning that the narrative that is missing is that of high-achieving, low-SES students. While low-SES students excel less frequently than their higher-income peers, 59 percent of high-achieving[2] students from low-SES backgrounds do graduate from a four-year institution (Wyner et al.,

[2] In their study, Wyner et al., 2007 defined high-achieving, low-income students as those who scored in the top 25 percent on nationally normed standardized tests and whose family incomes, adjusted for family size, are below the national median.

2007). However, there is a lack of understanding of the contexts and factors (personal, familial, and institutional) that contribute to the success of these students – and whether these students were achievers all throughout their academic trajectory, or whether they would have been marked as low-achieving students who later experienced supports that contributed to their development into an achiever. Therefore, it seems important to gain a better understanding of the educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving, low-SES college students and the conditions that help some low-SES students excel academically despite challenging circumstances. Using the theory of resiliency (Ceja, 2004; Reis, Colbert, & Herbert, 2005; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1995; Winfield, 1991) can help us understand how these students managed to succeed despite these challenges. Additionally, understanding how the personal, familial, and institutional contexts and factors (Harper, 2010; 2012) developed these students and overcome their low-SES disadvantages despite well-documented challenges could prove useful. Gaining insight into what has worked for this talented group of students could aid in the development of policy and educational practice that could significantly improve access and attainment rates for low-SES students. Our nation's educational policy priorities have focused on low-performing students from lower-SES backgrounds needing to improve basic skills to ensure minimal proficiency—ultimately characterizing these students' experiences as a single narrative marked by disadvantage (Terenzini et al., 2001).

While investigation into these areas is essential in understanding the circumstances that undermine the success of low-SES students and ultimately narrow this achievement gap, this kind of research continues to extend the narrative of low-SES student deficits and leaves out those low-SES students achieving at the highest levels. Although it might be assumed that high-

achieving, low-SES students face the same struggles as other low-SES students, given their achievement levels and potential, it seems important to collect better data in order to understand their unique circumstances and avoid losing this talented subset of students. As such, we have much to learn from research on how high-achieving low-SES students are successful in navigating their way to highly-selective institutions and through the college experience using an anti-deficit approach (Harper, 2010; 2012).

In order to gain a better understanding of the pathways and experiences of high-achieving, low-SES college students, it is important to first provide an overview of current discourse on low-SES students in postsecondary education and the association between SES and achievement.

Low-Socioeconomic Status Students in Higher Education

The low-SES student population is comprised of all racial and ethnic groups; the population includes men and women, poor and working students, students with disabilities, single-parent students, and former foster youth (IHEP, 2010). However, low-SES students entering postsecondary education are more likely to be from a historically underrepresented racial and/or ethnic group, and are less likely to have parents with a college degree than their higher-SES peers (Berg, 2010; Solórzano et al., 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001). Despite variety in the demographic composition of low-SES students, the majority of students from low-SES backgrounds report attending college in order to move beyond the current financial constraints in which they have lived (Berg, 2010; Solórzano et al., 2013). Yet in their decision to do so, low-SES students are much more sensitive to tuition and financial aid awards (Berg, 2010; St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2011; Harper, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001) and are more likely to attend less-selective institutions, such as community colleges, despite achievement

levels (Berg, 2010; McPherson & Schapiro, 2006; Solórzano et al., 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007; Wyner et al, 2007).

For nearly 50 years, federal and state policy has been focused on improving college access and equity in postsecondary outcomes (Higher Education Act of 1965). Policies and programs have aimed to increase access to higher education for low-SES students and help support them while they attend college. The investment of resources and pursuit for equity has been seen with the development of financial aid programs as well as federal, state, and institutional programs aimed at providing assistance and support to talented, low-SES students (e.g. Upward Bound, Talent Search, state grant programs, institutional support programs). Despite these efforts, research indicates poor college outcomes for low-SES students such as lower attendance, more dropping out, and attending less selective institutions.

When considering the economic returns on a college education, the low enrollment and completion rates of low-SES students become even more troubling as recent research has revealed that the individuals *least* likely to obtain a college education benefit most from a college degree (Brand & Xie, 2010). Although critics doubt the value of a college degree citing expanding access efforts as watering down a college degree (Berg, 2010), it seems to be more important to acknowledge the heterogeneity in returns on college degrees. Higher income students who are most likely to attend benefit least, while those deemed unlikely to attend and obtain a degree due to background characteristics would benefit the most from college. Meaning those most unlikely to attend – may in fact, later benefit the most from a college degree. However, a closer examination into differences of impact based on income and race and/or ethnicity are worth investigation. Relative cost-benefit analyses of higher education returns tends to receive much attention on the policy level, and research findings which demonstrate the

beneficial nature of a college education for those individuals least likely to obtain a college degree mean a potential impact on college access and financial aid policy. So while there is a well-documented relationship between low-income and/or low-SES individuals and the limitations faced in the opportunity structure (Lareau, 2003; Massey, Gross, & Eggers, 1991; Rank, 2004), a college education continues to be seen as mediating these effects and influencing life chances.

While socioeconomic status matters in postsecondary education, most of what is known is concentrated exclusively on the role of financial factors in the understanding and support of low-SES students, but an understanding of finances and financial aid alone are not enough to fully understand the college experiences and impact of the pursuit of social mobility of low-SES students. Historically, students from low-SES families have not performed as well as high-SES students on measures of academic achievement such as grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores, college enrollment, and college completion (Berg, 2010; Hossler et al., 1999; Radford, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). Thus, attention to issues surrounding low-SES students' preparation, access, enrollment, experiences, and success in college seems important.

Income and Achievement

The well-documented income-achievement gap in the U.S. has been widening over the past 50 years (Reardon, 2011; 2013). In an investigation of changes in the income-achievement gap, Reardon (2011) found not only that the achievement gap has grown significantly, but it has outgrown the black-white achievement gap as well. According to Reardon (2013), the black-white achievement gap was "considerably larger than the income-achievement gap in the 1950s and 1960s, but now is considerably smaller than the income-achievement gap as a result of

progress made in reducing racial inequality in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as increasing economic inequality in educational outcomes" (pg. 1). Despite resources and policies enacted to ensure access and equity for low-income students in higher education, little progress has been made in closing this gap – instead it is increasing.

The increase in the income-achievement gap is problematic given the large number of low-income students identified as high achievers early in their educational careers. Research shows that in the U.S. more than 3.4 million K-12 students achieving in the top quartile academically come from families earning less than the median income (Wyner et al., 2007). However, this number significantly decreases throughout primary and secondary school, meaning fewer of these high-achievers persist to postsecondary education.

The disparities in the income-achievement gap continue in college. In their study of high-achieving, low-income students Wyner et al. (2007) revealed the differences in college enrollment and completion patterns between this group and their more affluent high-income, high-achieving peers. Although more than 90 percent of high-achieving high school students attend college in both income halves (98 percent in top income split, and 93 percent in bottom half), there are differences in where they attend. Of those low-income high-achievers who do attend college, only 19 percent are likely to attend the most selective of institutions (compared to 29 percent of high-income, high-achievers). One reason is that these high-achievers from lower-income backgrounds are less likely to apply to these more selective institutions than their higher-income peers (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). This is troubling given the greater gains reported in educational outcomes when attending more selective institutions (Berg, 2010; Harper, 2005; 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011; Hossler et al., 1999; Radford, 2013; Schmertz & Carney, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007; Wyner et al., 2007). Additionally,

59 percent of high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds graduate college in comparison to 77 percent of their higher-income peers. Although high-achieving students appear to fare better than students marked as "underachieving," the important take away is declines in educational attainment by high-achieving students do mirror those of the underachieving students from similarly low-income families.

What this means is that despite the academic ability of students, socioeconomic status still really matters most. One reason this may be is the difficulty in transition to college. Despite the assumption that the most academically prepared students will have a smooth transition to college, the findings of a recent study (Schmertz & Carney, 2013) revealed the opposite. In their study of high-achieving, low-income transfer students, Schmertz and Carney found that even the best-prepared students reported questioning their academic abilities and choices (e.g. major), as well as their sense of belonging academically. If the best-prepared students are reporting these struggles and declines and can begin to question their abilities, then it seems perceptions of ability are malleable and can have a significant impact on academic achievement. That said, if these perceptions of ability are malleable in a negative direction, it seems that it might be possible to also change these perceptions in a positive direction leading to achievement levels previously not believed to be possible for low-SES students previously not identified as high-achievers. Understanding who may influence students' self-concept and beliefs seems important in understanding how certain individuals might influence student achievement.

Given the well-documented educational conditions and challenges experienced by low-SES students the theory or resiliency can help us better understand how these students manage to succeed despite these challenging circumstances. Several studies (Ceja, 2004; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Reis et al., 2005; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000; Wang et al., 1995; Winfield, 1991) have

suggested the usefulness of such a framework in explaining how students are able to negotiate challenges and difficult environments. In the current study, resiliency theory provides an appropriate analytical lens for understanding how high-achieving, low-SES students still manage to achieve despite the negative situations they encounter – and how these students develop resilience and employ strategies that assist in avoiding negative outcomes.

Taken together with resiliency theory, Harper's (2010; 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework is useful in more closely examining what personal, familial, and institutional factors contribute to the development of resiliency and how specifically, these factors enabled them to cope with difficulty and adversity. Both resiliency theory and Harper's framework are useful in understanding the focal population of this dissertation, as gaining insight into the contexts, factors, and supports (i.e., personal, familial, and institutional) that allowed high-achievers to sustain their academic achievement levels throughout college is a central aim of this study.

Research Purpose and Scope

Prior research findings related to low-socioeconomic status students indicate differences in college enrollment and persistence, as well as lower degree attainment rates (Berg, 2010; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2010; Wyner et al., 2007). However, low-SES students are a diverse group of students and these findings do not fully address the success stories of high-achieving students from low-SES backgrounds. Thus, it is critical to understand the ways in which certain low-SES students navigate higher education and ultimately persist through highly-selective institutions marked as top talent, despite the above mentioned and well-documented challenges. Therefore, dissertation qualitatively studies the educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving, low-SES, college seniors attending a highly-selective four-year postsecondary institution – the University of California, Los Angeles. College seniors are the

focal population for the study given they have persisted through college, signaling their ability to achieve. Further, given that early performance may not tell everything needed to know about future achievement (Dweck, 2006), this study seeks to understand not only how students recognized as high-achievers early in their K-12 academic careers maintained their achievement levels, but also how those individuals not considered high-achievers pre-college in a sense became achievers along the way. Accordingly, college seniors who have transferred to highly-selective four-year institutions, as well as those who have attended since freshman year, will both be included in the study to account for the different educational pathways experienced and to understand the differences in the growth of achievement over time.

Research Questions

To further examine the educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving students from low-SES backgrounds, this exploratory study follows an anti-deficit approach (Harper, 2012) guided by the following research questions:

1. What personal, familial, and institutional factors contribute to the educational success of high-achieving, low-SES students?
2. How do these factors function as facilitators of college opportunity despite any challenges that complicate and undermine their achievement?
3. Do the high school and college environments present any particular challenges? And how do these factors assist in successfully navigating these environments?

Significance

Research studies have addressed college access and choice, aspirations, persistence, and attainment for low-SES students. Although there is a widening gap in socioeconomic status and achievement (Reardon, 2011), a critical mass of low-SES students are actually excelling in

highest measures (e.g. GPA, standardized test scores, class rank) (Wyner et al., 2007). The findings from this study could add significantly to the income-achievement gap discourse and add to current theoretical understanding of social class inequities and their translation into higher education, particularly within status group and status transmission theories (Bourdieu, 1977; Weber, 1978). Status group and status transmission theories seek to understand upward and downward mobility following the assumption that elite status groups experience more intergenerational transmission of status and power. The findings of this study, taken together with resilience theory and using an anti-deficit model (Harper, 2012) may change our current emphasis on social capital, cultural capital, and habitus in explaining the continued stratification of existing social structure's (Walpole, 2007) and add to our theoretical understandings of the role of personal, familial, and institutional factors in the pursuit of mobility for lower-income students. Using an anti-deficit approach combined with resilience theory allows for a focus on what works in moving low-income students through the pipeline, instead of relying on existing capital theories that continue to highlight low-income student's deficits.

Given increased participation and degree completion continues to be a national priority, it is necessary to identify innovative practices and policies that ensure greater postsecondary access and success amongst low-SES students. Besides adding to the persistence and achievement literature base, the first aim of this study is to provide new insight to educational practitioners and policymakers in the development of programs that contribute to the success of low-SES students. The second aim is to provide institutions with suggestions as to how to implement programs that will address issues experienced by low-SES students with varying pre-college backgrounds. The findings of this study can help institutions implement more purposeful interventions that have more of an impact on academic outcomes of marginalized students.

Despite achievement levels or ability prior to college, a better understanding of how potential is unearthed or maintained can aid in the design and implementation of programs and interventions that can help more low-SES students in recognizing their own ability. Lastly, few income-achievement gap studies examine the unique relationship between high-achievement and low-SES and this study seeks to make sense of a largely understudied segment of higher education. Thus, a better understanding of the pathways and experiences of high-achieving, low-SES students can improve our knowledge of how to support low-SES students in their educational pursuits.

Definition of Key Terms

This dissertation focuses on low-SES students, nonetheless a review of the literature reveals writing about this topic is difficult given the many constructs and terms used in current research (Walpole, 2007; Terenzini et al., 2001). Income is often used interchangeably with socioeconomic status, and even in some cases social class, given that they are interrelated (Sirin, 2005). Despite socioeconomic status being one of the most widely researched constructs (Sirin, 2005), researchers, policymakers, and practitioners all continue to include and define socioeconomic status differently. One reason is because socioeconomic status is hard to define (Walpole, 2007). In the investigation of low-income, or low-socioeconomic status students, some scholars use income (Paulsen & St. John, 2002), others include wealth, while others rely on income in addition to parental educational attainment levels and occupational status (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Even more complex is defining socioeconomic status to include a combination of variables to capture capital, such as values and lifestyle. Meanwhile, many researchers have also advocated for the inclusion of race when investigating wealth and resources (Conley, 2001; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). How socioeconomic status is operationalized

has an impact on what we actually know about the students we study, as well as what is known about the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement.

Defining and reporting achievement is another complex task, as this is another construct that is operationalized in various ways, each with their own host of concerns in their potential to assess academic ability. Common measures of achievement include class rank or grade point average (GPA), as well as standardized test scores. Given the arguments of bias in using standardized test scores, some researchers include measures of academic rigor such as involvement in honors, Advanced Placement (AP), or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses. In her recent study of the class stratification in where high school valedictorians attend college, Radford (2013) reviewed these choices and determined using class valedictorians as a proxy for achievement was appropriate given their ability to excel over a number of years, "reflecting both a broad and long record of achievement" (pg. 12) versus test scores given their potential of showing inconsistent performance, and class rank due to its dependence on the ability of classmates at the high school.

The following terms will be used in this dissertation study:

Socioeconomic Status[3]: operationalized by a combination of family income, parental education, and parental occupation (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Dennis, Phinney, & Chateco, 2005; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2003). Low-socioeconomic status students include parents with no formal college education (parents did not complete college) and unskilled occupations. Middle-socioeconomic students include parents with little college experience (some college, community college certificates, or associate degree level work) and

[3] Income will be used as the primary measure throughout the dissertation, but socioeconomic status is defined given SES will be used in chapter three, and due to the lack of consensus in defining what SES is. Therefore, this definition of SES is the one that will be used.

skilled occupations. Finally, high-socioeconomic students include at least one parent with a college diploma (four-year institution) and white-collar or professional occupations. Given socioeconomic status will be the primary measure in this dissertation, chapter three outlines a 'self-reported social class measure' (Jackman & Jackman, 1983; Radford, 2013) that is a socioeconomic status measure used as a collective measure (versus using a standalone proxy for income) in the recruitment and data collection of this study.

Academic Achievement: captures the selectivity of the institution in which participants of the study are enrolled and their GPAs at this institution. For this study, this is students attending a highly selective, public, four-year institution – UCLA – with last term grade point averages of 3.0 or above. Given that highly selective four year institutions admit students based on pre-college measures of academic ability such as high school GPA, class rank (based on GPA), standardized test scores, and high school rigor (measured by honors, AP, or IB courses) these measures will also be considered and identified. Nonetheless, while these measures will be considered, last term GPA will be the primary measure of academic achievement in this study. This will be done in an effort to capture both students who have always been identified as high-achieving throughout their educational trajectory, as well as those who may have been identified as low-achievers and became a high-achiever during somewhere during their educational experience, such as in the community college. Capturing the contexts and factors that shaped this is significant, as it allows for understanding the growth of achievement in those students who would not have been considered high-achievers.

Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter provided an introduction to the study, background of the study, statement of the problem, research purpose and questions, significance of the study, and definition of the

terms. Chapter two provides a review of the literature related to low-SES students and their experiences in college, including aspirations, access, persistence, and completion. Additionally, literature pertaining to the income-achievement gap and recent research regarding high-achieving, low-SES students will be included. Theoretical concepts used in this study will also be explored in Chapter two. Chapter three provides the overall research design, describing the qualitative methodology employed, including sampling techniques, and methods of data analysis. Chapter four will present the findings of in-depth interviews and focus groups. Chapter five will summarize the findings across the data and provide a discussion of these findings as well as connections to the theoretical frameworks in this study. Chapter five will also discuss recommendations for educational policy and practice and suggest where future research is needed.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THEORY AND LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the theory and literature related to the educational pathways and experiences of low-socioeconomic status (SES) students in higher education, and the role of personal, familial, and institutional factors in their achievement. This chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section I provide a focused review of the literature on low-income and low-SES students in higher education. In addition, I will address what we know about the relationship between SES and achievement, and possible explanations for the lower achievement levels of low-SES students - such as less academic preparation or lower academic-self concept. In the second section, traditional theoretical approaches surrounding social and cultural capital and the development of capital are presented here to demonstrate how current literature and conversations address the educational experiences and outcomes of low-SES students. Given the shortcomings of using these perspectives, the third section will then introduce the conceptual framework that will be used for this study. This framework will include resilience theory (Reis et al., 2005; Spina, 1997; Wang et al., 1995; Winfield, 1991) and the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (Harper, 2010; 2012). Taken together, these frameworks provide a way to examine the specific personal, familial, and institutional factors that help high-achieving, low-SES students succeed, and in what ways these factors function as facilitators of college opportunity despite the challenges that complicate and undermine success. This chapter will conclude with a synopsis and an identification of the specific gaps in the literature this study will address.

This dissertation study intends to move beyond the deficit perspective that pervades current research about the achievement levels of low-SES students in higher education research, policy, and practice by instead highlighting the personal, familial, and institutional factors that have helped low-income students succeed and achieve at the highest levels—specifically, how these factors aid in the development of resilience that assists in navigating challenging environments. Through this exhaustive review of theory and literature pertaining to low-SES students in higher education and the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement, it is apparent there is an abundance of research about why low-SES students fail—why they fail to enroll in college, do well in college, or complete their degree. While it is important to understand and measure what barriers exist for low-SES students in an effort to design strategies and programs to aid low-SES students, this dissertation intends to instead emphasize how the identified factors have been the facilitators of college opportunity despite the challenges that complicate and undermine low-SES students achievement (Harper, 2012). Taken together, the resilience and anti-deficit achievement framework was used to guide the survey of literature, and the literature and framework, together, informed the study's methodological approach.

Literature Review

A focus on college access, persistence, achievement, and outcomes are the pillars of higher education research, policy, and practice. However, the conversation has yet to be framed around what works for high-achieving, low-SES college students completing degrees at highly-selective colleges and universities. Much of the current conversation is focused around educational disadvantage and underrepresentation, a lack of academic preparation, and the barriers that exist for low-SES students in postsecondary education. Recent focus on the concepts of talent loss and undermatching have received much attention in terms of focusing policy and

practice efforts in sending those highly capable low-SES students to institutions that will foster their success. With research, policy, and practice focusing on these access issues, much still remains unknown about the college experiences that enable high-achieving, low-SES students to successfully navigate their way through higher education.

Empirical Research on Low-Socioeconomics Status Students in Higher Education

In this section, I offer an overview of the literature on low-SES students in higher education. Besides background characteristics of low-SES students, the literature reviewed will provide a profile as it relates to low-SES students and college access, postsecondary enrollment patterns, college experiences, and outcomes. While the barriers of college opportunity are bound to surface through this literature review, the personal, familial, and institutional factors that have been identified as contributing to the success of low-SES students in college will also be included.

Socioeconomic status continues to play a critical role in postsecondary education access and outcomes, especially in the context of the country's current economic recession. Access to and success in higher education has "enormous implications for one's economic prospects in life" (Kahlenberg, 2004, pg. v). However, the national portrait of low-SES students' access to and success in postsecondary education continues to demonstrate inequalities. Low-SES students attend college at lower rates, complete college at even lower rates, and attend less-selective institutions more frequently than their higher-income counterparts (Berg, 2010; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Kahlenberg, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Radford, 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). Unequal participation and persistence in higher education affects students from poor and working-class backgrounds of all racial and ethnic groups at much higher rates than other students. When considering college access alone, U.S. Secretary of education Arne Duncan

acknowledges that college access disparities "are actually worsening" (Carnevale & Rose, 2004), as only approximately one-fifth of high school graduates from families in the bottom quintile of the income distribution actually attend college—which colleges they attend is an issue wrought with its own unique implications (Berg, 2010; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Kahlenberg, 2004). It has been well documented that where one attends college is important to one's ability to succeed in and complete college, as well as the increased economic returns related to graduating from a more selective institution (Berg, 2010; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Bastedo & Jacquette, 2011; Espenshade & Radford, 2009). For low-SES students who do matriculate to college, the majority apply to and enroll in less-selective colleges and universities, which have lower success and graduation rates. According to Carnevale and Rose (2004), only three percent of students at selective colleges and universities come from the bottom socioeconomic quintile (compared to seventy-four percent from the richest socioeconomic quintile). One reason is that students from more affluent families have more social and cultural capital that they dedicate to their pursuit of education, positioning them favorably for admission to selective institutions (Lareau, 2003; McDonough, 1997).

Student demographics. In combination with socioeconomic status, this stratification is also troubling given the overlap between race and socioeconomic status (Berg, 2010; Terenzini et al., 2001). Low-SES students in postsecondary education are overwhelming students of color (Berg, 2010; Solórzano et al., 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001), as there are a disproportionate number of African Americans and Latina/os classified as low-SES (Solórzano et al., 2013). Therefore, race cannot be ignored when talking about income, socioeconomic status, or social class (Horvat, 2001), as race also plays a significant role in defining the social conditions of individuals (Myrdal, 1994). Social and political contexts contribute to the inner dynamics of

race, class, and gender in the United States (Henderson & Tickamyer, 2009). For example, in the United States, "poverty is given a Black and disreputable face" (Henderson & Tickamyer, 2009, pg. 50) and then ignored. Poverty and persistent exposure to poverty is "closely associated with an urban, Black underclass" (Henderson & Tickamyer, 2009, pg. 51) and the public is very reluctant to acknowledge the reinforcement of these ideologies that are tied to income, socioeconomic status, and social class. At the same time, wealthy or rich classes are often associated with White individuals within the dominant discourse (Wilson, 2010). What this means is that disparities are seen in college enrollment levels of African American and Latina/o students, where large declines are seen in two- and four-year college enrollment while whites and Asian American and Pacific Islanders increase in their proportion of enrollment (Solórzano et al., 2013).

Similar to race and ethnicity, other background characteristics have also been identified as high-risk for school failure (Horn & Chen, 1998). Characteristics such as gender, being an immigrant or the child of immigrant parents, being a first-generation college student, coming from a single-parent household, and academic preparation (Berg, 2010; Horn & Chen, 1998) all have the ability to negatively influence college dispositions, persistence, and degree completion rates (Berg, 2010; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). Overall, parents have a significant impact in shaping students' educational outcomes and predispositions toward college (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Kahlenberg, 2004; Lareau, 2003; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Nisbett, 2009; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). However, while the reasons for these disparities in educational outcomes are clear, what is less evident is how students demonstrating these same background characteristics

can be successful. Few studies have been done that take an anti-deficit approach in examining what has worked in an attempt to focus, not on the problems, but on the solutions.

In one such study that took this approach, Horn & Chen (1998) examined the ways in which the student, parent, and peer engagement factors that contributed to at-risk students' success in graduating from high school continued to be important in making the transition into postsecondary education. In this study, the authors determined that parent and peer engagement, as well as participation in college prep and outreach programs increased the odds that these students enrolled in a postsecondary institution, with many enrolling in a four-year college. Low-income students with parents who frequently discussed school-related matters and friends who also planed to enroll in college were more likely to enroll in college themselves. Also increasing the odds of postsecondary enrollment was participation in college prep activities such as collecting information on admissions and financial aid, as well practicing entrance exams. The findings of their study are in direct contrast to the deficit approach typically used, which blames the student for their own lack of success—that if they just work harder, try harder, or want harder, they can succeed. While the sample used in the study was large, and its findings contributed to an asset-based approach (Harper, 2005; 2010; 2012; Solórzano et al., 2013) in understanding positive personal, familial, and institutional factors that worked—what is still missing is a better understanding as to *how* it works, and more specifically *who* and *what* made it work. Additionally, while the Horn and Chen (1998) study adds to our understanding of the conditions necessary in supporting student access to college, additional qualitative investigation into how these conditions may support students differently during college is worthy of further investigation.

Environmental and Social Context. Most research on low-SES students selects students who fall under particular income parameters or who exhibit certain indicators of being from a low-SES background, such as being a first generation college student. While these areas of research are useful in helping to further understand the challenges of low-SES students, few studies have focused on persistently poor college students' experiences and outcomes. Poor would refer to those individuals who come from families where the parents are habitually unemployed, chronically on welfare, or nonskilled workers (Nisbett, 2009). Students who were born into poor families and grew up in impoverished environments carry with them the residual effects of these environments and experiences. While we do not know exactly how much growing up poor contributes to the achievement gap, we know that living in persistent poverty would have a much more damaging effect than just experiencing a poverty spell prior to college. Children exposed to environmental and social factors related to a childhood in a low-income area undoubtedly have more difficulties related to learning and school achievement in later ages (Nisbett, 2009). Little prior research has examined low-SES student achievement using a sample of low-SES students who have lived in persistent low-income conditions throughout childhood to understand their postsecondary achievement and success. This study intends to consider how achievers from these backgrounds manage to overcome such disadvantage.

Despite controversy regarding intelligence (e.g. what it is, how it is measured, the objectivity of intelligence), IQ and achievement tests have a large role in education and employment. While it is still unclear if or how these constructs might change the way students are currently tested, it is worth noting that The College Board even complied with a project on college campuses which supplemented the SAT exam with measures of creativity and practical intelligence (see Sternberg, Wagner, Williams, & Horvath, 1995). Intelligence and IQ are not the

focus of this dissertation—and are beyond the scope of this dissertation, however, given the attention that these constructs receive in terms of educational testing, they deserve a small discussion to demonstrate current discourse.

Historically, arguments about income, socioeconomic status, or social class and intelligence have varied from social class being a consequence of intelligence – the poor are poor because they aren't intelligent and that no amount of money, parenting practices, or class can change this. Other arguments on heredity and mutability have demonstrated that a poor child who grew up in an upper-middle-class family has an IQ of 12-18 points higher on average than a poor child raised in a lower-class family, demonstrating that environmental factors outweigh the genetic ones. In other words, this evidence basically says that being poor has a huge impact on intelligence (Nisbett, 2009). There are several social and environmental factors that influence intelligence, and research shows that some of these factors would be ameliorated if the poor were better off financially (Massey, Gross, & Eggers, 1991; Nisbett, 2009; Rank, 2004).

Being poor is associated with many environmental factors that lower IQ and academic achievement levels, such as differences in nutrition; effects of lead (in the form of pollution and old peeling paint); use of alcohol when pregnant; poorer health—which is an impediment to learning; low birth weight; breast feeding; and medical care—which is much worse for the poor, as individuals from low-SES backgrounds are almost twice as likely to have no medical insurance (Nisbett, 2009). Additionally, access to doctors is more difficult, as doctors are much less available in poor neighborhoods. While there are damaging effects from each of these factors, and they are all fairly common among low-SES individuals—we still don't know exactly how much they contribute. "You can't add them all up and assume they account for a large fraction of IQ differences between low-SES and high-SES individuals" (Nisbett, 2009, pg. 82)—

because these deficits are likely correlated with one another and therefore can't be regarded as additive.

When it comes to school achievement and learning, children from low-SES families move around more frequently than high-SES children, and as a result they experience more stress (Nisbett, 2009). Overall, instability is much more common, often leading to behavioral problems (Horn & Chen, 1998; Nisbett, 2009). Beyond the classroom, the neighborhoods that low-SES children live in have been found to be more stressful (Massey et al., 1991; Rank, 2004; Wilson, 2010), and the homes of low-SES families are more susceptible to turmoil and strife (Nisbett, 2009).

Parenting is also different across social classes—families from low-SES backgrounds prepare their children for different occupational and social roles than families from high-SES backgrounds (Conley, 2004; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2003; Nisbett, 2009). When it comes to parenting choices and discipline, low-SES parents are less likely to be warm and supportive and much more likely to issue harsher punishments. These experiences increase stress in children's lives, and this early emotional trauma has been found to damage the prefrontal cortex—which is directly related to fluid intelligence. According to Nisbett (2009), there are two types of intelligence—fluid and crystallized intelligence. Fluid intelligence involves the ability to solve novel, abstract problems and require little use of the real-world information obtained over a lifetime. Crystallized intelligence is "the store of information that you have about the nature of the world and the learned procedures that help you make inferences about it" (pg. 9). Thus, the higher stress associated with low-SES parenting seems to produce damage to fluid intelligence—which is "particularly important to learning and to school achievement" (pg. 83).

Overall, these facts demonstrate differences in the cognitive culture (Nisbett, 2009)—the parenting practices and contexts (personal and institutional) experienced that make learning more or less likely in home and school more difficult—for low-SES children. Overall, children from low-SES homes have more challenges and problems related to socioeconomic status—poorer health, more disruption due to lack of stability, and "lowered expectations for the rewards of an education" (pg. 85). This "vicious feedback loop" of being raised in a low-SES environment brings lower academic achievement levels which in turn will later lower the value of these individuals in the labor market—which in turn results in continued low-SES (Nisbett, 2009, pg. 85). Again, while intelligence is not the focus of this dissertation, there is a value in understanding the current arguments in why low-SES students fail.

This leaves us with the same question asked by Levine & Nidiffer (1996), "what can be done to improve the odds that poor people face?" (p. 57). While most of the research cited thus far continues to focus on the problems and identified the causes, in order to help eliminate them it is also important to focus on the solutions. By emphasizing the low-SES students that have managed to escape the odds against them (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996) we are instead focusing on what has worked in order to apply this knowledge to help other low-SES students do the same (Harper, 2005; 2010; 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Wyner et al., 2007). While this approach accepts poverty and the conditions set for low-SES students as a continuing reality, it has great potential to shed light on policies and practices which may be replicated and implemented quickly in ways that can enhance college opportunity and success for low-SES students. At the same time, it becomes important to also take a closer look at the achievement gap, as these disparities in postsecondary outcomes form a significant dimension of

this gap. The next section will more closely examine the growing income-achievement gap and the current discourse of possible explanations for this gap.

The Income-Achievement Gap

Historically, low-SES students have not performed as well as high-SES students on measures of academic success such as G.P.A, standardized test scores, high school completion rates, and college enrollment and completion rates (Berg, 2010; Hossler et al., 1999; Radford, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). Countless studies have documented these disparities and have investigated the reasons why they exist in an attempt to reduce the growing income-inequality gap. In the past 50 years, the income-achievement gap has well surpassed the black-white achievement gap (Reardon, 2011). According to Sean Reardon (2011), if we do not reduce this gap in education outcomes, schools will no longer be the greater equalizer they are believed to be in the pursuit of upward mobility.

Academic preparation. Low-SES students are likely to enter college with less preparation and have limited information on the college experience readily available (McDonough, 1997; Radford, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). On average, low-SES students score lower on national standardized exams such as SAT by a margin of 22 to 26 percentile points (Terenzini et al., 2001), and SAT scores remain one of the greatest measures of college preparation levels. Low-SES students also demonstrate lower rates in other achievement measures such as GPA, completion of honors courses and AP/IB exams, and single subject achievement measures (verbal, math, or science achievement). Research regarding the academic preparation of low-SES students entering postsecondary education (Terenzini et al., 2001) shows students from the lowest SES-quartile were less likely to be in the upper two quartiles in all academic ability areas tested, and that these same students

were significantly less likely to bring to college the same level of academic resources known to be related to degree completion. Additionally, reports suggest that low-SES students are much more likely to require remediation than students from higher-SES families (Solórzano et al., 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001).

One reason offered regarding these dipartites includes the rise in income inequality, which has resulted in differential resources available to high-income and low-income families for investment in their children's educational development (Reardon, 2011). The rise in income inequality parallels significant declines in the country's economic growth. This declining economic growth in the U.S. also helps to explain the changes in the U.S. class structure, as disparities between the rich and poor are much more pronounced, but with blurry definitions of the middle class. Jobs that previously provided the middle-class with employment and wages without a college degree are now missing from the equation, making educational degrees even more essential (McMurrer & Sawhill, 1998; Reardon, 2011; Sawhill & Morton, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2013). While these social conditions are often acknowledged, they are commonly considered problems of the poor. This approach in understanding places the blame on the individual and looks for the individual causes and explanations for the circumstances one is in. When thinking about the income-achievement gap using this approach, possible explanations include not only a lack of academic preparation, but also lower levels of academic self-concept, and low-SES students' lack of social and cultural capital - which has been found to significantly benefit student success in college.

Academic self-concept and academic achievement. Achievement level differences have also been explained by the academic self-concept of students. It has been a widely held belief that enhancement of self-concept, or a positive self-concept will lead to positive outcomes

in areas such as academic performance (Robbins et al., 2004). However, research has demonstrated differences in self-concept based on factors such as race and/or ethnicity, gender, and income and/or socioeconomic status (Cuellar, 2014; Hurtado, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Nunez, 2009). Members of minority groups have lower levels of self-concept and higher attrition rates (Cuellar, 2014; Hurtado, 1994; Nunez, 2009). Research points out that individuals in lower social status positions in American society are particularly vulnerable having a to lower academic self-concept (Cuellar, 2014). However, even considering the staggering differences for these groups, academic self-concept generally increases by the end of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Findings such as these maintain the belief that an enhanced self-concept operates as a positive factor that can influence academic achievement.

Self-concept is a multidimensional concept that has been difficult to define, and thus it has been defined differently in research and theory. However, self-concept is generally defined as how an individual thinks of him or herself and is informed by their experience with the environment (Harter, 1983; Robbins et al., 2004). Each individual has an organized set of internal perceptions of self that are also influenced and reinforced by relationships with others (Harter, 1983; Robbins et al., 2004). College students bring with them a set of these perceptions that often influence their ability to adjust to and relate to college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). One of the most frequent investigated areas of self-concept is in the relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement. In fact, Tinto's model (1975) of student departure suggests self-concept as a significant component in a range of attributes that influence performance in college (Fischer, 1994). Non-cognitive variables such as academic self-concept have received a lot of attention in research regarding achievement, success, and persistence in college, as these variables may be just as important to academic success. However, just as there

have been several critiques over the years in the applicability of using models such as Tinto's (1975) in understanding the experiences and persistence of minority students (Braxton, 2000), careful considerations must be used when understanding self-concept and academic achievement of minority groups. Rosenberg (1979) has suggested social and cultural influences that exist between minority groups that influence the development of self-concept. These social and cultural influences also contribute to self-concept variations that influence achievement behaviors (Fischer, 1994).

Similar to the differences in academic-self concept development and outcomes for minority groups, research has also focused on other psychological forces, such as stereotypes, and their influence on academic performance. Given that students from minority backgrounds have demonstrated lower academic self-concept levels that then relate to lower levels of academic achievement, scholars and policymakers continue to investigate whether interventions can be designed to alter and enhance self-concept (Fischer, 1994). This enhancement would be greatly desirable in higher education—as it would lead to enhanced academic performance. Thus, it appears that not only is academic self-concept highly malleable, but also academic achievement. Regardless of background challenges, achievement is flexible and able to change throughout an individual's lifetime. In light of this, it would be important to determine the relationship between the impact of stereotypes and academic self-concept development on achievement.

Stereotypes, self-perceptions, and academic self-concept. Stereotypes or self-perceptions of one's ability have also been shown to impact achievement levels. Much of the previous literature regarding college students, development, and stereotypes has been the work of Claude Steele (1997, 2010). Steele's research on "stereotype threat" has primarily focused on the

influence of stereotypes on identity and academic performance. The prevalence of stereotypes, or the feeling of being judged with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists, and ultimately have a negative impact on their academic performance. This threat can take a cumulative toll, as students are even more likely to under-perform whether they are experiencing the stereotype threat, or even when this threat has been removed (Steele, 1997). Steele further explained how stereotypes about groups can influence intellectual functioning and identity development of an individual by shaping experiences in ways that might frustrate their identification with school, which according to Steele is necessary for academic success (Steele, 1997). What this means is that just the threat alone of a stereotype can distract a student from focusing on identifying with school, and instead shift the student's focus to the stereotype and create concerns of fulfilling the stereotype. Overall, Steele's work emphasizes the importance that stereotypes have in distracting students from their own academic success and identity development because of intense focus in fulfilling stereotypes in experiences where performing tasks are linked to negative stereotypes (Steele, 1997; 2010).

Students who are stereotyped are not only facing the regular stressors of adjusting to college, but they are also dealing with stereotypes and attempting to actively resist them. Findings from research conducted by Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) concluded that overcoming stereotypes can be a burden, and this burden appears to mainly weigh on the shoulders of racial and ethnic minorities. Their research also determined that attempts at 'fighting,' 'challenging,' or 'overcoming' the stereotypes can be an overwhelming task, damaging to self-perceptions, and slowing the identity development process. Additionally, disproving a stereotype in one setting does not always translate to another setting; so disproving a stereotype can feel like a never-

ending task (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Steele, 1997). These internalized negative beliefs influenced how participants saw themselves, their experiences, and even influenced their academic abilities, thus supporting related experimental research on the impact of stereotypes on academic performance (Pittinsky, Shih, & Ambady, 1999; Steele 1997; Steele, 2010).

Even if not ingrained by years of stigma, when a social identity is made more salient, academic performance changes to the direction predicted by the stereotype. According to Steele (1997; 2010), situational factors, such as the difficulty of the task and the belief that this task will measure their ability, and the connection of this task to a negative stereotype, create feelings of inferiority, anxiety, and lowered expectations. In addition, student perceptions of a situation can create this anxiety, which also leads to poor academic performance. Although stereotype threat is not a developmental process, Steele's work affirms the impact that self-perceptions can have on anxiety and performance. Overall, these stereotypes create negative self-perceptions that ultimately affect achievement and performance. Where this does not completely add up is for high-achieving students from low-SES families. Given the large number of high-achieving, low-SES students in the US, it is worth asking how they performed against challenging environmental factors and schooling processes. Possible explanations for the income-achievement gap including lack of academic preparation, lower academic self-concept, and susceptibility to negative stereotypes are all explanations that do not help us understand those high-achieving, low-SES students.

The Role of Resilience. Similar to the investigation on the role of self-concept, another that idea that has been widely explored is the role of resilience in "high-risk" student success. The concept of resilience has been used in educational research in a number of studies on highly successful students of color (Ceja, 2004; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000),

and it has been suggested by these studies to use this concept in understanding how students are able to achieve academically while negotiating challenging social, economic, and cultural forces (Ceja, 2004; Reis et al., 2005; Wang et al., 1995; Winfield, 1991). Most researchers have defined resilience as the likelihood of success despite challenging circumstances and adversities within the environment (Wang et al., 1995). Others have defined the development of resiliency as developing high levels of competency and the ability to demonstrate positive coping patters despite stressful and problematic environments (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000).

The development of resiliency in students has been much focus of current research. One such notable study by Ceja (2004) examined the role of parents in developing educational resiliency in Chicana students' college aspirations. Through interviews with Chicana high school seniors, Ceja examined not only the different ways that parents influence and shape the development of resilience, as well as the development of educational goals and aspirations – but Ceja also focused on the importance of how the participants in the study made meaning of, and understood, their parents' influence. In other words, it isn't just the positive relationship and encouragement from parents that developed resiliency in these students, but instead it is a combination of those factors and how the students interpreted their parents' efforts that led to the development of a strong positive self-concept and resiliency. Continuing along these lines of investigating what has worked for successful, "high-risk" students, it becomes important to review the literature that is available on high-achieving, low-SES students.

High-achieving, low-SES students. Historically, low-SES students have been linked to low achievement, as low-SES students have scored lower than their higher-SES counterparts on national standardized exams, earned lower GPAs, and have entered and completed college at lower rates. However in the U.S. more than 3.4 million K-12 students achieving in the top

quartile academically come from families earning less than the median income, which is a population larger than the individual populations of 21 states (Wyner et al., 2007). Few studies have been done that focus on high-achieving, low-SES students. One of the most cited is Levine and Nidiffer's (1996) qualitative investigation of twenty-four low-income students who gained admission to college—with some gaining admission to elite institutions—similar to the focal population of this study. In essence, these students "beat the odds" against them and Levine and Nidiffer sought to understand and focus on the escape routes these students used to get to college. Participants in this study were not "blocked by the obstacles that have made higher education historically inaccessible to the poor" (pg. 61) as each one found their way to college. While the Levine and Nidiffer study provided a significant contribution in understanding such a heterogeneous group of people—besides being low-income, the participants of their study varied greatly in their background characteristics—what is still left missing is a better understanding of the college contexts and factors that might have this same positive impact as the findings of the Levine and Nidiffer study. The current dissertation study proposes to provide an extension to Levine and Nidiffer's findings by examining qualitative differences in the influence of college on their continued ability to "beat the odds"—in being identified as high-achievers.

Recent studies (Wyner et al., 2007; Harper, 2005; 2010; 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011) have begun to examine what works not only for high-achieving, low-SES students to gain access to college, but also for what helps them successfully transition into and navigate through college. Harper (2012) introduced anti-deficit approaches into studies of achievement of minority students, specifically low-income Black males in higher education (Harper, 2005; 2010; 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011). He argued that the college enrollments, disengagements, underachievement, and low rates of degree completion for black males in higher education were

troubling, but just as troubling is the continued investigation into these issues by educators, researchers, and policymakers—as the results amplify the troubled status of black males while offering few solutions. Harper has continued to argue that in order for minority student success, one must investigate those who have actually been successful. Besides uncovering pre-college socialization and readiness factors, his work has extended beyond access issues and as a result has identified engagement, peer support, strengthening of networks and acquisition of social capital, and responding to negative stereotypes all as factors that contributed to the success of low-income, Black males. Given a lot of what we know about high-achieving, low-SES students has to do with college access potential and pitfalls, Harper's study extends our understandings of achievement and the potential influence the college environment can have on achievement.

A lot of what we know about high-achieving, low-SES students remains focused around pipeline issues in terms of pre-college preparation, socialization, and readiness—with the assumption that once these highly qualified students are admitted into college, they will succeed. However, the most highly researched areas regarding high-achieving, low-SES students have to do with talent loss and undermatching. Talent loss refers to young adults who have the academic ability to continue schooling beyond high school but do not enroll in postsecondary institutions (Jordan & Plank, 2000)—and is mainly concentrated among the poor and minority students. An opposite phenomenon than those qualified not enrolling at all is undermatching, where students enroll at institutions of lower selectivity than they're qualified to attend (Roderick et al., 2008; Hoxby & Avery, 2012). In this case, research has shown that students who undermatch have a lower probability of completing their degree than similarly qualified students who attend more selective institutions (Bowen et al., 2009; Hoxby & Avery, 2012).

The talent loss phenomenon is concentrated among poor and minority students (Jordan & Plank, 2000). Research in this area focuses on gaining a better understanding as to what challenges these highly qualified students are facing that keep them from enrolling in college—and while one of the more obvious explanations for talent loss includes the financial costs of higher education, but this alone falls short of providing a complete explanation. A mixed method study conducted by Jordan and Plank (2000) explores other possible explanations for talent loss amongst students who perform well academically but are placed at risk for academic failure because they are also from low-SES families. The authors' findings suggest that students' lack of social capital can explain, to some extent, the talent loss phenomenon. In the study, social capital was operationalized as the interactions and exchanges between students and significant adults in their schools and families. The authors hypothesize that when these relationships have been forged they can be effective in reducing talent loss because "they allow the knowledge and resources of adults and institutions to benefit adolescents who would not otherwise possess such knowledge and resources. When such relationships have not been established – talent loss can be expected (pg. 85-86)." When preparation levels are high and it is assumed students should enroll, but do not, or they enroll in institutions they are overqualified for and then are unsuccessful—social capital theories are often used then to understand the difficulties and challenges low-SES students face in their pursuit of higher education. Through this lens, low-SES students are often viewed as having a lack of capital, which is necessary for postsecondary success.

Social and Cultural Capital

Social and cultural capital have long been directly linked to academic achievement (Coleman, 1988). Defined as resources embedded in social structures, social capital reflects the ability of individuals to secure benefits through networks and interconnections between

individuals (Coleman, 1988; Walpole, 2007). A related concept, cultural capital includes the attitudes, preferences, and behaviors passed on to children by their parents and invested for social profits (McDonough, 1998). Both social and cultural capital are fundamentally important to educational success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Research has continued to emphasize individual attributes and family background such as generational status, social class, and parent occupation as key determinants of inequity (Lareau, 2003; McDonough, 1998). Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital helps to understand how social class advantages promote mobility, describing both families and schools as mutually influential in educational mobility and individual outcomes. According to Bourdieu, "economic obstacles alone are not sufficient to explain disparities in the educational attainment of children from different social classes," (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, pg. 8). These connections between schools, families, and communities have been found to provide access to capital, or aid in the development and acquisition of capital and highlight the importance of these networks, as the development of social capital has been linked to desirable educational outcomes (McDonough, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Coleman (1988) referred to social networks as an integral part of social capital, as socially marginalized and vulnerable students overwhelmingly lack access to these social networks that provide valuable information to navigate complex college processes.

Issues of college access, college choice and enrollment, as well as transition into college experienced by low-SES students are strongly affected by family influence (Conley, 2004; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2003; Nisbett, 2009), relationships with peers (Berg, 2010; Harper, 2005, 2010, 2012), and institutional forces (Barratt, 2011; Berg, 2010; Harper, 2005; 2010; 2012; Hossler et al., 1999; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; McDonough, 1997). Traditional models of social and cultural capital have focused on the central importance of building capital for low-SES

students, as a lack of social and cultural capital has been cited as one of the many reasons low-SES students fail to succeed in their educational trajectories. Given this, educators and policymakers continue to develop initiatives based on traditional capital theories—intending to provide students who participate with the capital they "lack." Programs such as Upward Bound, CAMP, TRIO, and Talent Search are all examples of well-researched and well-funded federal programs with a central goal of providing low-SES students with the cultural and social capital they would not have accumulated at home, but need, to be successful in college.

In a qualitative study by Coylar (2011), six low-income, first-generation college students in their first year of college were interviewed regarding their participation in a summer bridge program designed to ease their transition into college. Several themes emerged from these students' voices, but most poignant of Coylar's findings was that even a program designed for support and transition can stigmatize a student, ultimately disenfranchising participants despite the goal to support transition into college. The reasons for this is that despite the contributions of Bourdieu's work in describing the forms of capital most useful to be successful – the same concepts by which many bridge programs are built – the fact is these programs are taking a deficit approach in seeking to provide the capital that these students lack. This not only "otherizes" students, but privileges traditional students while reproducing inequalities (Walpole, 2007). Coylar's study provides an opportunity to reconsider the ways in which institutions help to reproduce inequalities—as institutions privilege certain values and behaviors most associated with more affluent students, while excluding and stigmatizing marginalized students. Few studies have shifted the focus from individual student deficits, and away from the changes that low-SES students need to make (Bergerson, 2007) toward what is fostering low-SES student success.

While strides have been made to explore the access and success of low-SES students in general, very few studies have been conducted examining not only capital accumulation but also the psychological impact of upward mobility on low-SES students. Roberts and Rosenwald (2001) conducted a qualitative study to analyze the beginning phases of upward mobility, through the experience of higher education. The beginning phase was considered the transition point during which the low-SES student participants were moving away from their families and peers. A more social-psychological approach in the investigation of upward mobility, the authors found that upward mobility can negatively impact family and social interactions, as well as educational outcomes including achievement and college adjustment. Overall, the low-SES students in this study were similar to low-SES students who aren't considered high-achievers in other studies regarding their adjustment to college and the distance college creates from working-class peers and families. However, the primary difference was that this is one of few studies describing upward mobility via higher education as psychologically more complex and demanding for low-SES students. The importance of considering the ways in which both capital accumulation taken together with social-psychological factors influence low-SES student achievement is critical in order to fully understand the success stories of low-SES students. However, recentering this debate beyond individual student deficits while simultaneously "re-privileging" (Coylar, 2011) traditional students is essential in exploring how low-SES students acquire capital (Harper, 2012).

Key elements of the theories discussed in this section have been the focus of much debate given their attention to individual deficits. It is important to take note that these dominant theories have been criticized for their focus on the deficits of marginalized communities rather than identifying the values and resources cultivated by marginalized communities that influence

persistence and social mobility. These values and resources have been overlooked in traditional notions of social and cultural capital. Yosso (2005) proposed an alternative capital theory, Community Cultural Wealth, that is applicable to marginalized populations such as low-SES students, and students of color. Her theory incorporates ideas from current emerging research that challenge contemporary norms on race in society, and uses a critical race approach (Solórzano, 1998). In essence, this theory views individual capital accumulation as having dominant advantages, and instead Yosso describes six alternate types of capital (aspirational, linguistic, familial, linguistic, navigational, and resistant) that socially vulnerable populations possess and which help aid in their success in institutions such as colleges and universities. Yosso (2005) has proposed that the current understanding of capital is, in fact, that dominant groups (such as Whites, or higher-SES students) are wealthy in capital, while marginalized groups are poor. In other words, institutions such as colleges and universities continue to value only these traditional forms of capital possessed by more privileged students. The implications of this are that if these alternative forms of capital are not recognized despite their ability to help marginalized students succeed. Educators and policymakers are therefore lacking the capacity to promote these forms of capital and instead may jeopardize and stifle them. When working from this theoretical orientation, however, we may be missing an understanding of the psychosocial piece (Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001)—an inclusion of how academic self-concept or a strong belief in self found in the resilience framework play into the achievement and success of high-achieving, low-SES students. In this way, additional research should be approached with an anti-deficit approach, in tandem with resilience theory and research. The intent of this study is to use both anti-deficit and resilience frameworks in understanding high-achieving, low-SES students in highly selective institutions.

Conceptual Framework

College success is a complex and multifaceted process that begins early in a student's educational experience. As evidenced in the literature, exposure to educational disadvantage, insufficient preparation, underrepresentation in educational institutions, academic underperformance, lack of income and capital, academic self-concept, as well as family, community, and peer influence and support, are all factors that begin to influence an individual early in the educational pipeline and impact their odds at college enrollment and success. While access has been a well-researched area for this focal population, little research has investigated what has a significant impact on the continued success of these students during their undergraduate experience. The overarching framework guiding the investigation of the educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving, low-SES students will consist of multiple components.

A critical interpretation of resilience theory (Spina, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000) can help us understand how these high-achieving, low-SES college seniors managed to succeed despite the challenges and barriers documented in this chapter. Resilience theory has been useful in several previous studies (Ceja, 2004; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Reis et al., 2005; Wang et al., 1995; Winfield, 1991) in explaining how "high-risk" students are able to achieve academically while negotiating challenging social, economic, and cultural forces. These investigations are often based on the idea that individuals develop high levels of competency and demonstrate positive coping strategies – despite stressful and problematic environments (Reis et al., 2005; Spina, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000; Wang et al., 1995; Winfield, 1991). The resilience framework, then, has often been used in educational research to understand the phenomenon of

those students who "succeed against all odds," but there has also been criticism of this usage as "romanticizing adversity," by those taking a more critical approach.

The critical resilience lens used for this study follows the critical interpretation of resilience theory, and utilizes an analytical lens that does not follow more conventional frameworks' consideration of resiliency as more individualistic and culturally biased (Spina, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). Spina (1997) cautioned that resiliency is not universal and is not necessarily about the outcome, but instead the response that individuals develop. Therefore, a closer examination into the factors that contribute to resiliency, and how—beyond individual factors alone, is the focus of this study.

In order to do this, an adapted version of Harper's (2005; 2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework was used within a resilience framework in an effort to examine the personal, familial, and institutional factors that have contributed to the educational success of high-achieving, low-SES college students. Harper's model was developed with the intention to understand Black male student success in college, but has also been adapted to examine the success of students of students of color in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Harper, 2010). This study builds upon this model to create an anti-deficit achievement conceptualization for low-SES students with an emphasis in understanding what personal, familial, and institutional factors contribute to the educational success of high-achieving, low-SES students. Using Harper's model within a resilience framework will also help to structure an analysis of how these factors influence the development of resiliency and a strong belief in self (or self-concept). The following sections describe the models and theories used in the framework.

Critical Resilience Theory

Given the challenges experienced by low-SES students, resiliency theory helps us to understand how these students negotiate and manage these challenges despite their circumstances. Resiliency has been considered a set of "inner sources, social competencies, and cultural strategies that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, and thrive… but also to draw from the experiences to enhance subsequent functioning" (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, p. 229). Similarly, Alva (1995) referred to resilient students as those who "sustain high levels of academic motivation and performance, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk for doing poorly… and ultimately dropping out" (p. 289). These definitions suggest the development of resiliency as a belief, competency, or outlook that allows for the enhancement of coping abilities that assist in avoiding negative outcomes.

Despite the contributions of these interpretations of resiliency, there is still too much focus placed on individual attributes, and the level of individual control over these elements. What is still missing is an understanding of resiliency that balances individual agency and the influence of social structures (e.g. schools, neighborhood environments, limited opportunity) outlined in the literature that impacts the development of resiliency and implementation of necessary coping skills. Also missing is the acknowledgement that depending on these socialization factors individuals experience stress and challenge differently. This is where a more critical approach to resiliency, such as Spina's (1997) in which resiliency is seen as "growing out of a complex set of interactions involving an individual (or group), the social context, and the demands, restraints, and opportunities it" (1997, p. 2) is valuable. In this study, this concept allows us to examine a more complex view of resiliency by considering the interaction between individual and environmental conditions.

Critical resilience emerged as a result of the concerns associated with traditional definitions of resilience and the tendency for traditional definitions to place the focus on the individual while also considering resilience as static (Campa, 2010). Therefore, in taking the concepts of resilience, along with Trueba and Bartolome's (1997) concept of "funds of knowledge," in which the focus shifts away from individual characteristics to understanding families and schools – the concept of critical resilience emerged. This approach attempts to focus on the students' existing capital and is underpinned by four tenets: (1) the personal and environmental factors described in the traditional paradigm of resilience; (2) examines the role of power within families, schools, and communities when considering environmental factors; (3) stresses the importance of social, cultural, historic, and economic context; and (4) focuses on the complexity of race, class, gender, and age in understanding how individuals negotiate environments.

Similarities exist between resilience, academic self-concept literature, and even Steele's (1997; 2010) classic work on stereotype thereat and achievement. What is different, however, is the development of resiliency. Not only can the development of resilience be applied in understanding individual students, but it can also be applied in understanding the role of parents, educators, administrators, researchers, and policymakers in the way the abilities and achievement potential of low-SES students are conceptualized. Using an approach such as critical resiliency allows for moving away from any examination of low-SES students as having a self-concept or positive coping skill development deficit, but instead examines the ways that resiliency is malleable and can change—and is a contextually optimal response—ultimately influencing academic achievement and success. Thus, a focus on the response to challenging situations and

what factors influence positive coping strategies seems more important than a focus on a universal resilience outcome.

Harper's Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

Student access, persistence, achievement, and outcomes have been a focus of higher education research for decades. Though much of the current work uses models such as Tinto (1975), Bourdieu (1977), Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003), Braxton (2000), and Astin (1993) in different ways to advance the study of underrepresented students, the applicability of these traditional models to minority populations has been frequently questioned by scholars (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2005; 2010; 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011; Yosso, 2005). In an attempt to provide an anti-deficit view of Black men, Harper expanded upon earlier frameworks and literature by using research from existing theories and conceptual models (social and cultural capital theories; stereotype threat theory; attribution theory; campus ecology theories; self-efficacy theory; critical race theory; college retention theories; and possible selves theory), to develop the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework. This framework emphasizes a series of possible questions for researchers to explore to better understand how students of color persist and successfully navigate their ways through various junctures of the pipeline (2005; 2012). Harper's model is appropriate for this study as it has been adapted and applied to students of color in STEM (Harper, 2010), low-income and working class achievers (Harper & Griffin, 2011), and first generation, low-income high achievers (Villarreal, Cabrera, & Freidrich, 2012).

The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework proposes three different pipeline components: (1) pre-college socialization and readiness; (2) college achievement; and (3) post-college success. Each of these components consists of eight researchable dimensions that have been found to be related to achievement: (1) familial factors; (2) K-12 school forces; (3) out-of-school

college prep resources; (4) classroom experiences; (5) out-of-class engagement; (6) enriching educational experiences; (7) graduate school enrollment; and (8) career readiness. According to Harper, given the importance of peers and faculty to persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), special attention should also be paid to understanding the role of these factors in the experiences of the high-achievers (See Figure 2.1).

<table>
<tr><td>PRE-COLLEGE SOCIALIZATION & READINESS</td><td colspan="2">COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENT</td><td>POST-COLLEGE SUCCESS</td></tr>
<tr><td>Familial Factors</td><td colspan="2">Classroom Experiences</td><td>Graduate School Enrollment</td></tr>
<tr><td>How do family members nurture & sustain low-income students' interest in school?</td><td>What compels one to speak & participate actively in courses?</td><td>Which institutional practices best engage low-income students?</td><td rowspan="2">What happens in college to develop & support low-income students' interest in pursuing degrees beyond the baccalaureate?</td></tr>
<tr><td>How do parents help shape low-income students' college aspirations?</td><td>How do low-income students earn GPAs above 3.0 in majors & institutions in which they are academically underprepared?</td><td>How do low-income students craft productive responses to stereotypes encountered in classrooms?</td></tr>
<tr><td>K-12 School Forces</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="3">PEERS - PERSISTENCE - FACULTY</td><td>Career Readiness</td></tr>
<tr><td>What do teachers & other school agents do to help assist low-income students in getting to college?</td><td>Which experiences do low-income students describe as preparing them to compete successfully for careers in their fields of interest?</td></tr>
<tr><td>How do low-income students negotiate academic achievement alongside peer acceptance?</td><td>How do low-income students describe faculty & other institutional agents as enhancing their career development & readiness?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Out-of-School College Prep Resources</td><td>Out-of-Class Engagement</td><td>Enriching Educational Experiences</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>How do low-income students acquire knowledge about college?</td><td>What compels low-income students to take advantage of campus resources & engagement opportunities?</td><td>How do low-income students cultivate value added relationships with faculty & administrators?</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Which programs & experiences enhance low-income students' college readiness?</td><td>How do achievers foster mutually supportive relationships with their lower-performing peers?</td><td>What do low-income students find appealing about doing research with professors?</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Figure 2.1 Harper's (2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

The first component addresses students' pre-college socialization and readiness, including familial factors, K-12 school forces, and out-of-school college prep resources. This component will play a key role in this study in the form of gaining a better understanding as to how family support, peer interactions, and institutional agents such as teachers and K-12 counselors influenced the development of resiliency and achievement behaviors. The second component, college achievement, includes classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, and enriching educational experiences. This component will play a key role in this study in the form of providing a better understanding as to how low-SES students maintain college achievement levels (GPA of 3.0 or higher) despite any challenges faced.

Understanding the role of peers in this component will be especially important, and determining whether participants develop mutually supportive relationships with peers of similar and different achievement levels will be of interest. Understanding how faculty may have a role in the development of resiliency that supports continued achievement will also be of importance. The final component, post-college success, will be understood in the current study in the way that participants are shaping their future graduate school or career aspirations, and how those aspirations shape their current achievement levels.

Summary of Conceptual Framework

This study draws on relevant elements of critical resilience theory (Spina, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000), and Harper's (2010; 2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework to inform the conceptual framework guiding the examination of high-achieving, low-SES students in a highly-selective, public institution. Critical resilience theory will inform the analysis related to understanding the development of resilience, how participants were able to succeed despite challenges, and how participants successfully navigate challenging educational environments.

While components were used from Harper's model in the development of research questions in the interview protocol, as well as in the structure of the literature reviewed for this chapter, these components also inform the initial analysis of the data and will help in the organization of the findings. Additionally, Harper's personal, familial, and institutional factors provided a more precise examination into resilience beyond just individual factors.

Taken together, the resilience and Anti-Deficit achievement models give structure to understanding which personal, familial, and institutional factors may have influenced resiliency and achievement, and how. Combined with empirical research on high-achieving, low-SES students, the use of this adapted framework to study high-achieving, low-SES students will help to expand research on low-SES student achievement by giving resiliency development a more specific understanding, as well as untangling what characteristics are associated with achievement in higher education.

Chapter Synopsis and Identifying the Gaps

Theories and research on low-SES students in this chapter identify a number of experiences that contribute to the income-achievement gap, as well as possibly explain the inequalities experienced by low-SES students in postsecondary education. However, very few studies examine the experiences of high-achieving, low-SES students in highly selective institutions. As described in this chapter, some studies identified access issues such as talent loss among high-achieving, low-SES students (Jordan & Plank, 2000), or the impact of institutional selection on low-SES students (Bowen et al., 2009; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Terenzini et al., 2001; Solórzano et al., 2013). However, if and how participation in college may have an influence on continued achievement levels of low-SES students is still relatively unknown. Several researchers have identified social and cultural capital as important to continued access

and success of low-SES students (McDonough, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). However, research in this area has been critiqued for taking a deficit approach (Coylar, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Other studies have examined the influence of academic self-concept development (Harter, 1983; Robbins et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) or stereotype threat (Steele 1997; 2010) on achievement and success. Yet empirical investigation into how these concepts taken together with social and cultural capital theories influence achievement is still necessary.

The work of Harper (2010; 2012) with the development of the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework provides a deeper investigation into specific personal, familial, and institutional factors that might contribute to, and help us better understand and explain, the development of resilience. In this study, these frameworks are used to provide an appropriate analytical lens for understanding how the personal, familial, and institutional factors identified by high-achieving, low-SES students function in their educational experiences. The goal is to better understand what contributed to continued success despite the well-documented challenges that low-SES students face in their educational experiences (Berg, 2010; Kahlenberg, 2004; Radford, 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007), and to also better understand how these factors worked, how participants interpreted their challenges, and what they do to navigate new challenges presented in the educational environment.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Few studies have investigated the experiences and trajectories of high-achieving, low-socioeconomic status college students. The common narrative of low-SES students is one marked by disadvantage and deficits, thus this study sought to better understand the success stories of high-achieving students from low-SES backgrounds, and the ways in which certain low-SES students navigate higher education and ultimately persist through highly-selective institutions despite significant challenges. Most research continues to place emphasis on the barriers and individual deficits rather than focusing on the facilitators of college opportunity (Harper, 2005; 2010; 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011). The intent of this study was to explore what personal, familial, and institutional factors contributed to the success of high-achieving, low-SES students and in what ways these factors functioned in their educational experience. Therefore, a qualitative study was appropriate given the central goals and research questions of the study. By using a qualitative design, this study was able to collect rich, thick descriptions of participants' educational pathways and experiences in order to better make sense of the personal, familial, and institutional factors contributing to participants' educational success. Additionally, qualitative methods are useful in uncovering the meaning people assign to their experiences (Creswell, 2007) giving insight into the function of the supports and facilitators of success experienced.

Research Method

Guided by the perspective that the essence of one's experience is best described by participants (Creswell, 2009) and recounting narratives is a central way of making sense of one's experience (Seidman, 2013), this dissertation incorporates both phenomenological and narrative

strategies of inquiry. In-depth, semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2013) with high-achieving, low-SES college seniors were employed to better understand their lived experiences. Using this method also allowed for gaining insight into the personal, familial, and institutional factors that contributed to participants' success. Therefore, this study included a series of two separate one-on-one interviews with each participant, as well as focus groups conducted with a subset of interview participants, in an effort to uncover participants' experiences (Schuman, 1982; Seidman, 2013). This strategy of inquiry was more appropriate than other possible approaches because it allowed for purposely engaging with participants through extensive and prolonged periods of time. This level of engagement contributed to greater opportunities for me as the researcher to develop patterns and relationships of meaning, rather than attempting to explore the topic through one interview and risk losing the thick, rich context of participants' experience (Creswell, 2009; Seidman, 2013).

In recounting their own experiences participants are simultaneously making meaning of these experiences. Guided by social constructivism, this study encouraged participants to provide their own understandings of the world and their experiences. According to Seidman (2013), in order to recount these experiences, participants reflect and select important details of their experience, "giving them order, and thereby making sense of them" (pg. 7). Additionally, the multiple-interview design of this study (Schuman, 1982; Seidman, 2013) allowed for more engagement with the participants and provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on experiences. These reflections come from various points of their educational journeys relying then on more of the participants' social and historical views of their experiences and demonstrating the foundation for social constructivism.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving, low-SES, college seniors attending a highly-selective, four-year postsecondary institution. This study specifically sought to use the resilience framework to better understand how certain personal, familial, and institutional factors functioned in participants' experiences and contributed to their achievement levels. Given that low-SES students have different pathways to the four-year university, college seniors who have transferred to UCLA from community colleges - as well as those who have attended since freshman year, were both included in the study to investigate different educational pathways experienced.

To further examine the educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving students from low-SES backgrounds, this study follows an anti-deficit approach (Harper, 2010; 2012) guided by the following research questions:

1. What personal, familial, and institutional factors contribute to the educational success of high-achieving, low-SES students?
2. How do these factors function as facilitators of college opportunity despite any challenges that complicate and undermine their achievement?
3. Do the high school and college environments present any particular challenges? And how do these factors assist in successfully navigating these environments?

Research Design

Few studies have examined the trajectories and experiences of high-achieving, low-SES students (Schmertz & Carney, 2013; Wyner et al, 2007), therefore current discourse on low-SES students continues to focus on individual deficits and continues to explore the barriers of opportunity and success. Seldom are qualitative studies published describing the institutional factors, such as policies and programs, which enable low-SES students to navigate their way to

and through college successfully – let alone how these function to support student achievement. While quantitative methods can reveal what works, one cannot begin to fully understand and replicate the policies, programs, and services that had the most positive impact on students unless we better collect data on the personal, familial, and institutional factors that left an impact on students' experience (Harper, 2007). A qualitative study will thus encourage the emergence of multiple perspectives and meanings of these experiences.

Institutional Setting

The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) is a highly-selective, four-year institution that was used as the site of data collection in this study. UCLA is a public, four-year research institution in southern California and is included in the list of the top 10 most-selective public institutions by U.S. News & World Report (2012). Speaking to this selectivity, the university reports in their facts and figures "UCLA is the most applied-to university in the nation. For the fall of 2012, 72,000 freshman applications and approximately 20,000 transfer applications were received" (UCLA Profile, 2012). The admit rate for these applicants is approximately 20% for freshman and approximately 26% for transfers. The profile of incoming freshman and transfers further reinforces the achievement levels of the students and selectivity of the institution. For fall 2013, the university reported the average weighted G.P.A.[4] of admitted students was 4.40 for freshmen (4.31 for those who enrolled), and 3.72 for transfer students (3.68 for those who enrolled). Similarly, the average SAT score of incoming freshman was between 1760-2140. When considering transfer students, it is important to note that over 92% of transfer students in fall 2013 transferred from a community college, while the remaining transfer students'

[4] Average weighted G.P.A.s include an extra grade point for all U.C. approved honors courses such as AP, IB, school-based honors, and transferable college courses in which a grade of C or higher is earned. The maximum value possible is 5.00.

starting institutions included other UCs (nearly 4%), other schools in California (approximately 1%), schools in the U.S. but outside of California (nearly 3%), and other non-U.S. schools (less than 1%).

Enrollment at UCLA is more than 40,00 students, with undergraduates comprising approximately 67% of the enrollment. In terms of student composition, women make up the majority of students at UCLA, accounting for 55% of the population (UCLA Profile, 2011). In the university's profile for 2011-2012, the university reported 34% of the population identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 32% identified as White, and 17% as Hispanic (see table 3.1 for full demographics of the research site).

Table 3.1
Demographics of Research Site

	Percent
Gender	
Women	55
Men	45
Race	
African American/Black	3
American Indian/Alaskan Native	<1
Asian/Pacific Islander	34
Hispanic	17
White	32
Unknown	3
International	7

(UCLA Profile, 2011-2012)

Finally, when considering income levels of students and financial aid received, the university boasts on its website that 55% of students receive some sort of financial assistance (UCLA Facts & Figures Webpage). During the 2010-11 academic year, 55% of UCLA undergraduates received financial aid, including student and parent loans. In fall 2010, approximately 52% of undergraduates received need-based scholarships or grants, and 36% of

undergraduates received Pell Grants. Students qualify for this type of aid based on their families' income. Given this, the number of Pell Grant recipients in an institution has been used as an indicator of the percentage of low-SES students served by the institution. Finally, this site was also selected given the researcher's ability to gain access to the site and participants, and establish rapport based on the shared experience of attending the same institution.

Purposeful Sampling

This study utilized purposeful sampling techniques (Seidman, 2013; Patton, 2002) to identify 21 high-achieving, low-SES college seniors attending UCLA. Purposeful sampling allows for the researcher to select individuals because they purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and the central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007). Thus, I utilized this technique as a way to purposefully select participants who are considered "experts" in being a high-achieving, low-SES student throughout their educational trajectories. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to establish predetermined sampling parameters (Merriam, 2009) and select information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2002). For the purposes of this study, these parameters include identification as: (1) a senior beginning fall 2014 quarter; (2) a high-achiever as determined by last term grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or above; and to determine low-SES, (3) participants also indicated receiving financial aid (Pell-grant eligible) or fellowships ($0 parental contribution required), and/or reporting a combined family income of under $49,999, which is the income threshold used in federal financial aid calculations to determine the exclusion of assets in the expected family contribution calculation (IFAP, 2014-2015). Finally, participants also indicated being: (4) a first-generation college student (parent not receiving U.S. four-year college/university degree).

While G.P.A., first-generation status, financial aid eligibility and/or household income were the primary parameters to determine eligibility to participate in interviews; a central goal of the study was to also consider participants who lived in low-SES circumstances throughout their educational trajectories. Therefore, once participants met the purposeful sampling requirements, an examination of income over childhood was also considered. In this effort to ensure a low-SES habitus throughout childhood, students were also asked their family's social class during childhood and high school (e.g. lower-class, working-class, middle-class, upper-middle class, and upper-class) and participants were selected if their responses were middle class or below (see table 3.2 for required responses to recruitment survey and Appendix A for recruitment survey).

Table 3.2
Required Responses to Recruitment Survey

Question	Response
Stem Questions	
1. Class Year	A
2. GPA	3.0+
3. Financial Aid/Fellowships	YES/YES
4. Parent's College	NO (U.S.)
5. Household Income	A or B
Class Habitus Questions	
7. Social Class – Childhood	A, B, or C
8. Social Class – High School	A, B, or C

Using Patton's (2002) suggestions for purposeful sampling, I also employed maximum variation sampling in an attempt to ensure sample variation when taking into account participants' race, gender, and admit status (freshman and transfer). Maximum variation sampling aims at capturing and describing variation in small sample by describing both the patterns that emerge from the variation and by also capturing the shared experiences of the phenomena (Patton, 2002) – the central goal is to include a wide range of extremes in an attempt to be a representative of the diversity of the setting as possible, given a random sample cannot be drawn. Using the maximum variation sampling technique yields two kinds of findings: "(1) high-quality, detailed

descriptions of each case, which are useful for documenting uniqueness, and (2) important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive out of heterogeneity" (Patton, pg. 235). In order to maximize this sample variation, the recruitment survey also included questions regarding racial and/or ethnic identification, gender, and UCLA admission status (freshman versus transfer). Using this information I was able to purposively select participants who varied along all three of those dimensions, best representing the population of students at UCLA. Again, the characteristics that remained static – and that were the criteria for participation - for all participants were being low-SES and identifying as high-achievers as a result of their current GPA.

Approximately 20-30 participants were initially targeted for the study, as Seidman (2013) stated this to be an ideal sample size for an in-depth phenomenological design; however, data saturation was reached with a final sample of 21 participants. There were two criteria that I employed in order to determine if this was achieved. In the first, sufficiency, (Seidman, 2013) I determined if enough participants were included in the study to reflect the range of participants that make up the population so that other high-achieving, low-SES students outside of my sample can read the results and potentially feel connected to what they read. The second, saturation of information, was determined at the point in the study where I begin to hear the same information reported and was no longer hearing anything new from participants. This was easy to monitor given I was the sole interviewer and was reviewing the data alone.

However, given that phenomenology guides this study, it is important to note that in-depth interviewing of participants over two time points, as well as a subset of participants in focus groups, will result in thick, rich data of "a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions [giving] enormous power to the stories of a relatively few

participants" (Seidman, 2013, pg. 59). So while my initial goal was 20-30 participants total, at the point of 21 participants I recognized that I was not learning anything new and that continuing the interviewing process would have been just laborious rather than informative. In addition, it was not necessary to recruit and interview additional students beyond my saturation point in order to prepare for possible attrition of participants, as all students maintained their participation in the study.

Recruitment Procedures

Recruitment of participants occurred through recruitment e-mails sent to various listservs associated with student programs and organizations. Student Affairs staff members who have a working relationship with the researcher made announcements and sent e-mail blasts to students who participate in their programs. Additionally, students were recruited through the counseling offices of UCLA undergraduates, as I held a part-time appointment in the undergraduate counseling office of UCLA's College of Letters & Science. One such role I fulfilled in this position was to serve as a counselor to a program for high-achieving, low-SES students interested in the sciences upon entry to UCLA. Given my relationship to this program, I was also able to request the program coordinator to send e-mails to students who have participated in the program. All word-of-mouth and e-mail recruitment included my contact information for interested participants to contact me for details on the study. Recruitment efforts were as broad as possible as to not only focus on programs or activities designed for the focal population. By selecting participants who are outside of specific club and centers focused on serving low-SES students (e.g. EOP) or high-achieving students (e.g. college honors program), I was checking against drawing easy conclusions from my research (Seidman, 2013).

Initial recruitment included potential participants' completing a brief survey in order to determine if participants are eligible to continue in the study (see Appendix A for the recruitment survey). Participants for the study were then recruited during the last term of their junior year (spring quarter, 2014) in an effort to determine eligibility for participation in the study, as well as begin collecting basic background information on participants to create profiles for each participant that will aid in data collection and analysis. Given the number of interviews that needed to be conducted, determining eligibility through completion of the background information survey and beginning to meet with participants to complete their first interview in the summer between their junior and senior year did not compromise the purpose of the study but instead aided in allowing the researcher to collect all of the interviews necessary in the proposed year-long timeframe.

Identification of low-SES students. In order to identify low-SES students for this study, a self-reported socioeconomic status measure was used as a proxy measure to determine low-SES (see Jackman & Jackman, 1983; Radford, 2013 for similar measures). This measure was used given the challenges with identification of low-SES students. First, using parents' income alone is not ideal because this measure would rely on students self-reporting their parents' income and students may not be able to accurately know their parents' income (see Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2003; Radford, 2013). Second, using only students' eligibility for financial aid programs by using a measure such as Pell Grant eligibility may be more helpful, but given limits on federal aid eligibility for undocumented students, I would have potentially lost a good subset of students who have been cited to be high-achieving students (Perez, & Cortes, 2011). Finally, given this study aims to understand the educational trajectories and experiences of high-achieving, low-SES students, it is also important to identify students who have been

considered low-SES throughout their educational trajectory. Given the current economic crisis and number of individuals who might experience a poverty spell, I did not want to risk potentially including individuals in the study who may have had a more affluent K-12 experience and more recently fell into a lower-income level.

Given the challenges discussed, the self-reported SES measure will include a combination of these factors (income, financial aid status, and parental education), and was used to identify participants for the study. In order to be eligible to participate in interviews and focus groups, potential participants indicated on the recruitment survey (Appendix A) that they were receiving either the federal Pell-grant, or other fellowship programs that required zero parental contribution, and/or reported a combined family income of under $49,999, which is the income threshold used in federal financial aid calculations to determine the exclusion of assets in the expected family contribution calculation (IFAP, 2014-2015). Additionally, participants also had to indicate on the recruitment survey that they were a first-generation college student.

In an effort to ensure low-SES habitus during childhood, the recruitment survey also included the following central question asked over three time periods: "How would you describe your family's social class or socioeconomic status during your [*elementary school experience, senior year in high school, and now*]? Please pick one of the answers below: (1) Lower Class; (2) Working Class; (3) Middle Class; (4) Upper-Middle Class; and (5) Upper Class. This question has been used in previous research (Jackman & Jackman, 1983; Radford, 2013) as a self-reported social class measure in an effort to classify students into income groups. In previous studies using these proxy measures, the responses to these questions were compared to responses about annual household income, college generation status, parents' occupation, and highest level of

parents' education in an effort analyze the relationship between the various social class indicators and the group classifications.

In her study of high school valedictorians and how social class shapes college going, Radford (2013) used the same question (but only in asking about family's class or SES during their senior year of high school) and examined the relationship between the SES category chosen and answers reported in the other SES classifications. Radford's study demonstrated excellent correspondence between the measures, with "ninety-five percent of all low-SES valedictorians indicating having one or more of these characteristics: no parent with bachelor's degree or more, annual household income of less than $50,000, or family assets less than $50,000" (pg. 169). Additionally, following Jackman and Jackman's (1983) recommendation of using the five social class categories to allow for ease in response to the question, Radford's study also found that respondent's perceptions of their class were "well grounded in their family's actual socioeconomic standing, with education, occupation, and income the most influential" (pg. 245). Suggesting that the social class reported by students using this measure is a good measure of their actual socioeconomic background. Similar to these studies, the stem question used in this study, (How would you describe your family's social class or socioeconomic status during your [*elementary school experience, senior year in high school, and now*]?) was also a good measure of actual socioeconomic background to ensure low-SES habitus throughout childhood until college.

Identification of high-achieving students. Similar to the challenges in identifying low-SES students, there are several issues with using measures related to achievement, as achievement is operationalized in diverse ways. Common measures, such as class rank, GPA, standardized test scores, involvement in honors courses, and completion of AP or IB courses,

each generate their own concerns in their potential to measure academic ability as discussed in chapter one of this study. Given these challenges, I used last term (quarter) GPA over 3.0 in order to recruit for my sample. Given that GPA presents its own set of challenges, as GPAs could differ based on major and other factors such as starting as a freshman or having a transfer GPA, this is why last term rather than cumulative was used as the recruitment measure. Additional questions regarding academic achievement were included on the full background information survey that was administered to students qualified to participate, as well as questions in both the interviews and focus groups regarding background achievement. These additional measures determined if the last term GPA was a one-time only case, or if the participant had demonstrated growing achievement levels in college, or if the participant had been an achiever throughout their educational experience (see Appendix B for background information survey). Questions on the survey and in the interviews asked about cumulative college GPA, any honors received in college, AP and IB courses completed, GPA and honors involvement at the community college (if transfer student), participation in gifted and talented programs in K-12, and any other previous markers of achievement.

Study Sample

Overall, 48 students completed the survey and 37 students were eligible using the purposeful sampling criteria of G.P.A. and SES-measure. Next, in using the maximum variation sampling technique, a total of 21 students were selected to participate in the study (see Table 3.3 for sample). Participants identified in the following groups: African American or Black (2), Asian or Pacific Islander (5), Latina/o (10), Other (1), and white (3). Sixteen of the participants were female and five identified as male. While participants reported cumulative GPAs between 3.0 - 4.0, on average participants reported a 3.4 cumulative GPA. Eleven participants were

admitted to the university as freshman, while 10 transferred from local community colleges. All participants reported receiving some sort of full financial support (i.e. full federal and state financial aid, full funding in the form of fellowships or scholarships, or full tuition, fees, books, and housing in the form of participation in ROTC programs).

Table 3.3
Interview Sample

Name	Gender	Race	Admission	Major	Cumulative GPA
Alejandra	Female	Latina	Freshman	Economics & Spanish (Double)	3.2
Alicia Mae	Female	Latina	Transfer	Chicana/o Studies	4.0
Alma	Female	Latina	Freshman	Sociology	3.2
Angel	Male	Latino	Freshman	Chicana/o Studies & English (Double)	3.3
Ashley	Female	white	Freshman	Atmospheric, Oceanic, & Environmental Science	3.7
Avi	Male	Latino	Transfer	Applied Linguistics	3.3
Cody	Male	white	Freshman	Geology	3.0
Danielle	Female	Latina	Freshman	Physiological Sciences	3.7
Emma	Female	Asian American	Transfer	Mathematics for Teaching	3.0
Irene	Female	Asian American	Transfer	Spanish	3.6
Kelly	Female	Asian American	Freshman	Psychology	3.4
Liz	Female	Latina	Freshman	Political Science	3.3
Los	Male	Latino	Transfer	History	3.6
Luna	Female	Black	Transfer	English	3.3
Marvin	Male	Latino	Transfer	Sociology	3.7
Michelle	Female	Latina	Freshman	Psychology	3.4
Mila	Female	white	Transfer	Psychology	3.9
Monica	Female	Other	Freshman	Molecular, Cell, & Developmental Biology	3.7
MP	Female	Asian American	Freshman	Chicana/o Studies	3.0
Rose	Female	Asian American	Transfer	Sociology	3.1
Ryan	Female	Black	Transfer	English & Gender Studies (Double)	3.6

In terms of family's current socioeconomic status, the majority of participants reported working class (9), while others reported lower-class (7), or middle-class (5). While somewhat

consistent with current family income reported, there were discrepancies, such as a student reporting being working class while also reporting family income less than $24,999 and a household size of 11. However, both consistencies and discrepancies were discussed in detail during interviews and had much more to do with how students saw upward social mobility from childhood SES to college (e.g. lower-class during childhood, but moved to working or middle during college due to self or sibling college enrollment and/or completion).

Data Collection and Management

The data collected for this study were gathered over the course of one academic year (3 quarters), beginning in spring 2014 through the following winter 2015 quarter. Following the recruitment survey, for those students who were eligible and invited to participate, data collection included a biographical information survey (Appendix B – background information survey), using Qualtrics, a web-based survey program. Additionally, a series of two separate one-on-one interviews with each participant (see Appendix C for Interview Protocol) were conducted, and all participants were invited to a series of focus groups. The survey data taken together with the analyzed interview data were discussed in these focus groups to determine if the general themes connected to the participants' lived experiences and their interpretations of these experiences.

The interviews were a combination of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and life history interviewing, drawing on the assumptions of phenomenology with the goal of having the participants reconstruct their educational experiences in an effort to better understand the supports contributing to their academic success (Seidman, 2013). Given that most research on low-SES students focuses on low-achievement levels, lack of academic preparation, and low persistence and completion rates (e.g., Hossler et al., 1999; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole,

2007), I was most interested in those low-SES students who have persisted through college and are recognized as the high-achievers in a highly-selective four-year institution. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the nature of these students' experiences with the hopes of unraveling the factors that have contributed to their endurance and success in college, with a better understanding of how these factors functioned in their success. What this meant was a main focus of these interviews was to gain a deep understanding of entire educational experiences to figure out how for those achievers identified early in their academic experiences remained achievers, what might have developed those labeled early as low-achievers, what specifically contributed to their later academic success, and how. Given this task, multiple interviews with each participant was critical, given that only conducting one cross-sectional interview with each participant would not have allowed for gathering rich, thick descriptions of these experiences and the context of their lives. According to Patton (2002), "people's lives and experiences become more meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them. Without context, there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of their experience" (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2013). Therefore, the two-interview approach, followed by focus groups, allowed for both participants and researcher to draw out their experiences and place them in context (Schuman, 1982; Seidman, 2013).

In the two-interview approach, primarily open-ended questions were used with the central goal of exploring participants' reconstructions of their experience of being a high-achieving, low-SES student at a highly-selective, four-year institution. In exploring the issue of SES and achievement, I was able to examine the experiences of participants and the meaning that this experience has had for them. In the first interview, the primary goal was to build rapport and establish context, or build their life history. The second interview allow for participants to

reconstruct the details of their contemporary experience, which in this case was their college experience so far. Following these interviews, participants were invited to participate in focus groups, which encouraged participants to reflect on the meaning that this experience holds for them, and to discuss the themes that had emerged from the analysis of the first two interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60-75 minutes, following Seidman's (2013) suggestion on the importance of the length of interviews, as well as spacing between interviews in order to build the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. This also realistically allowed for enough time to collect the rich data needed to understand life experiences and histories while simultaneously making meaning of said experiences. Each of these interviews will be described in this section in further detail.

Interview One: Focused Life and Educational Histories

This first interview took place during finals week of spring 2014, or summer 2014 and was the end of the junior year for participants. By identifying participants at the end of their junior year, this allowed for continued in-depth collection throughout their senior year. Prior to the first interview, a biographical information survey was collected using Qualtrics, a web-based survey (Appendix B). This survey collected basic demographic information on participants such as high school attended, number of honors courses taken before college (e.g. AP, IB), previous institutions attended, and G.P.A. information. This survey was used as a means to keep basic demographic information on participants and serve as a guide when participants discussed different educational contexts in interviews. This survey included questions regarding the self-reported SES measure in an effort to keep academic and income information together. This survey data was later paired with interview transcripts for each participant, as well as field notes and participant profiles created by the researcher.

In the first interview, the goal was to have the participants put their experiences in context (Seidman, 2013) by asking as much as possible about participants lives up until they came to college, going as far back as possible within the 75 minute time limit. Participants were asked to reconstruct early experiences in school, with friends, their families, and in their communities. The focus was mainly past experiences in school, and with school related relationships and contexts (e.g. tutoring, coaches, college prep activities, etc.) before college in order to gain a better understanding of participants' entire educational trajectory up to how they came to UCLA.

Interview Two: Details of the College Experience

The second interview concentrated on reconstructing the details of participants' experiences in college. For some participants, this included recounting experiences at different colleges and universities (e.g. community colleges), while for others UCLA was the main focus of the entire interview (e.g. freshman admits). Participants were asked to reconstruct details in context by also explaining relationships in college with faculty, friends, family, mentors, counselors, or other important relationships identified. Having participants describe any challenges experienced, as well as accomplishments was also a focus of this interview. Finally, participants were also asked to walk the interviewer through a day of their experience at UCLA. What this meant is that participants described in detail the campus contexts they experienced, what they engaged in, how they studied, and with whom they've interacted. By asking participants this line of questioning, I was able to identify contexts and experiences common across participants in an order to better understand the nature of specific college contexts high-achievers access, and how those contexts influence continued achievement. According to Seidman (2013), changing the line of questioning in ways that ask participants to reflect or

recount specifics may better elicit details regarding the conditions specifically necessary in college to ensure success that otherwise could have been overlooked.

Focus Groups: Reflection on the Meaning

The purpose of the focus group interviews was to ask participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience and gain feedback on the themes that had emerged from the previously collected data. Given what the participant has said in interviews one and two, what meaning did they make of their achievement levels in college? And how did their experience in school make sense to them now? Questioning in the focus groups also took a future orientation (Seidman, 2013) in the way that participants were asked where they see themselves going in the future given what they have reconstructed in each of the interviews.

Allowing participants to make sense of their experiences and everything they have shared in each of the interviews allowed for a better understanding of the factors that have interacted in participants lives to bring them to their present experience (Seidman, 2013). Through the two-interview and focus group interview series, participants also looked at their lives in detail and how a combination of the personal, familial, and institutional factors in their lives has contributed to their achievement levels. Thus, this design not only allowed for me to analyze responses from participants and between participants in an attempt to uncover these factors, but also allowed for participants to answer these questions themselves.

Focus groups not only were used in an attempt to provide additional data on how participants interpreted and made meaning of their experiences – but in the case of this study, focus groups were used as a supplementary source of data, as the study primarily relied on background information survey and one-on-one interview data. For the purposes of this study, the design included the focus group interviews as a follow up to the individual interviews to aid

in understanding how participants interpreted my analysis of the data, and to see if group interaction surrounding questions about SES and the college experience might illicit different responses not found in the one-on-one interviews. Thus, focus groups also served as an additional source of data, helping to generate different information than gathered from individual interviews (Bazeley, 2013). By conducting focus groups as a follow-up to the individual interviews, this allowed for me to explore issues that came up during the analysis and to confirm themes that have emerged.

Patton (2002), Morgan (1997), and most recently, Bazeley (2013) make an argument for combining both individual interviewing and focus groups as a way to "explore the most effective uses for each method" (Morgan, 1997, pg. 22). By using both as complementary techniques, I was able to strengthen the data collected in the study in both data collection, and as a basis for triangulation in the analysis of the data.

All interview participants were invited to participate in the focus groups, and a total of three focus groups were held in winter 2015 quarter. Given schedules of participants, a total of 12 participants were able to complete a focus group interview. This was sufficient, as this was more than half of the entire study sample (Patton, 2002; Morgan, 1997). The participants able to complete a focus group interview also varied in gender, racial and/or ethnic identification, and UCLA admission status, and thus were representative of the larger study sample (Table 3.4).

A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) was used as a guide during the focus groups, and questions were guided by the conceptual frameworks of the study, Seidman's (2013) suggestions for phenomenological interviewing, as well as the analysis of the first two interviews. Similar to the individual interviews, the focus groups allowed for the collection of thick, rich data, but focus groups were also concluded following the third round given that no new findings

or themes were emerging from the data. Focus groups were also audio-recorded, and participants maintained their pseudonyms during this time.

Table 3.4
Focus Group Sample

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Admission	Major
Alma	Female	Latina	Freshman	Sociology
Angel	Male	Latino	Freshman	Chicana/o Studies & English (Double)
Ashley	Female	White	Freshman	Atmospheric, Oceanic, & Environmental Science
Avi	Male	Latino	Transfer	Applied Linguistics
Cody	Male	White	Freshman	Geology
Irene	Female	Asian American	Transfer	Spanish
Los	Male	Latino	Transfer	History
Marvin	Male	Latino	Transfer	Sociology
Monica	Female	Other	Freshman	MCDB (Bio)
MP	Female	Asian American	Freshman	Chicana/o Studies
Rose	Female	Asian American	Transfer	Sociology
Ryan	Female	Black	Transfer	English & Gender Studies (Double)

Considerations in Continued Participation

Given the intensive nature of this phenomenological research study and the time commitment associated with participation in each of the three interviews, students were offered incentives. A tiered incentive system was used so that participants will receive a gift card at each of the one-on-one and focus group interviews, in hopes of encouraging participation in all interviews. In interviews one and two, participants received a $10 gift card each meeting. In the focus group interview, participants received a $15 gift card. This incentive structure was tiered to

encourage full participation and to be respectful of students' time and participation in the research study.

Data Management

Organizing the research process and the materials that were generated from in-depth interviewing of 21 participants (resulting in 42 individual interviews, and three focus group transcripts total), can be a challenge and is stressed as one of the important components of data collection and analysis. Therefore, as the sole researcher on this project, I employed data management strategies recommended by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2013), Seidman (2013), and Patton (2002) in the ways that I collected, organized, and managed all data for the study.

All data was collected and stored by one researcher, which is helpful in the organization of information collected by multiple data sources. In the case of this study, these data sources included recruitment surveys, biographical information surveys, transcribed interviews (two for each participant), transcribed focus group interviews (three total), audiotapes, and researcher field notes. The biographical information surveys were collected using the Qualtrics program, a web-based survey tool. All interviews were audio recorded using a digital software program and interviews were then uploaded to the researcher's password protected, encrypted data storage system. All digital interviews were stored by participant pseudonym. Upon completion of the first set of 10 interviews, I transcribed these interviews verbatim. These transcribed interviews were saved by pseudonyms to the researcher's password protected, encrypted data storage system. The participant key was kept in a separate location that only the researcher had access to.

Given the large number of interviews that took place (42 individual interviews total), approximately 50% of these interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service. These digital files were sent to the transcription service over a password protected, encrypted

web site. Once transcripts were returned, all transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by the researcher, which allowed both for review of the audio files, and time to make additional notes about these interviews. These digital files and transcriptions were also stored by pseudonym in the same data storage system. This same system was utilized for the focus group interviews and transcription.

In addition to researcher notes, a digital journal was kept during the data collection and analysis process in order to keep track of decisions made during the process – such as reaching saturation and ending interviews – and aided in the management of a large qualitative data set. All files were then uploaded to HyperRESEARCH 3.7.2, an online qualitative data analysis software program that is compatible with Qualtrics. The analysis of data will be discussed further in the following section.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis were somewhat of a simultaneous process (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009), as the two-part interviews, and focus group interviews, took place over the course of one-year. Verbatim transcription began for interviews immediately, as to not become overwhelmed with the large amount of data that needs transcription, and to aid in determining if any changes need to be made in the protocol. Analysis occurred within each interview in the two-part set, as well as across all interviews.

Data analysis was based around three stages of coding (open, selective, axial) in order to allow research findings to emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The initial stage of analysis involved detailed examination of each transcript (line-by-line), followed by revisiting the interviews to identify open codes. Next, selective coding was used in order to create broader categories of codes relevant to the conceptual framework. This included the resilience

framework and the anti-deficit framework (Harper, 2012) outlined in chapter two. Finally, axial coding consisted of grouping the codes into relevant themes. Through this analysis, different themes and rich descriptions emerged (Creswell, 2009).

The development of this coding scheme was the first step in data analysis (Patton, 2002). In order to develop the coding scheme, I reviewed verbatim transcripts line-by-line. As previously mentioned, the researcher transcribed the first 10 interviews, while the remaining interviews will be split so that at least 50% were transcribed by a professional service. However, all professionally transcribed interviews were reviewed for accuracy.

During line-by-line review, emergent themes were identified, categorized, labeled, and classified as primary patterns in the data. The coding was emergent in the sense that it emerges from the data rather than having a theory placed on the data. A codebook was developed from: (a) the initial themes that emerged from line-by-line review of the transcripts, (b) central themes from the literature and conceptual framework, and (c) the standardized questions in the interview protocol (Patton, 2002). Approximately ten percent of the first interviews were hand coded using this codebook to determine if the codes could accurately be applied to the passages in the data, or if additional categories needed to be added for when passages do not fit well in the available categories. Additionally, in the development of these codes and categories I performed analysis for convergence – or the extent to which things fit well together – in the coding and classifying of the data (Guba, 1978), as well as examining the divergence – or the exhaustion of patterns or saturation of categories – which also included the identification and examination of deviant cases (Guba, 1978).

This preliminary coding scheme was tested with a colleague graduate student on approximately 10% of the interview transcripts. This also helped in testing the accuracy of the

codebook, and will aided in refining the codebook. Discrepancies found in the coding divergence process (Guba, 1978), as well as the peer-coding process, was discussed to determine if further refinement of the codebook was necessary. However, the peer-coding process resulted in the colleague not finding any significant themes that were not already included in the coding scheme. The final coding scheme was then applied to all interviews in interview wave one. This process of developing the coding scheme was revisited after each interview wave to determine if additional codes needed to be added or refined. Although the final codebook generated from the first set of interviews was applied to the following interviews, the same process was used to test for the validity of coding schema. This was necessary given the goal of each interview is different and the questions asked and themes that emerged from each interview could call for different coding schemes.

The final coding scheme was first applied by hand and then re-applied at a different day and time using qualitative data analysis software. The coding done using the software was initially done without using the hand-coded notes as a way to check intracoder reliability and ensure that I was consistent with coding over time. In this reliability check the goal was to gain over 80% consistency, which is required for rigorous analysis (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002), and this was achieved.

In addition, data analysis was aided with the use of HyperRESEARCH 3.7.2, a qualitative data analysis program that has the ability to code and retrieve data, analyze text, audio, and video data – making it ideal for analyzing qualitative research. HyperRESEARCH's capabilities also include the ability to import from Qualtrics, which was used for collecting the participant surveys. Additionally, HyperRESEARCH 3.7.2, allowed for me to build theories and test them against the codes I had applied to the data. In other words, the software allowed for me

to test theories I had about the themes in my data by letting me create a model of the relationships in my data and testing the validity. Using this function allowed for me to determine if the data supports any inferences and interpretations I had about the data. This was done by creating theory "rules" consisting of both antecedents (the "if" statements, or assumptions to check for), and consequents ("then" statements, or actions to take if the antecedent is true). The software then checks to see if this theory "rule" is true against the data, and if found to be true, this can then be added as a theme code. These codes are based on either a presence or absence of certain codes in the data and must be configured by the researcher.

Rigor and Validity

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study depends on the credibility of the researcher, and qualitative studies must provide enough detail to show that the conclusions make sense as "the applied nature of most social science inquiry… makes it imperative that researchers and others have confidence in the conduct of the investigation and in the results of any particular study" (Merriam, 2009, pg. 210). This section will discuss the efforts that were made to ensure the validity and reliability of the data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Following the suggestions by Merriam (2009), Creswell (2007; 2009), and Patton (2002), efforts were made to improve the internal validity by attempting to triangulate interview data, survey data, and researcher field notes. Additionally, by collecting surveys, completing two interviews with each participant, conducting follow-up focus groups, and keeping researcher field notes, I was able to collect rich descriptions of the research settings and participants. These field notes also served as an audit trail that show the steps taken. Additionally, through the two-interview design of this study, and follow-up focus group interviews, I was able to meet with participants multiple times and could solicit feedback on my interpretations of their narratives.

Respondent validation, also referred to as member checking, is the systematic solicitation of feedback about data and conclusions from the research participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By asking participants to review the conclusions I was drawing from the broad themes, as well as review my interpretation of their quotes and meanings, I was able to minimize the possibility of misinterpreting participants' experience. This process of sharing the emergent findings was an important part of incorporating participants' interpretations in the findings, and is key in phenomenological studies (Seidman, 2013).

Finally, through the two-interview, and focus group design, I collected enough data to ensure saturation. This includes collecting data that consistent as well as discrepant. Patton (2002) suggests seeking alterative explanations in the data, and therefore in my analysis I completed a discrepant case analysis to uncover data that might disconfirm or challenge the findings or my expectations.

Throughout the data coding and analysis process, the trustworthiness of the data was assessed through peer examination of the coding process and analysis. A colleague was asked to validate the coding scheme, and was also involved in discussions of the themes of the findings to prevent biases in the findings reported. The process of intercoder agreement involved asking a colleague familiar with qualitative research to code a subset of transcripts to establish intercoder agreement in the coding scheme. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend agreement of at least 80 percent. After reviewing and coding the first two transcripts, we compared individual notes and achieved intercoder reliability at greater than 80 percent.

Additionally, peer debriefing involved several discussions of the findings with peers and colleagues in person, and by allowing them to review transcripts and emergent themes to determine congruence in findings and to glean additional perspectives. This process of peer

examination proved to be invaluable in ensuring accuracy in the interpretation of data during analysis and reporting, and the rigor of the research.

Position of the Researcher

According to Creswell (2009) in qualitative research, "the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases" (pg. 196). While my own experiences in my educational trajectory, as well as my experience working in postsecondary education, can contribute to my understanding and be useful in gaining access to sites, my perceptions and experiences can also bring certain biases to this study.

My personal experiences in my own educational trajectory are one of a low-SES, high-achieving student, and therefore my perceptions of the design of this study, and of the data collection and analysis were shaped by my personal experiences. I was born into poverty, living in various apartments, motels, with family members, and even spent a short period of time homeless in my youth. My parents, one a high-school graduate and army veteran, the other a high-school dropout and stay-at-home mother, worked hard at living in the same communities and therefore kept me enrolled in the same schools. My elementary and middle schools were both low-resourced and were located in poor, urban communities of color. As one of few poor white families in the community, race and class both were not salient for me until middle school when I was bussed to a higher-resourced middle school due to my placement in a gifted and talented program. Despite these gains, I fell back into a low-achieving grouping in high school and ultimately left a regular enrollment high school for an alternative high school (continuation school). It was through enrollment in an Upward Bound program (federally funded TRIO program aimed at college preparation for historically underrepresented students) that I began to

believe in my abilities at the continuous encouragement of mentors working in this program. Through their support, I completed high school and enrolled in the local community college.

Taking a less traditional path, I worked full-time while in college (given my financial constraints). Enrollment in college was met with many challenges, and included non-continuous enrollment (stopping-out) as well as enrollment in two different community colleges before completing requirements for transfer. Ultimately I completed a baccalaureate degree and then a master's degree, both while working full-time in postsecondary education institutions in student affairs and counseling roles. My true achievement and academic ability was realized for me during the masters program when I was encouraged to pursue doctoral education. Being here at UCLA as a graduate student pursuing a doctorate demonstrates high levels of achievement despite the challenges I have personally encountered.

I believe this understanding of context enhances my awareness of the challenges of being a low-SES student with varying achievement levels over-time. I bring knowledge of both living in poverty and the structure of higher education (as a student and employee) and this knowledge assisted me in working with the participants of this study. I entered this study as an insider, privileged by the ability to participate in an understanding of a culture and sentiments, but this insider perspective presents both strengths and weaknesses. Due to my previous experiences, I did bring certain biases that may have shaped the way I understood and interpreted the data. Merriam (2009) suggests that a skilled interviewer can mediate these effects, but that considering the predispositions, physical characteristics, and biases I brought to the participants may effect the interaction during data collection. Therefore, I commenced this study with the perspective that low-SES students bring a diverse set of experiences with them, and should not be understood by one-single narrative marked by disadvantage.

Limitations

While the research design of this study was intended to address the research purpose and questions, despite the strengths of the interviewing structure selected for in-depth interviewing and data collection, there are limitations in the methodology and research design to note. Creswell (2009) suggests a number of factors that need to be considered as limitations in research design, including sampling and interviews.

With regard to sampling, the identification of high-achieving, low-SES students as participants of the study was challenging. Given that participants are self-reporting all information collected for the SES measure, the challenges present with participant self-reporting still remain. However, given that multiple questions regarding income and social class were be asked and compared against one another, the measure that was used in this study still appears to be a good fit. Additionally, the same challenges exist for measuring achievement, but as discussed throughout the chapter, the benefits of using last term GPA in recruitment of participants allowed for capturing participants who would otherwise have not been considered achievers if using standardized test scores, or cumulative GPA. Future considerations include using other SES and achievement measures in order to determine if similar results may emerge to reflect a wider population of low-SES students.

Another issue comes with interviewing and the possibility that participants might view the researcher as intrusive (Creswell, 2009), especially given the delicate nature of topics discussed in this study. I found this issue to be mediated by conducting conversational interviews, where being open about the study and my own personal background led to participants being receptive and connecting with me and the research itself more than I anticipated. Many

participants have since continued to connect with me about their graduate school application process and future goals.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology and research design of this qualitative study. Included in this chapter are the researcher paradigms, worldviews, and approach brought to the study, as well as researcher positionality. Guided by the conceptual model of this study – an anti-deficit achievement framework and critical resilience framework – I provided an overall research design, including data collection, analysis, and validity considerations. Additionally, by following Seidman's (2013) structure for in-depth, phenomenological interviewing, I provided details regarding interviewing design, including the pre-interview biographical survey that was collected, and the details of the two-interview approach, as well as focus group interviews. Chapter three was concluded with the limitations in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to use an anti-deficit approach in examining the educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving college students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. This study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) what personal, familial, and institutional factors contributed to their educational success; (2) how did these factors function as facilitators of opportunity despite any challenges; and (3) did the high school and college environments present any particular challenges? And how did these factors assist in successfully navigating these environments?

Analysis of 21 semi-structured individual interviews and three focus groups with 12 high-achieving, low-SES college students serve as the primary data source used to understand the lived experiences of these students. Demographic survey responses from the 21 participants are also included in the findings and were used to contextualize one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews. As discussed in Chapter Three, this survey assessed students' basic background demographic data, and academic history – including high school GPA, honors and AP courses, school resources, college GPA, and academic enrichment program participation. Surveys also collected information on family educational and socioeconomic background, as well as degree aspirations and post-college career and educational goals.

This chapter highlights the results pertaining to the research questions and applies the conceptual frameworks outlined in Chapter Two. The findings are presented in two distinct sections. First, an overview of the personal, familial, and institutional factors that contribute to high-achieving, low-SES student success are presented. Second, the themes that correspond to

and highlight getting to college (pre-college socialization and readiness), and getting through college (college achievement) using both resilience theory and the Harper (2012) framework will be presented to more closely demonstrate how the identified factors functioned as facilitators as college opportunity. Additionally, part two includes data that highlights the additional challenges presented in the high school and college environments; and how high-achieving, low-SES students navigated these environments and challenges in relation to the factors identified.

Part I: Overview of Personal, Familial, and Institutional Factors

Previous studies have called for a re-examination of the experiences of underrepresented students from an asset-based approach, as opposed to a deficit model (Harper, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2013: Yosso, 2005). The findings from this study provide insight into how certain personal, familial, and institutional factors influence high-achieving, low-SES students educational pathways, aspirations, and college access strategies. Understanding the experiences of low-SES students who have not only gained access to college, but succeeded through college, provides insight about navigating challenging pre-college environments and the transition to college, and more specifically – does this through an anti-deficit lens. Overall, the data yielded: (1) a more critical examination of resilience by using the Harper framework to identify personal, familial, and institutional factors that contribute to success – rather than just attributing resilience development as an individual trait; and (2) the resilience and coping strategies developed by participants. Using the resilience framework, this theme describes how participants developed and employed coping strategies associated with resilience and thus avoided negative outcomes. The positive influences of the personal, familial, and institutional factors had a large impact; in particular: (1) the development of a strong sense of self; and (2) the usage of corollary formulas.

Personal, Institutional, and Familial Factors

The personal, familial, and institutional factors participants reported as contributing most to their academic success include family, other supportive adults (e.g. mentors, teachers, counselors), relationships with peers (in particular, other high-achievers), the development of a strong belief in self, the development of coping strategies to deal with particularly difficult situations, and participation in special programs, activities, and courses (e.g. Upward Bound, Talent Search, GATES Scholars, AP, Honors, SAT prep). What was most surprising, perhaps, was the identification of factors that have previously been considered "risk factors" (Reis et al., 2005), but for this study were positive factors in participants' success. These included parents who are immigrants and the associated struggles with this experience – not having English spoken at home, coming to college as a first-generation college student, and therefore "lacking" traditionally valued forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Weber, 1978), and attending low-resourced high schools (see Table 4.1 for Personal, Familial, and Institutional Factor Types Used and Definitions). Overall, the low-SES students in this study were able to successfully access and persist through college, in large part, due to these unique characteristics, as will be evidenced in the following section.

While the identification of specific factors that contribute to the development of resilience and academic success of these students is important to our understanding of how to better serve high-achieving, low-SES students and enhance these factors. But, identification alone is not enough. The next section will review the results of research question two in an effort to better understand *how* these factors functioned as facilitators of opportunity – specifically it will cover *how* these factors helped the high-achieving, low-SES students in this study to succeed despite disadvantages in their journey to and through college.

Table 4.1
Personal, Familial, & Institutional Factor Types and Definitions

Factor Type	Definition
Personal	
Development of a strong belief in self	Demonstrated a strong sense of self-efficacy & the belief in being successful because they choose to be.
Development of coping strategies	A strong belief in self led to the development of coping strategies that enabled participants to deal with difficult situations, environments, and people. Coping strategies varied according to the challenge and the environment, but seemed to be a corollary formula, or natural result or response to the risk of the situation.
Relationships with peers	Peers – in particular, other high-achieving peers – played a major role in prevention of underachievement (Reis et al., 2005). Peers provided support and were a central source of information.
Familial	
Family & other supportive adults Immigrant family experiences English not parents' first language 1st generation college experience	Familial factors, such as family experiences, functioned in the way that they encouraged educational achievement and success in different ways, and played a role in deciding where to go to college, selecting a major and considering career choices, and also played a role in the development of participants' belief in self. Family histories in particular also influenced the development of different coping strategies participants utilized.
Institutional	
Supportive institutional agents	Supportive institutional agents such as teachers and mentors played a significant role in demonstrating a successful path for students to follow. These individuals also influenced the development of different coping strategies participants utilized in the examples they provided to participants in getting to where they are now. These supportive institutional agents were generally from low-SES backgrounds as well.
Participation in special programs, activities, & courses	Participation in programs such as Upward Bound, Talent Search, honors courses, AP/IB courses, etc. provided not only sources of information and support for participants, but also taught participants how to seek out help and demonstrated different pathways as they navigated challenging environments that could lead to positive outcomes.

Resilience and Coping Strategies

Using the critical resilience framework, this theme describes how participants developed and employed coping strategies associated with resilience, thereby avoiding negative outcomes. The factors discussed in part one all contributed to the development of resilience in the participants of this study. Thus, participants used these coping mechanisms as a way to negotiate the challenges in their educational experiences. The factor that had the biggest impact in the development of resiliency and coping strategies were family, as previously discussed. Other factors discussed in part one that had a large influence: (1) the development of a strong sense of self; and (2) the usage of corollary formulas (see Table 4.1 for definitions).

The personal factors described in research question one, such as the development of a strong belief in self and the development of coping strategies to deal with difficult situations, functioned in interesting ways for participants continued college achievement. One of the most significant ways in how participants identified what they believed to contribute the most to their success – which they all typically attributed to self – and how that functioned in "activating" certain formulas for success that participants had previously learned from significant mentors, teachers, and even siblings earlier on in life. Danielle described this effectively when asked about the factors that have contributed to her success in college,

> I guess myself. Just choosing to put my academic life first. It is always hard, but I guess I just know I have to do my academics first. It is just knowing that comes first and other things like organizations and sports and visiting home come second or whatever. I guess it is just a habit because since we [self and siblings] were kids, all of my siblings we have been doing well. Even in elementary school, middle school, high school, we did not have as much extracurricular activities as I have in college, so it was just learned… a habit to focus on academics with that time.

In addition to influencing their motivation to attend college, participants described a positive self-concept, as well as personal values and characteristics as a central reason for their

continued success. In participants' own words, these values and characteristics included: determination, passion, drive, focus, being resourceful, commitment, motivation, love for learning, desire, resilience, and pride, among others. An example of this can be seen in Alma, an undocumented student, as she describes how she has gained access to college and persisted despite several challenges she has faced, but due to these personal characteristics:

> So definitely I have been really, really, blessed having outside organizations help me, but it also has to do with the fact that I was the type of person that takes initiative. I care about my schoolwork, my family is very poor, we don't have a lot of – we have what we need, but – and we don't need like luxuries. Really, we're a humble family and we're not used to having luxuries so for me they always told me growing up, "you're not going to inherit any money from us – it's impossible, but you're going to inherit the values that we've implemented on you- your beliefs and all these like – determination, passion, persistence – that's what we're going to give to you. And you have to make the best out of it."

She continued,

> And I am a very – I'm a person of faith so I always believe that I was born for a reason, I'm here for a reason and everything that I've been through is for a reason. I always said that God made me strong because he knew what I had to go through. And so I definitely know that coming here to UCLA I have certain goals, I made a list of certain goals and slowly I've been checking them off, one by one. So definitely the struggles of an undocumented person pursuing higher education are very, very challenging. I have a lot to say about that. But, it's not impossible.

For Alma, she directly attributes her family to passing down these personal characteristics that have helped her in the face of adversity. Alma demonstrates an example of a strong positive sense of self that she attributes as coming directly from her family. Similar to Alma, others describe personal traits that have helped them to succeed. Ashley, a student who describes her high-achievement as the result of these personal characteristics says,

> I had always wanted to get good grades and to go above and beyond what I was just doing it in high school. There was never a question I wouldn't do my homework, that's just the way I was. I tried really hard to get good grades and I took as many AP classes as I could and I'd always stuck with a group of students who were known as high achievers and then I graduated ranked pretty high [as third in her class].

When prompted to discuss her academic self-efficacy, and what motivated her to do well academically, take advanced placement courses, and socialize with similar peers, she again attributes this to personal characteristics,

> Well partially probably I just think the way the personality was, the way I am. I just always want to be the best that I can be, no matter if it's in school or with sports or whatever it was; and I just think my parents just pushed me. They never wanted me to settle – they always wanted me to do the best that I could and they believed that I could in every single way. I always wanted to live up to their expectations and also that you make them proud.

Participants overwhelmingly reported similar experiences, and it appears that these traits and characteristics served as motivators to succeed in the face of adversity. Likewise, participants reporting these traits and characteristics also reported overwhelmingly positive experiences as attributing to their desires to persist through high school and into postsecondary education.

While positive self-concept and personal characteristics and traits are one of the personal factors that contributed to the success of high-achieving, low-SES students, changes in self-concept are also known to have an impact on academic ability (Robbins et al., 2004). This positive self-concept and the development of these personal traits and characteristics seemed to be informed by both family and institutional agents (counselors, teachers, mentors of college prep programs). For students who did not identify as a high-achiever early in their academic journey, institutional agents became integral in the development of a positive self-concept, which in turn impacted their academics to take a turn for the positive. It appears that it was not just the involvement of a positive mentor or teacher, but the timing of theses relationships seemed to be what was most important in the development of a positive self-concept that created change in academic achievement levels. For example, Alma discusses not finding out her undocumented status until 7th grade, and the negative impact this had on her self-concept and beliefs about what she would then be capable of achieving. Alma always liked school and thought she would be

capable of anything until she found out she was undocumented. However, at the same time of this discovery her school also happened to develop a program with Project Steps and they came to her school for a presentation,

> In the 7th grade they came into the auditorium and made an announcement – "you're part of this program now," and I think everything happens for a reason. So I participated, I did everything, and it definitely helped me a lot. My counselor from Project Steps would tell me, "you're good," she never said, "you're undocumented, what are you going to do about school?" Instead they told me about scholarships, and ways to enroll in college. It was really them, not anyone else in school. And sometimes I wonder where would I be if it hadn't been for them. Everything happens for a reason.

Similarly, Angel who was previously discussed as not really sure he even wanted to go to college talks about how the timing of teachers showing him the power of language and voice, which in turn instilled in him the positive self-concept he felt he needed in his approach to his education and goals:

> I think my English teacher, the way that he taught, the things that he taught, and the person that he was, really helped me understand the power of being able to own your voice and being able to articulate and use it in a way that shows how much strength you have in yourself. I guess being in that situation really taught me to put myself out there and know how to talk to people…Whether it's the way I write my English paper, or the things that I want to talk about, the things that I'm interested in. I can talk about having experience that I know how to talk about. I just think this all really shaped my education and how I approached what I want to learn and how I'm going to accomplish that.

For participants like Angel, teachers in tandem with courses or material made them think critically about themselves, their goals, and made them develop more positive self-concepts about their capabilities. Angel demonstrates the influence that teachers had on the development of his positive sense of self, as well as how these experiences developed corollary formulas for him to follow throughout the rest of his educational experience – formulas that helped him remain successful.

Part II: Getting To and Through College

In an effort to answer the second research question, data from individual interviews, focus groups, and background surveys were analyzed. For all participants, the decision to attend college was something they were certain of throughout their lives– but the process of college preparation was largely influenced by high school context and socioeconomic status. As participants transitioned to college and successfully neared their college graduation their continued success was largely influenced by the context of UCLA (e.g. the institutional resources and characteristics). Overall, the data yielded two important themes in terms of how the factors identified in part one functioned in college access and achievement:

1. **Familial Involvement: Encouragement Types.** This theme describes the various types of encouragement and support that functioned as motivators in participants' lives. As discussed in part one, family is the number one factor reported by participants as influencing their success. In this study, family was defined mainly as parents, but would also include siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles. However, few instances included extended family. How family functioned in both pre-college and college environments is the focus of this section and is organized by three distinct encouragement types: (1) struggles and hardship; (2) development of autonomy; and (3) helpless neglect. These encouragement types had a significant influence on the coping strategies and resilience employed by participants.
2. **Academic Preparation and Academic Experiences.** This theme describes students' high school preparation and readiness for entering college, as well as the unique challenges students faced in their high school and college academic experiences, and how they employed various strategies to navigate these

challenges. The challenges present in these environments were often catalysts for participants developing resilience and utilizing various coping strategies.

Familial Involvement: Encouragement Types

This theme describes the various types of encouragement and support that functioned in participants' lives as motivation. Overwhelmingly, participants reported family experiences and support as the most influential factor contributing to their success. Participants characterized the process of coming to college (application, information seeking, campus visits), and later, enrolling and attending, as the beginning of something that could finally democratize the opportunity structure—as the mechanism that was finally helping them move from low-SES to a higher class status for themselves and their families. Students did not deliberate and come to decisions about college on their own. Instead, decisions were greatly informed and influenced by parents and other family members. Previous literature has concentrated on the important role parents play in the development of aspirations, continued motivation, and encouragement (Ceja, 2004; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler et al, 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992). Therefore, it is not surprising that the role of families emerged as a finding in this current study. However, this section focuses on the diverse ways in which the role of family operated in both pre-college and college environments, and it is organized by three distinct encouragement types: (1) struggles and hardship; (2) development of autonomy; and (3) helpless neglect. These encouragement types have a significant influence in the development of resilience and the coping strategies employed by participants (see Table 4.2 for Parental Encouragement Types). It is important to note that these encouragement types as discussed in this study are mutually exclusive, as demonstrated in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2
Participant Parental Encouragement Types

Name	Gender	Race	Admission	Parental Encouragement Type
Alejandra	Female	Latina	Freshman	(1) struggle/hardship
Alicia Mae	Female	Latina	Transfer	(1) struggle/hardship
Alma	Female	Latina	Freshman	(1) struggle/hardship
Angel	Male	Latino	Freshman	(1) struggle/hardship
Ashley	Female	White	Freshman	(2) autonomy
Avi	Male	Latino	Transfer	(2) autonomy
Cody	Male	White	Freshman	(2) autonomy
Danielle	Female	Latina	Freshman	(1) struggle/hardship
Emma	Female	Asian American	Transfer	(1) struggle/hardship
Irene	Female	Asian American	Transfer	(2) autonomy
Kelly	Female	Asian American	Freshman	(2) autonomy
Liz	Female	Latina	Freshman	(1) struggle/hardship
Los	Male	Latino	Transfer	(1) struggle/hardship
Luna	Female	Black	Transfer	(3) helpless neglect
Marvin	Male	Latino	Transfer	(1) struggle/hardship
Michelle	Female	Latina	Freshman	(1) struggle/hardship
Mila	Female	White	Transfer	(1) struggle/hardship
Monica	Female	Other	Freshman	(1) struggle/hardship
MP	Female	Asian American	Freshman	(3) helpless neglect
Rose	Female	Asian American	Transfer	(1) struggle/hardship
Ryan	Female	Black	Transfer	(1) struggle/hardship

Overall, for all of the participants in this study, the pursuit of education has always been important in their lives and in the lives of their families. For the majority of parents, there were low levels of formal education, and for some—little experience with navigating the U.S. educational system. Despite this and other previously documented "challenges"—these factors became the most important messages transmitted to participants, resulting in parents having a strong influence on participants' motivation and goals. Each of the families in this study approached education in distinct ways, resulting in the three different encouragement types presented here. Yet each encouragement type embodied critical messages that participants interpreted in ways that became the sources of resilience and motivation. Thus, it was not necessarily the actual message sent to each participant, but instead how students interpreted these

messages and made sense of them in their own lives. Ultimately, each of the three encouragement types contributed to the development of resiliency for participants.

Struggles and hardship. Family histories of struggle, sacrifice, and suffering were a common theme in participants' motivation to persist. The majority of participants (n=14) had parents who were not born in the U.S. and had similar immigrant stories of sacrifice in order to provide better opportunities for their children. The idea of the "American Dream" was a recurring theme in participants' stories as they described the ways in which their parent's struggles and sacrifices motivated them. While this encouragement type embodied struggles and hardship—generally through the lens of the immigrant experience, occupational struggles, and/or multiple forms of oppression—it was more so in how students began to make meaning of these struggles in their own understanding of larger social conditions and turn them into a catalyst for wanting to succeed despite the challenges they face.

Several students, including Monica, described how influential their parents were in the development of their educational ideologies, aspirations, and expectations for college. Monica, whose parents both earned college degrees in Egypt, talked about how her parents' degrees were not valid in the U.S. Her father had been an accountant who had his own business, and her mother a teacher, but after immigrating to the U.S., neither parent was able to establish careers in their respective fields. However, her parents always pushed her to attend college. In the following passage, Monica discusses her parents immigrating to the U.S. in search of better opportunities for her brother and herself,

> There was never a question I would do this [go to college]. We did not know how, but I knew I had to find out. My parents always talked about college as something my brother and I would do, even though they knew nothing about college. As I got closer to my junior year [in high school] I figured I could start by looking at my transcripts to figure out what classes I still needed to take. I would figure this out – for me, for my family. I was born in Egypt and both my parents have their badges [degrees] and they were pretty

> well established in Egypt – but we came here, and then working, it was pretty much, as if their degrees never happened. And so, like, it's always been that you're going to go to college because you don't want to be like slaving away like us – 'you don't want to be not getting what you deserved because you are the person that worked so hard.' So it is more than just for me that I need to finish college, it is because I really don't want to let my family down. Also, all of my teachers that believed in me and told me about college… they are counting on me too.

Similar to Monica, other students described their parents' impact on their college decisions. One student, Marvin, describes his choice to attend community college and not go into the workforce as a combination of watching his parents work hard for little reward, and wanting to do better to for himself and his family. When prompted about when he first started thinking about college, Marvin says:

> For community college, it was like the end of my senior year. I remember I was in the career center – and I remember seeing this application for Mt. San Antonio Bridge Program and I was like, because my dad does gardening and landscaping and I hated like – I hated working like my dad, doing gardening and landscaping. But I had never been to Mt. Sac, but I just signed that application. See, my dad's a gardener; he has done that his whole life. He doesn't want us to do that. And my mom doesn't want us to do what she did - she worked in a factory for a while. And in our home it's kind of not talked about, we were not very expressive, but we were really close, but we don't display. It's kind of like we don't talk about it because none of them went to school, so they don't know what it is like. They're immigrants, so they didn't go to school here. They came when they were 14 and then like started working here. So they don't want us to work, my dad doesn't want to see me gardening but he won't mind, my brothers go sometimes to help. And he wants us to go to school - he is like you guys are done, you guys go and you guys learn, you guys know English.

Marvin continues to talk about this motivation upon completing his coursework at the community college and applying for transfer to a four-year institution. Marvin wasn't sure where he wanted to go next, but due to high expectations and the positive push of his Bridge counselor, he applied to both California State University schools (CSUs) and University of California schools (UCs). Marvin talks about his brothers who were working alongside his father as landscapers, and says:

> In the back of my head I was like I don't want to be disregarded in life. That's like something I don't want to do. My parents didn't come here for me to be disregarded. I know I would see my brothers kind of struggling, so like I don't want to do that, so I just applied -- I applied, I got the waivers so I applied to all the Cal States and I applied to UCs.

Similarly, Michelle recalled how her parents' occupation as farm workers in a border town made her aware of larger social inequities and motivated her to pursue higher education as a means to success:

> I was born in El Centro, California, but I lived in Calexico, which is a border town. It's a pretty small town and usually all the people that live there are from Mexico and you have a bilingual setting with people like my parents. Most are farm workers so they work fields, which is why I got motivated to pursue a higher education because it is very sad to see your parents work hard every day and waking up early and coming home late or not really good salary, you know. That's why I got motivated to just focus on education and try to repay my parents for everything they did for me, all the sacrifices. And now I am trying to pursue that education to have a better life. So that's how I applied for UCLA and other schools too, I wanted to get out of my community because I wanted to expose myself to the world and to gain that knowledge. So going from being in a comfortable place when you are at your parent's house you are protected and now when you expose yourself you become independent and you just go forward. I got accepted to UCLA and I was all yes I am going to Los Angeles, I knew it is going to be hard because I am very attached to my parents but I was like no I need to do this it's a sacrifice, they did a sacrifice for me so I need to do this for them. Now I am here and this is my fourth year.

Other students, like Angel—a Latino student whose parents emigrated from Mexico—describes the tension between not really wanting to attend college, and the sacrifices his mother made to make this path possible:

> Actually, during high school, I wasn't interested at all in going to college. I was always told that I was a bright student: "Oh, you have such potential" and everything…but I never had the urge up until my senior year when everybody was applying… So, everybody applied and I guess I decided to. I wasn't really excited or looking at any particular college. Coming from a poor area… my mom's an immigrant, so of course she has an expectation of her kids - "My children will bear the fruits of my labor and be able to succeed." And so, in a sense I felt like not pursuing higher education or doing something that would definitely, or more likely, make my family and me live more comfortably was a bit selfish. I still have mixed feelings about coming to college.

Similarly, Emma talks about her mom motivating her to pursue a college education for the "American Dream" as she says, "It was my mom. My dad actually had very little education; he didn't finish high school. He never pushed for us to go to college. And I know my mom really wanted the whole American dream idea… take advantage of all the opportunities."

Family culture and history were both elements that influenced students' decisions to pursue higher education – and particularly at a highly selective institution such as UCLA. In terms of culture, Mila describes how her culture impacted her approach to education:

> My whole family pushed it, like everyone. It's really cultural too, because I'm Persian. So it's like, when you see everyone around you and they are successful… most of them. All of my Persian friends are either becoming lawyers or doctors; and the girls are becoming pharmacists or PAs [physician assistants] or whatever, if you ask 90% of them this is what is going on. Your family pushes the same thing on you, no matter what.

In some cases, students were keenly aware of their parents' struggles, hardship, and sacrifices to enable them to attend school, yet these students were not motivated by upward mobility in the same way—they were not interpreting their parents struggles within larger social inequities, but instead looking at taking care of their parents as a necessary part of growing up. Alicia Mae shared her experiences throughout college in taking care of her parents:

> I feel like since my dad – again he was sick for a while. I was sort of like pushed to be like – well I mean I grew up fast like I felt like I just have to mature. And I took it upon myself to like work more, to like kind of provide for like our apartment like we used to live in a garage and I was like we can't be living here. I'm willing to get another job and I did and I went ahead and like oh my god, I can't stop going to school.
>
> But still like, I'm going to figure this out. And I felt like I had to be an adult and like the landlord calls me every time for like anything to do with the house. Everything is in my name, all bills, all the contracts, everything. My siblings are going to school, I'm the one that enrolled them, because my mom, she has trouble reading and writing and plus she is at work the whole time. And I'm like I don't want her to deal with that, so I just – I felt like it's part of like being adult and I just kind of did go with it. In school it's kind of like that place where you're just kind of zoned out for like two hours and you just learn something. And I think that's why I pretty much enjoy it.

> So I mean I just had to like – and I'm appreciative of all those experiences. I feel like I'm more mature and I think that kind of adds to the fact that I feel older around here, because mostly students are – their experiences are different and I understand it. I'm like they've never had to pay bill or like even have an open account for like AT&T. But yeah, I mean now it's like I don't know I guess – I get home and I'm like mom is there any mail which should be taken care of? I guess I devote like two hours to that house things and like okay now I got to study. And now they're like okay Alicia studying, you just – everybody should probably do something quietly.
>
> Well it's almost like I, it could only go forward from that - I've never really had anything. I never had money, I never had thought about even going to college. I'm here and I'm just going to make the best of it and I know that at the end it's going to be better than when I started. And that's always like one of the major things I guess just knowing where I come from, when I come to the projects, I have to work at McDonald's and all these things I'm like well I don't want to do that forever. And I know I have access to other things so I'm just going to keep going at it.

What becomes clear from examples such as these is that some parents, because of their lived experiences and sacrifices, realized that they could use concrete examples from their lives as a source of parental encouragement and juxtapose these possibilities with the educational and financial limits that characterized their lives. For so many parents, using this encouragement type was a direct attempt to persuade their children to achieve in school and thus experience upward economic and social mobility. Therefore, while these messages did not always explicitly include the typical college messages (e.g. how to get to college, which colleges to choose), the participants interpreted these messages as the types of support and encouragement needed for them to achieve and succeed.

Development of autonomy. Participant's families who utilized this encouragement type (n=5) appeared to place importance in developing the skills necessary to be independent and self-sufficient in an effort to instill these skills in their children for future decision-making, and career and life success. Participants interpreted their parents' encouragement as something that taught them how to consider multiple perspectives, such as those of peers and co-workers, when making decisions, as well as how to feel confident in the choices they make as adults. One such example

can be seen in Kelly, who acknowledges her parent's choice to leave major decisions up to her, because early in her life her parents had provided a framework for her to use and build from as an adult. Kelly also attributes this to her culture, when specifically asked about her encouragement and support system:

> It's kind of strange because I think that also it had to do with cultural differences, or maybe it's just how my family works. But my family, they're not very too much involved in what I do. They just kind of care if I graduate or not - that's kind of like the main thing. They say, "really, okay, you need to graduate this year." I said, "Yeah, I will. I have my set plan, that's pretty much it." But they haven't been too much involved in what I do now – I make decisions about my extracurricular and things like that.

When further probed about the role of culture in her family's encouragement type, Kelly replies:

> Because definitely, or what I've seen - like more Americanized families, they're definitely very supportive and they give advice. Like if I ask for advice I don't really go to my parents anymore, I go to other people. And just like the communication, I guess, that about their lives and being more involved because they are definitely, my parents are definitely not too involved in my life, in terms of like academics and things like that – well that's funny because I say that but the only thing I really talk to them about is academics. So, I guess it's more like… I guess there's not too much of an emotional aspect of it. Oh, like, "Oh, are you doing okay?" "Is anything tough?" like, "Is there anything I can support you through?" nothing like that. It's more like, "Okay, how's school?" "What are your grades?" That's pretty much it.

For another participant, Cody, his parents "built a foundation early on that education was very important." When Cody's father passed away, it significantly impacted how he approached his own life decisions. For example, he started college following a pre-med track, but upon further reflection and re-evaluation, decided to pursue other major and career options. When asked who was involved in that decision and how his family influenced it, he responded:

> Not much, because I've tried to sort of keep family separate this time because growing up they cared about my schooling and cared to start me off basically the right way, so I have that basis and that foundation moving forward. Because my foundation started out pretty big so that's where it ends up here in college. And in the beginning of college there was still a lot of family involvement, but now I try to keep it sort of separate and my mom will just call and say like "I know you are up there at school and you are having fun but don't forget class" because she knows that there is a certain level that I can achieve even

> at UCLA, but besides that it is left up to me because she knows they gave me that foundation.

In another example, Ashley talked about how she interpreted her family's encouragement and support as present, but that they had instilled certain academic values in her very early in life—and have now left it up to her to make the best decisions she can. Ashley bases this interpretation off of trust and expectations, saying:

> I just think my parents definitely instilled in me early on that they wanted the best for me and trusted me to do that – they knew I could. The trust and expectations made me want to live up to this and make them proud. Some parents are really strict about grades and what is important – my parents told me early on I was capable and knew I would achieve whatever my "best" was.

For participants who understand their parents' encouragement in the way of developing autonomy, similar to Ashley's sentiments, the foundation of this encouragement type is the belief that parents have trust in their child, and this trust is the motivating factor.

Helpless neglect. While positive parent and family involvement was definitely a strong factor in support participants' academic success, there were a few participants (n=2) that also described a lack of family support and involvement as a motivator. For parents who employed this encouragement type, it was not that they abandoned their children throughout the educational process—instead, they were significantly impacted by their own lack of knowledge and understanding of the educational experience, that they often just neglected to become involved in their children's experience. However, all participants in this encouragement type interpreted their parents' messages and actions as caring and supportive, but sometimes combined with guilt.

M.P. describes her journey to college as supported by mentors and counselors of the Upward Bound program saying, "Upward Bound were parents to me. My family wasn't as involved as I wanted them to be. I am at UCLA because of Upward Bound. I would be really

excited throughout high school to get report cards that would show A's and B's to show them to Upward Bound because I knew they would be proud of me." Although M.P. described the same "American Dream" ideal as other participants, saying that her parents had explicitly told her, "we are here in the U.S. to get you an education," M.P. shares a different story because while she describes mentors and programs such as Upward Bound as her support system, she acknowledges that her parents lack of support wasn't because they weren't her "cheerleaders" but instead because her parents did not have advice for her to follow. She was still motivated to succeed by their sacrifices and wanted to "provide a better life—a stable life" for herself and her family.

Luna also discussed her parents' lack of encouragement and motivation in her education as she recalls:

> I actually like school, when I started school I remember I liked it, like I enjoyed learning. I remember even before I started school I would tell my dad, "Oh, daddy, I want to go to school, I wanna go to pre-school, I wanna go to kindergarten." But then, I remember it's like, I started losing interest in school in 5th grade, 4th grade when I had a teacher who didn't, she just didn't teach us. I went to a school that wasn't the best so it was hard, and my parents, they weren't active parents. They had to work all the time so they weren't asking me, "Where is your homework?" They would ask me, "Did you do your homework?" And I would just say, "Yeah" and that was sufficient. They would never really check my homework. So because they did that, I was slacking off in school and I was always known as the smart kid. But then, of course if you don't study you're not going to get it - it doesn't matter how smart you are.

Luna's recollection of her parents' lack of involvement impacted her during her interview. She still feels very emotional about her parents' involvement and support, but feels that they motivate her to succeed. When probed further about her parents' role in her education to this day, she responded:

> My mom and my dad, I love them, and I know they want the best for me but they're not involved, at all. They don't, I guess, because they're not educated themselves so they don't understand, like, education is not about being smart or just, like, getting things. It's about, like, constantly studying and, like, it's a habit, like, school is just a habit. You

> have to be able, my parents don't understand that so they're not really involved and, I guess, because they were not educated on what school is.
>
> Sadly I don't discuss my education with them - and my dad really feels guilty about it now. He's always, like, I never prepared for this. I felt like he feels like he should be helping me financially but it's like, I mean, luckily I get financial aid but, I mean, we never talked about it. I don't think my dad expected a lot from us, from me, like, he just expected us to like maybe have kids - go start our own life. So he does feel guilty about it.

Finally, in processing her experience and thinking about where she has come from and where she is now, Luna finishes by saying:

> I don't know, sometimes it's weird. Like I, I don't know why I'm here sometimes. I don't know, it's just like, I look at the people I went to school with and then I'm, "What makes me different than them?"

Luna's family has had a significant impact on her in both positive and negative ways. While only two participants (M.P. and Luna) seemed to interpret their parents' encouragement type as helpless neglect, it is still significant as they give concrete examples and provide insight into what different types of parental encouragement look like. Overall, all three encouragement types outlined here provide examples that might begin to shed light on the influence and methods of parental encouragement—particularly for low socioeconomic status students.

Academic Preparation and Experiences with College Curriculum

When it came to academic preparation in high school and experiences with the college academic curriculum, participants overwhelmingly described feeling unprepared for academic curriculum in college, and at UCLA in particular, when compared to their peers. Participants attributed this to the resources available at their high schools. However, despite these challenges they developed a strong belief in self and employed various strategies associated with the resilience framework that ultimately resulted in them avoiding negative outcomes.

Academic preparation. Participants were quick to relay anecdotes and experiences about how they navigated different challenges when prompted about their high school curriculum and preparation for college. One participant, Danielle, attended school in Mexico until her junior year of high school, when she began high school in Chula Vista, California—just across the Mexico and U.S. border. In discussing the resources available to her at the U.S. high school when it came to college preparation, she says:

> My high school was not a very good high school. It's really close to the border… there are a lot of students who cross the border every morning to get to school – I did that a couple of times, so…. It's not nice. Yeah, my high school was not like the greatest high school.

This experience is not exclusive to students who immediately enrolled at UCLA after high school, but can also be seen for students who first attended community college. One example of this can be seen with Ryan, who knew she wanted to attend a community college before transferring, and still described feeling underprepared:

> There isn't a lot of focus on the student that doesn't necessarily want it – who knows that they want to go to community college first, for whatever reason they're aware that they want to do community college- which was me. I knew that I physically and feasibly [financially] wouldn't be able to go to a university straight off the bat so I, so they don't prepare you for community college. They send you down this very singular track in terms of you're supposed to go to a university, it doesn't matter which university, it doesn't matter what you do, they don't prepare you for anything, they don't give you the information you need in order to make informed decisions and that's what frustrated me.

As a result of this lack of preparation, Ryan continues by describing how this impacts time to transfer and general community college experience, saying "they don't prepare you for other options and then when you're not prepared for other options you end up spending 4-5 years in a community college circling around because you don't know what you're doing." Other students such as M.P. who came directly to UCLA after graduation shared similar sentiments. When asked whether she felt academically prepared, she said:

> No, not at all. I felt like high school was so easy and then I was put into one of the hardest institutions and that's where I feel like if I could go back I would not go to the same high school or not compete either one or the other because even the AP classes were so easy. They were not hard at all. I didn't know college was hard like this. I wasn't challenged in high school.

Similar to M.P., Cody described not feeling as adequate for UCLA as his peers due to high school preparation:

> It's intimidating coming into UCLA realizing how smart everyone was and hearing about other people's high schools and how on the AP test if you didn't get a five it was like, "oh shame on you" and in my high school if you got a three it was "Yay" so it was a little discouraging.

While several students were quick to mention their high schools not preparing them for college, for some students, such as Alejandra, this sentiment was a result of a direct comparison of the resources available to their peers at UCLA:

> When I got to UCLA I started hearing about all these preps and my high school only offered like seven AP classes and when I got here hearing students talking about 11 AP classes they took and my high school didn't even offer that many.

Like Alejandra, Angel expressed his own preparation in comparison with that of his peers, and the imbalance in resources offered. However, this imbalance appeared to be related to socioeconomic status, an aspect that Angel acknowledged in his response:

> I mean my experience in my first year and like in the dorms… I would just go to try to talk people in my hall and it feels like random like middle class or upper class people or people just had money and they will talk about these trips, that is cool you know. And I know people who just – come from different backgrounds and you know. These students would be like, "oh, I had like 20 AP classes in my high school," and stuff like that. I mean there are two AP classes in my high school! I was able to work from my school to come here. It is so different.

Another participant, Emma, who transferred from a charter school in Arizona to a public school in California, echoes these sentiments:

> Luckily for me, I was really appreciative of the fact that when I went to my charter school [in Arizona] we all wore uniforms with the same outfit. So that definitely took away the idea of having a distinguished social class most of the time. But like when I transferred to

> like California public school – that is when I realized my different [social] class impression on other people. And how it does set me back in terms of my social life and educational opportunities. Like a lot of my friends from Canyon High School in Anaheim [CA] that I went to, they had like… they went to elite colleges, and they had all these SAT tutors which is something I didn't have. I just went to libraries and tried to take advantage of all of the resources that were free around me. I didn't have that… my mom can't afford that, you know. So that is when I realized that a lot of those kids had such high scores because their parents can afford to have these additional resources and that was really beneficial. And up until now I am more conscious of like my social class and how that interfered with my educational opportunities.

The academic preparation of participants varied, but the majority of participants (18) all reported over 3.0 high school G.P.A.s and completed anywhere between one to 12 Advanced Placement (A.P.) courses. For the three remaining participants, one had a high school G.P.A. over 3.5, but did not take any A.P. courses although her high school boasted offering over 37 A.P. courses and exams. This participant (Rose) academically excelled in all of her courses despite challenging circumstances from family and socioeconomic status. Rose had to maintain full-time employment throughout high school while also living a transient lifestyle as her family had to move back to Thailand and were forced to leave her in the U.S. The other two participants, Los and Marvin, both reported a high school G.P.A. below 3.0 and neither completed any A.P. courses or exams. The high schools these two participants attended both had similar high school academic offerings—11 A.P. courses and exams offered at Los's high school and 12 A.P. courses and exams offered at Marvin's high school. However, interestingly both Marvin and Los were participants who classified themselves as low-achievers throughout their middle- and high school trajectories due to messages and feedback received from teachers, counselors, administrators, and peers. This is interesting because upon closer examination, it was only the male participants in this study (n=5) that classified themselves as low-achievers early in their educational experiences and could recall a time when an institutional agent, or other significant mentor, influenced them to begin to have a more positive belief in self. While this

demonstrate a gender difference in the way that the development of strong belief in self (personal factor) interacted with the institutional agent (institutional factor), there were not enough males in the sample to examine these gender differences overall.

The majority of participants (20) attended public high school. One participant, Avi, attended a private, Catholic, college preparatory high school. However, Avi did not graduate from this high school, or any high school for that matter. Instead, Avi described his time at this private high school as a horrible experience that triggered his depression. He says of the decision to drop out:

> I was like about 16, I dropped out. I was doing okay but then I refused to go back, and I literally had a mental breakdown because there was other stuff tormenting me and I couldn't stand being there. You know it [high school] was just like a torturous place and for me…the thing is I didn't have the mental wherewithal or guidance or support to really get me through that time. My parents tried to help but they didn't know how to deal with a chronically, clinically depressed kid and with anxiety issues. So what happened was it was just a daily struggle to get me to not be an idiot.

Avi opted to obtain a G.E.D. and attend community college, eventually transferring to UCLA. All three participants discussed in this section - Avi, Los, and Marvin - identified themselves as students who were considered low-achievers who, during the course of their academic trajectories, began to identify as high-achievers. As previously discussed, all males in the sample followed this pattern and it had to do with the interaction between an institutional agent and the development of a strong belief in self that led to this resilience – and the change in how they responded to challenges in the educational environment.

Overwhelmingly, participants reported inadequate high school preparation and acknowledged their college peers as likely having an advantage over them in terms of the number of Advanced Placement courses taken in high school and other resources offered for college preparation. However, there was one participant with an alternate account of high school

resources and support when it came to a comparison between the educational system in the United States and Mexico. Danielle, who previously discussed her U.S. high school as inadequately preparing her for college, when compared to her peers at UCLA, described how if she had remained in Mexico's educational system she likely would not have felt underprepared in comparison to her peers. According to Danielle, it was the experiences of negotiating the differences in the educational context of Mexico and the US that have actually made her a successful college student. She further discusses high school in Mexico preparing her to be the type of independent and self-motivated learner that U.S. college students are expected to be, saying:

> In Mexico, you have to buy your own stuff. It's public education, but you don't get free books or uniform. And the high school professors would be like, "Okay, you have to read from chapter 1 to chapter 20 by the end of the quarter, see you exam day.**"** Which is in two months, bye, like no class for the rest of the quarter. It was your responsibility to get those chapters done and like study and get good grades. Here [the U.S.] it was more like you have to do this and we can do this for help and you can ask me after lunch or during lunch you can come and it was just nice.

Similar to Danielle's interpretation of this challenge being a factor that contributed to her development of a strong sense of self and belief in her abilities—which ultimately led to her success, most participants felt similar despite their acknowledgement of the challenges in high school preparation for college. For the participants in this study, these challenges and setbacks never truly deterred them from persisting and succeeding in accomplishing their goals. This is consistent with the findings of Reis et al. (2005), which demonstrate that the development of a strong sense of self-efficacy and belief in success because of an explicit choice in being successful. This, and other findings surrounding participants employing strategies and factors in their success will be discussed in further detail in the Coping Strategies and Resilience section of this chapter.

In addition to academic preparation, there were several other areas that participants discussed in terms of preparation for college and the environment of UCLA. These included advisement by high school counselors, teachers, others mentors, peers, and reliance on self for guidance; as well as the role of finances.

High school advisement. Most guidance came from high school teachers – both in their modeling behavior of colleges they went to, and the time and effort spent with students. Danielle talks about her ESL teacher being the biggest promoter of college opportunity. This teacher not only encouraged her to apply – and encouraged her to apply to more selective institutions, but also encouraged her to apply for the Gates Scholars Program and helped her to figure out all financial aid opportunities. This teacher, who went to University of Michigan, also shared a lot of her own personal experiences applying to and attending college—which was something Danielle lacked at home. The personal experience shared by this teacher really made Danielle feel engaged in her education, while making the possibility of college even more of a pursuable reality.

Similar to Danielle, Alicia Mae describes the impact that seeing a teacher with a shared culture succeed had on her beliefs about her ability to pursue college:

> I always try to find that one professor that takes me with her hand and is like "hey there is this way to go," and I'm like 'oh, cool.' But they sort of like relate themselves to me and then I'm just like all right, you're from this neighborhood too, you lived near my street…like what, cool. Like I just never knew people are around me that are like the teacher or something– like we share cultures and I'm just like oh cool. I guess they did go to college and do this [live a similar cultural experience].

When prompted to discuss why she tries to find professors like this, Alicia Mae shared that this worked for her to succeed in high school. When she found a teacher with a shared culture and history, she was open to discussing her goals and dreams with this teacher, and this teacher then

developed a relationship of guidance and setting expectations for Alicia Mae. She talks about first finding out about their shared culture and histories in disbelief,

> It was a teacher like in our neighborhood. But like being up in those I guess positions or careers, most of the people around me are just like typical workers, my neighbors are like selling stuff the street [fruits and goods], we're all kind of like really friendly. But yeah, one of my high school teachers, she would drive – I would walk to school, she would always pass me on her car and whenever I run into her at school, she'd tell me like "oh yeah, you live down the street," I'm like whoa, I don't know, I thought teachers live some place else - they're not from my neighborhood. But she would ask about my personal life, like "oh, do you live with your parents?" I'm like yeah, I'm living with my mom and dad and then she is like "oh you know – I grew up like that too, with a single parent mom and things like that." I'm like really, like I don't know, I just didn't – I pictured teachers to be like totally different.

High school teachers had a big impact on the participants of the study in terms of encouragement, support, and role modeling. Some participants attributed the role of teachers to preparing them for college due to the curriculum in their courses preparing them for particular skills such as critical thinking and appreciation for diversity. For example, Monica described her academic preparation, and the role a teacher played in her success, in tandem, noting:

> Yeah, I really had very good teachers all the way through. Like elementary school teachers were super invested and they're really excited about being there, instead of just me being excited about it. And my high school, like one of my English teachers in my senior year, he had us think a lot more, and discuss a lot more. I like that a lot too because it wasn't so much like, "can you solve the problem?" Because a lot of the issues that we were bringing up [in that class] were really big like, "how do you fix the education system?" And it was not something that you necessarily come to a solution to, but it was just discussion about it. That was a cool experience because it helped me learn that there isn't always an answer, or a right answer, at least.

When asked, participants commonly referred to certain teachers as having a significant impact on their success. Not only in encouragement, reinforcement of their skills and abilities, and advisement of college going processes, but at times these teachers were also the significant individuals in their lives who assisted in resolving financial challenges.

Financial challenges to college prep. Finances were understandably an issue for students from low-SES backgrounds. While not a challenge necessarily generated from the high school environment, high school students applying for college often gain assistance navigating college costs and financial aid through high school teachers and counselors. When asked about the college application process and college choice, Danielle discusses how money is often a factor in choosing where to apply. Many of her peers decided to live at home while they attended community college, "the financial aspect of it… they were scared of applying to UCs. For me, I actually I didn't know, so it is just like, okay, let's do this." However, when probed about their lack of college cost knowledge, and its impact on applying to more expensive institutions, such as private schools, Danielle responds, "I didn't know [about them]." Adding that she really only knew where to apply by following the guidance of her transcript that outlined requirements for the UCs and CSUs. Instead, Danielle describes how she found out about college admissions requirements such as courses and exams,

> My Transcript. It was just like you have two little, what is called… like categories? One is like to graduate from high school - you need all these credits, like history, English, all that stuff and then UC requirements, the A-G's. Then you see a little section with the SAT scores, and then also a community service section. At the time, I was missing a lot of A-Gs, and looking at all of that I was like, 'hmmm I have to do all that.' But I did ask some teachers from high school who helped me a lot. Yeah, but it was mostly just like going onto websites like figuring out, okay, this is how it works, go to UCs, or there are Cal States, or stay at a community college and then do something else. But it was just pretty much figure it out and just looking for information.

Danielle's experience demonstrates the impact of self-advising, or reliance on systems such as California high school transcripts, can impact where a student chooses to apply. Driving home the point that it appears students need to be self-reliant on systems the institutions already have in place because they cannot afford to have someone else give them the information. Similar to Danielle, other participants, such as Ashley, discuss the ways that the socioeconomic status of

their peers and surrounding community impacted college going. When probed about college application and attendance of her high school peers, Ashley said:

> Um, no not typically [is everyone applying to college]. Half of Santa Maria is pretty low-SES and the other half – Well, I actually come from a small town called Orcutt, which is kind of part of Santa Maria and so I think the rate of kids that went to college was relatively low. I'd say about 20% that went straight to a four-year and then a lot of students went to the junior college in town – Hancock College. So yeah, it was a pretty small percentage of the school. I pretty much mingled with those students because I took classes with those students – AP classes and stuff like that.

For Ashley and other participants, relationships with peers (in particular, other high-achievers) contributed to the development of a strong belief in self, and a focus on being successful. Ashley demonstrates this when she explains:

> Yeah, I had always wanted to get good grades and wanted to go above and beyond. There was never a question – I wouldn't not do my homework, that's just the way I was. I tried really hard to get good grades and I took as many AP classes as I could. Partly because I'd always stuck with a group of students who were known as high-achievers and then I ended up graduating ranked third.

Several of the students in the study were like Ashley in that peer interaction was a source of support. Most participants attempted to surround themselves in friendship groups with similar college-going ideologies, but like Ashley's story, the habitus of the high schools they attended were not always consistent with their own college-going goals. For example, Danielle talks about different peer group perceptions of postsecondary education,

> Some people thought, 'I am going to college,' like it was the only way. Some people thought like, 'I'm just interested in working and going to a community college,' which is actually what most people do. But if you look at my high school graduation rate and the number of people that went to college, the people that went to UCs, Cal States, and community colleges…there was a very small percentage if you are looking at like UCs and Cal States. So, I don't know, I guess they don't see that [college] as important.

When comparing college-going ideologies of her classmates in the U.S. to her classmates in her high school in Mexico, Danielle explains that she believes the difference lies in what she refers to as, "appreciation."

> I want to say appreciation, like any of my friends in Mexico who would have gotten a free textbook or free lunch, free breakfast. Like it is not like it is so expensive in Mexico. It is just that it is free here [in the U.S.]. The government here is giving all these aids… and you are just not using it, you are just not caring. So I guess, my peers here in high school like they did not realize what they have.

Advisement via teachers, mentors, counselors, and peers has shown to all have an impact on college choice. Another significant factor found to have an impact on students' college choice and attendance process is socioeconomic status. Low-SES students have been found to attend community colleges as a means of saving money, and are often suggested to do so by mentors, peers, family, teachers, and counselors. However, some of the participants in this study were active in the decision to attend a community college and made this decision as a strategy to their long-term goal. Participants employing this strategy were confident that they would be most successful in making this decision.

Access strategy: University via the community college. For participants who had transferred to the four-year university (n=10), there was something significant about this access strategy. Community colleges played a valuable role for high-achieving, low-SES students. Although community colleges have been found in previous research to have a "cooling out" function (Clark, 1960), meaning those who enroll are less likely to attain a baccalaureate degree, the opposite seemed to be true for participants in this study.

Other than their similar background as transfer status, study participants greatly varied in personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, high school attended, and academic involvement. However, all of the participants characterized participation in support programs (e.g. EOPS or Honors) at the community college as critical in their academic trajectories. Despite economic restraints, participants never felt that college opportunities were limited for them, and describe recruitment and counseling offered by special community college programs as playing a critical

role in their identities as successful students despite any negative expectations directed at them. One participant, Luna, reflected her choice to attend community college although she was accepted into a four-year institution (CSU Northridge), "Although I did really good in high school, we didn't have the money for me to go to college. When I graduated high school I was unprepared to, I mean, like… I got into Northridge, but I had no idea like what college was. I just went to the community college because I know it's safe – that, you know, it wouldn't require spending too much money." Luna's experience is an example of one who didn't feel college opportunity was limited for them, as she was accepted into a four-year institution but made the choice to attend a community college. For another participant, Emma, she shares how negative expectations were directed toward her for making the decision to attend a community college first. Emma shared:

> Like you know, I didn't want to be considered dumb going there [community college]. But I realized it was something completely different. I also do think it was for friends and other people who had no idea what they were going to do with their lives or where they were going, but I had already done my own research online. I had gotten into Chapman University but I ultimately decided to go to a community college so that I could save money and later apply to a UC. It was a strategy – a choice, but there is a lot of stigma that I had to face because of it.

Choices like the ones that Emma, Luna, and other participants made left them facing negative expectations of their abilities by peers, teachers, parents, administrators; but in the face of these challenges, they were confident that these were strategic maneuvers, and part of their access strategies to more competitive, highly-selective institutions. This confidence, in part, came from a strong belief in self developed over time between their academic abilities, and support from teachers and other supportive adults.

Experiences with the college curriculum. The personal, familial, and institutional factors identified in research question one functioned in getting participants through college in

similar ways as through high school. However, experiences with the college curriculum in the unique context of UCLA provided students an opportunity to grow and develop further motivation and a stronger belief in self. One very significant way that the college environment and curriculum significantly differed for participants is in the availability of opportunities such as research and study abroad programs. Both intersect with students' academic curriculum, and both were contexts that participants described as contributing to their success. Regardless of previously well-documented obstacles and barriers, the participants in this study approached their college experience as if they were free of barriers and continued to express that they were successful because they chose to be.

Opportunities for research involvement promoted continued academic achievement in courses. These experiences were often directed experiences – where participants were encouraged to engage in these activities by institutional agents such as counselors, faculty, or staff. Other times, participants sought out these experiences after hearing about the positive experience and outcome of participation by their peers. Overall, the opportunity to work alongside the same faculty who were writing the textbooks they were assigned in class had a profound impact on the academic identities of participants. In addition, students reported feeling as if they were contributing to solving a larger issue/problem in society. Rose, for example, discusses how involvement in research has significantly changed her goals since the time she was at the community college and transferred to UCLA. She says:

> At that point I didn't even expect to get that far because being undocumented in high school and after high school like to me it [attending UCLA] was something that was not going to happen. So even when I got accepted – when I got the letter of acceptance it was just so unreal. So I just knew still at that point like okay, my goals can change to something about research because I was kind of introduced to research at the community college level - I was introduced to research through a sociology methods course that I took. The professor there [community college], she actually suggested that I apply or submit for a conference, so I did that before coming to UCLA.

When further probed about her interest in research leading her goals, Rose continued by saying now as a senior at UCLA the exposure to research opportunities has led to her continuing post-baccalaureate, "I am actually applying to graduate school this quarter pursuing a Ph.D. I'm applying anywhere and everywhere. I am getting recruitment emails from the East Cost through the McNair Program and other programs." For Rose, the extensive opportunities presented to her at UCLA and the McNair Scholars Program have really solidified a future that pre-college she did not consider a possibility due to her undocumented status.

Similar to Rose, Danielle talked about how when entering college her goals were just to "graduate and go to med school," but now that she is in her senior year she reflected on the experiences and opportunities she has had at UCLA that have changed her goals. Danielle stated, "my goals have changed for sure because I became more exposed to other options like research. And with grad school, there is more than just med school. I am somewhat still towards med school [attending], but they [my goals] have definitely changed in the way that I am not only seeing med school [as an opportunity]." Danielle continued to describe how finances were also a big part of her future plans and goals. As a Gates Scholar, Danielle has had funding for her undergraduate experience but when asked about what other options have opened up during her time at UCLA and what might help her make her decision she said,

> For sure research, like grad school. Because I'm a Gates Scholar. They do not pay for med school but they do pay for other types of grad school. So that will be easy to do just like go to grad school and do research.

For Danielle in particular, the experience of being a Gates Scholar really left a significant positive impact on her college experience. When asked about the ways that finances have affected her undergraduate college experience, she stated,

> Not really, I am a Gates Scholar so I am pretty good financially. I guess they are affected in a positive way because I get so much and I just have to learn how to manage throughout the quarter. Like it has been not too hard to manage – I even get to send some money home, and spend some money on myself.

It is expected that finances, cost, and the availability of financial aid or fellowship support would contribute to the decision-making process of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In that same regard, Danielle discussed an influential faculty member that she became connected to through her participation in a research program and the support that faculty member offered her, "when I saw Dr. H, she was like 'go to grad school' in the most direct way. She said to 'get into research and get into a lab and I will get you scholarships.'"

Another participant expressed similar enthusiasm about the unique environment provided by UCLA and the benefits and impact of attending UCLA. Alma recounted discussing this recently with a mentor:

> I was actually talking to my mentor about this because we talked about how the name carries a lot of weight it like "Oh UCLA." And I was telling him that when I came in here obviously UCLA has a very strong reputation and the professors are awesome; well not always the professors aren't always and I just learned this that professors aren't there to teach they are there to do their research. Only a few professors actually have a passion for teaching and you can tell because in the way that they teach and in the way they engage with students. But most of all I've gained a lot of skills at UCLA, I've learned a lot about diversity, a lot about being inclusive with communities, I've strengthened many of my morals. I was just learning about this in my training last week it was something about the community principles you know how to be and how not to judge people and listen to their story. I've learned a lot of skills, research skills that are obviously very important. I've learned in terms of study habits or reading and writing I've learned to be more analytical and question rather than just take it as it is, I've learned that that's the biggest thing. And being in sociology that's what I do but those are the biggest things.

Similar to research exposure and the influence of the rigor and UCLA environment on other academic skills, study abroad provided an experience that made students reflective, and broadened their worldviews and ideas of opportunities and goals within their reach. For some students, like Alejandra, the idea of study abroad alone was an accomplishment for a first-

generation college student. This experience provided her intergenerational investment for her family:

> So I started here as an Economics major and Spanish minor, and last year I was studying abroad in Barcelona for six months - which again something no one in my family has done. I have a big family and I was the first one doing that and everyone was happy because I am an example for the next generations. When I came back from Barcelona I told my counselor that I wanted to double major in Spanish and so that's what I am doing now. I wish I'd be able to study abroad again in Latin America.

Not only did Alejandra's experience have significant meaning in her life as an accomplishment and example for future generations, but it also influenced her choices in college such as double majoring.

Danielle, who also went to Barcelona, Spain in her junior year for a summer and two academic quarters, eloquently described what prompted new ways of thinking in her study abroad experience, "It is just like getting to know new cultures and new cities." Danielle also described how she was also particularly interested in her study abroad experiences to better understand her roommates in Los Angeles better, "it was real interesting to me because I got to know more of their culture and where they are from."

Other students' comments about their experience with study abroad included more specific links to their academic experience and future career choices. One example can be seen in Michelle, who did her study abroad along with an internship at a prison in Barcelona. She described the experience as "amazing" saying, "I worked with a psychologist and professionals like social workers. So I was able to see a different world and was able to do interviews and assist programs. It inclined me towards clinical psychology as a career." Michelle continued by saying how she wanted to connect her study abroad and internship experiences with research:

> I want to compare and contrast both prison systems [in Barcelona vs. the U.S.]. I did a research paper over there so have that, so I will be able to compare and contrast both prisons because I joined this organization that's here called Social Students for Justice. It

> is a new organization and basically we want to bring social awareness. It's cool because I did the internship and I have the background to help. I want to bring something positive to this world. I know I am not going to change the world but at least I can try to make a difference along with my friends. It's pretty good, I have a lot of things going on in my mind and this is my senior year so I need to make it happen. This internship really opened my eyes to traveling and seeing the world in a new way. I was able to have a huge impact on those people and now I see things differently.

For participants like Michelle, experiences provided through their college curriculum served to build bridges towards their career and life goals. Other participants had similar responses when asked what kept them most engaged in college during their time at UCLA. While responses varied, one theme that arose was the sense of community provided by the institution. The community that UCLA provided also connected students with other peers and significant mentors. Liz said that her biggest support system was the environment at UCLA. She stated,

> I do not know, I think just the environment, like the atmosphere that we are in; here it is like little this bubble – UCLA. It is just like uplifting and I feel like people expect me to do well. Also like back home like people expect me to like it is just, 'oh Danielle is going to do well, like she is fine,' like it is tough right, but it is it is it is just expected, that expectation. It is a motivation and like also I just have to meet the expectation. I just have to do something.

When further probed about the environment and the most significant relationships therein, Liz continued:

> I definitely have a significant relationship with my AAP tutors, like my PLFs [students she tutors], my co-workers and also faculty members. I find a lot of support there [AAP]. It is really nice, and also you know the PEERS program with my friends and my community is significant. There are some faculty members - I took Chem 14D with Professor G last spring and we kept in touch - He is a really good professor. It is definitely the professors like added to it [support added to academic success].

Nearly every participant had similar experiences about the college curriculum and context as a positive experience that further developed a strong belief in self. Participants reported few setbacks due specifically to the college context, but instead described significant campus relationships with faculty and peers, and challenges in the curriculum as improving their

resilience and ability to avoid pitfalls along the way. How this was done was generally through the development and employment of strategies associated with resilience.

Summary and Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study shed light on the positive factors associated with the development of resilience in high-achieving, low-SES students. Specifically, this study clarified how these factors functioned within the lives of the participants of this study, and the role they played in navigating the unique challenges of high school and college environments. Participants entered college with an understanding of their strengths, and much of this strong belief in self and motivation can be attributed to family, and the unique encouragement types that families employed. Institutions and institutional agents, such as teachers, also had a significant impact on the development of resilience and coping strategies that participants employed in an effort to avoid negative outcomes.

Participants indicated that a combination of their k-12 experiences and their parents shaped their educational aspirations, ideologies, and motivations. The parental encouragement type of struggles and hardship appeared to have the biggest impact on participants as they navigated the challenges of K-12 and made decisions regarding college. This encouragement type was a result of what participants perceived to be important in the conditions and struggles their parents faced—translating to messages of empowerment and motivation that provided context to participants developing awareness of social inequities and their opportunity for mobility. For all encouragement types, the theme of educational value was explicit in students' perceptions of their parents' messages. Self-interpretation of these messages was the most important piece of the encouragement types, as it was not always what parents said directly in their messages, but instead how students interpreted these messages in their own experiences.

This finding is consistent with Ceja's (2004) research on the role of parents in developing educational resiliency for Chicana college aspirations. The findings of the current study echo Ceja's conclusion urging researchers to continue to unpack the role of parental encouragement, and for schools and administrators to acknowledge the important role that parents play in the educational pursuits of their children—despite their own limited knowledge of the U.S. higher education system.

In summary, the findings presented here portray participants' development of resilience - or the consciousness, or mental outlook, which allows them to form a critical perspective and succeed despite challenging circumstances. Using the resilience framework, the participants in this study have been able to successfully negotiate the various environments (e.g. social, institutional, familial) that could pose a positive or negative impact on their educational aspirations and goals. Using the resilience along with the Harper (2012) framework, allowed for an understanding of what specific factors contributed to the development of resilience and how the factors functioned in doing so.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This concluding chapter offers an overview of the dissertation and the significant findings from this study on the experiences of high-achieving, low-socioeconomic college seniors at a highly-selective institution, in an effort to gain a better understanding of the conditions that help some low-SES students excel academically despite challenging circumstances. First, a restatement of the problem will be presented, as it served as the motivation for this study, along with the research questions that guided the study, shaped data collection, and findings. Second, a summary of the key findings will be presented along with an interpretation of the findings and comparison to the significant themes found in previous literature. A critical analysis of any gaps or similarities will be discussed for each theme, as well as a discussion of alternative findings and existing tensions. Third, a summary of the implications for theory, research, policy, and practice will be presented. Finally, the dissertation will conclude with remarks that serve to close the study in an effort to counter the current deficit perspective that dominates discourse on low-socioeconomic students in higher education.

Restatement of the Problem

The benefits of a college degree are greater than ever, yet low-socioeconomic status students continue to have lower college enrollment and completion rates than their more affluent counterparts (Kahlenberg, 2004). Despite the growing demand for college-educated workers, college access and attainment remains unequal. Nearly half of all higher-SES families have earned a bachelor's degree by the age of 25, compared to just 1 in 10 from lower-SES families (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Further, colleges and universities have grown much more competitive, meaning that access to college has become much more restricted over the years

(Bound, Hershbein, & Long, 2009). Given an increase in college enrollment and completion has become a national priority, these disparities in the college preparation enrollment, and graduation of lower-SES students have garnered attention from the White House, as the President has developed a Call to Action for increasing college opportunity for low-income students (USEOP, 2014).

Extant literature, as well as the President's Call to Action, has focused attention on the major barriers facing low-income and low-socioeconomic status students. Conversely, a fraction of research has focused on the successes of lower-SES students throughout their educational trajectories. While most research has focused on the barriers, it does suggest that lower-SES students must be supported throughout their K-12 educational experience in an effort to increase the pool of students who are prepared for college (ACT, 2008; 2012) as well as support the development of college aspirations and the transition to college (Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Venzia & Jaeger, 2013). However, these improvements will not come without observing the successes of those low-SES students who have proven successful in academic achievement.

The purpose of this study was to use an anti-deficit approach in examining the educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving students from low-SES backgrounds. The questions that guided this research are the following:

1. What personal, familial, and institutional factors contribute to the educational success of high-achieving, low-SES students?
2. How do these factors function as facilitators of college opportunity despite any challenges that complicate and undermine their achievement?
3. Do the high school and college environments present any particular challenges? And how do these factors assist in successfully navigating these environments?

Methodology

This study employed both a phenomenological and narrative qualitative method, guided by the perspective that the essence of one's experience is best described by participants (Creswell, 2009) and recounting narratives is a central way of making sense of one's experience (Seidman, 2013). The main sources of data collection were background demographic information surveys, one-on-one interviews with 21 participants, and three focus groups with 12 participants. The sample of participants included high-achieving, low-SES college seniors at UCLA. Participants varied in racial and ethnic composition, as well as gender, and whether participants started at UCLA as freshman or transfer students. However, participants shared similar experiences due to the overlapping identity as low-SES students. As a result of my openness to sharing my experience as a high-achieving, low-SES student, meaningful interactions surfaced and rich narratives were formed.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study were presented in two distinct sections and addressed the three research questions guiding the study. The first part of the findings focused the first research question and identified the personal, familial, and institutional factors that participants described as contributing to their success despite any challenges. The second part of the findings section focused on the themes emerging from the data that related to how the factors functioned in getting participants to college, and successfully through college. The second part of the findings section focused on answering the second and third research questions. The conclusions and significance of the findings are presented here.

Part I: Overview of Personal, Familial, and Institutional Factors

The first research question focused on identifying the factors that contributed to the educational success of high-achieving, low-SES students, despite the well-documented challenges. The first part of the findings chapter presented an assessment of participants' responses regarding these factors, using the combined lenses of resilience theory and Harper's (2010; 2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework. This was motivated by an effort to better understand the factors contributing to successful academic achievement and a desire to examine factors more closely by using the personal, familial, and institutional framework provided by Harper. Additionally, this closer examination into these factors also led to a better understanding of the experiences that appeared to be instrumental for all participants by providing the means of developing coping strategies that enabled them to avoid negative outcomes.

Personal, institutional, and familial factors. Using the Harper framework (2010; 2012) in this study as a microscope of the resilience framework enabled the identification of the most influential personal, familial, and institutional factors that contributed to the development of resilience within these students that enabled continued academic success (see table 5.1 for full listing of the factors identified by participants). However, the findings of this study both build on and diverge from Harper's framework. Participant stories in this study capture how access to resources, individuals, information, and opportunities led to success – and in this case, ultimately toward upward mobility. From participants' perspectives, this all occurred through an integration of Harper's personal, familial, and institutional factors. Without exception, the 21 high-achievers in this study stated that different types of familial encouragement, teamed with positive institutional agents led to the development of a strong belief in self – that all contributed to

academic achievement. Given that the results were analyzed using Harper's framework, these findings are consistent with findings from Harper's previous studies (2005; 2010; 2012).

Table 5.1
Personal, Familial, & Institutional Factors

Personal
Development of strong belief in self
Development of coping strategies
Relationships with peers
Familial
Family & other supportive adults
Immigrant family experiences
English not parents' first language
1st generation college experience
Institutional
Supportive institutional agents
Participation in special programs, activities, & courses

In sum, the Harper framework (2010) is mostly about the questions researchers ask, and encourages "instead of" queries – "instead of relying on existing theories and conceptual models to repeatedly examine deficits" (pg. 68) – that researchers should use the Harper framework to deliberately attempt to understand how some students are successful despite challenges. Using Harper's framework as a lens within resilience theory is where the findings of this study diverge from Harper's framework. Instead of relying on deficit-laden reinforcements of low-SES student underachievement in the social science and education literature, and instead of relying on resilience theory alone which places responsibility of achievement and success primarily on the effort of the individual – an anti-deficit inquiry instead considers cultural, economic, historic, and institutional contexts. In this way, I was able to demonstrate that low-SES students are not a "monolithic group of individuals who all make the same choices, approach college in the same way, or respond identically to different learning environments" (Harper, 2004; pg. 14). Thus, for the participants in this study the factors participants utilized from the Harper framework

demonstrated the cultivation of a larger purpose connected to the social uplift of themselves and their families, and is related to existing studies using critical resilience frameworks (Campa, 2010).

Overall participants indicated that their families were the most significant contributors to how they perceived their goals, shaped their aspirations, and experienced their K-12 and college education. Participants' relationships with their families were complex, as they appeared to influence all of the other factors participants identified as contributing to their success. With regard to family as the biggest factor, Michelle remarked:

> My parent's philosophy. It influenced like the way I think, like having my feet on the ground, how I feel [about] the work ethic, how I am supposed to work. Be responsible, patience, being determined, moving step by step… getting back up and not giving up… like who I am I think really it is because of my parents. Family is the best.

This role of family expressed by participants is not surprising – as family and family support does function in some expected ways. Consistent with similar findings about family being very connected and influential to students' educational aspirations and motivations (Ceja, 2004; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler et al, 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992), participants in this study were deeply tied to their families' histories, lived experiences, and culture. The findings of this study also demonstrate the influence of family on the development of the personal factors identified (strong belief in self, development of coping strategies) and how participants employed those. This can be seen in the above example of Michelle as she lists personal characteristics and traits she has used to succeed – personal characteristics and traits that she attributes her parents to instilling in her. What became interesting and novel in the findings were related not to the identification of these factors, but how they functioned and how they actually helped participants to overcome their socioeconomic status disadvantage. Further discussion of the function of these factors will be fully discussed in part two of the discussion.

The family and achievement relationship is in line with previous inquiry into those variables (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler et al, 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992) but the relationship between family and achievement as explored in this study is surprising given the background demographic characteristics of the families involved. It is clear from the literature on the role of family that parental support and encouragement are influential factors in the development of students' aspirations and ideologies (Ceja, 2004; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler et al, 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992). What emerges from the findings of research question one then, is the unique factors identified by this specific group of high-achieving, low-SES students and how they are characterized as playing a role in their lives and success. Current literature suggests that some of these factors (e.g. immigrant family experiences, English as second language for parents) might predict low achievement (Berg, 2010; Horn & Chen, 1998; Carnevale & Rose, 2004).

Although the role of family is considered key, the current deficit lines of inquiry have concentrated primarily on explaining the achievement gap through the adverse effects of familial practices – such as the value of education in a first-generation college household (i.e. the assumption that no value is placed on postsecondary education) (Berg, 2010; Wilson, 1987). However, here it is argued that the presence of these factors may in fact contribute to persistence and high-achievement. Similar to other studies (Calaff, 2009; Campa, 2010; Ceja, 2004; Gandara, 1995; Solorzano, 1998), this study demonstrates the high value that these families place on education. Although current discourse is fueled by deficit perspectives, this study attempts to show how families express to their children the importance of academic success and its relationship to upward mobility by encouraging their children to succeed and assist in navigating that process.

Finally, the identification of these factors begins to provide specific examples of what these factors may look like for high-achieving, low-SES students and can begin to shed light on the possible relationship between different personal, familial, and institutional factors and how they influence the development of resiliency.

Resilience and coping strategies. While achievement levels seemed to be the most interesting factor regarding differences in shaping the educational ideologies and aspirations of low-SES students in this study, it is clear that the successes of these students can be attributed to much more than academic preparation prior to college application and enrollment. A strong belief in self and the development of the personal characteristics and traits were described as essential in the success stories of the participants in this study. Participants also reported their belief in self and personal characteristics as informed by family and institutional agents. Other significant institutional factors had to do with teachers and classrooms that both supported and challenged students. Participants overwhelmingly discussed challenging curriculum as something that further developed their aspirations and strong belief in self. Teachers who were willing to share their personal histories and journeys with students made all the difference. Multiple participants reported the value of sharing personal stories and cultures as a significant factor that had an impact on their aspirations and college choice process. When educators connected with students and their families, this further reinforced students personal belief that they were capable of pursuing careers they may have thought of as out of reach.

These findings are consistent with literature used more widely in K-12 educational research and practice (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Dweck, 2006; Tough, 2013). In this line of inquiry, educators work with students in ways to highlight their assets early on and this can lead to better performance academically. Notably, the personal characteristics students reported as

essential, teamed with their academic success seemed to ultimately mitigate the need for any traditionally valued cultural capital. It is important to note that the findings of this study are not emphasizing individual agency as solely responsible for the success of these students. Nor is this a call to feature rugged individualism as a virtue that has any value – as that idea is dangerous and false. Instead, there is something significant to be said in the way that dominant theories focus on deficits and lack of capital in ways that some low-SES students (e.g. high-achieving) have no experience with. While their individual strong belief and intellectual competence seem to mitigate the need for traditional capital, it is only in tandem with support from family and institutional agents who focus on the values and strengths of these students. These findings and discussion are consistent with the research on the influence of cultural characteristics exhibited by immigrant families that facilitate their development of resiliency in the face of adversity and support their success in their educational pursuits (Calaff, 2009; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

However, it is also important to note the use of resilience theory in my analysis and interpretations of the data. As discussed in the conceptual framework section of chapter two, resiliency and resilience theory are based on the idea that individuals develop high levels of competency and demonstrate positive coping strategies – despite stressful and problematic environments (Reis et al., 2005; Spina, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000; Wang et al., 1995; Winfield, 1991). The resilience framework is often used in educational research to understand the phenomena of those students who "succeed against all odds," but there has also been criticism of this usage as "romanticizing adversity" by those taking a more critical approach. These critiques also include how more conventional frameworks consider resiliency as more individualistic and culturally biased when applied in this way (Spina, 1997; Stanton-Salazar &

Spina, 2000). Thus, Spina (1997) cautions that resiliency is not universal and is not necessarily about the outcome, but instead the response that individuals develop. Important from this discussion to the findings of this study is the alternative interpretation that it is possible the participants in this study only *appeared* resilient because they did not perceive the challenges discussed in chapter four and here as a risk factor.

Part II: Getting To and Through College

The second and third research questions and corresponding findings focused on how the factors identified in part one functioned within participants' experience and two main themes surfaced across the research questions. The two themes were familial involvement: encouragement types, and academic preparation and experiences with college curriculum. Across all participants, familial encouragement types served to provide participants with aspirations, motivations, the development of a strong belief in self, and resilience. The academic preparation and experiences with the college curriculum provided unique sets of challenges that explicitly demonstrated the ways that the factors functioned and contributed to the development of resilience that enabled participants to successfully navigate these challenges.

Familial involvement: Encouragement Types. When using the Harper (2010, 2012) framework to gain a better understanding of how family functioned in assisting with this, family and other significant adults (e.g. teachers who came from similar cultural backgrounds or had shared histories with the students) reinforced the ideas of college as the only option, usually it seemed by parents using stories of their experiences and challenges as motivators.

A college going-mentality was present in nearly all of the households of the participants of this study, despite the lack of first-hand experience parents and other significant family members had with college. When considering the role that cultural capital plays in mediating

access to elite higher education institutions (Bourdieu, 1977), we would assume that the participants of this study, coming from lower-class backgrounds, would "lack" the high status cultural capital that would be valued in elite institutions. These traditional models of social and cultural capital have focused on the central importance of building capital for low-SES and first-generation college students, as a lack of social and cultural capital has been cited as one of the many reasons low-SES students fail to succeed in their educational trajectories. Given this, educators and policymakers continue to develop initiatives based on traditional capital theories – intending to provide students who participate with the capital they "lack" (Coylar, 2011). However, despite most participants coming from households with little to no experience with college, participants and their families still cultivated and maintained an emphasis on college going. Parents supported participants as they sought out resources such as tutoring, support programs, and college prep. Participants and their parents never questioned getting to college, but instead focused their efforts on *how* to get there. While this is a departure from previous research on the role of lower-income parents involvement in education and the belief that it is best left in the hands of school personnel (Lareau, 1993), the focus should be more on *how* families and school agents function together to share resources and emphasize access to more selective institutions.

Most significant is the high expectations set by family and other important adults. Different from the Levine and Nidiffer study (1996), where participants reported that their primary institutions (family, schools, churches, etc.) failed them, participants in this study overwhelmingly reported positive family and institutional experiences as responsible for their success. High expectations set by family and other significant adults helped participants to set high goals and prepare for various routes to get to their end goals. Although the participants in

this study recognized that their high schools did not prepare them for college, they acknowledged certain school agents (teachers) as guiding them to particular institutions. These findings are consistent with previous research on the experiences of the impact of school agents guiding educational outcomes (Griffin & Allen, 2006; McDonough, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Specifically related to the three encouragement types outlined in this study - struggles and hardship, development of autonomy, and helpless neglect - finding meaning in these encouragement types was an important source of motivation for participants. These encouragement types demonstrate *how* the familial factors functioned within participants' experiences and continued success. The three encouragement types in this study not only define types of parental influence and messages that encourage college aspirations and motivation, but also show the differences in how participants interpreted their parents messages, and how they contributed to the development of resilience for participants. These encouragement types add to previous research by highlighting three effective strategies used in some families to encourage college aspirations and motivation. Although there is great diversity within the low-SES student population, these encouragement types provide explicit examples and reveal certain methods used by low-SES families to transmit educational messages. With greater understanding of the familial encouragement types and their influence in developing a sense of resiliency among low-SES students, interventions to help and support low-SES students can be better targeted to meet their needs.

The specific examination of the role of familial factors using the combined frameworks of this study proved useful in uncovering the encouragement types and uncovering how participants were able to interpret the meaning behind the well-documented realities of barriers and challenge to one of motivation. Recognizing the challenges parents have faced, morals and

values parents are attempting to instill, or the feelings of inadequacy parents sometimes had regarding college knowledge led to the resiliency that allowed them to surpass perceived challenges.

Academic preparation and experiences with college curriculum. The unique challenges present in the K-12 and college contexts and how participants navigated those environments were central to understanding how the personal, familial, and institutional factors functioned in these experiences. Most participants reported feeling underprepared for college, however shortly after the transition to UCLA they rebounded from this. However, this finding is still significant and concerning because as the results chapter discussed – some participants reported coming from high resourced schools, and others admitted to their school having little to no resources – yet despite these differences, participants were still not entering college feeling prepared.

Participants noted the importance of critical learning experiences as an institutional factor that shaped their aspirations and influenced their access strategies to a more selective institution. Given this, introducing course material that engages critical thinking, as well as materials that include race, culture and class related experiences seemed to have the ability to encourage more selective college enrollment early on. It is through these critical learning experiences that participants were able to better understand the role of privilege and oppression and thus reported not feeling as marginal in their experience as previous research assumes. Instead, participants felt empowered and discussed that while they were keenly aware of social class differences and the opportunities that are afforded to some over others, there was never a question that they would not succeed. While they knew the role that income and social class played in their journey through K-12 and into higher education, they were able to navigate the choices available to them

in ways that seemed they were not interested in "accumulating" capital or adopting any unfamiliar cultural norms. Again, through a deficit based lens, postsecondary programs and services aimed at increasing low-SES student degree completion levels often focuses on the lack of "insider knowledge" or important networks that low-SES students possess – and attempts to cultivate this type of capital for students. Rather, in the case of the participants in this study, they were armed with their own intellectual competence and the asset of understanding sociopolitical conditions in ways that made them focus on taking advantage of educational opportunities vs. accumulate traditional capital. Thus, the findings of this study demonstrate that academic achievement itself appears to be its own asset.

There is only one study (McLoughlin, 2011) that proposes a new capital hierarchy for institutions to use with high-achieving, low-income students, which places intellectual capital ahead of cultural and economic capital in terms of importance. However, the author explains that this is a very context-specific type of capital, given that elite institutions value and privilege intellectual capital, making a student's income level not as salient. Thus, in these settings intellectual capital may be the dominant capital that is essential in getting into college and doing well. I argue in this dissertation that it is important to further examine the contextual influences which make cultural capital more or less salient for college bound students, as well as how academic achievement levels, or intellectual competence, intersect with or mitigate cultural capital. Understanding that the high-achieving, lower-income students in this study appear to identify a "lack" of the capital we perceive as important as not really important to their experience means that we need to not just re-think the theoretical models we use to understand the development and access of social and cultural capital for students, but also what personal and intellectual factors students have that make capital acquisition and usage unnecessary.

Implications for Theory

The frameworks that guided this study were resilience theory (Reis et al., 2005; Spina, 1997; Wang et al., 1995; Winfield, 1991) and the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (Harper, 2010; 2012). Resilience theory has been used in educational research in a number of studies on highly resilient students of color (Ceja, 2004; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000) and has been suggested by these studies to use this theory in understanding how students are able to achieve academically while negotiating challenging social, economic, and cultural forces (Ceja, 2004; Reis et al., 2005; Wang et al., 1995; Winfield, 1991). Resilience has been considered the likelihood of success despite challenging circumstances and adversities within the environment (Wang et al., 1995). The work of Harper (2010; 2012) with the development of the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework provided a deeper investigation into specific personal, familial, and institutional factors that might contribute to, and help us better understand and explain, the development of resilience.

In this study, these frameworks were used to provide an appropriate analytical lens for understanding how the personal, familial, and institutional factors identified by high-achieving, low-SES students functioned in their educational experiences. The goal was to better understand what contributed to continued success despite the well-documented challenges that low-SES students face in their educational experiences (Berg, 2010; Kahlenberg, 2004; Radford, 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007), and to also better understand how these factors worked, how participants interpreted their challenges, and what they do to navigate new challenges presented in the educational environment.

For example, participants indicated that the encouragement of their families played a critical role, and for parents who used the struggles and hardship encouragement type – this

made their children aware of the challenges their parents have had to face, and how their parents often existed on the margins of society. These understandings and interpretations often led to an awareness of larger social inequities and the steps that would need to be taken to ensure economic and social mobility for themselves and their families. The discoveries of sociopolitical forces that limited opportunities for their families and others then became the catalysts for participants to do well in school, and often led to selecting majors that would lead to careers where they could make social change. Alongside family, participants witnessed these struggles, hardships, and inequities within their peers in their communities. In describing his comparison between himself at UCLA and his peers from his home community, Angel said:

> Among my friends, a good number of them dropped out in high school and went to continuation school - it wasn't for them. Now, they're jumping around jobs - security jobs. You know, kind of in that cycle of "who knows where it's going to end up in the next six months?" And so, that was the safety for me in pursuing education: Because one, I know that I have the potential and capacity to and I could push myself to do it. There's also a satisfaction in just learning new things, especially more so now that I've stepped out of the environment that nurtured me, but also growing up poor, growing up on the streets, that also harms you and your friends. Sometimes, I feel a little lost because sometimes I'm just spitting theory or other times I find ways to reconnect with them: "I learned this in this classroom in that class." And it's so crazy because we've experienced this and we've never had a language for it. And so, in that sense, this path is really rewarding. But it's the fact that I've had [this] realization, not that there are more things expected of me, necessarily, but that with where I'm from and who I am and what I can accomplish for the people around me, this really isn't about me anymore. I'm still really worrying about my friends back at home. What's happening with him or her? This person got pregnant; this person is homeless. I'm not there for them.

In this example, theories taking a deficit approach, and much of the previous literature on low-SES students would indicate that a student such as Angel, is “at-risk” or has a high probability of failing to persist in school and graduate, or might be likely to suffer other negative outcomes. Previous theories and research focusing on “at-risk” or “high-risk” students and deficiencies implied the need to develop educational policies and practices that would remediate, or make low-SES students “equal” to their more affluent counterparts (see Kahlenberg, 2004; Terenzini et

al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). One such theoretical orientation that is used in this is social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986) which has been used to better understand the traditionally valued forms of capital and the relationship between these and successes or failures in schooling (Hossler et al., 1999; Lareau, 2003; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; McDonough, 1997; Radford, 2013).

Currently, the way we think about capital is in terms of the way cultural capital continues to perpetuate privilege and power. Cultural capital is thought of as class-based "good" which privilege more affluent students over others. Theoretically speaking, the amount of cultural capital one possesses influences the worldview they have – which in turn maintains inequalities. Therefore, using this lens would mean that students in the current study would have more limited ideologies, aspirations, and therefore college access strategies, yet that was not the case. While it might be more fair to say that the students in this study did not possess the habitus, or system of dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984) that their higher-SES peers at UCLA did, the participants of this study did not view their educational experience and opportunities at UCLA as inferior or from a negative perspective. Instead, the participants of this study viewed their challenges as providing them with unique skills (resilience and coping skills) that allowed them to pursue opportunities and appreciate them. Having families who have immigrated to the United States with little to no educational experience, living in impoverished communities, and not having exposure to English at home may seem to be challenges that would lead to negative outcomes and provide limited choices for participants – instead, the participants of this study described these factors advantageously, providing with values and resources they compared their high-SES peers as lacking.

These values and resources have been overlooked in traditional notions of social and

cultural capital. Yosso (2005) proposed an alternative capital theory, Community Cultural Wealth, that is applicable to marginalized populations such as low-SES students, and students of color. Her theory incorporates ideas from current emerging research that challenge contemporary norms on race in society, and uses a critical race approach (Solórzano, 1998). In essence, this theory views individual capital accumulation as having dominant advantages, and instead Yosso describes six alternate types of capital (aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, navigational, and resistant) that socially vulnerable populations posses and which help aid in their success in institutions such as colleges and universities. Yosso (2005) has proposed that the current understanding of capital is, in fact, that dominant groups (such as Whites, or higher-SES students) are wealthy in capital, while marginalized groups are poor. In other words, institutions such as colleges and universities continue to value only these traditional forms of capital possessed by more privileged students. The implications of this are that if these alternative forms of capital are not recognized despite their ability to help marginalized students succeed. Educators and policymakers are therefore lacking the capacity to promote these forms of capital and instead may jeopardize and stifle them. When working from this theoretical orientation alone, however, we may be missing an understanding of how resilience is developed – and how this plays into the relationship between capital and achievement. In particular, how the relationship between community cultural wealth and the development of resilience plays into the achievement and success of high-achieving, low-SES students. In this way, additional research should be approached with an anti-deficit approach, in tandem with capital theories and research.

By applying a more critical approach to resilience theory (Spina, 1997) and the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (Harper, 2010; 2012), and taking into consideration capital theories such as community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005; 2006), I am attempting to revisit and

expand upon our traditional – and often deficit views – of what we consider as challenges and barriers, as well as strengths for students. This dissertation served as an attempt to reframe how we understand the factors involved in academic success for low-SES students, and how these frameworks might speak to one another in doing so. Focusing on high-achieving students allowed me to hone in on success stories and further pointed to a disconnect between what we consider in educational research, policy, and practice as barriers and what is actually valued by some of our top-talent as having a significant influence on their success. This study is a starting point to guide current discourse and construct new asset-based narratives about low-SES students.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Higher education is seen as a vehicle for economic and social mobility and upward mobility is a goal to lower-SES students as they strive to achieve economic independence for themselves and their families. However, in order to achieve these goals, both K-12 and college practitioners need to redefine how they view and value the capital and assets that low-SES students possess. For the participants in this study, college going was never really a question. Every participant, regardless of early achievement levels in K-12, mentioned knowing they would go to college. Participants knew early on that college was the only possible option for what they wanted to pursue in their lives, and their goals of upward mobility for themselves and their families. In addition to the theoretical implications addressed in the discussion, the findings from this study have important implications for policy and practice. Researchers, faculty, and professionals in K-12 and higher education settings must recognize the significant role that income and socioeconomic status play in the lives of their students beyond the challenges and barriers already well documented. Instead, understanding how students perceive their

socioeconomic status, related challenges, and available supports is critical in understanding their aspirations and experiences related to their educational pursuits. Taking this step alone will help in disrupting the way institutions privilege traditional forms of capital. As discussed in the implications for theory section, previous theories and research focusing on high-risk students take a deficit approach and would suggest the development of educational policies and practices that would make low-SES students "equal" to their more affluent counterparts. It is upon the suggestion of this study, however, to disrupt and redefine our notions of capital and instead suggest educational policies and practices that would take into account the alternative forms of capital the participants of this study utilize. For students in this study, they knew they were from low-SES backgrounds; yet saw their families' background characteristics as strengths, which were advantageous in their pursuit of higher education.

K-12 Administrators

The K-12 educational experiences of participants all varied to some degree, but there seemed to be significant overlap in terms of academic preparation, K-12 institutional resources, and high school advisement and support. Most participants replied that their high schools did not prepare them for college. However, despite feeling underprepared what was most interesting was the significant role of teachers within participants' experience. For the participants in this study, teachers provided significant amounts of support outside of teaching the curriculum. They were often the gateway to college prep knowledge that was not available at home. Teachers also provided participants with many the formulas and steps to be successful in the K-12 environment that they later successfully employed in new college environments to avoid negative outcomes. Thus, it seems important then to reconsider the role of teachers in college prep process beyond academic instruction. Also significant from the findings was the importance of teachers and

mentors who had similar cultural backgrounds and upbringing as participants. These relationships provided participants with models of others who have achieved with similar background characteristics. K-12 institutions need to focus hiring efforts on teachers and administrators with shared backgrounds as the students enrolled in their schools. Teachers and administrators who came from the same communities, share racial and/or ethnic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and SES backgrounds will all prove critical in the success of the students enrolled in their schools. Additionally, training and encouragement for teachers to share their lived experiences with students, and even parents, seems that it would be fruitful in K-12 student success.

Finally, at the K-12 level, program development centered on the parental encouragement types outlined in this dissertation, including how that influences college knowledge and motivation is important. More specifically, involving family in the curriculum, school events, and workshops in ways where teachers and school administrators can focus on and recognize the value families add, using theoretical models such as community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to do so, schools can explicitly offer examples to students of how the assets their parents possess can support them along their educational journeys. By recognizing family assets (e.g. immigration status, English as second language, encouragement type) and redefining our notions of capital with students early on in the educational pipeline, teachers and administrators can possibly support more low-SES students through K-12 and onto college. Centering programs on family assets, backgrounds, and knowledge, as well as understanding how students perceive their parent's encouragement and their family SES is critical in understanding their aspirations and experiences related to their educational pursuits.

College Administrators

Overwhelmingly, participants responded very positively about their college experiences at UCLA. While the initial transition to college, either from high school or as a transfer student from a community college, provided the most shock and doubt in their abilities, it wasn't long into their experience at UCLA that participants reported they felt more confident in any of their abilities that they doubted, felt a sense of support from the institution, and were academically successful. However, given differences reported on this transition between freshman and transfer admits, I offer recommendations that can be implemented at the university level that seemed to be most effective across the data gleaned from interviews and focus groups.

First and foremost, college administrators must change the way they conduct recruitment, admissions, and advisement of low-SES students. To follow suit from the theoretical and K-12 implications, college administrators must move away from current understandings and valuation of capital – in that dominant groups are wealthy in capital, while marginalized groups are poor. In other words, colleges and universities currently continue to value only traditional forms of capital possessed by more privileged students. The implications of this are that alternative forms of capital, such as community cultural wealth and resilience, are not recognized despite their ability to help marginalized students succeed. Currently, instead of redefining our notions of capital and reconstructing what counts as capital in processes such as recruitment, admissions, and advising, institutions build support programs for admitted students that attempt to "build" traditional forms of capital for low-SES students. Instead, recruitment and admissions processes should include ways to value Yosso's (2005) six alternative types of capital (aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, navigational, and resistant) that socially vulnerable populations posses and which help aid in their success in colleges and universities. Instead of placing such high

value on activities such as service learning, honors and AP courses, and other activities that privileged groups dominate, admissions processes and college advisors should value activities such as working throughout high school, navigating high school graduation and college admission policies with little to no assistance, and familial backgrounds such as immigrating and English as a second language as highly valued forms of capital.

Additionally, understanding how students perceive their socioeconomic status is pertinent in servicing and supporting these students. For the participants of this study, their low-SES status was not as salient to them as their academic competence and achievement. It isn't that they do not identify as low-SES, but rather they perceive their background characteristics as strengths – and very advantageous to them in their pursuit of higher education. The high-achievement abilities of the participants of this study in tandem with the resources and support within the institutional context of UCLA, this is a possible explanation as to why the findings of this study are not consistent with literature on low-income students in general (Berg, 2010; Kahlenberg, 2004; Radford, 2013; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). The participants of this study did not seem to struggle in a highly-selective, elite college environment (Bowen & Bok, 1998) and instead thrived from the opportunities presented to them at UCLA. The participants of this study were also not at risk of failing out of courses, nor did there seem to be any concerns about their persistence throughout their experience.

Instead, participants in this study seemed to take advantage of every opportunity – such as research opportunities and study abroad experiences. Participants also engaged with academic courses to the extent that several were interested in double-majoring, and minoring. The only challenges were often gaining access to some of these experiences (e.g. faculty for research opportunities, financial aid for study abroad, timely advising for adding double-majors and

minors within four-year graduation timeline). This suggests that it is not necessarily creating more opportunities and support, but rather better advising about how and when to access these opportunities and more education and outreach regarding how to access faculty for research programs.

Similarly, college costs were expected to be a challenge that were present for participants in this study – and a theme that is very consistent with the literature on low-income students. What was different, however, was that it was not the cost of application and enrollment at UCLA that was a challenge for students, but instead that they had to sacrifice certain opportunities because of money. For some students this was leadership opportunities, participation in certain organizations, internships, additional study abroad opportunities, or summer school. Some participants described not being able to participate in additional research opportunities due to time constraints with their classes and the employment that was required of them in order to maintain their living expenses. Currently, colleges and universities are seen as the vehicle that equalizes the opportunity structure, reducing inequality, and promoting social mobility (McMurrer & Sawhill, 1998; Rank, 2004; Sawhill & Morton, 2007; USEOP, 2014). However, if this is the case, then it seems that colleges and universities need to improve the financial support available to students beyond current financial aid packages that cover the cost of room, board, and other expenses. Clearly the expenses related to truly participating in college and taking advantage of wonderful learning opportunities far exceed what we currently consider as college cost. Additionally, as evidence by the findings of this study – the factors that contributed to achievement had so much more to do with the experiences out of the classroom. Suggesting a better assessment of current college costs at the institution level is necessary in order to better understand if the aid awarded to students is really sufficient.

Responses by most participants also suggest that they felt academic support programs and services were available if they needed them. Most reported they knew they were there, but did not need them. However, when more specifically probed about any experiences with academic challenges during college, most participants also reported times where they had difficultly with exams, papers, or general course content. However, many academic support services seem to focus on writing and course support for general education writing courses and pre-requisite level courses in majors, etc. Another example of participant responses to these prompts was that they often felt that the support services are there for other students who "might need them more." What this means is that colleges and universities may find that high-achieving students might benefit from more robust, specialized, services for low-SES students who are achieving at the highest levels. Given that the participants in this study also employed strategies previously learned in other contexts, having the necessary resources and supports in place when these students are confronting challenges might make students employ those strategies and formulas with more ease, thus supporting their success.

Finally, given the increased importance and national attention (USEOP, 2014) on increasing access and completion of low-SES students, continuing outreach and transition efforts for low-SES students is imperative. Programs such as Upward Bound, the Posse Foundation, and UCLA's Center for Community College Partnerships (CCCP), and the Academic Advancement Program (AAP) all recruit disadvantaged students, many high-achieving, and provide advising, mentoring, workshops, and assistance in seeking financial support. These successful programs should be replicated, as all participants that participated in these support programs characterized their participation as critical in their academic trajectories. For the community college participants, they described the recruitment and counseling offered by special programs, such as

UCLA's transition program offered through AAP – the Transfer Summer Program (TSP) as playing a critical role in their identities as college students despite any negative expectations directed at them. Future university policy and practice should include these elements, as well as attempt to strengthen the transfer pathway for students who access the university via the community college.

Policy

Policymakers currently lack the capacity to promote the alternative forms of capital previously discussed, and instead may jeopardize and stifle their development. Following the lead of K-12 and college administrators, policymakers work from the orientation of valuing the capital of traditional students. Similar to the suggestions in the implications for K-12 and college administrator sections, policymakers also need to consider the factors that contribute to and help to better understand the development of resilience, given the relationship between community cultural wealth and the resilience play into the achievement and success of high-achieving, low-SES students. What this means is instead of developing policies that assist in "remediating" or making low-SES students "equal" to their more affluent counterparts (see Kahlenberg, 2004; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007), policies need to emphasize the cultivation of low-SES students' assets and values. One such way this might happen is in transfer policies given that community colleges often play a key role in the success or failure of low-SES students. Moving beyond access, policies need to consider the community cultural wealth, assets, and resilience of students and make use of family in ways to help low-SES students thrive in community college environments. The low-SES students in this study understand how to navigate challenges and make use of the resources they have, but community college policies can help to recognize and enhance these strengths as they advise and assist in the transfer process.

It is not a new finding that financial aid matters and as mentioned in the results, as well as in the implications for college administrators, financial aid and financial issues are significant stressors for low-SES students. As discussed in the implications for college administrators, colleges and universities need to improve college costs. However, federal financial aid policies also need to be improved. In the President's Call to Action (2014), changes in financial aid policy are outlined as efforts to help keep college affordable. These efforts include increasing the maximum Pell Grant award, while also expanding access to more students; introducing new tax credits to help pay for college; and changing student loan repayment options. Additionally, President Obama also outlined a plan to keep college costs from rising by compensating colleges and universities based on their performance. While these efforts are ambitious, I would also suggest that financial aid policies be amended to possibly expand the current federal work-study program to include internships, leadership opportunities within student-run organizations, and service activities. The participants in this study all reported valuing these activities, but often had to sacrifice them in order to work. A better assessment of financial aid policies and any flexibility for those achieving at the highest levels would more effectively improve low-SES students' experience.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

Despite the findings, there are a few limitations to note. With regard to the research design, the identification of high-achieving, low-SES students as participants of the study was challenging. Given that participants are self-reporting all information, the challenges present with participant self-reporting still remain. However, given that multiple questions regarding income and social class were asked and compared against one another, the measure that was used

in this study appears to be a good fit. Additionally, the same challenges exist for measuring achievement, but the benefits of using last term GPA in the recruitment of participants allowed for capturing participants who would otherwise have not been considered achievers if using standardized test scores, or cumulative GPA. This sample and the identification and recruitment were appropriate for this study; however, future studies could focus primarily on social class, cultural capital, and the function of class and capital within experiences and achievement during college for a deeper investigation.

Additionally, while the study had a somewhat longitudinal design in the way that data was collected in three time points over a one-year period, the data collected was largely reflective in nature. While appropriate for answering the research questions, future research should collect longitudinal data over a longer time frame of several years, each interview collecting current data of that year. It would seem useful to study the experiences as they happen (e.g. first-year, sophomore year), as being in the experience is much different than reflecting on it later. Reflection tends to be easier than being in the midst of a challenge and trying to determine the best course of action to avoid negative outcomes. This would provide a better lens into how socioeconomic status, families, institutional agents, and a strong belief in self all function in participants' educational trajectories, rather than asking students questions to reflect on experiences. By collecting data at multiple times points, and perhaps in multiple ways, this may provide researchers the ability to determine how income and achievement function differently within different contexts and experiences, and might also lend to a deeper understanding of how academic achievement, or intellectual competence, mitigates the power of cultural capital in shaping college readiness and success. Additionally, by collecting data during a challenge, researchers could better understand these issues before students solve them and

could thus develop policies, programs, and services that might more effectively support low-SES students.

Finally, the smaller size of the sample selected presented challenges in further examining socioeconomic status in relationship to race, gender, and other identity dimensions. Although the design used maximum variation sampling in an effort to vary the small sample size, and saturation was reached with the 21 participations, the results of this study do not represent the experience of all low-SES students – as low-SES students represent a diverse demographic. Additionally, the participants in this study were high-achievers, who had developed resilience and coping strategies successfully to help them continue to succeed. Therefore, the results of this study are limited to high-achieving, low-SES students – in essence, the outliers. Also, given the nature of the diversity of this sample, it is difficult to tease out differences based on race, gender, or family encouragement types. One surprising discovery that surfaced from the data was that the men in the study (5) appeared to have differences in their achievement patterns throughout their K-12 experiences. However, given the small number of men in the sample – and the fact that this also seemed to be more evident in the experiences of the men of color (4) – a larger sample that included more male volunteers might allow future scholars the benefit of a wider range of experiences for men and women when it comes to socioeconomic status and achievement from which to draw conclusions.

Also related to sample is that missing from this study sample were recruited UCLA athletes and African-American males. Despite attempting the most variation by using a maximum variation sample, there were no African-American male survey respondents, nor did any Division I, recruited athletes complete the recruitment survey. Attempts were made to recruit both, however given the racial and/or ethnic diversity of UCLA, it was not surprising that

African American males were not represented in this study. Of all men at UCLA, African American males make up approximately 3% of the population (UCLA Profile, 2013-14). Additionally, given the nature of Division I athletics, it is also challenging to recruit athletes to participate in student dissertation research as athletics departments are cautious and protective of their time, and do not allow athletes to participate without consent. Thus, a future study including a larger sample might help to see differences in understanding income and achievement and its functions within college experiences by gender, race, and other dimensions.

This study attempted to better understand the experiences of high-achieving, low-SES students at a highly selective institution, and how certain personal, familial, and institutional factors functioned in the development of resilience, coping strategies, and ultimately academic success within their experiences. The findings suggest future research employing similar asset-based frameworks with a larger sample of students at other similar institutions and contexts, as well as different institutions to better understand how they face challenges, develop resilience, and succeed.

Conclusion

Although there is a widening gap in socioeconomic status and achievement (Reardon, 2011), a critical mass of low-SES students are actually excelling in highest measures (e.g. GPA, standardized test scores, class rank) (Wyner et al., 2007). The goal of this dissertation was to contribute to the anti-deficit discourse on low-SES students and encourage change in the way we support and serve this student population. The purpose of this study was to use an anti-deficit approach in examining the educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving, low-SES college seniors at UCLA. Using both a phenomenological and narrative qualitative method, one-on-one interviews with 21 participants, three focus groups with 12 participants, and background

demographic surveys revealed two main themes across the research questions – (1) familial involvement: encouragement types, and (2) academic preparation and experiences with college curriculum. Across all participants, familial encouragement types served to provide participants with aspirations, motivations, the development of a strong belief in self, and resilience. The academic preparation and experiences with the college curriculum provided unique sets of challenges that explicitly demonstrated the ways that the factors functioned and contributed to the development of resilience that enabled participants to successfully navigate these challenges.

The findings of this study suggest that for high-achieving, low-SES students there is some progress being made in the income-achievement gap. The participants of this study attend and are graduating from one of the most highly-selective institutions in the United States. Participants also described their experience at UCLA as very positive, and discussed the various ways they were able to successfully navigate K-12 and college environments. However, I contend that K-12 and college administrators need to redefine their notions of capital given the alterative forms of capital maintained by the participants of this study.

The findings from this study add significantly to the income-achievement gap discourse and add to current theoretical understanding of social class inequities and their translation into higher education, particularly within status group and status transmission theories (Bourdieu, 1977; Weber, 1978). Given increased participation and degree completion continues to be a national priority, it is necessary to identify innovative practices and policies that ensure greater postsecondary access and success amongst low-SES students. Gaining insight into what has worked for this talented group of students aids in the development of policy and educational practice that has the ability to significantly improve access and attainment rates for low-SES students.

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT SURVEY

1. What class year will you be in fall 2014:
    a. I will be a senior
    b. Other

2. Last completed term G.P.A. (fall, winter, or spring quarter) _____

3. Are you receiving any financial aid? YES NO

    a. If YES, are you receiving any grants/fellowships? (e.g. Pell Grant, Cal Grant, University Scholarships or Private foundation fellowships?) YES NO

4. Did your parents go to college (check one):
    _____ Yes, Both Parents Went to College
    _____ Yes One Parent Went to College
    _____ No, Neither Parent Went to College

5. Currently, what is your best estimate of your household's total income?
    a. Less than $24,999
    b. $25,000-49,999
    c. $50,000-74,999
    d. $75,000-99,999
    e. $100,000-124,999
    f. $125,000-149,000
    g. $150,000-199,000
    h. More than $200,000

6. How many people are in your household (include your parents, siblings, yourself, and anyone else living in your household): _____

7. How would you describe your family's social class or socioeconomic status during childhood?
    a. Lower class
    b. Working class
    c. Middle class

d. Upper-Middle class
e. Upper class

8. How would you describe your family's social class or socioeconomic status during high school?
    a. Lower class
    b. Working class
    c. Middle class
    d. Upper-middle class
    e. Upper class

9. How would you describe your family's social class or socioeconomic status during college?
    a. Lower class
    b. Working class
    c. Middle class
    d. Upper-middle class
    e. Upper class

10. How do you racially identify?
    _____

11. Gender:
    a. Male
    b. Female

12. How were you admitted to UCLA/How did you begin at UCLA?
    a. Freshman
    b. Transfer (from community college)

APPENDIX B

BACKGROUND INFORMATION SURVEY

PART I: SELF-REPORTED SES MEASURE

1. How would you describe your family's social class or socioeconomic status **during childhood?**
    a. Lower class
    b. Working class
    c. Middle class
    d. Upper-middle class
    e. Upper class

2. How would you describe your family's social class or socioeconomic status **during high school?**
    a. Lower class
    b. Working class
    c. Middle class
    d. Upper-middle class
    e. Upper class

3. How would you describe your family's social class or socioeconomic status **during college?**
    a. Lower class
    b. Working class
    c. Middle class
    d. Upper-middle class
    e. Upper class

4. Are you the first among your family to attend a four-year college?
    a. Yes
    b. No, someone else attended a four-year college before I did

5. Please select the highest level of education your father and mother had obtained by the start of your freshman year in college:
    a. Father
        i. Less than high school
        ii. High school
        iii. Some college but no degree
        iv. Associate's degree
        v. Bachelor's degree
        vi. Master's degree
        vii. Professional degree
        viii. Doctoral degree
        ix. Not applicable

b. Mother

i. Less than high school
ii. High school
iii. Some college but no degree
iv. Associate's degree
v. Bachelor's degree
vi. Master's degree
vii. Professional degree
viii. Doctoral degree
ix. Not applicable

6. Does your family currently own or rent the home in which they live?
    a. Own
    b. Rent
    c. Don't know

7. **During childhood**, what is your best estimate of your household's total income?
    a. Less than $24,999
    b. $25,000-49,999
    c. $50,000-74,999
    d. $75,000-99,999
    e. $100,000-124,999
    f. $125,000-149,000
    g. $150,000-199,000
    h. More than $200,000

8. **During high school**, what is your best estimate of your household's total income?
    a. Less than $24,999
    b. $25,000-49,999
    c. $50,000-74,999
    d. $75,000-99,999
    e. $100,000-124,999
    f. $125,000-149,000
    g. $150,000-199,000
    h. More than $200,000

9. **Currently**, what is your best estimate of your household's total income?
    a. Less than $24,999
    b. $25,000-49,999
    c. $50,000-74,999
    d. $75,000-99,999
    e. $100,000-124,999
    f. $125,000-149,000
    g. $150,000-199,000
    h. More than $200,000

10. What is your best estimate of your family's current assets?
    a. Less than $24,999
    b. $25,000-49,999
    c. $50,000-74,999
    d. $75,000-99,999
    e. $100,000-124,999
    f. $125,000-149,000
    g. $150,000-199,000
    h. More than $200,000

11. How many people currently reside in your household? _____

12. Are you receiving any financial aid? YES NO

    a. If YES, are you receiving any grants/fellowships? (e.g. Pell Grant, Cal Grant, University Scholarships or Private foundation fellowships?)
    YES NO

13. Is anyone in your household currently receiving public assistance? (e.g. Cash Aid, Food Stamps, Unemployment Benefits)? (Circle one):
    YES NO

14. Parent's current occupation:

    a. Father's current occupation:
    _____

    b. Mother's current occupation:
    _____

PART II: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Zip Code in which you currently reside: _____
2. City where you grew up: _____
3. High School Graduated From: _____
4. Cumulative High School G.P.A.: _____
5. Did you take AP Classes? (circle one): YES NO
    a. If YES, how many? _____
6. Gender: (circle one) Female Male Transgender

7. How do you racially identify: _____

8. Were you born in the United States?: YES NO

    a. If NO, where were you born? _____

    b. How old were you when you came to the US? _____

9. Were your parents born in the United States?:
    YES, BOTH YES, ONE NO, NEITHER

10. Are you currently working? YES NO

    a. If YES, circle one: Full-Time Part-Time

11. Major _____

12. Last term GPA (fall, winter, or spring): _____

13. Cumulative GPA _____

14. Total UCLA Units completed _____

15. Career Goals/Plans (e.g. pre-med, law school, etc.):
    _____

16. Did you transfer to UCLA? YES NO
    a. If YES, please list any other colleges attended:

College	Dates of Attendance

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview One: Focused Life and Educational Histories

1. If you could start by telling me a little bit about yourself & how you came to college. When did you first start thinking about college? What is your earliest memory?

2. What is the first thing you remember about attending school? Could you tell me a bit about the schools you have attended?

3. How would you describe your family's approach to education (K-12 and postsecondary)?

4. Are there any individuals in your life (relatives, siblings, teachers, other adults, etc.) who had an impact on how you approached education?

5. Besides school, what other kinds of activities did you participate in (sports, academic tutoring, etc.)? And how did you become involved in these activities (e.g. parents wanted them to become active vs. school suggesting involvement in federal TRIO program)?

6. Throughout school, were you considered a high-achiever by others (teachers, coaches, principal, peers, & family)? By yourself? (Refer to survey to see achievement history reported & if consistent with how others saw participant & how participant saw self).

7. Where did you receive most messages about your academic performance in school (e.g. parents strict about grades despite getting B's or higher; teachers giving impression that you were not capable, etc.)?

8. Have you ever experienced academic difficulty (needed tutoring, been on academic probation, needed to repeat a course or grade level)?

    a. If not, what do you think has kept you motivated to succeed throughout school? If yes, what do you think has changed that has improved your achievement levels?

9. In high school, how did your classmates approach their academics?

10. In your community, how did residents view education?

11. Is there anything you did to prepare for college? Academic programs, test preparation, extracurricular involvement, summer programs, etc.? If yes, which ones & when did you begin these types of activities?

12. If & when your family discussed college while you were growing up, what types of colleges were discussed? What about with your peers?

13. Which colleges, if any, did the adults you knew attend?

14. How much guidance did your schools provide to your educational journey (e.g. resources outside of school, suggesting different middle or high schools with certain programs, suggesting college, etc.)?

15. Tell me more about high school, specifically. Walk me through each year in high school and tell me your high school story. What did a typical day look like in your senior year?

16. How did you begin to explore college options? When did you start looking and how did you gather information? Who did you talk to & who was involved in this process with you?

17. What were the primacy sources of information you had about college admissions & financial aid? Was any particular source (individual, book, website, etc.) helpful to you?

18. How did important individuals (family, friends, teachers, coaches, etc.) nurture and sustain your interest in school? How did these same individuals help shape your career and college aspirations?

19. What role did you feel teachers, and other school agents, play in getting you to college?

20. How did you academic achievement levels coincide with those of your peers? If there were differences, how did you negotiate those differences?

21. Which programs and experiences do you believe enhanced your college readiness?

22. What have been the most significant ways that college cost has shaped your experience? (e.g. where attend, what to major in, motivation for completion, etc.).

Interview Two: Details of the College Experience

1. Before we begin today, is there anything about your overall journey to college that you want to add from our last meeting? Any questions you have for me before we begin?

2. Toady we are going to talk more specifically & in depth about your experiences in college. Is UCLA the only institution you've attended? If not, could you tell me about how you came to UCLA from when you first started college?

3. What were some of your life goals when you first started college? What did you see yourself doing when you started? What are those goals now? Who has influenced or shaped those goals, besides yourself?

4. What impact do you think attending UCLA will have on your life? How much difference do you think attending another college would have?

5. What kinds of things are you involved in here at UCLA? (clubs, organizations, sports, etc.)? Can you walk me through your UCLA experience starting from your first year?

    a. For transfer students – ask these questions about the previous institutions as well to get an idea about the programs, experiences, & individuals they interact with.

6. (Review survey to see achievement information) – Can you tell me about your academics since you've started college?
    a. If consistent with GPA, what has contributed most to this?
    b. If achievement patterns are low then high, or varied, have participant talk through this.

7. Can you tell me about any significant classroom experiences you've had in college? In which classes and spaces have you felt compelled to speak and participate actively?

8. What do you think has contributed most to you earning a GPA above 3.0 despite any challenges you've had to overcome?

9. What do you think has engaged you the most in college?

10. What are the most significant campus relationships you have (e.g. student-faculty interactions, relationships with coaches or club advisors, peer relationships, etc.)? In what ways?

11. How do your academic achievement levels coincide with those of your peers? If there are differences, how did you negotiate those differences?

12. What role does your family play in your current college experience?

13. Who is included in your support system? Can you tell me why & how?

Focus Group Interview: Reflection on the Meaning

1. Thank participant for coming again – I'd like to start this focus group interview by checking in to see if you have any questions or information to add since our last meeting. Check in about how senior year is going so far & any changes in goals/plans?

2. (Begin this interview by reviewing a synopsis of the study & that you plan to check in about main themes/ideas that have emerged). Begin reviewing some of the overarching ideas - What do you think of that assessment? Does it sound accurate?

3. Review major personal, familial, and institutional factors that have been discussed in interviews as contributing to success – are there others to add? What or who else may have influenced your success? (What personal factors do you think have shaped your achievement levels the most? What institutional factors? Familial factors?)

4. Discuss role of family & influence of family on motivation and "resilience" – consistent with their interpretation?

5. What meaning do you make of your achievement levels throughout K-12? In college?

6. How does your experience in school make sense to you now that we've discussed your trajectory?

7. Where do you see yourself going in the future? Has this changed at all given you've reconstructed your experiences in these interviews?

8. Is there anything else you think I should know? Is there anything you'd like to ask me?

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