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ISBN

9798189231391

Author

Foster, Shani

Publication Date

2026-08-21

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

What Stories are Being Told?

A Thematic Exploration into the

Narratives of Black and Latinx

College Applicants

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Shani Munirah Foster

2026

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Thematic Exploration into the Narratives of Black and Latinx College Applicants

by

Shani Munirah Foster

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Lori Patton Davis, Committee Chair

In the wake of the Supreme Court's 2023 decision in *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard*, the college admissions essay has been transformed from a standard application component into a primary legal and sociopolitical battlefield for racial identity. This qualitative study investigates how eight Black and Latinx high school seniors navigate this heightened systemic pressure while completing the University of California's Personal Insight Questions (PIQs). Grounded in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, this research challenges dominant deficit-centered educational narratives by examining how marginalized youth treat their lived experiences not as structural burdens, but as legitimate sites of institutional expertise and asset cultivation.

Data collection involved textual analysis of 16 personal admissions essays alongside semi-structured interviews. The cross-case synthesis revealed that participants actively reject the institutional expectation to perform or trauma dump for admissions gatekeepers. Instead, students practice sophisticated narrative gatekeeping and strategic silence to preserve their personal dignity and maintain ownership over their family histories.

The analysis identified four distinct archetypal modes of narrative self-authorship: The Reformers, The Sustainers, The Alchemists, and The Visionaries. Together, these archetypes illustrate a vibrant spectrum of how Black and Latinx youth leverage linguistic, navigational, familial, and resistant capital to claim space within higher education. Ultimately, this study argues that the college essay functions as a critical site of Resistant Capital. Rather than hyper-focusing on the mere mechanics of application access, this research offers concrete structural frameworks including a Class Asset Dashboard and a Bridge Dialogue series to shift institutional accountability. The findings demand that post-secondary institutions transition from evaluating student deficits to actively preparing classrooms to receive the sophisticated, pre-existing brilliance of incoming minority students.

The dissertation of Shani Munirah Foster is approved.

Kevin Eagan

Kristen Rohanna

Lori Patton Davis, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

DEDICATION PAGE

In Memoriam

For Meyerline Foster and Rashad Crowder

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude extends first to my committee chair, Dr. Lori Patton Davis. I feel honored to be the first of many UCLA students who will have you as a guiding light as we stamp our research into the academic canon. Your direct and encouraging feedback was soul-healing and vital. It was equally meaningful for me to have leadership that reflected back to me what is possible, and for that, I say thank you.

To Dr. Eagan and Dr. Rohanna, thank you for your guidance, thought-provoking questions, and graceful push for more. I am incredibly grateful for your dedication to the work you do in service of your students and education as a whole.

I feel extremely blessed to be part of a cohort that demonstrates the best of what educational leadership has to offer. I am so grateful to have learned from and grown alongside colleagues across the vast spectrum of early childhood development, community colleges, public, private, and charter school systems, and higher education. We are called for such a time as this, and I am excited to see how we all meet this moment in our country's history and in our own. During our time together, we have buried loved ones, brought children into the world, raised the ones we already have, charted new directions in our career paths, and overcome great personal challenges. In between all of that, we still showed up for our individual and mutual growth, and for that, I say thank you.

A special thanks to Brandie, Jonathan, Anyssa, Kendall, Abby, Rose, and Eena: thank you for your support, candor, and for being a soft place to land throughout these three years. Your light in my life has blessed me.

Deep gratitude to Denise, who called me to the carpet of my soul, caught me when I fell into deficient mindsets, and pushed me to heal, grow, and maintain perspective throughout this process.

Finally, thank you to my family—both those by blood and by bond—who served as my sounding board: Gee, Jessica, Charles, Amanzi, Afton, Toni, Zelda, Dominique, Pascale, and Jerry, and all of my family, for their endless love and support.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Stories have the power to shape our understanding of the world and our place in it. They forge links across generations, carrying messages that enable us to experience the lives of others and to glean wisdom from their successes and setbacks. In much the same way, the personal essays within college admissions can serve as a vital tool for storytelling as well as self-exploration for the writer. The process of writing these essays provides students opportunities to convey their unique lived experiences and perspectives. Crafting a personal essay for college admission can be a transformative experience, as questions often prompt students to reflect on a challenge they've overcome or a barrier to their educational access. However, in the wake of the Supreme Court's 2023 decision in *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard*, the personal essay has been transformed from one component of an application into the primary legal battlefield for racial identity in admissions. This study investigates how Black and Latinx students navigate this heightened pressure. It explores the themes that emerge from their essays, how their stories act as a form of resistance against dominant narratives, and the ways they balance demonstrating resilience without falling into the trap of *trauma-dumping*. By examining these essays, this research sought to reclaim the space between the high school classroom and the college campus, transforming the admissions narrative into a pathway that honors the whole person and validates the expertise born from their lived histories.

College admissions have evolved since the early 18th and 19th centuries, when the emphasis was on demonstrating proficiency in classical subjects like Latin and Greek (Diner &

Wechsler, 2022). These requirements to demonstrate proficiency in classical subjects obviously barred all but the most privileged high school students from college. As higher education became slightly more accessible, we saw the creation of standardized tests like Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) to provide colleges with common metrics to compare students from different high schools and educational backgrounds (Giordano, 2005). Still, there was a need to know more about students beyond their academic courses and grades. As more students set out on the path to higher education, competition for admittance to colleges and universities increased, and college and universities needed an additional lever to distinguish college applicants (Kurtz, 2023). Hence, the creation of personal essays provided opportunities for students to demonstrate their individual personalities, unique experiences, and character (Snyder, 2009).

The 2023 *SFFA* ruling fundamentally shifted the admissions landscape by effectively ending race-conscious programs and placing an unprecedented weight on the personal essay. Chief Justice John Roberts noted that while universities may no longer use race as a standalone factor, they may still consider "an applicant's discussion of how race affected his or her life, be it through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise." This creates a paradoxical burden for Black and Latinx students, who are now tasked with *performing* their racial identity and resilience through narrative to receive the consideration previously afforded by holistic policy. Consequently, while a wealth of resources exists on the technical *how-to* of crafting compelling essays, this study moves beyond logistical advice to investigate the lived experiences Black and Latinx students actually choose to convey. By analyzing the meaning and social relevance of the essay content rather than simply grading writing quality this research explores how these stories

act as a form of resistance, allowing students to express their life journeys while countering negative, limited views of their communities and more.

Statement of the Problem

The problem this study addresses is the tension between the administrative utility of the college essay and the psychological reality of the student writer. Addressing the often daunting task of personal essay writing, Lassonde (2024) notes that for many students, writing personal essays is the first time they explore stories from their lives that have deeply impacted their desire for higher education. These stories take on additional importance because Black and Latinx students are living through a society dominated by inaccurate, deficit-based narratives about their communities. For example, the Pew Research Center (2023) found that 43% of Black Americans believe news coverage of their community is negative and perpetuates stereotypes. Other research by Ipsos and the National Hispanic Media Coalition has found similar results regarding the perception of immigrants, Asian Americans, and people with disabilities (Newall et al., 2023).

In addition to media and public discourse, there is also a pervasive “deficit- view of Communities of Color” that permeates education as well(Yosso, 2005). For example, in schools, a deficit view often suggests that students of color and their families are to blame for poor academic performance, believing they don't value school or aren't prepared for it. This mindset ultimately leads to the implementation of educational policies and practices that focus on "fixing" what is "wrong" with students of color and their families, rather than addressing systemic issues like underfunded schools and biased curricula (Yosso, 2005).

These gross narratives reinforce systemic inequalities and negatively impact Black and Latinx students' sense of belonging and well-being (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harper & Quaye, 2015).

In the United States, millions of students write these essays annually, but the act of writing particularly in this format offers a powerful opportunity for counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Using the lens provided by Linda Smith (2021), these essays could serve as a window into how lived experiences inform the specific themes students choose to explore. For four years, as Director of Education at a literacy-focused nonprofit, I supported numerous students in developing these essays. Through this experience, I observed a delicate and often painful balancing act. Students, particularly from Black and Latinx backgrounds, grapple with how to authentically represent their struggles and resilience without feeling as though they are “trauma-dumping” for admission. They wrestle with questions of vulnerability: *Is this too much? Will it overshadow my accomplishments?* This internal debate reveals a deep awareness of the power dynamics in the admissions process, a fear that their stories might be reduced to a stereotype rather than seen as evidence of their character and potential. While bell hooks (1994) reminds us that sharing struggles can foster empathy, and Yosso (2006) demonstrates the extensive "cultural wealth" students bring to education, many students still perceive their adversities as evidence of deficiency (Anderson & Maquire, 2024).

This internal struggle for authenticity is further complicated by the rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the writing process. As students use AI models to help structure their narratives, and as admissions offices explore AI efficiencies to screen thousands of essays, the *human* element of counter-storytelling is at risk. If an AI model smooths out the unique *cultural wealth* in a student’s story to make it fit a standard template, the student’s genuine

agency may be lost before it even reaches the reader. If we are to support students through the pipeline from high school through college graduation, we must fully understand all the variables at play.

Currently, a disconnect exists: high schoolers are encouraged to be vulnerable for an acceptance letter, but we lack an understanding of how that vulnerability affects their sense of belonging once they arrive on campus. Therefore, this study seeks to delve deeper into the writing processes of Black and Latinx students, moving beyond viewing essays merely as admissions tools. Instead, it recognizes them as vital forms of self-expression and counter-storytelling. This approach diverges from the prevailing post-affirmative action discourse (*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 2023) by prioritizing these essays as living artifacts of our younger generations' lives.

Existing Research Gaps

The existing literature on college essays covers a wide range of important topics. Studies effectively address the role and impact of these essays in admissions (Selingo, 2020), the resource disparities that affect students, including limited access to test preparation and college counseling (Patrick et al., 2020), and the specific challenges faced by Black and Latinx students (Selingo, 2020). Moreover, recent events like the end of affirmative action have significantly increased the emphasis placed on college essays (Knox, 2023).

Yet, much of this research has focused on outcomes, motivations, and the logistical challenges of the application process. For example, a recent Pell Institute study (Brent et al., 2024) surveyed students about their motivations for enrolling in college and their perception of higher education's value. The study is valuable for identifying key themes that Black and Latinx students value in their pursuit of education, but it largely bypasses the stories and lived

experiences that led them there. Beyond motivations, other researchers have attempted to quantify the application itself through computational lenses. Alvero et al. (2021) conducted a content analysis of UC admissions essays, concluding that the essays serve as proxies for socioeconomic status similar to the SAT. However, by focusing on the utility of the essay as a data source rather than its role in actual admissions decisions, their work much like the Pell Institute study (Brent et al., 2024), risks overlooking the nuanced stories of the applicants. While Alvero et al. provide a technical connection between essays and standardized tests, they do not account for the subjective weight these narratives carry in the eyes of an admissions officer, nor the lived experiences that inform them. This highlights a gap in the K-16 support pipeline. We know why students want to go to college, but we are missing an understanding of what they have carried and experienced during the transition. The personal essays written by hundreds of thousands of Black and Latinx students every year offer a rich opportunity to fill this void. This study seeks to fill this void by treating these narratives as documented cultural wealth rather than mere application requirements. Hence, the following research questions aim to complete this endeavor:

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the common themes that emerge in personal essays written by Black and Latinx students?

RQ2. In what ways, if any, do Black and Latinx students' personal essays challenge or subvert dominant narratives about their communities?

RQ3. How do Black and Latinx students navigate between sharing personal hardships in their college essays while simultaneously highlighting their resilience?

Research Design

Through a qualitative approach with two data collection methods, this study explored how senior high school Black and Latinx students expressed themselves and challenged dominant narratives through their writing. This approach was appropriate because it provided a more comprehensive understanding of what those students expressed in their personal essays and how they experienced the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Textual analysis of student essays identified recurring themes, topics, and writing strategies, while data from semi-structured interviews illuminated students' experiences, motivations, and the meanings they ascribed to writing personal essays.

A total of 16 college essays comprising approximately two from each of 8 high school seniors in the Los Angeles area applying to the UC system was examined using MAXQDA. By focusing specifically on applicants to the UC system, an institution where the utility of the essay is often scrutinized in relation to standardized metrics (Alvero et al., 2021) this study aimed to uncover the range of perspectives held by Black and Latinx students. Through this process, I sought to explore both the common ground these students share and the points where their experiences and viewpoints differ, particularly in how they perform resilience and navigate the racialized expectations inherent in high-stakes admissions narratives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the same 8 Black and Latinx high school seniors whose essays were analyzed. The data collection utilized a semi-structured interview protocol. This protocol consisted of a standardized set of core questions; designed to ensure consistency across all participants, which were then tailored with specific probes derived from a preliminary textual analysis of each student's UC Personal Insight Questions. This served to compare data for a more comprehensive and deeper assessment.

Site Participants

This research examined the college essay writing experiences of Black and Latinx students who are supported by YBP (pseudonym), a non-profit organization in Los Angeles County. This organization was selected for the high percentages of Latinx and Black students they support in writing college essays, aligning with the study's focus on centering Black and Latinx voices. Students at this site were actively engaged in college essay writing as part of the curriculum and had access to tutoring support. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all participants and the sites were de-identified using pseudonyms and general descriptions. Additionally, selection of this site was based on their diverse student populations, accessibility to student essays, and existing professional relationships, facilitating feasible data collection. The study's population of interest consisted of Black and Latinx high school seniors who were currently writing college essays and have provided informed consent. The study employed purposive sampling to reach this group; consent was given by a parent or guardian or by student if they were over the age of 18.

Study Significance

This study holds profound significance as it delves into the nuanced essays of Black and Latinx students during a pivotal moment in the history of American higher education. By illuminating the common themes within their personal essays, we can gain crucial insights into the lived experiences, aspirations, and challenges of a generation navigating the post-affirmative action era. Furthermore, this research is significant for three primary reasons:

- **Challenging the Narrative Burden:** It addresses the delicate balance between vulnerability and resilience, a tension uniquely navigated by Black and Latinx students

who must now rely on personal narrative as the primary way to convey their identity to admissions committees.

- **Illuminating Cultural Wealth as Counter-Narrative:** By exploring these essays as living artifacts, this research highlights how Black and Latinx students use their writing to actively resist and reshape dominant societal perceptions. It shifts the focus from what the student lacks (deficit-view) to the cultural wealth they bring to the university setting.
- **Strengthening the K-16 Pipeline:** Most critically, this research seeks to draw a sustainable and replicable bridge between the high school application process and college persistence. By understanding *what* students carry into college, educators and policymakers can develop better support systems that honor student stories without exploiting them.

Ultimately, this research examined the reflective process Black and Latinx students undergo as they explored their personal journeys, an aspect often overlooked in favor of the essay's function as a gatekeeping tool. By prioritizing the voices of the students themselves, this study provides a necessary foundation for reimagining how we support marginalized students from the moment they pick up a pen in high school to the moment they walk across the graduation stage.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The pursuit of higher education is profoundly shaped by systemic barriers that often obscure the intellectual and personal assets of students from underrepresented backgrounds. This literature review moves beyond purely academic metrics to explore the college application as a crucial document of holistic review. We begin by establishing the roots of access disparities, examining research on undermatching (Hoxby & Avery, 2013) and the significant "knowledge gap" (Bettinger et al., 2012) that limits opportunity. Then we analyzed the rise of holistic admissions and the increased weight placed on the personal essay following the Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard (2023) decision. Ultimately, this exploration demonstrates that the personal essay is a vital artifact where students translate their Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) into demonstrable evidence of agency, serving as the critical bridge in the K-16 pipeline.

Introduction & Context:

In their final year of high school, aspiring college students dedicate the fall semester to crafting compelling admission essays. These essays are often the primary way colleges get to know applicants beyond their grades and test scores, making them a crucial part of the application (Early et al., 2010). The emergence of the personal essay in college admissions grew from the need to shift from purely academic evaluations to a more holistic admissions process. This shift was particularly amplified by the rise of the Common Application in 1975, a standardized online undergraduate college admission application that allows students to apply to multiple institutions with a single form. By streamlining the application process for over 1,000 colleges and universities, the Common App solidified the personal essay as a crucial tool for

evaluating applicants beyond standardized metrics (Stoller, 2024). Now, given the Supreme Court's ruling against affirmative action, which has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of college admissions, the importance of personal essays has been significantly amplified (Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2023). With race no longer permissible as a direct factor in admissions decisions, universities are increasingly relying on essays to gain a nuanced understanding of an applicant's background and lived experiences (Anderson & Svrluga, 2023).

These essays now serve as a crucial platform for students to articulate how their unique journeys, including those shaped by race and ethnicity, have fostered personal growth, resilience, and a distinctive perspective. Colleges are actively seeking essays that demonstrate how an applicant's experiences have shaped their character and their potential to contribute meaningfully to the campus community (Jaschik, 2023). This shift has also prompted changes in essay prompts, with institutions encouraging students to reflect on themes of adversity and the impact of their backgrounds on their aspirations (Stoller, 2024). All while navigating the complex legal landscape to build a diverse and vibrant student body. The question now arises: how do these shifts impact Black and Latinx students writing personal essays for college admissions? For many, it's a tightrope walk between authenticity and strategy, as illustrated by this fictional vignette based on my experiences working with students and reading their essays:

That cursor? Straight up taunting me. Like, “write something good, or else.”

"Authenticity." That word was stuck in my head, like a broken record. Mrs. Johnson said it meant "real." But what was real when every word felt like a performance?

My fingers hovered over the keyboard. "Tell your story," they said. But my story wasn't a neat narrative. It was a tangle of my family being deported, the smell of my abuela's arroz con pollo, and the quiet, persistent fear that I wasn't enough. It was the weight of generations, the whispers of "first one" that followed me like a shadow.

They wanted "adversity." They wanted to see how I'd "overcome." Did they want the story of the time I was stopped by the ICE agents walking home from the library? Or the time a teacher told me I was "articulate," like it was a surprise? How much trauma did they want? Could I package it neatly, tie a bow around it, make it palatable?

"Show them who you are," they said. But who was I? The kid who aced AP Calc? The one who volunteered at the homeless shelter? Or the one who lay awake at night, wondering if any of it mattered, if I was just a checkmark on a diversity quota? The blinking cursor mocked me. I wanted to scream, to tell them that my life wasn't a college essay, that my worth wasn't reducible to a 350-word narrative.

Understanding the pressures illustrated in this vignette, it's crucial to explore strategies that empower Black and Latinx students to navigate the college essay process authentically and effectively.

The High-Stakes Path: College Going and Preparation

For decades, the foundation of college readiness in the U.S. has been rooted in measures of academic rigor specifically, high school GPA, challenging coursework (e.g., AP/IB), and standardized test scores (ACT, SAT). Research consistently confirms that these cognitive factors

are necessary for college success; students who complete a rigorous high school curriculum are more likely to enroll, persist, and graduate (Adelman, 2006; ACT, 2021). However, for Black and Latinx and first-generation students, academic preparation, while vital, is increasingly shown to be an insufficient predictor of degree completion (Sedlacek, 2004).

While a demanding academic course load acts as a critical floor for college-level work, systemic inequities ensure that this floor is unevenly distributed. For many underrepresented students, the academic rigor of their high schools may not be equivalent to that of well-resourced schools, or they may face internal tracking that limits their access to advanced courses (Kurlaender et al., 2019). This disparity immediately establishes the high-stakes context: for these students, the essay may become one of the few places to overcome structural disadvantages by showcasing *non-academic* strengths.

The gap between academic preparation and college success is best explained by the literature on non-cognitive factors (NCFs). Research demonstrates that traits like resilience, perseverance (often termed "grit"), and a positive self-concept are stronger predictors of persistence through the rigorous application process and subsequent college years for certain underrepresented groups than traditional academic metrics alone (Sedlacek, 2004; Duckworth et al., 2007). Crucially, these NCFs directly relate to the content of the college essay:

1. Academic Tenacity: Persistence through challenges is a narrative of resilience, a central theme admissions officers now seek in the post-affirmative action environment.
2. Racial Identity and Self-Efficacy: For Black and Latinx students, the ability to "understand and deal with racism" is a specific non-cognitive variable that shapes their entire educational experience (Sedlacek, 2004). The essay serves as the primary, and often only, tool to articulate this identity and the corresponding growth.

In essence, while academic preparation grants entry, the system places a premium on the demonstration of resilience-based traits. Consequently, the essay is not just a reflection of success, but a site where students must work to prove their worthiness within a system that assumes academic preparation is the only barrier.

The Knowledge Gap: College Knowledge and Navigational Barriers

The pathway to higher education is often gated by unwritten rules and opaque processes that systematically disadvantage students who lack prior family or community experience with college. This creates a hidden curriculum where high academic achievement alone is insufficient to guarantee optimal college enrollment. Students who successfully navigate these hurdles and manage to enroll at selective institutions often do so by demonstrating a form of personal advocacy that must be explicitly communicated in their college essays. In this study, this dynamic is examined through a sample of high school seniors applying to the University of California (UC), an institution where the personal insight questions serve as a critical site for students to translate their navigational capital into a formal application.

The most significant evidence of the knowledge gap in college admissions is the phenomenon of undermatching, where highly qualified students enroll in less selective colleges than their academic profile merits. The landmark study by Hoxby and Avery (2013) demonstrated that the vast majority of high-achieving, low-income students do not even apply to selective colleges; for every high-achiever from a low-income family who applied, there were an estimated 8 to 15 comparable high-income students who did not, making this application disparity a primary driver of enrollment gaps. The difficulty in accessing generous financial aid is exacerbated by the complexity of the process itself, creating another major navigational barrier. Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the essential first

step for most aid, yet the form's complexity and perceived difficulty deter many first-generation and low-income students from applying. Research confirms that the real barrier is often the application process itself, not the cost of college: a study by Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu (2012) found that providing low-income individuals with personalized FAFSA assistance significantly increased filing, aid receipt, and college enrollment. For students who successfully overcome these substantial barriers, their application essay becomes a critical space to translate this lived experience into evidence of personal agency or advocacy, traits highly valued by selective institutions.

Beyond Metrics: The College Application as a Tool for Holistic Review

The evolution of the college application reflects a fundamental shift in admissions philosophy: moving beyond purely academic evaluations to a holistic review of the applicant. This shift became a necessity as selective institutions recognized that traditional metrics like GPA and standardized test scores often failed to capture the non-cognitive traits essential for success and contribution to a campus community.

Admissions officers rely on essays to gain a holistic understanding of applicants, going beyond the limitations of standardized metrics (Rostrum Education, n.d.). While applications offer a snapshot of academic performance, essays provide the narrative depth needed to assess a student's character and potential. Essays serve as an alignment litmus test to ascertain if students fit within the college community (Lassonde, 2024). These college essays also provide insights into personal challenges, unique interests, and the ability to articulate complex ideas. While undeniably crucial for admissions, limiting their significance to admissions alone would be to overlook the multifaceted value these essays hold. To support students from high school through college graduation, we must view the essay as more than an admissions "litmus test" (Lassonde,

2024). Instead, we must analyze it through the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework (Yosso, 2005). CCW allows us to move beyond a deficit-based view where Black and Latinx students are valued only for the hardships they have survived and instead illuminates the diverse forms of capital they possess.

The Post-SFFA Landscape: Race, Authenticity, and the Essay

Pressure and the Demand for Narrative

The landscape for college applicants, particularly for marginalized students, has become increasingly complex, placing unique pressure on how they use personal essays to demonstrate their alignment with college institutions. This challenge is compounded by the Supreme Court's ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (SFFA), which limits the direct consideration of race in admissions, leading to increased pressure for Black and Latinx students to authentically communicate their racial and ethnic identity through their essays (Anderson & Svrluga, 2023). Black and Latinx students often attempt to usher in a new generation of college-educated individuals within their families, an endeavor that inherently carries significant responsibility and aspiration. How, then, are applicants articulating these complex lived experiences within their personal statements and how are researchers capturing these themes? Examining recent content analyses of college essays provides insight into both the narratives students tell and the structural gaps in how institutions process them.

Data and Narratives: Analyzing Essay Trends

While universities rely on essays for holistic review, they have largely neglected the systematic analysis of these documents to gain deeper understanding of applicants' backgrounds and learning journeys. Stearns et al. (2022) conducted a narrative analysis of 40 application essays from non-traditional students (aged 25 and older), highlighting that while these statements

are standard admissions requirements, universities have largely failed to examine their content as a meaningful data source for institutional equity. This is a missed opportunity, especially for marginalized groups, whose collective stories remain largely unexplored by academic programs. While the research population in Stearns et al. is different from the study currently proposed, the fundamental issue of universities overlooking the valuable information within application essays persists across diverse student populations, highlighting a widespread need for more rigorous analysis. Stearns et al. (2022) found that about half the students in their study showed self-authorship, meaning they could make their own decisions and set goals despite external pressures. They came to these findings by utilizing narrative analysis of students' personal essays, coding for themes of agency, decision-making, and goal-setting, focusing on how students framed experiences, used language to express motivation, and built future aspirations. This detailed approach revealed nuanced expressions of self-direction.

Beyond narrative content, other research has explored purely quantitative methods. Pennebaker et al. (2014) focused solely on the function words (like pronouns, articles, and prepositions) of over 50,000 college admission essays. The study showed that these function words reveal a student's cognitive style and could predict their future academic performance in college. While Pennebaker et al. effectively demonstrated the predictive potential of function words, its purely quantitative nature differs significantly from the aims of my proposed research. My study diverges from counting pronouns to a deep, qualitative exploration of Black and Latinx students' narratives within their cultural and social contexts, which I hope will reveal insights into distinct thematic patterns, instances of narrative subversion, and the nuanced ways Black and Latinx students articulate both their struggles and their strength, adding critical depth to the existing research on self-authorship.

While quantitative methods like those used by Pennebaker et al. (2014) offer predictive insights based on linguistic style, they inherently fail to capture the meaning and contextual richness of a student's lived experience. Similarly, Alvero et al. (2021) utilized computational content analysis to suggest that UC admissions essays largely encode the same socioeconomic indicators found in standardized tests like the SAT. These studies converge in their attempt to reduce the personal essay to a measurable data point for institutional utility. However, Alvero et al.'s focus on textual encoding without examining actual admissions decisions diverges from the reality of how these narratives are weighted in practice. This study occupies a critical gap in the literature; by moving beyond the predictive 'utility' explored by Alvero and Pennebaker, I utilize a systematic qualitative analysis to center the emotional labor and navigational capital of Black and Latinx students, exploring the stories that these automated models often flatten or ignore. Furthermore, there is a significant gap in understanding how AI-generated content affects the perceived authenticity of Black and Latinx narratives. While admissions offices look for AI efficiencies to manage the surge in applications post-SFFA, this move toward automation may overlook the subtle, non-linear ways that Black and Latinx students express resilience. Research has yet to fully explore if AI tools help close the knowledge gap for first-generation students or if they unintentionally strip away the very resistant capital that makes these essays vital forms of self-expression.

My research, therefore, shifts away from counting function words to a deep, qualitative exploration of Black and Latinx students' narratives within their cultural and social contexts. This qualitative focus is essential for revealing distinct thematic patterns, instances of narrative subversion, and the nuanced ways these students articulate both their struggles and their strength, adding critical depth to existing research. To effectively move beyond a deficit-based view and

fully illuminate the assets embedded within these compelling personal stories, this study requires a theoretical foundation that explicitly reframes the experiences of marginalized students as sources of strength, which is precisely the function of the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

In 2005, Dr. Tara J. Yosso sought to break free from the traditional ways educational research had been conducted. Those traditions stemmed from the belief that the attributes of academic and social difficulties experienced by students from marginalized backgrounds are due to perceived deficiencies in their cultures, families, or communities. Yosso developed the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework as a *do-not-pass-go* challenge to the cultural deficit model. She identified that the cultural deficit was inherently flawed because it did not *see* the ways in which students come into academic spaces with significant cultural resources.

Yosso identified 6 forms of cultural capital that marginalized communities possess:

- ❖ Aspirational-*the persistent ability to envision and strive for future success, even when facing adversity.*
- ❖ Linguistic-*this encompasses the diverse language skills and communication styles, like storytelling and multilingualism, valued within communities.*
- ❖ Familial-*It's the collective wisdom and support gained through strong family and community ties.*
- ❖ Social-*This refers to the valuable network of relationships and resources that provide guidance and opportunities*
- ❖ Navigational-*It's the skill to effectively maneuver through complex and often inequitable systems.*

- ❖ *Resistant-This represents the knowledge and skills developed through acts of challenging and overcoming systemic oppression.*

Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) has become essential in educational and social science research by highlighting the strengths of marginalized communities, moving beyond deficit thinking. Researchers use CCW to analyze student experiences and assets (Garcia, 2012; Muñiz, 2019; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005), to understand cultural capital in diverse communities (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007), and to inform culturally responsive practices (Harper, 2012). The CCW framework offers a powerful lens for analyzing Black and Latinx student college essays because it provides a pathway to move beyond deficit-based interpretations toward highlighting inherent strengths. By examining essays through the lens of CCW, I aim to identify recurring themes informed by linguistic, familial, social, navigational, aspirational, and resistant capital. Moreover, CCW provides insight into how students navigate the delicate balance of sharing personal hardships while simultaneously showcasing resilience revealing how they draw upon cultural resources to maintain hope. Within this framework, I anticipate that students primarily (re)present aspirational capital (the ability to maintain hopes and dreams despite real and perceived barriers) and navigational capital, manifested in the strategies they use to maneuver through institutions like the UC system.

Framed this way, these essays function as more than simple requirement checkboxes; they are a space where students strategically deploy storytelling to translate lived experience into proof of institutional readiness. Ultimately, this study addresses a key gap in the literature by examining how students utilize essays not merely to gain admission, but to establish the narrative agency vital for college persistence.

Conclusion

College applications serve as more than mere administrative hurdles; they are critical sites where students are expected to demonstrate initiative, persistence, and character. While admissions committees look to these essays for a contextualized understanding of an applicant's values beyond standardized metrics, what remains under-explored is how Black and Latinx students utilize this space for self-representation, especially when their agency is obscured by the trauma-dumping expectations often inherent in the admissions process. By delving into the nuanced strategies Black and Latinx students employ to navigate this complex landscape, this research strives to illuminate the inherent agency and cultural wealth embedded within their narratives. By treating these essays as living artifacts rather than just gatekeeping tools, this study stands as an advocate for an equitable K-16 pipeline, one that acknowledges that the stories told at the end of high school are the same stories that will sustain a student through their college journey, provided we learn to value a student's assets over their traumas.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Millions of high school seniors undertake the college admissions process by developing personal essays. The subjects of these essays are varied, encompassing topics about educational opportunities or barriers, the navigation of challenges, personal identity and background, and expressions of creativity, among others. As a result, an abundance of guidance exists for crafting these narratives. However, this study aimed to investigate how Black and Latinx students engaged in the process of reflecting on their experiences, thoughts, and emotions to construct meaning in response to personal essay questions. Specifically, this research analyzed how Black and Latinx students utilized the personal essay as a tool for self-expression, a means of challenging dominant narratives, and a pathway to deeper self-understanding. This investigation was guided by the following research questions:

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the common themes that emerge in personal essays written by Black and Latinx students?

RQ2. In what ways, if any, do Black and Latinx students' personal essays challenge or subvert dominant narratives about their communities?

RQ3. How do Black and Latinx students navigate between sharing personal hardships in their college essays while simultaneously highlighting their resilience?

Methodology

The study adopts the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework because it aligns with a critical and interpretivist methodology. This approach rejects the idea of a single, objective truth, favoring instead the socially constructed meaning that students assign to their

own lived experiences, which is a key principle of interpretivism (Crotty, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Fundamentally, employing CCW is a commitment to Critical Theory, allowing the research to serve as a direct methodological challenge to deficit models found in educational scholarship (Creswell & Poth, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Through Yosso's (2005) six forms of capital, the study systematically reframed the narratives of Black and Latinx students, viewing their experiences not as deficiencies, but as evidence of six distinct forms of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). This provides a systematic qualitative lens to validate the assets and strengths students drew from their communities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), offering a powerful, asset-based interpretation for both academic analysis and holistic college review.

Design Overview

This qualitative study employed two data collection methods to explore how Black and Latinx students expressed themselves, challenged dominant narratives, and engaged in self-discovery through their writing. This approach was appropriate because it provided a more comprehensive understanding of what Black and Latinx students expressed in their personal essays and how they experienced the writing process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Utilizing two distinct qualitative data collection methods allowed for the collection of layered, complementary data, which is essential for achieving a rich and nuanced understanding of students' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). First, a qualitative content and textual analysis of student essays was conducted to identify recurring themes, topics, and writing strategies, focusing explicitly on the meaning and interpretation of the text rather than numerical quantification (Krippendorff, 2019; Schreier, 2012). Second, semi-structured interviews gave students space to share their lived experiences, what motivated them, and what writing these essays actually meant to them.

This dual qualitative approach offered a comprehensive exploration of Black and Latinx students' writing processes and self-expression, ensuring a rigorous triangulation of text and voice (Patton, 2015).

Site and Sample Selection

This research was conducted in partnership with YBP (pseudonym), a non-profit organization in Los Angeles County dedicated to supporting student writing skills. This site was selected due to its focus on serving a diverse student population, including a significant number of Black and Latinx students, and its established programs that guide high school students through the college application essay writing process. Selecting a site where the phenomenon of interest naturally and dynamically occurs aligns with standard qualitative case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Anonymity and confidentiality was maintained for all participating students and the organization through the use of pseudonyms and the avoidance of specific identifying details. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to directly target the study's population of interest: Black and Latinx students engaged in the college essay writing process within a dedicated writing support organization. This method is uniquely suited for selecting information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely (Patton, 2015), ensuring the data collected directly aligned with the research questions.

Initially, 10 potential student participants met the inclusion criteria and were invited to join the study. Through the recruitment and screening process, the final sample size was refined to eight students. The two remaining candidates from the initial group were excluded because they did not write essays for the University of California Personal Insight Questions (UC PIQs), which was a core requirement for participation. This final sample of eight was deemed sufficient

for the qualitative design, providing a deep, robust dataset for thorough thematic analysis while maintaining a manageable scope of data.

Participants

Participants were included based on their self-identification as Black and Latinx, submission of a personal essay for the UC application in Fall 2025, and their status as a high school senior during the 2025-2026 academic year. Defining these explicit boundary characteristics ensures that the final sample is directly aligned with the study's phenomenon of interest (Robinson, 2014).

Informed consent was provided by both the participant and a parent or guardian. The participant sample consisted of Black and Latinx senior high school students in the Los Angeles County area who are participating in YBP's programs and are actively engaged in writing personal essays for college applications. Reflecting the inclusive mission of the program, there are no additional exclusionary selection criteria such as minimum GPA requirements or first-generation status; the study focuses specifically on the shared navigational experience of the UC application process among this diverse cohort of Black and Latinx learners. This intentional bounding of the sample allows for a deep, context-specific analysis of the participants' shared structural realities (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Recruitment

To encourage participation, significance was placed on the value of each individual's unique insights, and a gift card was offered to all participants as a token of appreciation for their time and contributions. Because all participants were recruited from YBP, their essay-writing process was embedded within the organization's structured programming. Specifically, students participated in writing workshops held either at their respective school sites or at the organization's centers. Within these spaces, students received one-on-one support from staff

members and volunteer tutors who assisted them through various stages of the writing process, ranging from initial brainstorming to editing and slimming down drafts to meet strict UC word-count limits. Leveraging nearly two decades of professional experience working with youth, I intentionally built rapport with the participants to foster an environment of trust. This established relationship was essential for encouraging open and honest dialogue, ensuring that participants felt comfortable sharing their unique perspectives and lived experiences during the subsequent semi-structured interviews.

Access

As Director of Education at YBP, a non-profit organization that focuses on supporting students with their creative and expository writing skills, I have established relationships with many students and their parents. I leveraged these connections by framing this research and interviews as a true collaboration, emphasizing that I wanted to center *their* voices as they prepare for college. My priority was to foster trust and transparency so that students felt comfortable sharing their honest and insightful experiences, and parents trusted that I would do just that. To achieve this, I hosted informational sessions for parents and students at my job sites. These sessions outlined the project's purpose and emphasized that student and parent input is valued throughout the process. Following these sessions, students with parental approval signed up and completed the necessary permission forms. Furthermore, I leveraged my strong relationships with teachers and college counselors to personally share information about this study within their respective spaces, if possible.

Data Collection

Data collection for this research involved two primary methods: textual analysis and semi-structured interviews. Textual analysis is a qualitative research method used to interpret the

characteristics, themes, and underlying meanings of recorded communication (Frey et al., 2000); in this study, it serves as the systematic framework to examine the narrative strategies and asset-framing within students' written UC personal essays. Semi-structured interviews are flexible, open-ended dialogues guided by a defined set of questions, allowing the researcher to explore participant perspectives while giving the interviewees space to elaborate on their unique lived experiences (Mason, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this inquiry, these interviews provide the essential verbal counter-narratives that illuminate the motivations, pressures, and strategic choices behind the students' written words.

Personal Essays

The primary data source for the research were the personal essays written by Black and Latinx students for their University of California (UC) applications. The UC application requires students to answer four of eight "Personal Insight Questions" (PIQs), each with a maximum word limit of 350 words.

The eight questions from which students choose are:

- **Leadership Experience:** Describe a time you showed leadership.
- **Creative Expression:** Discuss how you express your creative side.
- **Greatest Talent or Skill:** What is your most significant talent or skill?
- **Educational Opportunity or Barrier:** Describe how you took advantage of a significant educational opportunity or overcame an educational barrier you faced.
- **Significant Challenge:** Discuss the most significant challenge you've faced and the steps you took to overcome it.
- **Academic Subject:** Think about an academic subject that inspires you and describe how you have explored this interest.

- **Positive Impact:** What have you done to make your school or community a better place?
- **Strong Candidate:** Beyond what you have already shared, what do you believe makes you a strong candidate for admission to the University of California?

To ensure consistency, this study examined 16 college essays in total, specifically selecting two out of the four required application prompts from eight high school seniors in the Los Angeles area applying to the UC system. High school seniors who had completed their UC application essays were invited to participate in the study; their work was collected via a call for submissions once parental consent was secured. While multiple prompts are available within the University of California Personal Insight Questions (PIQs), this study intentionally centered its focus on Questions 1, 5, and 7. Beyond the fact that every selected student naturally chose at least two of these three prompts, these specific questions were the most compelling because they explicitly required participants to navigate concepts of leadership, unique challenges, and community context. Selecting this specific subset of prompts ensured that the artifact data directly generated the text necessary to explore common themes (RQ1), evaluate potential subversions of dominant community narratives (RQ2), and analyze how participants structurally balance narratives of hardship and resilience (RQ3). Across the eight participants, the distribution of analyzed prompts consisted of five responses to Question 1, seven responses to Question 5, and four responses to Question 7.

Semi-structured Interviews

Those 8 students whose essays were analyzed were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews after parent consent has been obtained. The interviews contextualized the textual data, offering deeper insights into the students' writing processes and motivations. Before each interview, all of the students' essays were analyzed to identify major themes, such as

resilience, community engagement, or academic passion. The interview questions were then guided by these specific themes, allowing for a more focused and personal discussion with each participant about their individual narrative and choices.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis, similar to the essay analysis, to identify key themes and connections to the research questions. The interview data was used to enrich and expand upon the findings from the textual analysis. I conducted 8 interviews, spending 30 to 40 minutes with each interviewee. These interviews were conducted via Zoom or in-person at a neutral non-school site/location.

Data Analysis

This research employed a qualitative approach combining textual analysis of college essays and thematic analysis of interview transcripts. The rationale for this approach was to provide a comprehensive understanding of Black and Latinx students' experiences as expressed in their personal essays, systematically identifying and analyzing patterns across the datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The textual analysis involved close reading and coding of the essays to identify recurring themes (RQ1), instances of challenging or subverting dominant narratives (RQ2), and how students portray both hardship and resilience (RQ3). Based on existing literature, I developed a coding framework and refined it iteratively throughout the analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). To combine the essay and interview data, I started by analyzing two essays per participant. I focused on PIQ prompts 1, 5, and 7 because every student in the study chose at least two of them. Once I had read the essays, I began the open-coding process with MAXQDA, utilizing the software to organize and manage the raw textual data (Rademaker et al., 2012). After exhausting the initial open-coding phase, I conducted a second pass, this time coding specifically for the six types of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW),

moving intentionally from first-cycle open codes to second-cycle pattern codes (Saldaña, 2021). Following this, I wrote an analytical memo for each essay to document themes, the prevalence of specific codes, and the direct and indirect messages within the students' writing, utilizing memo writing to capture reflexive, analytical insights as they emerged (Saldaña, 2021). This initial analysis was critical for preparing for the subsequent interviews; having thoroughly engaged with the essays beforehand allowed me to be more present and responsive during the interview process.

Textual Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on the 16 personal essays to systematically identify recurring themes, patterns and divergences. This study employed a hybrid coding approach, utilizing inductive first and then deductive methods to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The qualitative analysis followed a multi-phased approach to ensure both depth and theoretical alignment. Inductive coding was conducted first, allowing themes and patterns to emerge organically from the raw text, ensuring that the initial data exploration was driven directly by the participants' narratives (Saldaña, 2021). This initial bottom-up approach was crucial for capturing the nuanced, authentic voices of the students and identifying unique insights. Once the initial themes were established, deductive coding was applied. This transition reflects what Creswell and Poth (2018) describe as a natural progression in qualitative analysis, where a researcher moves back and forth between inductive data exploration and deductive framework checking. This dual approach was essential: while inductive coding explored new territory, deductive coding provided a structured lens to validate known patterns, creating a rigorous hybrid approach that balances data-driven insights with framework-applied analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). By balancing these methods, the study discovered fresh

insights and connected them with existing theories. To manage this process, the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was used to organize the data, maintain the evolving codebook, and visualize the relationships between these emergent and established themes.

Thematic Analysis of Interviews

I used thematic analysis to identify and report patterns within the transcribed interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This followed a systematic process of getting familiar with the data, generating codes, and discovering, reviewing, and naming themes. This approach was ideal for exploring how students personally experienced and interpreted their own writing processes, which provided essential context for the textual findings.

Cross-Case Synthesis and Archetype Development

Following the interviews, I imported both the interview transcripts and the student essays into MAXQDA for formal analysis. To move from raw data to the archetypes presented in Chapter 4, I employed a two-cycle coding process that prioritized the participants' own voices before layering in external theoretical frameworks.

In the First Cycle, I utilized inductive In Vivo coding, prioritizing the participants' own words from both their written essays and interview transcripts to ensure the initial data generation remained grounded in the actual language of the students (Saldaña, 2021). This allowed me to identify recurring anchor phrases, to see where student narratives remained consistent or expanded across both data sources. In the Second Cycle, I utilized Pattern Coding to group these initial, organic codes into four distinct archetypal modes: The Reformers, The Sustainers, The Alchemists, and The Visionaries, as Pattern Coding is uniquely suited for pulling together First Cycle codes into more meaningful, meta-unit themes (Saldaña, 2021). Once these archetypal patterns were established, I subsequently applied the Community Cultural Wealth

(CCW) framework to categorize these modes. This integrated analysis ultimately yielded a set of core themes and structural archetypes that provide a framework for understanding the diverse backgrounds, assets, and perspectives of the student participants.

This analytical process was sparked by looking closely at how these students showed up in their daily lives, their families, their communities, and for themselves. As I looked for overarching patterns and areas of tension in the data, it became clear that these students were using their lived experiences to strengthen their communities. They were actively pushing against societal stereotypes and family expectations, acknowledging real hardships and systemic lack without letting those struggles dictate their futures. I wanted an analytical framework that would allow me to see these students not just as separate data points, but as a collective force defining their own lives. These four archetypes were born out of that desire to capture the distinct ways they navigate and speak about their worlds.

Rationale

The combination of textual and thematic analysis provided a robust and nuanced understanding of the research questions. Textual analysis allowed for the examination of the essays themselves, while thematic analysis of interviews provided insights into the student's intentions, motivations, and interpretations. By comparing these two data sources, I enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of my findings, providing a richer and more comprehensive understanding of how Black and Latinx students use personal essays to express their experiences, challenge dominant narratives, and navigate the complex interplay of hardship and resilience. This approach relies on Patton's (2015) framework for comparing and cross-checking the consistency of different qualitative data sources to build a deeper, multi-dimensional view of the participants' experiences.

Positionality and Ethical Issues

As a first-generation college student, I directly experienced the systemic disadvantages inherent in the college-going process, which often overlooked cultural and non-cognitive assets in favor of traditional metrics. This personal history creates a deep resonance with the goals of this study, namely, to validate the strengths of students whose experiences are often framed through a deficit lens. Furthermore, my role as Director of Education at non-profit, which provides comprehensive student support that includes essential college essay writing programs, offers me an intimate, practical understanding of the pressures and strategic choices Black and Latinx students make when crafting their narratives, particularly in the post-*SFFA* landscape. This professional exposure ensures the analysis was grounded not just in theory, but in the practical realities of application essay construction. This dual lens anchors my work in what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) term the space between, occupying an insider status that brings a deep cultural loyalty and empathy to the research, ultimately allowing for a more meaningful and authentic interpretation of the students' stories. This insider perspective necessitates a commitment to reflexivity throughout the analysis to ensure that personal assumptions did not overshadow the participants' unique voices, allowing the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework to function as an objective guide for interpreting their narratives of strength.

Ethical Considerations

A primary ethical issue was ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of students. In order to create a sustainable system where these ethical issues are addressed, I developed a comprehensive protocol that outlined clear guidelines for data handling. This included implementing pseudonymization techniques during data collection and storing both physical and digital data in secure, access-controlled locations. The second issue of concern was ensuring

students had access to support after the conclusion of interviews, particularly if personal topics are broached that are emotionally charged. To mitigate this, I provided all participants and their families with a voucher to receive free counseling through BetterHelp. I was able to provide this service because my organization has a partnership with BetterHelp to offer free mental health support to students and parents in our community, as well as information about support groups and online communities that may be beneficial.

Although I didn't have direct authority over the students I contacted, I recognized my position as an adult, which inherently carries a certain level of authority. I was mindful of this power dynamic when interacting with participants to ensure they felt comfortable and not pressured. This approach aligns with standard qualitative ethics, which require researchers to actively reduce the natural power imbalances that happen when an adult enters a space meant for young people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To mitigate any potential discomfort for students and parents, I reiterated that participation in this study was voluntary and confidential, ensuring that participants do not feel pressured. I ensured students and families understood that I am entering this space as a student researcher.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this study was the small number of student participants; a larger participant pool would have garnered more data, themes, and insights to explore. Additionally, due to my bandwidth as the sole researcher working within a finite amount of time, I was only able to analyze two PIQs per student. It would have been amazing to read and analyze all four PIQs for each of these students to gain an even fuller picture of their narratives.

I must also acknowledge the inherent power dynamic at play; despite my intentionality in wearing a humanistic hat, students may have subconsciously leaned into the resilience

narratives they felt the system rewards, telling me what they believed a leader in education wanted to hear. Additionally, because these students have access to specialized writing programs, they may already possess a higher level of awareness regarding their assets than those in schools without such support, meaning these findings represent students who have already begun to see their lives from a place of power.

This study also served as a specific snapshot in time, occurring during the high-stakes pressure of the college application window. While it proved that these students possess a deep well of transferable resilience, the lack of longitudinal data means we do not yet know how the university ultimately responded to them or if these assets translated into success throughout their freshman year. Also, the geographic focus on the Los Angeles and California landscape provides a very specific context for systemic erasure. The space navigated by a student in an urban center dealing with the chaos of local housing or ICE is distinct; therefore, the specific navigation skills identified here may manifest differently for students in rural Appalachia or the Deep South, where the landscapes of struggle and survival carry their own unique textures.

Beyond the limits of time and place, the study was also shaped by the specific essay questions I chose to analyze. The selection of PIQs 1, 5, and 7 inherently bounded the scope of the data. Utilizing alternative prompts such as those focusing on individual creativity (Question 2) or specific academic talents (Question 3), likely would have shifted the findings toward individualized skill sets and capabilities. However, because this study specifically sought to understand how students construct community narratives (RQ2) and navigate the complex tension between personal hardship and resilience (RQ3), Questions 1, 5, and 7 provided the most robust textual framework for capturing those specific phenomena. While this focus necessarily

excluded other dimensions of the students' writing repertoires, it was essential for generating the specific, narrative-rich data required to fully address the research questions.

Finally, in qualitative research, I must acknowledge that I am the instrument. Because I was so intentionally focused on identifying Community Cultural Wealth, there is a possibility that I glossed over moments where students felt genuinely defeated or lacked a specific asset. This dedication to finding brilliance where others see gaps required a constant, reflexive check to ensure that my desire for student empowerment did not obscure the full, complex reality of their struggle. As Saldaña (2021) points out, because the researcher's mind is the primary analysis tool, it is completely normal to have to consciously balance your passion for a specific framework with a realistic view of the raw data.

Credibility

As a Black researcher investigating the nuanced themes within Black and Latinx student essays, several potential credibility issues must be addressed. Internally, the risk of over-identification and subjectivity necessitates mitigating my personal biases that may influence interpretation. To alleviate these concerns, I maintained a detailed research journal, documenting my thoughts, feelings, and biases throughout the process, and explicitly state my positionality in my findings chapter. In addition, having two data collection methods using the same subjects provided stronger validation of my findings. I proactively challenged my own biases, sought diverse perspectives, and grounded my interpretations strictly in the data.

Crucially, this reflexive practice was central to how I approached the development of the four archetypes. The student participants were not consciously trying to convey these specific archetypal categories in their essays or interviews; rather, they were authentically sharing the underlying foundation of their lived experiences. The creation of these archetypes is an analytical

framework from my perspective as a researcher. It is intended to serve as a tool that offers new ways to look at our students, providing a framework that honors them not as something new, but as a reflection of who they already are. Acknowledging this distinction ensures that the analysis does not impose rigid labels on the participants, but instead amplifies their existing modes of self-determination.

To avoid confusion, I clearly defined my role when interacting with participants, and addressed any potential concerns regarding my objectivity. Finally, I clearly acknowledged the limitations of my study in my written work. By implementing these strategies, I aimed to conduct ethical, impactful research that accurately reflects the experiences of Black and Latinx students.

Trustworthiness and Scope

This study conducts an in-depth analysis on a purposive sample of 16 student essays and corresponding interviews. As this is a qualitative study, the findings are not intended for statistical generalization to the wider population of all college applicants. Instead, the goal was to achieve rich description and deep, contextual insight into the specific experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The findings are intended to offer transferability, meaning they provide detailed insights that other researchers or educational practitioners may apply to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the research, the following measures will be implemented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- Consistency: A consistent, pre-tested semi-structured interview protocol will be used for all participants, and all interviews will be documented using audio recordings and

transcribed verbatim. This operationalizes Lincoln and Guba's (1985) construct of dependability by ensuring a stable, traceable, and high-fidelity collection of raw data.

- Uniform Coding: Uniform coding procedures will be applied to both the textual data and interview transcripts, guided by the CCW framework, ensuring the systematic and replicable interpretation of themes. This ensures the analysis is systematic and reliable, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), because it keeps the coding grounded in a strict, uniform process instead of leaving it up to random guessing or personal bias.
- Transparency: The researcher's positionality and the detailed analytical process will be fully articulated, allowing readers to audit the connection between the raw data and the final conclusions. By being completely transparent about my process, I am creating an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This proves to readers that the final conclusions are visibly rooted in the participants' authentic stories instead of the researcher's opinion.

CHAPTER FOUR

The kitchen table is clear, save for the laptop glowing in the dim, late-night light. A student sits there, cursor blinking at the top of a blank University of California (UC) prompt. They aren't just writing; they are calibrating. They are thinking about this invisible committee that will spend less than ten minutes weighing their life against a rubric. They are deciding how much of their lived experience is useful, wondering what they should emphasize. They are seeking a balance between turning their lived reality into a competitive advantage without losing their sense of self. This moment is a deliberate, high-stakes calculation. It marks the precise intersection where institutional expectations meet personal agency, the moment a student must determine exactly how much of their own history to translate for an audience that seeks evidence of resilience. While the student sits in isolation at the keyboard, their struggle is far from singular; it is a shared tension reflected across the data collected for this study. Thus, this chapter explores the process through an analysis of 16 UC admissions essays and 8 semi-structured interviews with Black and Latinx high school seniors in Los Angeles.

Guiding Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

- **RQ1: What are the common themes that emerge in personal essays written by Black and Latinx students?**
 - *Focus:* Establishing the primary cultural assets, familial support, neighborhood pride, and internal drive, that students foreground to construct their belonging.
- **RQ2: In what ways, if any, do Black and Latinx students' personal essays challenge or subvert dominant narratives about their communities?**

- *Focus:* Identifying how students if at all reframed systemic challenges as evidence of capability, shifting the reader’s perception of the applicant from a passive subject *to whom things happen* to an active agent *who makes things happen*.
- **RQ3: How do Black and Latinx students navigate the tension between sharing personal hardships in their college essays while simultaneously highlighting their resilience?**
 - *Focus:* Uncovering the decision-making process involved in deciding how much of their lived experience to reveal to satisfy the institution without becoming defined by it.

Building the Frame: Introducing the Participants

The eight Black and Latinx seniors from across Los Angeles, California, who participated in this study shared their racial and gender demographics through a preliminary screening questionnaire. These students approached the University of California Personal Insight Questions (PIQs) with a sincere desire to convey the depth of their lived experiences. Of the eight participants, five identified as female and three as male; six identified as Latinx and two as Black. Below are brief profiles of each student currently in the 12th grade.

Esperanza (Pseudonym) Esperanza attends a public high school within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). As the eldest daughter in an immigrant household, she serves as a proxy-adult, managing medical logistics and linguistic brokerage for her family. Her narrative reframes domestic responsibility into a sophisticated suite of leadership skills.

Cristian (Pseudonym) Cristian attends a public high school in LAUSD and is a recent Posse Scholarship recipient. Deeply tethered to his Oaxaqueño roots, Cristian’s identity is defined by proactive stewardship. He utilizes his power to protect his community from systemic threats while fostering social infrastructure through local athletics.

Marisol (Pseudonym) Marisol attends a public charter school in Los Angeles. As the child of immigrants, she experienced the isolation of linguistic barriers in early childhood. She has since dedicated her academic trajectory to institutional reform, leveraging her journey from an English Language Learner to a student leader to ensure younger peers receive the guidance she once lacked.

Raquel (Pseudonym) Raquel attends a public school in LAUSD. Facing significant economic barriers, she steadfastly refuses the deficit label. She views school resources as tools for intellectual reclamation, strategically navigating advanced academics to secure her future as a neuropsychologist.

Jimena (Pseudonym) Jimena attends a public school in LAUSD. As the youngest of four children, her narrative centers on the friction between familial expectations and individual aspiration. By rejecting a prescribed community college path in favor of a UC education, she actively reforms the definition of success within her family.

Sonia (Pseudonym) Sonia attends a public school in Los Angeles. She has transformed a lifelong struggle with epilepsy into a platform for institutional leadership. She utilizes her narrative to challenge the fragile labels often placed on students with chronic health conditions.

Tomas (Pseudonym) Tomas attends an arts high school in Los Angeles. The youngest of three children, he views his craft as a filmmaker as a need rather than a want. He frames his creative ambition as a non-negotiable tool for transcending the labor-based expectations of his environment.

Arturo (Pseudonym) Arturo attends a public high school in LAUSD and is the youngest of two children. He maneuvers through the admissions process with a focused emphasis on dignity and choice. Through narrative gatekeeping, he protects his family's story while pursuing higher education as a transformative *thank you* to his mother's sacrifices.

As these profiles demonstrate, these students do not merely recount their struggles; they frame their navigation of systemic barriers as evidence of the resilience they already possess. By comparing the formal voice used in the Personal Insight Questions (PIQs) against the more candid, reflective voice of the semi-structured interviews, I identified four distinct archetypal modes: The Reformers, The Sustainers, The Alchemists, and The Visionaries. These resulting archetypes provide a comprehensive spectrum of how Black and Latinx youth utilize their narratives to navigate, resist, and aspire

- **The Reformers and The Sustainers** focus on challenging structural inequities and preserving community cultural wealth.
- **The Alchemists and The Visionaries** demonstrate a more internal-to-external transformation, either by pushing past vulnerabilities into current authority or by transcending present limitations to pursue their futures.

The Sustainers

The Sustainer mode is defined by a commitment to maintaining the integrity of familial structures and communal safety. Esperanza and Cristian exemplify this by reframing domestic and community responsibilities as sophisticated assets. Their narratives center on a dual-consciousness: simultaneously functioning as children learning about the world and as proxy-adults sustaining their communities. Their writing and interviews illustrate how these students actively negotiate their roles as both scholars and community stewards.

For Esperanza, her position as the eldest sibling serves as a cornerstone of her identity. She views this role as a primary source of maturity and responsibility, noting how it has shaped a perspective on life that often diverges from that of her peers. As she articulated in her PIQ essay:

By assisting my family in any way I can, I've developed great communication skills and patience. I am not only a helper to my siblings but to my parents as well. As immigrants to this country, my parents work hard to provide a good life for me and my siblings. While both my parents can speak and read English, there are things they need assistance with. When my mother needs to submit medical documents, I fill them out and then explain them to her, because she never signs anything she doesn't understand.

However, during her interview, Esperanza deepened this context, revealing the emotional labor behind the task: "I had to learn to translate the tone, not just the words... I feel like I'm 17 going on 40." While Esperanza navigates the internal logistics of the home, Cristian's stewardship extends to the literal borders of the neighborhood. In his PIQ essay, he describes the fear created by ICE raids:

Immigration and Customs Enforcement was just five minutes away from my family and me, waiting outside the Fox Hills Mall in their unmistakable vehicles. Until then, every sighting had been distant, never in LA, never in Culver City, never close enough to shatter our feeling of safety.

For him, sustaining his family is not just about household support; it is about maintaining a sense of normalcy and safety against a backdrop of systemic kidnapping. A role he describes in his own words in the same PIQ essay:

I vividly remember the raid on Venice and Sepulveda: taking fellow Oaxaqueños one by one. I was just a mile away; I mounted my bike and pedaled. When I arrived, they were already gone. Riding on Venice Boulevard, I urged people to go inside their houses as immigration was still in the area. Videos showed they had taken three people in broad daylight. Right now, living in fear is inescapable. Even in a sanctuary city, no family is safe.

Cristian attempts to shield his family and community from the chaos of the outside world because he feels the disconnect between the official policy of a sanctuary city and the lived reality where no family feels truly secure. This dissonance compels him toward active community stewardship; furthermore, Cristian's commitment to stewardship is not an accidental byproduct of his circumstances, but rather an intentional application of his cultural values. During his interview, Cristian reflected on how his background served as the primary lens for his responses:

Themes that kept coming back to me centered around my identity and my culture. My culture has really shaped the person I am today and what I do on a daily basis. I felt like I kept coming back to that to answer the prompts.

Cristian and Esperanza exist in a state of dual-consciousness, balancing their own coming-of-age with the responsibilities of sustaining their communities. These forces, while challenging, are not a deficit; rather, they serve as a powerful asset. This is evidenced by the high level of situational awareness needed to translate both tone and words to ensure a parent truly grasps the gravity of the documents they are signing. For Esperanza, this practice of reading the room transforms a family necessity into a cognitive and social-emotional skill set. Throughout her interview, Esperanza did not seem to view the needs she fulfilled for her family as burdens; rather, she reflected on how being the older sibling shaped her perspective and maturity:

I felt it was important to share that I was the eldest child. I feel like I had more responsibility growing up. Like, one of my sisters and one of my brothers... I see my brother now, he's 11, and it's just different. It's a different experience.

Her experience highlights that the proxy-adult role is defined not just by physical tasks, but by the strength required to sustain them. This is particularly evident in her interview, where she described the internal pressure of “having to be the one who knows what’s going on” while simultaneously navigating the demands of being a student. In her PIQ essays, Esperanza reveals that she is managing a “lot of responsibilities,” including sibling care and school work. For example, she demonstrates conflict mediation skills in her role as a sibling mentor. When assisting her brother with his writing, she reflects in her essay that the process often “ended in bickering and tantrums.” Rather than abandoning the task, she reframes it as an “exercise in patience,” learning to adapt her style to meet his needs. This ability to navigate interpersonal friction while maintaining a clear instructional goal is a hallmark of high-level social-emotional intelligence. Ultimately, Esperanza’s narratives present her not merely as a student, but as a

household manager, tutor, and negotiator, roles she inhabits while successfully navigating her own senior year.

Cristian's narrative mirrors this proxy-adult reality, though his context is defined by the immediate threat of systemic violence. In his PIQ essay, Cristian shares that despite being "born on American soil and [having] nothing to worry about" personally, he felt a profound responsibility to stabilize his family and community. This realization prompted an immediate shift from passive fear to active service:

After constant raids, I began going out to buy weekly necessities. I got a job to support my family, stepping in when my parents couldn't work due to fear. I volunteer at West Los Respuesta Rada, helping deliver despensas to impacted families. Leading Latinos Unidos, I hosted fundraisers and donated the proceeds to families affected by these tragedies. Even as raids and fear continue to spread across Los Angeles, my community always finds ways to love one another, and I hope to carry that same spirit of resilience and compassion into everything I do.

In our interview, Cristian revealed that including these details was a strategic act of resistance; he utilized his personal statement as a deliberate tool for social commentary rather than just a list of activities. He explained his intent to center the political realities of his neighborhood and push back against the invisible nature of state surveillance:

I really wanted to address the stereotypes that affect my community on a daily basis... considering the presence of ICE in Los Angeles, it can be a real struggle, especially for Brown and Black people.

For Cristian, as for Esperanza, the role of proxy-adult is not merely about helping; it is about functioning as a primary interface between the household and a hostile outside world. Whether navigating medical forms or the fear created by ICE, these students are not just surviving, they are preserving their community's integrity through active, expert leadership.

The Reformers

While the Sustainers stabilize their communities, the Reformers' narratives center around interrogating the systems that try to dictate what they can aspire to. Reformers are agents of change who challenge barriers defining their futures. For Marisol, the primary gatekeeper was the English language. Growing up in a household of native Spanish speakers, she identified a systemic void in the support provided to students of immigrant backgrounds. As she articulated in her PIQ essay:

When beginning kindergarten at the age of five, I was appalled by the shift of my surroundings... From the young children babbling to their parents to the foreign letters on the wall of the classroom that looked back at me, thus I felt as if I've fallen into the deep end of the summer swimming pool.

While her essay uses the "deep end" to illustrate childhood isolation, Marisol's interview reveals a sophisticated awareness of how this narrative functions within the university admissions process. She moves beyond the feeling of drowning to describe the immigrant experience as a site of unique expertise rather than just a typical struggle:

My parents are immigrants from Mexico, and there is that stereotype about being a minority that a lot of people believe. While writing the PIQs, I knew the typical narrative is that a daughter of immigrants doesn't have the same opportunities as

other kids... However, I think those experiences are what actually make us unique, regardless of where we come from. I thought, this is something a kid who grew up with immigrant parents would write about, but it is still unique to each and every one of us.

Marisol acknowledges the typical narrative of deficit but consciously subverts it, into a testament to her unique perspective and agency.

The Reformer impulse is equally present in Esperanza and Cristian, whose acts of stewardship naturally evolve into institutional interrogation. Esperanza does not just translate for her family; she critiques the necessity of having to do so when institutions fail to provide accessible information. Similarly, Cristian pivots from a Sustainer of safety to a Reformer of policy. By utilizing his bike to alert his community of ICE presence, he actively identifies a gap in the protection promised by sanctuary city status.

Raquel applies a similar drive to dismantle the barriers created by a lack of resources. She identifies her family's financial hardship not merely as a personal struggle, but as a barrier that seeks to limit her access to the tools of her own intellect. As she articulated in her PIQ essay:

It felt so frustrating as I believed my work could be better if I had better materials or guidance in writing... [but] I handled this challenge... by taking advantage of my school's resources. Whether it was my advanced English and art classes or programs that are made to help students succeed. This felt liberating as I felt as if I was taking back a part of myself.

During her interview, Raquel expanded on this reclamation, explaining that her focus on "taking back" not just as a struggle for grades, but as a battle for a specific, professional future that transcends her current circumstances:

I wanted to show that I'm very passionate about a career in psychology. I'm willing to do anything to get there because I come from a difficult background, and I want to be more than that, more than my family members. I also wanted to be seen as a good writer, since I put so much intent into my skills.

Refusing to let a lack of resources define her worth, Raquel leverages advanced art and English classes as a launchpad for her future in Neuropsychology. Similarly, Jimena identifies a systemic constraint within the home, navigating familial expectations that attempt to dictate her academic trajectory.

Jimena's narrative centers on the structural friction between a prescribed family plan and her individual aspirations. While her father views community college as the standard path, Jimena identifies this expectation as a limitation on her own potential. In her PIQ essays, she frames her application to the University of California not as an act of rebellion, but as a lever for achieving both self-determination and collective stability:

Ever since I could remember, my dad has planned where I should go after high school. All my siblings went to community college first... However, I don't want that for myself; I want to be able to make my own decisions... I want to be able to make him proud and be the first in my family to actually pursue something that I will love and be able to give them financial security. I know to achieve this goal, I have a lot of learning to do on my own academically and habits I need to break... but nonetheless, I will expect the unexpected and face it head on.

By refusing to let the established family history dictate her trajectory, Jimena actively reforms the definition of success for a first-generation student. During her interview, she clarified

that "facing it head on" involves a profound level of personal agency; she is willing to navigate familial disapproval in the short term to secure the long-term financial and professional freedom, required for her family's future. Her narrative shows that for the Reformer, the application is used to break cycles and build new, more expansive definitions of what is possible.

The Alchemists

While the Reformers focus on dismantling external barriers, the Alchemist engages in a more internal transformation, turning personal vulnerability into a site of undeniable authority. Sonia embodies the Alchemist mode, turning a chronic health condition into a credential for leadership. As the only participant in this study to navigate a serious medical condition, Sonia uses her narrative to directly challenge the at-risk labels often placed on students with epilepsy. In her PIQ essay, she addresses this stigma directly:

I wanted them to know that being seen as fragile doesn't prevent you from doing things. Ever since I started school, people had their eyes on me 24/7 as the sick kid. It really bummed me out... but I want people to know there is no limit to how much you can dream or achieve.

As Sonia matured, her ability to monitor and manage her epilepsy increased, allowing her to reclaim agency over her daily life. This transition was not merely a medical success but a profound social and academic restructuring. In her PIQ essay, she describes the rigorous self-discipline required to transition back into a world that had become foreign to her:

At thirteen I was off my dose, being monitored by blood tests, therapy, appointments, and improving my lifestyle by eating healthier, reading, as well as being more active... Overcoming the control my Epilepsy had over me wasn't

easy, but returning to school wasn't either. I was left alone, navigating a world that I didn't know anymore. I pushed myself to take small steps and engage with people inside and outside my classroom; I allowed myself to ask for help and feel safe in a space I was not used to.

For Sonia, the Alchemist mode is most visible in how she frames this recovery. She does not view her medical history as a period of lost time; instead, she identifies it as the foundation of her resilience. She concludes her narrative by explicitly linking her medical endurance to her academic ambition:

My journey through my condition taught me to slow down and solely focus on feeling better but also doing better for myself. It showed me however slow of a process I can overcome other obstacles, motivating me to take a new one on: higher education.

While Sonia's medical journey was initially defined by a loss of control, her leadership narrative serves as the site where she actively reclaims it. In her interview, she recalled how her early years were characterized by a protective hyper-vigilance for her own safety. However, in her PIQ essay, she contrasts this past surveillance with her current visibility, describing how she now stands "in front of all classes" to advocate for her peers as Student Council President:

During the year I was student council president I had been in charge of promoting, planning, accepting and reviewing other ideas that everyone had... The moment I take the position of a leader I become a person with proper and positive attributes.

This transition represents the essence of the Alchemist; the eyes that were once fixed on her for signs of illness are now fixed on her for signs of leadership. In her interview, Sonia reflected on the nature of the stereotypes she faced, revealing that reclaiming her agency was a collective effort rather than an individual one. She noted that while the system may be designed for struggle, her success was rooted in a deliberate choice to lean into her community assets:

Just because you have one parent doesn't mean you don't have a village. Friends, extended family, teachers, and counselors... helped me find opportunities. I never thought I'd make it to this point, but here I am. Hearing topics like this makes me feel proud of my background rather than ashamed.

By reframing her family structure from a single-parent deficit to a village asset, Sonia demonstrates how the Alchemist changes potential or perceived shame into pride. The Alchemist mode is not limited to the medical; it also manifests in the reclamation of intellect and purpose from the site of internal psychological frustration. While Sonia reclaims her body from epilepsy, Raquel reclaims her academic destiny from the emotional weights of her past. In her PIQ essay, Raquel reflects on an early academic baseline that bordered on intense self-doubt, noting how she kept her struggles locked inside for years:

Truthfully, I handled this challenge poorly in the beginning. When I was younger, I was overly critical of myself, it felt as if I was bordering on imposter syndrome... It felt so frustrating as I believed my work could be better if I had better materials or guidance... But eventually, my passion fizzled out as the sinking feeling overcame me.

However, Raquel's narrative pivots as she describes how she actively chose to confront this internal stagnation. Rather than allowing these early hurdles to dictate her capacity, she transformed her lived experience with frustration into an intentional focus on scientific inquiry. Her narrative turns her past emotional battle into the foundational catalyst for her future career:

This was meaningful because my interests, my expression, makes up a big part of who I am as a person and it's what is pushing me towards my future career as a Cognitive Neuropsychologist as I hope to one day study why my interests feel so essential. Through my journey, I discovered that I'm quite a persistent individual.

By explicitly linking her psychological processing to her ambition to study the human brain, Raquel shifts from a subject to an active investigator of the mind. Both students utilize the Alchemist lens to prove that their internal conflicts did not diminish their potential, but rather catalyzed their resourcefulness. When viewed together, Sonia and Raquel illustrate the Alchemist's core power: the ability to take the very thing the world sees as a vulnerability, be it a chronic illness or a battle with personal isolation and refine it into intellectual expertise.

The Visionaries

Rather than simply navigating or reforming the world as it exists, students like Tomas and Arturo utilize their narratives to project themselves into futures that defy traditional expectations. While the Sustainer protects the present and the Reformer interrogates the past, the Visionary claims the future by treating their creative and professional aspirations as a form of non-negotiable liberation.

Tomas, a budding filmmaker, embodies the Visionary archetype by framing his creative ambition as a non-negotiable necessity. During our interview, I asked Tomas how he decided

how much detail to include when writing about the difficulties of his journey. His response revealed a strategic distinction between the facts required by institutional prompts and the visceral need that drives his work:

In my college essays, I was told to stick to the facts rather than storytelling mode. For the UC essays, I wrote about feeling upset, it felt like life or death. I wanted the reader to know I had to get it done... I didn't want them to think I hated doing it. But *want* is different from *need*. I might want to be a painter, but I don't have the need to go buy a paintbrush. I wanted to show that even if I don't go to their school, I'm still going to do this.

Tomas's distinction between a "want" and a "need" reframes his creative identity as a fundamental requirement for his survival rather than a casual interest. This internal drive allows him to project a future not tied to a labor-based manual job, but to a creative one. During our interview, he explained that his narrative was a tool to dismantle the limited expectations others might have of his trajectory.

I wrote about coming from the hood with two immigrant parents. My dad is a dishwasher, my mom is a housekeeper, and my brother works in air conditioning. The stereotype is that people from my background are expected to go into labor jobs, working just to live. On school tours, I saw a lot of white people from nicer places like Burbank, and I didn't see people from my background majoring in film. I wrote about my background to show that I don't fall into those stereotypes.

By explicitly naming the labor-based roles of his family members, Tomas does not distance himself from his community; instead, he identifies the lack of representation he

encountered on school tours. His refusal to conform to the "working just to live" expectation serves as the core of his identity. He uses the college application not to ask for permission to be a filmmaker, but to assert that his presence in the field is a necessary disruption of the status quo. This same refusal to stop is seen in Arturo's narrative, though his focus shifts from the persistence of the artist to the persistence of the son. Arturo embodies the Visionary archetype by rejecting the path of previous generations, reframing his journey as a strategic pursuit of the options his mother was never afforded. In his PIQ essay, he identifies his application as a direct response to his mother's *settling*:

I would like to attend college so I can make my mom proud and show her that because of her I have options and I don't just have to attend the CC [Community College] nearest to me... My mom didn't think she had a chance with a University so she settled.

For Arturo, the visionary goal is the existence of choice itself. However, creating these options requires a high degree of narrative protection. During our interview, Arturo revealed a sophisticated mastery over his own story, explaining that he deliberately withheld certain details to prevent the reader from viewing his life through a deficit lens:

I feel like I didn't share a good amount just because I thought of the reader being like, Okay, this is just another typical story. I feel like a lot of things I did leave out just because of that... I knew people might focus only on when my dad had a bad period, which isn't who he is.

Arturo insists on a version of the future where his family's history is acknowledged but does not define his potential. He anchors his resilience in a professional identity that exists outside of

traditional classroom metrics, moving beyond the label of a struggling student to see himself as a technical expert. In his essay, he explicitly de-links academic performance from his actual capability, framing his "hard work" through the lens of industry-specific mastery:

I feel as if ability and potential don't always correlate to academics. I am a hard worker and can rig a set properly but I was never a scholar in school... My goal is to join IATSE film union... I hope to one day be a key grip and lead my own team of grips.

Arturo and Tomas both prove that being a Visionary means looking past the *typical story* to see a version of themselves that the current system hasn't yet made room for.

This visionary theme is equally present in the narratives of Sonia and Raquel. While Tomas and Arturo use their narratives to project themselves into the creative world of film, the Visionary lens is equally present in how Sonia and Raquel claim authority in the medical and psychological fields. For Sonia, the Visionary pivot occurs when she stops defining her life through the medical monitoring of her epilepsy and begins to project herself as a Student Council President. In her interview, she doesn't just discuss her health; she envisions a world where her "proper and positive attributes" are the primary standard by which she is judged. Like Arturo, who seeks options his mother never had, Sonia seeks a visibility that is defined by her leadership rather than her diagnosis.

Similarly, Raquel shows her Visionary side through her creative writing. In the ninth grade, a simple classroom assignment turned into an obsessive project where she wrote way past the word limit to create complex characters facing tough choices. She doesn't just see writing as

a hobby; she sees it as a blueprint for her future. She explicitly states how she plans to combine her art with her career goals:

My end goal is to eventually utilize the future education I'd receive in Psychology to be able to deeply explore such characters, effectively portray them, and structure a plot if I ever rewrite this story and have it published as I do want to be an author.

By mapping out exactly how she will use a psychology degree to fuel her passion as a published author, Raquel is claiming her future on her own terms. When viewed alongside Tomas's insistence that he is a filmmaker "even if I don't go to their school," and Arturo's specific goal to join the IATSE union, a clear pattern emerges. These Visionaries utilize their narratives to draw a hard line between their current environments and their future vocations. Whether it is a film set, a neuropsychology lab, or a student government office, these students are not merely asking for an education; they are announcing their arrival into their chosen fields as a non-negotiable act of self-liberation.

Cross-Case Analysis

The following analysis synthesizes how the eight participants collectively utilized various forms of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) to author their narratives. By looking across the cases, it becomes clear that student success is a communal, rather than individual, endeavor.

Aspirational and Familial Capital

While each student's journey is unique, a collective context emerges from their college essays and interviews regarding how they view and author their own lives. These students do not view the complexities of their lives; economic hardship, medical monitoring, or family brokerage as mere burdens. Instead, they frame these experiences as the very sites where they developed

the agency and expertise required for higher education. This is evident when Raquel notes in her personal essay that her financial constraints actually “improved my academic life” by forcing her to maximize school resources, and when Sonia states in her written response that managing her epilepsy “showed me however slow of a process I can overcome other obstacles, motivating me to take a new one on: higher education.” Far from being sidelined by their environments, participants treat their histories as assets. Esperanza and Marisol both reframe their roles as translators into an advanced, unique set of communication skills and personal maturity. Esperanza outlines in her admissions essay, that the translating and navigating the system for her family is precisely where she “developed great communication skills and patience.” Similarly, while writing her PIQs, Marisol confronted the typical narrative that daughters of immigrants lack the same opportunities as other kids, writing, “However, I think those experiences are what actually make us unique, regardless of where we come from.”

For these eight seniors, the "I" of the university application is inherently plural. Success is not defined by individual social mobility, but by a collective drive to pull their families through the gates of higher education. This Aspirational Capital, the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This is evidenced in Arturo’s interview, where he frames his college application process not as an isolated, individual milestone, but as a shared family trajectory mapped out alongside his sister. When reflecting on how he chose to anchor his narrative of future progress amidst deep family struggles, Arturo explained:

Well, actually, I thought of that with my sister too, because she's transferring and doing the applications. So, like I asked her, and I decided to write about my dad

because of how much impact he made on the whole family. But I focused more on our family struggles...

By processing his application choices in tandem with his sister's transfer journey, Arturo demonstrates how his educational aspirations function as a coordinated, multi-generational effort to honor and transform his family's collective history. This projection of future possibility is mirrored in Tomas's interview, where he describes his creative ambition not as a casual, elective choice, but as an unyielding drive that exists completely independent of institutional validation. When reflecting on the grueling production process that dropped his grades and made him question his talent, Tomas reframed his relationship to his craft through a lens of raw artistic urgency. He explicitly rejected the idealized, safe narratives of his classmates, noting:

My peers wrote about why they liked film or what made them fall in love with it. I wrote a story about how a project made me almost hate it... I look up to musicians and artists who go through *hell on earth* but still go through with it because they are ambitious about their art form.

Tomas further expanded on this boundary-pushing by explaining that his connection to filmmaking is an inescapable force. He utilized his narrative not to request entry into a program, but to announce that his creative trajectory is already non-negotiable, asserting:

I used the word *addiction* because I'm drawn to it... I wanted to show that even if I don't go to their school, I'm still going to do this.

By moving from seeking permission to asserting artistic autonomy Tomas does not view higher education as the creator of his talent, but as a vehicle for a path he has already fiercely claimed.

This powerful expression of Familial Capital is vivid in Cristian's personal essay and interview, where he navigates divisions within his own school to fiercely protect his family's cultural legacy. In his PIQ essay, he documents a stark tension within his high school environment, showing how he had to lean on his community's internal values when surrounded by peer apathy:

As these events continued, divisions grew within my school: friends who rationalized ICE's actions and those who saw it as the tragedy it was. It was painful knowing that the people closest to me were apathetic to the injustices.

Instead of letting this isolating environment diminish his drive, Cristian channeled his Aspirational Capital outward, anchoring his goals in the preservation of deep generational roots. He took on a leadership role in a local basketball league to ensure that younger youth could thrive in a space built on solidarity, noting, "we wanted to continue what our parents began back in Oaxaca." This narrative choice perfectly mirrors his interview, where he emphasized the familial obligation of learning his mother's handcrafted recipe as a vital act of keeping "the family legacy going."

This narrative of shared survival is clear with Marisol, who connects her family's daily hard work directly to her own educational drive. In her interview, she shared how watching her parents manage their everyday responsibilities taught her how to handle her own schoolwork:

Seeing how hard my parents work every single day without complaining taught me what real discipline looks like. I took that exact same mindset and applied it to studying for my classes and getting through these applications.

This shows a great deal of Familial and Aspirational Capital. Instead of looking at her home life as separate from her education, Marisol uses her parents' work ethic as a direct blueprint for her own academic discipline.

This perspective matches Raquel's approach in her interview. Raquel explained that she used her essay to formally put her academic and creative goals into words for the first time, noting that she did it with a specific purpose in mind:

I wanted to come across as studious so these institutions would consider me.

For both Marisol and Raquel, writing their college essays isn't about trying to escape where they come from. It is a deliberate, aspirational choice to push past standard stereotypes and force admissions offices to see them as capable, focused thinkers right from the start.

For students like Jimena and Arturo, UC aspirations are not just personal milestones; they are tools for generational liberation, a transformative *thank you* to their parents' sacrifices that actively seeks to expand the options available to their entire lineage. In her admissions essay, Jimena frames her academic ambition as a deliberate lever to break cycles and establish collective safety, writing that her goal is "to be able to make him proud and be the first in my family to actually pursue something that I will love and be able to give them a better life." This exact sentiment of centering the broader household trajectory is echoed in Arturo's interview reflections, where he notes that his decision to delve into difficult personal histories was driven entirely by a desire to honor the collective journey of his household. When explaining how he decided to handle the emotional vulnerability of his narrative, Arturo stated:

I wanted to show that even when things got heavy at home, we always sat down together at the end of the day to figure it out. Writing this wasn't just about my own goals—it was about showing how we all pushed each other to get to this point.

Rather than viewing the college application process as an isolating, individual burden, Arturo focuses on how it impacts his entire family. Like Jimena, he treats applying to college as a collective family project meant to honor their roots.

Resistant Capital and Narrative Gatekeeping

A distinct pattern of agency emerges in how participants exercise Resistant Capital through narrative gatekeeping, selectively sharing their lives while fiercely protecting their self-definition. Sonia, in her interview, reflected deeply on the strategic choices she made when deciding how much of her medical history to share with admissions committees:

I knew I had to mention my health because it's a part of my life, but I didn't want them to feel sorry for me. I stopped writing at the exact point where it felt like I was just asking for pity, because I wanted the focus to be on how I handle things, not just what happened to me.

Rather than letting her medical challenges define her entire identity for the institution, Sonia uses her narrative choices to set a firm boundary. She intentionally decides what to share so the college sees her as a leader of her own life, not just someone who went through a tough time. By setting this boundary, she takes total control over how she is viewed, turning a difficult situation into a clear example of her own strength and independence.

Arturo exercises a parallel form of narrative gatekeeping by carefully partitioning his family's structural barriers from their private dignity. In his college essay, Arturo names the systemic hurdles his family faced, writing that when he was four years old, his "dad got deported for the first time," which forced his single mother to work "nightshifts" while he bounced from house to house. However, Arturo's interview reveals a strict boundary regarding what he owed in his essays writing . He admitted that he "didn't share a good amount" of his history to prevent readers from reducing his life to "just another typical story." While he was willing to document the reality of deportation on paper, he deliberately omitted his father's subsequent "bad period" to protect him from a formatting system where a single institutional "depiction is enough" to make a loved one "seem bad." Arturo refuses to trade his family's humanity for admissions capital, explicitly stating in his essay that his true motivation is simply to "show [his mom] that because of her I have options." Furthermore, he extends this resistance to dominant definitions of merit, by pointing to his own intellectual potential by declaring that "ability and potential don't always correlate to academics," asserting his worth as a "hard worker" even if he was "never a scholar in school."

Arturo and Sonia, refused to perform the expected narrative of isolated struggle. Together, these students move beyond a deficit narrative, utilizing strategic silence, selective disclosure, and collective identity to assert that they are the sole authors of how their families, bodies, and communities are perceived.

Linguistic and Navigational Capital

For Marisol, Esperanza, and Raquel, utilizing Linguistic and Navigational Capital functioned as an empowering tool. In their writing and interviews, they describe the strategic process of navigating unfamiliar institutional spaces when their immediate households could not provide standard academic guidance. Marisol highlights this dynamic when reflecting on how she had to step out of her comfort zone early on to bridge the resource gap for her family:

English was like the relative side plate that not many touched at dinner... My parents had difficulty understanding English... The lack of education running through my family made me realize that I couldn't rely on my parents like my peers at school did.

Rather than allowing this lack of institutional knowledge to stall her education, Marisol proactively sought out external networks. She took the initiative to ask her third-grade teacher for guidance, which eventually led her to discover YBP. Years later, she returned to the organization as a summer intern, leading a group of fifty younger students and helping them overcome their own shyness to present their creative writing. Through this intentional navigation, Marisol transformed her early language barriers into a direct professional path toward becoming an educator.

This resourceful approach to navigating the application process matches Esperanza's interview reflections. Instead of viewing the college application journey as a solitary, rigid task, Esperanza leaned on peer collaboration to find her footing, explaining how she balanced her writing process with community support:

My PIQs were written the day they were supposed to be submitted... I was on the phone with Marisol. I bounced my ideas off her, and I stole some ideas from her, too.

Even under tight deadlines, Esperanza used her peer network as a sounding board to ensure her essays remained fully authentic to her lived experiences outside of the classroom. This reclamation of space is further expanded by Raquel, who reframed a lack of material resources as a systemic gap rather than a personal deficit. Raquel noted that she navigated her high school environment by aggressively pursuing advanced classes and specialized workshops that were designed to help students succeed. For Raquel, strategically capitalizing on these institutional programs was not just about getting into college; it felt liberating because it allowed her to take back a part of herself. For all three students, highlighting these experiences is a deliberate act of Navigational Capital. They reject a deficit lens, forcing the reader to recognize that their capability, resourcefulness, and community leadership were forged through actively carving out their own paths to success. This resourceful way of navigating around systemic challenges flows right into Cristian's experience. Instead of letting community crises derail his goals, Cristian used his navigational skills to help organize a local basketball league, turning a stressful environment into a space for community protection and cultural survival:

We wanted to continue what our parents began back in Oaxaca. It was about making sure the younger kids had a safe place to be, where they didn't have to worry about what was happening outside the court.

Cristian showed how he could navigate a difficult local climate while keeping his community connected. He didn't solely focus on his own path to college; he used his narrative to show that his personal success is tied to protecting and lifting up the next generation.

By the time these eight students submit their applications, they have already functioned as complex translators, medical advocates, youth mentors, and community organizers. As Marisol's journey demonstrates, this path is defined by an active choice to seek out structural lifelines and build leadership from the ground up:

Got the information by asking 3rd grade teacher. Helped in the area of English as it was my second language and parents didn't have resources to help me.

Far from arriving at the university underprepared, these narratives demonstrate that these students are already seasoned project managers. The way they navigate difficult systems and guide others every day is its own kind of academic credential.

Synthesis of Cross-Case Patterns and Dominant Capitals

An analysis across all eight student cases reveals distinct patterns in how specific archetypes utilize different configurations of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). Rather than relying on a single asset, the students systematically coordinate multiple capitals.

Archetype	Core Participants	Dominant Forms of Capital Driving the Mode	Primary Narrative Pattern
The Sustainers	Esperanza, Cristian	Familial Capital, Navigational Capital	Taking on everyday responsibilities—like translating for family or protecting the neighborhood—and turning those experiences into real

			leadership skills.
The Reformers	Marisol, Raquel, Jimena	Resistant Capital, Linguistic Capital	Pushing back against unfair school rules and changing the definition of what it means to be successful.
The Alchemists	Sonia, Raquel	Resistant Capital, Aspirational Capital	Taking private struggles, like a chronic health condition or deep self-doubt, and using them as proof of personal strength and expertise.
The Visionaries	Tomas, Arturo, Sonia, Raquel	Aspirational Capital, Resistant Capital	Deciding exactly what their future career will be and treating that goal as a mandatory path to freedom.

The biggest difference in patterns across these student cases is where they choose to focus their energy. The Sustainers operate through an outward, protective approach, using their skills to guard their community, whether that means carefully translating medical tones to protect a parent or setting up local sports leagues to keep neighborhood kids safe. On the other hand, the Alchemists focus inward, taking deep personal struggles like managing a chronic health condition or fighting intense self-doubt and transforming those internal challenges into direct motivation for their higher education.

Similarly, while the Reformers focus on directly challenging and breaking down external barriers like confronting language gaps in schools or pushing past family expectations about community college; the Visionaries do not wait for institutional approval at all. Their approach demonstrates an entirely autonomous baseline; they simply carve out their own paths without asking permission. By writing about their future careers as if they are already happening, they draw a hard line that separates their true potential from their current financial struggles.

While the students pull from many different cultural assets, Resistant Capital and Aspirational Capital are the primary driving forces behind these distinct approaches:

- Resistance acts as a shield through the practice of narrative gatekeeping. Across the study, students refuse to share painful stories just to gain sympathy points from admissions officers. They share just enough to explain their reality, cutting off the narrative before it slides into a cliché about hardship so they can keep total control over how they are viewed.
- Aspiration acts as a lever to drive these first-generation students toward college. For these eight seniors, ambition is a collective effort rather than an individual pursuit. They consistently frame getting a degree as a multi-generational *thank you* to their families or a collaborative blueprint designed to open doors for everyone back home.

These overlapping patterns demonstrate that these students do not sit down to write their essays as passively. They arrive at the keyboard as active, highly strategic managers of their own stories.

CHAPTER FIVE

Introduction & Summary of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to center student voices on their pathways to higher education, particularly during a global and political moment where their communities were being actively erased and marginalized. I chose to focus on college essays, specifically the UC Personal Insight Questions because they represent a unique space where students distill their lived experiences to prove their readiness for the future. While existing research often prioritizes the mechanics of writing or the logistics of access, my goal was more fundamental: to understand the essence of what students are actually saying. I sought to explore how their narratives challenge the stereotypes held against their communities, and how they navigate the delicate tension between the vulnerability required to share their greatest challenges and the agency to hold some truths for themselves. Using Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth allowed this study to be anchored in possibility and overflow as opposed to deficit and it provided the framework to look at these students and their narrative from a profound sense of belonging and hope.

The findings reveal that students of color utilize Community Cultural Wealth to transform household responsibilities and community advocacy into institutional expertise during the UC admissions process. Their narratives redefined achievements such as acting as linguistic brokers, managing household labor as proxy-adults, or advocating for neighbors during ICE raids as displays of navigational wealth. These stories functioned not merely as personal milestones but as conscious negotiations with systemic barriers, where students actively dismantled deficit myths by centering their roles as community protectors and cultural assets. Furthermore, the data highlights a high-stakes negotiation between sharing hardship and asserting narrative sovereignty. Students exercised strategic silence to protect their dignity to avoid performing

trauma for the admissions gatekeeper. Whether through outspoken critique of institutional frameworks or the protective refusal to disclose sensitive family histories, participants curated their stories to maintain ownership of their identities. Ultimately, the study found that for these students, the college essay is a site of Resistant Capital, where the act of deciding what to withhold is as vital to their liberation and agency as the act of what they choose to share. This delicate balance between self-disclosure and protection directly echoes Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2014) work on refusal in research the idea that marginalized communities have the right to limit institutional access to their pain. Rather than viewing missing trauma details as a gap in a student's story, this study positions narrative sovereignty as a form of intellectual self-defense. By analyzing these essays through Laura Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory alongside Yosso's framework, we can see that when institutions validate students' pre-existing cultural wealth rather than demanding a performance of hardship, they create a humanizing bridge into higher education

Discussion of Findings

The archetypes and cross-case themes presented above provide a detailed map of how these eight students utilized their Community Cultural Wealth to navigate the UC admissions process. The following discussion links those lived experiences to the study's research questions and the existing literature. In doing so, this chapter adopts what Shaun Harper (2010) terms an 'anti-deficit achievement framework.' Instead of continually asking why students of color struggle to fit into rigid college structures, this discussion uses the literature to highlight how these eight students actively leverage their lived brilliance to navigate those structures. Connecting their words back to established scholarship allows us to see these personal essays not just as individual stories, but as qualitative proof of institutional readiness.

Discussion of Research Question 1: Common Themes

The first research question sought to identify the common themes that emerged in the personal essays of Black and Latinx students. The narratives encompass a broad spectrum of lived experiences, ranging from the domestic weight of eldest-sibling responsibilities to high-stakes advocacy as vital resources during ICE raids. Participants described navigating language barriers, reclaiming school resources to redefine personal possibility, and pushing against familial disapproval or significant medical obstacles. Notably, several students pursued creative paths that intentionally defied the manual labor stereotypes. While their specific challenges vary, these stories are unified by the participants' immense self-awareness and sophisticated deployment of Navigational, Aspirational, and Familial Capital (Yosso, 2005) to negotiate their environments.

A primary theme across the narratives is the role of the proxy-adult and linguistic leader. Students like Esperanza, Marisol, and Arturo describe a life defined by household management, skills that are often invisible in traditional admissions rubrics. By assisting parents with medical documents or managing the academic trajectories of younger siblings, these students demonstrate a high degree of Navigational Capital.

This aligns with the literature on Black and Latinx educational persistence, which suggests that the community is a primary driver of academic success. Scholars like Uriostegui et al. (2021) suggest that for students of color, individual success is often inseparable from the uplift of the family unit. Consequently, what an admissions officer might see as a burden is actually a foundational asset that fosters the grit and multi-tasking abilities necessary to persist through a rigorous university curriculum. The *what* of their stories, ranging from the household

labor of the proxy-adult (Esperanza) to the high-stakes community advocacy during ICE raids (Cristian) serves as a profound proof of concept for their academic readiness.

Discussion of Research Question 2: Subverting Dominant Narratives

The second research question explored how students challenge or subvert dominant narratives about their communities. A key finding is that neighborhood stewardship, most visible in Cristian's and Tomas's narratives, highlights a deep-seated Social Capital and neighborhood pride. Unlike the traditional Western narrative of rugged individualism often found in college success stories, these students frame their academic journey as a collaborative project (Thomas, 2015). Tomas's creative aspirations and Cristian's community protection roles are strategic deployments of Resistant Capital. In the context of educational persistence, Thomas notes that students who maintain a strong connection to their cultural roots often possess a "fortified identity" that protects them against the isolation frequently experienced in higher education. By centering these roles as community protectors, the participants redefine achievements as the ability to transform household and community responsibilities into institutional expertise.

The student narratives reveal that navigating an educational journey is rarely a neutral act; rather, it is a conscious negotiation with the systemic barriers that surround them. While some participants initially viewed their experiences through a personal lens, others spoke with a sharp clarity, identifying how institutional frameworks were often seemingly designed for their demise. The findings suggest that subversion occurs through two primary modes:

Outspoken Critique: Students like Tomas and Sonia specifically utilized their narratives to dismantle stereotypes of "the hood" or the "lazy" student of color. Sonia's emphasis on her "village" serves as a direct rebuttal to the single-parent deficit myth, while Tomas's creative

aspirations explicitly challenge the cycle of manual labor projected onto his neighborhood. This aligns with Yosso's (2005) assertion that Resistant Capital is a tool used to challenge inequality. Cristian, for example, leveraged his personal statement to center the presence of ICE in his community, positioning himself as an advocate against state-sanctioned surveillance.

Strategic Silence: This study adds a layer to existing literature through the concept of narrative sovereignty. For students like Arturo, subverting the deficit was not always about what was said, but what was withheld. By refusing to let his family's struggle be consumed as "just another typical story," Arturo practiced a form of protective refusal. Raquel offers a third path: de-emphasizing racial exceptionalism to embrace a shared local identity, resisting the institutional pressure to perform a singular, isolated trauma.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that these students are the primary architects of their own narratives, utilizing their Resistant Capital to maintain dignity within a system that often demands vulnerability for entry.

Discussion of Research Question 3: Navigating Tension and Vulnerability

The most sophisticated finding of this study is the high-stakes negotiation students perform between sharing hardship and asserting agency. This tension represents a practical application of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2014) "Methodological Act of Refusal." Tuck and Yang argue that marginalized subjects exercise a fundamental right to keep sensitive parts of their lives private to prevent institutional exploitation. The participants in this study, specifically Raquel, Marisol, and Arturo, exercised this right by thoughtfully calculating when and how much vulnerability to offer. They navigated a tightrope where they needed to be distinguishable to the admissions reader without appearing fragile or as if they were performing trauma for

sympathy points. The findings reveal that for Black and Latinx students, navigating hardships is not just about what is written, but about the strategic silence used to protect their dignity. This is evidenced by Arturo's refusal to reduce his father's history to a "typical story" and Raquel's choice to mention her father's arrest without providing the "full detail" of the act itself.

For these students, stewardship of their stories allowed them to decide which truths belonged to the public and which remained sacred. Beyond external pressures, students navigated an internal friction between their natural communication styles and the rigid expectations of the college essay. The discomfort expressed by Sonia and Jimena regarding "putting feelings into words" highlights the unnatural nature of self-reflection within this process. To successfully navigate this, students engaged in a process of curation, ensuring their essays functioned as assets rather than "vent notebooks."

Ultimately, students viewed the admissions reader as a powerful gatekeeper of their identity. Whether it was Esperanza "tailoring" her words to put herself in a "better light" or Cristian's sense of community responsibility outweighing his personal discomfort, the act of writing was never merely a school assignment. Within the context of CCW, this act of refusal is a potent expression of Resistant Capital. These students maintained ownership of their stories, ensuring their resilience was not a performance for the reader, but a protected aspect of their own identity and a necessary tool for their own liberation.

The Big Picture: Moving from Taking Student Stories to Preparing the University

Before detailing specific recommendations for practitioners, faculty, and admissions teams, it is critical to step back and examine the larger institutional imperative this study uncovers. Beyond any single tool, dashboard, or workshop, the central finding of this work

points to a fundamental flaw in how higher education interacts with students of color: colleges take and use students' personal stories to decide who gets in, but then ignore those same stories when it is time to actually support and teach them. During the admissions process, universities demand that applicants lay bare their personal histories, domestic responsibilities, and emotional hardships to prove their worthiness for admission. Yet, once the acceptance letter is mailed, that rich, deeply contextual human data is locked away in admissions vaults, completely decoupled from the student's actual college experience. The student enters their freshman classroom treated as a blank slate or worse, as another underprepared student who must adapt to rigid institutional norms.

The core contribution of this study is a call to shift higher education from selective extraction to institutional reception. Getting to know our students deeply, authentically, and holistically must be the primary objective. The college essay, specifically the UC Personal Insight Questions should not function merely as an entrance exam. Instead, it must be recognized as a profound archive of student brilliance, problem-solving, and pre-existing leadership. When we zoom out, tools like the Class Asset Dashboard, Bridge Dialogues, and altered admissions rubrics are not the ultimate goal in themselves. Rather, they are the necessary structural bridges built to serve a larger purpose: ensuring that institutions prepare for the student with the same rigor that students are expected to prepare for the institution. By shifting our perspective from "How do we evaluate this student?" to "How do we receive and honor the brilliance this student already possesses?" higher education can finally fulfill its promise as a space of mutual transformation and true belonging.

Implications and Recommendations

Reviewing the interview transcripts and coding the essay responses led me to reflect on how these students will be supported during the critical transition of their freshman year. While existing scholarship remains hyper-focused on the mechanics of the essay, the how-to and the word counts, we have overlooked the potential of the essay to serve as a pedagogical jump board. These narratives should be tools that professors and institutions use to prepare for the student, rather than just tools to evaluate them. This perspective challenges the quiet narrative in academia that incoming freshmen are increasingly *underprepared*.

We must bridge this gap by recognizing that these students arrive with a profound readiness to navigate complex systems. If we acknowledge the transferable skills they have already honed, negotiating with ICE, managing adult responsibilities, and thriving with limited resources, we recognize a grit that is directly applicable to academic perseverance. The foundation for their success is already built; the institution simply needs to believe in their survival and meet them there. Building upon the finding that the college essay serves as a site of Resistant Capital, the following recommendations provide a framework for translating that capital into institutional practice.

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework serves as a direct rebuttal to the mainstream deficit thinking that permeates educational research and policy. It offers us a clear and powerful alternative: the idea that beyond mere survival, marginalized communities wield a distinct brilliance. These communities utilize a strategic set of assets, born from necessity, to disrupt systemic erasure and carve out paths of success within the very systems designed to exclude them. Our focus must shift: we are no longer just preparing students for institutions; we are preparing institutions and ourselves to receive them. This requires us to treat lived experience

as a legitimate academic credential. High school counselors and advisors play a pivotal role by providing students with bridge language—a conceptual tool that connects personal narrative to institutional currency. Through this vocabulary, students learn to reframe everyday survival and resistance strategies into recognized forms of Community Cultural Wealth. We can help students code their own lives by asking: 'What skill did you use to navigate that situation?' whether it was code-switching, resource management, or community care.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Educators

Starting in the ninth grade, we should ask students to create a brilliance folder, digital or otherwise, that captures their growth. This ensures that by the time they reach the PIQs, they aren't reaching for sob stories but are selecting from a library of proven competencies. Beyond the classroom, we can host workshops and community partnerships where leaders stamp and validate the students' narratives, explicitly telling them: This thing you did at home and in your community is exactly why you will survive Organic Chemistry.

Putting Asset-Building into Practice in High Schools

1. Implementation of Brilliance Folders: High school counselors and advisors guide students in maintaining a digital portfolio starting in 9th grade. Counselors conduct bi-annual check-ins where students log real-world responsibilities (e.g., managing household appointments, translating medical documents, coordinating neighborhood programs) and translate them into skill-based summaries.

2. Instruction in Bridge Language: Advisors explicitly teach students how to reframe everyday survival into recognized institutional currency. Using Yosso's (2005) framework, counselors prompt students: "What specific navigational or resistant skill did you use to resolve that conflict

or manage that system?" This equips students to articulate pre-existing mastery without reducing their essays to performative hardship.

3. Community Validation & Stamping Workshops: Secondary schools partner with local leaders, alumni, and community organizations to host narrative validation workshops. These sessions structurally affirm to students that domestic project management and community care are direct indicators of academic perseverance.

Recommendations for Admissions Divisions and Application Readers

To dismantle one-sided storytelling at the entry point, university admissions offices must overhaul reader training and scoring rubrics. Readers are traditionally trained to look for "overcoming obstacles" through a deficit or hardship lens as a prerequisite for entry. Instead, admissions offices must re-train application readers to identify and code pre-existing Community Cultural Wealth. Scoring rubrics should explicitly reward students for demonstrating navigational, familial, and resistant capital as proof of institutional readiness. Furthermore, readers must be trained to respect narrative sovereignty, ensuring that students who choose not to disclose trauma are not penalized, but are evaluated on the agency and strategic problem-solving present in their writing.

To college professors, who often complain about underpreparedness because they are looking for traditional academic markers. I offer the concept of transferable resilience. Typically, freshman professors enter a classroom with only a list of names and perhaps majors. But if that resilience is to be made palpable, imagine if that roster included a collective profile: *30% of your incoming class demonstrated high proficiency in Navigational Capital (managing complex systems like healthcare or immigration), and 40% showed Linguistic Capital (translation and code-switching).* While student privacy is honored, the professor finally knows the collective

brilliance in the room. The UC Personal Insight Questions (PIQs) are full of data about how students solve problems, yet that data usually remains buried in the admissions office. I propose that this data be mined to create a class profile. If a professor knows that many students wrote about 'adult-proxy responsibilities' such as managing household finances or caring for siblings that professor can skip the basic lecture on time management. Instead, they can focus on how to transfer those existing high-level management skills to a twenty-page research paper. The professor no longer asks, *How do I get these underprepared kids caught up?* The new question becomes: *How do I design my course to honor the sophisticated navigation skills these students already have?*

What Universities Need to Learn and How Faculty Must Adapt

1. Departmental & Syllabus Redesign: When faculty receive aggregate asset summaries, leadership uses this data during pre-term curriculum planning.

- Institutional Learning: If an economics or biology department learns that 40% of its incoming cohort possesses high Navigational Capital, faculty learn that the cohort already possesses advanced systems-analysis skills.
- Actionable Shift: Professors adjust course syllabi to skip introductory "time-management" lectures and instead structure major research projects around real-world policy analysis, case studies, or community-based research that leverages existing analytical grit.

2. Student Affairs & Retention Frameworks: Academic advising and student support units utilize cohort asset profiles to redesign orientation and support models.

- Institutional Learning: Advising teams learn that first-generation students managing "adult-proxy" responsibilities are not failing to engage due to a lack of academic commitment, but are balancing multi-system project management.
- Actionable Shift: Universities replace rigid, mandatory drop-in hours with asynchronous advising models, peer-led navigation networks, and academic credits that recognize community-based project management.

To move from theory to practice, this study proposes a structural shift in how student data is shared between admissions and faculty.

Building and Managing the Class Asset Dashboard: Privacy, Access, and Process

1. Purpose and Data Synthesis

The Class Asset Dashboard is an aggregated, de-identified analytical tool managed by the Office of Institutional Research (IR). Rather than creating public profiles of individual students, IR synthesizes macro-level themes across an incoming cohort using Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework. By coding personal statements and application responses for specific indicators of navigational, familial, linguistic, and resistant capital, IR generates a holistic profile of the incoming class's collective strengths. For example, rather than faculty viewing a first-generation cohort through a lens of academic deficit, the dashboard provides department-level and course-level summaries highlighting:

- **Linguistic & Translation Assets:** Aggregate summaries of students with demonstrated experience navigating complex institutional systems, translating for family units, or managing multilingual environments.
- **Problem-Solving & Navigational Capital:** Identified strengths in self-advocacy, cross-cultural navigation, and peer mentorship forged through community involvement.

- **Domestic & Project Management Responsibilities:** Aggregate data on students balancing significant household responsibilities or off-campus employment alongside their studies.

2. Making the Class Asset Dashboard Work: Institutional Research Steps

Implementation is highly feasible within existing university infrastructures. Institutional Research offices already conduct extensive data mining on yield rates, GPA predictions, and demographic metrics. Redirecting a portion of IR's analytical capacity toward asset mapping requires no new software platforms; existing enterprise tools (such as Tableau or PowerBI) can readily host these aggregate views. The primary operational shift lies in establishing a collaborative workflow between Admissions, IR, and Academic Affairs:

- **Admissions Tagging:** During the evaluation review process, admissions readers assign high-level asset tags (e.g., Community Organizing, Family Translation, Financial Navigation) alongside standard rubric scores.
- **IR Aggregation:** IR compiles these tags into department-level and college-level summary profiles prior to fall orientation.
- **Faculty Briefings:** Academic departments receive cohort summary reports ahead of course planning to tailor syllabus design, active learning strategies, and office hour frameworks to the actual lived strengths of their incoming students.

3. Privacy, Data Governance, and De-Identification Safeguards

A fundamental prerequisite of the Class Asset Dashboard is absolute adherence to student privacy and narrative sovereignty (Tuck & Yang, 2014). To ensure student stories are honored rather than exposed, the dashboard operates under strict data governance protocols:

- **Strict De-Identification:** Individual names, student ID numbers, and specific narrative details are scrubbed entirely. Data is presented exclusively in aggregate percentages (e.g., "42% of incoming biology majors demonstrate significant informal project management experience").
- **Opt-In and Consent:** Students are explicitly informed during the application process how their statements may be used in aggregate form to inform campus support services, maintaining full transparency and agency over their personal narratives.
- **Access Control:** The dashboard is accessible to instructional leads, department chairs, and student success teams as a macro-level planning resource, never as an individual student lookup directory for instructors.

As demonstrated in Table 5.1, the Class Asset Dashboard provides a mechanism for faculty to translate student narratives into actionable classroom strategies.

Table 5.1.

Class Asset Dashboard for a Freshman English professor		
<i>Identified Asset (from PIQs)</i>	<i>Student Experience</i>	<i>Classroom Application</i>
Navigational Capital	Navigating ICE/Legal systems.	Researching and interpreting complex institutional policies.
Resistance Capital	Challenging unfair school rules.	Critical analysis of power dynamics in literature and historical texts.
Social Capital	Organizing community food drives.	Collaborative peer-review and community based research projects.

By utilizing the dashboard, a professor can recognize that a student who managed household finances (Navigational Capital) is not underprepared for a high-level economics course; rather,

they possess a pre-existing mastery of resource management that can be harnessed for academic research.

To disrupt the traditional power dynamic where secondary institutions merely feed students into the university, this study proposes a Bridge Dialogue series designed to empower high schools to actively instruct the university on how to better serve and support their incoming students. This movement goes beyond the sterile data points of transcripts and test scores to establish a qualitative audit of resilience, where high school leaders present the navigational realities of their seniors. When we reveal that more than half of a class is managing multi-generational households while applying to college, we force faculty to recognize that these students are already seasoned project managers of their own lives. Through intentional resource mapping, we challenge the deficit narrative that *students can't write* by proving they can navigate three-hour commutes and complex legal hearings, demanding that professors find ways to harness that grit in the classroom. This creates a shared stamping protocol where community care is finally validated as a transferable academic skill, ensuring students never feel the need to hide their lived brilliance to fit into an ivory tower.

Complementing this exchange are alumni feedback loops that position freshmen as the ultimate experts on where the bridge to higher education is broken. By returning to their high schools to translate their lived experience, these alumni validate that home chores were actually professional internships in navigation, showing younger scholars that the advocacy used at a doctor's office is the same skill needed to master a financial aid bureau. These experts refute the idea that family responsibilities are a burden and instead framing them as the very discipline that outpaces their more privileged peers. Ultimately, this feedback loop reaches back to the faculty, allowing alumni to advocate for themselves as adult-proxies who aren't missing class due to lack

of preparation, but are instead utilizing deep-seated resourcefulness to navigate both a syllabus and a family.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should follow a cohort of students from the point of writing their PIQs through the completion of their first year of college. A longitudinal study could determine if stamping a student's assets during the transition period leads to higher persistence rates and a stronger sense of belonging. Specifically, researchers should investigate whether students who are taught to view their own lived experiences as academic capital feel more empowered to navigate the freshman year compared to those who are not.

There is a profound need for research that focuses on the adult voices in the room. A pilot study could implement a *Class Asset Dashboard*, providing professors with de-identified summaries of their students' navigational and linguistic capital and then measure the shift in faculty pedagogy. *Does having access to the pulse of a student's brilliance change the way a professor designs a syllabus or handles underpreparedness?* Understanding the institutional side of the bridge is just as critical as understanding the student side.

To address the regional and political limitations of this study, future inquiries should explore how Community Cultural Wealth manifests across diverse landscapes of struggle. Subsequent research could compare the transferable resilience of urban students in Los Angeles with that of students navigating rural environments or more conservative political climates. Such a comparison would help identify which assets are universal and which are context-specific responses to local forms of systemic erasure, ranging from housing instability and environmental racism to varying immigration policies. By expanding this geographic scope, we can better

understand how students across the country adapt their brilliance to meet the specific challenges of their surroundings.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study serves as more than a qualitative analysis of college admissions essays; it is a call to recognize the intellectual sovereignty and inherent brilliance of Black and Latinx youth. We began this inquiry at a precarious crossroads where the personal essay was transformed into a primary legal battlefield for racial identity. What emerged, however, was not a narrative of students waiting to be saved or fixed by higher education, but a portrait of seasoned project managers, linguistic leaders, and community protectors who are already navigating complex systems with a sophisticated suite of cultural assets.

The shift from deficit-framed *sob stories* to asset-based brilliance folders is not merely a pedagogical choice; it is a requirement for institutional integrity. When we move beyond the mechanics of word counts and rubric scores, we find that the college essay is a site of profound Resistant Capital. It is here that students perform a high-stakes cost-benefit analysis of their own vulnerability, choosing what to reveal and what to protect with a level of strategic agency that institutions have long overlooked.

To build a bridge between secondary and post-secondary education, the university must stop asking if these students are *ready* and start asking if its own halls are ready to receive the sophisticated navigational wealth they bring. By implementing tools like the Class Asset Dashboard and fostering Bridge Dialogues, we stop treating student history as a burden to be overcome and start treating it as a legitimate academic credential. When the institution finally lays down its deficit-lens and picks up the tools of validation, the narrative shifts from mere survival to inevitable success. In this reimagined space, the gatekeeper becomes the collaborator,

the ivory tower becomes an inclusive home, and the student voice becomes the very roadmap that guides the institution toward true equity.

APPENDIX A

UNIT OF MEASUREMENT

Unit of Analysis

1. My Unit of Analysis is the ways in which Black and Latinx students use personal essays (for college applications) to showcase resilience, share personal experiences of hardship, and/or challenge dominant narratives about their communities.

Unit of Observation

Research Questions	Units of Observation	Data Collection
RQ1. What are the common themes that emerge in personal essays written by Black and Latinx students?	● Compound Disadvantages (<i>i.e. challenges due to poverty, unsafe neighborhood conditions, quality in health care, immigration, language, etc</i>) ● Academic Improvement (<i>i.e. instances of a new investment in their grades and as a result, great academic improvement</i>) ● Grief (<i>loss of loved one through death, murder, immigration</i>) ● Personal Triumphs (<i>i.e stories of determination and grit through harsh realities</i>) ● Lack of Resources (<i>i.e.any instances of not having enough of something or not being able to access necessities</i>)	Text Analysis (<i>student college essays</i>)
RQ2. In what ways do Black and Latinx students use personal essays to challenge or subvert dominant narratives about their communities?	● Essays that challenge the following: ○ “model minority myth” ○ narratives of criminality or laziness ○ Reframing narratives about how the complexities of living in a traditional household in a modern world ● Essays that subvert expectations by: ○ Instead of focusing on oppression focus on strength and the cultural richness ○ Celebrating the beauty of their culture to counter hardship	Text Analysis (<i>student college essays</i>) and semi-structured interviews

RQ3. How do Black and Latinx students negotiate the balance between sharing personal experiences of hardship and showcasing resilience in their essays?	● Acknowledge hardship but focus on agency ● Demonstrating resilience throughout the narrative ● Shifting from victim to advocate ● Being vulnerable ● Showing hope	Text Analysis (<i>student college essays</i>) and semi-structured interviews
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APPENDIX B

CODING SCHEME AND SAMPLE DATA

Raw Data Excerpt	Initial Code	RQ1: Common Themes	RQ2: Counter-Narratives	RQ3: Resilience & Hardship
"Growing up, I was taught to work twice as hard to get half of what others have, a lesson my grandmother learned as a domestic worker. Her story fueled my drive to be the first in my family to go to college."	Intergenerational hard work; Family values; Overcoming obstacles	Theme: Family as a source of motivation	Counter-Narrative: Challenges the stereotype of laziness by showing generational drive	Balance: Connects shared family hardship to personal resilience and achievement
"The news always showed my neighborhood as dangerous and full of crime. But what they missed were the block parties, the communal gardens, and the neighbors who looked out for each other like family."	Media stereotypes; Community strength; Defying expectations	Theme: Community Pride	Counter-Narrative: Directly counters the "dangerous neighborhood" stereotype with a positive portrayal of community	Hardship & Resilience: Acknowledges external negative perceptions but focuses on the internal strength and support of the community
"I learned English when I was seven. My mom worked three jobs to pay for our tutoring, but the counselors at school assumed I was a struggling student because of my accent. My essay isn't just about my hard work; it's about proving them wrong."	Language barrier; Misunderstanding; Proving people wrong	Theme: Academic Perseverance	Counter-Narrative: Rejects the stereotype of a "struggling immigrant" by detailing efforts to learn and excel	Resilience: Focuses on proving others wrong through personal effort, shifting the narrative from a deficit to one of strength

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. We're going to be reflecting on the personal essay(s) you submitted. My aim here is to create a comfortable space for us to explore your writing process and the significant themes that emerged for you. There are no right or wrong answers. I'm simply interested in hearing more about your thoughts and experiences as you crafted your essay. So, please feel at ease and take your time as you respond. We'll be touching on a few areas, including the key experiences you highlighted and how you approached sharing moments of hardship and resilience. Does that sound good to you?

Common themes that emerge in personal essays

1. Thinking about the essay(s) you wrote, what were the main experiences or ideas you kept coming back to or focused on the most?
2. Were there any specific stories, moments, or feelings that felt really important for you to share?
 - a. Why did those parts feel so important to you?
 - b. What do you think made you choose those specific stories?
3. As you wrote, did you feel like you were connecting your personal story to any bigger ideas or topics?
 - a. What were those big ideas?
4. When you think about other personal essays you've read or heard from students of color (Black and Latinx), do any similar experiences or ideas come to mind?

Challenging or Subverting Dominant Narratives

5. As you were writing, did you know about any common or simple stories or ideas (stereotypes) that people often tell about your community?
 - a. If you did, how did that knowledge affect what you decided to share in your essay?
6. Were there any parts of your experience that you felt people often misunderstand or talk about unfairly?

7. Can you remember a specific moment in your essay where you felt you were sharing a different point of view or proving a common idea wrong?
 - a. What was that moment, and why was it so important for you to show it?
8. Did you think about how your story might be seen by readers who have different ideas or beliefs about your community?
 - a. How did that thought change how you wrote your essay?
9. In what ways do you hope your essay will help people better understand your community or change the simple stories (stereotypes) they already believe?

Navigating Hardship and Resilience

10. When you wrote about difficult or hard things that happened, how did you decide how much detail to include?
 - a. What things helped you make that decision?
11. What was difficult about trying to share your struggles (vulnerability) while also wanting to show that you are capable and strong?
12. Did you have a specific message or feeling you wanted the reader to be left with about your ability to get through tough times?
 - a. How did you try to get that message across?
13. Looking back, do you feel you successfully showed both the hard times you faced and your ability to overcome them?
 - a. Why do you feel that way?

Closing

14. Is there anything else you would like to share?

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