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Cacti in the Classroom: Cultivating College-Going Culture for Black Males in Ninth Grade

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Cacti in the Classroom:

Cultivating College-Going Culture for Black Males in Ninth Grade

A dissertation submitted in partial

satisfaction of the requirements for

the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Tr'Vel Terrell Lyons

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Cacti in the Classroom: Cultivating College-Going Culture for Black Males in Ninth Grade

by

Tr'Vel Terrell Lyons

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Chair

This phenomenological, qualitative study examined the educational experiences and barriers to college entrance for Black males in the 9th grade attending urban high schools in South Los Angeles and Pasadena. Research shows that when afforded equitable college access resources and supports, Black males retain and achieve in higher education equal to or better than their minoritized peers in the college setting. However, according to national data, Black males are beset with a myriad of college- going challenges including low-quality schools, low teacher expectations, and limited access to the aspects of college readiness. Although Black males aspire to attend collegeat rates comparable to their racial peers, they are the least likely to be enrolled in college-preparatory courses, i.e. Honors and Advanced Placement. Particularly, Black ninth-graders are most likely to be enrolled in math courses that are below Algebra 1.

Student trajectory to college and likelihood to drop out is effectively predicted by the completion of freshman courses. Approximately 20% of students who repeat freshman

year complete high school in six years. College access programs, equipped with mentorship, culturally relevant pedagogy, and identity development act as a crucialintervention measure that has the potential to increase high school matriculation. Furthermore, increasing high school matriculation and college enrollment is the first stepin securing better mental health conditions and overall living conditions for Black males.The research questions were answered through focus groups and in-depth interviews with students who participated in an academic summer program, administered via Zoomin Los Angeles, CA. The college access program analyzed in this study also sent Black undergraduate men and women at a flagship California university to high schools and conducted college mentoring and counseling aimed to increase student access. The findings from this research recommend an increase in early college access supports for Black males and culturally competent approaches to preparing teachers to engage with Black males. The overall goal of this dissertation was to assist education researchers andpractitioners address the unique needs of Black males in pursuit of higher education— ultimately making schools and other social institutions more nourishing environments for Black life.

The dissertation of Tr'Vel Terrell Lyons is approved.

Walter R. Allen

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Terry K. Flennaugh

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University of California, Los Angeles

2022

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to all those who are constantly in the liminal space, longing to be everywhere and everything all at once. To those who adapt out of necessity, but never get toocomfortable. To the Katrina babies. And to young Black males who light up when they see faces that resemble theirs in spaces they were told they did not belong,
in spaces where they were told they could not flourish.

This is for you.

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KEY TERMS

In this dissertation, I use several terms that warrant contextualization to ensure clarity. I will use the terms:

- Black and African American: to mean of African descent, used interchangeably.
- Access to higher education: increasing students' chances to attend a 4-year public or private institution of higher learning (and also to be prepared for academic rigor at thecollege level).
- College preparation program: a student-based outreach program (situated at a university)centered around preparing students for college (it provides services to students and their families; it fosters and builds community amongst those involved).
- Education attainment goals/education attainment gap: an underrepresentation of ethnic minority groups seen in higher education (most commonly, low college enrollment numbers, high college graduation rates after the loss of affirmative action). This study contends that high schools and universities must make it their priority to close the gap between racial groups, making immediate college entrance rates more proportionate.
- Urban school: characterized by having a majority of students of color and/or who areeconomically disadvantaged.

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There were several days, weeks, months where I did not believe I would finish this dissertation. Even as I write my last words on this document, it all feels surreal. Finishing this dissertation was easily one of the hardest things I ever had to do. As such, I have so many people and whole organizations to thank for the completion of this journey.

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VITA

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Smith, M., **Lyons, T.T.** (2016). Post Secondary Pathways In T. Howard, J.D. Tunstall, and T.K. Flennaugh (Eds.) *Expanding college access for urban youth* (pp.115-137). New York, NY: TeachersCollege, Columbia University.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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Project(s): Beyond the Schoolhouse: Overcoming Challenges & Expanding Opportunities for Black Youth in Los Angeles County
Position: Graduate Student Researcher **PI** – Dr. Tyrone Howard

Summary: The "bright spots" project is a qualitative study that analyzed the practices and procedures of five schools and two community-based organizations in South Los Angeles that successfully support the academic and social-emotional wellbeing of Black children. The study included interviews and focus groups of 50 participants, including teachers, staff, and students.

Contributions: conceptualized research design, developed interview protocols, collected data, analyzed data, drafted report write-up, presented findings.

21st Century California School Leadership Academy (2021 – present)
Project(s): "Come, 'be', and become": Understanding the Role of Targeted Professional Learning for Black Male Leaders
Position: Graduate Student Researcher **PI** – Dr. Nancy Parachini and Tr'Vel Lyons

Summary: The qualitative research study investigated the effectiveness of a targeted learning community for Black male school leaders in Northern California. The study included participant survey, focus groups, individual interview data from 33 K-12 school leaders, and UC Berkeley site observations.

Contributions: developed interview protocols, collected data, analyzed data, drafted final report, presented findings

UCLA's Vice-Provost's Initiative for Pre-Scholars Program (2020 – 2021)
Project(s): Day One | KINGS Summer
Position: Graduate Student Researcher **PI** – Dr. Jonli Tunstall and Tr'Vel Lyons

Summary: A four-year longitudinal study examining the impact of mentoring and supplemental academic support on the high school performance of Black male freshmen in urban high schools.

Contributions: Led mixed methods data collection, analysis, and evaluation from program participants from 10 Southern California high schools, created and managed program initiative, supported students' (and families) preparation, eligibility, admission, and enrollment at UCLA

UCLA Black Male Institute (2016 – 2020)
Project(s): Gateway to Graduation
Position: Graduate Student Researcher **PI** – Dr. Tyrone Howard

Summary: The research lab's, ECMC Foundation funded, formal research project investigating the impact of Black-centered programming on the retention, persistence, and graduation rates of Black undergraduate students at UCLA.

Contributions: led mixed methods data collections, coordinated annual convening and student retreats, designed marketing materials, drafted manuscript for journal publication, presented findings

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

"Internalize, Black man, if you get a teaspoon of compassion

that's more than double the serving size." - Phonte, Cry No More

Growing up in New Orleans, I thought of college as both fantastical and mandatory. I could identify a few people that had gone, but everyone told me it was my only option. Neither of my parents finished college but they did not present it as a choice I could make when I was ready. My teachers taught in overcrowded classrooms, from outdated books, and in buildings in constant need of renovation. Regardless, my parents set the expectation that I was to attend college and it was those high expectations that shaped my education. In 2005, my mother, eldest sister, and I fled Katrina-stricken New Orleans and went to Los Angeles to stay with my maternal grandmother. There, I attended my final year of middle school and all of high school. During my second summer in high school, I enrolled in a college access program that introduced me to a social justice curriculum that catalyzed my journey to academia. The California College Access Program (C-CAP) curriculum included pioneering writings in education from Daniel Solórzano, Jeannie Oakes, bell hooks, and more. I met the first Black doctoral students and Black professors I had ever known. Many of my mentors were Black males, several coming fromsimilar socioeconomic backgrounds, and they proved to be encouraging. The mentors checked my grades bi-weekly, helped me pick out courses, provided supplemental instructions when I struggled in classes, and helped me apply for scholarships. Having never felt so supported, I was enveloped by the program and followed its leadership all the way through my pursuit of a doctoral degree. Several daunting aspects of high school, applying to college, and graduate school were made simple with their support, and I genuinely do not know where I would be without their guidance. For a first-generation, Black male from New Orleans, I found the

program to be life-changing. When I reflect on my experience with mentorship, I lament the fact that too many Black males go without such mentorship in college readiness, and I felt called to pay forward the access in both my roles as a practitioner and researcher.

This study is a product of the K-20 academic pipeline created by the C-CAP Program and an effort to extend its reach to underserved Black males aspiring to attend college. This introduction seeks to illuminate my personal connection to this work. In the subsequent parts of this chapter, I attempt to shed light on the landscape of education for Black males in the United States. While other racial groups are seeing increases, Black males are seeing a decline in immediate entrance into moderately and highly selective universities coupled with an overrepresentation in markers of academic underachievement (Comeaux et al., 2020; Ryan & Bauman, 2016). I will provide context on the primary stance that this study takes: Black males are underserved and disempowered at the start of high school and seldom receive support to be competitively eligible or prepared for the pursuit of postsecondary education, resulting in diminished education attainment. The study will examine an interventive mentoring effort that looks to empower students to pursue higher education. After providing that context, I will provide some textual evidence on the potential effectiveness of mentoring programs and how urban school settings could benefit from intentional efforts not unlike the program studied here. After displaying the specific questions that will guide this study's inquiry, I note the significance of the study and unpack some key terms that will be used throughout.

Problem Statement

In the context of U.S. urban education, Black males face disproportionate college-going challenges including low-quality schools, disproportionate representation in suspensions and expulsions, poor student health, and limited access to the aspects of college readiness (e.g.,

Advanced Placement courses, college counseling, and supplemental learning resources) (Lewis et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2006). Inequities in schooling experiences worsen existing marginalization for Black males and prove to lessen their participation in academic engagement and competitiveness, such as college access programs, than their racial peers (Wood & Harper, 2015; Howard, 2014; Noguera, 2016). Research on college access for Black males highlights that in addition to being underrepresented in college preparatory and gifted courses, they are overrepresented in special education, which greatly impacts their graduation and college entrance trajectory (Ford & Russo, 2016).

The limited access to college preparatory curriculum and opportunities is especially disenfranchising when coupled with negative stereotypes about Black males, listing them as lazy or underachievers (Harper, 2016; Smith & Hope, 2020; Strayhorn, 2008). White teachers' expectations for Black males' education attainment are lower than those of white students—they are generally less optimistic about their chances to succeed (Papageorge et al., 2020). The stereotypes inspire a pragmatism that causes college counselors to overlook Black males for college readiness experiences due to low expectations of interest or completion. And consequently, school administration and educators sow notions of mistrust and doubt in male students themselves, which creates a self-fulfilling prophecy (Bowen & Stewart, 2019; Steele, 2003). Research shows that negative relationships between teachers and administration can foster negative learning attitudes, which has an especially significant impact on adolescent-aged Black males from economically disadvantaged households (Velez & Spencer, 2018). Early intervention programs work to reverse the negative outlooks on college and counter voices of discouragement.

Early intervention programs have seen a boom since the early 1980s and pursue a common goal in a myriad of ways. The primary goal of early intervention programs is to provide resources and support that foster retention, matriculation, and college access for minoritized student groups and low-income families (Fenske et al., 1997). There are six forms of early intervention programs: "programs established by philanthropic agencies, federally supported programs, state-sponsored programs with matching federal support, entirely state-supported programs, systemic changes involving school-college collaboration, and college or university-sponsored programs" (Fenske et al., 1997, pp. 6-7). College access programs, *i.e.* academic outreach programs, work to enhance educational opportunities for underserved and historically underrepresented high school student groups. Academic outreach programs may prepare students for college with or without an intended academic discipline (Fenske et al., 1997). Academic outreach programs engage students in tutoring, mentoring, or sharing information pertinent to their college readiness (Yavuz, 2017). Another key function of the programs may also be to provide scholarships or stipends to alleviate any financial barrier to college entrance. Early intervention programs assist in preparing students for college and help them acclimate to the demands of their freshmen year.

Research confirms that academic outreach programs increase college readiness and those who participate in them are more likely to enroll (Howard et al., 2016). As highlighted by Perna (2015), academic outreach programs can best increase college readiness in five distinct ways: (a) target services to low-income and first-generation students; (b) assist students with the processes that get them into and through college, with a focus on financial aid; (c) ensure that the services are relevant to their needs and contextualized; (d) leverage federal funding to maximize the number of students the program can serve and; (e) prioritize program evaluation to gain an

understanding of how the program works and increase return on investment. Students who engage in academic outreach programs are more likely to visit college campuses via tours and residential programs. While on campus, program participants are also more privy to information regarding college culture, financial aid, and other campus resources that contribute to student acceptance and success (Perna, 2015).

The scholarship on early intervention and academic outreach proves its effectiveness, however, there are aspects of the topic that remain understudied. First, there is apparent race and class inequity in which students receive college preparation (Tierney & Coylar, 2004). Pre-collegiate programs are designed to raise the academic level of the participants and often are considered a bridge to the rigor and expectations of college. Currently, Black and Latinx high school graduates enter their universities with levels of academic preparedness less than that of their racial peers and continue to be excluded from enrolling in flagship universities (Allen et al., 2018). Allensworth et al., (2009) found that a potential barrier to collegiate success for historically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged is the inaccessibility to high-quality college preparation. The problem of access to college preparedness is more apparent when looking at Black males specifically.

Contributing to the growing body of research on the Black male experience with pre-collegiate academic outreach is an important reason for my study (Harper, 2015; Strayhorn, 2015; Thomas & Warren, 2015; Warren, 2016). Black males are less likely to engage in college preparatory curriculum. Generations of scholars have studied the experiences of Black males and their barriers to higher education (Howard et al., 2019; Noguera, 2016; Wood & Harper, 2015), as well as their involvement in young men of color initiatives. Although, research on programs that provide quality academic preparation for Black males is limited. Studies confirm the utility

of early intervention academic programs that seek to address the unique challenges Black males face in their pursuit of higher education (Jackson & Cameron, 2014; Knaggs et al., 2015). In their K-12 experience, Black males are more retained than any of their racial group and they are mostly retained in their ninth-grade year (Blackwell, 2008; Annamma et al., 2014; Smith, 2015). Ninth grade has significant predictive power for retention and matriculation. Neild et al., (2008) found that only 20% of students who had to repeat ninth grade more than once, graduated within six years. Although her study did not disaggregate for race and gender, the Schott Foundation's 2015 national report titled "Black Lives Matter: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males" revealed the national high school graduation rate for Black males is 59%, compared to a 65% and 80% rate for Latinx and white males respectively. Despite these data on Black male retention and graduation, there is little research on measures that center their experience and work to increase their access to sufficient academic preparation. Considering the consequences of educational disenfranchisement, it is important and urgent to study the impacts of early intervention programs that work to increase Black male academic success.

Conceptual Framework

Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete?

Proving nature's law is wrong it learned to walk without having feet.

"A Rose That Grew from Concrete" is a poem by Tupac Shakur and also the title of his anthology of poems. The short piece describes a rose growing from concrete, fully developing in spite of its harsh conditions. Passersby admire the beauty of the rose but did not care until it stood tall, having triumphed against the cold hard cement. Tupac was also known for his philosophy, THUGLIFE, which called attention to the deleterious effects of child neglect. The acronym stood for "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody." Tupac warned that the fate of the most marginalized and resource insecure groups was intertwined with the fate of

everyone. Shakur's works garnered the respect of intellects across the world. Poet extraordinaire, Nikki Giovanni, especially venerated Pac's philosophy as she also got a tattoo of the acronym on her arm. Tupac's profound metaphor for resilient, underserved populations in this poem, in particular, has been adapted by many theorists through the lens of education.

In his essay, *Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete*, Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2009) likens the toxic environment of concrete to the conditions of the urban classrooms, neither conducive to growth. However, the cracks in the sidewalk that let in the invaluable nutrients are the opportunities to educate students properly in spite of the conditions. He posits that a critical hope, broken into three elements, is necessary when educating urban youth for higher education amidst the many stressors. If educators are to have a shot at success, they must: (1) acknowledge that there are opportunities to get through to students, one just has to find them (material hope); (2) exhibit the courage to stay the course and face the challenges that arise (Socratic hope); and (3) accept the responsibility to destroy the concrete and make a rose garden (audacious hope).

Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) further explore the salience of wisdom deriving from hip-hop artists and champion their ability to speak to the conditions of urban youth. They argue that the work of rappers and poets is often "a serious site for social knowledge to be discussed, interrogated, and critiqued" (p. 89). The researchers analyzed a classroom that utilized culturally relevant pedagogy by way of aligning prevalent rap songs with canonical English curriculum, consisting mainly of old white men (e.g. Whitman and Shakespeare). Morell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) found that the incorporation of the hip-hop elements catalyzed critical dialogue and fostered a deep connection to the canonical texts, ultimately aiding their identity development. The classroom experiment described in this article is an archetypal crack

in the concrete; the scholars found that incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014) was an opportunity for students to learn through a depiction of the world that is notably similar to their own.

A critical component of the rose that grew from concrete and the imagery presented by notable hip-hop artists is the harshness of urban environments and the dangerous acceptance that only a few will grow to be beautiful or successful. Success in neighborhoods that are predominantly socioeconomically disadvantaged, whether it be academic or otherwise, is considered to be a rarity and is limited to few avenues. Beauty or success is determined by the dominant narrative. Take the example of the rose: a rose is one of the innumerable plants that are considered to be conventionally beautiful. In the poem, there is a single rose that rises from concrete that is admired for its so-called beauty because it matches the traditional characteristics of pretty flowers. There is one flower that is applauded for beating the odds and onlookers go on about their day. The metaphor, when adapted to different fields and notions of success, ultimately reifies notions of Black exceptionalism, "the paradox of justifying the violent oppression of the majority of black people by celebrating or censuring a single black figure (Wolfson, 2019, p. 619). In education, we accept that a few students will make it out of the urban schools and communities because they exhibit proficiency by traditional measures, while the majority will never bloom or thrive. The concrete is unforgiving and there are too small parameters for determining value and beauty. Other plants that emerge from that unfit soil may be cast aside as weeds or unsightly because they do not fit the same beauty standards. If a rose could, in fact, grow from the concrete, very few could attest to witnessing it. We must consider other plants in the ecosystem. A particular plant that is perceived as unsightly, no less resilient, enduring traumatic conditions, and far more common is a cactus. I propose that understanding

the conditions and adaptations of cacti may provide a better perspective on engaging with urban youth than the proverbial rose.

Cacti are native to some of the driest, most desolate environments and adapt in various ways in order to retain water and protect themselves. In lieu of leaves, many cacti develop coarse spines that are designed to ward off predators. Its ability to retain water and protect itself is considered miraculous, but its exterior is rarely classified as beautiful. There are several types of cacti, all adapting differently for survival. The idea of cacti in the classroom looks to move beyond the deficit-based thinking that urban youth may only arise as a pretty and bright rose to be considered a success. Instead, there should be a consideration for those who adapt in different ways, ensuring their survival by way of methods that may be unconventional but are no less resilient. Furthermore, we encounter cacti more often than roses, many even growing as tall as trees. When fostering educational equity, there needs to be a framework that adequately considers students' risks and stressors with respect to their access to mitigating resources. Moreover, it is of paramount importance that the framework acknowledges and propagates students' unique methods of adaptation and resistance.

Theoretical Framework

Two formative theoretical frameworks guide the analysis of my study: Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) (Spencer, 1995, 2006, 2008). In this section, I will identify key tenets of the frameworks, identify their utility to my study, and analyze how I conceptualize them working together.

Critical Race Theory

CRT as a theoretical framework illuminates the pervasive impact that race and racism have on schools, resulting in disparate academic outcomes for students across racial lines. My work utilizes the tenets in CRT that are important to humanizing Black males throughout their experience in education: the first is the practice of creative counter storytelling and narrative theory and the second is the permanence of race and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Hiraldo, 2010; Howard, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1998/2016b, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2013; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002/2016; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 2016). Solórzano and Yosso (2009) explain that CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination. In fact, critical race theorists view this knowledge as a strength and draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color. (p. 133). CRT stands as a framework that amplifies the voices of the students incessantly marginalized (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). The framework's role in redefining whose perspectives are valid and valuable is important when considering the increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the nation's schools. The counter-narrative tenet of CRT is especially powerful because of its work to undo the internalized negative or otherwise debilitating self-perceptions (Howard, 2008). Youth of color in urban schools have an "intimate knowledge [of] their lives" (Stovall, 2006, p. 591), and amplifying their voice about their perspective on schools effectively helps them navigate the "negative, and even hostile, campus racial climate in which they endure incessant covert, yet shocking, racial assaults" (Yosso et al., 2009). CRT's commitment to challenging the dominant narrative that tells African American males that they are the culprit for their outcomes is invaluable. Centralizing race and validating experiential

knowledge serves as a source of 'affirmation' that helps develop positive cultural/racial/ethnic identities (Jennings & Lynn, 2005, p. 192).

CRT also works to "identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 132). Scholars have not agreed upon tenets that are unanimously accepted and implemented across all disciplines (Crenshaw et al., 1995), though all CRT research must be motivated by the pursuit of social justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In light of my intent to utilize CRT to frame college access, it is crucial to note how race and racism are intrinsically associated with schooling and the pursuit of higher education. CRT scholars assert the *centrality and permanence of race and racism* in American society (Bell, 1992; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1998/2016b, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2013). A fundamental belief of CRT is based on the premise that race and racism are endemic and permanent. Race is a central, rather than a marginal factor. CRT literature posits racism privileges whites and irreversibly identifies African Americans as the racial subordinate (Bell, 1990; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Hiraldo, 2010; Noguera, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This tenet insists white supremacy has "made the modern world what it is today" (Mills, 1997, p.1); eliminating this fabric may cause the country to unravel. In the words of James Baldwin (1962), in his *Letter to My Nephew*, any move by African Americans to dismantle racism for "most white Americans [means] the loss of their identity" (p. 1). Derek Bell (1990) proposed that African Americans adopt a "racial realism"– a sober understanding of racism, abandoning the belief that African Americans will ever be accepted as equals (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. 306). How students build their identity and coping strategies—adaptive or maladaptive— is significantly indicative of their academic and subsequent life trajectories. It is

thus important that my dissertation call on a framework that analyzes the various ecological factors students may encounter and investigate their perceptions on how to engage with the resources available to them.

A third tenet central to CRT's core is the positioning of Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Legal CRT scholar, Cheryl Harris, (1993) posits that "Whiteness and property share a common premise - a conceptual nucleus - of a right to exclude" (p. 1714). She adds, "owning white identity as property affirmed the self-identity and liberty of whites and, conversely, denied the self-identity and liberty of Blacks" (p. 1743). The connection between race and property is apparent in the underfunding of urban schools based on "property tax-based funding schemes for public schools that operate to the disadvantage of all poor students," describes Bell (as cited in Harris, 1993). According to this tenet, whiteness hinders youth of color from seeing themselves in the curriculum and excludes them from the pursuit of education and liberty (Howard, 2003).

Critical race theory literature also champions the principle of *interest convergence* presented by Derek Bell (1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1987). The principle insists African American progress only occurs when their goals align with those of whites. A historical example of interest convergence is affirmative action. CRT scholars found that affirmative action was only supported in instances it proved to be effective for all students: Youth of color getting the right to higher education and the privileges it provides and whites getting a diverse learning environment (Cabrera, 2018; Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012; Hurtado, Dey, Gurin, & Gurin, 2003). In this lens, it is harder to consider any civil liberties as a harbinger of progress in racial relations and equity in schools. Malcolm X once proclaimed, "sticking a knife 9 inches into my back and pulling it out 6 inches is not progress; neither is pulling it out

completely. Progress is healing the wound." According to DeCuir and Dixson (2004), "civil rights gains were in effect superficial 'opportunities' because they were basic tenets of U.S. democracy" (p. 28). A current example of interest convergence in social policy lies in the racial breakdown of welfare recipients. Civil rights and welfare are believed to be designed to level the playing field for people of color, however, studies show that white women are the primary benefactor for both. White women undoubtedly encounter gender discrimination, but may potentially support a household with white men and children in it, thus "White individuals benefit from a structure that was initially implemented to offer equal opportunity to people of color" (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Hiraldo, 2010, p. 56). The interest convergence argument inspires a deep skepticism and wondering with respect to every step forward in United States race relations: How will racial diversity in schools help white people?

Developing a school culture that acknowledges the 'Whiteness as property' tenet of CRT could be pivotal in disrupting the paradoxical dynamic for African American males in many K-12 schools (Howard, 2013). On one hand, Black males are still not graduating at rates comparable to their white peers, they are disciplined and pathways for postsecondary opportunities are often obstacle-filled (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Howard, 2010; Artiles et al., 2010; Aud et al., 2010). On the other hand, African American males are vigorously sought after by collegiate athletic departments. While students who participate in athletics tend to have healthy eating habits and physical fitness, "there is a need to disrupt the notion that Black males are suited only for the athletic domain" (Howard, 2014, p.76). Providing the historical grounding for how America has viewed and used the bodies of Black men may dispel internalized notions of worth being attached to athletic ability. Moreover, once public schools provide similar social support and encouragement towards academics, research asserts that African American male

academic performance will improve (Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 2000). If African American males do not consider themselves beholden to professional athletic careers, they may also capitalize on frequently untapped STEM potential. This tenet of the framework could be introduced by educators and counselors in urban schools in an effort to introduce more restorative, culturally cognizant measures that foster Black male retention and matriculation.

Campus culture driven by critical race theory actively works to contextualize race and its role in the state of Black male education. The framework's stalwart *critique of liberalism*, for instance, challenges traditional claims that educational institutions make regarding the perception and abilities of African American males in education. Without CRT, "these traditional claims act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society" (Calmore, 1992; Solórzano, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 133). Through engaging CRT and critical race pedagogy in urban K-12 classrooms, schools may equip students with the tools to discern and dismantle racist ideologies that sought to limit their potential and silence their stories.

A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)

Margaret Beale Spencer's (1995, 2005, 2006) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) is a comprehensive theory that consists of 5 components—1) net vulnerability, 2) net stress, 3) reactive coping process, 4) emergent identities, and 5) stage-specific coping outcomes— and considers "both normative developmental processes and specific risks faced by African Americans, the effect of experiences on coping and identity processes, and the effect of these on life outcomes" (Swanson et al., 2003, p. 610). The net vulnerability component refers to any race discrimination, socioeconomic disadvantage, and/or sociocultural expectations that pose a threat to proper development. In the education context, Spencer

essentially explores the risk factors present in student life and analyzes several coping mechanisms that coincide with their identity development. An adolescent's net stress literally analyzes a student's stressors—race, gender, and/or class-based or otherwise—but also considers their apparent support. Spencer's model looks at the resources youth have to cope with their stressors and posits that students engage in a "self-appraisal" based on how they adapt to their stressors, expectations, and supports. The reactive coping process that follows, the author notes, can either be seen as adaptive or maladaptive; regardless, the coping mechanisms are pivotal in constructing identities and defining how youth maneuver the world. The first four stages of the PVEST model occur cyclically, throughout life's stages. Spencer and researchers found that PVEST was impactful when analyzing life outcomes for some of the most vulnerable demographics with compounding risks, namely Black adolescent males. Swanson et al. (2003) argued that the PVEST model "enhances our ability to interpret the available work and to recommend future improvements on how we structure studies and ask questions about 21st-century experiences of African American males" (p.613).

The PVEST model frames the analysis of the education intervention explored in my study. The male-focused, expansion of the interventive college access program in this study, First Day, seeks to build equity and foster a college-going culture for 9th-grade Black males in urban high schools. The creators and director of the program took into consideration the "risk factors and unproductive outcomes" for Black males in urban schools and designed the program to lessen the impact of conditions that are proven barriers to graduation and postsecondary education (Spencer, 2017, p. 838). The objective of the program is to center the experiences of Black males in a way that champions their abilities and promise in spite of the supposed shortcomings of their schools or communities due to racism and economic inequality. Another

claim of the PVEST model that is used in this work is the point that problems of inequality exacerbate the level of human vulnerability. Spencer (2017) notes that inadequate access to assets and support results in high or severe vulnerability. Education not only disenfranchises Black males by increasing chances for push-out and school-to-prison nexus, but the PVEST model posits that racism and poverty work to deter normative social development. Adolescents assess the risks they are up against and align them with their perceived supports. The theoretical framework for my dissertation lends heavily from the counter-storytelling tenet in CRT and the net vulnerability stage in PVEST when assessing the discrepancy between the support that schools proclaim to offer and how students experience them as barriers or inhibitors to their success. The male students counter the narratives that paint them as disinterested and culturally disconnected from college, despite seeing themselves as capable students and prospective college applicants. Moreover, the counter-storytelling tenet will be useful in unpacking the coping mechanisms and cultural methods of engagement that students adapt that are often considered disruptive. C-CAP and its First Day initiative essentially put a spotlight on the adaptive genius of Black males in urban schools who are like cacti in the desert; faced with abject neglect and scant resources, they cope by developing in ways that appear coarse but are necessary to ensure their survival.

Transformational Resistance

My study engages a great deal of adoration for students' ability to adapt to inequitable learning conditions, racial microaggressions, and more pronounced instances of antiblackness and structural racism. Incorporating tenets from both CRT and PVEST, my dissertation will examine students' college access experiences in different educational contexts with a particular focus on their perceptions of race, class, and gender inequalities. To further make sense of the

cacti analogy and students' coping processes, I will use Solórzano and Delgado's (2001) understanding of transformative resistance, built upon by Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2022, which theorizes and re-envisions students' oppositional behavior as a response and resistance to racialized, gendered, and/or class oppression.

Research Questions

Gorski (2013) posits that the achievement gap between Black and non-Black students points directly to a gap in opportunity *i.e.* access to resources, that otherwise brings students closer to academic achievement. The opportunity gap is especially noticeable in 9th grade, particularly in math and English courses (Allensworth et al., 2009; Dahlstrom, 2005; Martin, 2019; Wood & Jocius, 2013). My work calls on the PVEST model to argue that the development of Black males is significantly impacted by their transition from middle to high school, mainly based on their success in math and ELA courses. In their study, Neild et al., (2008) posited that the majority of eighth-graders entering ninth grade at urban high schools are already performing below grade level, and encounter teachers that are underprepared and overwhelmed. The sheer newness of the buildings, schedules, and degree of freedom make the transition difficult for all students but Black males are especially vulnerable due to racism and structural inequality (Flennaugh, 2017). Black males are not supported academically or mathematically and are least likely to be recommended for access to gifted education programs and advanced math courses (Davis et al., 2019). Subpar college counseling during the ninth grade, or other during any period, is proven to be a condition that exacerbates the resource gap and/or further disempowers underrepresented students—Black males, in particular. Invoking interventive measures e.g. mentorship and advocacy that will help Black boys to do well at this stage in education is necessary for fostering higher education options and improved life outcomes. As such, my study

sought to highlight the educational experiences of Black male ninth-graders in relation to college access. With focus groups and subsequent in-depth interviews, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. *What factors contribute to the college-going aspirations of Black males in ninth grade? What are the perceived impediments?*
2. *In what ways, if any, do schools play a role in fostering and supporting Black males' pursuit of higher education?*
3. *How, if at all, do the programmatic contributions and/or mentorship of First Day impact college access for Black males?*

To answer these questions, I examined the experiences and perceptions of 15 Black male high school students participating in C-CAP. Followed over a 2-year period, which will include a virtual summer program, this study will center the perceptions of these Black males on their schools, college, and mentorship experience. I am hopeful that the stories captured further contextualized barriers for navigating the transition into high school that is often exacerbated by race, class, and gender. It was my intent for the findings from this study to catalyze the support of successful programs that work to foster the development of Black male students and inform research and practice to create more programs to serve students and increase student success. It was also my hope that my findings informed schools about how to better serve and support Black males' pursuits of higher education.

Outline of the Dissertation

In the following chapters, I explore the literature examining the schooling factors that students encounter during the transition from middle-to-high school for Black males. There is still limited research that posits that being both Black and male exacerbates adapting to high

school and passing ninth grade. The apparent phenomenon in the data is that race, class, and gender significantly impact students' schooling experience and Black males encounter disproportionate hindrances to higher education. The second chapter explores the pertinent literature that depicts the ninth grade as being indicative of high school success and an especially pivotal time for Black males. This chapter will also review literature that documents the schooling experience of Black males to gain insight into why fostering intentional and interventive college access measures starting in ninth grade is salient. Chapter three details the methodological approach I employed to answer my research questions. Here, I also provide a detailed overview of the First Day program, my methodological approach for this study, the study participants, and my long-standing role(s) in the program and as the researcher in this study. Chapter four presents the participants' perspectives and my analysis. In this chapter, I present three main, emergent themes and 9 subthemes from the data collection process. Chapter five, the final chapter presents a larger discussion around the data and analysis and presents implications for practice based on my analysis. I conclude this chapter with suggestions for future research and closing remarks.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

In this chapter, I will explore the literature examining the factors and obstacles that impact Black males' educational outcomes and access to college. I will highlight research that identifies the challenges facing Black men; factors that impact college access for Black males; and the complexities of Black male identities. This chapter will also investigate the salience of fostering intentional and interventive, college access measures with a social justice lens starting

in ninth grade. This chapter concludes with championing the importance of calling out instances of Anti-Black racism. The following chapter will explore my methodology.

The Challenges Facing Black Males

The uniqueness that many Black males encounter is informed by living in an age of the broadcasted killings of countless unarmed Black men and teenagers. Constant instances of police brutality and graphic showings of state-sanctioned murder can lead to identity tensions about how many Black male students see themselves and how these young men should traverse through schools and society that see them through a lens of pathology. The numerous identities of Black male students (*i.e.* race, gender, class, and sexual orientation) have intersected in often complex and harmful ways. Within the U.S., these intersections have profoundly influenced the manner in which Black males experience schools and society. Research on student achievement elucidates that Black males are more likely to experience racial discrimination and institutional racism in schools that result in ghastly academic and social consequences (Andrews, 2016).

Some of the more storied academic consequences include underrepresentation in advanced placement/ honor courses and gifted education; overrepresentation in both special education and exclusionary discipline; and lower high school graduation and college entrance rates than their peers (NCES, 2019). Nationally, Black males are disproportionately diagnosed with emotional disturbance (ED) and are twice as likely to receive educable mental retardation (EMR) classification than white males. Conversely, they are half as likely to be nominated for gifted education. The national suspension rate for Black males is 17%, the highest amongst male groups in any race (NCES, 2019). McFadden et al., (1992) found that racial/ethnic discrimination in discipline also persisted without any evidence of notably higher rates of students misbehaving. Suspension numbers show far too many Black students in urban schools

getting suspended— more often and for more subjective offenses than white students— irrespective of poverty and other demographic factors (Skiba, 2002; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace & Bachman, 2009). Although, that is not to say that poverty is no longer a barrier for Black students; the poverty rate is the highest for Black students and they are the most likely to attend a high-poverty school.

At the time of writing—early 2022— the extremely contagious COVID-19 Omicron variant has significantly altered, once again, the quality of consistent, in-person schooling, particularly for Black students. The lack of internet is now a learning barrier for Black students: 90% of students reported having internet compared to 96% and 98% for white and Asian students respectively. Of the students who had access to their online classes, 11% of Black students could only do so through a smartphone, whereas only 2% of Asian students and 3% of white students encountered that barrier to learning (NCES, 2020). In 2018, Black males aged 18-24 entered college at a rate of 33% in 2018—an 8% increase from 18 years prior (NCES, 2019). Moreover, academic disenfranchisement leads to disproportionate unemployment rates (Billue, 2014). These discrepancies only highlight and widen the opportunity and resource gap experienced by Black males. The academic consequences of the marginalization and inequitable resources are apparent and disheartening. The social consequences, though appearing subtler, are no less pernicious. And in light of them both, it is imperative to recognize that many of the barriers to education for Black males are beyond the realm of their control, yet Black students adapt and find ways to persist in schools (Flennaugh, 2014; Harper et.al, 2014; Noguera, 2008).

Many of the barriers to inclusive education for Black males ultimately result from classifications and diagnoses that rely heavily on the perceptions of teachers and administrators. Any preconceived perceptions of Black males (especially adolescents) as disruptive or

aggressive have the potential to exacerbate any classroom misunderstandings, be they literal or cultural. Watts & Everelles (2004) postulate that students' race, class, gender, and/or disability classification may be used to preemptively label Black students as deviant and resistant to school culture. Moreover, the authors note that conditions of high-poverty U.S. public schools decenter the experience of students of color, compelling them to feel more vulnerable and unsafe in schools. An anti-racist and anti-deficit approach to both teaching and college access for Black males. Instruction and college access support that unabashedly address racial prejudice and discrimination could enable students to build pathways to higher education and develop defenses against systemic racism's impact on academic and college-going opportunities.

Factors That Impact College Access for Black Males

Generations of education and equity scholars have examined the factors that impact the academic outcomes and college-going rates of Black males (Flennaugh et al., 2017; Howard, 2014; Scott et al., 2013; Wood & Williams, 2013). These factors are race- and class-based and include increased vulnerability to home conditions that result in behavior deemed to be disruptive, leading to overrepresentation in school discipline (Gregory et al., 2010); disproportionate attendance of under-resourced, low-quality schools (Milner IV, 2007; Noguera, 2014); deficit-based perceptions from instructors that foster low expectations and negative learning attitudes (Harper, 2009); and lack of access to college counselors and limited participation in college prep programs (Perna, 2005; Warren, 2016).

In their literature review on racial differences in behavior, Skiba and Williams (2014) found that while poverty is significantly correlated with a student's likelihood to be suspended, Black students were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than white students irrespective of income level (Carter et al., 2017). Skiba and Losen (2016) also argue that there is

no conclusive evidence of race-based differences in behavior. Instead, evidence highlights that Black students and other students of color tend to receive disciplinary referrals for subjective offenses. Black students are ultimately penalized more often and severely for not adapting middle-class methods of communicating and classroom engagement. According to Skiba et al. (2014), the intersection of race, class, and gender increases the risk of exclusionary discipline and arrest; Black males are consistently amongst the most vulnerable. Black students are suspended nearly twice as often as white students and researchers found that the differences in disciplinary actions persist when controlling for poverty (Howard, 2014). The repercussions of the disproportionate suspension of Black males are devastating. Skiba et al. (2014) posit that removing students from school literally lessens the opportunities for students to learn—one of the strongest predictors for achievement—and fosters academic disengagement and attrition. Balfanz et al. (2014) reviewed longitudinal data and concluded that even one suspension has a substantial impact on students' likelihood of graduating; 73% of ninth-grade students that were suspended subsequently failed one or more courses taken that year and they were 20% more likely to drop out. For Black males, overrepresentation in discipline and dropouts catalyzes the school-to-prison nexus, in which perceived misconduct in school leads the student into the carceral system (Kim et al., 2010; Noguera, Bishop, Howard, & Johnson (2019); Wald & Losen, 2003). Fabelo et al. (2011) report that suspensions and expulsions triple a student's likelihood of entering the juvenile justice system—the two measures are directly correlated. In summation, suspensions, and expulsions, as early as 9th grade, result in fewer opportunities to learn and an expedited path to incarceration, and these disparities are more damaging in low-quality schools.

Black males disproportionately attend under-resourced schools in urban communities (Noguera, 2014). In his work titled, "Urban Schools and the Black Male 'Challenge,'" Noguera

(2014) depicts urban schools as under-resourced facilities that are serving students that are impacted by poverty and other environmental conditions such as crime, drug trafficking, and unemployment. These conditions exacerbate the race and class-based challenges Black males face in attaining access to college. Urban schools have higher enrollments than suburban and rural schools with fewer resources (Schaffer et al., 2017). The challenges present in urban schools have a direct correlation to students' academic underperformance. And the schools' inability to properly address the complex needs of Black males, in particular, has long-standing effects on their academic outcomes and life trajectories.

Urban and low-quality schools are prone to overcrowded classrooms, notions of unsafety for students and teachers, high teacher turnover rates, and lack of access to academic preparatory resources. According to the California Department of Education [CDE] (2020), a school is considered critically overcrowded if the number of students per acre is double the state standard, the standard being 90 pupils per acre for grades 7-12; 90% of students in critically overcrowded schools are students of color. In other words, schools with a student population that is majority students of color are more likely to be overcrowded than those that are not (Ready et al., 2004). Oakes (2003) lists the importance of adequate schools first among her seven necessary conditions for equitable and diverse college access. She describes safe and adequate schools as free from "overcrowding, violence, and unsafe sanitary conditions" (p. 2). In addition to overcrowded schools, Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick (2016) explain that, compared to white students, Black students are exposed to twice the level of concentrated disadvantage and three times the violent crime rate, both factors contributing to Black students potentially feeling unsafe while at school. The researchers concluded cramped classrooms, deteriorated facilities, and notions of unsafety decrease students' sense of school connectedness and increase the likelihood

they will disengage. Students are not the only folks impacted by inadequate schools. Good teachers are invaluable in the process of educating students, however, the resources of low-quality schools make it harder to hire qualified teachers. In their study investigating teachers in high-poverty schools, Ullicci and Howard (2015) reveal students from impoverished backgrounds are more likely to experience novice teachers and the average Black or Latinx student attends a school with twice as many low-income students as the white or Asian student. In her study, Darling-Hammond (2018) explains that Black students are more likely to experience a high teacher turnover rate than their racial peers. Moreover, she notes that math, science, and English teachers experience higher turnover rates than other subjects. These factors, when attending low-quality schools, thus produce poorer academic outcomes and limit student access to advanced courses and specialized enrichment programs (Oakes, 2014).

Hotchkins (2016) argues that the same culturally uninformed perceptions of disruptive behavior that fuel disproportionate disciplinary actions also result in stereotypical perceptions of academic capability and foster hostile learning environments for Black males. Racialized and gender-biased views from white teachers create "culturally deficit thinking, a form of microinvalidation racial microaggression" (Hotchkins, 2016, p. 2). Solórzano et al. (2000) describe microaggressions as subtle insults aimed at people of color. The slights may be automatic and by definition are not malicious although they derive from internalized racism. Regardless of the intent, however, the racial microaggressions and negative stereotypes that permeate interactions between Black male students and white instructors carry plentiful and deleterious effects. Solórzano et al. (2000) also find that an especially harmful effect of racial microaggression is the eventual internalization by the students, which impacts their self-image and academic aspirations.

Another challenge for Black males in attaining post-secondary education is their limited access to college counseling and enrichment programs that will increase their academic preparedness for college-level coursework (Greene & Forster, 2003; McDonough, 2005). Gullat and Jan (2002) explore the importance of early academic planning. They posit that students should outline their academic coursework and align them with their collegiate goals starting as early as middle school (Cohen & Smirdon, 2009). By ninth grade, students should be informed of college requirements, involved in college preparatory extracurricular activities, and enrolled in courses that will create a trajectory for the college prep curriculum (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). According to Johnson (2016), students' academic momentum stands as the best predictor for college completion for historically underrepresented students. The author explains that academic choices made early on in high school, e.g. decisions on advanced coursework, have a significant impact on their probability of success in higher education. In their report, Gandara and Bial (2001) found that inequities in urban K-12 schools result in less rigorous coursework and poor counseling that neither adequately informs students of the requirements for college nor helps them achieve their goals. Black males are underrepresented in Advanced Placement courses and typically score below their peers (Dandy, 2014). The trifecta of poor college counseling, high teacher turnover rate, and low student expectation serves to (all but vocally) exclude underrepresented and low-income students from higher education. Inadequate college counseling keeps 80% of Black males unenrolled in advanced courses even when they are qualified (College Board, 2012). Fashola (2003, 2005) argues that focusing on out-of-school and extended school day enrichment programs would serve to improve the academic development of Black males. Woodland (2008) found that the involvement of Black males in after-school programs correlated with increased academic performance, better conduct in school, and decreased juvenile arrests.

However, Hodges et al., (2017) found Black, Latinx, low-income students, and males are largely underrepresented in gifted and out-of-school enrichment programs. Low-income, Black males lie at the crux of demographics least served by enrichment programs. Enrichment programs pair students with adults who enlighten students about their options, set high expectations, and create positive relationships that are influential to student progress.

A prominent feature in the literature for increasing access to higher education is how scholars define "access" and measure success by increasing it. Other components of defining access were exposed to new forms of social and cultural capital (King, 2009, pp.7-8). Counselors in the Puente program, for instance, were able to increase college access by "(a) [stressing] academic preparation for college, (b) [working] with parents, and (c) [influencing] freshmen on the importance of making educational choices as they pertain to their present and future lives" (p. 9). The BOSS program is a CAP (College Access Program) designed to encourage low-income, first-generation African Americans to attend college and pursue business majors. Their access-building exercise stressed the importance of "dinner etiquette" and stressed there is a way they should "be proper" if they wanted to be successful (p. 7). Facilitators of this CAP insinuate the only way to gain access is to acquiesce to the standards of the dominant group. Black boys are often made to grapple with pressures to surrender aspects of their cultural identity or familial responsibility in order to participate in academic programs (Carey, 2018). Additionally, Fisher (2005) postulated that a lack of cultural inclusivity for Black male students attributes to their underrepresentation in gifted programs and enrichment program engagement. Stanton-Salazar (1997) critiques the BOSS program as they exemplify "challenges that working-class minority youth face in relation to differently defined and regulated participation in home, community, peer groups, and school, in light of ideological forces rampant in public education" (p. 2001). It

is crucial that CAPs and education interventions do not work to further marginalize and oppress student groups that are most frequently vulnerable to microaggressions and marginalization; the danger of such is widely documented.

The interventive college access program in this study, First Day, seeks to build equity and foster a college-going culture for 9th-grade Black males in urban high schools. As described earlier, the creators and director of the program took into consideration the "risk factors and unproductive outcomes" for Black males in urban schools and designed the program to lessen the impact of conditions that are proven barriers to graduation and postsecondary education (Spencer, 2017, p. 838). The objective of the program is to center the experiences of Black males in a way that champions their identities, abilities, and promise in spite of the supposed shortcomings of schools or communities due to racism and economic inequality. C-CAP, through First Day and ROYAL Summer essentially put a spotlight on the adaptive genius of Black males' multiple identities in urban schools who are faced with abject neglect and scant resources; Through this ecology, Black males cope by developing in ways that appear coarse but are necessary to ensure their survival. The First Day program seeks to allow students to hold onto their cultural capital in pursuit of college. As Allen (1992) says "any attempt to address the problems faced by African American college students without considering the broader context of issues confronting Blacks as a discriminated minority in America is doomed to fail" (p. 42).

Complexities of Black Male Identities

Vassar Reynolds & Howard (2021) talk about examining the intersectionality of Black male identities, and the danger of creating the singular depiction of who Black males are, and how they see the world around them. They state that:

> The diversity of experiences that influence the *individual* identity Black males develop in the United States would find that while obvious social identities such as race and gender are prominent as…equally captivating are the ways that religion, sexual orientation, political persuasion, gender expression, ethnic origins, age, and geographical location also paint an intricate picture of how Black males define themselves and ultimately live their lives. (p.236).

Any efforts to address the educational experiences and outcomes of Black males must recognize the complexity and diversity of Black male identity. Like all other subgroups, Black males are not a monolith and must be seen and taught in such a fashion (Allen, 2020; McCready, 2004; Terry et al., 2013). A racialized, classed, and gendered lens as Reynolds Vassar and Howard (2022) speak about anchoring our notions of how teacher educators can better support the understanding and education of Black male identity through a Critical Race Theory Lens (Lynn & Dixson, 2022). Reynolds Vassar and Howard (2022) postulate that failure to explore the complexities of the Black male identity may result in researchers and teachers alike maintaining shortsighted examinations and stereotypical depictions of Black males that will ultimately mark numerous forums, conferences, and calls to action futile. The authors illuminate the pressing need for research on the influence of race, class, and gender on the Black male identity development but furthermore beckon researchers to produce unique insights that work to address a more robust scope of students' self-concept and interaction with the world e.g. religion, political inclinations, age, sexual orientation, and exhibition of masculinity (Nasir et al., 2009). "The will to change," bell hooks (2004) urged men to reclaim feminism and noted how patriarchy prevents them from "knowing themselves, being in touch with their feelings, and from loving" (p.27). Amechi et al. (2016) along with several scholars (Bonner & Bailey, 2006;

Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006) contend that performing well academically has historically been considered unaligned with what was considered "cool" and/or acceptable forms of masculinity for Black males. Students professed to be too prideful to ask for help taking advantage of academic and social supports on their respective campuses. Davis and Jordan (1994) found that Black males grappling with gender roles often perceived many schooling activities as feminine and irrelevant to their development as men. Alienation and divestment in the classroom merely result in less time in the classroom for Black males due to an increase in discipline and exclusionary practices. Carter et al., (2017) reported a link between a teacher riddled with discipline issues and a decrease in the academic and curricular focus given to students; he contends that many teachers are frankly ill-equipped to maintain classroom order and learning while enduring stressful school conditions. The investigation of Black male identity development and its influence on students' learning attitudes and sense of belonging is central to preparing teachers to positively engage with Black males (Howard, 2014). Teachers that lead with genuine attempts to understand the influence of gender/gender nonconformity and variant exhibitions of masculinity position themselves to develop learning settings that are significantly more conducive to the early academic success and personal development of Black men.

The Important Role of Ninth Grade

Neild (2009) found that the criticality of the freshman year cannot be overstated. Students who handle the transition into high school proficiently go on to graduate four years later and those who do not are substantially more likely to drop out. The authors theorize that there are four essential reasons for students not earning sufficient course credits, *i.e.* getting off track in ninth grade: 1) coincidental life-course changes, 2) school change, moving away from the comfort of middle school, 3) inadequate preparation of some students, and 4) the physical

environment of the high school serves as a barrier to learning for some students. A potential fifth factor alluded to by my work is the impact of race and socioeconomic status on students' educational progress. Longitudinal data reference in Neild (2009) showed that ninth graders in large urban districts were substantially more likely to fall off track after ninth grade, which has immense implications for subsequent educational outcomes. Hauser et al. (2007) analyzed yearly data for the decade 1990-2000 and found that nationally, 10% of ninth graders are not promoted to tenth grade. All across the US, several students are getting stuck at the gate.

National data convey students of color are amongst the most vulnerable. Neild (2009) presents data taken from the Current Population Survey (CPS) that shows that Black and Latinx students are more than twice as likely to spend an additional year in the ninth grade. Furthermore, boys are twice as likely to be retained. Chances of promotion are lessened when students derive from families in the lowest-earning percentile. Approximately 5% of the ninth-grade students in the lowest-earning percentile were not promoted compared to 1% of students in the highest-earning percentile (Neild, 2009). Neild's (2009) study importantly deduces that several of the difficulties of ninth grade are exacerbated for Black boys and low-income families. Her findings illuminate the fact that many of the very conditions that are ubiquitous in urban schools are the same conditions that prove to be especially deleterious to the progress of Black boys as early as ninth grade. A case study led by Neild (2008) found that ninth-grade teachers are more likely than other high school grades to be uncertified or new to the school. Low adult expectations, teachers being underqualified, and home and school disharmony are three impactful factors on the progress of students. Academically, students encounter significant difficulty getting past 9th-grade English and math.

In their report on Black and Latinx males, Meade, Gaytan, Fergus, & Noguera (2009) found that Black and Latinx males more often enter high school performing below grade level in math and English. Many of the students who drop out do not complete coursework in the first year of college; “67% of those who dropped out failed math and 63% of those who dropped out failed science, and 49% failed English” (Meade et al., 2009). Zilanawala et al. (2018) studied longitudinal student data on the math trajectory for Black males in a large urban city. They found that the math proficiency of Black males is declining over time and the singular measure associated with growth was placing Black males in more academically challenging environments. Findings recommend summer bridge programs to aid in the transition to high school for struggling students.

Beset with such an array of disadvantages, there remains scant research on interventions designed for Black males during the transition to ninth grade. College access scholarship focuses on Black male high school graduation rates, in lieu of college eligibility, and does not sufficiently aid the number of Black males who are no longer college-bound by the time 10th grade begins. Researchers are able to predict with substantial efficiency student likelihood to drop out of high school after their freshman year. However, too few of these works have addressed the specific barriers and conditions of ninth grade for students of color in urban high schools and less work has sought to thoroughly examine Black male college readiness in the early stages of high school. Without an intentional analysis of the Black male perception of college and access in the ninth grade, we will continue to shut out generations of potential collegians who may not have the resources or support to make college eligibility their reality. This study attempts to remedy a gap in the literature by analyzing the significant predictor factors of ninth grade on high school graduation. This crucial period serves as an adequate

indicator of Black males' increased likelihood to drop out of high school, among other important indicators of academic attainment and performance. A key goal of this study is to explain how conditions of urban schools impact those factors disproportionately for Black males, and postulate the importance of early college access intervention programs when cultivating a social justice, college-going culture.

The Benefits of Social Justice College Access Programs

There is ample evidence showing a number of positive benefits of social justice programs for Black males. Of importance is not only providing college preparatory resources and support to students when schools fail to do so. Rather, social justice college access programs emphasize students' racialized experiences, with respect to gender and social class, in their schools and communities when attempting to support their academic behaviors.

In order to respond to the growing chasm between many Black males and the college access programs they interact with daily; a more equity-focused and social justice approach is needed. Social justice within the context of education, in particular, rests on the idea that demands and works towards equity for all students, but it also recognizes historical disadvantages which lead to current-day disparities (Francois & Quartz, 2021). Social justice-focused approaches to education also recognize the importance of growth that is provoked by student diversity. The recognition of different ways of being, knowing, communicating, and learning are integral to social justice education. It also recognizes personal experiences, values, and worldviews that arise from race, ethnicity, gender/gender identity, religious and spiritual beliefs, class, age, color, sexual orientation, disability, immigrant status, and national origin to enhance creativity and learning potential (Francois & Quartz, 2021). Education works when programs are empowered with the knowledge, resources, strategies, skills, and resources to

incorporate students' backgrounds and experiences as strengths rather than view them as hurdles to overcome (Howard & Milner, 2014).

Moreover, social justice is about distributing resources fairly and treating all students equitably so that they feel safe and secure—physically and psychologically (Edwards, 2021). Sadly, a look at schools across the nation makes it clear that equitable distribution of resources remains unequal, and there is often a race-based connection to these differences. To that end, students in poorly-funded schools often do not have the technology, new books, or art and music programs that create a well-rounded education, while students in more affluent areas have the latest academic resources, school counselors, librarians, and more to help them succeed (Darling Hammond et al, 2020). These schools are also disproportionate where Black males are present. Bringing social justice into college access programs does not mean just having a reading, a course, or a statement about social justice matters. On the contrary, it means examining the very structures, curriculum, admissions procedures and requirements, and means of support and assessments of how the work is done. Also critical to the work is the nature of where the work is done (Francois & Hunter Quartz, 2021). Community engagement that centers the perspectives, knows the histories and recognizes the cultural complexities of Black life is vital as well for teacher education programs (Clark et al., 2021).

Similar to the work of many scholars, I argue that for social justice work to be meaningful in the current moment means to recognize the pervasiveness of institutional and structural racism (Howard, 2019). Often absent from many conceptions of social justice work in college access programs is a true reckoning of how the effects of racism shape the day-to-day lived experiences of Black people, Black males in particular. Race must be deeply theorized within the historical and contemporary context, anti-Black racism must be essential in

coursework, and teacher educators have to ensure that they have the racial literacy to engage in deep and thoughtful work with teacher candidates about the complexities of race.

The intentional social justice, college access program in this study seeks to build equity and foster a college-going culture for 9th-grade Black males in urban high schools. Previous research documents several other benefits of social justice college access programs, including but not limited to: racial identity development; racial socialization (e.g., preparation for bias); academic self-efficacy and agency; critical consciousness; and college-going behavior (Watts, 2003; Howard et al. 2016; Flennaugh et al. 2018). There is ample evidence showing a number of positive benefits of such programs for Black students. To my knowledge, few social justice college access programs engage with Black males at the intersection of the school-university-community, and no studies have examined how students' involvement in such programs impacts the Black male students' college academic preparation, transition, and retention. Furthermore, existing studies have not documented the programmatic components of Black male-specific college access programs. This research is pertinent for understanding the support for Black male students, and the various ways universities, communities, schools, districts, teachers, and other key stakeholders can implement and integrate programming related to Black male school achievement.

Calling Out Structural and Antiblack Racism in College Access Programs

A wealth of scholarly literature exists on the pervasive nature of anti-black racism and its adverse impact on the educational and everyday experiences of Black people (Dumas, 2016). Warren et al. (2022) characterize antiblackness as an omnipresent force—a deep loathing and disregard for Black life that undeniably shapes the way Black males and their families are seen and understood. The more notable consequences of antiblackness result in overt acts of racism

and prejudice e.g. hyper-surveillance, the murder of innocent Black children by police officers with impunity, and longstanding disproportionate incarceration rates (Tillet, 2012). However, antiblackness is most vicious due to its dehumanizing nature. Wilderson (2010) contends that at the heart of antiblackness is a condition to see Black people as animalistic, rendering the comprehension of their humanity impossible. The view of the Black body as inhumane is then used to justify systemic and physical violence and the revocation of citizenship privilege. Ultimately, the very existence of Blackness becomes a marker of difference and a problem that needs to be solved, or at best an illness that requires a palliative (Baldwin, 1962; Howard, 2013).

Identifying school (de)segregation education policy as a most prominent example, Dumas (2016) substantiates the claim that antiblackness has a causal relationship to education conditions that prove to be deleterious for Black students. Dumas (2016) states, "differences in academic achievement; frequency and severity of school discipline; rate of neighborhood school closures; fundraising capacity of PTAs; access to arts, music, and unstructured playtime…are all sites of antiblackness" (p.17). Zero tolerance policies are another example of antiblackness shaping education conditions such as differences in school safety faced by Black students. Zero tolerance policies punish all offenses sternly, no matter the magnitude (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). As a result, zero tolerance policies increase suspension and expulsions, decrease attendance and campus engagement, and ultimately diminish academic achievement (Kupchik & Ward, 2014). The policies issued disproportionately impact Black and Brown students in urban schools (Lacoe, 2015).

Zero tolerance policies are a step further in the wrong direction because they beckon school militarization and establish a safety gap between white youth and youth of color (Anyon et al., 2016). The difference in response to school violence and classroom disruption in schools

serving White, affluent youth versus low-income youth of color reflects a gap in whose safety and emotional wellbeing are valued. For example, exclusionary measures that focus on punishing students, such as installing metal detectors, and drug-sniffing dogs are more likely to appear in low-income schools serving youth of color (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010; Irwin, Davidson, & Hall-Sanchez, 2013; Wacquant, 2001).

Kupchik and Geoff Ward (2014) explain how these exclusionary measures catalyze the "'school to prison pipeline,' where students are diverted from schools to courts and carceral institutions via the criminalization of school misconduct" (p. 337; Kim et al., 2010; Lewis, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003). Policing and punishing offending students ultimately serves as an impediment to achieving school safety. Bucher & Manning (2003) explain that police presence and intense campus surveillance e.g. locked bathrooms, do not constitute students feeling safer (Skiba et al., 2002; Kupchik & Ward, 2014). Introducing students to the "school to prison pipeline" by way of exclusionary measures and "push out" (Morris, 2016) has a considerable impact on student social mobility as well as their potential educational and employment attainment (Fabelo et al., 2011; Western, 2006). Any plan that only seeks to shield students from physical harm and policing may not be enough to create safer schools and improve campus climate.

In addition to the role of education conditions and antiblackness shaping the experiences of Black students, a burgeoning scholarship calls attention to larger environmental factors. Discussed in more detail in sections to follow, Margaret Beale Spencer's (2006) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) identifies five developmental processes that contribute to the antiblackness faced by many Black students: 1) net vulnerability, 2) net stress, 3) reactive coping process, 4) emergent identities, and 5) stage-specific coping

outcomes. These processes document the “normative developmental processes and specific risks faced by African Americans, the effect of experiences on coping and identity processes, and the effect of these on life outcomes" (Swanson et al., 2003, p. 610). The literature treats these processes as central to an individual’s life stages. Spencer (2017) notes that inadequate access to assets and support results in high or severe vulnerability. Education not only disenfranchises Black males by increasing chances for push-out and school-to-prison nexus, but the PVEST model posits that racism and poverty work to deter normative social development.

At the root of these processes is the role of the environment. For example, racism and poverty are culprits of food insecurities, which play an important role in normative social development and social mobility for Black male students. South L.A. is comprised of 57% Hispanic/Latino and 38% Black and the same demographics suffer higher morbidity and mortality rates from several diseases such as hypertension, cancer, heart disease, and Type II diabetes (Kung & Xu, 2015). The children in these households often attend under-resourced urban schools, where their access to food is not considerably better (Morgan et al., 2008). The condition of lacking access to healthful foods is worsened by the fact that impoverished communities tend to be laden with fast-food restaurants and liquor stores (Forsynth, 2012).

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It has now been 15 years since I have been introduced to C-CAP programming. I have engaged with and served the program in every capacity that is not the executive or assistant director position. I credit the program for my pursuit of higher education and it is (in more ways than one) the reason I am writing this dissertation. I have seen and felt the necessity of C-CAP programming; I have experienced the program as a youth and I have mentored dozens of students personally and overseen the mentoring of hundreds of students as a program director of

First Day. If First Day is not the pinnacle of college access programming, it surely is the prototype. In one of the first meetings as an undergraduate researcher at UCLA with Dr. Tyrone Howard, I first heard the phrase "research is me search." The significance that aphorism has in my work and life cannot be overstated. In my study, I employed a methodology that enabled me to carry out my research and simultaneously strengthen the relationship between my data and my own experiences in the program and academia (Jewell, 2007). In light of student voice and experience being such pivotal aspects of my work, I utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach to answer my research questions.

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the components essential to conducting research: research questions that guide the study; the rationale for using a qualitative phenomenological approach; the history of the California College Access Program (C-CAP) and First Day, its initiative to increase college exposure for Black males; and the description of research participants. Following these discussions, I will expound on the study's design, site selection and description, data collection, site access, and data analysis. Subsequently, I provide details on my positionality in the program and the research in long form.

Research Questions

To further my understanding of the perceptions of college and levels of college readiness, I used a qualitative study approach where I gathered accounts from surveys, individual interviews, focus groups, and digital artifacts such as student assignments and documents from the summer programming. With these data collection tools, I documented the college access experiences of 15 high school Black male participants both in the First Day Program and at their respective high schools. Despite the varied interactions with teachers, counselors, and resources available at their schools, a commonality in the academic facilitation for Black males was their

connection to A-G requirements. A-G compliance is paramount to college eligibility and is achieved by receiving a C or better in 15, year-long courses in California high schools required to meet the admission requirements of the California University systems. Each letter represents a different subject, and each subject has a specified number of year-long courses: A) History – 2 years; B) English – 4 years; C) Math – 3 years; D) Science – 2 years; E) Language Other Than English – 2 years; F) Visual and Performing Arts – 1 year; G) College-Preparatory Elective – 1 year. According to a Campaign for College Opportunity report by Bates & Siqueiros (2019), 35% of Black students who graduated high school also met the UC/CSU requirements. This study assumes that Critical Race Theory works to explain the myriad of drawbacks often experienced by Black boys in urban schools when pursuing higher education and the PVEST model explains how they adapt. Using a methodological framework that encapsulates the participants' unique experience as Black males in urban schools, the goals for this study are situated in answering three research questions, which are:

- *What factors contribute to the perceptions of college and college-going aspirations of Black males in ninth grade? What are the perceived impediments?*
- *In what ways, if any, do schools play a role in fostering and supporting Black males' pursuit of higher education?*
- *How, if at all, do the programmatic contributions of First Day impact college access for Black males?*

As mentioned in Chapter one, the students identified what factors contribute to their academic success and pursuit of college. They also provided perspective on the conditions of their respective schools that they believed fostered or hindered their school engagement and their pursuit of higher education. It was my hope that the accounts gathered in this study from the

Black males in the social justice-oriented college access program highlighted students' experiences in a way that informed schools, college programs, and education policymakers alike. My study centered the voices of these students in an effort to improve schooling conditions and college access equity for Black males, ultimately increasing the number of high school graduates and competitive college applicants.

Rationale for Qualitative, Phenomenological Approach

I chose research methods and procedures that would simultaneously allow me to expand the reach of college-access programs for Black males and carry out my dissertation research efficiently. To provide an in-depth take on the traditional work the program does with select students and offer context as to why it was necessary for the program to extend its reach, I chose to undertake a phenomenological approach. Academic grades, graduation rates, and college admission numbers indeed paint a picture of the state of Black male education in K-12. In order to better understand and contextualize student experience with college access, I employ a qualitative approach. The first step was conducting interviews and focus groups with an ethnographic phenomenological lens. Creswell (2007) states that the "basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce the experiences of persons with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (p.252). Further, Creswell (2007) states that once research(er) chooses a phenomenon, an element of their job is to interpret or "mediate" between different meanings (van Manen, 1990, p. 26). Ethnography was the tool I utilized to interpret the various accounts of experiences. Creswell (2007, citing Harris, 1968) defines ethnography as a "qualitative design in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group" (p. 68). Mentoring towards college access can have no static modus operandi that will work for every mentor and protege dynamic.

Therefore, cultural competence and shared racialized and gendered experiences are highlighted as invaluable in the study. It is thus important to interpret values and language in particular areas where mentorship takes place. According to Maggs-Rapport (1999), a triangulation of the ethnographic and phenomenological approach enables the researchers "to highlight their interpretation of [the phenomenon] under review, whilst at the same time considering that phenomenon in terms of the participant group, their cultural background, and day-to-day experiences" (p. 219).

A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). While the students have divergent experiences in their respective schools, the phenomenon they share in this study is their participation in the virtual summer program, ROYAL Summer. Phenomenological studies typically rely on in-depth interviews to collect data. While that is true for this study, data collection will also include digital artifacts, focus groups, student work, and student recorded testimonials. The phenomenological approach is used to properly capture the essence of the students' experience in the college access program and schools. I use this method to interpret and understand the students' perceptions of barriers, their motivation to pursue college, and the potential utility of mentorship. Also, the phenomenological approach is employed to study the ways in which the First Day program fosters student retention and engagement in schooling in spite of a myriad of race and class-based disadvantages.

Margaret Beale Spencer's (2006) phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) is a human developmental framework that acknowledges the inequalities that adolescents face at different stages in their development. PVEST is useful for this study because the "phenomenological experiences represent a particular human condition, [that] is

development-stage sensitive and critical to adolescence. That is, they impact how youth (1) experience, interpret, and respond to membership in a racial or ethnic group, (2) influence how they experience and feel about gender identity, and (3) become cognizant about how their life options are affected by social status" (Velez & Spencer, 2018, p. 83). Critical Race Theory conjoined with the PVEST model allows for an ecological analysis of their educational experience and takes into account the multifaceted contexts that influence their racial identity and environment.

Site Selection and Description

I attribute so much of my intellectual curiosity to the university partnership entitled C-CAP California College Access Program. C-CAP is a college-access, mentoring, and intervention program that works with various high schools in the Los Angeles and Pasadena area, designed to help prepare historically underrepresented students, specifically Black students, to become competitively eligible for undergraduate curriculum at competitive and credible universities. C-CAP's mission is also to encourage the pursuit of graduate and professional education. This site of study is unique because the program uses a social justice framework and a holistic approach.

The program was created in 2005 in response to low Black application and enrollment trends at a historically white university in Southern California and other universities following the passage of Proposition 209, the California anti-affirmative action initiative. Therefore, the C-CAP curriculum prioritizes educating students about the historical context of race, class, and gender inequalities in the American education system. Equipped with college access tools and critical consciousness of injustices within education, C-CAP students go on to become change agents and leaders in high school, college, graduate school, and within their career fields. C-

CAP Academy students apply in the spring semester of their tenth-grade year, and after fifteen cohorts and ten sites, despite some minimal progress, there remained an inequity in the amount of competitively eligible Black males. Similar to the rationale for starting the C-CAP program itself, the program decided to launch an intentional effort to mentor and foster a college-going culture for Black males starting in the fall of their ninth-grade year, entitled "First Day." Since 2018, First Day allows the program more dedicated time to serve and support the processes of recruitment, application, retention, and completion of the program for young men of color, particularly Black males.

All participants attended ten schools in Los Angeles County from Los Angeles Unified and Pasadena school districts. Of the ten schools, three of the schools were located in Pasadena, California. Six school sites were located in the greater Los Angeles area. A single participating site was located close to the border of the South region of the Los Angeles Unified School District and is located in Long Beach, CA.

The three participating school sites in Pasadena were State High, Whitewater High, and Eureka High. State High, the first site, is one of few secondary schools in Pasadena that span from grades 6-12. The total student population is just over 2000. According to EdData (2021), approximately 7% of students identify as Black and 71% of students receive free and reduced lunch. Of State High's graduating seniors, 67% graduate A-G compliant and UC/CSU eligible. The second participating site, Whitewater High, is a comprehensive high school with a student population of 1700, making it the most populated high school in Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD). Whitewater High comprises a Black student population that is under 18%. About two-thirds of its student population come from lower socio-economic homes, and half of its graduating students are immediately eligible for UC/CSU admission. The third participating

site in Pasadena is Eureka High, an early college magnet. Black students make up 25% of Eureka High's total student population of 969, and nearly 86% of its total student population receive free and reduced lunch. Eureka offers courses through the local city college and 41% of its graduating seniors completed their A-G requirements.

The seven Los Angeles Unified school sites were as follows: Westside High, Frozen Lake Secondary School, Northeast High, Spring Gardens High, Laguna High, and Deer River High. Westside High, the first site, is a public university preparatory secondary school located in the City of Los Angeles and has a total enrollment of just over 1600 students in grades 6-12. Approximately 19% of Westside students identify as Black and 54% of its total student population receive free and reduced lunch. Close to 98% of its graduating seniors completed high school requirements, and 84% were A-G compliant at the time of graduation and thus eligible for UC/CSU admission. The second site is Frozen Lake Secondary School, a high school that prides itself on its college preparatory education. Frozen Lakes enrolls students in 9-12 grade and approximately 49% of the students are Black. About 89% of its total student population receive free and reduced lunch and 37% of its graduating students are eligible for UC/CSU admission after four years. The third participating site, Northeast High, is a medical/science magnet high school located in South Central Los Angeles, California. Northeast enrolls students in grades 9-12 and centers college preparatory programs for its student body of nearly 1589 students. Over 90% of Northeast's students qualify for free and reduced lunch, and its total student population consists mainly of Black and Latinx students—43% of which identify as Black. Participants interviewed in this study lauded the number of teachers and administrators of color present at Northeast, whereas 31.9% of the teachers are Black and 73.6% of teachers on campus were nonwhite. Of its graduating seniors, 70% are immediately eligible for UC/CSU

admission. Spring Gardens High, the fourth site, is a magnet high school in the west region of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Nearly three-fourths of the student population is Black, making Spring Gardens one of few Los Angeles high schools that remain predominantly Black. Spring Gardens enrolls students in grades 9-12 and offers three magnet programs: Gifted/High Achieving/Highly Gifted STEAM Magnet, Health & Sports Medicine Magnet, and Environmental & Natural Sciences Magnet. All Spring Gardens students participate in full A-G coursework and 51% of graduating seniors are eligible for UC/CSU admission after four years. The fifth site, Laguna High, is a public high school located on the west side of Los Angeles. The school comprises four small learning communities and two magnet schools, and a student body of over 2500 students across grades 9-12. Just fewer than a quarter, 24%, of students at Laguna High identify as Black and 67% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Two-thirds of Laguna's graduating students are immediately eligible for UC/CSU admission. The sixth site, Deer River High, is a public middle and high school in Long Beach, California, enrolling students in grades 6-12. Deer River High has a student body of 742, 22% of whom are Black. The graduation rate for Deer River is about 87%, and 41% of its graduating seniors are completely compliant with A-G requirements and eligible for UC/CSU admission. The final school site, Waterfalls High, is a financially independent charter secondary high school and one of the first high schools in LASUD to achieve independent charter school status. Black students make up 10% of Waterfalls' total enrollment of 3000. Graduation requirements for Waterfalls mirror that of A-G requirements; 97% of students graduate in four years, and 97% of its graduates are immediately eligible for UC/CSU admission. Of its graduating seniors, 58% of students enroll in a 4-year university and 35% enroll in a 2-year/vocational/trade school immediately after graduation.

At participating high schools, First Day staff and mentors work with campus liaisons (e.g. counselors, teachers, assistant principals) in summoning and meeting with students. Counselors provide a list of ninth-grade students who identify as Black at each high school and who have academic profiles that could make them competitively eligible for college admission. The number varies considerably from site to site. The fewest total Black males a school has had in a given year is 14, and the most in a yearly caseload has been 86. First Day staff meets with students weekly at their school sites, sometimes twice a week, to introduce the program and perform academic assessments. The academic assessment is a tool that informs the students of their A-G requirements and helps track their compliance over their four years in high school.

ROYAL Summer (1-week program)

After their first fall semester in high school, students are encouraged to apply for the summer programming. The summer component for First Day is referred to as ROYAL Summer. Students submit applications voluntarily and are chosen based on their application essays and the prior engagement with their respective mentors; there is no GPA requirement. In light of the fact that grades are more of a neutral factor, the students selected from the program represent a varying levels of academic achievement and connectedness to school.

During the first year of the summer programming, mentors received 25 applications from students from 8 different school sites. Two of the mentors were unable to secure any complete applications. ROYAL Summer students participated in programming, in person, while living on the campus of a Southern California university. Students arrived on a Thursday evening and departed on the subsequent Sunday afternoon. While on campus, students engaged in math, writing, art enrichment courses, attended college readiness workshops, and participated in team-building recreation activities. Applicants for the second year of programming submitted their

applications just weeks before the COVID-19 school closures were enacted. And in light of COVID-19, 15 summer program participants engaged with First Day completely virtually. Facilitated entirely via Zoom, and expanded to one week, and the second year of ROYAL Summer sought to increase high school mastery and scholar development. In the second year, the staff increased the instruction time and allocated more time for academic assessments and college preparatory workshops. All of the facilitators and staff of the program are Black, with the majority being Black and male. This is an intentional effort to surround students with a support system of potential role models with shared cultural experiences.

C-CAP Academy

The overarching goal of ROYAL Summer program was to create a program pipeline for Black males going into higher education and diverse fields of human endeavor, but a first step of sorts was to create an initiative that would feed more Black males into the C-CAP Academy, a 3-week residential program. The objective of the 3-week program is to get students acclimated to the flow of college campuses, and improve writing and critical thinking skills through an intense writing course for 4 units of college credits. The program provides students with holistic and 24/7 mentorship from college undergraduates and engages students in conversations revolving around social justice and global affairs. Given the nature of the data collection timeline, several participants who participated in the ROYAL Summer program also participated in the C-CAP Academy program and their experiences therein also contributed to their accounts recorded in the data.

Saturday Workshops

During the academy year, First Day offered Saturday workshops in the form of auxiliary courses in math and writing. The same instructors from the virtual, week-long summer program logged

on to Zoom to conduct 2 hours of instruction that built off of academics and curriculum from prior engagements. The courses were not optional, however, there was no penalty for missing a session, which caused great fluctuations in attendance. Math and writing sessions were bi-weekly and scheduled in an alternate format. All sessions would begin with a check-in, before getting into their lesson plans. The math instructor would encourage students to share topics from their respective math courses and highlight any topics that they were struggling with so that he could go over them during the session.

STAND Activities

In the summer of 2020, while working with C-CAP as a graduate student researcher, I created and introduced the STAND curriculum—Science, Technology, Art, Nutrition, and Dialogue—as a culturally relevant approach to virtual learning and sociopolitical development. The science workshops included information from the medical field on pertinent COVID updates and utilized a scientific approach to understanding the connection between systemic racism, comorbidity, and increased vulnerability in a pandemic. Technology facilitation explored the ways in which students and families can engage through technology e.g. social media and virtual connections. Art education is and will continue to be invaluable in educating students holistically. The art activities in STAND were designed to engage students right brains and champion their creative self-expression. Nutrition education is pertinent to overall health; instructors provided information on healthful meals and activities to maintain physical wellness. Lastly, C-CAP sought to make sure that students and families were heard and could engage in thought-provoking dialogue that informed the support that we offered.

These expected outcomes facilitated the larger goal of C-CAP to impact the college-going culture at each of our partnering high schools by increasing the number of eligibility to become competitive for admission to and success at Polk and other flagship universities.

Study Population and Rationale

Table 1. Participants in the Study

Participant	Data Collected	Site	Percentage of Black Students	Cohort Graduates Meeting UC/CSU Requirements:
Jerry	Survey; Focus group; Individual interview	State High	7%	67%
Garfield	Survey; Focus group			
Michael	Survey; Focus group	Whitewater High	11%	50%
Tre	Survey; Focus group; Individual interview	Laguna High	26%	64%
Bruce	Survey; Focus group; Individual interview	Northeast High	43%	70%
LR	Survey; Focus group; Individual interview			
Jeff	Survey; Focus group			
Chic	Survey; Focus group			
Polk	Survey; Focus group; Individual interview	Eureka High	25%	41%

Rock	Survey; Focus group; Individual interview	Westside High		
John	Survey; Focus group		44%	84%
Jordan	Survey; Focus group; Individual interview	Waterfalls High	10%	97%
Horizon	Survey; Focus group; Individual interview	Frozen Lake Secondary	49%	37%
Giant	Survey; Focus group; Individual interview	Spring Gardens High	74%	51%
Jah	Survey; Focus group; Individual interview	Deer River High	22%	41%

The population of interest for this study was the cadre of Black male students who participated in the second cohort and first week-long iteration of the ROYAL Summer program, N=15. All participants were rising sophomores during the time of the survey and focus group data collection. Participants in the second year of programming had a unique experience in ROYAL Summer, being a part of the first cohort to engage with the First Day curriculum and college preparation online. All virtual interactions between First Day mentors and students were geared towards fostering a college-going culture by way of increasing student exposure to the university experience. Additionally, my study sought to investigate whether an intentional summer program hosted the summer after ninth grade would have an impact on participants' education attainment goals. I designed the courses and activities throughout the summer to advertise the plethora of resources that would be available to them as college students. Based on preliminary evaluations and their applications for the program, students exhibited excitement and

investment in higher education in the way they laud the campus and the opportunities presented to them. Since they were participating virtually, students lived vicariously through the university experience of the undergraduate mentors. While some high school students were already very much on track to college, many participants would be first-generation college students and are engaging in college preparatory curriculum and college students for the first time while participating in the program.

Data Collection

My data collection process started during the summer of 2020 and was completed in the winter of 2022. My study utilized a qualitative research approach to examine the efficiency or lack thereof in urban high schools in preparing Black males for college entrance. It also analyzed the roles the schools and college access programs play in shaping student perceptions of colleges and universities. In order to learn more about students' experiences, perceived challenges, and encouragements, I used qualitative surveys with open-ended questions, focus groups, individual interviews, reviewed student assignments from the summer programming, and referenced student-submitted videos. Students took a pre-survey **(Appendix B)** prior to engaging in the summer program that sought to understand their connection to and satisfaction with their current high schools and college access journeys. Although informative, neither the pre-survey nor student video data are reflected in the data analysis.

All ROYAL Summer students (N=15) participated in a focus group of 4-5 participants. The focus groups took place on the last day of the summer program. The focus groups were led by colleague researchers who did not participate in the program as mentors or facilitators. The students represented different schools and communities and thus conveyed an array of perceptions of college access and experiences in the program. The focus groups were useful in

identifying consistent themes and shared phenomena for the students both in school and in the summer program. Conducting the focus groups in this study was integral for identifying shared experiences that were highlighted via individual interviews. It was my plan to interview every student who participated in the focus group but not all students responded to my emails and text messages inviting them to do so. Of the participants who engaged in the focus groups, N=10 students responded and participated in an interview about their experience in high school and summer programming.

Semi-Structured Interviews

During fall 2021 and spring 2022, I conducted 10, 30-45 minute, semi-structured interviews with all participants. Semi-structured interview processes are characterized by an open-ended, "mix of more and less structured questions" (Merriam 1998, p. 74). The semi-structured format will allow flexibility in the wording of questions, in many ways aiding the flow of the dialogue and co-constructing the conversations with the students based on their responses (Fellows & Liu, 2008). The purpose of these phenomenological interviews was to capture and center these students' unique identity and affinity to college within the course of the study. What I intended to parse out in the one-on-one interviews that I could not achieve in focus groups is a more personalized and detailed account of student identity and connectedness to schooling and college access. Individual interviews may also allow space to talk with the interviewer about topics they may not want to share with their peers in a focus group. I conducted phenomenological interviews in light of the position held by Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989) position that it is "the most powerful means of attaining an in-depth understanding of another person's experience" (p. 138). In an effort to present the most authentic account, I did not interview students looking to get a specific answer to my questions, instead, I allowed them to

present their perceptions of college access and their affinity to higher education as they wanted to share them. The only preconceived notions I had entering the interviews were drawn from the themes identified by students in the focus group data. My research methods, the semi-structured interviews, in particular, were geared to present their experiences and provide a clear understanding for school administration and education policymakers at large. As Thompson et al. (1989) state, "the ideal interview format occurs when the interviewer's short descriptive questions and/or clarifying statements provide an opening for a respondent's lengthier and detailed descriptions" (p. 139). I used the phenomenological interview method to empower participants to detail their experiences and create their own narratives. In light of the COVID-19 safety procedures, all 10 in-depth interviews took place on Zoom conferencing technology. I also collected digital artifacts from summer programming including course curriculum from instructors, samples of students' assignments, mentor workshop materials, and video testimonials from students recapping their experience in the program (Yin, 2017).

Data Analysis

Using a multi-step thematic analysis, I coded (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) the focus group transcriptions and interviews to identify specific themes, patterns, and individual quotes that summarized the key discussion point. Open-ended responses were transcribed and thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) was applied. In my study, these data were used primarily for contextual purposes to support the qualitative findings. To initiate my meaning-making, I also write notes that helped keep track of the emerging codes. I executed two rounds of coding to identify larger, more prevalent codes (Miles et al., 2018). The final step included a microanalysis of each domain and theme (Diamond and Gomez, 2004). As Bailey (2009) suggests, it is important to "contextualize and make connections between themes to build

a coherent argument supported by data" (p. 21). To prove trustworthiness, I allowed the participants to clear up any discrepancies that occur due to transcription. It is imperative that the participants be represented as they intended. I will compare the focus group data and semi-structured interviews.

Phases of Analysis

Transcription

The first phase of the data analysis began with transcriptions. Full video and audio recordings were sent to Rev.com to be transcribed. Once I received the transcription, I listened back to the audio recording and reviewed the tape for accuracy. This step commenced the mean-making process of the data.

Horizontalization of meanings

The next phase of data analysis and meaning-making was what Keener (2004) referred to as horizontalization— a process in which I identified statements or phrases that held meaning and significant relevance to the research questions. A crucial part of identifying significance was coding the data and physically highlighting the words and quotes of participants in the focus groups and interviews in order to capture patterns and recurring themes (Jewell, 2007). From the emergent themes, I pulled together similarly worded or repetitive themes and housed them under a larger umbrella of themes that more closely encapsulated the significance and essential element of the quotes (Conceicao, 2006). The resulting themes are known as the "horizons" or "the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97).

Access to Participants

As a staff member and researcher for C-CAP, I had access to both the data First Day mentors collected during the academic year and summer program as well as data from the

traditional summer programs. Through my involvement as a mentor for two of the ten partnering sites and coordinator of ROYAL Summer, I developed a rapport with several students. I met students during their ninth-grade year, which for some is almost two years ago. My relationship with students was influential in their opening up and trusting me with detailed information about their lives and identities. For the sites where I had not mentored students, I relied on the connections I made with staff members there. I have met and developed a rapport with several administrators and teachers at schools where I do not meet with students directly. My relationship with site contacts provided access to students who engaged in the C-CAP programming. My biggest strength as a researcher in this work has been my relationship building and positionality in the program.

Researcher Positionality

Growing up, I had 6 siblings and a headstrong matriarch who fervently championed the value of a college education. Since my early childhood, she effectively hid most of the markers of our poverty and insisted that doing well in school would allow me to circumvent all the problems we were facing in the future. Amongst my older siblings, I sought mentorship and academic guidance, however, the intrinsic barriers related to poverty proved insurmountable for all 5. In my sophomore year of high school, I was accepted into a C-CAP that provided informed guidance that was not available at home. This program provided me with essential tools for navigating high school, connected me with college mentors, and challenged me to be critically conscious and empower those around me throughout my educational journey. The program completely reshaped my views on what underserved students are capable of when given intentional equitable resources.

I decided to attend UCLA so I could stay under the tutelage of my mentors and help further the legacy of supporting underserved students. I became a researcher in UCLA's Black Male Institute (BMI), working with Dr. Tyrone Howard and Dr. Terry Flennaugh. I analyzed enrollment, graduation rates, as well as suspension and expulsion numbers of Black, White, Latino, and Asian males in the Los Angeles Unified School District. I saw myself in the data and felt charged to contextualize the experiences and narratives of students battling inequities and injustices that impacted me and my siblings. Working with my research advisor, I was able to present my findings and call for action at think tanks hosting hundreds of minority students and education professionals in the Greater Los Angeles area, as well as the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE) back in my hometown of New Orleans. My introduction to research did not satiate my inclination to work for equity, I had to get back face-to-face with students. I planned field trips that increased college exposure, aided in their college applications, and served as their aid when they were tasked with creating their own research projects. My involvement in the program assisted in getting several promising students into UCLA, who too felt called to pay forth their access and mentor students.

Upon graduating from UCLA, my academic curiosity took me to the south of Spain to study Spanish literature, history, and art. Ironically, even while touring the Alhambra in Granada, I was reminded of the power and majesty of my ancestors. It was conversations with Spanish peers, who believed the "n-word" no longer had a connection to racism or American slavery that served as a frigid reminder that there is so much work to be done if we are to confront the prevalence of racial inequity in education internationally. In an effort to delve into the political side of education, I earned a master's degree in education policy and management at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. Amongst some of the world's most brilliant minds, I studied

pedagogy, mindfulness, and empathy. The intense study and personal development I underwent in Cambridge encouraged me to continue in the pipeline that had already given me so much; I decided to return to UCLA and pursue a doctoral degree with the first education professor I had as my advisor.

These experiences led me to conduct this research and allow me to continue its legacy of college access mentoring while helping to expand its reach and effectiveness. I came to know the program as a youth participant, three years after its inception, and I began working with the C-CAP program as a mentor in September of 2011, returning to my alma mater high school. I served as an academic mentor for three cohorts and worked as a summer mentor twice during my undergraduate career. In 2013, I contributed to a chapter in the program's book on fostering college access for marginalized youth, (Smith & Lyons, 2016). I proposed an intervention that would start in ninth grade and focus on increasing the retention of Black males. In 2018, two years after the book was published, the C-CAP program received a grant to fund its "First Day" initiative. Since I brought the idea to the program, my role as coordinator and researcher is what my mentors would call "me-search." As I traverse the hills and valleys of academia myself, I remain cognizant of similarities in our experiences and feel as if my fate in education is in every way tied to theirs. If it were not for the C-CAP program, I would not have pursued higher education, so I am well aware of its impact firsthand. It is my goal to focus on the relationship I have with the students and this program (Jewell, 2007).

Study Limitations

Although this study may produce pertinent findings on Black male perceptions of college access and affinity to college, it is not without limitations. First, I am a Black male, who attended similar schools as the participants and I participated in the C-CAP program as a youth and

mentor. My objectivity in this study can easily come into question given my connection to the work and its goals. I am not coy in announcing my beliefs about Black males in education and the impact of programs not unlike C-CAP, but I believe it is my duty as a principal investigator to honor the students' accounts and the field of research by utilizing the scientific research methods outlined in this dissertation. In this section, I will discuss the major limitations associated with the study.

A noteworthy limitation of my study is the number of participants. The goal of conducting surveys and focus groups before supplementing in-depth interviews was to present a balance of breadth and depth in presenting student experience. However, N=15 total participants will not suffice for generalizability. While the goal of this study is to present student-rendered best practices to foster a college-going culture for the participants engaging in the C-CAP program, research should aim to be applicable for broader populations.

Lastly, my study was designed to explore the experience of Black males, however, all of the participants are students in urban high schools in Los Angeles and Pasadena. The characteristics of Los Angeles and Pasadena are unique from other major cities. Both the location of the study should be taken into consideration when discussing the students' educational experience and affinity to college broadly. Furthermore, all of the participants are involved with C-CAP First Day, an early action college access program designed to increase college access and resources for Black males starting in the ninth grade. The goal of my dissertation was to capture student perceptions of barriers and conduits for the pursuit of higher education. Students who choose to sustain involvement in the program may be students who already seek to align themselves with a college-going culture.

Another goal of this study is to center student voices in identifying best practices to increase college affinity. It may be difficult to generalize what students need based on the experiences of students who are engaging in a program designed to encourage Black males in urban schools. The schooling experience and perception of best practices may vary across different school settings and levels of support. The student experiences listed in my dissertation study are unique, and it is imperative that future research takes that into consideration when investigating best practices for fostering a college-going culture for Black males.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings from my focus group interviews with 15 students, individual interviews with 10 students, and student writing assignments from five students. The students that I interviewed expounded on their experiences with First Day and subsequent C-CAP involvement. The enrichment program, C-CAP Academy, is considered the natural progression for First Day. Four of the 10 interview participants went on to engage in an enrichment program designed for competitive, rising high school juniors; those four students also detailed their experiences with writing instruction from the same instructor during the subsequent summer programming. In addition to detailing their experiences in C-CAP programming, students discussed their perceptions of the impact of race and gender on their goals and college aspirations. Student participants described their experience of returning to high school and assessed the impact that First Day had on their high school academic performance and navigational capital. The participants' perspectives offered insight into the programmatic

information they found the most and least helpful. Furthermore, student participants provided information on whether, and to what extent, their engagement with First Day mentors shaped their knowledge of college and career pathways. My research questions asked the following:

1. What factors contribute to the perceptions of college and college-going aspirations of Black males in ninth grade? What are the perceived impediments?
2. In what ways, if any, do schools play a role in fostering and supporting Black males' pursuit of higher education?
3. How, if at all, do the programmatic contributions of First Day impact college access for Black males?

I analyzed all of my qualitative data sources which included: (a) transcripts from the individual, semi-structured interviews with 10 of the Black male participants in this study, (b) transcripts from four focus groups, and (c) five participant quick write assignments.

Data Analysis and Theme Development

The focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom. I sent the audio recordings to Rev.com for transcription. I then reviewed the transcripts to ensure accuracy. My analysis process for these data was twofold. First, I read the focus group and interview data several times and assigned color-coded themes. After I established my themes, I shared my codebook and data with trusted colleagues and research partners to confirm my codes and minimize research bias. My two colleagues conducted a critical review of the data and themes and assigned new themes. After they completed their reviews, I reviewed their discovery and collated the themes where necessary and appropriate. Subsequently, I organized the themes according to each of my research questions. Next, I categorized the questions into global themes

and labeled the themes found in the data as the sub-themes. Any emerging themes stemmed from constant review and triangulation in the analysis process.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will introduce the 3 themes and 9 sub-themes in three sections. The first question in my dissertation explores access and aspirations to attend college. Thus, the first section of my analysis will explore Black male students' aspirations and perception of barriers *i.e.* factors that may diminish or inhibit their pursuit. To answer RQ#1, a query on students' aspirations of college-going, *perceptions of barriers* to college access programming, culturally relevant curriculum was a recurring finding. Housed within that larger theme were three sub-themes: (a) *interactions with teachers and counselors,* (b) *C-CAP interaction,* and (c) *the role of race and racism* played on their forward trajectory toward college. The second section focuses on the impact of participants' adult relationships and partnerships between school and the First Day program. Also, in this section, I will explore students' experiences with instruction in their schools and First Day summer program. This section also includes analyses of any similarities and differences between interactions with adults/teachers at their respective schools and the mentors they encountered in First Day.

To answer RQ#2 and examine the tools to foster higher education pursuit, the emergent theme was the *Role of school and University Partnerships.* The quotidian classroom curriculum and their understanding of collegiate requirements fall under the *role of schools* theme. This second section also explores the students' ideas of academic readiness resources and discusses the role of the respective schools. This section unpacks how students' experiences with teachers impacted the fulfillment of those requirements and perceptions of higher education. The sub-themes were (a) *A-G requirements,* both the students' understanding of them via the school

personnel-led facilitation and from First Day mentors who met with students at school, how they acquired (b) *college knowledge,* and the significance and impact of *(c) college counseling.*

My third research question sought to explore the impact of First Day's programmatic efforts. The overarching theme from this question's findings is what I refer to as *cacti in the classroom,* unpacking the salience of students' environment and their adept ability to adapt. Students found ways to adapt to a dearth of resources. The sub-themes within the eponymous emergent theme of my dissertation were: (a) the importance of ROYAL Summer, the Black male-centered program in which students participated; (b) culturally relevant and sustaining curriculum; and (c) STAND activities, the virtual engagement I designed to create an intriguing and fun online learning experience.

Research Question	Finding	Sub-Findings
What factors contribute to the perceptions of college and college-going aspirations of Black males in ninth grade? What are the perceived impediments?	College Aspirations and Perceived Barriers	(a) interactions with teachers and counselors, (b) C-CAP interaction, and (c) the role of race and racism
In what ways, if any, do schools play a role in fostering and supporting Black males' pursuit of higher education?	The Role of School and University Partnerships	(a) A-G requirements,(b) college knowledge, and the significance and impact of (c) college counseling.
How, if at all, do the programmatic contributions of First Day impact college access for Black males?	Cacti in the Classroom	(a) the importance of ROYAL Summer, the Black male-centered program in which students participated; (b) culturally relevant and sustaining curriculum; and (c) STAND activities

In alignment with the project's prioritization of students' voices, I relied heavily on quotes from participants to illustrate my findings. With the exception of the plentiful "umm" and

"like" in students' dialects, I tried to maintain as much of the students' voices as possible in order to accurately depict their experiences. I only removed words and utterances to enhance readability and omitted only pregnant pauses.

Although most of the participants in the study attended different schools and had a unique set of experiences, several commonalities revealed themselves throughout the interviewing and analysis process. The participants brought unique experiences from their homes, schools, mentors, and engagements in the First Day programming. Despite their varying viewpoints and backgrounds, many of the participants shared common outlooks on race, schools, and experiences in ROYAL Summer and other college readiness programs. However, it is the very difference in their schools, environments, and perceptions that serve as the focal point in my findings.

Theme 1: College Aspirations and Perceived Barriers

Black males discuss their aspirations and perceived barriers to attending college.

Participants first engaged with C-CAP mentors during their ninth-grade year leading up to the summer program and before accumulating the GPA that would be considered by universities for admission. This allowed the students to gain a clear vision of themselves in college. The student's college education attainment goals already seemed steadfast and the majority of students listed career goals that required a college degree. Most participants expressed sovereign confidence in their ability to achieve their goals. Jerry is a student from State High with immense interest in the creative industry, namely music and digital arts. Jerry's brother, now an established cinematographer, also participated in C-CAP programming and has goals of following in his brother's footsteps. In response to a quick write prompt, Jerry wrote "Nothing can stop me from going to college except me because I am the only one that can stop

myself from pursuing my own dreams and goals." Most participants highlighted the importance of their own will and resilience in pursuit of higher education. Tre, a student at Laguna High, however, shared a pragmatic perspective, giving credence to the impact of academic insecurity. Amongst his friends, Tre is known as the calm and pragmatic one. Despite his acrobatic and active temperament, he tends to have a temperament and moral compass that is more like a parent than a peer. In response to the same prompt, Tre wrote, "Nothing can stop me from going to college except myself *i.e.* my own doubt or my inability to do certain tasks. If my will isn't strong enough to push me forward, then I might not make it." Tre believed that his success relied on his own will, an incredibly personal and individualized motivating factor. In most of his responses and in our interactions, Tre exhibited a sense of groundedness that often felt mature beyond his years.

LR, a student at Northeast High, also exhibited an impressive understanding of the world and his place in it. Quite the achieving student, LR participated in the ROYAL Summer program coming through his left headphone and another college access program coming through his right. There were few activities that LR was not eager to participate in and despite all of the mentors knowing that he was doubly involved with college programs and activities, his enthusiasm and engagement rarely waned. Proud to attend a predominantly Black and Latinx school in South Los Angeles, LR expressed that a barrier for students planning to attend college was the lack of community. He expressed that barriers may form from students' own learning attitudes and community influences due to working too independently. Describing what might serve as a barrier to college for Black males, LR stated: "their mindset, where they grow up, their environment, the people around them, how they're raised…Because there's not enough unity in their life. I feel like there's too much division maybe." In light of the vibrant community and

support system LR had access to at Northeast, he placed considerable emphasis on the significance of upbringing and learning environment for students. His take alluded to what Spencer (1997) would refer to as students' net vulnerability— the history of someone's experiences and their corresponding coping methods—and suggested community learning in lieu of working in silos as the solution to the lack of communal unity he perceived in other schools and communities.

The prevalence of barriers far outside the students' realm of control— be they systemic or otherwise— and their potential to impact the likelihood of Black males attending and performing well in college was not lost on LR. The Northeast High student listed "bad decisions, society, white supremacists trying to divide and conquer, peer pressure from my community" as all possible hindrances to achieving academic success. LR's point to bad decisions suggests that he held himself accountable, however, it was the acknowledgment of society and white supremacy that I observe as an intentional reconciliation with a systemic initiative to disenfranchise Black males in education. Battles with systemic racism and microaggressions often insidiously persist in school settings, undergirding Black males' educational experiences. For many participants, however, succumbing to negative influences and losing focus on earning good grades were a part of day-to-day considerations, conversations, and concerns. When asked what might prove to be a barrier to higher education, one student shared, "bad influences and getting distracted and not focusing on school" (Polk, Eureka High). Polk is a soft-spoken, Pasadena native. Coming up, he shared that he was always larger than his peers and that often brought him much-unwanted attention. Eventually, he was recruited for football and now seeks to play in college. For many students, not unlike Polk, athletics is simultaneously an incentive to keep their grades up and a great stressor on time and attention that occasionally causes their

grades to fall. In my study, I found that not performing well in classes–whether it be due to a lack of focus, deleterious participation in extracurricular activities, or a general misunderstanding of the material–was a baseline concern for students. Atop any potential external influences that are negative, Bruce, a Northeast High student, worried that he might not have enough support to solve his customary struggles with learning math online. Bruce stated, answering what might keep him from college:

> Maybe my grades…Your grades are typically the most obvious thing colleges would check in order to allow you to come in the college or not. This year I took geometry for math and I am not really good at geometry…Now that was during the pandemic and the frustrating transition to doing virtual learning. That had some effect on it but I was still struggling.

Bruce has been an honor student since middle school and has an exceptional commitment to C-CAP programming. Conversations with both Bruce and his family revealed a deep connection to higher education that ensured that he would happily participate in opportunities designed to achieve his dream of becoming a veterinarian. Despite this, even for involved and talented students like Bruce, COVID-19 school closures put a strain on curriculum absorption and overall C-CAP participation. Bruce shared that the switch to virtual learning during the pandemic in addition to general difficulty with the curriculum was a barrier to learning. Participants described what appeared to be a genuine concern that school and society would throw innumerable distractions and obstacles at them when attempting to earn grades that would further their pathway to college. In order to earn good grades, students understood that they would have to take the appropriate courses (meeting A-G requirements) and develop good relationships with their teachers and counselors.

Interactions with Teachers and Counselors

As students progressed through high school, they expressed that their relationships with teachers and counselors became increasingly consequential to their competitive eligibility for universities. Polk said:

> "I have a really good relationship with my counselor because he knows my goals, he knows everything about my school, and he's not one of those teacher-type counselors. [sic] He tries to be your friend. So, he would tell me about opportunities and [classes] to take."

Polk also credited his relationship with his counselor for keeping him on track and aware of college access opportunities, he stated:

> "I've always had a good relationship with my counselor…Literally, he's like a bro. He keeps it [real] with you. He knows what you need. He'll tell you what you need to do. That's why, when I figured out about [C-CAP] I was happy. Because that's good. That's great for my college education."

Students' affinity for college was largely impacted by positive relationships with counselors.

Participants also expressed that the teachers' availability or the ease in which they could meet with them played a pivotal role in their feeling cared for and supported. Rock has attended Westside, a high-performing secondary school on the westside of Los Angeles, since middle school and has consistently felt nurtured by his teachers and counselors. Rock is a decorated online gamer, but his gentle, quiet demeanor often caused him to participate less in the classroom—virtual and in-person. In our conversation, he shared how he benefited a great deal from the attentiveness of his teachers and counselors. Noting how fortunate he has been in his experience, Rock shared:

> I think I've had really good teachers and counselors throughout my years at Westside High. My counselor has kind of always been there for us and she's made sure we knew that we can always talk to her if we need anything or have any questions. And I'd say pretty much all of my teachers have been good in making sure that they want all their students to learn and they make sure that if anyone has any questions, they can all always answer them. So, I think I've been pretty lucky.

Many participants expressed an immense sense of gratitude for the connection they developed with their college counselors and teachers. Most of them shared experiences with teachers that were encouraging and affirming. Even in that instance—as shown by Rock— students still alluded to their realization that not all students' experiences with teachers and counselors were positive.

Participants were vocal about the instances where they felt unsupported or under-supported by teachers, and they often characterized those times as a lack of care. Jordan, a student at Waterfalls High—a non-partner school of C-CAP— heard about the program from his older sister who planned to attend the C-CAP academy until she discovered the all-male component. Jordan is a humorous, sociable student and avid basketball player with dreams of playing professionally. Conversations about post-graduation options revealed that his parents have firmly mandated college, and he does not feel like the choice is his to make. Jordan shared that basketball has been a longstanding element of his academic schedule, and his relationship with coaches has been positively influential on his college trajectory. Coaches, he believed, had a great way of showing the players they cared. Jordan shared that his experience with teachers was not always so caring and when asked about those relationships that he considered unsupportive, he shared:

> The teachers I don't rock with, the reason why I don't rock with them is they don't really care about the students. They don't really care about teaching. They just teach because it's their job. I had my math teacher this year, all she did was just notes every single class. We didn't even review them. It's just a new set of notes every class. Are you going to go over them? No. If I ask a question, you could feel she's annoyed. 'Just look at your notes, look at your notes.'

In my study, I found that participants felt a profound connection to their respective schools and curricula when they experienced teachers' care for their overall identity development and grasping of the material. It was a common student experience to not be instructed by permanent teachers for a subject or experience consistent substitute teachers. Regardless, a way to secure student buy-in was to teach with care:

> There's been such a variety of teachers and I think that just having a teacher that genuinely cares about the student and their wellbeing and who they are as a person, definitely changes your relationship and how the student will interact with your class. Just knowing that the teacher cares makes you want to care about the lesson that much more" (Horizon, Frozen Lake Secondary).

Horizon is a brilliant, perceptive, and hyper-involved student. Although he was a sophomore at the time of the individual interview, Horizon has long been familiar with C-CAP programming due to the involvement of an older brother who was both a participant and mentor for the program. Unique to Horizon is his precocious understanding of race and class inequality, especially the ways it appeared on his high school campus. But regardless of any negative experiences, Horizon maintains both a positive outlook on life and a great deal of school pride.

Similar to Horizon, Jeff and Chic, both Northeast High students, shared that their experiences with teachers were much more positive and they were more invested in the material when they felt that teachers cared about them. Jeff is a proud Nigerian student with an ardent dream to go into the medical field. Throughout ROYAL Summer, Jeff brought with him a sense of sternness and youthful professionalism to the program. Voted "most likely to perform surgery while quoting a scripture," it was always clear that Jeff was both focused on his academic and spiritual development.

Conversely, Chic—who is also a Northeast student—was a generous provider of laughs and comedic relief during some of the heavier topics discussed in the C-CAP space. Luckily, several of the jokes cracked by Chic were understood to be genuine and honest responses to the material. When mentors called students to unpack notions of sexism or homophobia, for instance, Chic often said the things that one would imagine are going through many of the students' minds. Playful in nature, but ultimately well-meaning and undoubtedly committed to the program, Chic's mentors considered him most likely to play Fortnite—a wildly popular online video game—while finishing an essay. Jeff especially lauded the efforts of the teachers at his school when he shared, "I'm blessed to say that I haven't been treated unfairly and I also have good teachers at Northeast and good counselors." When asked what he believed made them good teachers, Jeff added:

> They're always checking up on me. They're always [asking me], 'Hey, did you do this assignment?' My counselors are letting me know, 'You need to get your [grades] from this class, [turn in] assignments. So that's why I think that they're doing a good job and they're dedicated, even during this pandemic.

Many students interpreted the constant check-ins from teachers to be reliable acts of care and Northeast High, in particular, received resounding praise from their students in the program. Chic echoed the praises for the teachers at his school. In an individual interview, he shared, "...I love most of my teachers. Most of my teachers are really good, understanding and they'll take time to really help you, even if it's after school…" Unfortunately, not all students in my study had mostly favorable interactions with their teachers and administrators.

Giant is a student who, for one reason or another, you cannot miss or forget. Physically, he is a bit taller with a more athletic build than his peers. However, it's his fervent opinions regarding any topic and his tendency to multitask that make Giant so remarkable. During the program, he attended summer school on another computer and worked an evening job at the hospital. On the weekends, Giant was fully committed to football and his post high school plans include being a doctor—only during the NFL offseason, of course. Being a student at Spring Gardens rendered a teacher experience for Giant that seemed to be in stark contrast with that of Jeff and Chic at Northeast High. Recounting his classroom experiences, Giant shared: " To me, I feel like the teachers are tired…they're tired of [our] complaints because [the pandemic is] affecting them also." Talking with students, it was clear to me that they understood how rampant Zoom fatigue was for everyone in the school. Participants recalled difficulties in several classes due to the teachers spending fewer and fewer hours in front of the screen or being slow to return emails. Therefore, all additional communication from teachers whether it be corrective or affirming translated into genuine concern for their progress and wellbeing. For Jeff, having teachers follow up with him directly about his assignments felt like an intentional investment in his academic success. Jeff understood that the pandemic was a barrier to communication for

many teachers so, during the focus group, he found it necessary to affirm the teachers who were dedicated to teaching and supporting students.

For other participants, I found that the math and English courses were especially trying, which deemed making connections with those instructors all the more important. Jerry shared:

> My math teacher, she would make a week extension with the assignments. [Since] it was a harder chapter that we're learning, or with my English teacher, he was like, 'Oh yeah, just take the test when you're ready.' And so that's been [a] very big help as well.

Attending high school through the pandemic and via online learning was especially [taxing] on student and teacher learning interactions. Participants expressed that experiencing technical difficulties amidst customary miscommunication made learning more challenging for students, though it increased opportunities to make up work. The latter, sometimes combined with additional time issued for learning was interpreted as care to participants. Chic said:

> "...one or two of my teachers [out of] like the seven classes that I had actually been receptive. And if I had a question after class or need help with something, they'll actually help me instead of saying, 'Oh, do it on your own' or 'Ask classmates for help or something.'"

A large part of students' in-school engagement with teachers and curriculum warranted high tolerance for confusion and capacity for working independently. I found that many students reported caring interactions with the teachers and administrators of color on campus. Bruce, a Northeast High student, expressed that "I feel like a lot of the teachers are Latinx and Black… they really do understand the culture of what goes on in the school and the students." Participants articulated that feeling culturally seen and understood by teachers and administrators enhanced their learning environments.

Findings reflect that high expectation, particularly when issued and conveyed by teachers and administrators of color, positively impacts student learning and academic outcomes according to the students. Northeast High is an acclaimed urban school in South Los Angeles that proudly touts a "no-excuses" modus operandi characterized by "increased instructional time, a more rigorous approach to building human capital, more student-level differentiation, frequent use of data to inform instruction, and a rigid culture of high expectations" (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011; Marsh & Noguera, 2018). LR shared:

> I think teachers and staff understand where we grow up in and where the school is placed at in [South LA] but they still set [the] highest expectation for the way you act and their policies are very strict. Because they have these morals and values that they want their students to be raised upon. Not raised, but to follow.

Findings from my study showed that students were particularly enthusiastic about working with teachers and students from their shared race and/or culture.

The reassurance of Black teachers and site leaders often worked to palliate the infrequent notions of racism on their respective high school campuses. Several participants described learning from Black teachers, and amongst Black male peers who shared similar academic goals, to be a particularly rewarding element of the C-CAP interaction. Jah is a junior who shared that he often feels like he is much more mature than his peers. When I met him as a ninth grader at Deer River High, his backpack was a briefcase and the C-CAP informational meeting felt more like a job interview. Jah is a huge volleyball enthusiast and will tell anyone listening that his dream school is UCA. While he was raised by his grandparents, by the time of his individual interview, he moved to Las Vegas to help his biological mother raise his little brother and attended school there. Jah shared that participating in C-CAP gave him a much-needed

experience of being around peers whom he deemed to have equally as much maturity and promise: “I think just being around people who looked like me, it was definitely something that helped a lot. It made everything way better.”

For Horizon C-CAP became a safe haven away from the issues that he would usually face in his school and the world beyond. Reflecting on his experience he shared:

> …regardless of all the BS that may be going on or all the troubles I may be having... It's a great environment to be in and I know that of course with school, everything's not going to be the same way it was in that program, but I just know that [C-CAP] is almost like a sanctuary or like a place that I can go back to if I'm able to keep up my grades and just stay consistent.

Horizon presents an understanding of the aspects of the program, although desirable, will not always be present in his everyday learning environments. The classrooms that he occupies back on his high school campus may not consist of all Black students and peers and the curriculum may not center his experiences. Thus, he envisioned the C-CAP space and interactions as a respite from the complications that he and other Black males face in their schools. Here, Horizon exhibits an acute capacity to persevere through “the BS” of everyday life that is motivated by anticipation to return to the nourishing and affirming interactions in C-CAP.

C-CAP Interaction

C-CAP mentors all approached student participants early on in their ninth-grade year with the opportunity to attend a college preparatory program. Participating in the program was largely catalyzed by students’ aspirations of visiting and potentially living on a college campus. Talk with the average college counselor and she might say that ninth grade is a semester or three too early to speak with students about attending college. However, studies present ninth grade as

a critical juncture in the schooling experience with significant implications for the probability that students attend a four-year university (Neild, 2009). And despite initially knowing little about the program, student participants expressed an ardent desire to participate because it would advance them closer to their dream school, UCA, among other flagship universities. LR recalled his reasoning for participating in the program, having stated that he "wanted to join because UCLA has always been my dream college to attend so, this is a great way that I can help me to that goal." LR's motivation for joining the program resembled that of many other participants. Several students said that they viewed every step of high school as a move towards their ultimate goal of attending college and eagerly looked forward to accessing opportunities that would bring them closer to that goal.

A student's goal to attend college is often informed by family values and parental pressure to attend college and enter a lucrative career. In other scenarios, the nudge to attend college or college access programming is driven or influenced by observing an older sibling's journey through college access opportunities. Such was the case for Jerry, a student at State High, who shared:

> I found out about C-CAP from my older brother when he was in high school. I think they also went to his school as well, and I saw how the program really helped him find his college. So, I wanted to do the program also so that I could find my own college as well.

Horizon echoed Jerry's sentiments regarding the reason he joined C-CAP:

> I learned about the First Day program through my brother because my brother… just graduated from UCLA and also he did the three-week program. And so once my mother and my brother told me about it, I became interested.

Horizon described his interest as tied to his full grasp of First Day scope into the academic and personal lives of its participants through his older brother's participation in the program. Horizon's perspective highlighted the role of family and accessing clear examples of college access. Whereas LR bought into the program because of its proximity to flagship university UCA, Jerry and Horizon's motivation to join the program was familial and due to a close account of the program's effectiveness. For all three participants, joining C-CAP meant taking advantage of an opportunity to carve out their own experience in college access that would ultimately materialize their aspirations of getting to a college campus.

Exploring the reasons why students decided to participate in First Day often spoke to what students sought to gain from the program and subsequently attending college. For Giant, C-CAP's programmatic elements and incentives garnered his initial interest. Recounting the first meeting he had with a First Day mentor, he stated:

> …it's actually people like me, [Black, African male.] So, I was like, "Wow, wow. That's good. I'll definitely sign up. [The mentor] was like there is a scholarship [of] $20,000.00 scholarship. I was like, "Wow, that's good. And it's completely free!

Giant expressed that crucial motivators of participating in First Day was its focus on supporting Black males and the scholarship component. In light of the fact financial insecurity is often a barrier to college access, C-CAP offers a $20,000 scholarship for participants who were accepted to attend UCLA after high school. It was crucial that his school's assigned First Day mentor mentioned many of the program's key incentives to Giant because student buy-in is imperative to sustaining engagement from students. Giant also illuminated how essential it is for students to believe they will gain from the program in order to participate. For Tre, the program's writing component was a major catalyst for his participation. He noted:

> I was told it would help me academically, especially in some of my trouble subjects. I'm pretty sure they said they had math and an English workshop there. And I was interested, me and my parents were interested in the English workshops there because that was my most troublesome subject.

I found that the additional instruction hours within the college prep space served to boost students' confidence in their classes. This was especially the case in classes students struggled with understanding the content and subsequently performing on tests and other forms of assessments.

In the event that students did not receive nudges from their parents or were not incentivized by the program's components, it was my interpretation that a trusted school official would essentially instruct the student to engage in the program. Participants voiced that in some instances a counselor made the decision to participate for them. Polk, a student at Eureka High, had an immensely active and involved college counselor, and deferred to his judgment regarding his participation:

> I learned about [First Day] because I guess there are some C-CAP mentors that went to my school and told my counselor to talk to any freshmen that were ready for the [ROYAL program]. So, he put us in a class and told us about it. And I decided to sign up for it because my counselor made me. He didn't make me, but he told me that, "It's the best for you, so you need to sign up for it."

Polk also stated that the solid relationship he shared with his counselor engendered trust that the counselor had his best interest at heart on his journey to pursuing higher education. Additionally, he said he applied to C-CAP simply because his counselor told him that he should. Several participants detailed dynamics with teachers and counselors in which the adult was assumed to

know best, thus participants deferred to them for every aspect of college access. Trusting relationships with the adults on their respective campuses helped students overcome information barriers that may have prevented them from interacting with college access programs like C-CAP. Further, Polk, like other students, detailed interactions with teachers and counselors that spoke to the impact schools have on students' college aspirations, affinity to college, and their perceived barriers to get there.

A crucial directive of the C-CAP mentors was to assist the teachers and counselors on high schools campuses in their efforts to prepare Black male students for college. Although interaction in the program should have served as a complement to the college access present at students' schools, Black male students are more likely to attend schools that have insufficient college readiness support. In the event the teachers and counselors students were unsuccessful in supporting students, the mentors served as pseudo-teachers and college counselors. C-CAP mentors stepped in to provide tutorial resources and college information that was intended to fill the information and opportunity gap. Despite it being the schools' role to properly support students in their journey to education, the weight of the school's endorsement in C-CAP was clearly expressed in their experiences. The participating sites' buy-in to First Day proved influential in garnering students' interaction in the program. My findings showed that the endorsement of the program fanned the flames of students' college aspirations and the subsequent participation in C-CAP helped students mount barriers to higher education caused by lack of information. Another barrier to college for students that was addressed in their C-CAP interactions was their perceptions of race and the impact it had on their learning environments.

Racialized and Gendered Experiences

With RQ1, I sought to understand participants' college aspirations and perceived barriers across school sites. My findings showed that students' race-based and gendered experiences often had a varying impact on students' connection to school and college; the race and gendered experiences served a clear barrier for some participants and a motivating hurdle for others. Participants recalled encounters with teachers and administrators that they perceived as different from non-Black students. Polk said that his racially diverse high school was a more affirming environment than his mostly white middle school. Additionally, Polk shared that he felt singled out and unfairly reprimanded when at his former school:

> In middle school, I went to a mostly white school. And then I had a bunch of white friends and I would be the only black kid around them. And we'll play fight. So anytime we'll play fight or something or roughhouse or something, the other white administrator would always come get us in trouble, put me in detention, even though we were just playing. So, I think that affected me, kind of, but now that I go to a more normal school with people that look like me, I think it's better, not as much administrators that are targeting me out.

Polk realized that although he and his friends were playing, white administrators labeled him the aggressor, and only he received disciplinary action. Even then, he stated that it may have had an impact on him. Polk was reluctant to label his encounter as a blatant act of racial discrimination or caused by the gendered stereotypes placed on him by his school's white administration. However, it is important to note in Polk's account that he saw his current school, one with more people of color, as normal. Alluding to being the only Black male in a school environment as an abnormal experience, he ultimately identifies his experience as a counter-narrative. Many of the participants in my study, like Polk, attended high schools that were predominantly Black and

Latinx and thus were more likely to attend inequitably funded schools that historically underprepared students of color for matriculation into college. Regardless of the resources available at their high schools, Black males have comparable, if not higher, aspiration rates to attend college; however, they more often aspire to attend a Predominantly or Historically white institution (PwI/HwI). Despite the ambition of the students in my study, the prospect of being one of few Black males on campus, in a sea of white students, was both daunting and discouraging due to the unique barriers that understanding may await them on those campuses. According to Brooks et al., (2012) Black males experience lower academic outcomes on PwI campuses due to a disconnection from the campus. And Williams (2017) found that through mentoring programs, Black males are empowered to process the racial and gendered discrimination that they face while on those campuses.

Participants in my study shared that they often found themselves needing to adapt to learning environments that were abnormal and unsupportive of their unique needs. LR shared a similar experience to Polk's that spoke to his experience with teachers and administrators: "I feel like that racism has affected my experiences as a whole because... I feel like some teachers or just people in general, they don't give everybody a chance." Students conveyed that they felt like they were immediately up against unfair odds as soon as they stepped into a classroom. The students perceived prejudice in their interactions with teachers that they believed, albeit with uncertainty, was due to their appearance as Black males. Giant shared an anecdote in which a teacher graded him in what he considered a harsher manner than his counterparts: "I was thinking like, 'Is it because I'm Black?' I don't know because he's white. 'What's going on? What's really going on?" However, many participants did not attribute such divergence in their

experiences from non-Black male peers to race specifically. Giant went on to share more about his process, discerning why he might have perceived unfair treatment from teachers:

> No I feel basically, if you look at me...Without me saying anything, my physique, my everything, it's—Let me just put it this way, let me put [sic] a plain. My physique, everything looks intimidating. That's first of all. I'm 6'1 and I work out a lot.

Giant added, referring to a teacher that he felt had an issue with him:

> I think she was viewing me differently without me even doing much. I don't go talk in the class, I don't do anything, I just do my work and she was really [acts] different with me and I'm like, 'Man I'm completely the opposite.'

For Giant, entering his teacher's classroom was like entering a battleground. Feeling like he was up against preconceived and inaccurate notions about his ego and bravado, Giant adapted to the classroom environment in a way that resulted in lessened participation and engagement. The experience of feeling misunderstood by the leader of the classroom was certainly a perceived barrier for Giant. Other participants also shared that in many instances, they could see that their physical appearance directly impacted how adults in their schooling environment interacted with them. Giant, who decided on his own pseudonym, communicated a profound understanding of double consciousness (DuBois, 1903), in which he had to maintain an understanding of how the world saw him versus how he saw himself. Moreover, I presumed that Giant normalized the idea that teachers or adults perceived him as intimidating and adapted his learning behavior to navigate this reality. Similarly, Polk, a student at Eureka High, shared that the times he was singled out by teachers and administrators were likely due to his larger, physical stature. We discussed whether he believed he was ever treated unfairly based on race, and he shared:

> Yeah. I'm not always the calmest in the class. I don't know. I've been treated unfairly since middle school. Sometimes I would get picked on because I'm a bigger kid. So if I'm talking or on my phone, I'll usually be the one that gets picked on in the class. That's just life for me...

Polk and Giant both said that they experienced discrimination based on their physical appearance and, interestingly, both conveyed a sense of what I interpreted as acquiescence. Polk's "that's just life for me" expressed deep processing and adaptation in response to racial microaggressions that were not uncommon for Black males in school.

Students also described unfair, racialized engagements with teachers or adults that they believed stifled their academic achievement. Horizon, a Frozen Lake Secondary student, communicated that there were times when he felt the only factor that mattered to teachers was the color of his skin:

> I was being judged by some teachers that wasn't academic. So, they weren't judging me by my grades or anything like that. Maybe like even the color of my skin, who I was as a person. And so, because of that, they weren't able to see me of my fullest potential.

Horizon mentioned that the prejudice he experienced from teachers prevented his instructors from seeing him holistically. He noted the critical role of teacher perception and how stigmas and stereotypes of Black males in the classroom stifled his academic achievement and personal development. Students expressed feeling pressure to perform a level of decorum while on campus that was repressive. However, it was often Black teachers who seemed to have a better understanding of students' energies and struggles. This understanding from Black students provided a sense of comfort for many students. Horizon spoke about the mitigating factor of Black teachers:

> I think racism definitely has impacted my school or me and my peers, definitely, interactions with school. So, I can definitely say that I think in a more positive way being at Frozen Lake Secondary we also see a lot more teachers of our same ethnicity or same race. So in a positive way makes the assignment, or their struggles much more relatable, which can also just lead to just being more comfortable in a class. You don't have to be so tense all the time, or you don't have to think about changing who you are maybe to fit the standards. And I can definitely say there's been trouble like that in the past and I believe that me and my peers have all had a fair share of encounters with maybe unfairness or racism.

Who doesn't want to be accepted for who they are? Whenever Horizon did not feel the need to code switch or stifle his personality (*i.e.* Blackness), it improved the dynamic of his learning experience.

While participants had largely grown accustomed to the official and unstated rules of the classroom and teacher interaction, they shared that they were much more comfortable when the teacher and learning environment were more culturally affirming. One student shared:

> When a school is representing your culture, you feel a sense of pride within yourself. You feel like, "I'm in a community where people love me, where they care for me, and where they have respect for me." When you're not in the space like that, you feel secluded and you feel lonely, different. And it's not bad to be different or to sometimes be alone, but you shouldn't feel like that all throughout your high school. (LR, Northeast High)

So often, Black males are compelled to make themselves less than they are—physically and intellectually smaller, vocally quieter, more independent (read: requiring less support), less playful (read: more mature) or all of the above. In my study, I found that the call to be—or at

least act—more mature was a prevalent result of unfair and racialized experiences. Much like Polk and Horizon mentioned, students shared that if they did not present themselves as uncharacteristically calm or mature (for a high school student), they risked not being supported in assessing academic opportunities or being taken seriously by teachers. Jordan spoke to the silent requirement for Black boys to perform a sense of solemnity when interacting with certain teachers:

> I have to act more, not proper Black, act more serious in a way, because not all teachers take Black students serious. So when they find or see someone, when you see a Black kid who really wants to learn, then that's when they all put an effort. But most teachers don't really care…if they see that I'm just doing my own thing [and] I don't really care about what they're saying, They're not going to care about me.

Jordan felt that he had to appear more studious and engaged than his white counterparts in his school. He expressed that if he did not clearly convey to teachers that his education was a priority to him then he would not have received any guidance or care from them. Feeling that instructors are only invested in students if they are high performing is in many ways disheartening for students, regardless of their academic prowess. Regardless of the effort put forth, the white student in Jordan's class received tutelage and support from the teacher. The teacher followed up several times and would not let the student fail, Jordan said. However, the Black student was left to fend for himself since he did not appear to be engaged in the classroom. Several participants described interactions between teachers and their peers that they found to be discouraging and indicative of what may happen to them if their grades fell or they were less active in education programs. Jordan added:

> There's this [white] girl in my class or whatever, this semester, she didn't do anything,

> did not turn one assignment but the teacher was still on her talking about, do this, do this, do [your] assignments, do whatever…But another kid, he was Black. He didn't speak, not once turn in [an] assignment. It felt like he wasn't in the class…The teacher just didn't give him the time of day.

The common cultural adage comes to mind: "Black folks have to work twice as hard to get half as much as white folks." Jordan's perspective highlights that this might be the disparaging reality for some Black students regarding resources and attention from teachers.

Black students have to be noticeably as active as non-Black students to get half the attention. Some participants saw unfair treatment as a call to work harder to ensure that they were noticed and rewarded. Jeff, a student at Northeast, expressed that he was aware of the inequities he faced as a young Black male and felt motivated by them, sharing:

> My race has impacted me in the sense of being more dedicated to working hard because I know there are some forces against me, institutional racism that obviously doesn't benefit us. So it really influences me to work harder. That's what I would say. It resonates with me a lot. And I still see injustice in America. So yeah, just really making me want to work harder and strive to be greater and possibly help better people who are at lower levels in the education system, have a chance to have a true education instead of having to go to prison or have a low-wage job.

Jeff was well aware of systemic racial inequities and saw them as signals to work harder, much in alignment with the aforementioned adage. It appeared to me that Jeff alluded to the negative outcomes resulting from high school attrition that disproportionately impact Black males, for example—incarceration and lower-paying jobs.

Students conveyed how they adapted to the conditions of their schools and teacher or administrator interactions. Jerry shared a similar sentiment, when he stated, “because of my race, people would expect a bit more from me, or they'll say ‘because you're a specific ethnicity you should be able to this and that.’ It indirectly pushed me to do better.” He felt called to perform better, in school in light of potential barriers to higher education. Both Jeff and Jerry understood it would take additional effort to combat stereotypes and stigmas around their academic abilities. Other participants expressed another common adaptation to unfair expectations and conditions to explain away potential instances of racism. Negative media discourse and social perceptions of Black males often spill over into schools and impact the ways teachers of Black males interact with them. Teachers’ racialized and gendered perspectives of Black males cause them to misinterpret students’ behaviors and actions as disruptive or threatening which result in “discipline that is often unnecessary, unfair, and in many cases, harsher for Black boys than it would be for their White counterparts” (Allen, 2014, p. 211). The increased discipline results in less time in the classroom and disrupts students’ college trajectory. To my surprise, students expressed a belief that race was rarely the sole impetus for their unfair treatment. In fact, it was a common practice for the students in my study to extenuate instances of racism, more specifically antiblackness, and minimize microaggressions. Honoring notions of unfair treatment as race-based means they are based on characteristics that are beyond their control and permanent, which would be utterly maddening. It is much more appealing to senses to blame clothing, attitude, hairstyle, etc. (things that are clearly markers of race) than blame race itself. This practice is a key component of their genius adaptation, inspiring the title of my dissertation.

Several participants were altogether reluctant to label instances of prejudice as racist or credit occurrences of ostracism to racial discrimination. Some students proclaimed that they had

never experienced racism at all, while others attributed seemingly unfair treatment to other aspects of their identities. Jah attributed his being treated differently than his peers to not being from the area when he shared:

> Yeah. I mean, I don't think me being at the school I'm currently at, unfortunately, I get looks and I get stares and stuff like that, but I don't think because I'm Black or anything like that. I think it's just because I'm from LA. I think you can tell the difference from the way I dress and talk and compared to what they used to…

Undoubtedly, I think that being singled out because one is the new kid from out of town is much more palatable for Jah than grappling with being singled out primarily due to race. For Jerry, the differential treatment came from a counselor who placed him in a less competitive course than his Asian friend:

> One of my counselors, I would like to assume that maybe she didn't do it on purpose, but I remember last time, every spring semester we would go and request our classes, and I had requested to be in a higher math class, in Math II. I ended up in Math I instead. One of my Asian friends who also wanted to be in Math II with me, they got put ahead. I was just wondering why. Maybe there was so much space in there, but at the same time, I went to her first...So, I don't know what could have happened. I'm pretty sure it wasn't about grades because I also went to my teacher, to see if I could get a recommendation as well. I hope that it wasn't on purpose.

Another barrier to participants' college pursuit is lower expectations from teachers that result in underrepresentation in gifted and college preparatory courses (Allen, 2013b; Allen, 2014). During his account of the interaction with the counselor, who may or may not have been treating him unfairly due to his race, Jerry audibly processed possible reasons for being placed in a less

rigorous course than his Asian friend. He shared that he had competitive grades to qualify for the course, and even considered the class's capacity before concluding that he asked before his friend so if there was a space issue, he should have been awarded the spot. Even as he exhausted all conceivable reasons for being placed in the less competitive course, he expressed hope that his exclusion was not intentional.

Much like Jah, Jerry explained away his differential treatment in hopes that all things were fair. It appeared to me that participants conveyed a covert belief in meritocracy—if any student performs well in class and life then teachers and counselors will support and award students like Jah and Jerry. Bruce, a student at Northeast High, shared, "Honestly, I don't think my counselors or teachers would ever treat me unfairly because I guess I'm a good student." Black males are not a monolithic group so their academic prowess, energy levels, and range of enthusiasm to participate in class all vary greatly. Moreover, there are different versions of academic engagement and success—in other words, the way that one student exhibits maximum effort may present in ways divergent from another student's same level of effort. Regardless, the amount of support students receive being contingent on their engagement in the course—especially when so many participants do not feel comfortable participating in class—is wrong and needs repair.

The goal of the First Day and ROYAL Summer program was ultimately to provide the students with intentional support designed to mitigate any perceived barriers. Participants expressed positive interactions with C-CAP mentors and instructors during the summer programming that is discussed in the third section of this chapter. They described the C-CAP engagement as fun, informative, supportive, and transformative. The following section details their experiences.

Theme 2: The Role of School and University Partnerships

Students describe the interactions between their schools and partnership programs that furthered their understanding of admissions requirements and college culture.

In the findings from the focus group and interview data, participants described several interactions with adults at their school that was impactful on their academic outcomes and college readiness. Participants shared their experiences discussing A-G requirements, college knowledge, and college counseling while at school. The level of attention and tutelage regarding the three aforementioned topics varied by site and student. In the case that students perceived a lack of support, they shared about their experience in C-CAP and unpacked the ways the undergraduate mentors stepped in to aid their pursuit of education. Students also expressed that elements of ROYAL summer programming built on the instruction they received in the academic year and helped circumnavigate the educational inequities in public schools in urban contexts. The academic year and summer mentoring, the math course, the writing course, STAND activities, online community building, and engagement activities were all components of the C-CAP and ROYAL programming that championed Black life and sought to increase the postsecondary options available to students—starting with, but not limited to, attending college.

A-G Requirements

A majority of the participants professed a desire or intention to attend college and all of them conveyed they had heard of A-G requirements (A-G), but far fewer knew what they consisted of and their understanding of the courses entailed varied vastly. Implicit in the grasping of A-G requirements is knowing the first step of the college application. Students cannot gain admittance to several competitive four-year colleges or universities without the fulfillment of A-

G requirements. A-G courses are a sequence of courses that students must complete in order to convey aptness for the college curriculum and be eligible for college admission.

For Giant, the A-G requirements rang a bell but they still escaped him. When asked how familiar he was with the requirements, Giant stated, “I’m still mixed up in that there honestly. I feel like I know but I feel like I don’t know… people be talking about it, but I still don’t have a clear picture about what…A-G requirements [are].” Horizon conveyed a similar sentiment, and he noted that he knew the requirements but he was no expert. When I asked how he knew them, he said, “I learned [about] the [A-G] requirements... originally learned them in ninth grade, when my counselor…went through the A through G requirements with all the ninth-grade students and gave us handouts and worksheets specifically saying which ones are which.” Horizon shared how his understanding of the requirements illuminated the role that schools and college counselors play in college and career readiness.

Hines et al., (2019) argue that school counselors are key in fostering college and career readiness for students through their ability to provide crucial information to help students make decisions regarding their curriculum. In addition to instructing students on which courses to take, drop, or re-take, counselors retain the right to select the courses for students, often without their input. The rigor, or lack thereof, in students’ schedules could all be determined by their counselor. Participants’ experiences with A-G requirements and their understanding of the college readiness curriculum inspired an investigation of the role of counselors and teachers in the pursuit of higher education.

College Counseling

The ROYAL Summer program was designed as an early action, interventive program that excited participants about the innumerable options available to those who performed well in

high school. The program's approach was driven by another adage common in many Black households: "Do what you have to do now so that you can do what you want to do later." As such, the First Day started its facilitation by reviewing A-G requirements with all participants during the academic and summer mentoring. Many participants attributed their knowledge of A-G requirements to their engagement with First Day mentors. One student expressed, "I didn't know much [about] the [A-G] requirements initially. So, when I came into the C-CAP program, the mentors instructed us to go through it and I realized it's something you need… You need it to get into college" (Giant, Spring Gardens High).

Participants also expressed that their schools had mentioned college entrance requirements or even postered them in high-traffic spots across campus but it was only the C-CAP programming that caused them to grasp their importance. Tre, a student at Laguna High, shared, "I am somewhat familiar with the A-G requirements. I've been told them many times before and being in this program really just made me know even more." There is nothing catchy or flashy about the requirements that might help students remember them, but they were reiterated incessantly throughout the program to ensure that students had a clear road map to high school completion and college eligibility. Jordan shared:

> C-CAP taught us from the start, A-G requirements and the classes I need to take to get into those schools. So when there was a class I was put in that I didn't need to be in, then I can [be] like, "Okay, I don't need this class. I can take another class that's going to actually count towards something."

C-CAP facilitation encouraged mastery of requirements and championed constant communication with counselors in charge of selecting the courses. When asked how he came to know the requirements decisively, LR stated:

> Oh, C-CAP. The ROYAL summer program, of course. One week of A-G requirements talk constantly. It's stuck in your brain. And I'm constantly reminded of what classes should be taken. And if I don't have these classes, that [sic] I need to talk to my counselor.

Conversations between participants and mentors helped students gain insight on ways to best navigate high school and provided a chance to envision themselves as undergraduate students. An accessible way for them to experience a glimpse of such rigor on their campus and for free was signing up for Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses to earn college credit.

AP/Honors Courses

Students expressed an understanding that enrollment and performance in college readiness curricula, such as Advanced Placement and honors courses, were directly correlated with student competitive eligibility for college. Although approximately half of the participants were enrolled in AP/Honors courses after their ninth-grade year, participants were compelled to take AP courses in order to challenge themselves for college. Entry, however, was not guaranteed and it was somewhat common for students to avoid AP courses due to their reputations of immense difficulty. LR shared, "I was telling myself, 'AP, it's super tough, super hard. I'm not mentally ready. I'm not up for that challenge.'" Students who experienced AP classes during their ninth-grade year described encountering difficulty with the rigor and the pace of the course. One student shared:

> Going into ninth grade, I had a choice of starting off with honors world geography or doing AP human geography. And I went [the AP course] because I know that more intense classes look good, right? But it was just extremely hard, I couldn't bear it for those two weeks." (Bruce, Northeast High)

Tre, a student at Laguna High, expressed feelings of unpreparedness as a reason for not enrolling: “I’ve got to work up to that.” Giant listed the pandemic and virtual learning as culprits for his less than favorable performance in AP courses:

> So far, my AP classes are going well. The previous ones wasn't... It was trash. It was. That's why I said the pandemic wasn't good. Online learning wasn't good for some kind of courses and AP classes was one of them…I had like [two or three] AP classes and I just completely left one [to] focus on [another] because the work was too much and the distraction on everything was too much. I had to just do, not my best but do the minimum I could do for one, and the other one I know I failed woefully.

Although students were up to the challenge, they were not always met with the appropriate aid or circumstances for AP courses by teachers. During online learning, participants reported needing intentional support from their instructors in order to successfully manage the increased workload and rigor, yet they inconsistently received sufficient assistance. While some students lauded their teachers’ ability to respond promptly and teach effectively, other participants shared that Zoom fatigue and other technical difficulties often limited the amount of virtual interactions they had with their teachers—especially outside of class time. In their focus groups, students expressed a desire to communicate with teachers and wished they could work with them more often to stay up-to-date with their assignments and course learning. When they were unable to connect with their teachers for help, they reached out to express their needs and direct their questions to C-CAP mentors. In the event that the mentors were unable to supplement the support of teachers, they counseled students on ways to adapt their course plan in order to stay competitively eligible and on track to college. Students shared that the C-CAP program was

particularly influential by way of presenting new options for college and career pathways and by broadening their college knowledge overall.

College Knowledge

Research studies show that the more information about college a student possesses, the more likely they are to attend college (Perna, 2004). According to Vargas (2004), historically underrepresented students do not organically receive information about college because they disproportionately derive from families and households with little to no information about the college experience. Those students must rely on their schools for college knowledge, which is immediately problematic since they are more likely to attend under-resourced schools with limited personnel for college guidance. And according to Bell et al., (2009) ninth-graders typically rely almost exclusively on obtaining information about college from family and friends. In my study, I found that most participants felt comfortable reaching out to their counselors for information about college, however, the First Day program served as an additional, consistent, and reliable source of college information. When Polk, a student at Eureka High, reflected on whether First Day impacted what he knew about college, he responded:

> Oh, that's all it did! That's not all it did, but that's what mainly stuck in my brain. Because they would tell us how much college costs, what we had to do to join C-CAP. It gave me a lot of college advice and we talked to people that actually are in C-CAP and go to UCLA through this.

After meeting with C-CAP mentors, it seemed participants expressed an enhanced understanding of the components of college and had a clearer concept of what subject they might want to major in upon being admitted. One student stated,

> After C-CAP, I actually know the requirements to going to college and like specific majors that I want to do and that I would probably need to get a [Masters] in civil engineering if I would want to do certain projects or anything. (Tre, Laguna High)

My study found that the program component which grouped participants with Black undergraduate mentors—many of whom graduated from the very same high schools that participants attended—provided students a much-appreciated vision of what to look forward to once they enrolled in college. Horizon, a student at Frozen Lake Secondary, described the impact of First Day mentoring:

> ROYAL Summer definitely enlightened me about effects about college because after having mentors going through the same experience or have been through the same experience, just knowing that college is not this huge, unknown battleground I'm going to be walking into, but receiving information that may just enlighten my knowledge about what I'm going to be going into and what I'm going to be crossing into has definitely improved my whole outlook on college as a whole.

In focus group and interview data, participants identified the relationships with mentors as notably rewarding and informative.

The knowledge exchange from mentor-to-mentee, students described, was likely responsible for considerable growth in their racial identity development and world view. LR shared that "[mentors] provided me [with] different values and virtues that I never [had about] the world...[ROYAL Summer] just gave me more knowledge of the world, and how I can succeed while being a Black man, or a Black youth." Findings showed that conversations between mentors and mentees were also sites for career pathway information and planning. Participants credited First Day programming for simplifying the road map to their desired

professions. When asked how his participation influenced his college knowledge, Jah, a student at Deer River High, stated,

> ...a lot of the discussions that us kids and the mentors had, we talked about jobs and stuff like that and they gave us some insight and some advice to help us on our path...It made figuring out what career I want and when I want to be in that career… 10 times easier.

My study found that intentional adult relationships with students, e.g., mentor and mentee interaction and the success panel component, impacted students' proximity to attending college and their aspired careers. Many of the adults in the C-CAP program who interacted with students proved to be informative models and possibility markers for students. Mentors and models worked to be assuring and affirming in their interactions. Students expressed that another large part of their identity development derived from their experience in ROYAL summer program's culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum. Students engaged in math, writing, and STAND activities—all led by Black instructors. Participants gave accounts describing the significant impact of the coursework on their academic trajectories.

Theme 3: Cacti in the Classroom

The third finding section and the title of my dissertation is Cacti in the Classroom. I created the phrase to further the concept of Tupac's rose that grew from concrete. I sought to push the discourse beyond such a limited perception of beauty and the imagery of only one person surmounting the obstacles and emerging successful and prosperous. In this section, I unpack findings that present students' genius ability to adapt and preserve the things that matter most to them; the ways students adapt to learning environments to protect themselves. Cactus plants actively retain water to survive in times of drought and develop spines to prevent loss. Similarly, many of the participants adapted in ways that may have been misunderstood but were

actually adaptations intended to help them persist in spite of school stakeholders or classrooms that mean them harm.

Unpacking students' coping strategies and identity building

At the heart of this study was a desire to explore ways to enrich educational experiences and college preparation for Black males. Also, I engaged a critical race lens because I had hoped my research would investigate the impact race might have on their education journey and subsequent life outcomes. I wanted this study to explore how their schools and educational resources impacted their desire to attend and graduate from college. And admittedly, I only considered college as a harbinger of increased access to academic, financial, and socio-emotional resources. I found enriched connections to Black professionals, increased proximity to positive peer relationships, and increased likelihood for higher incomes most often led to long-lasting and fulfilling lives. In both the focus group and interview data, I asked participants about instances of race and racism in their schools. Several students presented the experiences with uncertainty, while others presented them as minimal or insignificant. When I asked participants if they felt the ROYAL Summer program (i.e., early access programming) was pivotal for Black males, however, they answered in the affirmative in light of historical, race-based, and gendered disadvantages that they are up against. The data provided insight on students' perceptions of race and racism working in the world, although mainly as a phenomenon happening outside of them, with other Black males. They described their connections with the Black undergraduate C-CAP mentors as influential and affirming. Evident in the findings was that the program's intentional focus on Black males proved to increase students' sense of belonging in academia.

This study found that many of the participants lifted up the programmatic contributions of the ROYAL Summer program for being a space that affirmed and encouraged them in ways

that were not always present in their in-school engagement with teachers and other adults. Students described components of the program that were remarkably engaging and fun, and thus fostered their zealous participation. Moreover, students described why intentional, Black male-centered college access programs are important in light of this population's unique barriers to higher education.

Impact of ROYAL Summer and C-CAP

Students reflected on their participation in the ROYAL summer program and C-CAP engagement, sharing that instructors and class activities worked to create an enriching academic experience that was unique, affirming, and necessary to their pursuit of education as young Black males. The program provided life skills and encouraged students to engage in complementing college access opportunities. Horizon reflected on his experience in the weeklong, Black male-centered programming and shared:

> My experience in ROYAL Summer…definitely made my high school experience much more positive because I knew that I had something after learning a series of skills there, but more than anything I think that just knowing that I did something outside of school that was school related definitely helped my motivation in high school. So it's almost like I never thought I would be able to do a program that requires me to do work. It required me to fulfill requirements and send in and apply. I never thought I would do a program like that. So maybe I can do more programs like that.

This study found that students identified the program as having had a positive impact on the rest of their time in high school; this impact was initiated when they applied.

In order to participate in the program, students had to submit an application that required them to write three admission essays of up to 250 words each. The program then required them

to spend their time and complete work outside of school hours and during their summers. Horizon's perspective spoke to the paradigm shift that occurred for many participants. Before the program, doing more school work and being in an academic space outside of the state-mandated academic year seemed counterintuitive to many participants. During the ROYAL summer, students were challenged by a college preparatory curriculum immediately following their ninth-grade year, which helped them create effective work habits for transitioning into more advanced high school coursework. Transitioning from middle school to high school is especially trying for adolescent Black males (Spencer, 2006). Rock, a student at Westside High, stated,

> I think First Day definitely sort of got me ready for the high school load. Because I would say my school has middle and high school and I think it definitely gets more challenging when you get into the high school side of it. And I think the ROYAL program helped better prepare me for that.

Participation in the program championed extracurricular activities, academic and recreational, and doing beyond the bare minimum.

Many students expressed that the program's facilitation helped them prioritize their studies, inviting them to invest more effort and focus on their goals of education attainment. Polk from Eureka High shared his experience with ROYAL programming when he stated, "It's going to make me go into high school more serious than last year because… I wasn't really focused. I would just barely just try to get a C. So this year, I'm going to just go in more prepared and knowing my goals." Jordan from Water Falls High added:

> This program taught me that…to get into college, I definitely do need to try. And I've never struggled academically. Just that second semester, I kind of started slipping off. I wasn't focused as much. Then [ROYAL Summer] showed me that I have to be focused

> and…the result of all that work and [suffering] and sacrifices, it's going to be worth it…Also, it [took] me…through the process of getting into college.

In both the focus group and interview data, participants highlighted the program's ability to encourage them to aim higher, dream (bigger), and secure as many options for life post-high school graduation as possible. Tre, a student from Laguna High expressed:

> I think that this program will drastically affect me in high school because it's going to make me go in more seriously to make me want to achieve greater goals and to shoot for even higher goals for myself and to get through high school with flying colors so I can get into any one of the colleges that I so choose.

Students consistently pointed back to elements of the program that beckoned them to raise expectations for themselves, focusing on academic achievement at times. Concerning the program's impact of the program, one student stated:

> I'm always looking too much into the future and sometimes I forget to focus on the now. And so now I'm able to focus on that…I don't see high school as just a stepping stone, but another goal in my life." (Horizon, Frozen Lake Secondary)

Similar to Horizon, Polk also changed his perspective on college due to his engagement in the program.

For Polk, attending college was initially a byproduct of playing the next level of competitive football. After participating in ROYAL Summer he stated, "[ROYAL Summer] got me focused on colleges. If football doesn't work out, I have another option…I'm not only football-based. That is what it also told me. You can still go to colleges with scholarships and stuff. Educational scholarships." Students' engagement in the program allowed them to develop a more comprehensive purview of what was possible after high school. For Polk, athletic

scholarships were considered the main, if not only, route to college, yet many other options were illuminated through participation.

"Made for me": Importance of ROYAL Summer for Black males

Participation in ROYAL Summer has impacted students' sense of belonging in educational settings as well as their understanding of unique barriers to higher education for Black males. The study found that close proximity to Black teachers and mentors aided in racial identity development. When responding to whether they thought the program was important for Black males, Jah noted that he had very many Black teachers throughout his learning trajectory so that immediately was impactful for him. Jah stated:

> I think just having somebody who looks like you to talk to and relate to so much and having, of course, black teachers and stuff like that teach you was a really big change for me because, of course, me growing up where I've grown up or really haven't had any black teachers like that.

The cultural alignment made Jah more comfortable sharing his experience and engaging with adults in the program.

Giant described his initial meeting with a C-CAP mentor and shared his perspective on the necessity of the program. When he heard the purpose of the program was to support young Black males with early college access and a connection to UCLA, he stated, "'[I said,] Damn you're talking to me. That's me.' Everything matched. I really wanted to be part of it." Giant then added:

> You can vent to who you want, you can vent how you feel. It's a good thing to be around not just guys, not just men, but Black men. So, it's a good thing to be around people you

> feel even with, you feel the same, not intimidated by the color or anything. You feel exactly who you want to be.

Giant shared that the focus on Black males piqued his interest and the learning environments felt safe enough for him to speak freely and vent with his peers. The shared cultural experience between Black males helped him develop his identity. Moreover, the space served as a brief respite from the all-too-common racial prejudice present in educational spaces. Jah was particularly impacted by the prevalence of the program's discussion topics, and shared that "some of the conversations we had, I would never expect to have a very deep conversation about politics or racism or anything that with somebody my age because I never really had that experience." ROYAL Summer also provided him with a space to speak freely and connect with peers on topics that he previously would reserve for only conversing with adults.

ROYAL Summer participants shared that the virtual facilitation was transformative, engaging, and ironically fun. Participants described interactions in ROYAL summer that provided them with a favorable counter-narrative to the stories and tropes they saw affiliated with Black men on TV and on social media. Horizon spoke to the importance of receiving possibility markers as a result of participating:

> I think programs like Day One are important for Black men. The reason why is because just seeing people of your same ethnicity, especially like with all the stuff you may see on TV and how we're incriminated and how we're shown on public media. I can definitely say that just seeing people who are on the right path and have already made their way, are walking path of success definitely changes your own views of success. It'll make you want to succeed, which is something that I think we tend to forget that we have the ability

> to do so. I feel like just having that ability just to see the future and to see people of the future will definitely change your outlook on who you are as a person and how your future may be.

Horizon stated that his involvement in the ROYAL Summer program provided him with positive role models that reminded him of his potential and helped reshape his personal goals and visions of success.

ROYAL Summer participants made a clear distinction between their engagement levels in the summer program and their academic year courses. Chic shared that the fun aspect of the summer program was important to Black males because it encouraged him to participate and made online learning more bearable:

> One thing that I couldn't have in school is have fun. It was mainly all work, work, work. And when some of the teachers were lecturing, it was just boring. But here, when they lecture, they're actually engaging, and it actually makes me want to be here, makes me want to learn more about the topic. And I really enjoyed the activities that they did, like the [Kahoot!s], the Jeopardy, the name the songs, it was really enjoyable. And I don't really think of any way I can incorporate that into my schooling.

Chic posited that the structure of academic year courses consisted of several assignments and uninspiring lectures; informative as they were, he found his classes boring. When he recounted the summer program, he listed many of the activities included in the academic and recreational facilitation that achieved their intention of keeping students engaged. Chic shared that he could not even imagine courses in schools being that engaging, which spoke volumes about the general atmosphere of his classrooms before participation in ROYAL Summer.

First Day participants also considered ROYAL Summer influential for Black males due to the emotional support they received during the program. In addition to providing information about college, Bruce, a Northeast student, shared that a salient component of the program was its impact on his holistic development. When he responded to the question of what Black males stood to gain from ROYAL Summer, he stated the following:

> College knowledge obviously, mental, physical, emotional health. Because mentors it's not only about academics getting to college, it's also about your wellbeing as well. And the stigma that Black men or Black people as a whole minorities go through that would really get them through, that could really benefit from it.

Bruce found that the First Day mentors were invested in him beyond his academic performance, and sought to nurture his overall wellbeing. He shared that participation served as an additional aid to combatting the preconceived notions and stigmas associated with Black people. LR, fellow Northeast student, added:

> I feel like ROYAL Summer, when you go through the program, it brings this maturity within you with the empowerment that the instructors, mentors that they give you, like the wisdom. I feel like if you're very attentive and you care, then you're going to want a program that benefits you, your health, that benefits your knowledge.

In my analysis, I found that participation in the program garnered a sense of maturity that participants noted as valuable to their academic and life progression. LR shared a sentiment that buy-in to the program benefited his overall health.

Other participants noted the value in the program because it provided students with mentors who served as accountability partners—a consistent person who would constantly push

and encourage them. Jordan conveyed a need for constant positive reinforcement for Black males in light of pressure to engage in less than positive activities when he shared:

> Well, I can't speak for the majority [of Black males], but I'm going to speak on the ones I know about if there aren't people pushing them, telling them what they can do, I feel they will go [astray]. Because I had a friend at a young age, we were playing basketball. We were on the same basketball team. And our coach was like a mentor to us, we were [an] all-Black team. He was a great guy. And I feel like he was keeping us or keeping some players from gang violence and all that. And as soon as we canceled the team [due to COVID closures], we had to end early because he had a better job somewhere. That player started getting into and getting involved and other things like that. So, I feel like we just need that person to push us and tell us that we can do it.

Jordan expressed that programs like ROYAL Summer could be responsible for keeping Black males on the path to college. He astutely shared that a mentor and a constant advocate were invaluable to a student's success and upward trajectory.

Polk, a student at Eureka High, shared the perspective that college access opportunities like ROYAL Summer were particularly important for Black males because they mitigated certain societal trappings: "I think it's more important that Black males get [college access opportunities] because they can go down the wrong direction very easily. They don't realize that you can make 10 times more money going to college than doing anything else." Polk expressed that there was disproportionate societal pressure on Black males to turn away from college in pursuit of wealth and financial security elsewhere. He shared a belief, however, that the most valuable payoff would come from entering a career that required a college degree.

Additionally, Horizon, a student at Frozen Lake Secondary school, shared that the ROYAL Summer environment was one in which he felt supported and thus was no longer afraid to fail. It appeared to me that participation assured him that he would have assistance in the face of adversity. Horizon stated the following:

> ...the ROYAL Summer program or the C-CAP program, in general, will definitely allow you the opportunity to just be you and just be a kid, be a team. It's okay to have struggles or it's okay to run into failures, but just know that in that environment, they're always going to pick you back up and make you continue to walk forward.

For Horizon, the ROYAL Summer program was the safety net that encouraged him to try when he was unsure of himself. The atmosphere affirmed that he had peers and adults on his team who both encouraged him to take more rigorous classes and challenged him to engage more honestly in activities. He was able to do both because he felt someone would be there to pick him up if he ever fell.

Culturally relevant and sustaining summer curriculum

The core curriculum of the ROYAL Summer program consisted of math and writing sessions. The math took a holistic approach by incorporating life lessons and best practices to elevate overall scholarship and the writing course helped students feel more confident about their writing due to the instructors' thoughtful and thorough feedback. Rock, a student at Westside High, described the writing course's impact on his preparedness for college preparatory course work:

> [The writing class] was really helpful. It definitely got me more prepared for my AP English class this year. And I really found [the instructor's material on] how to plan an essay very helpful, because I didn't really used to plan my essays. I kind of used to just

> rush in and now I kind of get everything that I need and think about how I'm going to put it in before I just write it…makes it way easier.

The course detailed the full spectrum of the writing process for students. The instructor started with critical literacy, inviting students to do deep reading and analysis to boost comprehension skills. She then reviewed the fundamentals of brainstorming and essay planning. Later, she provided a guide to outlining and editing essays that students found significant to their improvement as writers. LR described the impact of the course by sharing that working with the writing instructor "exponentially increased my writing skills" before he expressed:

> I find myself comprehending more English works easier and understanding what the writer's thought process was when trying to create a work, or when I'm trying to read something. The message clicks faster whenever my teacher is trying to give me a lecture or an assignment. I will say when writing a lot of words, a lot of big-brain words that I [couldn't] think of in 9th or 10th grade, they come to my head easily now. I just think my writing skills just improved dramatically, or drastically all over.

Horizon, a student at Frozen Lake, spoke the emphasis on the importance of editing your writing when he added:

> We learned a lot of writing, but I'll never forget the one lesson which was just in-depth about editing, just how to edit our sentences. And this is like quick editing, very on the spot, some of the tips you should use, maybe speaking out loud or also using a pen instead of a pencil to mark your edits, just very slight, but little things that could just increase or enhance your ability to edit. That would definitely change just the playing field and then actually after going back to school and using these things I learned it was

> definitely just kind of a change that realizing that the smallest little things can contribute to the biggest problems.

Students described an increase in their reading comprehension, vocabulary, and proofreading skills as a result of the writing curriculum.

For many participants, the writing course served as another resource that helped them feel prepared for college preparatory English classes. Jerry recognized components of the writing curriculum in his subsequent English course and felt like he had gotten ahead during the summer:

> I remember when my teacher brought up [a topic] in class, like two, three weeks ago, I was [like] 'Oh yeah, I already know this...'I had lots of those type of— 'I already know this' type of things after I went to ROYAL Summer. That's been very helpful. It's like getting a little cheat sheet, or [a] little upgrade.

Engaging in the writing course during ROYAL Summer provided a preview of the college curriculum that many participants sought when they decided to participate in the program. Giant expressed that the rigor of his English class at Spring Garden High rendered him complacent in his writing ability. He described his ROYAL Summer writing course experience by stating:

> I was really challenged. I have not been challenged like that. I felt like I was good. The thing is, I felt comfortable…I think this is how the standard is in college…I need to step up the game in my writing skills and not just be comfortable with my high school writing skills."

Participants were introduced to an evaluative standard that they believed to be college level and were energized to raise the caliber of their work.

The courses were designed with the intention to serve as complements to students' academic year curriculum and provide support in areas where they were struggling. Tre, a student at Laguna High, found that to be resonant with his experience and stated,

> One of the most important moments or courses in this program, to me, was the English [curriculum], since that is the one subject that I struggle with. It really helped me because I get to know a lot more with grade breakers and how to write not as formal, but more professional in writing.

Improving the students' writing began with avoiding "grade breakers"– a list of 14 common grammar mistakes and poor style choices writers often make that immediately diminish the quality of their work. Some of the grade breakers listed were: homonym confusion, missing or misspelling words, incorrect subject/verb agreement, and illegible penmanship (for in-class writing). The writing instructor gave students a copy of the list and walked them through an editing process to ensure they avoided each one; it very much became their cheat sheet. For many students, it appeared to me that the writing course served as a mirror and barometer for where their writing skills were and informed them of where they wanted them to be and how they could get there. Several participants did not earn their desired marks on the writing assignments but expressed gratitude for the copious amount of feedback they received and intentional support from the instructor. Horizon, a student at Frozen Lake Secondary, described the personal impact of the course:

> Having a teacher that definitely just consistently stay on you is pretty ruthless with the editing as well is something that definitely enlightened your writing experience as a whole. And just makes you realize that you may not be as bad as a writer as you say you are, and you may not be as good as a writer as you say you are. And you don't have to be

> the best at everything because, honestly, we're only 15 and 16 at that time, the ROYAL Summer Program, I was 14. So it was definitely a thing that I wasn't as good as a writer as I thought I was. But because I knew that I was able to improve and realize that early, which makes me a better writer in the future.

Participants expressed that engaging in college readiness material early on—while they were in their ninth-grade year—generated positive implications for their academic trajectories. The exposure they described had a positive impact on their writing ability regardless of the grades they earned in the course. In addition to the writing course, students also took a math course during summer programming. Similarly, the class was designed to complement math instruction that students might see in their subsequent math courses, however, the instructor prioritized sharing life lessons and best practices for maximizing student potential and positive life outcomes. I collaborated with the instructors to construct the curriculum in a way that would build upon students' proximity to the subject matter— in other words, help them feel more comfortable with learning math. Horizon, a student at Frozen Lake described a shift in his perception of math:

> All I know is that [the instructors] were [such] amazing teachers to make me motivated for math and just giving a whole new outlook to math itself. I just felt like math wasn't this big intimidating wall that has to really just face all the time or constantly in school. It really turned into a wall that I said that I'm able to climb. I don't have to go head up against it. There's ways to climb around it. There [are] ways to maneuver around it. And through that I've learned just to view math in a different way, which is find like the fun elements of math, or maybe find elements that you can relate with math that may help you or propel you in those elements that you may lack in.

Sub-themes from the unorthodox course included the "80/20 rule" and "lie, cheat, steal." Students expressed that the lessons had a granular impact on the way they would engage in classes. The "80/20 rule" refers to the "Pareto Principle" which posits that 80% of all effects result from 20% of all causes. In essence, students were instructed to do less, but to make sure that the parts that they prioritized were the most critical elements of the work. When asked to describe their experience, the impact of the 80/20 rule was significant and recurring. When describing the takeaways of the course, a student shared, "The other thing I learned was the 80/20, and I never thought [of] the world like that…It actually makes sense when you put it into perspective in every situation in life." John, a student at Westside High, added, "Basically the whole 80/20 rule is huge for everyone in the program. It was a big thing in the program because it's so real." Students expressed resonance with the 80/20 rule and its applicability to their lives. For Giant, a student at Spring Gardens High, the principle spoke to the importance of planning and prepping before executing any task:

> I gained something really good. The 80/20 system, that's [the] system of life. For instance… if you're given 10 hours to cut down a tree, you should use about eight hours to sharpen your blade then two hours to cut down the tree.

The role of planning and preparation is a through line in both of the classes and the broader program, as students were encouraged to take their time and plan before they act—in writing, in math, and in life.

My findings from the focus group and in individual interview data revealed a second sub theme amongst the life lessons offered in the math class: "lie, cheat, and steal." The instructor was, of course, not teaching students to lead lives of dishonesty and crime, but the misdirection was surely a part of the charm. As Laguna High student Tre shared, "I learned how to lie, cheat,

and steal, which is basically just reinforcing yourself, getting your friends to help you with stuff, and trying your best." The math instructor suggested that students lie—affirm themselves and their abilities irrespective of their current grade or skillset. He encouraged them to "fake it till you make it" regarding their studies. Secondly, students were instructed to reinterpret the concept of "cheat" as studying and reviewing every piece of information they received to the point where they had an unfair advantage over other students during assessments. He suggested that students utilize every single resource available to them in order to cheat the system. Mainly, they should share information with their peers and work as a community. LR, student at Northeast High, expounded on the philosophy by adding the following:

> ...getting towards your goal or whatever you need to do on that day…if you're about to [take a test], as soon as you get the paper, you want to write down all the formulas or all the things that you just seen on your notes.

And lastly, steal—identify the students and adults who are living and achieving in the ways that one would like and emulate their techniques. Steal the secret to their success. He noted that master students—much like artists—don't copy, according to a quote attributed to Pablo Picasso, they steal. Students expressed that "lie, cheat, steal" was an element of the curriculum that left a lasting impression. Bruce, a Northeast High student stated, "I'll always remember that from ROYAL Summer about math—lie, cheat and steal, that was really good. And I told you earlier, I was talking to students about how they study, that's what I've been doing."

In an intentional effort to increase their college readiness, the participants willingly signed up for math and writing summer facilitation. While applying the fundamentals of essay writing and high school arithmetic, students simultaneously received instruction on best practices for improving their scholarly toolkit. Students described feeling that the life lessons offered from

instructors during the class time were as, if not more, beneficial than the core curriculum. According to the participants, both classes were effective in changing the way they thought and saw the world around them. It was clear to me that course instruction did not have to make the participants better mathematicians or writers instantaneously. Instead, I gathered that participants gave credence to the idea that the early exposure to college-level material combined with high expectations and feedback would put them on the track to where they wanted to be in the future. Jah, a student at Deer River High, shared in his interview that if the program was anything like college, it was imperative that he attend:

> ...it definitely helped a lot because in my mind I'm like, 'Okay, look, if college is this fun, then you gotta make it happen'...it definitely gave me more of an insight of what it might be like to be in college.

Through his participation in the program, Jah was able to envision himself enrolling in college and engaging in mature conversations that he felt were missing at his high school.

STAND Activities

Another aspect of the program involving heavy and consistent student engagement, and that was absent from their respective high schools according to the student participants, was the Science Technology Arts Nutrition and Dialogue (STAND) curriculum of activities. I created the STAND activities as a way to keep the students engaged in learning and development that was fun and significantly more social than their math and writing courses. I found that participants appreciated the curriculum as a respite from academic conversation as they highlighted those activities were unique—meaning the topics they discussed and activities that they engaged in were not in the high schools. Jah, a student at Deer River, gave his account of the STAND activities when he stated, "We don't do that in my high school so that was kind of a new thing to

me. This was very helpful, I love doing it, it was very fun and useful activities." Such was also true for Rock, a student at Westside High, who responded to whether there was anything he did in ROYAL Summer that he did not do in his school by sharing, "The cooking portion was very good. It was very cool to learn how to cook nutritious foods rather than just the bad stuff you see online." Jerry, a student at State High, added "nutrition as well, knowing what foods to eat. We don't talk about that at school at all. For me, for what I would do when I go back to school, I would definitely be bringing this up in conversations." Students felt eager to bring what they learned in First Day programming back to their households and friends who did not participate in the program.

Experts of the respective topics facilitated the sessions. For the arts sessions, critically acclaimed music conglomerate '1500 or Nothing' worked with students on music production. For the technology portion, students experienced a technological entrepreneurship workshop and thought through how they might communicate and market a product of their creation. For Jordan, a Waterfalls High student, music and entrepreneurship piqued his interest. He described his experience in STAND activities by sharing the following:

> Yeah. I'd say the STAND activities that I liked the most were the 1500 [or nothing], the music one and the entrepreneurship. I liked the entrepreneurship [module] because it was a lot of fun in that class. And plus, I wouldn't say I found something like entrepreneurship. If I ever did, because I know I will soon. I would know how to sell things. I would know how to talk with clients and I'll just take a course overall.

All STAND activities occurred later in the day, following academic classes and lunch, and centered around collaboration and creativity. Tre, a student at Laguna High, realized a childhood

dream was attainable through his participation in the entrepreneurship course. He shared the following:

> The entrepreneurship one that allowed me to express a lot of ideas that I had some not only express my ideas, but actually like formulate them and put it into a plan or something to share them. We had to do a presentation of an idea…I did like an air filter that captures pollution from the air and could reuse something as fuel. But before, when I was little, like eight years old or something, and I thought that it was just like a fantasy dream. They actually helped me put my IDs together and maybe hopefully in the future I could bring it to light.

The guidance and support from STAND instructors encouraged students to convert their fantasies into viable possibilities and business ideas with proper planning and peer review.

In my study, I found that not all STAND activities, albeit interesting, received high praise from students. While some participants enjoyed the break in the academic curriculum, others listed the activities as least important among the program's facilitation for that very reason. Tre, a Laguna High student, expressed that the STAND activities engaged the students in ways that built community, however, they were still less important for him because that was not his priority when deciding to participate:

> one [component] that is least important to me, but is still really important, is the STAND activities. Even though it's fellowshipping with my peers, it's still not getting me ready for school. It might be honing my social skills, but that is not what I really need right now.

Participants were vocal about how determined they were to become prepared for college and expressed why they thought that it was important for them to be learning in ROYAL Summer.

During ROYAL Summer, students spoke directly to the salience of early access to college preparatory curriculum, especially for Black males. At every stage of the program, findings from focus group and interview data spoke to the experience of being a Black male and their understanding of race and racism. It was my intent to present the findings from my study that showcase participants' understanding of race in nuanced and unique ways. The following section summates my findings and analysis from this chapter.

Summary

Participants of First Day and ROYAL Summer programming described the impact the programs had on their high school skillset, college knowledge, and pursuit of higher education. They garnered a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the requirements to enter college and felt closer to role models who were engaged in their aspiring fields. Additionally, students detailed that their perceptions of race and racism and their experiences with instructors and adults working with the program affirmed their identities as Black males. The intentionality of the conversations and activities subsequently influenced the way that they interacted on their campuses and communities. Students shared which programs and activities were the most and least helpful for their development. STAND activities proved to be less pertinent than math and writing instruction, however, several students noted that they were grateful to gain entrepreneurial skills from the facilitation. Also, the STAND activity was considered least critical at the time of the program because the other topics were all simply more relevant to their high school coursework. Many students shared that their participation only strengthened their desire to attend college—it did not create desires where none existed. My study found that participation in First Day and ROYAL Summer provided students with much wanted early engagement and assured them that they have people in their corner in case they struggled or even

failed. Participation in the program as rising ninth graders increased students' desire to participate in other college access and intervention programs. More specifically, the focus in the curriculum and mentoring that centered their experience and perspective as Black males provided students with a sense of belonging in academia. Providing Black males from urban schools with connections to professionals in their aspirational fields and engaging them in curricula that centers their culture have larger implications for Black males at the participants' high schools and the state of Black male education in urban schools and communities globally.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

According to the College Board (2010), there are 8 components of college readiness: 1) college aspirations, 2) academic planning for college and career readiness, 3) enrichment and extracurricular engagement, 4) college and career exploration and selection process, 5) college and career assessments, 6) college affordability planning, 7) college and career admission processes, and 8) transition from high school graduation to college enrollment. The first, although many were applicable, is most resonant with the purposes of my study. The authors posit that the goal of focusing on college aspirations is to:

> Build a college-going culture based on early college awareness by nurturing in students the confidence to aspire to college and the resilience to overcome challenges along the way. Maintain high expectations by providing adequate support, building social capital, and conveying the conviction that all students can succeed in college (College Board, 2010, p. 3).

My study sought to understand the perceptions of higher education and college readiness for Black male students, in particular. I designed and facilitated an early awareness program with their unique history of disadvantages and resilience in mind. I wanted my study to unpack their affinity to college and any perceptions of barriers that they might have had due to race, class, or gender inequality.

Dulabuam (2016) explains that Black males face unique barriers to higher education based on stereotypes and discrimination. In her study, she found Black males on predominantly white campuses, especially, often had to combat pejorative expectations from peers and instructors. Black male students often found themselves in encounters they demanded they proved their intellect, which they rightfully found belittling, demeaning, and embarrassing.

Delabaum (2016) asserts, “barriers and achievement gaps in higher education are due to a complex set of factors ranging from societal racist practices to local budgetary cuts in programs and psychological phenomena associated with being a member of this particular social group” (p. 1).

My study and analysis examined students’ participation and experience with programmatic elements intended to serve as support in processing the psychological impact of consistent marginalization and disenfranchisement of at-promise students in schools. Currently, there is an equity issue in urban schools and districts that results in fewer Black males applying and enrolling in college. More equitable college access initiatives might result in increased exposure to diverse college and career paths for Black males. Both high schools and colleges are capable of championing programs that increase access to college and career readiness for its marginalized student populations. Hunn (2014) found that collaborating with Black students to create themes and courses that were relevant to their culture and experiences, was effective in increasing the students’ sense of belonging on their historically white campus. Creating curriculum and disciplines that center and humanize the experience of Black students would subsequently diversify whole college campuses and enrich all fields of human endeavor.

Summary of Findings & Connections to Theoretical Frameworks

Student responses revealed the Black male participants’ experience with race, high school, and college access. In order to center students’ voices and capture their experiences as they understood them, my study used a qualitative, phenomenological approach with the goal of highlighting what students believe they needed to attain higher education and feel more affirmed by their schools. I organized the themes into a theoretical framework using Spencer’s (1997) PVEST and Crenshaw et al. (1987) Critical Race Theory, Ladson-Billings’s (1995) Culturally

Relevant Pedagogy and Transformational Resistance (Hannegan-Martinez et.al, 2022; Solórzano & Delgago, 2001).

Spencer's (1995, 2005, 2006) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory is a life-span model of human development that suggests a person's intersubjective experiences and cultural contexts are salient in their meaning-making processes and foundational identity development. PVEST comprises five stages: "net vulnerability, net stress, reactive coping processes, emergent identities, and stage-specific coping outcomes" (Spencer et al., 2006, p. 641). The Phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory PVEST provides a lens to examine the factors that may disproportionately expose urban youth to risk factors (e.g. poverty, racial microaggressions, academic disenfranchisement) and the coping strategies they inspire. For adolescent males of color especially, Spencer (2003) posits that reactive coping strategies derived from males' net vulnerability—the remaining balance of risks and protections, stressors and supports—yield emergent identities that may often be misunderstood and taken as threatening, particularly to those without context. The title of this dissertation was heavily influenced by the tenets of the PVEST model.

In a recent reimagining of the PVEST model, incorporating intersectionality, Velez and Spencer (2018) state that "Challenges due to inequities of opportunity result in variations of coping responses given multiple intersections of oppressive conditions; immediate adaptation efforts are characterized as reactive adaptations" (p. 80). Students, not unlike cactus plants, undergo innumerable reactive adaptations to preserve their energy and protect the parts of themselves that matter most to them. My study intended to convey the importance of positive adult relationships—in schools and third spaces—on the learning attitudes and identity development of Black male students. I focused on students in 9th-10th grade and listed that

period as a crucial time for educational interventions for males of color in urban schools and communities due to the many developmental implications of adolescence; studies show that it is the period in which individuals become aware of social injustices and their place in the world (Spencer et al., 1997). My findings depicted participants' reactive coping strategies in response to stigmatized interactions in school and the world at large. Jeff, a Northeast students shared "Programs like First Day are important for Black men because there's a lot of things against us, especially our skin color." Students described race and gender specific vulnerabilities and stresses, and highlighted the importance of collaboration between schools and university partnerships as a protective factor. PVEST suggests that students' perception of vulnerabilities and stressors impact their identity development irrespective of the actual supports and risks. I found that engagement with Black-centered curriculum and programming led to students feeling more comfortable to talk about their racial and educational identities. Having identified a safe space to unpack and received support lessened the impact of oppression in their educational environments for several participants, and ultimately led to more productive stage specific coping outcomes such as academic achievement and college entrance.

I use Crenshaw et al. (1997) Critical Race Theory (CRT) in conjunction with PVEST to learn how students' perceptions of challenges and available supports to pursuing higher education were influenced by race. I engage the tenets of CRT in my dissertation humanize Black males throughout their experience in education. The first tenet I engaged was the practice of creative counter storytelling and narrative theory and the second is the permanence of race and racism (Delgado and Stefancic 2000, 2001). CRT posits that race is permanent and instances of racism are commonplace and normal in schools. Participants in my study list several instances of racism and ultimately reinforce the utility of CRT in education. Navigating their perceived

barriers and supports, students built their racial and educational identities and developed coping strategies that would have an impact on their life trajectories. Integrating PVEST at this critical point helps to analyze Black male students coping strategies alongside the various ecological factors students may encounter.

My work seeks to examine how cultural affirming and college access programming can impact students' scholarly and racial identity development. CRT is the lens that I engaged to explore whether and how the Black male participants' learning environments are impacted by systemic racism. Also, through CRT, I analyzed the conditions that participants must learn in and contextualized years of educational data that posits a perpetual academic underperformance of Black males. CRT shifts the focus from individual students to the systems founded on racist ideas and the resources they afford to minoritized populations. Students indicated the importance of their educators understanding the challenges they faced just being Black. Also, participants expressed a feeling of necessity for programs that focused on Black males, in light of systemic risks and hurdles to their healthy development. Here, CRT's third tenet is invaluable to examining these larger racist systems, or Whiteness as property. Legal CRT scholar, Cheryl Harris, (1993) posits that "Whiteness and property share a common premise - a conceptual nucleus - of a right to exclude" (p. 1714). Accordingly, Whiteness hinders the Black male student experience and the unique challenges they face (e.g., in the classroom, in the curriculum, and in their pursuit of further education and liberty) (Howard, 2003). Whiteness also underlies systemic racism and oppression in the form of school and neighborhood zoning, and racialized access to health and affordable food. These features, culprits of racism and poverty are essential in the development and mobility for Black male students. When mapped out, Black males and the urban neighborhoods and school they attended are marked by the disproportionately

overrepresentation in categories associated with failure and distress—from food insecurities to lower median incomes, higher levels of unemployment, increased likelihood of coming into contact with the criminal justice system, decreased academic achievement, among other things. Here is where the intersectional nature of race and class become most apparent. Developing a school culture that acknowledges Whiteness as property could be pivotal in disrupting the paradoxical dynamic for African American males in not only K-12 schools, but also in the neighborhoods in which they reside (Howard, 2013).

Ladson-Billings' (1995) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy suggests that establishing a congruous relationship between students' at-home culture and school curriculum is a way to encourage the academic success of Black students while keeping their cultural integrity intact. Student interview and focus group data revealed that students thoroughly enjoyed the material in the program that represented their cultures and experiences. Participants also acknowledged that they do not often see themselves represented in the everyday curriculum in their schools, and the culturally relevant aspects of the program increased their sense of belonging and comfort in learning spaces. In light of my findings, the benefit of incorporating curriculum and classroom practices that nurture Black students' cultural competence cannot be overstated; culturally relevant pedagogy should be a ubiquitous component of the education system.

Solórzano and Delgado's (2001) understanding of transformative resistance, built upon by Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2022, re-invisions students' oppositional behavior as a response and resistance to racialized, gendered, and/or class oppression. The Hannegan-Martinez et al., (2022) article illuminates four quadrants of oppositional behavior referred to as "(a) reactionary behavior, (b) self-defeating resistance, (c) conformist resistance, and (d) transformational resistance" (p. 2) To further make sense of students' interaction with systemic racism and their

phenomenological coping processes (both productive and maladaptive), I analyzed ROYAL Summer—through its curriculum and programming—as a resource and learning experience intended to inspire transformational resistance directed towards social justice.

Apparent throughout the discussion of major themes in my findings, I found that students participating in ROYAL Summer engaged in mostly internal forms of transformation resistance. My study engaged a great deal of adoration for students' ability to adapt to inequitable learning conditions, racial microaggressions, and more pronounced instances of antiblackness and structural racism. Incorporating tenets from both CRT and PVEST, my dissertation examined students' college access experiences in different educational contexts with a particular focus on their perceptions of race, class, and gender inequalities. Most notably, the introduction of anti-racist and anti-sexist curriculum often led students to "strong critique of their oppressive social conditions" and resources available to them at their respective high schools (Solórano and Delgado, 2001, p. 316).

Discussion of Major Themes

Findings from focus group data from 15 students, individual interviews with 10 students, and student work from 5 students suggest the effectiveness of the college access program in creating a college-going culture *i.e.* strengthening students' awareness and affinity to college. In my analysis, I made connections between the emergent themes of participant responses and relevant literature regarding the educational experiences and development of Black males. I discuss the 3 major themes from my analysis in the sections below.

Intentional mentoring efforts that raise awareness of college requirements early on in high school are critical to mitigating students' perceived barriers to higher education, especially for Black males.

Results from my study show that through academic mentoring with the First Day program and online engagement with the ROYAL Summer program, students participated in facilitation and dialogues that enhanced their understanding of college readiness and influenced their sense of access to college campuses and curriculum. For many participants, the undergraduate mentors and instructors served as "transformational role models," defined as "visible members of one's own racial/ethnic and/or gender group who actively demonstrate a commitment to social justice" (Solórzano and Delgado, 2001, p. 322). Conversations revolving around college requirements and high expectations inspired internal resistance to deficit based notions of their capability, which often times motivated new outlook on education and affinity to college. Students shared their views of the possible obstacles on their journey to higher education. Participants recalled instances of racial prejudice and detrimental teacher perceptions that they presumed did not give them an equal educational playing field. Conversely, many of the students in my study shared that they had a positive experience with teachers, especially teachers of color, and the First Day and ROYAL Summer programming served as another sense of affirmation potentially impactful on their educational experience. I aimed to present my findings in a way that presented students' streams of consciousness, many of which poured into a collective perspective of how it felt to be both Black and male in schools.

While students shared an analysis of race and systemic oppression that they might face, they also shared with me their grapplings with meritocracy—the belief that if they worked hard enough, they could attain whatever level of success they could imagine. When asked about a potential deterrent from attending college, Horizon, a student at Frozen Lake Secondary, wrote "Nothing can stop me from going to college except myself, the reason being that I am only

capable of hindering myself and not many other people can do so." Many students shared the belief that working hard should help them surmount any challenge. And though students gave credence to the significant role of their own hard work to ensure academic success, they also provided astute analyses unpacking the utility of mentorship and expressed that the role of a student's environment was invaluable. Engaging in the ROYAL Summer program led to more conversations between students and young adults revolving around college requirements and studying practices. As students built closer relationships with the adults in the program, discussing college almost in every encounter, it appeared their affinity to college grew as did their confidence in the idea that they belonged on a college campus. Although students interacted with the program instructors and mentors for fewer hours per week than their respective high school teachers and counselors, they shared experiences that included descriptive and informative comparisons between instructors and learning environments.

The lack of direct counsel and guidance was another perceived barrier for students, and site for transformational resistance, mitigated by the directness of C-CAP mentors. Several participants were cognizant that college programs existed on their campuses but they reported feeling that they should be more apparent, publicized, and in some cases, mandated. LR, a Northeast High student stated:

> I feel like there's already programs at certain schools and clubs to bring empowerment within their own culture and to bring wisdom to them. I just feel like some students aren't pushed towards these opportunities. Maybe they hear about it, but when they do it, it just goes through one ear and out the other. They just feel like school is somewhere where they can't be comfortable.

Most students expressed gratitude for mentors and counselors who insisted they enroll in college preparatory curriculum and participate in college access programming. At sites like State High, the college counselor built a rapport with students —through consistent communication and care—that allowed him to tell, not suggest, students their next move in the route to their college and career goals. Counseling relationships such as the one at State High simultaneously increased students' access and sense of belonging in readiness programs. My study found that students' investment in the First Day program and vision was influenced by the fact that the program was emphatically recommended by their counselors. For most students, First Day mentors served as closer-in-age, thus ostensibly more accessible, a college counselor who could encourage, motivate, and prescribe affirming higher education opportunities. Students' understanding of A-G requirements, AP/Honors courses, and college readiness at large were apparently impacted by program involvement.

I found that students' racial identity development and participation in college readiness programming were increased by interactions with First Day mentors whom they believed had both a better understanding of their cultural experience and wanted to understand their perceptions of school and life. Knight-Manuel et al. (2019) support these findings and as well as the criticality of creating a culturally relevant college-going culture—an environment that recognizes the value of students' cultural background in all aspects of learning—when they state "...a schoolwide college-going culture also involves creating opportunities for students and educators to engage in 'college talk' (McClafferty et al., 2002, p. 11) through their development of relationships that extend beyond traditional confines of classrooms" (p. 39). The consistent check-in regarding their compliance with A-G requirements served as another factor influential in helping them stay on track to graduate high school on time and march towards college

eligibility. Additionally, mentors regularly conversed with high school students about their experiences as former high school students and current undergraduates. Students expressed that mentors getting to know them, along with the ROYAL Summer technique of coupling life lessons and thorough feedback with math and writing curriculum were integral elements of the program that had an impact on students' desire to attend college.

Schools serving Black males need more educators and administrators that will affirm their cultural backgrounds and cultivate their college knowledge.

The Black male students in my study indicated a need for more educators who affirmed their cultural backgrounds and talked with them explicitly about aspects of college. In the event schools are under resourced and find themselves financially incapable of recruiting and hiring more Black and Brown educators and administrators then the goal should be to collaborate with college access programs with Black and Brown staff. Some of the more self-assured student responses came from students attending Northeast High, a school whose predominantly Black and Brown administration consistently and publicly affirms the cultures of its students. Bruce, a Northeast High student, shared:

> I feel like a lot of the teachers are Latino and Black, but there are also some white and Asians as well, but I haven't encountered any racism from them at all. They really do understand the culture of what goes on in the school and the students.

Bruce's statement spoke to the support he felt at his school.

My research sought to understand the role of schools on Black male students' pursuit of higher education and participants indicated that having educators of color had a profound impact on their educational experiences. Huerta, McDonough, and Allen (2018) contend that a lack of trust in adult relationships directly affects the ability to persist to higher education for young

males of color. And I must be clear in stating that simply adding Black educators to any school may not be the omnipotent solution for increasing academic success, however furthering the work to bring well-prepared, culturally affirming Black teachers and counselors who are also supported systemically is definitely a step in the right direction. Jerry, a State High student, expressed that just having a Black mentor helped him open up more when discussing race. Jerry shared, "I've had a few mentors in the past, my black mentors they talk more about [race]... more about issues. I'll be more real with them than other mentors."

The interview and focus group protocol asked students to share their experiences with teachers and counselors and detail the level of support they felt in learning about college. Many students described positive encounters with teachers and counselors, however, an equal amount shared notions of feeling singled out and prejudged due to their race or stature. Participants shared that the complementary college access program served as a necessary cultural assurance and source of college knowledge. My study found that participants felt more affirmed and more excited about the opportunity to attend college and could envision themselves as active members of college campuses more clearly after attending the ROYAL Summer program. Not only did students have a better understanding of what they needed to do to get to college after participating in the program, but they were also enthusiastic about returning to their schools and give back by way of encouraging acts of transformational resistance within their peers i.e. championing involvement in similar culturally affirming programs and extracurricular activities.

Students described positive connections with college counselors that were influential in lessening the anxiety they anticipated they would encounter once on a college campus. In addition to attending ROYAL Summer, participants conveyed that talks with supportive counselors demystified the college experience for them. One of the most resonating statements

came from Giant, a Spring Garden student, who shared that the open conversation around Blackness was particularly reassuring for him. Giant stated, “The overall topics about blackness, the whole [experience], it’s really unique. It’s something to embrace. Something people are proud of.” The focus on Giant’s Blackness in the ROYAL Summer curriculum made him feel like the program was made for him. The resonance of the program for Giant is particularly remarkable because he did not frequently engage with the counselor at his high school. Giant shared, “I don’t like, for instance, the counselor. I don’t go there that much. When I mean that much, I don’t go there at all.” Giant felt more seen by First Day mentors, so he was comfortable getting his information about college from the program and never went to the counselor’s office.

Huerta, McDonough, and Allen (2018) emphasize the utility of counselors for Black males when they contend “For many young men of color in the U.S., some schools do not provide the necessary resources for academic enrichment, but instead contribute to their early departure and feelings of isolation and alienation” (p. 714). Largely due to structural racism, Black males are disproportionately more likely to go without accurate information and support to navigate towards college readiness because they are more likely to attend urban schools with unqualified teachers and counselors (McDonough, 2004). And Black males who attend urban schools are 82% less likely to graduate from a four-year university than Black males who do not attend urban schools (Rose, 2013 as cited in Duncheon, 2021). More equipped Black educators and administrators are essential to addressing the college access needs of Black male students who, for a myriad of reasons—perceiving notions of antiblackness, for instance —do not visit the counselor’s office, do not have access to a college readiness programs like C-CAP to adequately support their journey to higher education.

Importantly, program contributions also engaged students in curriculum that spoke to their maleness. The curriculum inspired conversations around gender and sexual orientation that allowed program participants to contend with the intersectionality of their complex and contradicting individual positionings. Participants expressed an appreciation for the profundity of the discussions in the program, noting that such honest talks revolving around the considerably layered topics rarely occur at their school, if ever. Rock, a Westside High student, shared that he felt more comfortable engaging in dense conversations: "I feel like it was a safer space and at school, not a lot of people would want to talk about all the topics we discussed or have such deep conversation." Further, a finding that spoke directly to the necessity to address and unpack the gendered experiences of Black males came from Horizon, a student at Frozen Lake Secondary, who recounted the "deep topics" he discussed during a mentor workshop on masculinity and sexual orientation by sharing the following:

> I would love to bring up more of these topics that need to be discussed, but some people are just too afraid to discuss them because of how deep they are and how much it's going to make you think, as well. And also it's going to realize what you need to change in yourself…Toxic masculinity, femininity, or just feminine things, as well. And then just that whole talk about masculinity and also just being homosexual, heterosexual, as well, how people view those types of things. And those are the conversations that need to be talked about because people judge, and just because it's something different or it's not the same for them.

Horizon highlights the importance of having difficult conversations that seek to center and understand the experiences of marginalized populations. Moreover, he highlights that conversations like the ones in ROYAL Summer are less likely to happen because they may

challenges participants to address and changes their own biases. Alternatively, Tre, a student at Laguna High, shared that he does not believe the teachers at his school have the courage or range to discuss the topics that explore the intersection of race and gender. Tre shared:

> ...we were talking about Black Lives Matter earlier. You can't go to school and talk about that because either, your teachers aren't informed about it enough, or they're too scared to say something wrong that might cause a bigger issue at school.

Tre is perceptive to the widespread reluctance and illpreparation of schools to discuss systemic racism, instances of police brutality, and murder. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, as it's mentioned here stands as a quintessential topic that explores both race and gender simultaneously. According to Spencer (2017), the BLM social movement "highlights the unchallenged 'normalization of police arrests and killings' and other situations that signal significant risk especially evident for brown, black, poor, and – independent of age – too frequently male citizens" (p. 288). Findings from Rock, Horizon, and Tre insist that curriculum discussing the intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation may lead to deeper classroom conversations around antiblackness and systemic racism that will provide students with better understanding of their educational contexts and foster student engagement.

Creating and sustaining culturally relevant pedagogy is a paramount component of fostering college readiness, combating antiblackness, and enriching the educational equity for all students, especially Black males.

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is integral to the functioning of the theoretical framework for my study. Spencer's (1995, 2005, 2006) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory suggests the imperative nature of youth's context to their intersubjective experiences and identity development. PVEST is foundational to understanding adolescents'

emergent identities in light of their net vulnerability and the coping strategies they create to survive stressful conditions. PVEST posits that space matters, and Critical Race Theory (CRT) posits that race matters. CRT situates race at the heart of the disproportionate exposure to structural disenfranchisement for minoritized populations. CRT is pivotal to understanding the ways the Black male participants perceive their place within the world. Through CRP and Black centered programming, students are emboldened to critique current education systems and empowered to co-create new learning environments that maximize their academic potential (Gay, 2018).

The participants in my study expressed gratitude and pride to engage with curriculum that was culturally aligned with their backgrounds in the ROYAL Summer program. Moreover, students emphasized that the material and instructing style in their high school lacked cultural congruence and rarely centered their racialized and gendered experience. In an individual interview Horizon, a Frozen Lake Secondary student, shared that the structure and focus of the program made him feel comfortable by stating the following:

> I was able to have that sense of comfort, which I tend to lack almost everywhere because I always feel like that I'm alone or battling against everything by myself. So just having those people that I know I can maybe even ask for help for just requests or just talk to, and just question definitely helped me improve and build a great relationship with my mentors.

The program's intent to center his experience made Horizon feel supported academically and in ways that he had not felt before.

After engaging with the program, other students shared that the college and career readiness facilitation they received was contextualized to account for their cultural histories and

disproportionate encounters with barriers to higher education. Horizon added, “First Day definitely shaped my knowledge on the different career opportunities...learning about Black history [also] told us what other kind of careers were also possible.” Students reported that learning about their history while discussing their college and career potentialities had a positive impact on their confidence and participation. In fact, LR, a Northeast student shared that he believed COVID-19 and school closures did not impact his college trajectory due to his involvement in the C-CAP program. In a focus group, LR stated, “I don’t think it really affected my college [aspirations] because I’m still in this program; I’m still interacting with people that can help me achieve my goals.”

Incorporating CRP is a prominent, programmatic component that assures students that instructors value their perspectives and care about their complex and multifaceted identities. The data in my study show that students’ affinity to college is majorly influenced by how clearly they can see themselves represented—in the physical classroom, as well as in the curriculum. The STAND curriculum implemented in ROYAL Summer, for instance, sought to engage participants in transformational dialogue that would not only provide life lessons that elucidated parts of the college process but also spotlighted their own knowledge share and growth in perception. One of the more prevalent statements regarding the curriculum’s utility in increasing college readiness came from LR, a Northeast student, who shared, “They showed the world through a different perspective. I understand some other stuff, and it just gave me more knowledge of the world, and how I can succeed while being a black man, or a black youth.” Jah, a student at Deer River High, added “For my African-American friends who are not here, I think this would be very helpful and I think they would change the way they view things and the way they think.” Both LR and Jah emphasize the important role of C-CAP in shaping Black male

students' internal resistance to racial stereotypes and low expectations. Further, engaging in such programming served as a source of transformative resistance for both their personal and academic development. Hines et al. (2019) posit it is imperative that educators engage Black and Latino men of color in college readiness initiatives to ensure that they are academically competitive with their peers in high school and college. My work moves forward and postulates that it is equally imperative that the initiatives engage students in culturally relevant pedagogy; without CRP, programs will miss the mark of equity every time.

Implications for Practice

The creation and sustainment of college awareness initiatives for Black male students is a principal factor in increasing higher education attainment and career advancement for all. Schools and districts must nurture partnerships with equity-based programs who prove to have a genuine and explicit interest in improving the academic support of Black male students. Also, universities should work with researchers and race/equity centers to better equip undergraduate mentors to enter schools to work with students. Relationships and representation matter, as such, my study recommends that the programs that collaborate with schools, districts, and universities should consist of both majority Black leadership and staff. The following section lists implications for practice that are derived from emergent themes from my study on Black male college access and coping strategies.

Implement K-20 Pipeline Initiatives

My study strongly suggests the implementation of Black male-focused pipeline initiatives. There is a dearth of college access programs that: begin working with Black males as they are entering high school; work with them during their high school education; follow them to and through the university level and provide them with the network to graduate education. First

Day and ROYAL Summer was initially created as an expansion of a college access program intended for all Black identifying students, regardless of gender. The mission of First Day was to dedicate more time and effort to serving and supporting the processes of recruitment, application, retention and completion of the C-CAP program for Black males. Further, there was concerted intention to hire Black male mentors, include readings written by Black male authors and include media materials that presented Black males in a positive light. There are scant K-20 pipeline initiatives that center Black males' racialized and gendered perspectives. Moreover, there are fewer programs that engage critical frameworks such as PVEST, CRT, and CRP to contextualize students' learning environments and responses to social and academic stressors. In the classroom and in school specifically, students are notably sensitive to the expectations frequently prescribed to them by teachers and administrators. Therefore, providing the support and work to nurture more positive emergent identities, academic self-concepts, and coping strategies for students must begin early and remain consistent.

Black males are disproportionately discouraged from enrolling in college preparatory coursework, and experience access inequality across all stages of their education. It is imperative for students to engage with initiatives that carry students through a pipeline readying them for college and careers. Comeaux et al. (2019) contend that academically qualified, first-generation minoritized youth are more likely to choose a less competitive university due to the receiving inadequate information and social capital from their counselors and familial support systems. Students expressed that C-CAP and ROYAL Summer provided them with information and affirmation that emboldened them to make their respective dream universities a reality. Thus, establishing college preparatory initiatives for Black males that engage a critical race and phenomenological framework has immense implications for both universities and urban high

schools and their ability to support the educational attainment goals of Black males. A humanizing, learning environment that acknowledges students' race and space-based cultural backgrounds, effectively empowers students to critique and recreate their schools and universities in a way that will inspire structural and systemic change. The effectiveness of culturally relevant programming was confirmed by my study's data; students agreed that their affinity to college was influenced by their participation.

Building Positive, Empathetic Relationships

My findings revealed that building positive and empathetic relationships with Black male students is imperative to their educational attainment and college/career readiness. Positive adult and student relationships are an essential part of learning writ large. These relationships must be caring and should champion students' humanity by way of uplifting their cultural knowledge as value and influential to the learning environment. Encouraging dialogue and creating space for students to co-create their educational contexts improves schools' culture and boosts students' sense of belonging on their respective campuses. My study recommends building rapport with students through incorporating life lessons based on shared experience and providing support that enables students to circumnavigate barriers. Learning about students' backgrounds and interests is a principal step, however, because as John C. Maxwell states "children don't care what you know until they know that you care." All of the relationships may look differently since there is no static formula for building a relationship with every student. Establishing these relationships could be achieved by developing and proctoring an interest survey between teachers and students. Creating a bridge of communication between program mentors and school administration could also be a method to better understand students' needs, since students may be more comfortable sharing with their Black mentors at first. Starting the year with issuing the

interest survey or constructing a fluid relationship between school and program staff communicates to students that their perspective is a priority to the school. My dissertation posits that ensuring Black male students feel seen and heard, without negative stereotypes and racialized preconceptions, positively impacts their learning attitudes and confidence to engage in academic settings. As educator Sara Ahmed (2018) says, **"**we often ask kids to put themselves in someone else's shoes before we give them the opportunity to voice what it is like to be in their own shoes."

Recruit More Black Male Teachers Equipped to Incorporate Culturally Sustaining Curriculum

Approximately 7% of the nation's teacher force are Black—2% are Black males. Student data posits that the dearth of Black teachers, particularly Black male instructors, has a significant impact on the education and participation of Black male students. Participants expressed considerable ease while learning from an instructor with whom they shared cultural experiences. Bristol (2018) contends that Black educators' commitment to students extends beyond the classroom and is often woven into their culture and community. The implications for schools go beyond students' sense of belonging and have tangible implications on Black students' learning time and disproportionate representation in the exclusionary discipline. When Black students have a Black teacher, they are less likely to be suspended or expelled and more likely to attend college. Although students may encounter prejudice from teachers of color or Black teachers, in more cases they experience a culturally affirming relationship with Black teachers that is housed in understanding. Regarding adolescent Black males, Millroy (2013) states, "...at the end of the day what they are looking for is someone who understands, someone who can say: 'I've been where you are. This is how we'll deal with it…'" (para. 10). To simultaneously diversify the

teaching workforce and humanize the educational experiences of Black males in urban schools, school districts should recruit and hire personnel who contribute to the multi-faceted presentations of Blackness and masculinity among students. My study affirms a key way to ensure that instructors can identify and champion the intersections of students' identities is to ensure that they are training to engage students in the culturally relevant curriculum.

Centering curricula with themes, storylines, and characters that speak to the experiences of Black males, Black people, stories, and history will have tremendous implications for mitigating the challenges students face in urban schools that lead to their being and feeling unprepared to succeed in college.Content that allows Black males to connect with their everyday experiences as valid and valued perspectives is integral to enhancing their educational experience. There is a growing body of research on the utility of listening to Black males and centering their experiences as integral to how we respond to them at this moment (Howard & Howard, 2021). Activities that allow students to restructure their environments and realities are amongst the most important. When students feel like their voices are heard, they are more likely to share their opinions and commit to learning and building stronger schools, more equitable universities and healing communities.

Limitations

There are limitations to this dissertation, as with any research study, but conducting this research completely online due to school closures caused by a COVID-19 pandemic was by far the most unforeseen of them all. The other limitations include the sample size of the participants in study, the scope of the study, data collection, and researcher bias in light of my relationship with the students. Moreover, the details of the program serve as a limitation. I created this program working with schools in large districts with notable percentages of Black male students.

The results of my study may not be applicable to schools working with few Black male students and few Black educators.

COVID-19

Pandemic restrictions permeated and limited most aspects of my study. As for the program under study, school and campus closures made what would have been a residential summer program, a virtual program and completely changed the structure of students' day. Without COVID restrictions, ROYAL Summer engages students in physical and community-building activities together. Mentors and I tried to recreate these activities virtually, but it was clear that being virtual still had an impact on students' level of participation. Students are usually more likely to build connections with mentors and peers during walks to campus for their academic sessions or during independent downtime. Due to COVID restrictions, many of those small, yet impactful interactions were lost. COVID-19 likely impacted data collection due to the fact that many students still had to adhere to their in-home responsibilities whilst participating in the interviews. Pandemic restrictions also impacted my ability to go to schools for face-to-face interviews.

Size of the study

I collected focus group data from the Black male participants in the second year of the ROYAL Summer program. The focus group took place immediately after the closing ceremony of the program while students were still logged on. To conduct the interviews, I reached out to all 15 participants, however, only 10 responded and elected to participate. I had hoped to talk to all of the participants, but three students no longer had accurate contact information on file and two other students replied saying they could not find the time to participate.

Scope of the study

The scope of the study is indeed a limitation of my work. I intended to collect students' experiences in this week-long virtual program. My findings present only a brief snapshot of their perceptions of the program, interactions with mentors, relationships with teachers and counselors at their high school, and their education attainment goals. All data were self-reported and said to either myself or constituents of the program so it is possible their responses do not convey their truest perceptions or attitudes toward the program and their schools. Only Black males who have a proven interest in attending college and attended the college access program were interviewed in my study.

Data Collection

The actual data collection process served as a limitation for my study, as well. The quality of the focus groups and the productivity of the interviews varied greatly and that could have been due to one or several reasons. Different colleagues conducted the focus groups, with varying prowess in asking probing questions and feelings of connection to the study topic. As for the interviews, in which only I collected that data, I found that sometimes participants were more preoccupied with their home environment than others and some participants provided rather pithy answers. And although I tried to ask the same questions to all interview participants, their level of engagement and different responses often led to unique questions about their experiences. Moreover, for the interview, all students were reflecting on a program experience that they had over a year later—focus groups were conducted in summer 2020, and interviews were conducted in fall 2021 and winter of 2022. The accuracy of their perceptions could have been impacted by the time in between participation and reflection.

Researcher Bias

My researcher bias is the final limitation. My identity as a Black male who has a deep interest in college access for Black males may have influenced the design of the study and interpretation of the findings. My personal and professional beliefs regarding the potentialities of Black males and the ROYAL Summer program (that I created and facilitated) may have influenced my interpretation of my results. Although, I do believe my positionality as both researcher and practitioner were momentous to the data collection process. Students were familiar with me due to my involvement with ROYAL Summer and felt free to share their experiences. It is my belief that their trust in me enabled them to critique and expound on challenges and barriers they felt in their respective high schools. However, it may be the case that their very notions of closeness to me may have prevented them from sharing critiques of the program or expounding on negative experiences. In either event, I refrained from mentioning any personal information they had mentioned outside of the space and attempted to stay as close to the interview protocol as possible.

Recommendations for Future Research

The units of analysis for my dissertation were the aspirations and perceptions of barriers to higher education of Black male students in urban high schools and their involvement in an early action college access program. My findings yielded both anticipated findings and revealed coping strategies for students that were unexpected. Ideas for future research include: (a) impact of the program on college entrance rates for Black males, (b) more ROYAL Summer student voices, (c) compare aspirations and perceptions of barriers to Black male students who are not involved with college access, and (d) include voices of influential adults in students' journey to higher education: mentors, teachers, and counselors.

There remains scant research on the impact of college access programs that are not only designed specifically for Black males but engage the students in culturally relevant curriculum starting in ninth grade. The first recommendation for future research is to identify programs that center the experience and cultural knowledge of Black males starting in or before ninth grade. If they exist, the research could examine the impact culturally relevant programming has on its students' education attainment goals. Future research could investigate the impact the ROYAL Summer and other access programs have on students' subsequent high school graduation and college entrance rates. Research expanding on my study's focus could ask, what kinds of academic, professional, and social-emotional supports do Black male students influence in their matriculation? How, if at all, did what students discuss in ROYAL Summer influence college choice?

Additionally, future research could include more ROYAL Summer participants—there have been two more cohorts of students since the proposal of my study. Due to the limitation of COVID-19 distant learning, the Summer 2021 ROYAL Summer participants engaged online as well. The latest cohort, however, will return to the campus of UCLA to participate in a residential program. It would be interesting to learn more about how in-person programming impacts students' perceptions of college access and affinity to college when they are on campus. Also, students interacting with each other in the same space, in public on the campus of a historically white institution may inform students' perception of race. It would be informative to see the variation in responses from students who have participated in the C-CAP programming virtually versus those who engage with peers, mentors, and instructors in person.

Compare Perceptions from a more Diverse Population of Black males

My research study investigates students' perception of support in their schools and in C-CAP. For some participants, the two entities worked in tandem to create a web of support. Some students reported that they do not visit their academic counselor and only report to C-CAP for college knowledge. My findings focused on Black males who applied to participate in the college access program affiliated with a flagship public university. An additional area for future research would be a comparative analysis of the aspirations and perceptions of barriers of Black male students who do not participate in the ROYAL Summer or C-CAP programming and have made no such attempt to participate in college access programming. Those student responses describing the role of race and the academic support felt at school could differ significantly from those captured in my data. Students attending public schools that offer their populations more college access resources and guidance could provide perspectives that could have several implications for schools and education policymakers. The following questions could guide future research initiatives: What, if any, college access supports are present on your campus? How often, if at all, would you say you meet with your counselor to discuss college? Who is your primary source of college knowledge? The students' responses may impact the college and career readiness practices of schools and universities.

Incorporate Adult Voices

An important part of students' experience was their connection to the instructors and C-CAP mentors. Critical to their notions of support was seeing themselves represented in the curriculum and on college campuses. A potential project for future research would be hearing from the instructors—both at their high school and ROYAL Summer—and mentors to learn more about their interactions with students and their approach to college readiness. Questions for the adults that students engage with could include: What race and gender specific barriers, if any,

do you believe Black male students encounter in their pursuit of education? Why, if at all, do you believe it is important to engage them with culturally relevant curriculum in school and in the program? To what do you attribute your ability to build positive relationships with Black male students? The adult/student connections that students describe in this study are profound. Research analyzing the complementing perspectives of the adults could broaden the scope of this work and inform education research on best practices to effectively support Black males and enrich their experiences in schools.

Closing Remarks

It is my hope that this educational intervention program and dissertation offer a coherent call to continue rethinking the manner in which we study and support Black males. Achieving equity in education is a goal for all public schools in the United States. Many schools taut mottos that proclaim a mission to send all of its students to college. So, informed by my own commitment to equity and social justice, ROYAL Summer was designed to champion the development and success of Black males. Despite several efforts to support 'young males of color' (YMOC) the program and my dissertation unapologetically focused on Black males exclusively in light of the antiblackness students may encounter in people of color (POC) spaces as well. The YMOC spaces, though well-meaning, tend to lump the racialized experiences of Black males into a "students of color" experience categorization and often do not unpack the impact of antiblackness and consequential coping strategies of Black students. ROYAL Summer engages a framework that emboldens students to loudly critique their unfair circumstances and empowers them to make sense of their place in the world. Every activity and decision in the program along with my research derives from a deep and personal belief in the potential and genius of Black male students.

Despite the fact that students' responses convey positive experiences in the program, there is no evidence that the framework and program design improve their academic performance or likelihood to attend college. However, the ability the program has to make students feel seen and affirmed cannot be quantified. The impact of such assurance for Black male students in urban schools is immeasurable. And still, to quote the late great Kobe Bryant, "job not finished." We have much more work to do to support and affirm Black life. It was not my intent to claim that a single educational intervention program with a CRT lens or PVEST approach on its own would heal the wounds caused by years of structural disenfranchisement, oppression, emasculation, and the murder in U.S. schools and society. I simply want to inspire more ingenuity, more queries, more advocacy, and deeper levels of analysis that would center Black males and have them co-create and define their realities on their own terms.

In the words of Kendrick Lamar in his debut studio album, Section 80, "I wrote this because I was ordered to." My connection to the students and the work of C-CAP called me to continue conducting this research and returning to this manuscript when writing a single word felt like climbing a mountain. This study only exists because I felt it was absolutely necessary. The call to provide college readiness for minoritized youth increases educational equity for all students. College access that stops short of that goal is ultimately a disservice. Exposing Black males to literacies that center their otherwise marginalized experiences could provide students with affirmation that will change the course of their lives.

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