UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Race-Conscious College Access Programs and Critical Consciousness: Exploring the Racialized Experiences of Undergraduate Students of Color

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Cynthia Estrada

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Jessica Christine Harris, Co-Chair

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The racialized experiences of Students of Color (SOC) on college campuses continues to be a pressing issue in the field of higher education (Stokes, 2021). As a response, some college access programs have sought to prepare high school SOC to navigate these college environments by integrating critical consciousness—or critical awareness of inequity and injustice—as a fundamental component in preparing high school students to be "college ready." The problem that this dissertation addresses is that very little is known about the experiences of undergraduate SOC who have participated in such programs once enrolled in college. Grounded in Critical Race Theory, this study is designed to better understand how 12 undergraduate SOC navigated higher education after participating in VIPS, a race-conscious college access program. This

qualitative research study uses a Critical Race Methodology by drawing on *platicas* and life story mapping as sources of data.

The study found that through VIPS, SOC gain a critical consciousness and set of tools to identify and challenge the deep-seated nature of racism in higher education. Additionally, through VIPS' race-conscious curriculum, SOC can recognize and effectively respond to microaggressions and systemic barriers within higher education settings, particularly at UCLA. This preparedness helps them to manage and resist racialization processes on campus. Lastly, SOC utilize the insights and skills gained from VIPS to build community and advocacy, pushing for a transformative impact on campus policies and practices toward greater equity and inclusion.

The dissertation of Cynthia Estrada is approved.

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2024

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I frequently share that I am where I am because of my community. I recognize that I am blessed to have amazing people in my life who have brought me so much love, joy, and support over the years. First, I would not be where I am today were it not for my parents. Para mis padres que quiero con todo mi corazón, gracias. Ustedes me enseñaron tantas cosas importantes. Lo primero, me enseñaron lo que significa tener valor. Los dos se vinieron desde México para darnos lo mejor en esta vida sin saber el idioma. Eso es valor. Apa, tu ibas y venias desde México sin papeles por muchos años para ver a tu familia. Algo que siempre he admirado de ti es como manejaste tu carrera. Nunca de dejaste, exigiste el respeto y ese mensaje me ha servido muchísimo. Yo no tengo miedo defenderme, porque tú me ensenaste como. ¡Ama, tu fuiste a la escuela de pelo en inglés, aunque no hablabas el idioma! Y es más, sigues yendo a la escuela para seguir aprendiendo. Me encanta aprehender como a ti y yo siempre supe que me apoyabas en la escuela, porque a ti también tu gusta. Arriba de eso, como me ayudabas desde chica aunque trabajabas muchísimo. Nunca se me va a olvidar. Ustedes siempre me han ensenado que me quieren y que me apoyan y siempre se los voy a agradecer. Los quiero y como les he dicho, todo lo que soy y que tengo es por ustedes. Gracias, los amo.

To the rest of my immediate family, I love and appreciate every single one of you. Jorge, you are the best big brother I could ask for and your family is so special to me. You and Yvonne are always there to offer support, to ask how I am doing, and to provide space for us to get together as a family. I love getting together at your house or even at a sporting event. Go sports! To my beautiful, strong, and incredible nieces—Brianna, Angelica, and Vanessa—you inspire me. I am so proud of who you have become, and it has been the biggest blessing to see you all

grow up. I believe you can achieve anything you want in this life and am here for you every step of the way. Thank you for being some of my biggest cheerleaders.

To Robert and Gabby, I am so proud of all that you two have accomplished. You set your mind to something, and you grind until it becomes reality. Bianca, you are going for it these days and I am so excited to see what the future holds for you. I admire your kindness, beauty, and humor. Jr., you are the strong and silent type, but when your smile comes through it can light up the room. I will never forget the time we went to the UCLA football game together. Thank you all for being there to support me, I love you.

Sister, you have always been there for me. You always believed in me, and for that and so much more I am grateful. Any doubt I had in myself, you were among the first to remind me that I was more than capable. Not only were you willing to drop anything to help me, but you always asked how I was doing and how the writing was going. You showed a genuine interest in what I was doing and always told me you were proud of me. I can never fully express what that meant to me. Thank you, I love you. You also gave me the best goddaughter that I can ask for. My sweetie, Alyssa. I love you so much and am so grateful to have you in my life. I am not sure if I have told you this, but the day you were born, I was at Warped Tour with your Tio Fernando watching Senses Fail. I got the call from your mom that you were born, and we dropped everything to see you. We were waiting anxiously for your arrival and from then on, we knew you were special. Over the years we have watched you grow into the kindest, funniest, smartest, and coolest kids I have ever met. You are so unapologetically you and not a lot of people can say that! I love that about you. I will also say that what I love the most about you is your heart. You have a heart made of gold and I feel so blessed to be your nina. Thank you for making me proud and for that one time in Cabo! I could not have done this without you.

Pedro, I am so glad that we have gotten closer over the last few years. I have come to admire your willingness to be vulnerable with me and to share your love for us as a family. You are a caring person through and through and I am grateful to be your sister. You have made me laugh on days when I felt stressed and overwhelmed. You took an interest in what I was doing and asked questions. I have appreciated sharing this part of my life with you. Also, the fact that you kept "offering" to write this dissertation will always be an inside joke that makes me laugh. Thank you for being someone who brings me joy in life, especially as I completed this program.

To my best friend and life partner, Fernando, I love you. Thank you for being my biggest support system throughout this process. I truly do not know what I would have done without you and I am so glad that I had you by my side. You were there to hold me when I was overwhelmed, celebrate milestones alongside me, edit my papers, greet me after a long day, talk through ideas, and provide me with happiness and joy. Every stage, every step, you were there. You have always believed in me. You will tell anyone who listens that I am smart and that I am an incoming professor at Channel Islands. I see the pride in your eyes when you say it and it means the world to me. I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done to help me get here. All I can say is that I promise to repay the favor as you become Dr. Fernando Garcia!

To my suegros, Betty and Miguel Garcia, gracias por ser mis segundos papas. Ustedes siempre me han aceptado con una hija y estoy tan agradecida por eso. A mi suegra, te extraño y sé que me estas echando porras desde el cielo. A mi suegro, gracias por todo. Usted tiene un gran corazón y aunque ha sido un tiempo muy difícil nosotros sabemos que nos quiere y que podemos contar contigo. Lo quiero mucho. To Andy, my bonus brother, thank you. I could not have asked for a better brother-in-law. I am so glad that we can genuinely be ourselves around each other and just laugh.

To my best friend, Susan, you made this entire process doable just by existing. Truly, I could not have done this without you. You were my reprieve from the world of academia and reminded me to slow down. If I needed to destress and have fun, you were the first person I would contact, and you were always willing to make it happen. Every concert, every meal, every drink, and every venting session with you helped me stay sane throughout this program and I cannot thank you enough for that. I love you like a sister and I am so lucky to call you a friend.

Speaking of the UCSB homies, a special thank you to Cass, Gerard, Emily, and Luis. Cass, you are one of the most beautifully genuine people I have met. Thank you for being my friend, I feel so lucky to know you and to feel supported by you. I know that I count on you for anything and for that, I am so appreciative. Gerardo and Emily, I am so grateful to have you both as friends. Throughout this doctoral process, I needed to be grounded and you all provided that for me. You reminded me that I exist outside of academia and brought me back to our mutual hobbies. Alongside Sue, Cass, and Luis, you have provided me with more laughs than I can count in a time where I really needed it. You all are family to me and I thank you so much for being such a special part of my life. I love you all.

I recognize that I am so blessed to have too many friends to count, both old and new. To the OG Riverside homies like Carrie, Ryan, Marilu, and Austin, thank you for your support over the years. You all have checked in with me during my program and showed a genuine interest in my progress. I feel so lucky to have seen you all grow throughout the years, to see you get married and become parents. To Frank, Laura, Jack, and Alec, thank you for welcoming me into your homes. Because of you, Chicago has become one of my favorite places. I know that I can visit y'all and have the best time. To Mateo, thank you for being such a good friend to us and for showing us around Cincinnati. To Dio, thank you for always making the time to visit us in LA!

Your warmth and humor are so life-giving. To Cindy, thank you for housing me early in my program! To Jeremy and Molly, thank you for all the memories in LA and Pittsburg—you both are so special to us. To Omar Miranda, thank you for being the sassy friend that you are! There is no shortage of laughs when I am with you, and I appreciate how caring you are.

To the faculty at UCLA, thank you for believing in me and pushing my work forward. Dr. Jason Dorio, you are a gem and UCLA is so lucky to have you. You are a mentor and a friend. Words cannot describe how critical your support was during the MA program; you made me feel smart and worthy in a time when I really needed it. Dr. Ananda Marin, I frequently describe you as someone whose words are like hugs. You provided a space where I could explore my ideas and you made me feel seen.

To my committee members, thank you for your brilliance and support. Rob, thank you for seeing something in my application materials and providing me the opportunity to add "Dr." to the beginning of my name. I appreciated learning how you navigate academia as a higher education scholar, especially when it came to fostering collaborative communities to create change. I am also so grateful to have been a part of the HSI Initiative. You allowed me to make the brief series my own and trusted my judgement. Lastly, I thank you for your guidance throughout this process. I came to UCLA thinking I would be here for a year to earn a master's degree and somehow wound up becoming a professor myself.

Danny, I hope by now you know how valuable you are to so many of us. You make us feel brilliant, cared for, and seen. You radiate warmth in a place that can be cold and provide nourishment. When I wanted to retreat and isolate, you reminded me that I was missed at RAC as if you were calling me home. You allow us to freedom dream and exist unapologetically. The

RAC that you provide has given me the best friends and community that I could have ever asked for. Thank you.

Nancy, my forever academic crush! Thank you for inspiring me in the MA program through your work and for allowing me access to your brilliance early on in my academic career. You happily jumped on a call to discuss my research when I was still making sense of it. Over the years, we continued to cross paths at conferences like ASHE and AERA and you were always so kind to me and Fer. I went from admiring you as a scholar to admiring you as a femtor and friend. Gracias por todo.

Last but certainly not least, thank you to Jessica. You came into my life when I truly needed you the most. I took your class on a whim and I ended up with another femtor. As the only non-HEOC student in your class, I was a bit out of place but you made me feel comfortable. You made me feel brilliant. Over time, I sought you out because I liked talking to you about the race at the intersection of higher education. You were always so affirming and genuinely took an interest in how I was doing. Thank you so much for investing in me, it means the world to me.

To the other homies at UCLA who provided me with a sense of community, thank you. Lorena, you are too good for this world, I love you so much! You are someone I know that I can count on for advice, guidance, and to have a good time. I am grateful for every check-in, writing session, and resource shared. You exemplify what it means to be a good friend and I am so grateful that I met you. To Gabi, we have grown alongside each other, and few people make me laugh harder than you do. Your commentary inside and outside of Moore brought me life in ways that I cannot explain. Together, you and Lorena made this process so fun. To my other scholar sister, Tiera, thank you for being you. You are so brilliant; I have been so lucky to learn

from you over the years. You are one of the people I come to when I need to vent and are the first to hype me up. I treasure our friendship so much and thank you all for being my homegirls.

To those who are a part of Danny's RAC, I am so blessed to have you as my academic community. Audrey, Brenda, JC, Bryant, Sara, Michael Moses, and Mariana, you all inspire me so much. The level of care that you all pour into your communities is aspirational. You make me a better person. I am so grateful to know that I can always count on a spontaneous kickback with you all; to come together to laugh, drink, eat, and/or chismear. I want to especially acknowledge two mera meras in my life, Sharim and Katherine. You are both chingonas and forces to be reckoned with; beautiful, brilliant, and strong. I love that about you both and admire who you are as people and scholars. Sharim, you love harder than most people and I feel so honored to be cared for by you. Thank you for believing in me, loving me, and celebrating with me. Katherine, I am so grateful to you for always being willing to meet, share a meal, and provide guidance. You both have been there to celebrate many milestones and I will always be so grateful for that. You all are my academic family and I love you for that.

Omar and Jasmin, you two have been instrumental in my life in the last few years. I feel like we have become such good friends and so quickly! Your unwavering support has meant so much to me. Thank you for always being down to meet and for making this process so fun. A core memory will always be my dissertation defense when you and the rest of the homies watched from the living room and spent the day celebrating me. This brings me to Davis and Daniella, who have also quickly become core friends in my life. Davis, to avoid being "unbecoming" I will keep it short and sweet. Thank you for all of your love and support these last two years. I am so glad that Emily connected us. To the beautiful, hilarious, and kind Daniella, I am so glad to have met you! I appreciate you for always being so thoughtful, caring,

and willing to celebrate us. Elif, thank you for being such a thoughtful friend. Everything you do is show others you care and it does not go unnoticed. To my girl Rikka, we did it! I could not have done this program without you, especially in the last two years. Our writing sessions became a sacred space for us to vent and talk things through, which requires a great level of vulnerability. You made it so comfortable and easy for me to be myself. Thank you for providing that for me, and for being such an incredible friend. I love you!

I also want to thank a few other academics who have inspired me over the years. To Pepe, thank you for your kind words at CRSEA in my first year. They meant the world to me, and I am so glad we have stayed connected. To Miguel Ceja, I will always cherish ASHE in Portland. The stories and laughs we shared reminded me of what the professoriate can look like outside of respectability politics. To all profes who have shared a "let me know how I can support you" with me, thank you for offering your support. This includes but is not limited to Heather McCambly, Liane Hypolite, José Del Real Viramonte, Alma Flores, Melissa Navarro, Tanya Gaxiola Serrano, and so many others. You have made me feel welcomed and supported.

To the other faculty in my life, thank you for offering me a blueprint on how to be an incredible scholar and person. Eric, there are no words to describe how much I appreciate you and your family. Before you, I struggled to ask for help out of fear; I never wanted to bother my mentors. You have always pushed me to ask you for help and that has been huge for me. I feel so comfortable coming to you to ask questions, to ask for feedback or guidance. You are my trusted advisor. I trust your opinion and believe you have my best interest at heart. You have provided me with countless opportunities, and I will always be grateful to you for that. You checked in on me regularly both on an academic and personal level, making sure to consider how I was feeling and doing. Every step, you have been there. Thank you. I also feel blessed to spend time with

you and your beautiful family. Jacks is an incredible mom, partner, and general human being. Thank you Jack for welcoming Fer and I into your home. Elijah, thank you for being the funniest and sweetest kid. I love our time playing Mario Kart together and conversations about Pokémon. I will never forget how sweet you were at my graduation party, especially when you tapped me to whisper "I want you to play a game with me." Ruby, you are a baddie and I love it so much. Thank you all for sharing your lives with us, it has been instrumental to my wellbeing.

One of the greatest gifts that Eric has given me is the CCHALES family. To Rogelio, Carlos, Angel, Elizabeth, Erin Nicole, Citlalli, Stephanie Tammeil, Maria, Nathen, Isabel, Chloe, Ben, Alex, Wes, Cynthia C., Diego, and Laura, thank you for being a community that I can rely on. I could always count on you to make me laugh and keep me grounded. You all are some of the most brilliant and down-to-earth scholars I have met and I am incredibly proud to learn from you. I am so excited to see what you each continue to accomplish because I know you are all destined for greatness. I have so much love for every one of you!

Dr. V, as you know, you were the first person to envision me as a doctor, well before I ever did. Those words, "when you get your PhD" planted a seed that has now come to fruition. I can never thank you enough for all that you have done for me. You accepted me to the MA, wrote letters for me for the PhD, met with me to talk about research, and created a class for me to teach. You humanized the professoriate in ways that many of us look up to and aspire to be like. It has especially been amazing to see you with Eddie, who has been so kind to Fer and I. I will always cherish our time in Hawaii together. Thank you for putting me on this path and for continuously being a part of it.

Lastly, to all the students who inspired me to continue, thank you. You made this whole process worth it. A special shout-out to Janelle, Megan, and Danielle, who always affirmed me

as an educator. I have kept every email and handwritten note you have given me and often read them as a source of love and validation. Now, I am so grateful to call you all friends and look forward to all that you will accomplish.

VITA

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Estrada, C., Garcia, F., Paredes, A. (2023). Hitting the ground running: Exploring the success of Latino men at baccalaureate granting institutions. In J. Del Real Viramontes & A. Vasquez (Eds.), *Community college and beyond: Understanding the transfer pipeline for Latina/o/x students* (pp. 95–107). Information Age Publishing

Tanksley, T., **& Estrada, C.** (2022). Toward a critical race RPP: How race, power and positionality inform research practice partnerships. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727x.2022.2097218

Paredes, A., **Estrada, C.**, Venturanza, R., & Teranishi, R. (2021). *La Lucha sigue: The University of California's role as a Hispanic-Serving Research Institution system*. https://www.ucop.edu/hsi-initiative/_files/report-la-lucha-sigue.pdf

Estrada, C. (2019). *Looking beyond meritocracy for Latinx students: A critical examination of racial discourse in traditional and alternative campus tours.* Paper presented at the Association for Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Conference, Portland, OR.

Estrada, C. (2019). *A Chicana's (pa)ss(i)o(n) for education: Revisiting Chicanx college recruitment strategies in the 1970s.* Paper presented at the Critical Race Studies in Education Association Annual Conference (CRSEA), Los Angeles, CA.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The racialized experiences of Students of Color on college campuses continues to be a pressing issue in the field of higher education (Abrica et al., 2021; Harris & Wood, 2016; Stokes, 2021). Decades of research has demonstrated the detrimental effects that overt and covert experiences with racism have on racially minoritized students (De la Luz Reyes & Halcon, 1988; Franklin, 2016; Jones, 1991; Solórzano et al., 2000). These effects include higher levels of repressed frustration, lower grades, delayed graduation and/or greater dropout rates (Carroll, 1998; Feagin, 2002; Feagin et al., 2001; Solórzano et al., 2000). On college campuses, frequent and subtle racial assaults known as microaggressions can lead to feelings of insecurity, frustration, and isolation for Students of Color (Solórzano et al., 2000). Racial microaggressions can take place in the social world because there are so few Students of Color on many campuses, the physical world when there is little to no cultural imagery or representation for People of Color within buildings and statues, and the epistemological world, when cultural knowledge is disregarded or nonexistent in the classroom (Gonzales, 2002). Subsequently, scholars frequently describe higher education institutions as "hostile" for racially minoritized students who can feel like a "guest in someone else's house" (Abrica et al., 2021; Turner, 1994).

Given this racism, some college access programs have sought to prepare Students of Color to navigate college environments by incorporating race-conscious frameworks into college access curriculum. Historically, college access programs have sought to build a bridge between higher education institutions and K-12 schools (Contreras, 2011). These programs often target low-income high schools and focus on preparing minoritized youth to enter the college environment (Swail & Perna, 2002). Traditional college access programs seek to facilitate "college readiness" or a level of preparedness to succeed in college (Welton & Martinez, 2013).

Being "college ready" means that a student has acquired the necessary skill set (e.g., writing skills) and knowledge (e.g., A-G requirements) to enroll and graduate with little to no remediation (Conley, 2014; Quigley, 2003).

Some college access programs go a step further by centering critical consciousness as a fundamental component in preparing high school students to be "college ready." Critical consciousness is defined as having a "critical awareness of inequity and injustice, political efficacy or agency for responding to injustice, and critical activism, or engaging in behaviors to counter or change conditions of injustice" (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016, pp. 543–544). Programs like EMPOWER at the University of Washington, Westside Pathways Project at the University of Utah, and VIP Scholars at the University of California, Los Angeles seek to engage high school students in discourse that centers race related issues to build critical consciousness amongst Students of Color. Described in this dissertation as race-consciousness college access programs, the outcomes of this newer approach to college readiness is vastly understudied. This is especially true as Students of Color navigate higher education after engaging in race-conscious college access programs.

Study Background

As a result of demographic shifts and migration patterns in the United States. Students of Color are increasingly taking up space in schools across the nation. In fact, whites have not made up the student majority in K-12 public schools since 2017 (Schaeffer, 2021) and the percentage of undergraduate Students of Color has grown from 29% to 45% between 1995–1996 and 2015–2016 (Espinosa et al., 2019). Given the diversity in schools across the nation, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike continue to search for ways to successfully enroll and graduate Students of Color from college (Comeaux et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2017; U.S.

Department of Education, 2016). The operative words here are "enroll" and "graduate," which are often approached in a compartmentalized manner within higher education research and practice. How to enroll Students of Color in college is often found in the broader college access literature, which tends to focus on the high school experience (Auerbach, 2004; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Huerta et al., 2018). These types of studies may ask questions about a student's experiences in a college access program (e.g., Nunez & Gildersleeve, 2016) or with a high school college counselor (e.g., McDonough, 2008). Graduation in relation to retention on the other hand, refers to a body of literature that focuses on student progress in college (Tight, 2020). Specifically, it is a tool to measure how well an institution is retaining their students to help them meet their goals, such as graduation (Thomas, 2002). A retention study may focus on how a poor campus climate may impact the retention of Students of Color for example (Jayakumar et al., 2009).

Less higher education scholarship addresses how Students of Color make meaning of the entire college going process—from high school through college. What might undergraduate Students of Color share about their time in a college access program now that they are enrolled at a higher education institution? Looking back, what was helpful? What was less helpful? Did they feel that their college access program prepared them to navigate higher education? This dissertation seeks to address this line of questioning to examine race-consciousness college access programs that acknowledge that racism is real and pervasive within U.S. higher education institutions (Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013). Through this lens, this study can better understand how Students of Color navigate higher education as a racialized space, and how participating in a race-conscious college access program may have helped and/or harmed their college journey.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who have participated in a race-conscious college access program. Using a qualitative research design, this dissertation study was guided by the following research questions:

1) What do Students of Color learn about race and racism as it relates to the college experience through race-conscious college access programs?
2) What are the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who participated in a race-conscious college access program?
    a) How do these Students of Color perceive that the college access program has influenced their navigation of their racialized campus experiences?

Framework and Methods

To answer these research questions, I drew on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to inform all aspects of the research process including the design, data collection, analysis, and writing. The application of CRT is essential to this dissertation, as it allows scholars to examine the role of higher education in upholding, participating in, and benefitting from white supremacy (Patel, 2021; Patton, 2016). CRT debunks the myth that colleges and universities in the U.S. are race-neutral institutions. Instead, I can acknowledge that higher education institutions can serve as racialized sites that inflict harm upon Students of Color (Serrano, 2020; Solórzano et al., 2004). In addition to the many analytic tools that come from CRT (intersectionality, whiteness as property, etc.), I was also able to relentlessly center the experiences and narratives of Students of Color (Delgado, 1989; Martinez, 2020).

As this dissertation focuses on the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color, a qualitative research design was best suited for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015;

Ravich & Carl, 2019). Specifically, I used a Critical Race Methodological (CRM) approach to highlight the stories of 12 undergraduate Students of Color who have engaged in a race-conscious college access program called the Vice-Provost's Initiative for Pre-College Scholars (VIPS) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). In CRM tradition, their experiences navigating higher education as a racialized space were be held in high regard, seen as valuable sources of data and experiential knowledge that can be used to disrupt dominant research paradigms (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). To complement the storytelling tradition of CRM, I also used elements of *platicas* as a Chicana feminist methodology (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2006). In particular, I engaged in researcher reflexivity, vulnerability, and inviting study participants to serve as study collaborators (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2006).

Study Significance

There are several contributions that this study makes to the field of higher education. First, this dissertation study contributes to the large body of literature that focuses on increasing college opportunities for Students of Color. What sets this study apart, is the focus on how undergraduate Students of Color make sense of an emerging type of college access programming that centers critical consciousness in college readiness efforts. As demonstrated in the next chapter, most research on college access programs take a race-evasive[1] approach in the way that minoritized youth are prepared to enter higher education institutions as a racialized space. While college readiness scholars stated that "college preparation programs and students' support systems can be proactive in preparing students for college persistence by enhancing academic preparation and reviewing social strategies for survival during the first college years" (Tierney et

[1] This dissertation uses "race-evasive" in place of the widely used "colorblindness" term to "resist positioning people with disabilities as problematic" (Annamma et al., 2017, p. 153).

al., 2004, p. 5), they have also persistently ignored that Students of Color experience racialized oppression on college campuses (Morales, 2021).

Race-consciousness college access programs seek to prepare minoritized students to enter college campuses as a structure of white supremacy. By examining how Students of Color make meaning of their time in a race-conscious college access program, specifically if/how they used their critical consciousness to navigate higher education, this study provides fresh insights into practice. In particular, this study can inform recruitment staff at the higher education level from directors of college access programs to support staff. Findings can also be useful for high school staff such as college counselors and teachers who offer college guidance to Students of Color.

Findings from this study can also contribute to higher education theory and concept formation. The most pronounced is the concept of college readiness. As laid out in the literature review chapter of this dissertation, current conceptualizations of college readiness do not adequately acknowledge the role that structural racism plays in the experiences of Students of Color in higher education. Race-conscious college access programs set out to not only acknowledge but address the fact that higher education institutions uphold white supremacy. Thus, findings from this dissertation can come to redefine how Students of Color in particular, are prepared or "readied" to go to college. Additionally, part of being "college ready" involves being prepared for the transition to higher education (Nuñez, 2011). While some higher education transition theories comment on the importance of considering race and culture when it comes to preparing Student of Color to transition to college (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kolluri & Tierney, 2020; Rendon, 1994; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2012), less focus on preparing students to enter hostile racial climates. This dissertation contributes to existing transition theories for Students of Color or (re)imagine new theories that address the racialized realities that

minoritized students face in transitioning from high school to college. Bringing nuance to established theories and concepts can assist higher education scholars, practitioners, and policymakers better reflect the experiences of Students of Color as they seek out a higher education.

Methodological contributions can also be made from this dissertation to the field of higher education. This study uses a "college life story timeline" as a way to elicit narratives about the racialized experiences of minoritized students navigating higher education. Outlined in detail in the methods chapter of this dissertation, the "college life story timeline" invites Students of Color to reflect on their "highs" and "lows" from their first day in college to the present day. This approach in methods can provide higher education researchers (and beyond) with a research tool that can be used to evoke narratives and document important moments in the lives of Students of Color throughout their college journey.

Lastly, this research comes during a historical moment as affirmative action has been banned across the nation. With the consideration of race being banned in college admissions, higher education institutions across the nation could be looking to states like California who have been testing alternative approaches to race-based admissions for the last 15 years (Contreras, 2005). Since the passing of Prop 209[2] in California, Student of Color enrollment—especially within flagship institutions such as the University of California (UC) campuses—has fallen drastically (Allen, 2005). To address the decline in qualified applicants and enrollment amongst Students of Color, the UCs have invested time and fiscal resources to K-12 outreach efforts such as college access programs (Orfield, 2017). In 2014, the UCs spent over $61 million on college access programs like the Early Academic Outreach Program to provide college going support to

[2] Prop 209 effectively banned higher education institutions from considering race, ethnicity, and/or gender in college admissions decisions.

minoritized students (Orfield, 2017). For the UCs and other higher education institutions, investing in college access programs has become a necessary strategy to help increase college diversity (Orfield, 2017). At the same time, higher education scholars and practitioners are increasingly looking for more race-conscious and culturally relevant approaches to college access and readiness efforts for Students of Color (Castro, 2013; Knight-Manuel et al., 2019). This dissertation can provide such insights by asking how Students of Color navigate higher education after engaging in a race-conscious college access program.

Key Terms

Minoritized: This dissertation uses the term minoritized as opposed to minority in order to acknowledge the individuals and structures that actively oppress People of Color (Black et al., 2023).

Race: Race is a social construct that is formed when humans use categories to differentiate themselves from others (Banks, 1995).

Race-Conscious College Access Programs: Race-Conscious College Access Programs are college preparation programs that incorporate critical consciousness in their college readiness efforts for Students of Color.

Race-Evasive: Race-evasive is used in this dissertation in lieu of the word "colorblind" which means ignoring race, or insinuating race-neutrality (Annamma et al., 2017).

Racialization/Racialized: Racialization refers to the historical, political, and social process by which racial meaning is assigned to individuals based on the assumption that biological differences exist, and whites are considered superior (Omi & Winant, 2014). Racialization is a process that happens *to* People of Color, including Students of Color on college campuses that can create a uniquely racist experience (Harris & Linder, 2018; Omi & Winant, 2014). Others

have extended this definition to include the racialization of social structures such as higher education institutions (Hochman, 2019; Ray, 2019). To serve as a racialized space, higher education institutions reflect the racialization of groups by treating Students of Color unequally (Flint, 2021; Hochman, 2019).

Racism: Racism refers to the process of using race to deny racially minoritized groups access to resources or privileges through racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Students of Color: The term Students of Color is used to describe those who identify as Black, Latino/a/x, Native, or Asian American and Pacific Islander. I capitalize the "S" and "C" as categories used to describe cultural groups are typically capitalized (Crenshaw, 1991). I do not capitalize white as I have chosen to decenter whiteness in this dissertation while "reject[ing] the grammatical representation of power capitalization brings to the term white" (Perez Huber, 2010, p. 93).

White Supremacy: White supremacy refers to the ways whites maintain power over structures such the legal system and politics as well as material resources such as education and housing in order to subjugate People of Color. White superiority—as implied in the name—and other race-evasive ideologies are central to the efforts of White supremacy which seeks to embed whiteness within institutions and social structures (Harris, 1993).

Whiteness: Whiteness does not refer to a specific person, but rather the social construct that prioritizes white culture, ideology, bodies, emotions, epistemology, behaviors, experiences and values in a way that is standardized to uphold whites on top of the racial hierarchy (Matias et al., 2014).

CHAPTER TWO: FRAMEWORK & REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I draw from existing literature that informs this dissertation. First and foremost, I begin with Critical Race Theory (CRT), as it guides how I make sense of extant research on increasing college opportunities for Students of Color. Next, I provided a layout of existing literature on higher education access for Students of Color. This section details how higher education institutions serve as sites that reinforce racial hostility, racialization, and white supremacy. Despite this reality, I show how race-evasive college access programs ignore this reality in their college preparation efforts for Students of Color.

Critical Race Theory

> From its inception, the United States was founded on racist principles that have permeated the systems upon which this country functions; education is no exception.
>
> – Harper et al., 2009

I use CRT to frame this study, which includes the research design, data collection, and analysis of the data. CRT allows for the opportunity to highlight, examine, and critique the structures that maintain white supremacy in higher education (Patton, 2016). The tenets and tools of CRT encourage researchers to unapologetically center the experiences of Students of Color and the detrimental effects that white supremacy has on the US higher education system and society at large (Hiraldo, 2010; Patton, 2016; Patton et al., 2015).

In this study, the application of CRT involves interrogating the role that race and racism play in the experiences of undergraduate Students of Color as they navigate higher education after engaging in a race conscious college intervention program. A CRT lens is important in examining the complex and multifaceted ways that racist structures alongside other forms of oppression operate to continuously marginalize People of Color (Howard et al., 2016). CRT acknowledges racism as a real and everyday part of life in schools (Bell, 1991; Solórzano, 1997).

A CRT lens provides a theoretical construct that explains the many ways in which education—in particular, higher education—preserves racism to maintain racial hierarchies in which Students of Color are viewed as subordinate on college and university campuses (Patton et al., 2007; Solórzano, 2005).

Genealogy of CRT

CRT is a theory and a movement made up of activists and scholars interested in interrogating the relationship between race, racism, and power in U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). With roots in Critical Legal Studies (CLS), CRT emerged out of a need to advance civil rights within the U.S. legal realm (Crenshaw et al., 1996). CRT is considered a subset, or "intellectual continuity" (Tate, 1996, p. 198) of the CLS movement which sought to analyze the ways legal discourse and ideology functioned to create and maintain social structures in the United States. Predominantly made up of progressive, left-leaning white scholars, many of whom were men, CLS emerged in the late 1970s as an academic organization that produced hundreds of publications (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Tate, 1996). One of the main goals of CLS was to highlight and investigate the role of the United States legal system in creating and sustaining oppressive structures (Yosso, 2005). CLS made a significant shift from conservative conceptualizations of the law which was presented as objective, neutral, and detached from social and political influence (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Crenshaw et al., 1996). CLS scholars argued that the law is neither unbiased nor apolitical and recognized the roles that power structures and bias play in the construction and implementation of the law (Crenshaw et al., 1996). The central goal of CLS was to call attention to the fluid nature of the law, namely how "logic" and "reasoning" were used to create the illusion of legitimacy in lawmaking (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Tate, 1996).

CLS scholars sought social and political change, which legal Scholars of Color found appealing because they understood the limitations of the law in protecting Americans of Color, especially those who identified as Black (Ladson Billings & Tate, 2000). Before CRT took root, CLS was the academic home for many prominent legal Scholars of Color (Matsuda et al., 2018). It was a space where Scholars of Color could critique the relationship between legal discourse, legal practices, and social power (Crenshaw et al., 1996). Many of the ideological stances of CLS appealed to legal Scholars of Color, including the promise of creating social and political change for the people, the need to analyze the ways in which the law is used to serve powerful groups such as the wealthy, and a commitment to recognize and critique how social power is systemic, embedded within the fabric of US institutions (Crenshaw et al., 1996).

In many ways, CLS provided a foundation for future CRT scholars to interrogate the role that racial power plays in everyday life (Crenshaw, 2011). At the time, laws made possible by the civil rights movement were directly targeted or outright ignored in courtrooms (Crenshaw et al., 1996). The sociopolitical context of having a majority conservative supreme court under President Nixon created the conditions in which civil rights opportunities such as affirmative action could be attacked (Brown & Jackson, 2013). Efforts towards racial progress were being rolled back and CRT scholars believed that the race-evasive approach within CLS to civil rights was not only unhelpful, but detrimental to the cause (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Matsuda et al., 2018). A central issue that CRT scholars had with the CLS movement is the way CLS scholars conceptualized understandings of race and racism were too constricted and unrealistic to the realities of racial power (Crenshaw, 1993). For instance, CLS scholars often equated racial oppression with class-based oppression (Tate, 1996). CLS scholars argued that because race is

socially constructed, "it is theoretically and politically absurd to center race as a category of analysis or as a basis for political action" (Crenshaw, 1993, xxvi).

As it became more evident that race-evasive ideologies were used to justify racial inequity, early CRT scholarship began to challenge mainstream legal thinking (Matsuda et al., 2018). Between 1975 and 1980, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman began to set down the groundwork and intellectual foundations that influenced the CRT movement (Crenshaw et al., 1996). Bell (1975, 1980) criticized conventional civil rights discourse that regarded the law as a guarantor of equal opportunity; he argued that the law is unreliable in "the struggle of racial liberation" (Crenshaw et al., 1996, p. 2). Bell (1975) also critiqued the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, asserting that a race-conscious perspective was necessary to understand the realities of imposing integration upon the Black community. Later, Bell (1980) used the *Brown* decision to disprove liberal conceptualizations of the law as neutral. He proved how the *Brown* case was about facilitating and protecting white dominance under the guise of racial justice. Freeman (1977) further challenged the race-neutral liberal approaches to civil rights litigation. He called attention to liberal civil rights lawyers' (including CLS scholars) flawed and simplistic definition of racism through a "perpetrator perspective." As Freeman explained, racism was conceived as "intentional, albeit irrational, deviation, by a conscious wrongdoing from otherwise neutral, rational, and just ways of distributing jobs, power, prestige, and wealth" (Crenshaw, 1996, xiv). Through this lens, racism is limited to a blatant or uncommon act between perpetrator and victim (Freeman, 1977). This ideology serves to discredit the ways that racism functions throughout policies and within systems and structures (Bonilla Silva, 2006).

CRT focused on "understanding the very foundational ideas of traditional legal discourse and formulating criticisms of those ideas" (Brown & Jackson, 2013, p. 14). Kimberlé Crenshaw,

a leading Critical Race Theorist, dates the social origins of CRT back to the 1981 student boycott at Harvard Law School (Matsuda et al., 2018). The law students at Harvard demanded that the school increase the number of tenured Professors of Color after the departure of Derrick Bell (Matsuda et al., 2018). Bell, the first tenured Black law professor at Harvard, taught a Harvard course titled "Constitutional Law and Minority Issues" which challenged race-neutral interpretations of the law (Crenshaw, 2011). After demands to hire more Women of Color were ignored by the school's administration, students developed what they called an alternative course that gathered "many of the legal scholars who were beginning to teach and write about race with activist students who were soon to enter the ranks of teaching [Critical Race Theory]" such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Mari Matsuda (Matsuda et al., 2018, p. 4). The alternative course provided an avenue for like-minded legal scholars such as Richard Delgado and Lani Guinier to gather and share emerging CRT work (Matsuda et al., 2018).

As an intellectual movement, CRT soon expanded beyond the limits of the Harvard campus and into the American Association of Law Schools and CLS conference spaces (Crenshaw, 2011). At the time, legal scholars, who were predominately Scholars of Color, such as law teachers, students and activists began to find common ground outside of the CLS movement and actively sought places to talk, write, and think together (Crenshaw, 2011; Matsuda, 1993). These scholars challenged notions of meritocracy, race-neutrality, and liberal reform by critiquing the way that the law protected the status quo while maintaining an illusion of progress (Matsuda et al., 2018). In 1989, the first CRT workshop was organized by Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, and Stephanie Williams to bring together five scholars "who responded to a call to synthesize a theory that, while grounded in critical theory, was responsive to the realities of racial politics in America" (Crenshaw et al., 1996, xxvii). It was at this conference that the name

"critical race theory" was coined and a field of study dedicated to race, racism, and the law began to emerge (Crenshaw et al., 1996).

CRT in the Field of Education

Since the mid-1990s, CRT has been adopted by many academic fields, including education. In 1995, Ladson Billing and Tate ushered the use of CRT in the field of education to offer a theory that "is a radical critique of both the status quo and the purported reforms" (p. 62) in schooling. Since then, scholars in education have used CRT to highlight how race and racism are used to determine who is included and excluded from gaining access to educational resources and opportunities (Huber, 2009). In recent years, CRT has provided a powerful theoretical framework and set of methodological approaches that are particularly useful for examining higher education policy, research, and practice. For example, Harper et al. (2009) used CRT as an analytic framework to call attention to the ways policies reinforce white supremacy through race-evasive ideologies such as meritocracy to limit Black student participation in higher education. Through a CRT lens, Harper and colleagues demonstrated how higher education policies that are designed to advance racial equity in higher education, such as affirmative action and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, serve the interest of white students and strengthen stereotypes about Black students as racially inferior.

In research, CRT scholars have used counterstorytelling as a methodology to expose and highlight accounts of racism within higher education (Hubain et al., 2016). Jenkins and colleagues (2021) detailed racist interactions between college campus police and Black undergraduate students within historically white institutions. Specifically, the authors discussed how "campus police, while in theory intended to maintain campus safety, can also be instrumental in furthering a climate where some students—Black boys/men in particular—can

feel unsafe and unwelcomed" (p. 162). In practice, scholars (Linder et al., 2015) have utilized CRT to interrogate classroom practices within student affairs graduate programs. The authors show how Students of Color experience racial microaggressions by their faculty and white peers when issues related to race, racism, and social justice arise in the classroom.

Through this dissertation, I recognize and build on the contributions and applications of CRT from the past and present. As Martinez (2020) shared, "[c]ritical race theory is characterized by several major tenets that function as epistemological and ontological premises" (p. 9). From Legal Studies to Higher Education, CRT provides a multitude of concepts, tools, and methodologies that are useful in understanding the racialized experiences of Students of Color in higher education.

The CRT tenets that inform this dissertation include: (a) the permanence of racism/racism as ordinary; (b) challenge to dominant ideologies; (c) experiential knowledge/storytelling; (d) interest convergence; 5) intersectionality; and 6) whiteness as property. These tenets, as outlined in the following sections, allow me to center the lived experiences of undergraduate Students of Color as they navigate higher education as a racialized place. Additionally, through the operationalization of these tenets I explore how Students of Color experience and respond to racism and other forms of oppression after engaging in a race-conscious college access program. In the following sections I elaborate on the genealogy of these tenets and how I might use them to inform this study.

Permanence of Racism

Bell's (1992) philosophy of racial realism is used in this dissertation to acknowledge and forefront the fact that racism negatively impacts the lived realities of Students of Color. According to Bell, a racial realism mindset "requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our

subordinate status" in order to "avoid despair, and [free] us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph" (p. 374). Embracing racial realism rejects misguided attempts to obtain "equality" and instead recognizes that racism is a normal part of American life that is difficult to eradicate (Bell, 1992; Omi & Winant, 2014). Take the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case as an example. The promise of "equality" within the constitution was once used to improve the lives of People of Color and then later weaponized to repeal affirmative action. This is in part because racism adapts to maintain white superiority (Bell, 1991). For this reason, those applying a racial realism lens should be aware that People of Color will never receive the same privileges as those in proximity to whiteness (Bell, 1992). Instead, according to Bell (1992), CRT scholars believed in contributing to "peaks of progress" or "short-lived victories" (p. 79) that are meant to disrupt the status quo and "remind those in power that there are imaginative, unabashed risk-takers who refuse to be trammeled upon" (p. 378).

Because race is a socially constructed concept designed to fit the needs of systems and structures that maintain white supremacy, true racial progress is challenging and infrequent (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The social construction of race has served many purposes, but mainly functions to determine who holds the rights to certain privileges and resources (Lopez, 1994). In the simplest term, it is a process of *othering* that helps maintain a social order. Banks (1995) described this process as a ranking system in which people are placed into categories to differentiate themselves from others (Banks, 1995). Racial subordination within the law was decided by racial markers such as hair type, nose shape, and phenotype, which in turn allowed for the placement of whiteness at the top of the social hierarchy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Lopez, 1994). Through this process, race can be used to deny racially minoritized groups access

to resources or privileges through racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Race and racism thus becomes a permanent fixture of society in the United States (Bell, 1992), including educational structures such as colleges and universities (Harper & Patton, 2007; Harper et al., 2009). Scholars have noted that failing to recognize forms of structural racism within higher education institutions inevitably renders equity and diversity action plans inadequate or completely ineffective (Harper, 2012; Iverson, 2007). The goal then, is to accept that racism is here to stay, while actively working to disrupt it (Bell, 1991). That cannot be done without acknowledging the real implications that race and racism play within U.S. higher education institutions. I adopt the understanding that racism at the intersection of other forms of oppression, such as sexism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia, whether blatant or veiled, continues to influence the lives and educational trajectories of college students.

While many higher education institutions have adopted efforts towards antiracism, social justice, diversity and inclusion, a racial realist would be wary of such efforts (Bell, 1991; Hiraldo, 2010; Iverson, 2007). Because of the permanence of racism, Students of Color continue to face racism on college campuses (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; Morales, 2021). For this reason, some race-conscious college access programs (CAPS) aim to engage high school Students of Color in critical discourse surrounding the realities of racial oppression (Howard et al., 2017). Through a race-conscious approach to college preparation, some CAPs intend for Students of Color to enter higher education institutions with an awareness of the ways white supremacy will influence their lives and their college experience. For this reason, racial realism is critical in studying the experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who are navigating higher education institutions. CAPs may acknowledge how racism is a consistent and lasting part of

higher education in the United States and educate students on how to navigate these racialized realities.

Challenge to Dominant Ideologies

Part of working towards disrupting white supremacy in higher education is rejecting false narratives of neutrality, meritocracy, objectivity, and race-evasiveness that inhibit racial equity (Crenshaw, 1997; Ladson Billings, 1995; Solórzano, 1997; Yosso et al., 2004). These race-evasive ideologies purposefully serve to neutralize real conversations about the function of race and racism as a mechanism to subjugate People of Color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Race-neutral ideologies discredit the long legacy of racial oppression that continues to hold implications for Communities of Color today (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson Billings, 1995; Taylor et al., 2021). For instance, according to meritocratic reasoning, all are capable of success if one works hard enough (Matsuda et al., 1993). Meritocracy is a false notion in which the onus is placed on the individual, as they are provided with equal opportunities regardless of race (Cook, 1990). Meritocracy assumes that all begin on an equal playing field, which completely disregards the social structures and systems that create the conditions in which oppression is created, replicated, and sustained (Mitchell, 2013; Park & Liu, 2014).

One example of the myth of meritocracy within the field of higher education is the war on race-conscious admissions practices (Matsuda et al., 1993; Morrison, 1993). In California, where this study is situated, Prop 209 put an end to affirmative action initiatives that had sought to expand college opportunities to underrepresented students such as Students of Color. The arguments that swayed the decision relied on the need for meritocracy, or the idea that all Americans should have the same opportunity to be admitted to college, regardless of their race, class, and gender (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). Since the implementation of Prop 209, there has

been a decrease in the likelihood that racially minoritized students will gain admission to selective colleges such as the University of California (UC) system (Comeaux & Allen, 2009). Meritocracy is harmful to racial progress with regards to college access (Moses et al., 2019).

Discussion around college opportunity is riddled with dominant ideologies, especially in states like California that ban the consideration of race in their admission approaches. Under a meritocratic ruling, Students of Color must *earn* the right to attend college *just like everyone else* even though it means taking inherently racist standardized tests in order to meet application requirements (Au, 2016; Sackett et al., 2001; Stewart & Hayes, 2015) and obtaining high GPAs despite having a higher likelihood of attending under resourced schools with limited access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002).

Additionally, higher education institutions still promote themselves as inclusive spaces under the guise of neutrality and fairness, where opportunities to succeed are open to all (Morfin et al., 2006). Posing higher education as race neutral, objective, and/or a place where every student has equal opportunity is congruent with the very dominant ideologies that CRT seeks to disrupt. In relation to this dissertation study, race-conscious-oriented CAPs often seek to challenge dominant ideologies by facilitating conversations surrounding the impacts of racism and other forms of oppression on the education system in the United States. However, because social justice-oriented CAPs are still facilitated via higher education initiatives, I use this tenet of CRT to better understand if or how notions of race neutrality in relation to higher education play a role in the experiences of undergraduate Students of Color.

Experiential Knowledge and Storytelling

Because higher education often disregards the knowledge that Students of Color carry with them to college campuses (Bernal, 1998; Yosso, 2016), CRT scholars seek to centralize

their knowledge, experiences, and forms of Community Cultural Wealth (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). The untold stories of Students of Color can be used to provide insight into their experiences with racism on campus, detail an inspiring narrative that highlights the beauty in resisting oppression, or present an asset-based tale that allows for others from the same marginalized identities to feel seen and heard (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Experiential knowledge is recognized as a valuable, legitimate, and critical component of analyzing, understanding, and teaching about the oppression that Students of Color face on college campuses. It is recognized as a source of strength (Solórzano, 1998; Yosso, 2013).

Storytelling and counterstorytelling serve a critical function in challenging what some CRT scholars call "majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Majoritarian narratives reproduce and reinforce dominant ideologies that claim to be neutral and objective, while also creating and/or furthering racist stereotypes about Students of Color (Ikemoto, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, a persistent majoritarian story within higher education is that when white students are denied admission to a university, it is because a Student of Color took their rightful spot (Yosso, 2013). This narrative reinforces the idea that racially minoritized students attending higher education institutions gain admission only as a result of affirmative action initiatives, suggesting that they are not intelligent enough to get in by themselves. As a result, the dominant ideology of meritocracy is fortified while also degrading an individual's intelligence. To work against majoritarian stories, CRT offers storytelling as a method to centralize and better understand how race and racism can shape the experiences of minoritized students within higher education (Cook & Dixson, 2013). Through storytelling, People of Color are provided the agency to craft and depict their own stories, in ways that are true to them as the oppressed.

Counterstorytelling is both a method and methodology used to highlight the experiences of People of Color while actively working to cast doubt on the validity of majoritarian stories and the dominant ideologies that they reproduce (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Counterstorytelling can both name the racism that they experience while actively working to combat it (Delgado Bernal & Aleman, 2017). This dissertation (a) placed a substantial amount of attention, value, and analysis on the experiences of Students of Color and (b) used their stories to show how their knowledge from VIPS was used to counter majoritarian stories present in their lives. Capturing the experiential knowledge of racially minoritized undergraduate students can be crucial in countering majoritarian narratives surrounding issues related to college opportunity.

For example, CAPs and college access literature tend to focus their efforts on socializing Students of Color to be "college ready" (Conley, 2008; Perna, 2002). Moreover, often framed from a deficit perspective, college access literature focuses on what racially minoritized students are missing to be considered "college ready." Students of Color are frequently characterized as lacking in the necessary motivation to do well academically in order to go to college (Castro, 2021). Within this deficit literature, Students of Color are depicted as empty vessels in need of various forms of capital as they confront the college access process (Castro, 2013). The onus for success is often placed on racially minoritized students as opposed to the institutionalized barriers that exist to maintain white superiority. A majoritarian narrative embedded throughout this deficit approach is that Students of Color are racially inferior and lack the necessary capital to gain admittance to higher education institutions (Patton, 2016). Through an asset perspective, though, this dissertation placed value on the experiential knowledge of 12 undergraduate Students of Color as they navigated higher education. As students who have participated in a race-conscious CAP, this dissertation documented and illuminated their daily realities as

Students of Color in racialized spaces like higher education institutions that are neither race-neutral nor apolitical. These students' counterstories showcased how they experienced higher education after participating in a race-conscious CAP that brought awareness to students around educational issues related to racial oppression. In other words, this lens explored the question, did their CAP help reinforce majoritarian stories prevalent in higher education, or did it challenge them?

Interest Convergence

As a tenet of CRT, interest convergence can be used as an analytic tool to discover, highlight, and interrogate how higher education institutions will advance only the interests and needs of People of Color when it converges with white institutions' interests and needs (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). First conceptualized by Bell (1980), the interest convergence principle posits that any progress made in favor of People of Color will only occur when they align with those in power. However, if and when racial progress supersedes the privileges of whites, any forward movement towards race-conscious will eventually end (Bell, 1980; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004).

Using the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case, Bell theorized the interest convergence principle by showing how the court allowed for the move from "separate but equal" canon. Bell explained that three external realities influenced the decision. First, the commitment to desegregate schools came from a self-preserving need to "win the hearts and minds of emerging third world people" (Bell, 1980, p. 524). According to Bell (1980), it was essential that the United States maintain its credibility as a country that purports valuing the principle that all men are created equal, especially as the country sought to denounce communism. Second, there was much apprehension in the United States around the return of Black veterans who had gone off to fight in the name of equality and freedom in World War II. To return to a country where

Black men still experienced racial violence and oppression created a fear of retaliation. Ending segregation in schools was a way to preach equality while upholding white supremacist notions, practices, and policies. Finally, desegregation benefitted the southern economy as segregation threatened the expansion of industrialization and in effect, the profits that come with it. For these reasons, Bell argued that desegregation via *Brown v. Board of Education* was only made possible because it was serving the interests of whites. As a resulting concept, interest convergence asserts that the interests of People of Color will only advance if it benefits the interests of whites.

Interest convergence has been used within higher education to interrogate the field's recent interest in appearing to value diversity (Iverson, 2007). As Patel (2015) noted, colleges and universities benefit from coming across as valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion as it maintains their reputation. Admitting minoritized students to college and universities to meet diversity goals without an intentional assessment of racial campus climate or strategic efforts to increase sense of belonging for Students of Color can be framed as interest convergence (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Higher education institutions outwardly project an image of caring about the well-being of Students of Color while simultaneously upholding harmful policies and practices that protect the status quo (Castagno & Lee, 2007).

In this dissertation, interest convergence could be used as an analytic tool to expose how higher education institutions act in their own self-interest while appearing to advance racial equity, according to study participants (Aguirre, 2010). Interview questions asked how the Students of Color of this study experienced DEI efforts on their campus to highlight how they perceive diversity initiatives, policies, and procedures including the CAPs themselves (Linder et al., 2019). Do those efforts truly serve their needs as Students of Color? Or have they experienced hollow or self-serving attempts at DEI? Through an interest convergence lens,

student narratives might suggest how their CAP or other DEI efforts tout a commitment to racial equity through various practices or policies, while also protecting white supremacy. As the participants of this dissertation study described their experiences with DEI efforts such as their CAPs, an interest convergence analytic might describe how such efforts "suit the self-interests of the majority group" (i.e., white) while performing a commitment to serving Students of Color (Castagno & Lee, 2007, p. 4).

Intersectionality

In this dissertation, intersectionality could be used as an analytic tool to better understand if or how structures of oppression influenced the racialized experiences of Students of Colors at their higher education institution. As a concept, intersectionality came from a time period where Women of Color (namely, Chicana and Black) were outspoken about the multiple forms of oppression that they faced in society, specifically at the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Harris & Patton, 2017). In line with this movement in which Women of Color were describing their experiences with oppression, Crenshaw (1989), a notable CRT scholar in the field of Legal Studies, first introduced the term "intersectionality" to emphasize how Black women experienced oppression at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) unapologetically critiqued structures such as the U.S. legal system for failing to understand how specific marginalized identities can function together to oppress Black women.

In one example, Crenshaw (1989) presented the *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* (GM) case, where Black women sued GM for discrimination. The women argued that the seniority system favored white women as Black women had not been previously hired. This process made it difficult to receive fair treatment as all the women who received seniority were white. The

court ultimately struck down the suit stating that the law "must be examined to see if it states a cause of action for race discrimination, sex discrimination, or alternatively either, but not a combination of both" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 141; *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, 1976). Crenshaw used this case to show that, according to the law, sex discrimination is defined by the experiences of white women and race discrimination by the experiences of Black men. As a result, the experiences of Black women and other Women of Color are erased and reduced to be that same as those who do not suffer from racism and/or patriarchy. Intersectionality seeks to remedy this limited framing by considering how "isms" in society—racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, and more—work together to uniquely impact the experiences of those belonging to more than one marginalized community.

In 1991, Crenshaw built upon the concept of intersectionality by showing how antiracist and feminist discourse failed to accurately address the experiences of Women of Color with domestic violence and rape in the United States. Crenshaw (1991) demonstrated how these instances of racialized and gendered brutality are a byproduct of oppression at the intersection of race and gender. Crenshaw argued that there are three types of intersectionality that illustrate how race and gender intersect to create "structural, political and representational aspects of violence against [W]omen of [C]olor" (p. 1244). These three dimensions of intersectionality can serve as analytic tools to examine interlocking systems of oppression for Students of Color.

Structural intersectionality shows how Women of Color are structurally oppressed by failing to consider more than one marginalized identity. To illustrate, Crenshaw (1991) discussed how resources and policies that are supposedly designed to serve domestic violence survivors tend to center white women exclusively. For example, when funding is not allocated to shelters to secure bilingual personnel and resources, Women of Color who are also immigrants face a

structural barrier that does not meet their needs. In higher education, structural intersectionality is present when policies and practices on college campuses respond to sexual assault cases by centering support efforts around the experiences of white women (Duran et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2017).

Political intersectionality is concerned with the intersection of conflicting political agendas. For example, when a political agenda aimed at addressing racism is defined by Black men, conversations and policies designed to combat racism fall short in addressing sexism and patriarchy. Similarly, because feminism is often defined and led by white women, feminist efforts often fail to meet the needs of Women of Color who also experience racism. An example of political intersectionality in higher education can be found in a study on queer Student Leaders of Color who belong to a predominately white LGBTQ+ club on campus (Miller & Vaccaro, 2016). In attempting to support Black student organizations on a college campus, the study found a discrepancy in political agendas in that Student Leaders of Color wanted to support Black students while the white queer students did not. This caused friction between the two groups and left the Student Leaders of Color feeling outcast and ignored.

Lastly, representational intersectionality calls attention to how cultural representations enact and reproduce violence upon Women of Color. Crenshaw (1991) discussed how misogynistic imagery of Black women in rap music produces and reinforces sexist and racist stereotypes. Cultural images on college campuses can and have served as a form of representational intersectionality. For example, when faculty and office staff do not reflect a diverse demographic yet service-oriented jobs such as custodians are staffed by mostly People of Color, it can reinforce prevalent stereotypes about where People of Color "belong" on college campuses (Magdola & Delman, 2016). Crenshaw also asserted that Black women are further

oppressed and silenced when Communities of Color defend harmful representations because it is a part of "the culture." An example of this is when higher education institutions have mascots that reinforce racist stereotypes and Students of Color defend those mascots.

Researchers have used intersectionality as a paradigm, theory, framework, heuristic device, and framework (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Over the years, studies in higher education have increasingly used intersectionality as a theoretical framework (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Over the years, however, intersectionality has often become a watered down and depoliticized concept in the field of higher education. Harris and Patton (2018) showed how intersectionality has become a buzzword, often used to describe having more than one identity without linking these identities to the intersecting structures of oppression and the ways that they reinforce domination. Intersectionality can be minimized to an analysis of an individual's experiences as opposed to a "structural analysis or political critique" (Guidroz & Berger, 2009, p. 70). Embracing an intersectional framework means maintaining a commitment to driving social change and transforming structures such as higher education institutions (Thornton-Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

In this dissertation, I used intersectionality in the recruitment process, data collection, and analysis. In selecting eligible study participants, applying an intersectional lens meant intentionally identifying and selecting Students of Color who may belong to multiple marginalized communities (e.g., LGBTQ+, dis/ability, low socioeconomic status). I accomplished this by collecting demographic data during the recruitment stage (to be discussed at length in the next chapter). Additionally, the three forms of intersectionality assisted in the construction of interview protocols during the data collection phase of the study. Questions aimed to capture if or how structural, political, and representational intersectionality was present in students' experiences. For example, structural intersectionality can inform how college

policies and practices have mis/addressed students' needs. Or questions guided by representational intersectionality can ask how undergraduate Women of Color have experienced tokenization and stereotypes on campus. Ultimately, using an intersectional framework as an analytic tool helped me identify and address the ways that systems of domination such as sexism, racism, classism, and ableism work together to shape the experiences of Students of Color on college campuses (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989; Haynes et al., 2020).

Whiteness as Property

The final tenet that can be used as an analytic tool in the study of the racialized experiences of Students of Color in higher education is the concept of Whiteness as Property. In 1993, Cheryl Harris argued that whiteness operates as a form of property through the legal construction of race to maintain white dominance in the United States. As a social construction created and protected by the legal system, whiteness yields material benefits for white people such as money and land. Historically, being categorized as racially white within the law meant receiving privileges such as having the ability to vote, attend schools, and even work for money. Thus, identifying as white comes with "assumptions, privileges and benefits" (Harris, 1993, p. 1713) comes with many valuable resources that white people will seek to protect. Harris (1991) identified four forms of property rights that function to protect whiteness: the right to disposition, the right to use and enjoy, the absolute right to exclude, and the right to a good reputation and elevated status.

First, the right to disposition "ensures that those who do not fit the parameters of what it means to be white do not easily access, or inherit, whiteness and its privileges" (Harris et al., 2019, p. 18). Whiteness, therefore, cannot be transferred or sold, making it that much more valuable. The only exception, according to Patton and colleagues (2015), is that whiteness can be

passed on through family as evidenced by legacy admissions in which white students gain access to prestigious universities because of their familial connections.

Second, the right to use and enjoy includes being able to use one's white privilege for personal gain and to oppress People of Color. Simply put, being white provides individuals with the ability to both use and enjoy their white privilege over everyone else in ways that prioritize their needs and wants. In higher education, this property right is apparent when historically white fraternities and sororities are able to participate in and enjoy Greek life and the resources that they offer such as housing in proximity to campus, while excluding Students of Color (Harris et al., 2019; Ray, 2013).

The third form of property is the absolute right to exclude, which states that only whites have the ability to decide who is/is not white, and thus who is/is not deserving of white privileges such as being protected under the law. By dictating who can be considered white, People of Color (i.e., non-white people) are not only excluded from whiteness but the privileges that come with it. When white students in student affairs graduate programs solely socialize amongst themselves, excluding the Students of Color in their cohort, they are exercising their right to exclude (Bondi, 2012).

Finally, the right to reputation and status property implies that being white means you are trustworthy and respectable. White people, and those in proximity to whiteness are thus considered whole, worthy people. Being perceived as inherently good people is one that acts as a form of property that is critical to protect. It is deeply tied with white fragility, which is when the reputation of white people/structures is jeopardized in conversations around racialized oppression. For instance, the right to a good reputation and elevated status is evident when

higher education institutions hire Faculty of Color in order to appear to value diversity, equity and inclusion while also contributing to racially hostile work environments (Patel, 2015).

In many ways, higher education institutions themselves serve as a form of white property (Patel, 2015). White people at higher education institutions—including white students, administration, faculty, and staff—use their rights to create and enforce an "exclusive club whose membership [is] closely and grudgingly guarded" (Harris, 1993, p. 1736). For decades, the college degree has become a form of white property while access to higher education remains limited for Students of Color (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). The way curriculum in higher education is often reflective of white, Eurocentric perspectives, has reaffirmed who colleges and universities were created for and who they continue to cater to (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). As evidenced in the previously stated examples, whiteness as property as a tenet of CRT provides a powerful analytic tool to draw attention to the ways that higher education reproduces and protects college degree attainment and the promise of higher education as a form of white property.

Within this research, whiteness as property can be used to explore how whiteness structures undergraduate Students of Color campus experiences. If study participants understand how systems of oppression function in schools after engaging in race-conscious CAPs, a whiteness as property lens can provide additional insight in how those who identify as white may receive privileges that Students of Color do not. For example, how are the four white property rights prevalent in their college experiences? Have students been excluded from white benefits or spaces such as campus organizations or leadership roles? Do Students of Color get to enjoy the campus academically, socially, and professionally as the white students do? How might white privilege play out with their white peers inside and outside of the classroom?

Conclusion

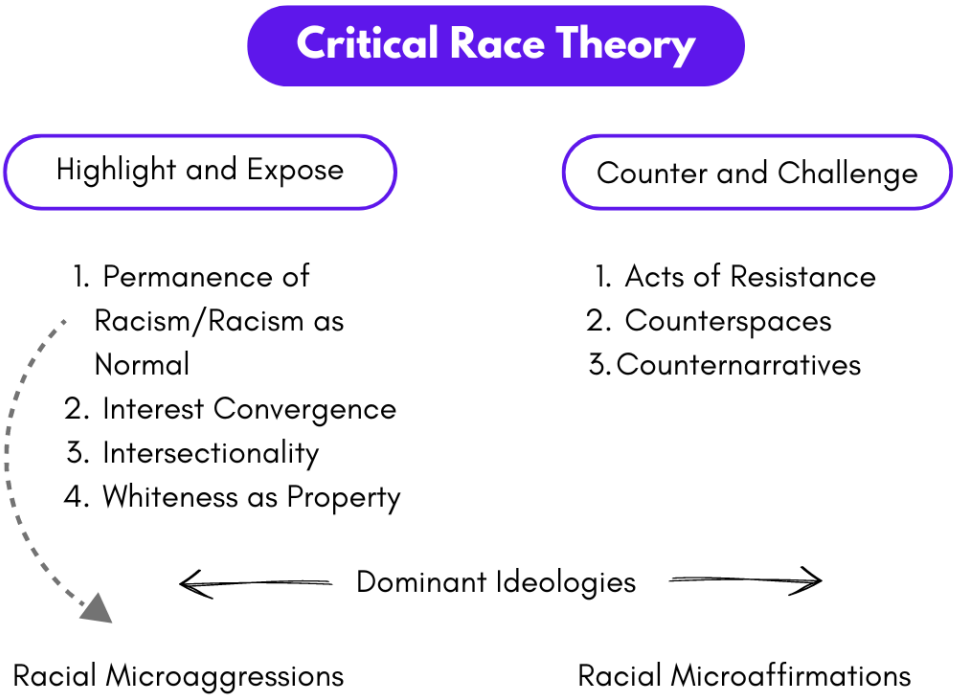
CRT provided a lens and set of tools to frame this study in a way that recognized the effects of white supremacy on the experiences of Students of Color navigating higher education. This section began with an overview of CRT as a movement and resulting theory. The history of CRT is relevant to this dissertation in understanding how oppressive structures are created through discriminatory policies, practices, and ideologies. CRT would warn higher education scholars to remember that colleges and universities are structures whose approaches can be used to further subjugate Students of Color. Through a CRT lens, this dissertation asked, What is the relationship between white supremacy and higher education institutions? More importantly, How do Students of Color who have participated in conversations around racial oppression in their race-conscious CAP experience white supremacy and higher education and undergraduate students? What are their experiences with racialization on their college campus and how, if at all, are their higher education institutions sustaining and producing racism and other forms of oppression on campus? How might they resist racial dominance?

Patton Davis (2016) asserted that CRT can play a pivotal role in "disrupting postsecondary prose, or the ordinary, predictable, and taken for granted ways in which the academy functions as a bastion of racism/white supremacy" (p. 317). This feat is accomplished by remembering that racism is part and parcel to life in America. Whether it is experienced in covert or overt ways, CRT states that racism is structural, it is systemic, and it is present in U.S. schools. In particular, I explored the experiences of undergraduate Students of Color to show how race-conscious CAPs assisted in that disruption.

To help visualize the application of CRT in this study, I created Figure 2.1 listed below. Specifically, this figure represents how I came to understand and think about CRT. On the left, I

listed the CRT tenets that best pertain to this study as they can be used to highlight and expose racism within higher education. As noted earlier in this theory section, tenets that could be used "highlight and expose" racism are (a) permanence of racism, (b) interest convergence, (c) intersectionality, and (d) whiteness as property. I also included racial microaggressions on the left as they are a result of the permanence of racism. On the right are some responses to racism, specifically how Critical Race Theorists might respond to racism and other forms of oppression are actively countered or challenged. This includes acts of resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), counterspaces (Solórzano et al., 2000), and counternarratives (Bell, 1999; Delgado, 1989). As these concepts have also been used to expose racism, specifically by noting the responses (e.g., counterspaces), these "tools to counter and challenge" can also be used to "expose and highlight." I also include racial microaffirmations as a response to racial microaggressions. Racial microaffirmations are defined as the "everyday forms of affirmation and validation People of Color engage with each other in a variety of public and private settings—those nods, smiles, embraces, use of language, etc.—that express acknowledgment and affirm self-worth" (Solórzano et al., 2020). Lastly, in the middle I have dominant ideologies which can both be used to both expose and challenge racism. This figure is referred to again in the findings to show how VIPS study collaborators possess the ability to *expose* and *challenge* oppression.

Figure 2.1. Critical Race Theory.



Review of the Literature

I situate this dissertation in two bodies of literature. First, I explore research that demonstrates how higher education institutions are often hostile spaces for Students of Color. This section details the often-hostile campus racial climate that minoritized youth can enter when pursuing higher education. I provide empirical evidence to demonstrate how Students of Color experience the campus environment as a racialized space, where students are confronted with racism in a multitude of ways. Second, I review the college access and readiness literature to examine the ways CAPs have traditionally approached serving Students of Color. I begin by showing why CAPs are necessary in preparing Students of Color for higher education, while also drawing attention to their race-evasive approaches. In this section I also explore critiques on race-neutral CAPs that promote assimilation into whiteness. Finally, I review literature on race-

conscious approaches to CAPs that seek to acknowledge the lived experiences of Students of Color.

Higher Education Institutions as Sites of Racialized Oppression

Racial exclusion, hostility and shameless attacks on Students of Color has been a part of the college experience since colleges and universities were first founded (Clark, 1967; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Johnson & Salisbury, 2010; Morales, 2021; Olivas, 1978; Reyes & Halcon, 1988). Since the beginning, higher education in the United States functioned to exclude minoritized students from obtaining a college degree by limiting enrollment to white, Christian, cisgender-men (Snyder, 1993; Wilder, 2013). And while minoritized students are now allowed to pursue a higher education, today, Students of Color face other structural barriers that limit and exclude access to higher education such as costly college tuition (DesJardins et al., 2002; Yu, 2019), underfunding K-12 schools with large proportions of minoritized student populations (Auerbach, 2004; Lewis & Manno, 2012), and bans on race-conscious admissions policies such as Prop 209 in California (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).When Students of Color do enroll in higher education institutions, they continue to face racist barriers (Embrick et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano et al., 2002).

Research has consistently demonstrated that Students of Color perceive campus climate differently than their white peers (Bourke, 2010; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin, 1992; Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Lewis et al., 2001; Lopez, 2005; Morales, 2014; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003; Valandra et al., 2022). Minoritized students are more likely to experience racial discrimination from faculty, peers, and staff and therefore perceive climates as less accepting compared to white peers' perceptions of climate (Kim et al., 2014; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Locks et al., 2008). Black students tend to view their campus racial climates as more hostile as a

result of racial oppression and differential treatment (Ancis et al., 2000; Cabrera et al., 1999; Cabrera & Nora, 1994, Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992).

Racial exclusion, segregation, and othering presents itself in social settings on college campuses in several ways. For example, Foste (2021) demonstrated how racialized meanings can be assigned to campus housing, where "premiere" halls are reserved for wealthy white students. Such practices reproduce racial segregation in which white students are placed at the top of the social hierarchy and Students of Color are othered and excluded from better campus housing (Foste, 2021). Second, Greek life is also notorious for being implicit in exclusionary practices that marginalize Students of Color on campus (Muir, 1991). Research has shown that white fraternities and sororities deny Students of Color membership to their Greek organizations because of their race or ethnicity (Cabrera, 2014; Foste & Jones, 2020; Garcia, 2019; Walker-DeVose et al., 2019). For this reason, Students of Color have had to form their own multicultural Greek organizations that are rooted in their own cultural values and experiences (Gillon et al., 2019).

Scholarship has also exposed how minoritized students, and in particular Black students, often experience criminalization and hypervigilance by police on campus and in surrounding areas (Smith et al., 2007). Alongside the police, staff, administrators, faculty and other campus constituents have also been known to typecast Students of Color as criminals who do not "fit the description" of a "typical" (i.e., white) college student (Smith et al., 2016; Timmerman, 2021). These examples illustrate how Students of Color experience racism through the racialization of social spaces on college campuses. Areas that *should* be regarded as common, welcoming, and inclusive spaces and places are racialized to privilege white students and reinforce white dominance over Students of Color.

The classroom is another space wherein college Students of Color experience racism. Research shows that white faculty treat Students of Color differently than their white peers (Feagin, 1998; Fleming, 1984; Hoston et al., 2010; Robertson et al., 2012). White professors are more likely to treat minoritized students as society does—with harmful stereotypes and patronizing behavior (Davis et al., 2004; Feagin, 1998; Hoston et al., 2010; Robertson et al., 2012). Given that faculty representation is overwhelmingly white (NCES, 2020; NCES 2022), curriculum and pedagogical practices frequently fail to reflect the knowledge, cultural wealth, and/or assets that Students of Color bring to higher education (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Gaither, 2005; Gurin et al., 2002; Nunez, 2011; Patton et al., 2007; Yosso et al., 2009). This reflected how whiteness is normalized in higher education, influencing Students of Colors' feelings of culture shock, marginality, and pressures to assimilate (Gonzalez, 2002; Gusa, 2010; Logan, 2002; Museus & Park, 2015; Nunez, 2011; Yosso, 2006).

Minoritized students also often experience overt forms of racism on college campuses that are tied to racial stereotypes (Jones, 2020; Knight & Marciano, 2015; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Although adapting to a new college environment can be an adjustment for all students, minoritized students experience an added challenge of having to cope with racialized assumptions about their intelligence, skills, and talents (Davis et al., 2004; Jones, 2002; Solórzano et al., 2001; Steele, 1997, 2004). This stereotype is grounded in the assumption that Students of Color are "special admits" that gained admission because of affirmative action policies as opposed to their academic merit and intellectual capabilities (Davis et al., 2004; Fries-Britt & Turner; 2001; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1996).

The daily reinforcement of harmful stereotypes about Communities of Color is not uncommon on college campuses. Racially themed parties (e.g., Texas A&M University "Jungle

Party" in 1992, University of California, San Diego "Compton Cookout" in 2010, Elon University's "Shock Your Mom" party in 2017), for example, have depicted Black students as thugs and gangsters, with "gold teeth, nappy hair, or cheap weave[s]" along with other racist stereotypes (Garcia et al., 2011). Similarly, Latino/a/x students have been stereotyped as maids, gardeners, and farmers on campus while Indigenous students are subjected to racist mascots (Castagno & Lee; Garcia et al., 2011). These types of occurrences are meant to reinforce racial stereotypes while dehumanizing Students of Color and positioning them as "other" on campus (Fiske et al., 1999; Solórzano, 1997), which reminds Students of Color that they do not belong and that higher education was never designed for them (Fisher, 2020; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Hate speech, hate crimes, and white supremacist propaganda on college campuses are also present on the college campus and the media coverage of these crimes have increased since 2015 (Bauman, 2018; Cabrera, 2014; Jacobs, 2018). Flyers that read "you will not replace us"—referring to the idea that People of Color seek to replace white people in the United States—have been circulated on college campuses across the nation (Kerr, 2018; Montano, 2019). Additionally, repeated attempts to bring divisive political leaders whose platforms rely on white supremacist ideologies to campus by predominantly white student groups has caused an uproar on many campuses across the country (Gerstmann, 2018). Among the most popular examples is when the Berkeley College Republicans at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) invited right-wing commentator Milo Yiannopolous to speak on campus (Park & Lah, 2017). It was reported that 1,500 protesters gathered to denounce Milo's hate speech by chanting "no space for racists" at Sproul Plaza at UCB (Park & Lah, 2017). These occurrences have become so common that *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has curated a list that shows how white supremacists—

known for spouting hate speech—have created hostile environments for Students of Color on college campuses (The Far Right Comes to Campus, n.d.; Tseisis, 2010).

Experiencing hate speech can be extremely detrimental to the success of Students of Color as they pursue a higher education (Welshon, 2020). Hate speech, or "words that wound," can escalate to hate crimes and racial violence as well as cause post-traumatic symptoms for the victim such as anxiety, stress, lower self-esteem, and depression, among other psychological and physical effects (Cabrera et al., 1999; Matsuda, 2018; Smith et al., 2011; Sullaway, 2004). Hate speech disproportionately impacts Students of Color on college campuses with the intention of degrading and disempowering the victims, often by relying on harmful stereotypes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2018; Matsuda, 1993; Stokes & Davis, 2022). In countless examples, Latino/a/x college students have been confronted with anti-immigrant hate speech by being told to "go back to their country" or "to speak English" (Ballinas, 2017; DeAngelo et al., 2016; Von Robertson et al., 2016). Black college students have been called "monkeys" who should "go back to the jungle" (Altman, 1993; Gale, 1991). Similarly, in 2022, racist text messages that read "all Asian people need to die" were made public between two students at Occidental College in Los Angeles (Moody, 2022). Racial slur namecalling is not uncommon on college campuses and remains pertinent today. In the same year, a viral video featured a white University of Kentucky undergraduate student repeatedly calling a Black student worker the "n" word at the front desk of her residence hall (Reilley, 2022). Increasingly, Students of Color can even find racialized hate speech in digital spaces such as college subreddits and twitter accounts (Gin et al., 2017; Saha et al., 2019).

College Access and Readiness for Students of Color

In the previous section, I established how campus climates can often be racist and hostile spaces for Students of Color. Next, I explore traditional college access programs, which are designed to increase higher education attainment rates for underrepresented student populations by providing K-12 schools with targeted interventions such as academic advising and college related information (Conley, 2008; Perna, 2015). As Corwin and colleagues (2005) wrote, CAPS are "aimed at enhancing and supplementing a school's regular activities to assist primarily low-income, minorit[ized] youth who might otherwise not be able to attend college" (p. 3). These more traditional programs are often framed as a college readiness intervention tool, but I argue that these programs often use race-neutral approaches to preparing Students of Color for college. Next, I highlight emerging research on access programs that seek to acknowledge and center the importance of race within college readiness efforts. I end this chapter by noting the lack of scholarship on access programs that not only center race, but the role of racism in how Students of Color are prepared for college. I identify a need for scholarship on the experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who had been prepared to enter higher education as a racialized space through their high school college access program.

College Access Programs as a National Imperative

Although college access for minoritized students has increased over the years, Students of Color continue to fall behind their white peers with regards to baccalaureate degree attainment (Kena et al., 2016). Disproportionate college attainment rates are an increasing concern as the demography of the U.S. population continues to diversify. This inequity is a social justice issue because higher education degrees are associated with better employment rates, better health, lower poverty rates, and longer life expectancies (Carnevale et al., 2013). Additionally, scholars

have also projected that there will be a shortage of 1.1 million college educated workers by 2030 in diverse states such as California (Johnson et al., 2015; NCES, 2022; Paredes et al., 2020). For this reason, the federal government continues to provide $1 billion dollars to college access programs nationwide to increase the number of underrepresented students—such as Students of Color—enrolling and graduating from college (Le et al., 2016; Swail & Perna, 2002).

College access programs have existed for nearly 60 years. In the beginning, as a means of addressing the historical exclusion and subjugation of Students of Color throughout the college-going pipeline, access programs served as a critical intervention in increasing diverse student representation within higher education (Gandara & Bial, 2001; Granger, 2008; Perna, 2002). College access programs are a byproduct of the Civil Rights Movement and higher education legislation such as affirmative action and the Higher Education Act (HEA) which allowed for the implementation of targeted college recruitment initiatives and funding opportunities (Patton et al., 2019). Through multiple iterations of HEA, the Department of Education has been able to incentivize higher education institutions to develop "Special Programs for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds" by awarding grants (Howard et al., 2016; McElroy & Armesto, 1998). These access programs—such as TRIO programs, Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services—have introduced and modeled college access programming across the nation. These programs were created to help "disadvantaged," namely low-income and first-generation students achieve their higher education goals (McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Thomas et al., 1998). "Low-income" and "first-generation" became eligibility requirements that ensured Students of Color would be eligible for these programs and they "would be provided with opportunities to improve their economic and social conditions through higher education" (Thomas et al., 1998, p. 390).

Each program was originally created to serve its own particular purpose (McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Thomas et al., 1998). TRIO programs were created with three collective goals: (a) to improve college retention for program participants; (b) to increase transfer rates from community colleges to four-year institutions; and (c) to support low-income first-generation students in their postsecondary educational goals. For example, Upward Bound was designed to increase college access and retention for underrepresented students, such as low-income Students of Color, by providing academic support such as tutoring, college guidance on admission requirements such as standardized entrance exams, and college transition assistance through summer bridge programming (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Talent Search was designed to find promising students who may be overlooked or pushed out of their high schools. Students identified as talented would receive academic, career and financial counseling from Talent Search to help them graduate from high school and enroll in college (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Student Support Services aimed to increase college retention and graduation rates by guiding students through college admission requirements and providing academic development opportunities such as tutoring, advising, and mentoring (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Ultimately, these programs were designed to increase college opportunity for underrepresented students by providing college preparation assistance such as tutoring, college counseling, and summer bridge programming (McElroy & Armesto, 1998).

At the core, college access programs are designed to assist historically underrepresented students in reaching their college degree attainment goals by providing the necessary skills, tools, and information necessary to become successful college students (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2017; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). With varying funding streams and approaches, today there are approximately 1,650 access programs in partnership with K-12 schools throughout the

United States (Swail, 2000; Swail & Perna, 2002). While some college access programs are federally funded (such as the TRIO programs previously mentioned) others are supported by private grants through philanthropic organizations such as Advanced Via Individual Determination (AVID) or sponsored by higher education institutions like the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) through the University of California system (Domina, 2009).

The government continues to invest in these programs because research has consistently shown that Students of Color are more likely to experience poorer and unequal schooling conditions that make it difficult to enroll and succeed in college (Auerbach, 2004; Harvard, 2009; Orfield & Lee, 2006; McDonough, 2005; Murray et al., 1998). Policymakers and educators have come to recognize that the K-12 education system is so broken that filling the gaps with college access programs is considered an easier solution than addressing all school issues that make education inequitable for Students of Color (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). As Hagedorn and Perna (2002) wrote, "[the] assumption is that if fundamental changes for all school children cannot be realized immediately, then college preparation programs might serve as demonstrations to point out ways to succeed, and in doing so, also help some children who otherwise would not have gone to college" (p. 2).

For example, to be considered "competitive" for college admission, students are encouraged to take as many Advanced Placement (AP) courses as possible in high school. However, schools with large proportions of Students of Color have less access to AP classes than their white peers (Hallet & Venegas, 2011; Handwerk et al., 2008; Klugman, 2013). Students of Color are also more likely to be tracked into "low performance" courses in high school because of racialized assumptions about their intellectual capability (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Oakes, 2005). Additionally, minoritized students frequently attend underfunded and under resourced

schools with limited and often low-quality access to counselors (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; McDonough et al., 2006), qualified and supportive teachers (Fischbach et al., 2013; McKown & Weinstein, 2008), and rigorous coursework (Burris et al., 2008). Students of Color also tend to be the first in their families to navigate the college going process; these students often rely on K-12 schools for college related information (Howard et al., 2016; Hurtado et al., 2020; Saenz et al., 2007). Scholars have found that the college attainment gap between white students and Students of Color is often a result of racist policies and practices in K-12 schools that limit the structure of college opportunity for Students of Color (Goldland, 1984; Huerta et al., 2018; McDonough, 2004; Rubin & Noguera, 2004; Yun & Moreno, 2006).

As a result of the unequal schooling conditions, college access programs are designed to provide supplemental college preparatory services to those considered to be underrepresented in higher education such as (but not limited to) first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized students (Howard et al., 2016; Perna, 2002). Research has shown that most common goals of college intervention programs include increasing college attendance, increasing college awareness, improving academic skills, boosting self-esteem, and exposing students to college (Swail & Perna, 2002).

Programs take varying approaches to preparing students for college, but typically offer some aspect of academic support such as tutoring, opportunities for parent involvement, and counseling services (Howard et al., 2016; Perna, 2002). Many of the offered services are guided by research. For example, because Students of Color often identify as first-generation (i.e., their families did not attend college) there is often a gap of knowledge on how to obtain a college degree (Perna, 2002). Involving parents in the college going process can be an important, if not the most important, predictor in postsecondary success (Brookover et al., 2021; Hossler et al.,

1999; Swail & Perna, 2002). Thus, involving parents in the college going process has become a common goal of college access programs. Similarly, demonstrating high academic preparation or achievements, such as taking at least one advanced math course for example, increases the likelihood of a student enrolling in college (Horn, 1999; Hossler et al., 1999; Perna, 2000). Therefore, offering tutoring services has become a critical component of college access program services.

There are many benefits to participating in college access programs as a Student of Color. Academically, college access programs have been tied to higher SAT scores, improvement in student GPAs, and better graduation rates (Morgan et al., 2015; Yampolskaya et al., 2006). Participation in college access programs can also improve college enrollment rates as well as college persistence (Bowman et al., 2018; Fogg & Harrinl Weigher et al., 2006). To illustrate, one study found that college access programs help students do better on course exams, take more Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and earn a B letter grade or higher in their fundamental college courses compared to students not enrolled in an access program (Le et al., 2016). College access programs also help increase college knowledge for racially minoritized youth (Mclure & Child, 1998; Watt et al., 2007). College access programs seek to expose students to college, which can strengthen educational aspirations and has proven to serve as a significant predictor of college enrollment (Hossler et al., 1989; Perna, 2000). As students are being given the skills and information needed to enroll in college through college access programs, they also build mentorships that can feel like family (Cooper et al., 2002). Having teachers, college access staff, and peers who share a similar goal of getting students to college creates a familial bond that is so profound that alumni frequently express a desire to help expand access by giving back to their communities (Cooper et al., 2002; Mendiola et al., 2010).

College Readiness as a Key Component to Access

Research on CAPS in relation to Students of Color have historically focused on interventions that help these students enroll in college (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). In recent years, however, there has been more interest in not only preparing Students of Color to enroll in college, but also preparing students to be college ready so that they might successfully navigate the campus environment and graduate from college (Conley, 2012; Tierney, & Duncheon, 2015). Many states and college access scholars have set parameters around what it means to be "college ready," although there is no single definition (Contreras, 2019). In California, for instance, the Common Core State Standards which were implemented in 2010 were intended to standardize what it means to be college and career "ready" (California Department of Education, 2022). The Common Core approach focuses on developing students to deepen their critical thinking, show that they understand core ideas, and demonstrate problem solving skills as opposed to regurgitating facts (McLaughlin et al., 2014). In math, for instance, Common Core standards place a bigger emphasis on connecting mathematical skills like multiplication to everyday life, such as having to do multiplication in a store while purchasing goods (Gao & Lafortune, 2019).

Researchers both align with and expand on these definitions of college readiness. Lu and colleagues (2012), for example, argued that college readiness is multidimensional in that there are many skills, traits, habits, and information that students need to enter and succeed in college. Conley (2007) contended that being college ready is being "able to understand what is expected in a college course, can cope with the content knowledge that is presented, and can take away from the course the key intellectual lessons and dispositions the course was designed to convey and develop" (pp. 5–6). College readiness is focused on ensuring that a student is academically prepared for the rigors of college coursework (Tierney & Sablan, 2014), such as being familiar

with key concepts in subject areas like math, science, and English are considered cognitive competencies that are critical for college readiness (Achieve, 2004; Conley, 2003). Writing is also greatly emphasized as a vital skill necessary for college success (Conley, 2008).

High school GPA, standardized test scores such as the SAT and ACT, and class rank have all been used to determine if a student is academically prepared for college (Allen et al., 2017; Greene & Forster, 2003; Kerr, 2016; Maruyama, 2012; Wiley et al., 2011). Some scholars have documented the relationship between a student's course-taking patterns and college completion (Adelman, 1999, 2006). For this reason, some researchers have focused on the importance of high school curriculum, stating that an intense and rigorous course load, such as taking algebra through precalculus, is critical in preparing students for college courses (Adelman, 2006; Attewell & Domina, 2008; Horn et al., 2011).

Others have pointed to the importance of obtaining certain mindsets, habits, and behaviors to aid in the college readiness process (Duncheon, 2021; Conley, 2012). Skills such as time management, financial literacy, and ability to interact with peers and/or faculty have been tied to positive outcomes in the college classroom (Conley, 2007, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Other behaviors such as demonstrating high levels of motivation, self-efficacy, and self-advocacy have been linked to promote college readiness and success (Hsieh et al., 2007; Kitsantas et al., 2008). Additionally, students who can positively engage in group work, use strategic study skills, and take ownership of their learning have been deemed "college ready" (Conley, 2008; Conley et al., 2014).

One additional component of college readiness is ensuring that students have the necessary "college knowledge" needed to enroll and graduate from their university (Conley, 2008; Tierney & Sablan, 2014). Students of Color often have the aspirations to pursue higher

education, but need supplemental information because they tend to be the first in their families to attend college and are less likely to have quality access to information (Hurtado et al., 2020; Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). "College knowledge" broadly refers to becoming acquainted with the logistical and cultural expectations of higher education. This college knowledge is often provided by college access programs (Duncheon, 2021). For example, learning how to apply to college is a critical component of college access programming (Perna, 2002). Students of Color need additional support in gaining an understanding of how to search for and apply to colleges that meet their needs (Roderick et al., 2011). This also includes a clear understanding of how to best approach financial aid, such as applying for fee waivers or scholarships, completing the necessary applications (e.g., FAFSA), interpreting award letters and weighing out the best aid options (Bettinger et al., 2013; Hoxby et al., 2012; Perna, 2015). Students also need to understand which courses must be completed (such as the A-G requirements in California) to maintain college eligibility (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Having an early grasp of college knowledge can help students who aspire to go to college to meet their academic goals (Kurlaender et al., 2019).

College knowledge also includes learning how to navigate college once enrolled, or the ability to integrate to the campus culture (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Tierney & Duncheon, 2015). Scholars have highlighted the importance of understanding higher education "culture and structure" such as "the ways of knowing and intellectual norms of this academic and social environment" (Conley, 2008, p. 6). In this respect, college access programs place a great emphasis on things like coordinating day or overnight campus visits and campus-led presentations that "expose students to academic communities" while also giving students a sense of college life with regards to norms, values, and beliefs (Kitchen et al., 2020, p. 267; Magdola,

2000; Tornatzky et al., 2002). In fact, this type of college access programming was regarded as the most influential for Students of Color in preparing them for higher education (Morgan et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2021).

Critiques of College Readiness

In recent years, scholars have begun to critique how college access programs approach college readiness for Students of Color (Castro, 2013). Higher education scholars and practitioners argue that traditional conceptualizations of college readiness are often rooted in deficit narratives that pose Students of Color as lacking in the necessary knowledge, ability, and aspiration to graduate from higher education (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018). This is compounded when college access programs take a one-size-fits-all, race-neutral approach to preparing *all* students for college in the same way (Castro, 2013). As a result, minoritized youth can feel the need to abandon their own diverse cultures and adopt white middle-class culture to succeed in college (Moses & Wiley, 2020).

College access programs that seek to facilitate "college readiness" are often grounded in race-evasive frameworks that do not adequately address the lived realities of Students of Color (Castro, 2013; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005). In particular, the question of whose culture is centered in college readiness efforts has received notable attention in the last decade. For example, the Common Core is a standardized approach intended to prepare all students for college and career, but scholars have critiqued how white perspectives are centered within the curriculum (Kolluri, 2022). A recent study revealed that high school Students of Color find the curriculum to be Eurocentric and less relevant to their lives (Kolluri, 2022). Students expressed feeling that the curriculum was incongruent with their own cultures, home life, and racialized realities. College readiness interventions are also riddled with neoliberal ideologies and deficit

perspectives that equate "college worthiness" to white, middle-class customs (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018). The researchers exposed how institutional stakeholders, such as school principals, operate under a "hierarchy of values" where white middle-class students are assumed to already hold values that are necessary for college success and Students of Color are positioned as needing to prove their college worthiness by rejecting their own cultural backgrounds (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018). Scholars have identified the centrality of whiteness as an issue, as studies have shown that utilizing culturally relevant approaches to college readiness can improve academic achievement and college success for Students of Color (Dee & Penner, 2017; Ladson Billings, 2014; Tierney, 1992).

Culture and Racism in Emerging College Readiness Programs

Some access programs across the country have tried to tailor college preparation to reflect the lived realities of Students of Color (Knight & Marciano, 2015; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Recently, terms such as "culturally relevant" and "critically conscious" have been used to differentiate emerging CAPs from CAPs that use traditionally race-evasive approaches. In this section of the literature, I begin to explore these CAPS that are decidedly different from traditional CAPs that are not race-conscious. I explored two different approaches that CAPs take to centering race through their programming: culturally relevant CAPs that use culture as a proxy for race and race-conscious programs that address the role of structural racism in preparing Students of Color for college. In the first body of literature, I show how culture within "culturally relevant" CAPs is used as a proxy for conversations about race. These culturally relevant CAPs often describe the integration of "culture" as an important means to prepare Students of Color for college do not explicitly aim to teach students about racism.

Race-conscious college access programming, on the other hand, often reach beyond culture and positions critical consciousness as a vital component of college readiness. In this different and understudied type of access programming, Students of Color engage in conversations around race and racism to prepare them for racism as a part of everyday life both inside and outside of higher education (Howard et al., 2016; Jayakumar et al., 2013). Through this dissertation, I aim to better understand the experiences of Students of Color engaging in race-conscious college access programming that integrates critical consciousness.

Culture among Students of Color

Over the last few years, several CAPs websites have made commitments to the incorporation of culture in their readiness. Institution affiliated college access programs like OASIS at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) as well as nonprofit organizations like Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) use the phrase "culturally responsive" to describe their approaches in preparing Students of Color for higher education. GEAR UP, a federally funded college access program at the University of Michigan writes on their webpage, "[w]e believe in education's transformative power and work towards equitable and culturally relevant educational opportunities for all students." Similarly, Arizona State University funds a pre-college program named INSPIRE, which helps Indigenous "students develop academic and personal success behaviors through culturally-relevant, project-based learning while connecting with ASU American Indian students, staff and faculty." Although the term is frequently used on college access programs or outreach websites, few have specified where the term culturally relevant comes from or fully operationalized what culturally relevant programming means in practice.

Although websites for CAPs provide little information on how culture is integrated into their readiness efforts in practice, there are some peer reviewed articles that provide insight into how some CAPs approach cultural relevance. Some studies connect culture to family by addressing college knowledge gaps for high school Students of Color and their parents/guardians in college readiness efforts. In this way, being "culturally relevant" means engaging parents/guardians in college readiness events such as campus visits or workshops (Bryan et al., 2019). For others, it means offering bilingual college access programming for students and their parents/guardians (Auerbach, 2004). Other scholars have examined the role of peers in providing culturally relevant forms of support as minoritized youth maneuver the college-going process (Marciano, 2017, 2021). The study suggests that when peers provide other Students of Color with words of motivation and overall support, they are assisting in their college readiness in a culturally relevant way (Marciano, 2017). Another study pointed to the power of representation and positive role modeling, recommending that college access programs incorporate diverse staff in order to be culturally relevant (Rivera-Mosquera et al., 2007). In addition to the aforementioned interventions, the overarching consensus in the literature is that culturally relevant programs are not only affirming of students' diverse cultures, but viewed as an asset (Bryan et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2016; Knight-Manuel et al., 2019; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005). When college readiness efforts do highlight, center, and appreciate a specific race's culture in their access programming, scholars have argued that there is a smoother transition from high school to higher education institutions (Kolluri & Tierney, 2020; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005).

Critical Consciousness in Race-Conscious CAPS

To combat college readiness interventions that promote the assimilation of Students of Color into whiteness, some researchers have called for more "evidence-based remedies that address [the role of] structural racism in college preparation" (Majors, 2019. p. 194; Castro, 2013). Race-conscious programs address the role of structural racism in the everyday lives of Students of Color, including higher education. Race-conscious CAPS—defined here as programs that include critical consciousness as a critical component of college readiness for Students of Color—continue to emerge in the field of higher education (Knight & Marciano, 2015). These programs build the critical consciousness of Students of Color by teaching them how racism and other forms of oppression can shape their schooling experiences (Howard et al., 2016). Race-conscious CAPs are different from those that center culture, because they also prepare Students of Color to enter college campuses as a racialized space where racism is prevalent and can have deleterious impacts (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Patton, 2016).

Critical consciousness in race-conscious CAPS is developed by openly discussing and engaging in learning opportunities around systems of oppression with high school Students of Color (Howard et al., 2016; Jayakumar et al., 2013). Because Students of Color experience racialization on college campuses, race-conscious CAPS attempt to prepare them to enter white spaces, such as higher education institutions. For example, one program provided a curriculum that covered the topic of anti-Black racism to prepare Black youth to deal with differential treatment in higher education (Jayakumar et al., 2013). However, little is known about CAPS that aim to raise critical consciousness and the experiences of students who engage in these programs. The research that does exist mostly focuses on high school perspectives of these programs (e.g., Howard et al., 2016; Knight & Marciano, 2015). For example, one article draws

on the experiences of Latino/a/x high school students after engaging in an afterschool program that promotes college readiness and critical consciousness development (McWhirter et al., 2021). The program provided traditional resources to facilitate college readiness such as academic support through tutoring and opportunities for career exploration, while also focusing on topics related to racism and other forms of oppression. Tutors were encouraged to provide students with an awareness of the realities of structural oppression, strategies on how to navigate those barriers, and an appreciation of how their home communities can contribute to academic success. The authors argued that students who participated in the program were better equipped to respond to oppression in academic and professional settings (McWhirter et al., 2021). McWhirter and colleagues (2021) further explained, "[s]tudents learn to advocate for themselves and work effectively with others by experimenting with strategies for addressing problems proximate to their daily experiences as Latinx immigrant students, for example, personal and bystander experiences of interpersonal racism, gender-based harassment, and homophobia" (p. 533). The authors argue that critical consciousness should be leveraged within college readiness efforts, specifically for Latinx immigrant youth. However, there is a dearth of literature that expands on the experiences of undergraduate Students of Color broadly (as opposed to Latinx students specifically, as are the focus for McWhirter and colleagues) as they navigate higher education after engaging in CAPS that develop critical consciousness.

Another qualitative research study focused on the experiences of 25 Black high school students involved in a race-conscious college access program (Jayakumar et al., 2013). The program, known as Young Black Scholars, hosted by UC Los Angeles, incorporated sociocultural development as a component of their readiness efforts. Workshops that were created to increase college knowledge also included discussions around systems of oppression in

relation to their positioning in society, including higher education. The study found that having an awareness of the realities of underrepresentation in Black students in college propelled their motivation to go to college even further (Jayakumar et al., 2013). This allowed for college-going to become about an "individual responsibility toward collective success" (p. 566) where Black student success became about resisting deficit stereotypes. This study is promising in that it supports Black students' motivation to enroll in college, but what is left to be explored is how critical consciousness translates as Students of Color transition to and through college. It also solely focuses on the Black high school student experience, while this dissertation focused on undergraduate Black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students.

With the growing popularity of college access programs that seek to incorporate race-conscious college readiness interventions, there is increasing need to understand how Students of Color respond to these efforts, especially as they navigate higher education. As demonstrated in this literature review, some studies focus on Students of Color in college access programs as a means to facilitate college readiness (Howard et al., 2016; Knight & Marciano, 2015). Frequently, these studies sample high school Students of Color, with less attention to how these access programs help them navigate college once enrolled (Jayakumar et al., 2013; McWhirter et al., 2021). At the same time, most studies on college access interventions take a race-neutral approach to readying Students of Color for college that in turn promote deficit perspectives and assimilation into whiteness (Castro, 2013). Although there is an interest in shifting towards culturally relevant programs that include critical consciousness, there is much to be explored with regards to the experiences and perspectives of Students of Color who have participated in these programs.

Research Gaps

Because higher education scholars have recently raised concerns about whether or not Students of Color should be prepared to enter college spaces in the same way as white students, there is a growing opportunity to explore CAPS that claim to center the lived realities of minoritized youth in readiness efforts (Castro, 2013; Jayakumar et al., 2013; Knight & Marciano, 2015; Welton & Martinez, 2014). While some research has explored the integration of culture in college readiness efforts for Students of Color, very few address how higher education institutions can serve as racially hostile spaces (Auerbach, 2004; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). In this dissertation, I learned more about the critical consciousness (CC) development of race-conscious college access programs and how SOC used CC to navigate higher education. To distinguish access programs that incorporate critical consciousness development as a component of college readiness from those that do not, I use the term race-conscious CAPS. The few studies that do focus on critical consciousness as a component of college readiness tend to draw from the experiences of high school students (Jayakumar et al., 2013; McWhirter et al., 2021). Instead, this dissertation study focused on the racialized experiences of college enrolled Students of Color who have engaged in race-conscious CAPS to better understand their experiences as they navigate college. Additionally, extant research has mostly focused on Black and Latino/a/x youth narratives respectively (Jayakumar et al., 2013; McWhirter et al., 2021). In this study, I highlight the experiences of Black and multiracial students.

Using CRT as a theoretical framework in this dissertation provided me the opportunity to consider the role of intersecting forms of oppression, which is also missing from existing scholarship on critical consciousness in race-conscious CAPS (Jayakumar et al., 2013;

McWhirter et al., 2021). Other research has used theories such as Community Cultural Wealth, an asset-based framework that argues that Communities of Color have aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital that is often ignored by schools (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Yosso, 2005). Critical Consciousness, which is defined as having a "critical awareness of inequity and injustice, political efficacy or agency for responding to injustice, and critical activism, or engaging in behaviors to counter or change conditions of injustice" (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016, pp. 543–544) has also been used to study the experiences of minoritized students in race-conscious CAPS. These frameworks have been useful in recognizing the forms of capital that Students of Color bring to educational spaces, particularly as they engage in the college-going process as well as demonstrate how critical consciousness is built in a race-conscious CAP, but do little to explain how racialization is actually experienced on a college campus (Jayakumar et al., 2013; McWhirter et al., 2021). Alternatively this study will utilize a CRT framework which provides many tools such as challenge to dominant ideologies, whiteness at property and storytelling . This framing can provide uniquely important insights as the narratives of Students of Color are centered in this dissertation (Patton, 2016).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Through this research, I was able to explore the experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who had engaged in a race-conscious college access program that sought to develop critical consciousness as a component of college readiness. In the previous chapter, I examined literature that demonstrates the many ways Students of Color experience racism, racism, and racialization differently from their white peers (e.g., Solórzano et al., 2002), pointed to the race-evasive approaches to preparing minoritized students for college despite this reality (e.g., Moses & Wiley, 2020), and highlighted emerging approaches to center culture and racism in race-conscious college access programming (e.g., Knight & Marciano, 2015). These race-conscious approaches, however, have largely gone unexamined. To fill this gap, I explored the following research questions through this dissertation research:

1) What do Students of Color learn about race and racism as it relates to the college experience through race-conscious college access programs?
2) What are the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who participated in a race-conscious college access program?
    a. How do these Students of Color perceive that the college access program has influenced their navigation of their racialized campus experiences?

To answer these questions, I used a qualitative research approach that takes a Critical Race Methodological (CRM) and Critical Race Feminista Praxis to examine the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In this chapter, I explain the choices I made in the design of this dissertation study, starting with the rationale for using a qualitative research approach. The following section presents the logic behind choosing CRM to study how Students of Color both experience and respond to intersecting forms of oppression on college campuses (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I also describe the unique context

of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) as the study's research site. I then provide detailed information on the specific methods that were used in the data collection and analysis process of this study including recruitment strategies, guiding questions, and analytic approach. I end with a statement on my positioning as a researcher in conducting this research as a light skinned Latina.

Qualitative Research Design

As this dissertation is concerned with better understanding the experiences of undergraduate Students of Color after engaging in a race-conscious CAP, a qualitative research design was best suited to answer this study's research questions. First, a qualitative approach provides insight into people's lived experiences, how they make meaning of those experiences, and how they understand the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using a qualitative research design allowed for the Students of Color in this study to reflect on their time in a race-conscious CAP, to explore their racialized experiences as an undergraduate Student of Color while also being prompted to make meaning of those experiences together. One way to gain such insights is through the use of interviews, which allowed me as the qualitative researcher to probe for more in-depth responses (Seidman, 2006). In this way, I became the tool through which data was collected and analyzed—another key characteristic of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Through qualitative research, I was able to use interviews to ask questions about the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color, build on their previous responses, and clarify any unknowns in real time (Maxwell, 2012). While quantitative research can use numbers and percentages to show how Students of Color are faring in higher education when it comes to retention, a qualitative approach can provide insight into why the numbers are what they are (Seidman, 2006). Fundamentally, doing qualitative research and using interviews is about

seeking out stories to understand (Seidman, 2006). Interviews thus allowed me to ask questions about context, while engaging in rich storytelling, and providing nuance about the experiences of undergraduate Students of Color (Ravich & Carl, 2019).

Critical Race Methodology

I utilized a Critical Race Methodology (CRM) to highlight the narratives of 12 undergraduate Students of Color after they have engaged in a race-conscious CAP (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Grounded in CRT, a CRM approach maintains a commitment to centering race, racism and other intersecting forms of oppression throughout the entirety of the research process (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The goal of CRM is to highlight and place value on the stories of those who exist on the margins, to disrupt unequal power structures, and unseat dominant research paradigms (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Part of ensuring that CRM research promotes social change within higher education, is by acknowledging that it exists on college campuses (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Patton, 2016; Solórzano et al., 2001). This means that race, racism and other intersecting forms of oppression are centered in all aspects of the research process (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In this study, subordination (racialized, gendered, etc.) are centered in the study design, data collection, and data analysis processes.

I draw upon the storytelling tenet of CRT and CRM to both center and better understand the racialized experiences of Students of Color as they navigate higher education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As a tool of CRT, storytelling provides insights into how intersecting forms of oppression and/or subordination shape the lived experiences of People of Color (Williams, 1991). These stories are seen as valid and important forms of data that can be used to analyze the role of oppression in schools (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2013). In this study, storytelling and narrative sharing foreground how data is collected (see "The Data" section of this chapter).

In this study, I refer to counter-storytelling as the act of countering majoritarian-narratives (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Majoritarian narratives are stories that work to silence and misrepresent the experiences of People of Color, often in an unassuming way (Martinez, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, one common majoritarian story in higher education is that affirmative action acts as reverse racism, where Students of Color are undeservingly provided access to higher education while taking the "rightful" spots of white students (Yosso, 2013). The "cure" to majoritarian narratives is to provide a counterstory that challenges the dominant narratives by telling the stories of those on the margins of society (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In this study, the concept of counterstories was used to show how VIPS, as a race-conscious CAP helps create narratives that oppose majoritarian stories. Instead, SOC can build community, resist oppression, and debunk false notions of race-neutrality as it relates to higher education.

Research Site

This research site for this study is the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). UCLA is a large, public, research-intensive institution located on the west coast of southern California with an undergraduate student demographic makeup that is 5% Black, less than 1% Native, 33% AAPI, 21% Latino/a/x, 26% white and 4% of which are unknown race/ethnicity (UCLA, n.d.). Although UCLA is no longer considered a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), it is still considered a Historically White Institution (HWI) in the way that the campus continues to reproduce whiteness and white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022).

I chose this research site for several reasons. First, I chose UCLA because it houses a race-conscious CAP known as the Vice-Provost's Initiative for Pre-College Scholars (VIPS), where typically, half the program's alum enroll. For example, in 2021, 17 VIP scholars were accepted

to UCLA and 15 chose to enroll. According to the program's data through the years, almost half of each cohort chooses to attend UCLA after participating in the program. I know this because I am currently serving as a Graduate Student Researcher (GSR) for the program. I have been in this role since September of 2022 and have attended most programmatic efforts. I have seen first-hand how the program integrates issues related to social justice in their readiness efforts, such as how to address racism in their high school classrooms. I have also analyzed previously collected data (by another GSR) on the experiences of VIPS students while they are in high school. Many of them have spoken to the critical consciousness component of the program, specifically how eye-opening it was to learn about systems of oppression as high school Students of Color. However, the program has yet to collect qualitative data on VIP scholars as undergraduate students. Thus, UCLA is well-positioned to provide study participants for my dissertation research because this study sought to recruit current undergraduate students who have participated in a race-conscious CAP, such as VIPS.

Secondly, UCLA has a recorded history of racially charged incidents that still persist today (Fonseca et al., 2022; Moses, 2020). A report recently released by the Luskin Center of History and Policy details the racist history of UCLA, including how the campus was built on stolen land (Fonseca et al., 2022). It also detailed the murder of two Black students by the names of John Huggins and "Bunchy" Carter at a Black Student Union meeting in 1969 (Fonseca et al., 2022). According to the Luskin report and many *Daily Bruin* newspaper articles written by UCLA students, racism remains a very real occurrence on campus.

One of the most salient concerns is the institution's large police presence on campus (Fonseca et al., 2022). In recent years, UCLA students and faculty alike have fought against the rising number of University of California Police Department (UCPD) officers on campus, stating that Students of Color are more likely to get stopped, profiled, and interrogated (Wheeler, 2022).

Documentation of racial slurs and hate speech have also been captured by the *Daily Bruin*. Last year, in 2022 the UCLA gymnastics team made headlines when a first-year student was accused of using racial slurs such as the N word in front of Black teammates (Cash, 2022). Another student athlete by the name of Chris Weiland was reprimanded for spewing racist and homophobic slurs via text and video message (Rivera, 2021). These are just some of the *recorded* instances that show how UCLA functions as a racialized space for Students of Color. Furthermore, both articles detail the lack of adequate institutional response from UCLA (Cash, 2022; Rivera, 2021). Both instances were repeatedly reported by students and the campus did nothing, emphasizing how higher education institutions like UCLA, serve as a form of white property in which whiteness is protected first and foremost (Cash, 2022; Patel, 2015; Rivera, 2021). Thus, because this dissertation studied the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color after engaging in a race-conscious CAP, UCLA was an ideal site from which to draw participants.

VIPS as a Race-Conscious CAP

VIPS is a race-conscious CAP that was created in 2005 as a direct response to the decline in the number of Students of Color—with a special focus on Black youth—who were admitted and enrolled at UCLA after the passing of Prop 209 (Howard et al., 2016). As noted in the book *Expanding College Access for Urban Youth: What Schools and Colleges Can Do* which highlights the VIPS program as a case study, the program came to be as a result of Prop 209 in California, which criminalized discussions of race and ethnicity within college admissions decision making. With collective organizing of UCLA faculty, staff, administrators, and students, VIPS was created with a focus on "college access and social justice" (Howard et al., 2016, p. 30). For over 15 years faculty, students (from undergraduate to graduate), and scholar

practitioners have helped run the program with the goal of preparing Students of Color to enter flagship higher education institutions like UCLA.

At the core, the program itself is designed to provide college information and support to Students of Color during their last two years of high school. As juniors and seniors, students from partnering schools within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) are selected to participate in VIPS based on a written application and interview. Every year, roughly 30 to 40 students and their families are invited to participate in the program. VIP scholars and their families (often parents) are asked to commit to the following components of the program: (a) attend one Saturday Academy per quarter each year to receive college related information; and (b) attend summer residential programming at UCLA where VIP scholars take college courses to develop writing skills and critical consciousness. VIP scholars also receive year-round support at their high school campus through their mentors, who are VIPS alumni and current undergraduate students. This includes workshops on filling out a college application, how to write a college essay, as well as general academic guidance and mentorship.

Where VIPS might differ from CAPs that use race-evasive approaches to college access programming is that the program expresses a commitment to social justice by developing student's critical consciousness (Howard et al., 2016). As a race-conscious CAP guided by CRT and other critical theories, VIPS not only introduces Students of Color to pertinent college knowledge (e.g., financial aid, how to apply, etc.) but invites them to explore issues related to race, class, gender and its relation to the education system in the United States (Howard et al., 2016). Creators of the program state that VIPS "engages students in a discourse that allows them to learn about their history, culture, and community throughout their participation in the program" (Howard et al., 2016, p. 30).

For example, as a part of the program, VIP scholars and their parents are required to attend a mandatory Saturday Academy Workshop which is held once every quarter from their junior to senior year of high school. In one of the workshops, VIPS facilitated many conversations around systemic inequities that exist within the education pipeline. One of those discussions involved showing students and their parents the disparities in access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses throughout differently resourced high schools. VIPS workshop facilitators showed how schools with large bodies of Students of Color enrolled tended to have less access to AP courses which hurt their competitive eligibility to top tier colleges (Hallet & Venegas, 2011; Handwerk et al., 2008; Klugman, 2013). Students and their parents are then provided with alternative solutions, such as discussing dual enrollment in community colleges.

Another core component of VIPS is their participation in the summer residential program where Students of Color take college-level courses that seek to develop "critical consciousness and social action in students as they analyze power structures and work toward liberation from oppressive constructs" (Howard et al., 2016, p. 34). For example, VIP scholars take a writing course where students engage in the works of James Baldwin, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison among others. Using the literary works of Baldwin, Butler, and Morrison is intentionally designed to engage Students of Color with literature that demonstrates the realities of racialized oppression of Black Americans in a white supremacist society (Howard et al., 2016). VIP scholars also engage in other social justice-related topics such as sex trafficking, immigration, and poverty to not only build their writing skills but to raise consciousness (Howard et al., 2016).

Another way that VIPS seeks to develop student's develop critical consciousness is by requiring them to take an education course at UCLA titled, "Education 98: Race, Class, and Inequalities" typically with Dr. Tyrone Howard. In this course, VIP scholars explore how racism and other forms of oppression exist within the education system, including higher education

(Howard et al., 2016). VIP scholars are required to read college-level scholarship centered around the educational experiences of Students of Color in the United States and write analytical essays on the readings. There is also a special focus on teaching VIP scholars to understand how education can be used to strip them of their cultural assets and exacerbate social hierarchies (Howard et al., 2016). At the end of the course, students are asked to turn in a culminating research project that asks them to identify the differences between the resources available to them at their own high schools versus more white, affluent schools. Students are then encouraged to make connections between low Student of Color college enrollment rates and access to resources and offer solutions. As Howard and colleagues (2016) wrote, "this way of learning and engaging with course material is the first step in becoming critically conscious before moving to social action and liberation" (p. 36).

Research on the experiences of Students of Color in VIPS primarily focuses on high school students, with some attention to student outcomes before and during college. The data shows that out of 210 VIP scholars, 95% of them were accepted to and chose to enroll at a four-year university (Howard et al., 2016). Today, close to 500 Students of Color have participated in VIPS. In terms of persistence, most undergraduate VIP scholars maintain a 3.0 or higher in college and enroll in a range of majors from sociology to biology (Howard et al., 2016). Outside of these numbers, little is known about how VIP scholars navigate college, particularly the racialized college environment, after participating in the program. Given the critical mass of VIP scholars enrolled as undergraduate students at UCLA, this site was ideal for this study.

Data Collection

Using a purposeful sampling method, I recruited 12 undergraduate Students of Color who had previously engaged in VIPS—a race-conscious CAP—as high school students for this study. Purposeful sampling in qualitative research is "based on the assumption that the investigator

wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 96). Therefore, I recruited 12 self-identified undergraduate Students of Color at UCLA who had participated in VIPS. I specifically chose to recruit between 10 and 15 participants as I sought to facilitate thick and in-depth narratives to the point of saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Saturation was reached when nothing new was being learned from the data (Ravich & Carl, 2019). With this in mind, it was the goal of this research to represent a diversity of experiences and perspectives given the focus on the broad term "Students of Color." For this reason, I was intentional about selecting a diverse group of racialized identities. I detail the selected study collaborators later in this section after explaining the recruitment process.

Recruitment

As one of the Graduate Student Researchers (GSRs) for the VIPS program, I had direct access to the contact information of VIP scholars that were incoming, current undergraduates, and alumnus of the program. I received approval from the VIPS directors to contact current undergraduate and alumni of the VIPS program to participate in this dissertation study. First, using the contact list of currently enrolled undergraduate VIP scholars obtained from the program directors, I reached out via email to invite students to participate in the study (see Appendix A). Embedded within the email, I included a pre-interview questionnaire using Google Forms (see Appendix B) that was designed to (a) allow students to express interest in participating in the study, (b) collect student demographic information, and (c) help identify participants who qualify for the study. Next, I emailed the VIPS retention coordinator to post a flier on the UCLA's VIPS Retention Program Scholars (RPS) Instagram social media account (see Appendix C). The post included a link to the questionnaire as well so that students could express interest.

Selection

I received a total of 20 submissions via the Google Form. I used a unique purposeful sampling method based on unique attributes based on a phenomenon of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Specifically, I used a criteria-based selection (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). The first selection criteria is that all participants identify as a Student of Color. As demonstrated in the literature review of this dissertation, white students experience higher education much differently than their counterparts (Hurtado, 1992; Solórzano et al., 2002; Ezikwelu, 2020). It was important that study participants identify as Black, AAPI, Latino/a/x and/or Native, as this dissertation aimed to examine the racialized experiences of Students of Color. Of all 20 who expressed interest in participating in the study via the Google Form, all identified as Students of Color; 13 self-identified as Black, and 7 as multi-racial (3 Black/White, 1 Black/Latinx, 1 Black/Native, Indigenous, 2 Black/Pacific Islander),

The second selection criteria is that study participants must have been involved in VIPS for the entirety of the program, which takes place in their eleventh and twelfth grades. This selection criteria is connected to the third, which involves requiring study participants to have attended most segments of the VIPS program, but especially Saturday Academies and summer residential programs. As previously mentioned, as a race-conscious CAP, VIPS seeks to provide opportunities for students to develop their critical consciousness. The Saturday Academies and residential summer programs engage students (and their families) in discussions around issues of race and other intersecting forms of oppression as it relates to education broadly and higher education specifically. Because this dissertation aimed to understand how Students of Color navigate higher education after engaging in such topics, it was important that the second and third selection criteria for this study include participation in events that seek to develop critical consciousness. As seen below, that included participating in the program for both eleventh and

twelfth grades. In applying the second and third selection criteria, one submission did not meet the requirement as they had attended only the 3-week summer residential program.

Table 1: *VIPS Program Structure*

VIPS Program Structure	
11th Grade	12th Grade
(3) Saturday Academy - w/family - Fall Quarter - Winter Quarter - Spring Quarter (1) 3 week summer residential program - Writing Course (exploring writing through the African American experience)	(3) Saturday Academy - w/family - Fall Quarter - Winter Quarter - Spring Quarter (1) 5 week summer residential program - Race & Education Course

The last selection criteria is that study collaborators must have completed at least one full academic year at UCLA to qualify. At this stage, 2 submissions were instantly disqualified as the students did not attend UCLA. The one-year requirement was implemented to give participants some time to experience the campus culture. With a one-year requirement, I was able to select from a large pool of collaborators including recent UCLA alumni, current UCLA seniors, juniors, and sophomores. Those who graduated in 2023 or 2022 qualified as alumni and were considered eligible for the study. Because one submission graduated before 2022, they were disqualified from the study. This decision was made to ensure that their experiences at UCLA were as fresh as possible. Additionally, the goal was to select participants with the most experience at UCLA such as recent alumni and incoming seniors, but incoming juniors and sophomores were also selected to provide insight on the transition years from high school to college as Students of Color from a recent perspective.

Exact parity did not matter concerning gender and class year, but I still tried to be as close as possible to generate broad themes. I recognized that the sophomore experience may contextually differ from the senior experience for example. Once ineligible submissions were disqualified from the study, I had 16 potential study collaborators to choose from. Those selected for the study are listed below.

Table 2: *Study Collaborators*

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Class Level
Destiny	Black	Woman	Third Year
Symone	Black	Woman	Alumni (2023)
Chantel	Black	Woman	Alumni (2022)
Kiana	Multi-racial (Black/Pacific Islander)	Woman	Third Year
Jamie	Multi-racial (Black/White)	Woman	Alumni (2023)
Jenny	Multi-racial (Black/White)	Woman	Third Year
Hyacinth	Black	Nonbinary	Alumni (2022)
Alex	Black	Man	Alumni (2022)
Isaac	Black	Man	Fourth Year
Malcolm	Multi-racial (Black/Indigenous)	Man	Third Year
David	Multi-racial (AfroLatino)	Man	Fourth Year
Luke	Black	Man	Third Year

I selected study collaborators by first prioritizing their length of time at UCLA. Those in their third year and beyond were considered first to ensure engagement in the university for a longer period of time. Next, I sorted by gender to capture a diversity in perspectives. With regards to race, I specifically chose multiracial students for the aforementioned reasons as multiracial college students experience racism in unique ways compared to their monoracial

peers (Harris, 2015). I did not receive any Google Form submissions for Latino/a/x, Asian American, or Indigenous students who did not identify as multiracial.

Study Collaborator Mini-Portraits

Destiny (she, her)

At the time of our *platicas*, Destiny was a Black third-year student at UCLA majoring in Religion with a minor in African American Studies. As all study collaborators were, she was kind, strong, brilliant and so impressive. Destiny was the first in her family to go to college, so she identified as first-generation. As a former steward of the court, she was passionate about giving back to foster youth. She did so by serving as a mentor and advisor to underserved communities through various clubs on campus. Together we looked at graduate school programs for school counseling and student affairs as she wanted to continue serving underrepresented students as they navigate higher education. Destiny was soft-spoken but direct in her responses around her commitment to social justice. VIPS had made an impact on her and the way that she viewed the world and often criticized how UCLA functioned as a racialized space.

Symone (she, her)

A self-proclaimed "nerd" Symone frequently described her love of anime, video games, and spending time with her friends. When I met Symone, she had recently graduated from UCLA in 2023 with a degree in Political Science and a minor in Chicano Studies. She was also the first in her family to attend college. Symone identified as a straight Black woman with a strong disposition to call things out. She did not shy away from sharing her opinions around issues related to racism, often problematizing how the Black community can also perpetuate oppressive harm. For this reason, Symone considered herself a Black feminist, stating that VIPS helped her understand how feminism requires action. In fact, she shared that her class with Black

feminist Dr. Tiera Tanksley in VIPS had inspired her to call things off with her boyfriend at the time, as she had realized that she deserved better as a Black woman.

Chantel (she, her)

A 2022 UCLA graduate in Anthropology with a minor in African American Studies, Chantel identified as a Black straight woman. Like many of the other study collaborators, Chantel was passionate about mentoring as a component of her social justice efforts. To help others and build community, Chantel often volunteered her time to the VIPS program, a transfer outreach program, and the Nigerian Student Association. After struggling academically during her first two years at UCLA, Chantel began to advocate for herself, eventually earning a spot on the Dean's Honor List which she was very proud of.

Kiana (she, her)

A third-year Education major, Kiana identified as multi-racial often referencing her Blackness and Pacific Island heritage in our *platicas*. She spoke passionately about social justice, making connections between what she learned in VIPS, her own experiences, and what she was learning in her education courses. To Kiana, VIPS was a transformational experience that helped her understand her racial identity while providing a sense of family, especially after the loss of a family member. Because of our shared understandings of race, racism, and higher education, we spent a significant portion of our *platicas* together critiquing education as a structure of white supremacy. At the time, her future goals were to bridge health and education as she was once a premed major before being "pushed out" because of weeder courses. We have plans to connect to talk about educational research.

Jamie (she, her)

I had previously met Jamie when she served as student staff in the VIPS office while I served as their GSR. We had minimal engagement outside of our VIPS roles until she agreed to

serve as a study collaborator for this dissertation. By the time we spoke again, she had already graduated from UCLA in 2023. Her major at UCLA was African American Studies, which she had switched to from Political Science for being too white. She identified as multi-racial, noting that she came from a very interracial household. She said that she had Creole, Filipino, and Mexican family members. Jamie made me laugh the hardest during our *platicas* as she frequently had a very humorous spin on the racism she experienced at UCLA.

Jenny (she, her)

Jenny identified as an autistic multi-racial woman and a daughter of immigrants. At the time that we spoke, Jenny was a third-year English major with a strong affinity for research. In addition to doing research in the English department, she also had a passion for using research to build awareness around the experiences of those at the intersection of race and dis/ability. As a research project at UCLA, she bridged what she had learned about racism through VIPS with disability studies to interrogate media portrayals of autism in Pixar films. Using Disability Crit, she argued that the films Float and Loop serve as counternarratives. Additionally, as a multi-racial student with a European white mother and African father, she also served as a member of the Mixed Student Union (MSU). She explained that VIPS helped her understand and embrace her racial identity in ways that made her comfortable taking up space in Black and multi-racial spaces like the MSU.

Hyacinth (they, them)

A non-binary, pansexual/queer, and neurodivergent Black alum from the class of 2022, Hyacinth graduated from UCLA with a Bachelor of Arts in World Arts and Cultures and African American Studies. Hyacinth was an artist through and through and as a music lover myself, I felt so blessed to have them share their music with me. VIPS was also a very transformative

experience for Hyacinth, in particular their reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* stating that they become "super radicalized" in VIPS. This carried over into their time at UCLA, specifically within the Cultural Affairs Commission (CAC) on campus where they hosted many events. They described this space as a place where activism could meet with entertainment while being in the community. Hyacinth frequently shared that CAC served as a home place for them, where they could be radical and expressive through art. At the time of our *platicas* Hyacinth worked for a social justice art program in West Los Angeles.

Alex (he, him)

After graduating from UCLA in 2022 with a degree in African-American Studies, Alex went off to work in the music industry. At the time of our *platicas,* Alex identified as a straight Black man and a first-generation college graduate from the East Coast. It was clear from the beginning that Alex was different from most study collaborators in the sense that he had been engaging in Black Thought early in his life. By the time he got to VIPS, it was not the critical consciousness component that especially stood out to him, but the familial aspect. For Alex, he was well prepared to have these difficult conversations but appreciated having them in the VIPS space. Because of VIPS, he had a community to refer back to especially as he maintained his deep commitment to social justice on campus. He was actively engaged in the African Student Union, the African Mxn's Collective, and the Hip Hop Congress.

Isaac (he, him)

A proud Physiological Studies major, Isaac was in his last year at UCLA before moving on to a doctorate of chiropractic program. He identified as a straight Black man and a first-generation college student. Isaac was very deeply committed to his studies and refused to be pushed out of his STEM major. He had a strong affinity for proving others wrong, especially

when they doubted him. As a VIPS mentor to high school SOC, he often explained to students to resist negative stereotypes and follow their aspirations. In addition to serving as a VIPS mentor, he was also a member of the Afrikan Student Union, the Afrikan Mxn's Collective, and the Black Fitness Society. Isaac held strong beliefs about UCLA, specifically critiquing how STEM courses actively work to push SOC out of the major, a topic he explored in VIPS.

Malcolm (he, him)

When I spoke to Malcolm, he was in his third year at UCLA as a Political Science major with a minor in Philosophy. He identified as a Black, Indigenous, and Armenian straight man and first-generation college student. Of all the study collaborators, Malcolm spoke of social justice issues the least. In particular, he expressed that he had not experienced too much racism at UCLA, although he did provide some examples using concepts that he learned in VIPS. He spoke more of structural forms of racism as opposed to personal accounts. What he did speak out extensively was his experience with imposter syndrome, stating that learning that term in VIPS impacted him the most. At UCLA, he was involved in Bruin Guardian Scholars and the Armenian Student Organization.

David (he, him)

A fourth-year UCLA student, David identified as a straight Afro-Latino man. His major was in Sociology and he was also pursuing a minor in Global Health. His mother was a Mexican immigrant, and his father identified as Black. Given his racial identity and his time in VIPS, David felt strongly about social justice issues especially as it related to Afro-Latinos. At UCLA he was heavily involved in the Afro-Latinx Connection de UCLA, Afrikan Mxn's Collective, and Afrikan Student Union. He also held positions as a VIPS mentor and research assistant for the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA. David was heavily involved at UCLA and stated

that the community component of his roles was essential to his survival. Although he was often tired, he explained that VIPS taught him to take of himself and to seek out community which these opportunities provided him.

Luke (he, him)

A third-year UCLA student pursuing a degree in Public Affairs, Luke identified as a Black straight man, the son of immigrant parents from Africa, and a first-generation college student. At the time of our *platicas*, Luke held several leadership positions on campus. He was heavily involved in his Black fraternity, UCLA's first-year scholar's program, Academic Support Program, East African Student Association, Afrikan Mxn's Collective, and Undergraduate Student Association Council. He explained that his major made it difficult for him to be proud of who he was, but that he eventually came back to what he had learned in VIPS, and to the VIPS family itself to regain confidence in his Blackness. For that reason, he aspired to become a lawyer; to fight for social justice.

Researcher Commitments in Embodying a Chicana Race Feminista Praxis

Once study collaborators were selected, I conducted two *platicas* with each student for a total of 24 *platicas*. As a Chicana embodying a Critical Race Feminista Praxis, I drew from the *platicas* methodology in the place of traditional interviews when conducting qualitative research (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). I drew from three key elements of *platicas* as a methodology. First, to *platicar* or to engage in a *platica* means to engage in an informal chat. Culturally, I have participated in *platicas* with mi familia. It is where stories, cultural wisdom, and life lessons are shared and it is something I am familiar with both personally and academically. Methodologically, engaging in *platicas* means that I, as the researcher, am able and willing to deviate from "the research agenda" and invite those that I speak to for this study to bring their

entire selves to the *platica*. This means that in addition to a research protocol, I asked how they and their loved ones were doing, asking about their personal lives, and welcomed unexpected topics to connect everyday experiences to the research topic (Fierros & Bernal, 2016).

Second, I reject any notion that I, as the researcher, am the ultimate keeper or producer of knowledge and welcome the participants of this study as study collaborators (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). Thus, I refer to study participants as study collaborators in this dissertation. One of the ways I engaged collaborators in this study was by inviting them to propose questions to include in *platica* protocols. In the first *platica* protocol, I asked study collaborators to submit a question for the second *platica* that they think should be asked of the others in relation to their experiences in VIPS and on campus. Lastly, I placed reciprocity and vulnerability as high priorities throughout this research process. As Fierros and Bernal (2016) explained, the "reciprocal process [is] necessary in a platica, in which the facilitator of the platica must be open and vulnerable" (p. 107). As I gathered data, I engaged in storytelling alongside study collaborators as I would not want to ask something of them that I would not be willing to do myself. For example, when I asked collaborators to share artifacts (as listed below), I also shared my own.

Las Platicas

The first *platica* focused on rapport building, artifact sharing, and discussions around students' experiences learning about race, racism, and other forms of oppression as high school students through VIPS. I began this first set of *platicas* by introducing myself as a doctoral researcher and reviewing key information about the study including their voluntary status, what to expect, and other pertinent information (see Appendix D). After answering any questions they had, I moved into artifact sharing. To elicit memories from VIPS, I asked study collaborators

beforehand to bring 3 artifacts to the first *platica* using the following prompts (Martin & Merrtsy, 2006):

1) One artifact that represents your overall experience in VIPS
2) One artifact that demonstrates how VIPS as a college access program encouraged conversations around racism and/or other forms of oppression
3) One artifact that demonstrates how you have been able to navigate issues related to race and racism at UCLA

Artifact elicitation has been used in the field of engineering (Douglas et al., 2015), pharmaceutical education (Edwards & I'Anson, 2020), and anthropology (Abildgaard, 2018) to evoke memory sharing and storytelling concerning research interest. One common form of artifact elicitation in qualitative research is photo elicitation used to initiate conversation surrounding specific dimensions of their lives (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). I used artifact sharing in this study to prompt storytelling based on any memory device (Abildgaard, 2018). This means that study collaborators could choose any form of artifact including but not limited to photos, jewelry, and artwork. Most study collaborators used photos while others brought VIPS related relics like course syllabi, t-shirts, tote bags, etc. One study collaborator used glasses as their artifact stating that VIPS helped him "see and name the struggle" that he encountered in schools.

In line with the *platica* tradition that encourages researcher vulnerability, I began the artifact-sharing process by sharing my artifacts. Since I did not attend VIPS myself, I used an example from my time in Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a race-evasive CAP as a high school Student of Color. Each artifact that I shared was used to engage in storytelling around my experiences in a race-evasive CAP, and how that translated to college. Once I was done sharing my artifacts, I invited them to share their own. For study collaborators, the artifact prompts were strategically designed to elicit narratives that could help answer the

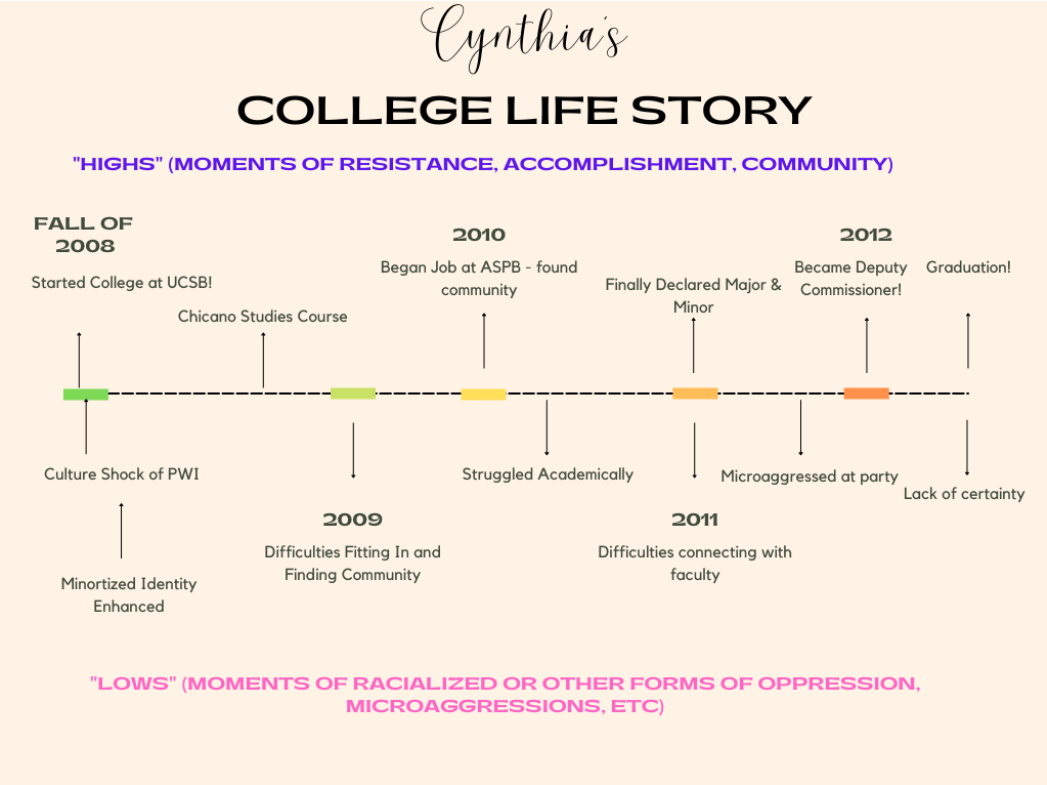
research questions of this study. The first artifact prompt asked study collaborators to speak about VIPS generally as a primer to gain a better understanding of how they felt about the program itself. The second prompt was designed to help begin answering RQ1 which asks, what do Students of Color learn about race and racism as it relates to the college experience through race-conscious college access programs? This prompt asks study collaborators to select an artifact that demonstrates how they learned about race, racism, and other forms of oppression through VIPS. Through this approach, study collaborators were encouraged to reflect upon the lessons from VIPS that stood out most as well as what they took from those lessons. The last artifact was designed to help facilitate storytelling around their racialized experiences at UCLA, which was the focus of the second *platica*. This activity was designed to engage in mutual sharing and rapport building while we got to know each other. At the same time, these prompts were designed to elicit responses that can be built upon during this first *platica* and most certainly in the second *platica.* Since *platicas* act as informal conversations between researcher and study collaborator, I also engaged in probing questions during the artifact-sharing activity (Fierros & Bernal, 2016).

After we both shared our artifacts, I moved into the core of the *platica* which included questions such as "What role did VIPS have in shaping the way you understand race, class, and gender?" and "Can you tell me about a time VIPS helped you better understand race and racism in the college experience?" All questions asked in this first *platica* (see Appendix D) were specifically designed to help answer the first research question which is, what do Students of Color learn about race and racism as it relates to the college experience through race-conscious college access programs? Thus, a large majority of this *platica* focused on their experiences in VIPS, including what they learned about oppression and how they made meaning of those experiences. Towards the end of the *platica*, I asked questions related to their transition from

VIP scholar in high school to undergraduate Student of Color at UCLA. As research has shown that Students of Color experience culture shock as they transition to college (Gonzalez, 2002; Museus & Park, 2015), I was curious to better understand what their transitions were like when prepared to enter higher education as a racialized space. Lastly, as a part of including study collaborators in the knowledge production process, I asked them to submit a question to be included in the second set of *platicas.* This first set of *platicas* took between 60 and 90 minutes each with most taking the full 90 minutes.

The second *platica* focused on better understanding the racialized experiences of study collaborators as they navigate(d) higher education. To prompt storytelling, study collaborators were asked to bring a completed "college life stories" timeline. During the scheduling process for the second *platica*, I provided study collaborators with instructions on how to create a "college life stories" timeline. I also provided study collaborations with a few examples. Noted in the example below, the activity asked study collaborators to pinpoint important moments of their college experience from their first day on campus to the last in the form of a timeline. I encouraged study collaborators to document their "highs" and "lows" relative to their racialized college experiences. The "highs" could be anything they would consider a positive experience and "lows" would consist of anything they would consider a negative experience. With CRT as a theoretical framing, the "highs" can refer to moments of transformational resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), accomplishment despite barriers, and community building. On the flipside, "lows" could be moments of racialized and/or gendered oppression on campus (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. Cynthia's College Life Story.



This activity was designed to help answer the second research question that asks: What are the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who participated in a race-conscious college access program? I have used this activity before in a study about the racialized/gendered experiences of Latina community college presidents. Study collaborators were asked to document their "highs" and "lows" as Latina presidents. It proved fruitful in having study collaborators sit, think, and document their experiences with oppression in an organized way. Most notably, this activity promoted storytelling as it related to the study collaborator's experiences with racialized/gendered oppression (Estrada & Garcia, 2023). For example, one study collaborator shared an instance where she was invited to speak at a convening alongside other prominent community college presidents. She explained that she was

the only President of Color at the convening. While she initially felt honored to be invited and to be able to share space with "the big wigs" in the field, it all came tumbling down when she discovered they had hosted a president's dinner without her. As the only President of Color, she expressed how excluded and marginalized it made her feel. This study collaborator shared many instances like this one which allowed us to have a deeper conversation around the ever present role of oppression in higher education. I adapted this activity to elicit narratives about how this dissertation study's collaborators have experienced "highs" and "lows" at UCLA as Students of Color. They were prompted to use the college life story activity to answer the following guiding question: What have been their experiences with oppression on campus from their first day as freshman to today? This activity took roughly 20 out of the 90 minutes and began with me, sharing my own timeline to show vulnerability (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). I also incorporated questions (see Appendix E) around their racialized experiences as Students of Color, in the event that their timeline did not focus on experiences with oppression.

The remainder of the second *platica* was dedicated to making the bridge between students' undergraduate experiences and VIPS. Thus, the second part of the second *platica* focused on answering RQ2a which is, how do these Students of Color perceive that the college access program has influenced their navigation of their racialized campus experiences? This portion of the second *platica* asked study collaborators to make meaning of their time in VIPS about their time as UCLA students. As Seidman (2006) stated, "[i]n order to give the details of their experience a beginning, middle, and end, people must reflect on their experience" (p. 7). This part of the *platica* allowed study collaborators to make meaning of their experiences with VIPS and at UCLA in relation to one another. This required that the second *platica* guiding questions be developed after the first set of *platicas* were completed and reviewed. That way, I

could build on information that was shared in the first *platica* to explore how, if at all, the lessons described in the first *platica* were used to navigate UCLA as a racialized space.

Data Analysis

All data was analyzed in the MAXQDA Coding Software using a 3-stage coding process that utilizes analytic coding tools (Saldaña, 2021). The first cycle used concept coding which "assign[s] meso or macro levels of meaning to data or to data analytic work in progress" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 152). I used this initial coding scheme to explore concepts or ideas such as racial microaggression within the data corpus. Using these concepts, I then consolidated all codes into categories. Categories are synthesized codes that are used to form a larger group around a specific concept or idea (Saldaña, 2021). In many ways, it is the beginning of a pattern (Saldaña, 2021). For example, one category was "counterstories" with a code of "help-seeking." A subcode in this family of codes was "community," "resources," or "campus staff." These new categories were tested across the data corpus until reaching a point where the codes and categories became refined and saturated (Saldaña, 2021).

The final stage of the coding process involved reviewing and organizing categories to generate themes (Saldaña, 2021). I used categorical theming of the data, where I reviewed all noted categories to develop overarching themes to construct a coherent narrative (Saldaña, 2021). Categorical theming is an approach that allows researchers to make notes of emerging patterns such as frequencies. For example, when the category titled "counterstories" was frequently used in the coding process and notice the same for the category "dominant ideologies " I grouped them to create the theme "It's Not Me": Embodying Counterstories and Countering Majoritarian Narratives. As I began to generate themes in this way, I also engaged in member checking with study collaborators as a part of the *platicas* methodology to ensure that they felt well-represented (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). Lastly, I also ensured to take analytic memos

throughout, to note why a particular code was chosen, how it related to other codes, and how a particular code related to the research questions. This practice can be especially useful in theme and theory building when reporting findings as it documents relevant thoughts and ideas around the analysis process (Bazeley, 2020).

Researcher Positioning

The work that educational researchers do is not separate from who they are as people. I am a first-generation college graduate, Latina, from a low-income household. While those identities have led to marginalization, I also held many privileges as I conducted this research. For this reason, I drew upon Boveda and Annamma's (2023) researcher positioning framework to wrestle with my positioning in conducting this research. A researcher positioning framework is different from a positionality statement in that your positioning as a scholar is revisited throughout the entirety of the study as opposed to a static piece of writing (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). It also extends beyond the acknowledgement of one's sociocultural identities but maintains a commitment to recognizing how, as members of the ivory tower, researchers carry power and historical legacies of intersecting forms of oppression (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). Guided by Black Feminist Thought and DisCrit, a researcher positioning framework encourages researchers to consider three elements including (a) the onto-epistemic, (b) the sociohistorical that engages historicity, and (c) the sociocultural that accepts whiteness and ability as property (Boveda & Annamma, 2023).

The onto-epistemic requires researchers to consider what assumptions can be made about how they understand reality, truth, and knowledge in relation to research (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). In this study, I came to this work with training in Critical Race Theory and Chicana Feminisms. These frameworks allow me to push against traditional research paradigms that reject alternative ways of knowing (Delgado Bernal, 1998). They also allow me the opportunity

to embrace study participants as study collaborators capable of engaging in the knowledge production process (Boveda & Annamma, 2023; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). At the same time, without explicit use or consideration of AsianCrit, DisCrit, and other sister CRT frameworks, I am susceptible to exclude narratives that fall outside of the able bodied, Latino/a/x and Black experience. For this reason, I commit to being intentional about my use of intersectionality as a tenet of CRT to consider and analyze gender, disability, etc. as forms of oppression.

The sociohistorical "responds to calls to attend to the interplay between biographical and social-historical junctures" (p. 6). This means that researchers should not only be considering their sociocultural identities but also by considering our ties to higher education institutions as sites that inflict harm amongst Communities of Color (Boveda & Annamma, 2023; Wilder, 2013). In this respect, should the collaborators of this study share their stories with racism or other forms of oppression at UCLA, I will be producing research that benefits the same institution. As a GSR and worker at UCLA, I am complicit in maintaining UCLA as a racialized space. Accordingly, I commit to placing the well-being of all study collaborators first and foremost, even if it means delaying this research or changing plans as needed. I also recognize that having an association to UCLA as a doctoral researcher and VIPS GSR comes with its own power dynamics. To circumvent this, I commit to centering the needs of this study's collaborators, as they described them. As noted before, I also invited them to take part in the knowledge production process to promote a collaborative dynamic between us.

Lastly, the sociocultural refers to the rejection of race-neutrality and white innocence in research by acknowledging historicity and intersecting oppressions (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). Through this framing, it was critical that I interrogated my own socio-cultural identities in relation to this research. I am a Latina, but one with white skin who does not experience colorism

in the ways that some of this study's collaborators may. This is especially true for the Black collaborators of this study, whose experiences I could never fully understand. I am conscious of that and choose to listen rather than speak. I am also able-bodied and straight, thus I do not know what it is like to experience inadequate accessibility issues or homophobia. I am a cis-woman who has the luxury of being born in a body that fits my gender. I grew up low-income, but I lived in a house. I do not know what it is like to be houseless. I have to work three jobs to afford living in Los Angeles to attend UCLA, but I do not have to commute far. My parents struggled to survive and thrive in the United States as immigrants, but we are all citizens. We have not experienced what it means to be undocumented. These tensions remained at the forefront of my mind throughout this research process, and this researcher positioning served as a reminder of my commitments to disrupt whiteness as a form of property, always center study collaborators first, and interrogate the privileges I hold (Boveda & Annamma, 2023).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I delve into the transformative experiences of 12 Students of Color (SOC) who had participated in the VIPS program, a race-conscious college access initiative designed to prepare them for higher education. Through a comprehensive analysis of their journeys, this chapter reveals how the VIPS curriculum not only enhanced their understanding of racism and its pervasive impact but also equipped them with crucial strategies to navigate and challenge the systemic barriers they encountered as undergraduates at UCLA. By fostering a critical consciousness and a resilient sense of racial identity, VIPS empowered these students to recognize and resist the racial dynamics that shaped their academic and social environments within Predominantly/Historically White Institutions (P/HWIs). The findings illuminate the critical role of such educational programs in cultivating agents of change who are well-prepared to advocate for justice within and beyond the college campus.

In this chapter, I begin with Finding I, titled, "Covering Race Matters When Race Matters," which emphasizes the role of the VIPS program in helping SOC develop a nuanced understanding of race, racism, and systemic oppression broadly, as they pertain to their college experiences. As a race-conscious college access program, VIPS taught that racism is a pervasive and ordinary reality in American society, deeply embedded in social structures. Through a race-conscious curriculum, SOC learn to identify and challenge racism and other forms of oppression, gaining insights into how these forces shape perceptions, access to resources, and experiences in educational settings.

In the next section, I move to Finding II titled, "'That's Whiteness Right There': Racism as Normal in Higher Education." I focus on the racialized experiences of (SOC) in higher education, specifically at UCLA, after participating in the VIPS program. This finding explores

how these undergraduate SOC encounter and respond to systemic racism and microaggressions within a Historically White Institution (HWI). The insights from this section show that the VIPS program effectively prepares students to identify and understand the complexities of racism in higher education settings.

I end this chapter with Finding III, titled, "'It's Not Me': Embodying Counterstories and Countering Majoritarian Narratives." This finding addresses how SOC utilize their experiences and knowledge gained from the VIPS program to navigate and counteract the racialized environments they encounter in higher education, particularly at UCLA. This finding explores the practical applications of their developed critical consciousness in real-world contexts, focusing on how they embody counterstories and resist majoritarian narratives as undergraduate SOC.

Finding I: Covering Race Matters When Race Matters

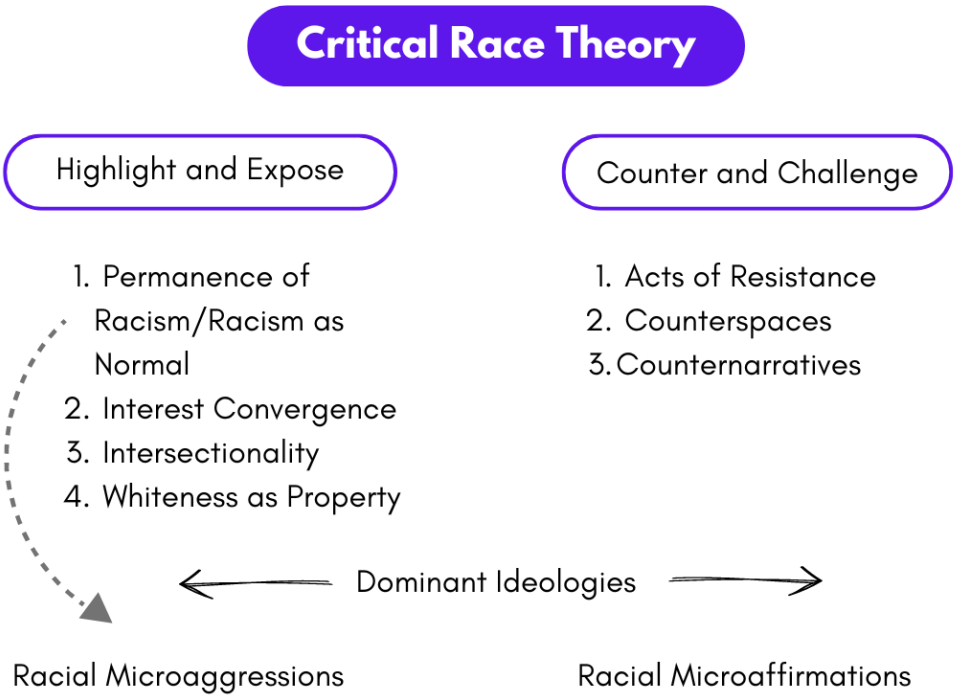
> It was VIPS that really did open my eyes to the fact that everything is rooted in race, especially in America.
>
> – Kiana

The first theme presented in this chapter answers the first research question which asks what Students of Color (SOC) learn about race and racism as it relates to the college experience through VIPS as a race-conscious college access program. The study found that SOC describe an understanding of how race, racism, and other forms of oppression can work together to form their reality. Because racism is real, students were taught that race matters; it can impact the way they are perceived, the access to resources that they are provided, and thus, the way they can experience college. Aligned with a core tenet of CRT, VIPS SOC learn that racism ordinary, not exceptional, and deeply embedded within society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Williams, 1991). Much like Critical Race Theorists, study collaborators are taught to recognize, highlight, and

expose racism and other forms of oppression through the VIPS program. Thus, these findings demonstrate how study collaborators engage in the critical reflection phase of critical consciousness through the race-conscious VIPS curriculum, where they explore systems of oppression in relation to social structures (Freire, 1970; Watts et al., 2011).

Notably, VIPS students also learn strategies to successfully navigate the college environment as SOC. In other words, study collaborators are taught to counter and challenge systems of oppression. I return to Figure 4.1 from the theory chapter of this dissertation. To illustrate the narratives and perspectives of this study's collaborators concerning what SOC learn about race, racism, and navigating the world through VIPS, I highlight three subthemes: (a) Challenging Worldviews; (b) "It's a PWI"; and (c) The Other Side of the Coin. Taken together, the first two subthemes demonstrate that as high school students in VIPS, SOC learned about racial identity, structures of oppression, and the realities of experiencing racialization within historically white institutions. I demonstrate how study collaborators develop the ability to "highlight and expose" racism and other forms of oppression through the critical consciousness gained in VIPS. In the last subtheme, I show how study collaborators also learned about the importance of taking up space by seeking out resources, building community, and advocating for oneself in college. Thus, VIPS SOC are provided the knowledge and tools to "counter and challenge" oppression on college campuses.

Figure 4.1. Critical Race Theory.



Challenging Worldviews: An Introduction to Being Oppressed in America

Critical Race Theorists believe that because racism is "ordinary"—meaning that racism is so profoundly embedded within our society, that it is considered normal (Delgado & Stefancic, 2016). Because racism is normal and left undiscussed, it becomes difficult to address because it is not acknowledged (Delgado & Stefancic, 2016). Through the program, VIPS students are made acutely aware of how race can affect their navigation of the world and are actively taught to identify racism and other forms of oppression. Through the VIPS race-conscious curriculum, students described leaving the program with a toolbox of terms and concepts that would be used to identify racism in high school students and later, in college (see Finding II). Over the span of two years, VIP students take college-level courses around race and education, critical writing, and other topical courses such as "Racism and Artificial Intelligence." These courses are taken

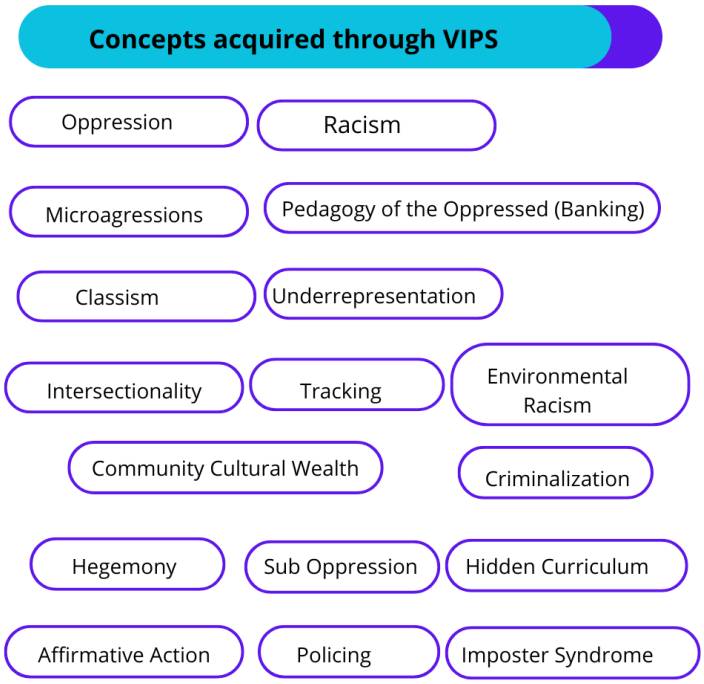
during their summer residential programs in addition to their quarterly "Saturday Academy" workshops which also tackle issues concerning Students of Color like racial microaggressions and under-resourcing in education (see Methods). Through an exploration of these topics, VIPS SOC engage their critical consciousness and walk away from the program with a plethora of terms that can be used to challenge race-neutrality.

In the first set of *platicas*, I asked study collaborators which lessons from VIPS stood out them. There was a broad range and depth of topics that students were exposed to as high school students over the span of two years through college-level coursework, quarterly workshops, and engagement with peer mentors who also identified as SOC. All served to dispel race-neutrality, by engaging students in a race-conscious curriculum that discusses racism on a personal and structural level. Students described learning concepts such as hegemony, tracking in schools, and affirmative action with an overarching focus on Blackness and anti-blackness. These lessons engaged high SOC in the process of critical reflection, where students explored issues related to systems and structures as a part of the critical consciousness development process (Freire 1970; Watts et al., 2011).

For example, Isaac a Black STEM major in his fourth year at UCLA, shared that through the VIPS program, he was "able to name things like hegemony and criminalization" and identify "the struggle that [he] went through" in K-12 schooling contexts. Jamie, recent UCLA graduate who identifies as multi-racial, spoke to her experience learning about affirmative action as a high school SOC through VIPS. Referring to Prop 209 and the ban on race-conscious decision-making in college admission, she recalled "learning about how there's no affirmative action [across] the UC systems." Luke, a Black public affairs major in his third year at UCLA, said that VIPS exposed him to the term intersectionality for the first time, specifically how

"socioeconomic status, gender, race, [and] sexuality" can work together to "affect a person." The concepts most referenced or described by study collaborators during our *platicas* are listed in Figure 4.2. The list below is not meant to be exhaustive, but a set of examples representative of the depth of topics covered and concepts learned through VIPS.

Figure 4.2. Concepts Acquired Through VIPS.



In high school, VIPS SOC learn that "Everything is rooted in race" in the United States as stated by Kiana, a multiracial undergraduate student at UCLA. By utilizing a race-conscious curriculum that engages SOC in discourse surrounding concepts like those listed in Figure 4.2, students developed a deep understanding of the ways oppression operates in society through VIPS. Above all, students gained an awareness of the many ways race, racism, and other forms of oppression function in the world. Consistent with scholarship on critical consciousness

development, many study collaborators describe this realization as "eye-opening" (Sule et al., 2021). For example, David, an Afro-Latino senior at UCLA, said:

> [VIPS] was very eye-opening . . . I remember every time I learned something new, it was just like, damn. Just learning about all the modes of oppression that exist that we're facing and operating at literally all the time is just like, fuck man. [Racism is] literally everywhere. It is in your environment, at school, at home, in your family, in the food you eat, it is just like they found every way to oppress [you] is crazy.

Because of the broad range of topics covered in the VIPS curriculum, students walked away with a new understanding of how racism operates. For David to learn that racism can impact schooling, interactions with family members, and the food we eat was astounding. This is because, in VIPS, students learned to deepen their views of racism. Isaac, a Black physiological science major and senior at UCLA, shared that racism goes beyond "when one race doesn't like another race" but instead "the different types and structures involved." This finding is consistent with scholarship on critical consciousness, that shows that SOC in the critically reflective stage of their development typically view social issues in systemic terms (Freire, 1970; Watts et al., 2011).

Because VIP scholars complete a college-level course on race and education as high school students, one commonly referenced structural form of racism is education. Most study collaborators spoke to the impact that Freire had on them. Specifically, study collaborators shared how *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* allowed them "to identify banking" as Isaac said or recognize "white oppression and how our systems are built with racial intent," as stated by Kiana. Jamie, a multiracial woman, and recent UCLA graduate, shared her experience reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a high school student in VIPS:

> *[Pedagogy of the Oppressed]* really changed my mindset and I felt radicalized me in a way because I realized that even the way that I viewed Black excellence or achievement for minorities is through a white gaze. It's like, oh, Black excellence is getting good colleges, getting rich, you know generational wealth—when that's all through the Western ideals of success.

A "changed mindset" was a prevalent outcome amongst most VIP scholars as a result of the program. Jamie described herself as "radicalized" by VIPS curriculum, specifically her engagement with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* According to Jamie, Freire altered the way she "viewed Black excellence or achievement for minorities" and how it is shaped by whiteness. Jamie implies a shift in how she viewed success outside of "Western ideals" of "getting good grades" or "getting rich." This was a common finding among study collaborators; whether students were discovering new topics such as environmental racism or racial health disparities, collaborators shared that VIPS engaged them in material that challenged the way that they viewed the world. This new lens in which they viewed the world was no longer race-neutral and they now had the language to highlight and expose oppression.

Study collaborators also explained how they not only learned these concepts in VIPS but were encouraged to use course material to reflect upon their positioning in the world as SOC. This practice is also supported by critical consciousness scholarship which emphasizes the importance of bridging critical consciousness and racial identity (Carter, 2008). Alex, a Black student, and recent UCLA graduate described the VIPS curriculum as "really raw" and "radical." He mentioned that "what makes the knowledge and all the different things that you're interacting with [in VIPS] stick, is the application to your own personal life." One way that VIPS encouraged students to tie concepts like those listed in Figure 4.2 to their own lives is by having students engage in autoethnography. Hyacinth, a recent UCLA graduate who identifies as Black and gender nonconforming said:

> I did a whole autoethnography on [*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*] while I was in high school in VIPS. And it exposed me to all the secrets and experiences that I was dealing with in K-12 public education . . . I did my project on the banking method and how that erases diverse learning styles and forces people to be under one rigid curriculum versus appealing to different people's backgrounds . . . and how banking leads to rigid thinking .

> . . I had experienced that a lot in high school. It was a lot of rote memorization and I didn't have free thinking until I got into VIPS.

In this quote, Hyacinth demonstrates her understanding of the banking method as well as their ability to apply the concept to real-life contexts—specifically theirs. Through the race-conscious curriculum in VIPS, Hyacinth learned to recognize how the banking method influenced their own K-12 public education and how this teaching style encouraged "rigid thinking." This quote highlights the development of Hyacinth's critical consciousness, in that the VIPS curriculum and concepts like the banking method allowed them to understand their educational experiences in more critical ways; specifically, in a way that allows Hyacinth to see how racism is embedded in social structures such as schools. In this example, Hyacinth shows that through VIPS, they have the tools (i.e., banking method) needed to highlight and expose racial oppression in their own life (i.e., in the classroom).

Many study collaborators spoke to the reflective component of VIPS as being instrumental to their racial identity development. As Isaac shared, "you literally take aspects of your life and see how they're interconnected to your experience in the world," adding "it gave me a new sense of identity." In VIPS, student not only learn concepts related to oppression but apply the curriculum to their own life in ways that help them make sense of their positionality . For many study collaborators like Isaac, their racialized identity evolved in how they see themselves and how they view their lived realities. Kiana for instance shared that VIPS allowed students to be "in touch with who you are" describing the experience as "important" to how she understands her identity as multiracial. To have the opportunity to explore her identities such as gender, culture, and religion allowed SOC to understand "what you value, what it means to you, and what you'd like to share with others." In this quote, Kiana described a sense-making process in which she connected what she was learning about racism to who she is as a SOC. She

explained that she felt "it is important to solidify that identity early on" to "be prepared for college" because "as a Black student you're not often given that voice."

This section detailed three key lessons that VIPS participants learned about race and racism as high school SOC. The first is that racism and other forms of oppression not only exist but manifest in various ways. In this way, VIPS challenges race-neutrality by engaging study collaborators in a race-conscious curriculum that explores issues related to race and racism. The second is that racism and other forms of oppression infiltrate structures in society shaping the way schooling, healthcare, and policing operate. For most study collaborators, learning concepts that describe how oppression functions is a new experience. As a result, study collaborators describe the VIPS program as a world-bending and mind-altering experience where they can see and name oppressive forces. The third lesson is related to how students learn to apply concepts to their own lives. Through this practice, VIPS participants can see how racism shapes their lives, leaving them to reckon with their racialized identities as SOC. This knowledge around the impact of racism in society and in turn, their realities, thus becomes fundamental to their development as people and future college students. In the next section, I detail how their understandings of racism and racialization are further developed within the realm of higher education; in particular, what VIPS study collaborators come to learn about racism in college.

"It's a PWI, Stuff's Going to Get Weird"

As demonstrated in the previous section, VIPS built the capacity for study collaborators to understand that racism continues to shape the lived realities of People of Color in various ways. Within those conversations, VIP scholars were also gaining an awareness of the term Predominately White Institution (PWI) and that contrary to the way that higher education institutions portray themselves, colleges and universities are not race-neutral (Morfin et al.,

2006). Instead, all study collaborators came to learn that as SOC seeking to attend a PWI or Historically White Institution (HWI), they may experience racial oppression. Jenny, a Black third-year English major and UCLA student disclosed that "VIPS was blunt and upfront about the fact that [UCLA] is a Historically White College" which meant that SOC—and in particular Black students—were underrepresented on campus. For Destiny, it was the first time hearing the term PWI. She said, "I had never even heard of the term PWI. I'm like what is that? So, I would say I am grateful for VIPS for introducing not only what it is but what it could entail for a Person of Color." She went on to explain that VIPS had made it clear that, "[t]here aren't a lot of Black people in college. You might have to unfortunately face implicit forms of racism throughout your experience." Through VIPS, study collaborators demonstrated an awareness of the racism embedded within P/HWIs. Specifically, they understood that they would be underrepresented as Students of Color at a P/HWI. In fact, about half of the study collaborators mentioned or alluded to the 4% Black student enrollment rate at UCLA. Luke shared that he "wasn't surprised" to hear this percentage from VIPS but found it "disheartening that 4% of the [UCLA] population are Black." Since half of the study collaborators mentioned the percentage, it was clear that study collaborators were aware of the underrepresentation of Black students at UCLA.

From VIPS, study collaborators also came to understand that being underrepresented at UCLA would come with challenges such as racial microaggressions, isolation, stereotypes, and imposter syndrome. With regards to racial microaggressions, Chantel, a Black woman and recent UCLA graduate shared the story of the first time she learned about microaggressions. She shared:

> I remember we had a VIPS meeting. It was a Saturday Academy, [and we were] talking about what [microaggressions] are, how to notice it, how to navigate through it, and things like that. And after understanding [I thought], "Oh, I have definitely experienced a bunch of microaggressions." It was like putting a face to the name.

Through the VIPS race-conscious curriculum, Chantel learned how to identify and navigate microaggressions in college. She implied that at VIPS Saturday Academy, she had suddenly recognized that she "definitely experienced a bunch of microaggressions" in the past. The conversation in VIPS as a high school student allowed her to "[put] a face to the name" when experiencing racial microaggressions. She would later use this same concept to identify racial microaggressions at UCLA as an undergraduate student (see Finding III). As a result of these types of conversations, VIPS SOC come equipped with the language necessary to name the racism that they experience.

Some students would even experience racial microaggressions as they were learning about them in VIPS. During the VIPS summer residential program, where students stay in the residence halls at UCLA as high school students to attend college-level classes, Jamie, a multiracial woman, and a recent UCLA graduate in African American Studies, detailed her experiences with microaggressions:

> I remember we would [discuss that] I would face microaggressions [in college]. And then I remember being in Ackerman and people coming up to us [and say], "Oh, are you guys part of a sports team or something?" . . . People wouldn't assume that we were part of an academic program. And it was just kind of patronizing in a way, because I know people would ask, "Oh, why are you here?" And I'm like, "Oh, I'm taking a college class." And they're like, "Oh, really? Is it hard?" . . .

SOC were experiencing racial microaggressions as they were learning about them in VIPS. In real-time, both in the VIPS curriculum and as they navigated the campus as a high school student, Jamie was made aware of how the college environment can be for Students of Color. The assumption that Jamie was an athlete as opposed to a high-achieving student was "patronizing" and shows how she was aware of what was happening to her as it happened. These types of experiences were not isolated.

Symone, a Black woman, and recent UCLA graduate in political science, detailed her experience at UCLA as a VIPS participant in high school. She mentioned that through VIPS, "people were always saying it's a PWI" and therefore, "stuff's going to get weird." She continued:

> I had been told that racism existed. . . . Then I got to campus in VIPS [for the summer residential program]. . . . And we were of course the only POC on campus, everybody else on campus [was] white. And we were in class one time, [when somebody said] "Do you guys ever notice that nobody gets in the elevators with us?" And everybody was like, "You've seen it too!!." . . . And if you've ever been on UCLA's campus, the elevators are big. They literally say they can hold 16 or something. . . . And they'll be like, "Oh, we'll just wait" . . . It was just weird.

In this example, Symone exhibited her awareness of the fact that SOC are underrepresented at UCLA when she said, "we were of course the only POC on campus." In the same breath, Symone then went on to share a racist experience at UCLA. Like Jamie, Symone was learning in real time what it meant to exist as a SOC on a college campus. Underrepresentation, racial stereotyping, and othering went from conceptual terms discussed in VIPS to a tangible reality. This finding emphasizes how SOC can perceive and experience an institution's campus racial climate before enrolling as students.

While not all study collaborators described instances where they experienced racism at UCLA as high school students, all study collaborators described learning about the realities of attending a P/HWI from VIPS in some way. Jenny shared that she learned about the effects that underrepresentation has on SOC when attending P/HWIs. She said:

> If you're in a class and you're one of the few Black people, [VIPS] told us bluntly that unfortunately, that is a reality at UCLA. . . . And sometimes being in that setting where you're one of the few or one of the only Black people, [it] can be intimidating because you feel that all eyes are on you or that if you make a mistake or something, then people are just going to react more negatively because you're Black.

In this quote, Jenny recounts learning about some of the struggles that come with being "one of the few" Black students on campus. Through VIPS, Jenny gained an awareness of the ways race

can impact experience within P/HWI classrooms, specifically the hypervisibility and stereotype threat that Black students can feel as a result of being underrepresented. When Jenny said "[it] can be intimidating because you feel that all eyes are on you" she is demonstrating an understanding of the hypervisibility that Black undergraduates can feel. Because Black undergraduates stand out racially from the rest of the student population, they feel that all eyes are on them (Harper et al., 2011). With this hypervisibility, can come a fear of fulfilling certain racial stereotypes such as being lacking intelligence. Known as stereotype threat, this fear can cause stress and anxiety, particularly amongst Black students (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013). Jenny described the feeling that comes from stereotype threat when she said, "if you make a mistake or something, then people are just going to react more negatively because you're Black." Therefore, through VIPS, Jenny learned that attending a P/HWI as a Black student or Student of Color can mean experiencing challenges like hypervisibility and stereotype threat.

As evidenced by the previous quotes, VIP students are made aware of the difficulties that can come from attending higher education institutions like P/HWIs as Students of Color. Study collaborators learn that colleges and universities can act as racialized spaces where microaggressions, hypervisibility, stereotypes, and underrepresentation are positioned as real issues that can be confronted in P/HWIs. The last two subsections of findings illuminate the role that critical consciousness—specifically how VIPS SOC explore systemic racism, or critical reflection—has on challenging race-neutrality within structures in society (Freire, 1970). Through this exploration, SOC that racism is normal and embedded within institutions such as colleges and universities in ways that shape how they will experience higher education.

The Other Side of the Coin: Claiming Space, Utilizing Resources, Building Community

As the previous findings show, VIP Scholars wrestle with difficult topics in the program as high school students. Study collaborators described learning about different forms of oppression broadly, oppression in relation to their positionality as Students of Color, and the role of racism in higher education. Study collaborators exhibited a deep understanding of how structural racism can limit college opportunities. Jenny spoke candidly about how VIPS taught the fact that "college access was not even an option for Black people" in the past, Kiana referred to the fact that her white counterparts "were given all these resources in high school" as opposed to her, and Hyacinth mentioned learning that "some of [the] peers at some other high schools . . . only offer maybe four AP classes" compared to her. These are all examples of how study collaborators walk away from VIPS with the tools and concepts needed to identify racial oppression in life and specifically in college. All study collaborators demonstrated an understanding of how racism (e.g., under resourcing) can manifest in ways that create tangible outcomes (e.g., underrepresentation in college). As demonstrated in Figure 4.3, these findings address the "highlight and expose" objective of Critical Race Theory, where SOC utilize their critical consciousness to put a name to the oppression they are confronted with.

An understandable question is: why do SOC choose to go to college with an understanding of the racial hostility that can await them? According to what study collaborators say they learned from VIPS, there is another side to the coin. On one side, racism can impact experiences. On the other, there are ways to survive and thrive on college campuses by challenging, resisting, and taking up space. These lessons align with Critical Race Theory, specifically the mission to "counter and challenge" oppression as seen in Figure 4.3.

When asked if the VIPS program had ever deterred them from going to college, all the collaborators said that they understood that VIPS engaged them in a race-conscious curriculum to prepare them for college. For example, Malcolm, a multi-racial student in his third year at UCLA, said:

> There's so much oppression that we face that could prevent us from even getting to this point [i.e., going to college] . . . I just think preparing us for that is so crucial so that we don't feel vulnerable, and we don't feel unprepared. [Through VIPS] we feel assured with ourselves, confident with ourselves.

One consistent takeaway from the program was that VIPS emphasized their capability to succeed despite the challenges that Students of Color face on college campuses. To Malcolm, and most of the other study collaborators, the race-conscious curriculum in VIPS was designed to ensure students were prepared to confront racism on campus. Instead of "being vulnerable" as Malcolm stated, VIP students were encouraged as SOC to be confident and assured of themselves. Part of building confidence is recognizing the power that comes within. Many study collaborators highlighted the importance of learning asset-based concepts like community cultural wealth through VIPS. For instance, Isaac a Black fourth-year UCLA student recalled learning about the different forms of capital that Students of Color come to schools equipped with. He said:

> That's the biggest thing I would say for me is having those different forms of capital and not selling myself short because yes, I come from whatever background, low-income, Black and whatnot, and a high school where it didn't necessarily have a college-going culture, but I also have these forms of capital to counteract a system that was placed against me.

This quote reflects Isaac's awareness—because of the VIPS curriculum—of the various forms of capital that People of Color possess. Through this awareness, Isaac was able to recognize his value despite the challenges that come with being Black, from a low-income background attending a high school that did not provide a college-going culture. Instead, Isaac suggested that one of the biggest lessons learned from VIPS was "not selling [himself] short", instead he was

encouraged to recognize his diverse strengths as assets that can be used to navigate and overcome societal barriers.

For this reason, VIP Scholars not only recognized how intersecting forms of oppression shape the college experience but were actively reminded of their capabilities. Luke, a Black public affairs major in his third year at UCLA, said:

> We're talking about intersectionality and stereotypes and isolation, things that Black students deal with . . . when they go to these big institutions. . . . In the program [they're telling us] we're enough and they're just encouraging us and telling us that we're meant to be here [at UCLA] and that we're meant to do well in life.

According to study collaborators, VIPS recognizes that racism can shape the college experience, but also tries to counteract these barriers. The message that Luke takes with him from VIPS is one of encouragement and affirmation. VIPS reassures Luke that despite the challenges that come with being a Student of Color at a P/HWI, they are enough, they belong in these spaces, and they have the potential to lead a successful life.

To succeed, many of the study collaborators described learning about the need to "make" or "take space." Kiana, a Native Hawaiian, and Black UCLA student mentioned that "VIPS has adamantly drilled into us, [UCLA] is not a school that is made for Black and Brown bodies, but you have to take space, you have to make space." Similarly, Chantel shared that through VIPS curriculum, she was very conscious of the unique way that she, as a Black woman would have to navigate P/HWIs. She explained that she felt "fortunate" that VIPS taught students about the transition from "predominately Black and Latino" high schools to UCLA as it was described as more "white and Asian." With this in mind, Chantel said she became more aware of the need to "make myself present in a space like [UCLA]" through VIPS. She expanded:

> [VIPS] is kind of having a big sister, a big brother to teach you these things. And because we are going into a Predominantly White Institution, it's just to kind of better prepare us. So we're not going in there blindsided by, okay, he just said this crazy thing and I'm just going to sit there and accept it and no—we need to speak up and say something about it.

To Chantel, and all the other study collaborators, taking space meant advocating for yourself. Through VIPS, study collaborators explained that part of the reason the program emphasized the challenges of attending a P/HWI as a SOC was to ensure that they were prepared to respond. When Chantel said "we're not going in there blindsided" she was referring to racial hostility on campus. Instead of "sit[ting] there and accept[ing] it," VIPS taught students to "speak up."

According to study collaborators, VIPS emphasized the importance of advocating for oneself to claim space at P/HWIs like UCLA. Alex—a recent graduate in African American Studies at UCLA—explained that he had been "reading Frantz Fanon since I was 11" but it was VIPS that "prepared" and "equipped" him for the reality he might be among the "only Black kids on campus." He explained that a "big lesson" from VIPS was to "stand up for yourself [because] . . . at the end of the day, they can't stop you. He continued:

> VIPS—yes tells you that [UCLA is] not designed for you—but also tells you, "This is your shit." For me, I just walk with the understanding, bro, it's nothing in this country. It's nothing in this country that anyone can tell me that I don't have access to or don't deserve or don't have the rights to . . . Because my family on both sides are the descendants of enslaved African people. I am deserving of anything that this country has to offer. Our country is still reaping the benefits of my ancestors.

In the face of societal barriers, Alex demonstrated a sense of empowerment and resistance in this quote when he said, "I am deserving of anything." Through VIPS, Alex learned that while UCLA was not designed for SOC, he should still claim ownership over the campus. Alex refused to be excluded from higher education, as he expressed feeling owed by the fact that this "country is still reaping the benefits of [his] ancestors." All the study collaborators showed a sense of resistance to exist on campus on other people's terms, often based on what they learned in VIPS.

According to study collaborators, VIPS encouraged students to "take space" by seeking out resources and sources of support when meeting challenges. Destiny, a third-year Black undergraduate majoring in Religious Studies at UCLA, said:

> . . . [T]he way VIPS described it, despite whatever my identities may be—these are not disadvantages. According to VIPS, there are resources for us and there is help. We just need to look for them and actually seek out the help . . .

According to Destiny and all the other study collaborators, one of the key lessons learned through VIPS was understanding, that as SOC there are resources and sources of support if challenges may arise. In this quote above, Destiny mentioned that VIPS was adamant about not allowing her racial identity to be a "disadvantage." While race can be used to discriminate, there were still resources and sources of support on campus. Students simply needed to "look for them and seek out the help." Some of the campus resources that were emphasized according to study collaborators were "academic counseling, mental health counseling, whatever the case" as Alex shared. He said, "[VIPS] always preach[ed] that there are resources available." Kiana and Alex also described VIPS as "holistic" in their approach to college readiness, speaking to the program's attention to mental health as SOC, sharing information on resources like UCLA's Counseling and Psychological Services. Kiana also shared that VIPS always made sure that students knew how to "access certain things on campus" such as "the AAP [Academic Advancement Program at UCLA] or the Black Bruin Resource Center." She added that VIPS intentionally made sure that students knew "we have these resources for us."

According to study collaborators, there was also a focus in VIPS on finding and/or building community on campus. Returning to the metaphor of the double-sided coin, on one side, students learn that racism can be a real part of the college experience. On the other side, there are

spaces where SOC can and should be supported and cared for on campus. A clear example of this type of messaging is David, who said:

> [Tiera] was actually the first one that introduced this concept to me of racism literally killing us by shortening our telomeres. And that's why it's important to just really take that time and space for yourself and put yourself in community with like-minded people who can support you.

In this quote, David illustrates the difficult conversations that VIPS had with students surrounding racism, particularly the consequences of racism on the health of People of Color. As a response, David explained that VIPS stressed the importance of prioritizing one's health by taking "time and space for yourself" and finding a community of "like-minded people who can support you." Thus, in VIPS, SOC learned about the harmful effects of racism while also advocating for self-care and community support to protect their well-being in college.

This final subsection emphasizes how study collaborators learned to "counter and challenge" racial oppression on college campuses from VIPS. As outlined in Figure 2, recognizing, and exposing racism and other forms of oppression is only half of what CRT is about. The other half involves actively challenging, resisting, and building which is what this subsection illuminates. According to study collaborators, VIPS teaches that racism is real, but there are also ways to claim space and thrive by surrounding yourself with people who support you. Similar lessons can be found within the literature on counterspaces (Patton, 2006) and campus climate (Solórzano et al., 2000), but is often realized once in college, if at all (Sule et al., 2021; Yosso et al., 2009). By participating in VIPS, study collaborators transitioned from high school to college understanding that a) racism is real b) higher education institutions are not race-neutral and c) active resistance and community is necessary to survive and thrive. In the

next section, I detail how VIPS SOC utilize their critical consciousness to make sense of their racialized experiences.

Finding II: "That's Whiteness Right There": Racism as Normal in Higher Education

> It's crazy to have it be told to you, but also to experience it and see it. I'm just like, they were not lying.
>
> – Chantel

This finding answers the second research question which is interested in the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who participated in a race-conscious college access program. Consistent with decades worth of research (Brown, 1990; Lewis et al., 2021; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Nadal et al., 2015; Ramirez, 1988; Swim et al., 2003), this study found that VIP Scholars experienced racism and other forms of oppression as undergraduate SOC at UCLA. Consistent with discourse surrounding hostile campus racial climates (Harper & Hurtado, 2009; Hurtado, 1992; 2022), racial microaggressions (Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Morales, 2014; Solórzano et al., 2000) and the prominence of whiteness in higher education (Cabrera et al., 2017; Tevis et al., 2023; Woodall, 2013) this section highlights the various ways that Students of Color experience racialization within a H/PWI (Patel, 2015; Patton, 2015).

Building upon the aforementioned bodies of literature, this research emphasizes the way VIP Scholars are uniquely positioned to understand the oppression they are experiencing. A Critical Race Theorist might say that in many ways, VIPS scholars are trained to understand that racism is "ordinary, normal, and embedded in society" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2018, p. 8). As evidenced by the previous finding, VIP scholars are prepared to identify oppression in schools, including higher education. Chantel's quote in the opening of this section alludes to the way VIP scholars experience their transition from high school to UCLA. In high school, VIP SOC are

"told" that racism can be a part of the college experience and then go on to "experience it" as undergraduates. The VIPS study collaborators in this research were able to recognize and name racism and other forms of oppression on campus as undergraduate SOC.

In this section, I detail their stories and experiences with oppression as UCLA SOC. I begin by highlighting the ways study collaborators describe racism within the structure of UCLA as a higher education institution. Next, I show how SOC experience racial microaggressions and criminalization. The following section demonstrates the study collaborator's awareness and critiques of intersecting forms of oppression on campus such as ableism, sexism, and classism. I conclude with narratives from study collaborators that emphasize the effects of these experiences as consistent with extant literature.

Higher Education Institutions as a Form of White Property (The Structural)

> Despite the growth and change in U.S. demographics, the academy is an overwhelmingly White terrain in terms of physical representation of White students and symbolically in terms of curriculum, campus policies, and campus spaces.
>
> – Patton, 2016, p. 320

As other scholars have noted, whiteness functions as a structuring property that systematically shapes and distorts the world (Gusa, 2010; Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As a social construction, whiteness functions by prioritizing white bodies, culture, behaviors, values, emotions, and ideologies within the social world to marginalize those deemed as nonwhite (Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2018; Harris, 1993; Matias & Boucher, 2023; Owen, 2017). As a prominent Critical Race Theorist, Harris (1993) articulated how, over time, whiteness has been privileged and protected as a form of property to be used and enjoyed. Higher education scholars such as Patel (2015, 2021) and Patton (2016) have extended this notion, by arguing that universities and colleges serve as a form of white property with respect to economic, cultural, and social capital. In this way, universities like UCLA enforce structural

policies and practices that privilege white students, and VIPS students are hyperaware of those structures. Because of VIPS, study collaborators notice how whiteness is prioritized structurally within UCLA. One of the first things that VIPS SOC notice is the lack of representation of SOC on campus. When moving onto campus, Destiny, a Black third-year religious major shared:

> I remember freshman year just getting my belongings [in] the carts, I just kept thinking to myself, where are [the] other People of Color? [Am I] seriously the only one here? Which absolutely terrified me initially until sophomore year [when] I lived on…the black floor basically.

This quote illustrates a common experience among most VIPS study collaborators. To know about underrepresentation through VIPS and then to experience it are two different things. While it is not necessarily new information, it is still a jarring experience for some. The way that Destiny astutely asked herself, "[am I] seriously the only one here?" implies having learned it before, but still being surprised to have it happen to her. When asked about the most difficult moments in their college trajectory Jenny, a third-year multiracial student, also said:

> This first happened with my English class. Just one day we were all in this big circle doing activity. I looked around and I realized that, oh, I'm the only Black person in the room, even though the VIPS Mentors told us bluntly before that, it's a thing that happens. I didn't really realize what that meant until I was in that experience.

For most study collaborators, the underrepresentation of SOC at UCLA was not surprising, but still required a level of meaning-making. Through VIPS, Jenny had been warned about the lack of a diverse study body but "didn't really realize what that meant" until she "was in that experience" herself. Many of the VIPS students explicitly recognized this as a form of structural or systemic racism. Alex, a Black UCLA alum, said:

> [W]hen it comes to navigating racism, I feel like for me, I went to UCLA, so I combated certain systemic things. So walking around, not seeing a whole bunch of people that look like you, knowing everybody that's Black, literally you can name 'em . . .

Many of the study collaborators shared this perspective. Like Alex, they described the underrepresentation of SOC—and in particular Black students—as a form of racism. Jenny

mentioned that she was often the only Black student in her English courses, Malcolm explained how he was not used to "seeing a lot of people who don't look like [him]" before UCLA, and Isaac frequently mentioned the underrepresentation of Black students in his STEM courses. Isaac shared that he was "1 of 4 Black students in the Physical Sci major" despite there being 250 students in the major. He added that "now there's only 3 Black students" after being weeded out. Poor racial campus climates (inclusive of a lack of diverse representation) and lack of culturally relevant institutional support are often cited as reasons why SOC are pushed out of STEM majors (Handelsman et al., 2022; Hatfield et al., 2022; McCoy et al., 2017).

Resource allocation—or lack thereof—for SOC on campus is another form of structural racism that VIPS study collaborators are aware of. Luke, for example, a Black third-year public affairs major and Greek life member pointed to the disparity between predominantly white fraternities and sororities compared to their SOC counterparts. He said:

> You could point out Greek life—how they have a lot more money, a lot more resources. They have a frat home and the Black fraternities and sororities don't have a house here at UCLA. . . . They have a whole row for fraternities, and they have a whole row for sororities . . . [L]ike, wow, they have a lot of resources and maybe the campus should help out the Black fraternities and sororities with at least getting one or two.

In the context of Greek life, this quote demonstrates Luke's awareness of the systemic inequities and racial disparities at UCLA. As a leading member of his own fraternity, he made note of the economic capital that white students have compared to the Black students in Greek life, and how that capital manifests into physical property (e.g., frat houses). Luke also raised a critical point about the role of higher education institutions in providing support to help remedy these disparities crafted by a legacy of racism and exclusion in Greek life (Ray, 2013). This quote emphasizes what Harris (1993) called the "right to use and enjoy" as a function of white property in which white students are provided the resources to enjoy frat and sorority houses near campus while Black students have none.

A few study collaborators mentioned the creation of the Black Bruin Resource Center (BBRC) which was institutionalized after the 2020 racial uprisings following the murder of George Floyd (G.D. Block, personal communication, June 30, 2020). A couple of study collaborators noted that the BBRC had struggled to be established before. David begrudgingly said that "the only reason we got that is because George Floyd died, and they just needed a quick response to settle people" or "to get them to shut up." Hyacinth, a Black UCLA alumnus who identified as nonbinary, also commented:

> [Before George Floyd] people who are vehemently against having a 20-cent increase to student fees. They were so like, what is this for? What about the white student resource center? Truly people are showing their colors. Are you serious? You're so mad that we want to have extra resources for Black students, and especially during this time, that is so heartbreaking . . . [T]he bill, it didn't get passed at first. I was like, this shows you guys don't actually care about Black students. Like you say you do—we might be on your brochures or your website, but we have to literally fight tooth and nail to be recognized and taken care of on campus, or we always have to make our own spaces. It's never an inherent like, oh yeah, this should be here.

Hyacinth shares in this quote the way that higher education institutions like UCLA are unwilling to support SOC on campus unless it meets their own interests. According to a few study collaborators, before the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, the bill to establish the BBRC was denied. Hyacinth communicated that students were unwilling to spend an additional 20 cents in student fees to fund the initiative and used reverse racism tactics by asking about a "white student center." Here Hyacinth highlights the fact that despite failing to become institutionalized before, it was the calls for racial justice following the 2020 uprisings that led to the university finally funding the BBRC. Whiteness as property and interest convergence as tenets of CRT emphasize the way universities act in their own interest to protect whiteness (Harris, 1993). In this example, UCLA protects its reputation and elevated status as a higher education institution that values diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by funding the BBRC and using their images in brochures. Through this approach, UCLA can continue to tout a commitment to DEI, without

public scrutiny. Still, as Hyacinth and David point out, it is only because of the public calls for racial justice following the murder of George Floyd that their interests converged (Bell, 1980).

The classroom was also described as a place that protected white interests, ideologies, values, and perspectives. Jamie for example, a multiracial graduate from UCLA in African American Studies, explained that she had originally wanted to pursue a degree in political science:

> I wanted to be a civil rights lawyer, work at the federal level to help address racial inequities. I became jaded because I realized that you really do just have to work with the system. And I remember I took Intro to American Government, and I remember our final question was something along the lines of, "Who is most likely to be the president of 2020?" And the professor was a Trump supporter. So I just put Trump because I was like, I know that will give me an up. And I had to explain because his theory was like, "Oh, he would be more likely to be president at the time." . . But I don't know even that I had to go against my own thoughts to appeal to this white man.

Jamie demonstrates pressure to conform to "appeal to this white man" who wields the power to impact her academic trajectory despite her own beliefs. Rather than arguing with a white man who was supporting a known white supremacist (i.e., Trump), Jamie decided to ignore her own thoughts and feelings surrounding the topic to receive a good grade. Racist rhetoric was described as prevalent within the political science major specifically. Luke and Symone also had similar experiences in political science courses to where they felt othered for their liberal views. For example, Luke mentioned that he was constantly "meeting people who had different perspectives, a lot of conservatives" who promoted "alt-right, racist ideology" in class. For Jamie, she ultimately decided to enter the African American studies major to find refuge in "Black spaces." She said that her experiences encountering racist ideology in political science courses made her question her belonging. She said, "Maybe I don't belong here. This is obviously not a space for Black people." Through these interactions, whiteness as property

functions by enacting the right to exclude liberal and anti-racist ideologies that resonate with the experiences of SOC (Harris, 1993).

Similarly, UCLA acts as a form of white property by excluding diverse perspectives within the curriculum (Harris, 1993; Patton, 2016). David for instance said that one form of structural form of racism is the underrepresentation of scholarship written by Scholars of Color. When asked how he noticed structural racism at play at UCLA, he said:

> Not seeing yourself represented in certain curriculums. I'm a Sociology major. We read about white people. I think we've learned about one Black person, and that was Dubois. My time here, especially being a Global Health major—half the time I'm [asking myself] how does this apply to Black people? What does this look like for Black people? Because our experiences are very vastly different from [white people]—like Black sociology is probably a whole other major that could exist.

This quote by David demonstrates an understanding of the canonization of white scholarship in higher education and the exclusion of Scholars of Color within curricula (Fernandez-Gaztambide et al., 2018; Gusa, 2010). According to David, the lens through which the field of Sociology and Global Health situated learning is through white perspectives. He recognized that white experiences and perspectives are "vastly different" from that of Black experience, even when the major was supposedly "global." The omission of Scholars of Color within college classrooms reifies whiteness as the standard (Harris, 1993; Patton, 2016). This is another way that UCLA functions as a form of white property, enforcing its right to exclude diverse perspectives while granting white students the privilege of seeing themselves reflected within the curriculum (Harris, 1993; Patton, 2016).

Lastly, some VIPS SOC describe structural racism as having too few People of Color as student support staff. This finding is consistent with extant research as the teaching force within higher education remains overwhelmingly white, representing 73% of faculty across the nation (NCES, 2023). Symone for example, told a story about a negative experience with a white

mental health counselor at UCLA. She explained that she had begun going to the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) to deal with grief and had been assigned a white therapist. Symone said that she only did two sessions with the therapist because she felt "like she didn't understand" her. She went on:

> I had said something along the lines of, "I've gotten used to the idea that I can't just instinctively trust a random white student to understand stuff and be socially conscious or care." And she was just like, "Oh, so you feel like you can't trust white people?" And I'm like, "Yeah . . . it's like they're not taught to care about other people" . . . It's like, that's not how I've seen stuff happen. That's not how I grew up . . . But it's like she didn't understand it and it's like, of course you don't understand. You're also a white woman . . . I was like, okay, I need a Person of Color to talk to this about. I was like, "I can't talk to you about it because you don't get it."

At the time, Symone was processing the death of her mother while dealing with an abusive father. When Symone spoke about her racialized experiences, she was met with questioning about her distrust of white students. Symone, clearly frustrated in retelling this story, expressed feeling like the therapist "didn't understand" why she did not automatically trust white people. As she said, she could not "just instinctively trust a random white student" because of her previous experiences growing up. This example demonstrates how the UCLA counselor protects the reputation and innocence of white students by the way she questioned Symone (Harris, 1993). This narrative is also consistent with extant research that shows that higher education counseling and therapy services within P/HWIs perpetuate systemic racism (Grier-Reed et al., 2021)

Destiny also described her experience with white student support staff as a form of structural racism. She explained that after experiencing racism in her philosophy class, she wanted to switch to an African American studies course and needed the help of an academic advisor. She explained that most of the academic advisors at UCLA were white women, which made it difficult to talk about her experiences with racism in class. She said "I didn't tell her

[about my experience] because I didn't feel comfortable telling her telling her that. I felt as if I didn't feel comfortable because I don't think she would've deemed it as an actual good reason to actually drop the class." Instead, she gave "logical reasons" to drop the class which did not end up working. The counselor was "in complete dismissal of this whole idea in general" and made it difficult despite her many attempts to get help. She added, "I just felt like she didn't, she wasn't hearing me . . . I didn't feel very supported when it comes to actually her really understanding the reasoning why I wanted to drop the philosophy class and the African American studies class." Destiny further explained that her experience with this advisor made her feel "very discouraged." This narrative is consistent with research that shows that higher education academic advisors perpetuate racial harm against Students of Color such as holding lower expectations, enforcing white norms, and enacting racist policies (Sarcedo, 2022). These practices, all uphold whiteness (Sarcedo & Matias, 2018).

The racialized experiences that VIPS study collaborators depicted affirm what they had learned in VIPS—that UCLA was not built for SOC. Instead, UCLA functioned as a form of white property, that could be enjoyed by white students, staff, and faculty. In this vein, study collaborators identify whiteness as a form of structural racism that impacts the way that they experience college. Their stories underscore the pervasive nature of structural racism within P/HWIs, illustrating how UCLA acts as a form of white property that excludes the diversity of SOC's experiences and perspectives.

Establishing Inferiority and Reinforcing Marginality (The Personal)

> As a structuring property, whiteness situates white individuals in positions of supremacy and privilege, while people of color are positioned as inferior within its structures.
>
> – Owen (2007)

Higher education institutions reinforce racial hierarchies in which white students are situated at the top of the social order (Lopez, 1994). At UCLA, SOC are positioned as inferior by their peers, faculty, and staff on a personal level. This finding shows how VIPS SOC experience racialization at UCLA in the form of hyper/invisibility, racial microaggressions, and criminalization. Often, study collaborators would name the racism that they were experiencing, demonstrating an understanding of what racism looks and feels like as SOC at UCLA. Some study collaborators even made connections between the structural and personal forms of racism. Symone, for instance, a Black alum from UCLA depicted her own experience with underrepresentation and hyper-invisibility. She told a story about her experience in a Political Science course at UCLA where was one of three Black students in class. She described there being "so many people" in class, to where "a lot of seats are full" and students are "sitting shoulder to shoulder." She continued:

> I realized something very quickly that even no matter where I sat, I always had two empty seats next to me. People never sit right next to me. And at first, I felt self-conscious. I was just like, well, do I stink? Did I dress weird? Am I sweaty? Because I just walked across this campus and power walked in the middle of the summer. I used to be like, dang, I wonder why nobody sits next to me.

This sentiment was mentioned by a couple of study collaborators. The idea or thought that they—as SOC—may "stink" because of the lengths that their peers will go to avoid them. Jamie, a multiracial alum of UCLA gave a similar testimony. She said, "People would rather sit on the floor than sit next to me" in a full auditorium of 300 students. She recalled asking herself "Do I stink or something," insinuating that perhaps the problem was her. For both Jamie and Symone, there was a moment of apprehension around what they were experiencing. However, as we discussed their racialized experiences on campus, both identified these moments as racist. In these examples, both Jamie and Symone were avoided as Black women. Higher education

scholars have described this phenomenon as hyper-invisibility, where Black students are outright ignored by their white peers on campus (Allen, 2021; Newton, 2023).

Chantel, a Black UCLA alum, also detailed a set of common experiences with hyper invisibility as a SOC on campus, specifically in the dining halls. When we chatted about her experiences with racism on campus, she explained that UCLA often felt like a space made for white people, where "it was their way or the highway." She continued:

> I've had my plate scooted aside before too, and somebody [is] sitting right next to me or even at the table and I'm like, "I'm saving these seats." What are you doing? They just don't care. Man, you always got to start off real respectful because also you don't want to feed into the angry Black women stereotype. So you just got to start off being calm, cool, and collected until they start to get real disrespectful. Then that's when you got to rile it up a little bit, like, okay, I'm still a human just like you . . .

At this moment, Chantel described many instances where her existence was ignored or pushed to the side. She recounted instances where her plate had been moved when she was clearly there or at times saving seats for others. Chantel rolled her eyes as she added, "They just don't care"—meaning white students simply do not care about her existence. Her quote implies that white students did not always see her humanity as she said, "I'm human just like you" noting the lack of respect that she had faced in the dining halls. When Chantel said, "You always got to start real respectful because also you don't want to feed into the angry Black women stereotype" she demonstrated the hyper invisibility/visibility that Black women face on college campuses. Chantel described being ignored in the dining halls while also being cognizant of the hypervisibility that could arise if she did not come off "calm, cool, and collected."

Symone also commented on the hypervisibility/invisibility that she experienced in the UCLA dining halls as a Black woman. She described an instance where a student cut her in line, flinched when she moved closer to him, and then remained vigilant of her actions. As she processed this interaction she said "I'm like okay, so I am invisible enough for you to just cut in

front of. But then I'm also scary enough that you feel like you have to keep watching me. So what is it? Because if you thought I was scary, you wouldn't cut me in the first place." Being dismissed or ignored in some instances while being made hyper visible in others are common encounters for Black women in P/HWIS (Allen, 2021; Newton, 2023).

Racial microaggressions were the most referenced form of racism that study collaborators encountered and described during our *platicas*. Often rooted in racial stereotypes, microaggressions are defined as subtle, everyday forms of racism (Pierce, 1969; Solórzano et al., 2000). For example, Kiana multiracial UCLA student in her third year told a story about when she had been the target of microaggressions by her own roommate's mother. She explained:

> There was one moment where [my roommate] was on FaceTime with her mom and I threw up, I just felt like this [makes a peace sign]. And her mom was like, what gang sign should I throw up? And I was like, you're a white mom . . . [and] your mom just asked me—your roommate at U C L A—what gang sign I should throw up? . . . I felt offended in that moment, and I remember stepping away from the situation and then the next morning I brought it up to her. I was like, I completely did not like that at all . . . why is your mom assuming that I know gang signs? I don't know no gang signs, I don't dunno any of them.

Kiana's quote vividly illustrates the nature and impact of racial microaggressions on SOC on college campuses. Although the comment made by her roommate's mom may seem harmless, it is rooted in stereotypes. This subtle form of discrimination reveals an underlying assumption that Black people are associated with gangs, purely based on their racial identity. Of note is how the assumption made her feel. Kiana said that she felt "offended in that moment," emphasizing how racial microaggressions impact the targeted individual. The mother's comment has a lasting impact on Kiana, compelling her to step "away from the situation," processing it overnight, and then bringing it up the next morning. This finding is consistent with studies that have shown how cumulative microaggressions can have detrimental effects on the psychological, physiological,

and academic well-being of SOC (Huber & Solórzano, 2014; Pierce, 1970; Sue et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2014).

Isaac, a fourth-year Physiological Sciences student at UCLA also described encounters with racial microaggressions as a Black undergraduate student. In fact, he named quite a few examples and then added, "I feel like I go through microaggressions rather often." He explained that he has had students on campus ask him "Oh, what sport do you play," assuming he was a student-athlete because he is "a Black male." Another example that Isaac gave was that he was often told he "looked like such and such from this show" when he would "look nothing like the person they say" aside from being from the same race. He continued, "that's a stereotype . . . [that] all people in a certain race or ethnicity look the same." The microaggression that Isaac spoke about in length and in both *platicas* was related to stereotypes around what majors Black students enroll in:

> I think a lot of people have preconceptions of me that are disproven after they get to know me, but beforehand, it's almost like it's up to me to just prove [to] them that they may think that I'm not as smart, or at least for me, a big one that keeps coming up . . . but they're like, oh, what's your major? [And then] they'll just tell me. They'll say what my major is. They won't give me a chance to answer the question, are you AF AM [African American Studies]? . . . I don't like the fact that you asked the question and they answered in place of me. Then when I say physiology, they're like, "Oh" and [sound or act] very shocked and astounded that that's what I'm doing.

Stereotypes follow Black students as demonstrated by Isaac's quote. In this example, the assumption is that as a Black student, he could not possibly be a STEM major. Instead, other students on campus have presumed that he is an African American Studies major. What bothered Isaac the most was that those "preconceptions" were made well before getting to know him. He also shared later that these assumptions "set a bad precedent for building a relationship" with peers on campus because before he can "even get the chance to introduce [him]self" he was "already categorized" in ways that promote racial stereotypes. Additionally, the fact that his

peers were "shocked and astounded" to hear that he was a physiology major implies that Black students are not intelligent enough to major in STEM. Encountering these types of racial microaggressions is not an uncommon experience for Black students in STEM and often leads to a low sense of belonging and poor scientific identity development (Lee et al., 2020; McGee, 2016; Miles et al., 2020).

Another common form of racialization that study collaborators shared was criminalization. Studies have shown that SOC—and in particular Black men—are often associated with criminal proclivities on college campuses (Jenkins et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2007). Other research has described how higher education institutions employ carceral state powers to surveil, intimidate, and maintain control over SOC (Castro & Magana, 2020; Johnson & Dizon, 2021). Study collaborators made similar connections between the criminalization that they experienced from faculty and the increase in policing in and around campus. When speaking to the different forms of oppression that study collaborators have faced on campus, Hyacinth, a Black non-binary alum from UCLA, elaborated:

> Criminalization, definitely. Protesters during BLM were being detained in the Jeff Jackie Robinson Stadium. The audacity, the actual audacity of UCPD. I've seen one of my classmates . . . a PhD candidate, pulled over by UCPD [for being] on a scooter and it's like, what do you mean?. . . It's not that big of a deal . . . [During Block Party at UCLA] these white kids literally have lit mattresses on fire. They were doing reckless things. But then I think there was a group of Black students that got talked to by UCPD that night, and it's like they're just walking. They're just bypassers. But you see this nonsense and there's just clearly an imbalance there. That goes in with criminalization [and] police brutality.

Race and racism have been linked to campus policing practices in ways that maintain whiteness while criminalizing SOC (Dizon, 2021). Hyacinth noted the dichotomous nature of policing whereby white students are the cause of illegal activity (i.e., burning a mattress) and Black students are criminalized for walking by. Furthermore, Hyacinth's quote notes how Black students are policed for riding a scooter or protesting for Black rights while white students do

"reckless things" like light a mattress on fire. Hyacinth demonstrates an understanding of how campus policing is tied to criminalization for SOC—and in particular Black students. As she stated, "There's just clearly an imbalance there" in terms of the treatment of SOC and their white counterparts.

As a Black man, Alex also shared similar sentiments about UCPD. A recent UCLA alum from the African American Studies department, Alex claimed that "UCPD is actually a really real problem" on campus:

> UCPD is weird. . . . They follow you. It's so weird. [They will] pull me over. Mind you, I have blue tints on my car. I have blue tints that you can very clearly see through. Definitely was not past the shade limit. This white police officer followed me around Westwood for at least 15 to 20 minutes, tailing my car and I'm looking for a parking spot. I just finally pull over and I'm like, yo, as soon as I pull my car, whoop, whoop [imitating police sirens]. And he's just talking, talking, talking, trying to find any reason to write me up for a ticket. Must've had to made some sort of quota. They just so extra over there. So extremely criminalizing. I'm glad I had a friend in the car in that particular instance.

This quote emphasizes how campus police racially profile and criminalize Black students in and around campus. The cop could clearly see his window, which means he was not committing a crime. However, Alex noted that the police officer was "trying to find any reason to write me up," implying that he was guilty of committing a crime, despite the lack of any legitimate cause. The true crime that Alex committed was "driving while Black," a phenomenon that has long been documented in the U.S. (Harris, 1999). Alex recognized this occurrence as a form of criminalization, even communicating relief that a friend was in the car with him. This comment emphasizes the psychological stress that campus police impart of SOC. When Alex had said "I'm glad I had a friend in the car in that particular instance," he implied that there is some sense of safety in numbers, as opposed to facing police violence alone. This finding builds on existing research that shows how these types of confrontations with campus police can create psychological stress for SOC (Smith et al., 2007).

Instructional staff (e.g., faculty, lecturers, teaching assistants) can also criminalize students according to study collaborators. Isaac spoke at length of the criminalization that he experienced in the classroom. He called it "criminalization, not in the sense of police, but academic success" specifically when "somebody attributing you doing good on a test to cheating":

> In Phy Sci, I swear I'm not lying to you. Me and my friend [Arnie] would sit next to each other on the test. I promise it would be like three TAs [teaching assistants] behind us and the other three would be dispersed. . . . Any test, they will always be around us the most. . . . They always assume that me, I'm cheating or something, or [they will wonder] how did he do this [referring to receiving a good grade on a test]? . . . The whole standing behind me during the test, that's a form of criminalization in my opinion, because if cheating is a crime or not allowed, and the fact that I'm being targeted as though I could be cheating or something like that is a form of criminalization.

This is a clear example of criminalization in an academic setting. In both of our *platicas*, Isaac spoke about this type of criminalization was a result of racism. Because he was a Black student doing well in STEM, he and his other Black friend in class were disproportionally surveilled during exams. Out of six TAs, three were behind Isaac and Arnie and three were spread out amongst the other students. This reflects a racist assumption that presumes misconduct from Black students without any cause, and that Black students are not smart enough to do well in a STEM course without cheating. Isaac's story is also an example of a racial microaggression where this subtle action conveys racist assumptions about who belongs in STEM.

As evidenced in this section, study collaborators experience racialization at UCLA and are profoundly aware of the racial discrimination that they face on campus. In many cases, they outright name the racism that they have and continue to experience on campus such as hyper invisibility/visibility, racial microaggressions, and criminalization. In the previous finding, study collaborators demonstrate an understanding of how structural racism functions on campus. In

this finding, they recognize how racism is used to push them to margins and establish their inferiority by weaponizing stereotypes against them.

Finding III: "It's Not Me": Embodying Counterstories and Countering Majoritarian Narratives

> When you're not ignorant to why these forces exist or why you're being treated that way, it makes it a lot easier to deal with. It's like, okay, y'all are just stupid and racist. I don't have to let that dictate my experience here.
>
> – David

The third finding answers the research question which seeks to understand how, if at all, SOC perceive that the college access program (VIPS) has influenced the navigation of their racialized campus experiences. In the previous sections, I established that study collaborators developed their critical consciousness in VIPS in learning about racism in relation to systems and structures. Then, in Finding II, study collaborators go on to use that critical consciousness to identify the racism they are confronted with as they experience it at UCLA. In this last set of findings, I demonstrate how study collaborators respond to racism on campus. Three sections comprise this finding under the larger theme, "It's Not Me": Embodying Counterstories and Countering Majoritarian Narratives. The first subsection titled, "Recognizing and Rejecting Dominant Narratives in Higher Education" shows how study collaborators used the knowledge and tools gained in VIPS to reject dominant ideologies such as race-neutrality, meritocracy, and equal opportunity at UCLA. The second subsection is titled "Responding to Racism with Resistance" which highlights how the experiences of study collaborators in VIPS uniquely equipped them to respond to racism with resistance. The last subsection, "Taking Belonging: When Race is Power and Community is Everything" emphasizes how study collaborators enact their agency on campus by drawing on their race as a source of power. Together, VIPS SOC use

their critical consciousness to "highlight and expose" racism on campus, while actively "countering and challenging" oppression on campus.

Recognizing and Rejecting Dominant Narratives in Higher Education

This study found that study collaborators possessed the ability to recognize and resist dominant narratives within higher education settings. Dominant ideologies such as race neutrality, equal opportunity, objectivity, and merit obscure the role that white supremacy plays in creating oppressive conditions for People of Color to thrive (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Dixon & Rousseau, 2018; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). As demonstrated in the first finding of this dissertation, VIPS SOC learn that racism and other forms of oppression impact systems and structures, including higher education institutions. This finding highlights how study collaborators apply the knowledge they learned in VIPS as high school SOC in college to reject dominant ideologies.

Jamie, for example, mentioned that VIPS had taught her all about affirmative action, specifically Prop 209 in California which banned race-based decision-making in college admissions in 1996. She said she learned that "there's no affirmation action in the UC system" in VIPS and "then f[ound] out so many people think affirmative action is still in place at UCLA." She added that her peers at UCLA have told her "It must be easier for them [SOC] to get in than me", meaning that because of affirmative action, it is easier for SOC to get into UCLA. This is a common and recurring majoritarian narrative on college campuses which is rooted in meritocracy as a dominant ideology (Yosso, 2013). The story is that SOC only attend higher education institutions because of affirmative action policies that make it "easier" to be admitted (Yosso, 2013). Simultaneously, this narrative reifies the idea that SOC are unintelligent and undeserving of college admission (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Jamie continued, “I was just like, what? You don’t think that everyone deserves to be here?.” She said that she ended up having the “opposite reaction” and thought about how many of her classmates “were supper class or white” who had the adequate resources to do well in school. She credited VIPS for helping her process these instances to “look through the bullshit” and recognize that “[they]’re the one that is ignorant.” She later continued:

> I remember I had a political science class, and I had this partner that would not talk to me and then I overheard her talking about affirmative action and how it’s detrimental to UCLA and I literally chimed in. I was like, it’s been outlawed for 20 years in the UC system. What are you talking about? It would be certain things like that I think [that] VIPS gave me, educated me on so much about inequities and recent history especially that when people would tell me ignorant stuff, I’m like, okay, you’re wrong. I think that’s what really helped me.

This quote demonstrates how VIPS SOC use the knowledge gained through VIPS to recognize and reject dominant narratives within the college environment. The assumption was that affirmative action was detrimental to the prestige of UCLA because as Jamie said earlier, her peers have expressed that “this idea that all these low-income students, first-gen, it must be easier for them to get in.” For that reason, affirmative action was considered by Jamie’s peers to be “detrimental to UCLA”, implying that the school was somehow less prestigious because there was an increase in SOC who considered were “less qualified” to get in. However, because Jamie learned in VIPS that affirmative action policies were banned in California because of Prop 209, she was able to resist this dominant narrative. More importantly, instead of internalizing the messaging that—SOC are intellectually inferior—Jamie labeled the narrative as ignorance which “really helped [her].”

Similarly, when asked how VIPS SOC prepared them to navigate the campus culture at UCLA, Symone said:

> [VIPS] did prepare me, I guess [for] what I would call the fake woke liberalism that UCLA likes to portray. Knowing [and] being able to have conversations about what actually happens versus what they try to portray all the time. And so that I don’t feel

> confused or just caught off guard by things when they happen because sometimes, I feel like people get too caught up in the I-can't-believe-it part, and it's like, no, I need you to get on the train, believe it, and then what's the next step?

Racism does not come as a shock to study collaborators because they were primed by VIPS to recognize race neutrality. When Symone commented on the "fake woke liberalism that UCLA likes to portray" she was suggesting that UCLA only appears progressive on a superficial level. Like Critical Race Theorists who critique liberalism for appearing forward-thinking while obscuring the salient role of racism and touting equality, Symone said that "what actually happens" at UCLA is different from "what they try to portray all the time" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dixon & Rousseau Anderson, 2018). Notably, Symone conveyed that VIPS prepared her to navigate the inconsistency between what UCLA claimed to be and what the campus is like for SOC. Instead of dwelling or getting "caught off guard", she emphasized moving towards action ("what's the next step"). The dominant ideology carefully crafted by UCLA to appear "liberal" and "woke" is thus recognized and rejected by Symone.

Another dominant ideology that study collaborators refused to accept and/or internalize is meritocracy. Because SOC learned how racism functions structurally in VIPS, they can dismiss false notions of merit at UCLA. A good example is Isaac a Black STEM major in his last year at UCLA. Isaac understood that structural racism shaped the way he experienced his experience at UCLA as a Physiological Sciences major. He often spoke to the fact that he was one of the "few Black students" or "marginalized students" in his classes. He explained that professors at UCLA also make it less diverse "by scaring you out of the classes." He went on to say that he knew "so many people" who were in STEM majors who were ultimately pushed out. He said that those peers would tell him "I'm not going to do this because these teachers purposefully scare you off to make you nervous to continue. . . . It's not supportive." He continued:

> It's hard to be like, "Okay, I'm going to do this" when you're not getting the necessary support that you need. Having the experience of VIPS was just a testimony to what we already knew, which is that yes, they're allowing minoritized or marginalized groups to be in these classes, but we aren't getting the necessary equitable resources to succeed in those classes because you can start off as a biology major and then you get an F on a chemistry test because you don't get the necessary support . . .

To Isaac, the system was already set for him to fail. As he said, SOC are not "getting the necessary equitable resources to succeed" in STEM, thus placing the blame on weeder courses instead of himself. He said that he "never beat [him]self up throughout any of [his] weeder courses" at UCLA because he knew he did not always have the "necessary support" to do well. He continued, "That's not to say I didn't do bad in them…[but] I never beat myself up for anything like that though…I'm not hard on myself." Isaac knew that if he did not do well, it was not because he was not smart. He said, "If you do better on a test than me, that doesn't mean that you're smarter than me…[its] that pull yourself by the bootstraps" language that "does not account for the fact that students may have so much other stuff going on [such as] financial burden, financial stress, or having to help at home." He recognized that succeeding is not a testament to intelligence, but rather circumstance.

This sentiment was common amongst VIPS SOC who participated in STEM courses at UCLA. Kiana for instance shared that she knew that "these [STEM] courses [were] built to take out the majority of the people" and because she knew that she would "take [her] L [loss]" if she did not do well in those courses. In these instances, both Kiana and Isaac dispel meritocracy as a dominant ideology. They do not subscribe to the idea that all opportunities are equal, and thus, not all can succeed if they simply "work hard enough." Instead, Kiana and Isaac understand that failing in STEM can be by design, a result of systemic racism which pushes SOC out (McCoy et al., 2017). This finding is of particular importance as previous research has shown how dominant

ideologies like meritocracy can limit the participation of SOC in higher education (Harper et al., 2009).

Responding to Racism with Resistance

This finding demonstrates how SOC respond to racism on campus, after participating in VIPS as a race-conscious college access program. In this section, I highlight strategies that study collaborators utilize when faced with racism on campus. Specifically, illustrate two common responses a) actively engage and challenge and b) preserve energy. I draw attention to how their narratives serve as counterstories, where study collaborators describe naming and then actively resisting oppression on campus (Delgado Bernal & Aleman, 2017). One caveat that is important to make clear is that these strategies are not static – meaning that the way that study collaborators react at a given time does not reflect how they always respond. Instead, I highlight some strategies that VIPS SOC have developed in VIPS and utilize on a case-by-case basis. I underscore the through line between these strategies is that they do not blame themselves for the racism they are experiencing.

Actively Engage and Challenge

This section represents several ways that VIPS SOC challenge racism and other forms of oppression at UCLA. One approach when experiencing racial microaggressions or confronting white supremacist ideologies on campus is to correct others and create change. Because of VIPS, study collaborators are well-versed in what is considered racist or problematic and actively use that knowledge to educate others. Research shows that when critical consciousness is developed through critical reflection (see Finding I), SOC then move into critical motivation and critical social action (Freire, 1970). Critical motivation is having the belief in oneself to create change while critical social action involves carrying out efforts to create social change (Freire, 1970).

Hyacinth shared that it was VIPS that "made [her] fall in love with finding new ways to change the education system" and to make it "more accessible and understanding of the nuances of BIPOC experiences." Amongst most study collaborators, promoting social justice on campus was a passion, and part of that making that change was to educate others. Kiana for example shared that she recognized that "there's a lot of things that people don't know" with regards to issues related to social justice. She said:

> I think it's important that we share the information . . . to tell them when it's wrong. Because if people continue to make those mistakes, you're no better than the next because you're letting them do that to you. It really just takes as much as being like, "That was wrong and I'm not okay with that." And if you can stand in your truth and . . . if I advise them to go do whatever, then what else are you going to do? Force them to do it? So I think that's what's also important. VIPS has given me a voice and I have a voice because [of] the foundational knowledge I have. I know what's wrong and I know it made me feel this way. So, I can say this to you and I'm going to say it to you because if I don't, I'm just repeating history and I'm not going to do that.

Kiana's quote emphasized the importance of the "foundational knowledge" she gained through VIPS. This knowledge was then used to advocate for herself and for what she believed to be an injustice. Kiana credited VIPS for giving her a voice and a sense of empowerment to "stand in [her] truth." She demonstrated a sense of responsibility to "share the information" gained through VIPS to avoid "repeating history." She refused to stay silent given what she knew about issues related to oppression, regardless of the outcome because "what else are you going to do? Force them to do it?" To her, speaking up was a necessary action to disrupt the cyclical nature of oppression.

Educating for a better world was a common goal amongst study collaborators. It was their way of challenging oppression on their campus and beyond. Alex for instance reestablished the African Men's Collective at UCLA in response to sexual assault allegations made by Black women on campus. Alex recognized that "most people [on campus] didn't have a VIPS" to

educate them on issues related to Black women "before [they] get to school." He acknowledged that there is an assumption that because the Black men at UCLA are "getting educated" and that "it's a little bit different" in terms of problematic behavior toward Black women. To address this need, Alex said:

> A lot of these behaviors that we bring into these institutions that are super woke, are not right, are not cool, which are things that you may not really realize how bad they are until you get to the institution [UCLA]…I say it to say there was a very clear need for Black men to have a space on campus to yes, hold ourselves accountable and not be hurting all the women in our community or other men in our community for that matter… We thought that it would be a dope thing to not only have a space to hold us accountable, help each other grow holistically, but also to mediate [and] restore broken relationships in the community with the help of professionals.

Like Kiana, Alex expressed feeling compelled to educate students on campus. In this example, Alex had felt a responsibility to educate Black men who may not have discussed issues at the intersection of race and gender. He suggested that some of the behaviors that men engage in are harmful to Black women which can be addressed by creating a space for Black men on campus to "grow holistically" and "restore broken relationships in the community." Alex's actions serve as a counternarrative that highlights the importance of intersectionality. Alex understood that Black women are on the receiving end of injustice—first because they are Black and second because they are women. Thus, they are oppressed at the intersection of race *and* gender at the hands of Black men (Crenshaw, 1989; 1990). Instead of contributing to that oppression, Alex used the knowledge he had gained in VIPS and in other social justice CAPs to educate and heal other Black men.

Luke also mentioned that in high school, VIPS tried to "cultivate [them] as leaders"—a sentiment that made study collaborators shared. Most of them served in leadership positions on campus and were often fueled by the desire to combat oppression on campus. He said, "[VIPS] gave us the information, knowledge, and the awareness so that we're able to recognize those

disparities." Luke added that VIPS participants were encouraged to become leaders and use that knowledge "so that one day [they] could be in the position to advocate for the change [they] wanted to see on campus." Many VIPS SOC did just that. Luke for example was heavily involved on campus. One of the most remarkable ways that Luke utilized his VIPS knowledge was when he coordinated a Black Women's Appreciation Dinner at UCLA through his Greek fraternity. He said,

> We did [a program] which was called Black Women's Appreciation Dinner, and that was a time where we got to recognize the Black women on our campus. And that's something that really just stems from VIPS. And how they're talking about intersectionality and how Black women deal with a lot. So that was something I prioritized going into college, and that's how I wanted to make my mark and my impact…That's kind of how I navigate my UCLA experiences, by using my platform as a member of this fraternity…by trying to prioritize their experiences.

When asked to discuss the event, Luke explained that Black women from all over campus were invited and given plaques. He expressed that the idea for the event stemmed from his time in VIPS, specifically from their conversations around the concept of intersectionality. Through the race-conscious curriculum in VIPS, he came to understand that "Black women deal with a lot" and thus wanted to ensure that his navigation of college included making his "mark" and "impact."

Many of the study collaborators used the knowledge gained in VIPS to make UCLA a better place for those experiencing college on the margins. They acknowledged that racism and other forms of oppression were real, shaping the lives of those on campus, and then actively worked to combat it. As demonstrated in the first finding, they reject dominant ideologies such as race-neutrality and majoritarian narratives around who belongs on campus. With this information, they deliberately construct counterstories where communities of Color are centered and appreciated as they navigate higher education (Delgado Bernal & Aleman, 2017).

Another form of resistance that VIPS SOC take is to be more dismissive when confronted with perpetrators of racial microaggressions on campus. For example, Jamie said that she "started trolling people." Trolling is a term used to describe annoying and/or insulting someone, typically online (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Jamie described "trolling" people on campus as a response to being microaggressed. She stated:

> I remember I used to get really fed up when people would ask me my ethnicity. So I would just say something randomly and they would believe it. Or if I was in a sport, I'd be like, 'yeah, I'm in volleyball' [laughs]. I would just be saying something stupid…I was like, you guys are so ignorant to the world.

This example illustrates how VIPS SOC take back their power when being microaggressed. Instead of continuing to "get really fed up" with people at UCLA, she would "troll" them instead. Specifically, she would make them believe she was a "random" ethnicity to make them look foolish. Instead of internalizing the fact that she was being stereotyped as an athlete on campus, she laughed at the fact that she told people on campus that she was a volleyball player. She placed the onus on those who she described as "ignorant."

Isaac similarly shared that he "never took it to heart" when he was microaggressed. Instead, he would respond with "a smart remark back if [he] felt like somebody was trying to be funny." He continued, "I just hear certain remarks on campus…it happens so often that I just come back with another smart remark back—since you're trying to be funny, I'm going to be funny too." Through this approach, Isaac shared that he "never really got offended by microaggressions on campus." Instead, he would use it as an opportunity to quip back without internalizing harmful rhetoric.

Resisting racism also involved refusing to diminish oneself for the sake of a white student. Many study collaborators spoke to a lesson in VIPS that prepared them to be shoved on campus to make way for white students. This phenomenon, scholars have argued, stems from

surviving racial etiquette from the Jim Crow era when Black people were expected to step off the sidewalk to make room for whites (Davis, 2006). Symone and Jamie in particular, mentioned that they refused to move for their white peers. Symone said:

> When people don't want to move on the sidewalk, and that happens all the time. And I just started shoulder-checking people. I used to sometimes walk around them and kind of step into the street, but I started just not moving at all because I'm like, there's a commonsense etiquette about spaces on the sidewalk. If you have a big group and it's just one or two people, your big group needs to adjust to let those people pass. . . . Or if it's two and two, once again, somebody needs to adjust. But it's that thing of you could be walking and it's two people and they just keep going like this [signals with her hands as if to say "what are you going to do"]. I just walk right between. I'm like, what do you want to do?

Jamie similarly stated that VIPS taught her not to "accommodate [herself] for white people or people that think you don't belong here." One of her "biggest takeaways" from VIPS was that "you don't need to minimize yourself to make them feel comfortable." Symone's quote shared a similar attitude in that she eventually learned to stop moving off the sidewalk for her white peers. Instead, she would hold her ground or "walk right between" students who refused to move.

Preserve Energy

Another response to racism and other forms of oppression described by study collaborators is to preserve their energy. Instead of internalizing racism from others on campus, some study collaborators preferred letting it roll off their shoulders. Chantel credited this tactic to VIPS. She said that her understanding of racism came from VIPS, specifically "the key phrases that VIPS told us about." As outlined in the first finding of this chapter, VIPS study collaborators were taught race-conscious concepts like microaggressions, intersectionality, and police brutality. She said that those concepts taught her "how to see microaggressions and to navigate those." Most importantly, these lessons taught her to "really understand it's not a viewpoint of who [they] are" but rather "it's just an insecurity of the other people." A consistent thread

between all the findings in this chapter is that the blame for racism was rarely placed on study collaborators. Instead, it was placed elsewhere, specifically on those responsible for contributing to the cycles of oppression. To do so, is to align with Audre Lorde (2017) who said, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p.132). As the title of this finding section suggests, study collaborators took an "It's not me" approach and moved on to care for themselves.

Malcolm explained that preserving his energy was one method of confronting racism. Specifically, he spoke about an incident in the classroom when his professor decentered Black people when speaking about a Black issue stating, "It's not just an African problem." He added, "It just felt kind of weird that she just brought it up out of nowhere" but he ultimately decided to let it go. He said:

> When it's in a lecture situation, I kind of notice it and then just brush it over. I'm not going to raise my hand and be like—well, I mean I could do that, and it might be good—but where would that really get me? I mean, like I said, when you call somebody out, I've noticed for an uncalled thing [that they said], they make it seem like such a small thing.

At this moment, Malcolm assessed the situation and recognized that it was likely that the professor would "make it seem like such a small thing" if he spoke up. To speak out against racism while being told said racism is "such a small thing" is an example of what some scholars call racelighting (Wood & Harris, 2023). Racelighting is a form of manipulation used to make People of Color second guess themselves and their racialized experiences and perspectives on racism. He understood that while speaking up "might be good" he implied that he may experience racelighting and at that point "where would that really get [him]?" Instead, he decided to respond by "brush[ing] it over" and moving on.

David explained taking a similar approach at times. He said that at UCLA "you definitely choose your battles" when it came to handling racism. When "dealing with classes, club stuff"

and issues outside of school such as "financial and food insecurity and when something racist comes up…yes its irritating and yes its angering [but] sometimes it's easier just to not address it." He recalled a specific incident with his housemate at UCLA. He said:

> I remember I was living in [Sun] court and it was 3:00 AM. My roommates thought I was asleep, and I had the door cracks open. He [his roommate] had his friends over and he just started saying the N-word. And I'm just like, should I get up right now? What would happen if I just opened the door and walked outside? But I was tired. It was 3:00 AM I'm like, it's 3:00 AM, and no conversation I have is going to change [pauses] I'm not going to change someone's mind. People are going to do what they want to do at the end of the day, and I'm not going to waste my energy [I'm] not going to shrink my telomeres.

In this example, David chose to preserve his energy and health. He mentioned that he was not going to "shrink [his] telomeres" over his roommate using the N-word. In Finding I, David explained that he had learned through VIPS that racism could literally kill Black people by shortening their telomeres. Thus, in this quote, David is stating that he refused to shorten his life for his roommate. Additionally, David said that he recognized that he was "not going to change someone's mind" implying that a confrontation was likely to be fruitless. Given the research on racial battle fatigue and the emotional and mental toll it takes on SOC (Franklin, 2019; Smith et al., 2007), responding with self-preservation is promising.

Taking Belonging: When Race is Power and Community is Everything

This section details how study collaborators described unapologetically existing and taking what they need to succeed at UCLA. In the first finding of this chapter, I discussed how study collaborators were taught to understand and acknowledge oppression as high school students in VIPS. In this finding section, I highlight how they operationalize those lessons to disallow oppression from defining their UCLA journey. Instead, they learned to place value in their racial identity and enact their agency to thrive on campus. In this way, they "take belonging" by recognizing that the institution was not made for them, while actively taking up space. Notably, many of the study collaborators experienced imposter syndrome at one time or

another, but often shook it off using lessons from VIPS. To take their agency and belonging at UCLA, SOC used lessons gained through VIPS such as: a) recognizing that their race is an asset, b) taking space and existing unapologetically, and c) the importance of seeking community and resources to succeed.

An Excerpt on Belonging

A significant body of literature in the field of higher education is concerned with a student's sense of belonging at their institution (Astin, 1999; Freeman et al., 2007; Hurtado, 1997; Museus et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2018; Tinto, 1975). Student belonging, which is often associated with feeling connected, accepted, represented, and/or included in their college campus has been tied to student retention (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2018). Considering the research that shows how hostile campus racial climates harm sense of belonging amongst college students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2021), I wondered how VIPS SOC made meaning of their sense of belonging at UCLA—especially after learning about the racism at UCLA as high school students in VIPS. The responses were mixed, but most study collaborators often stated that they did not belong at or to UCLA. There was clear resistance to giving any power to the institution over their belonging. For example, Kiana stated:

> I don't think any of us feel like we belong at UCLA, but we do find belonging in certain areas or certain things. Fortunately, enough, there's LLC [Living Learning Communities] and there's things like that where we're allowed to foster this sense of belonging. But I also am resistant to the idea of belonging because who are we belonging to?

This quote is representative of the complicated nature of belonging to an institution that also causes harm to the SOC who participated in this research. Kiana herself earlier in the platica that she did not know if she belonged. She said, "I don't know. I think I'm still working on that because I want to say that I do belong here." On one hand, she said she was happy to be a Bruin—"I'm a Bruin, yay"—but on the other hand she thought hard about how UCLA failed to

make SOC belong. She said, "Unfortunately, a lot of the students here [at UCLA] don't find a sense of belonging, they force themselves to find a sense of belonging." There are, as Kiana said, belonging "in certain areas" such as Living Learning Communities within the campus dorms that reflect specific identities (e.g. racial, sexual, etc.) that help foster belonging. However, as Kiana stated, that belonging must be found. In the next sections, I detail how study collaborators describe taking belonging for themselves as emphasized by VIPS.

Race as Power

There is a negotiation of racial identity that SOC confront when attending higher education institutions that were not designed for them (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Hunter et al., 2019; Stewart, 2015). Because study collaborators explored their racial identity through an anti-blackness lens as high school students in VIPS (see Finding I), study collaborators navigated UCLA viewing their race as an asset as opposed to a deficit. Destiny spoke about how Black history was omitted from her K-12 school curriculum. She said:

> I really felt the importance of my identity as a Black woman was constantly being filtered or erased in some kind of manner [in K-12 education]. And so, I feel as though with VIPS they kind of bring that into light, if that makes sense. And they pretty much teach me to use that as a superpower because it's rare. But despite it being rare, it's something that should be cherished.

Many of the study collaborators like Destiny viewed race as a source of power. In K-12 schooling, Destiny expressed feeling as if opportunities to explore her racial identity as a Black woman were either "filtered" or "erased." The VIPS program played a big role in helping her understand Blackness and Anti-Blackness in a way that taught her to use her race as a "superpower" which she recognized as "rare." According to Destiny, VIPS emphasized that because Black women are rare at institutions like UCLA, it is a unique and valuable aspect of who they are and thus should be cherished. In our second platica, Destiny expanded on how VIPS helped her understand her identity and use it to navigate UCLA. She said:

> [In VIPS, we explored] the very identity of being this Black scholar…Like I said, it is a superpower because I've met other students who truly believe [that] the stereotypes [associated with] Black people are real. They think, "Oh you, you're lazy" or "slow" or "not smart," or that I'm only valued for my looks and my body…. And it's something that affects me the most because I've encountered people who would give me not-so-nice compliments or very inappropriate compliments about how I look… With VIPs it kind of show[ed] me that I have a mind…I am so much more than just flesh bones… It has taught me that I can be all things, but the most important thing is I can be a scholar. And that's what I find empowering about how I fit in [at] UCLA…I am a scholar, and I can contribute things that other people may not be able to contribute at all because they don't have the lived experiences of it.

This quote highlights the crucial role that VIPS played in the racial identity development of Destiny. She commented on her refusal to accept Black racial stereotypes such as being "lazy," "slow" or "not smart" and then notably demonstrated an awareness of the hyper sexualization of Black women. She explained that she had been on the receiving end of "inappropriate compliments" about how she looked. Her comments are warranted as the hyper sexualization of Black women has been linked to higher rates of objectification and sexual violence on college campuses (Leah et al., 2021). Through VIPS however, Destiny said that she was able to look beyond those stereotypes and see herself as a scholar, capable of "Black excellence." Most importantly, the messaging from VIPS positioned Destiny to view herself as capable of "contributing" to UCLA spaces as a scholar and in ways that "other people may not be able to contribute at all because they don't have the lived experiences of it." This quote emphasizes how racial identity development through a race-conscious curriculum in a college access program like VIPS encourages SOC to reject racial stereotypes and embody counternarratives where race is a superpower. Kiana expressed similar feelings stating, "There is power in my Blackness and in my womanhood." She continued, "There's power in my indigeneity." Together, these marginalized identities "put fuel in [her] tank" when it comes to navigating UCLA. It made her want "to go harder" and take up space on campus. Luke similarly shared that he turned deficit

stereotypes into his "strengths" and used that energy to help other marginalized students see their worth.

David also stated that VIPS was instrumental in how he understood his racial identity as an Afro-Latino. He shared that his VIPS writing teacher Ms. Levy "taught that it's not oppression that comes from white people, it's obsession." According to David, Ms. Levy taught that "It's an obsession, a very deep and necrotic one that has led to the really bad conditions that we see our people living in today." He continued:

> And that stuck with me because it was just very powerful, especially for me as a Black man navigating the world and coming into UCLA or the hate that I would receive, whether be directly or indirectly, just reminding myself that it's not because you're less than, it's because these people are obsessed with you. It was just very affirming for me and my Blackness. We are the culture, we are everything. And so, it's not oppression, it's obsession. And the reason why people do what they do is because they're scared of going back to how they lived before.

This quote is part of a larger conversation that David and I had about antiblackness. In our *platica,* David mentioned that he had the opportunity to explore antiblackness as a concept in VIPS. Specifically, he explained that antiblackness comes from "a place of fear of them [white people] not wanting to go back to how they lived in medieval times." He said that this drove white people to "pillage and savage all these other communities" and "create an entire mechanism in order to keep those people there in order and to keep black people there." Thus, in the quote above, David explained that white people are obsessed with oppressing Black people because "they're scared of going back to how they lived before." He admitted feeling powerful as a Black man to know that he is not "less than" but rather that people are obsessed with his culture. In other words, the racism he experienced at UCLA was not a reflection of his inadequacy but rather a result of obsession from others.

Jamie described feeling similarly. She said that learning about antiblackness through VIPS made her gain a sense of "pride in being Black." She continued by saying that she saw her race "as an act of resistance" where she thought to herself, "Oh, all these people hate us." After reflection, she realized "You know, like fuck we're cool. Everyone's trying to copy our culture." In other words, she saw power in her culture and saw it as an act of resistance to be proud of being part Black. Thus, when we experienced racial microaggressions at UCLA she would dismiss it by saying to herself, "Y'all want to be us." She credited VIPS for the ability to reject stereotypes stating, "I think especially VIPS they kind of helped reframe my mindset on that."

Another notable consensus amongst study collaborators was that VIPS taught students to understand Blackness as nuanced. David explained that VIPS taught that "there is not one way to be Black" and that Blackness was "multifaceted", "beautiful", and "courageous." This approach was significant for all study collaborators as they navigated UCLA but was especially impactful for those who identified as multiracial. For example, Jenny described coming from an "African immigrant" background which led to a "different kind of concept of Blackness" than her peers who were born in America. She also mentioned that her mother being European white also played a role in how her parents approached Blackness. She admitted that because of her background, she was "still kind of struggling with the idea of what it means to express my Blackness or if I'm expressing it correctly." She described struggling mostly because she did not "really have anybody else to look at as an example." She continued,

> Through VIPS I learned that there's different ways of expressing Blackness and that it's not a monolith. And that there is a type of power that comes from being part of the Black community and recognizing what it means to be part of that community.

This sense of power would become especially important to Jenny as she navigated UCLA as a multiracial student. She told a story of the first time she went to a Multiracial Student Union

meeting when she began speaking with another multiracial student who happened to be Black and Asian. Jenny explained that the student reiterated what many others at the meeting had – that "they feel to some extent afraid to go to other identity ethnic-based groups like ASU [African Student Union]." She continued,

> But during the meeting, I was like, "Oh yeah, I think you should go to one of those meetings again because I had a great experience." Thanks to VIPS, I kind of felt more comfortable being able to go to those meetings, but also encouraging somebody else to go to those meetings too. In that meeting, I realized that if it wasn't for VIPS, I would probably still be that person I was talking to, especially since I still kind of have those moments sometimes. But I feel that it would happen more often but thanks to VIPs, I had a little bit of that confidence to go to those meetings and feel like I belonged there.

As stated by Jenny in the previous quote, VIPS helped her learn that Blackness is not a monolith. Through this understanding, Jenny "felt more comfortable being able to go to those [ASU] meetings" as a multiracial student. She implied that if it had not been for VIPS and their racial identity development around Blackness, she "would probably still be that person I was talking to", where she might not have had the confidence to attend an ASU meeting as a multiracial student. This finding is especially salient as multiracial students tend to either feel pressured to choose between racial communities (e.g., Black and White) or not feel accepted by either (Harris, 2015; 2019).

In the next section, I describe how exploring issues related to racism and racial identity cultivates a sense of self-confidence amongst study collaborators. Alex said it best when he expressed that "a really big piece of VIPS and all that comes with [the program] is the self-confidence." He said:

> It's like studying your identity and studying things that affect you and those that look like you really does something holistically for your spirit, which is something I don't even know how to verbalize. But it's huge and VIPS does that, VIPS feeds the soul in a lot of different ways. As much as it is about studying racism, race, classism, and all the isms, it's really a path in identity and studying that and having a safe space to study and create your own ideas about identity.

In VIPS, race and issues related to racism are centered within the curriculum as SOC prepare to go to college. For many, as demonstrated in Finding I, VIPS is the first time that students explore such topics. More importantly, as Alex suggests, centering the racial identity of high school SOC "does something holistically for [their] spirit." It is an opportunity to self-reflect in a "safe space" where SOC are provided the agency to "create [their] own ideas about identity." To Alex and all the other study collaborators, this cultivates a sense of power and confidence in themselves as SOC.

Take Space and Exist Unapologetically

With a newfound confidence to navigate higher education VIPS SOC describe feeling comfortable "taking space" on campus by advocating for themselves and existing unapologetically. As Jenny and Isaac alluded to, once study collaborators were given "the language to express [their] experiences" they were then able to name their "struggle" and then do something about it. To illustrate, Hyacinth shared that VIPS helped them be "more confident to advocate for myself and [their] peers." They continued:

> I remember when I learned the word microaggressions, it just made me super hypervigilant, and I think that's a good thing. Yeah, I guess it gave me the tools to be confident to call certain things out or to avoid certain things in spaces…. [In VIPS we read] 'Teachers Learn our Names' and that was so impactful…That one was impactful just because my name is hard to pronounce for a lot of people. It was empowering because it made me proud of my Blackness and it made me aware of how some people will take your name lightly, and that's another way to perpetuate erasure and oppression. It made me want to say my name correctly and just made me feel comfortable taking up space. I think actually, yeah, that's how VIPS prepared me for U C L A. It made me comfortable to take up space and to challenge.

The article that Hyacinth referenced was written by Kohli and Solórzano (2012) which showed how the repeated mispronunciation by educators of racial and/or ethnic names acts as a form of racial microaggression. Refusal to learn the correct way to pronounce a student's name can lead to internalized racism, where students begin to view their cultural identity as inferior. Having a

difficult name to pronounce themself, Hyacinth came to understand that taking one's name "lightly" is "another way to perpetuate erasure and oppression." This quote demonstrates how Hyacinth became empowered by VIPS to not only be more confident and outspoken, but to "feel comfortable taking up space" at UCLA.

All study collaborators spoke to the level of confidence that VIPS instilled in them through their race-conscious curriculum. Malcolm for instance stated that "VIPS has been a strong foundation for my confidence." He said that he realized that "[UCLA] wasn't meant for people like us, so the fact that we're here, we got to show out. we got to show out why we deserve to be here as much as somebody else who is a different skin tone as us."

In order "to show out", study collaborators shared that self-advocacy was a key lesson taken from VIPS and applied to their navigation of higher education as UCLA students. Chantel shared that she was comfortable asking questions and speaking out in the classroom. She said that "VIPs really instilled in all of us to take up space" and detailed a specific moment in her art history class where she was the only Black person. She said,

> I was in my discussion…[and] the TA asked a question. He's looking around, other people are looking around and I'm like, "I might as well say something." [I] said something. It was the right thing to say. I thought okay, feeling a little more confident. So next discussion comes, I'm talking a little bit more, having good academic banter or an academic debate…[VIPS] made me a little bit more confident to speak up in those classes where I was the only Black person. (RQ3, Pos. 390)

Chantel often shared that VIPS taught her to "take up space" at UCLA. She said that they always reminded her not to "fall into the background" even if she was the only Black student in class. In this example, Chantel did just that. She exuded confidence when no one else was speaking in class despite being the only Black student in class. This quote highlights how VIPS empowered study collaborators like Chantel to embrace their self-confidence and "take space" despite being underrepresented.

Taking space also included existing outside of the stereotypes that others might place upon them. Instead, VIPS SOC tried to navigate UCLA as confidently and authentically as possible no matter what others may think. Jenny shared that VIPS taught her to dismiss stereotypes and do "what makes [her] feel happy." She described going to the dining halls during the VIPS summer residential program as a high school student when she and a VIPS mentor stumbled upon watermelon. She admitted to being "self-conscious about the stereotype that was out there [about Black people]" at first. When another student asked the mentor if she was going to eat watermelon, "just like that", the mentor responded, "Yeah, if they make a stereotype about me because of that, that's their problem. I'm just going to do what makes me feel happy." Jenny continued,

> To me, that was really powerful because I just also thinking about academic spaces too [such as] being afraid to ask questions because people might think badly about you or things like that. At some point, you have to do what's best for you and what makes you happy. And that at this point, if people look down on you for that, then it's their problem.

The shift from being self-conscious to doing what "makes you happy" is critical for SOC to move from surviving to thriving at higher education institutions. This quote highlights how VIPS taught her to look beyond what others think of her and to do what is needed to thrive at UCLA. Most importantly, this mentality translated into the way Jenny navigated the classroom. She spoke of one of her first experiences in a UCLA classroom where she was one of the only SOC in class. She said that for a second she "felt the pressure of being the only Black student in class." But through VIPS, she was able to recognize "that was reality" and then move on. She said,

> It didn't discourage me from participating in class, emailing the lecturer, or going to office hours because I still wanted to succeed in that class. I still wanted to do good even though it sucked that I was the only [Black] person in that room. I also told myself that at the end of the day, what I want to do is succeed in this class. So I have to do what it takes to succeed in a class, which means communicating with the teacher, doing the assignments, and things like that.

Confronting racial stereotypes is not an uncommon experience for SOC on college campuses (Davis et al., 2004; Solórzano et al., 2001) but Jenny's quote emphasizes how VIPS students push beyond those stereotypes in search of success and happiness. In this way, study collaborators relied on their self-confidence to navigate UCLA authentically and advocate for what they needed. Having the autonomy to define their college journey was critical to VIPS SOC and they often relied on their confidence to make decisions that felt right to them. For example, David said that he "came into college with a confidence that no one could really take away from me." He continued,

> When I decided to change my major, I didn't feel like I was dumb or I couldn't handle it. I just literally did not enjoy it. And so I switched. I'm like, I don't have to feel bad for these choices that I'm making…If I'm not enjoying something, I'm not going to do it. And that doesn't make me any less smart or capable. It's just not for me. And that's okay. And so I think in that sense, just being very astute in who I am and my positionality in the world, it just makes me more confident in my decisions and my ability to make those decisions for myself and not having to be dictated by the world. The world is very loud and very vocal about who they want you to be or who you should be or who you need to be to fit in. And I feel like having that sense of identity in my own voice has made it a lot easier to drown those voices out or to just completely tune them out and be confident in my own decisions not only in my educational journey but my life.

This quote emphasizes how David's journey towards self-empowerment, is characterized by a strong sense of identity, autonomy in decision-making, and resilience to mold to other's expectations. Through his racial identity development in VIPS, he was able to understand his "positionality in the world" which allowed him to feel more "confident in [his] decisions." Jenny and David's mention of joy and happiness is also of note. Recent scholarship identifies a need to document Black joy in higher education contexts broadly and HWIs specifically (Tichavakunda, 2022). Through VIPS, study collaborators describe moving beyond surviving towards thriving at UCLA. They do so, by relying on their self-confidence fueled by racial identities to take space on campus even when they are underrepresented.

Finding Counterspaces and Resources to Succeed

Research has shown that SOC are less likely to seek help than their white peers, out of fear of confirming racial stereotypes (Massey & Fischer, 2005). This is especially concerning as SOC transition from relying on their high school support networks (if any) to having to find new sources in college (Harnett et al., 2013; Rios-Aguilar & Del-Amen, 2012). The ability to seek help (Karabenick, 2004; Martin et al., 2021) and build community (Black & Bimper, 2020; Brooms et al., 2021; Solórzano et al., 2000) is crucial as help-seeking behaviors are associated with higher academic performance among college SOC. This study found that study collaborators were more than willing to engage in help-seeking behaviors such as utilizing resources and finding community.

To illustrate, Destiny shared that after having a "major setback" in school she had the "incentive to seek out help and utilize the resources on campus." To her, this meant "acclimat[ing] to UCLA by group" such as the Bruin Guardian Scholars (BGS) program on campus that is designed to serve current and former foster students. She said she had a "few affiliations on campus" because she was trying to "make new friends and really get in contact with the counselors there and just ask them questions" about school and job-related topics. She said,

> [In VIPS] I felt as though many of the concepts that we talked about really stressed the importance of community and finding your own group essentially. . . . That was the main thing that I got from VIPs—not only from those small little courses but just in general. . . . I think self-advocacy is a very important thing. And of course, community—making sure there are other people that truly understand where you're coming from and will actually encourage you and support you . . .

Here Destiny demonstrates her ability to seek out community and access to resources during a difficult time in her college journey. Through VIPS, Destiny learned the importance of seeking out counterspaces on campus to succeed. Counterspaces are described as places where

SOC can exist and thrive within a supportive environment away from racial stereotypes (Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). She described trying to find community in places where "other people" could "truly understand where [she was] coming from." As a former steward of the court, BGS was that space for her. In fact, she described it as one of her "favorite spaces" which could be interpreted as a counterspace.

Luke described struggling to feel confident as a first-year public affairs major at UCLA. He explained that his peers were often "conservative" with "different perspectives." Before UCLA he said that he went to a predominately Black high school and thus, "there was no reason to question my Blackness." But in his courses at UCLA, he would often be shown Prager U videos that used a "lot of racist jokes, stereotypes, and being labeled." He suggested that at first, it "forced [him to be silent." It was not until he "leaned into his VIPS family" at UCLA, a space that he described as "uplifting" and "reaffirming" that he was reminded of the power of his racial identity. He said:

> I would say in the interactions that I would have with my friends who had different political ideologies and who didn't understand the worth of People of Color—they tried to demonize the most vulnerable communities. And for a while, I was lost in who I was and in my identity. And then once I went back to my VIPS community, [my] VIPS family, I was reaffirmed, and I was uplifted and encouraged. So, they really helped me get out of that dark place.

This quote emphasizes how important counterspaces like the VIPS community are for SOC. Research has shown that counterspaces are an indispensable environment for SOC to process racial microaggressions, validate each other's lived experiences and knowledge, provide support, and serve as sites for joy (Patton, 2006; Solórzano et al., 2000). As Luke experienced racism at UCLA, he relied on his "VIPS family" to feel validated. He said that VIPS helped him get out of "that dark place" implying that his experience in the classroom took a mental and/or emotional toll on his well-being. He explained in our *platicas* that VIPS always emphasized the

importance of "utiliz[ing] resources" and "build[ing] a tight-knit community." He said that when he "experienced microaggressions or isolation, [he] just kept putting [him]self out there and tried to be involved in the community." Thus, VIPS became a counterspace for Luke, one that he would seek out when he needed to be "uplifted" and "encouraged." All study collaborators described the VIPS office as their "community", "family" or "counter-space" on campus. Alex said that he often went to the office if he "needed a little hit of melanin" especially on days when he had not seen any Black people on campus. He said that when he felt that he needed to "talk and chill and laugh with somebody that [he] kn[e]w" he would visit the VIPS staff. In those conversations, Alex said that they would "always preach that those resources are available, whether it be academic counseling, mental health counseling, or whatever the case is."

Taking advantage of resources was commonly mentioned by study collaborators as a valuable lesson learned from their time in VIPS as high school students. There was a range of resources that study collaborators shared during our *platicas*, but the most common were Counseling and Psychological Services, the Academic Advancement Program, and office hours with faculty and teaching assistants. To give an example, Hyacinth shared that one topic emphasized by VIPS was mental health. They said that they appreciated "them making that space for us" to discuss mental health, specifically with the peer mentors. Peer mentors were one component of the VIPS program where undergraduate SOC at UCLA served as mentors for the program. Most if not all the peer mentors went through VIPS themselves in high school. Hyacinth stated:

> I knew mental health was a thing, [but] hearing it from my peers [in high school] ….made me feel seen. I think that was extremely life-altering for me and any mentorship roles that I had moving forward, made me passionate about being open about mental health. And because college is tough, it's so tough. Had I not felt comfortable early on to discuss that mental health, I would've thought, "Oh, this is normal in college." . . . Even though CAPS [Counseling and Psychological Services] wasn't the best of the best, knowing it was there

> was helpful. And it did lead me to get access to mental health services later. . . . So yeah, it was helpful during Saturday Academies when they let us know what resources were available on campus.

Talking to the UCLA undergraduate SOC who served as peer mentors for VIPS made seeking out mental health services feel normal for Hyacinth. Without it, Hyacinth suggests she may not have sought out mental health services on campus. Many study collaborators spoke to the holistic approach that VIPS took with regard to college readiness, specifically the emphasis on mental health. As Kiana shared, VIPS added a "nuance [that] because you are Black, you need to make sure you make sure you make this extra effort to be in these spaces because there are no other spaces on campus for you. But also, with the emphasis on prioritizing yourself, prioritizing how you feel, prioritizing what's best for you, prioritizing your emotional wellbeing." As a result of this messaging, several study collaborators stated that they utilized CAPS despite not being "the best of the best" as Hyacinth stated. This finding is promising, as SOC are less likely to utilize mental health services (Anglin et al., 2008; Cheng & Robinson, 2013; Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020).

Chantel mentioned that—thanks to VIPS—she sought out Youlonda Copeland-Morgan who served as Vice Provost for Enrollment Management at UCLA. She explained that she had been introduced to Youlanda through VIPS and ultimately became "a really good mentor to go to." As a "Black woman in higher education and a good top-level position," Chantel would seek her out if she ever needed anything. She said that "if we ever had a problem" Youlanda would help them "figure it out." When issues would arise, most study collaborators stated that they would seek out people that they knew would help.

Another resource that study collaborators were encouraged to utilize was academic resources such as office hours. Isaac for instance shared that one of his biggest takeaways was

finding resources, especially resources "that you need as a Black student on UCLA's campus." He said that VIPS helped him "navigate where to find resources and also being a resource" such as office hours. Isaac shared:

> I think in instances where I felt like maybe my test score was not accurate of what I did, I had no hesitation in going to talk during office hours. Then [the professor would say], "Oh, okay, I didn't see that you're correct." And they'd give me back my points because I feel like at certain times, you can identify certain Black people by their names. . . . So just not giving me my credit when it's due, I feel like I'm advocating for myself in that sense. . . . When I'm confused, I'm never going to *not* ask a question. I'm going to advocate—so [when the professor asks] "Oh, does anybody need me to reexplain what's being said?" Nobody [would say] "Yes, please reexplain what you said because . . ." and then everybody thanked [me] for asking them. Yeah, because if y'all not going to ask them to reexplain it, we're not going to get it. We're not going to understand it. So just advocating for myself and others being impacted by it, I think is a big thing that I took away from VIPS.

Isaac's quote illustrates his confidence in self-advocacy, specifically in academic settings like the classroom and office hours. He suggests that lower test scores may sometimes be due to racial bias and had no issue speaking up during office hours to get his "credit when it's due." This form of help-seeking behavior is a direct result of the empowerment and tools gained from VIPS. While not all study collaborators felt comfortable going to office hours (e.g., Hyacinth), all sought out some form of support at UCLA through different sources such as the Black Bruin Resource Center, the Chicano Research Center, the Academic Advancement Program, and of course, VIPS.

Conclusion

I return to David's quote at the beginning of this findings section. He said, "When you're not ignorant to why these forces exist or why you're being treated that way, it makes it a lot easier to deal with. It's like, okay, y'all are just stupid and racist. I don't have to let that dictate my experience here." The first subsection titled "Recognizing and Rejecting Dominant Narratives in Higher Education" demonstrates how VIPS' race-conscious curriculum can disrupt

majoritarian narratives fueled by dominant ideologies. Instead of being bound to the racialized scripts that would have them believe they are inadequate, they are set free. In the second sub-section "Responding to Racism with Resistance", I highlight how VIPS SOC can identify and resist racism on campus in ways that allow study collaborators to take ownership of their college experience. Once VIPS SOC decide that racism is not going to "dictate [their] experience" they can make higher education work for them. In the third subsection "Taking Belonging: When Race is Power and Community is Everything. Together", I detail how VIPS "Take Belonging" on campus. The findings in this section emphasize how the VIPS race-conscious curriculum helped study collaborators a) view themselves as powerful, b) exist authentically and unapologetically, and c) find counterpaces and resources. In this way, study collaborators recognized that they do not belong *at* or *to* the institution, but rather, that the institution belongs to them which is why they feel compelled to take space at UCLA. Together, these sections demonstrate the way VIPS SOC embody counterstories and counter-majoritarian narratives.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

> White supremacy/racism served and continues to serve a foundational role in the US higher education system.
>
> – Patton, 2016

Higher education institutions are not race-neutral institutions, and this dissertation demonstrates what may happen if precollege Youth of Color were to find that out before college (Patel, 2015). As undergraduate Students of Color (SOC), there is a likelihood that they will experience college differently than their white peers; as SOC adjust to the new environment, they must also navigate racism on campus and adapt to a white-dominant culture (Moses & Wiley, 2020; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005). Yet, college access programs that seek to prepare underrepresented students for higher education have historically taken a one-size-fits-all approach to college readiness (Castro, 2013). Such race-neutral approaches have garnered critiques in recent years, citing research that shows how SOC feeling pressured to assimilate into a white-dominant culture to succeed in college (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018; Kolluri, 2022; Moses & Wiley, 2020). Although some access programs have moved towards a culturally relevant approach to college readiness for SOC, there is still a need for more empirical research to consider and address the role of structural racism in "readying" SOC for college (Castro, 2013; Majors, 2019).

The findings from this dissertation offer the field of higher education the opportunity to better understand race-conscious approaches to college readiness, specifically how such efforts translate to college navigation behaviors and/or attitudes. Specifically, the research questions that guided this dissertation study were:

1) What do Students of Color learn about race and racism as it relates to the college experience through race-conscious college access programs?

2) What are the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who participated in a race-conscious college access program?
    a) How do these Students of Color perceive that the college access program has influenced their navigation of their racialized campus experiences?

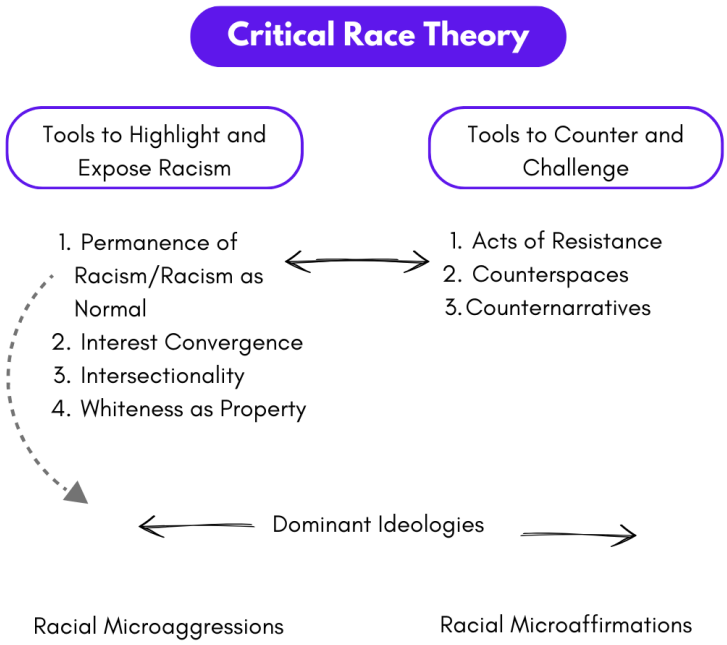
These questions were addressed using a qualitative research design guided by Critical Race Theory. I conducted 24 *platicas* with 12 SOC ranging from third-year undergraduate students to recent alum from UCLA. All participated in VIPS as high school students, a race-conscious college access program that centers critical consciousness as a component of college readiness.

Engagement of Theory & Summary of Findings

As I sought to understand the racialized experiences of SOC who had participated in VIPS, I continuously returned to the tenets of CRT. I continued to ask myself: why CRT for this dissertation study? The easy answer was that CRT allowed me to center race and racism in the study – to recognize racism as real, normal, and deeply embedded in structures like colleges and universities (Patton, 2026). This theoretical lens would surely help me understand the second research question which asked: What are the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who participated in a race-conscious college access program? Through a CRT framework, I could use interest convergence, racial realism, and whiteness as property to show how SOC experience racialization on college campuses. I returned to the other two research questions and asked myself how I might use the tenets of CRT beyond highlighting and exposing racism. I realized I had been so focused on exposing racism in higher education that I was neglecting the "challenge" component of CRT. Critical Race Theorists do not only critique, but they also challenge racism through a social justice commitment to make a change, to imagine and build a

better reality for People of Color (Solórzano, 1997). From this thought process, I created Figure 5.1, which helped situate the findings for Research Questions 1 and 2a of this study which I detail further below in a summary of findings.

Figure 5.1. Tools Gained through VIPS.



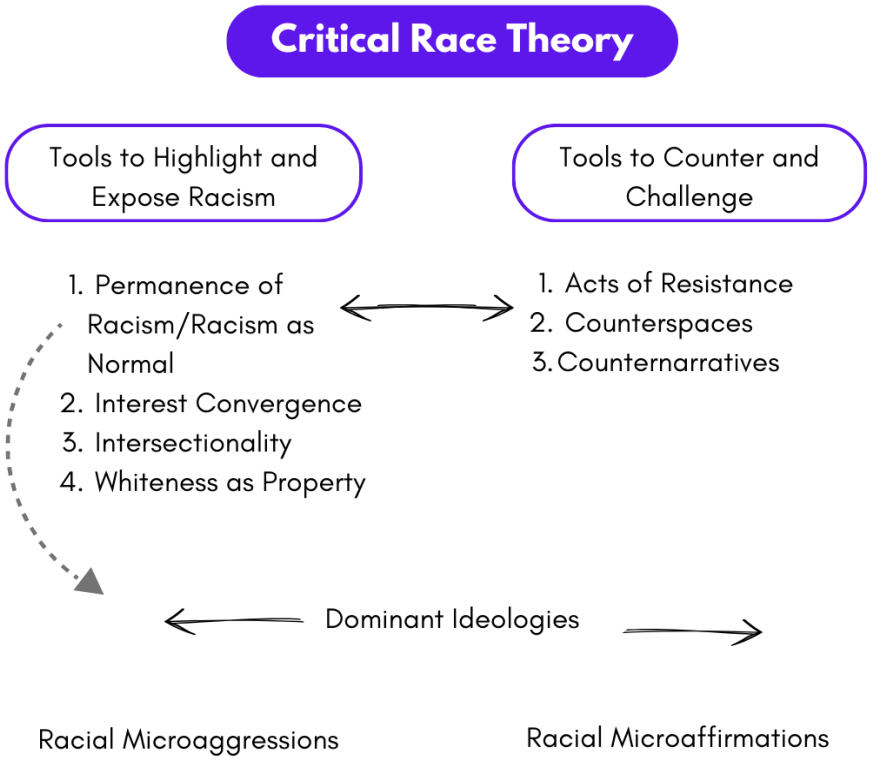
RQ1: What do Students of Color learn about race and racism as it relates to the college experience through race-conscious college access programs?

The study found that a race-conscious curriculum engaged SOC in developing their critical consciousness. Through an exploration of social justice issues through VIPS coursework and quarterly weekend workshops over the span of two years, study collaborators gained an understanding of how racism and other forms of oppression operate on the interpersonal (e.g., racial microaggressions) and structural level (e.g., epistemic erasure via the banking method). This finding builds upon Carter (2008) who found that a critical race consciousness (CRC) could be used to empower SOC by fostering positive racial identities and academic resilience when

confronted with racism in schools. CRC, as described by Carter (2008) was developed amongst SOC through an exploration of social justice issues and racial identity, similarly to VIPS. In this study, study collaborators explored topics related to racism such as racial microaggressions, intersectionality, under-resourcing in schools, and affirmative action to name a few. These lessons around race and racism broadly, shaped how they came to view the world and reflect upon how they fit in as SOC.

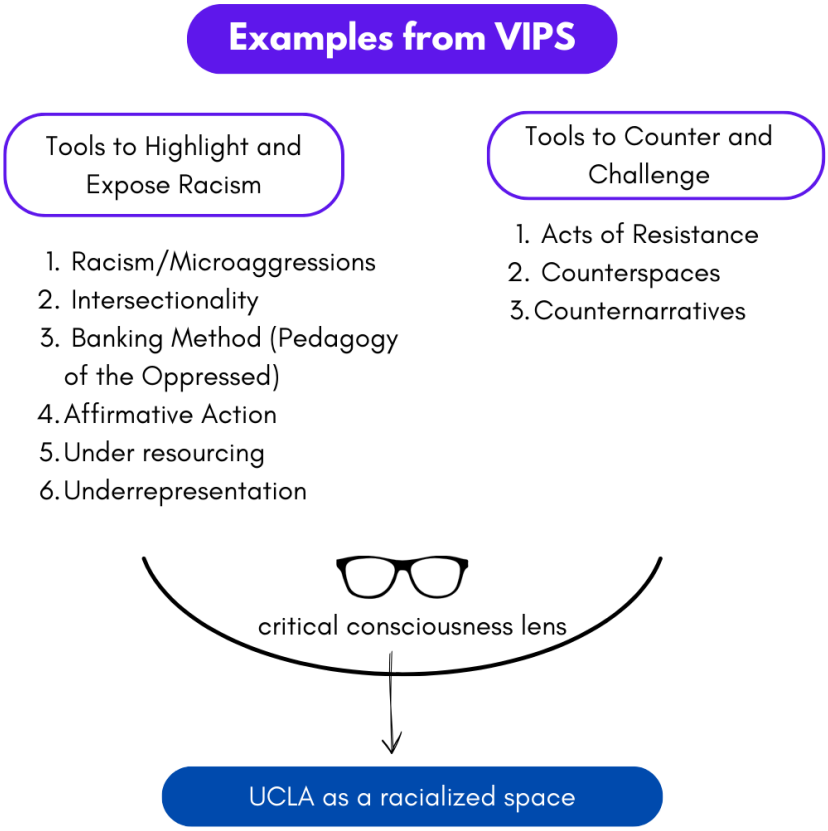
Through VIPS, the study also found that SOC learn about Predominantly/Historically White Institutions (P/HWI). In particular, they learn what it means to navigate a P/HWI as a SOC. Study collaborators described understanding that they may feel the impact of being underrepresented at institutions like UCLA. Being one of the few on campus—according to what study collaborators described learning through VIPS race-conscious curriculum—meant being susceptible to racial microaggressions, hyper/invisibility, and rejection. Referring to Figure 5.2 below, I recognized that VIPS had equipped study collaborators with the "tools to highlight and expose racism" in ways that Critical Race Theorists do.

Figure 5.2. Critical Race Theory.



To be clear, I do not argue that study collaborators necessarily learn about the permanence of racism, interest convergence, or whiteness as property in VIPS (although they do learn about intersectionality). Instead, I refer to the shared act of learning how to "highlight and expose racism" as a form of praxis. In Finding 5.2, I detailed the concepts that study collaborators gained through VIPS, which ultimately led to the development of their critical consciousness. Concepts like microaggressions, pedagogy of the oppressed, intersectionality, and underrepresentation were among the concepts most discussed during our *platicas.* As listed in Figure 5.3, the concepts learned in VIPS were used to "highlight and expose racism."

Figure 5.3. Critical Consciousness: A VIPS College Approach.



At the same time, VIPS SOC also learned how to respond to racism on campus by encouraging students to take up space. This meant seeking out community and resources, acknowledging their community cultural wealth, and advocating for oneself. In this way, VIPS SOC learn how to "counter and challenge racism" on campus to succeed. Together, these findings demonstrate how study collaborators learn to recognize, expose, and resist racism as college students well before enrolling.

RQ2: What are the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who participated in a race-conscious college access program?

Despite attempts to create more inclusive campus cultures, this study found that racism continues to be a pressing issue within higher education institutions. For example, SOC are

continuously dealing with a prioritization of whiteness, racial stereotyping, profiling, and criminalization on college campuses. Most notably, study collaborators are uniquely positioned to recognize racism on campus as they have been primed to do so through their engagement in VIPS as high school students. To study collaborators, like Critical Race Theorists, racism is normal and embedded in society (Bell, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and they have a toolkit of terms to name many manifestations of racism.

Moreover, the study found that SOC who participated in VIPS were able to name racism at the structural and interpersonal level. Structurally, study collaborators described how they felt othered due to the overwhelming culture of whiteness at UCLA. This finding emphasized how higher education institutions function as a form of white property (Patel, 2015). According to study collaborators, whiteness was present in the classroom through the demographic makeup of their peers and the curriculum. Whiteness was also present in the resource allocation of specific social settings such as in Greek Life and resource centers. On an interpersonal level, study collaborators described experiencing racial microaggressions and criminalization on campus. These findings support the permanence of the racism tenet of CRT, underscoring the need for higher education institutions to move towards more race-conscious approaches to college readiness.

RQ 2a: How do these Students of Color perceive that the college access program has influenced their navigation of their racialized campus experiences?

I return to Figure 5.3 to show how the race-conscious curriculum in VIPS provided the study collaborators with the tools to "highlight and expose racism" as well as the "tools to counter and challenge." This section details how study collaborators describe using those tools to navigate higher education as a racialized space.

As demonstrated in the second set of findings for RQ2, VIPS SOC demonstrate an ability to recognize racism as they are confronted with it at UCLA. At this stage, study collaborators have learned that racism is real and embedded in structures like higher education and have then gone on to experience it themselves. This research question was concerned with better understanding how they utilize the tools gained through VIPS race-conscious curriculum as undergraduate SOC. As this study found, taking a race-conscious approach where SOC are prepared to enter college environments as a racialized space, allowed students to take ownership of their higher education. Instead of internalizing racism such as dominant ideologies and racial microaggressions, study collaborators relied on their positive racial identity. Developed through VIPS, the study found that study collaborators viewed their culture as an asset and found power in their race. This empowered study collaborators to "take belonging" on campus by finding counterpaces and utilizing resources on campus.

Contributions to College Access and Readiness Literature for SOC

In recent years, higher education scholars have called for more race-conscious approaches to college readiness efforts that acknowledge and address the unique needs and challenges of Students of Color (Perez et al., 2021). While college access programs have moved in the direction of providing more "culturally relevant" approaches to college readiness, few have addressed systemic racism in their college preparation (Auerbach, 2004; Bryan et al., 2019; Castro, 2013; Majors, 2013). Those that have, emphasized the role of critical consciousness development among Youth of Color within access programs (Jayakumar et al., 2013; McWhirter et al., 2021). Like VIPS, these studies utilize a race-conscious curriculum to discuss issues related to racism and other social justice issues. However, these studies primarily focus on the experiences of high school SOC.

As such, this research contributes to the literature on college readiness efforts by asking what happens when SOC are prepared to enter higher education institutions as a racialized space. Specifically, this study explored how they might use that critical consciousness to navigate college, especially when considering the research on hostile campus racial climates (Hurtado, 1992). Race-conscious college access programs like VIPS, address the lived realities of SOC by teaching Youth of Color to recognize structural and interpersonal racism broadly, and in college specifically. Most importantly, VIPS SOC take these lessons well. The race-conscious curriculum in VIPS is thought-provoking to be sure, but study collaborators reported feeling grateful to the program for being honest about the realities of attending a P/HWI as a SOC.

Findings from this study could also redefine what should constitute as "college knowledge" for SOC within existing college readiness frameworks. College knowledge refers to understanding college systems and culture (Conley, 2007). As evidenced by this research for SOC, part of navigating a campus environment involves confronting the prioritization of whiteness, racial microaggressions, and criminalization. Provided that "college knowledge" is typically passed on to SOC through college access programs (Duncheon, 2021), this study demonstrates how race-conscious approaches equip SOC with tools to navigate racism in higher education.

This study also contributes to scholarship on the role of racial identity development as a means to persistence in schools (Carter, 2008). Findings demonstrate the level of pride and sense of empowerment that SOC felt through the VIPS race-conscious curriculum. This is consistent with the work of Carter (2008) who argued that critical race consciousness and positive racial identity development motivate SOC to persist in K-12 schools. Together, these skills function to create defensive mechanisms and protective factors against oppressive forces. This dissertation

extends this notion to higher education, emphasizing how VIPS SOC dismiss racism at UCLA by rejecting dominant narratives that would have them believe they are less than.

Contributions to Discourse around Retention for SOC

There are several contributions that this dissertation makes to the broad literature on retention for SOC. In particular, I refer to the literature on racial campus climate. As research has shown, negative perceptions of an institution's campus climate can impact student retention (Edman & Brazil, 2009; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000). In this study, VIPS SOC chose to enroll and attend UCLA despite having a poor perception of the campus climate ahead of time. In fact, some study collaborators confronted UCLA's poor campus climate well before enrolling through VIPS. This implies that SOC can perceive an institutional climate through pre-college campus visits. Provided the literature on campus climate perceptions before enrolling, this finding is concerning as research has shown that high-achieving Black students consider campus climate when selecting colleges to attend (Comeaux et al., 2020). Additionally, there are negative outcomes associated with SOC who experience racism on college campuses. Studies have shown that SOC who are confronted with racism in higher education spaces are more likely to isolate resulting in poor mental health, lower grades, and greater dropout rates (Carroll, 1998; Feagin, 2002; Feagin et al., 2001; Solórzano et al., 2000).

This research confirms that hostile racial climates continue to be an issue in higher education for SOC. Study collaborators identified a) poor compositional diversity regarding student enrollment, staff, and faculty, b) a historical legacy of exclusion, and c) white-centric pedagogical practices as confrontations they have personally had with racism at UCLA (Hurtado, 1992, 1994). However, this study found that when SOC are prepared to enter higher education institutions as a racialized space, they are better equipped to identify and respond to racism.

Instead of internalizing racism, study collaborators demonstrate a sense of racial resilience to protect themselves while navigating higher education (Evans & Moore, 2015). This research contributes to the scholarship of every day "micro-resistances" used by SOC to cope with racism on campus (Evans & Moore, 215).

In addition to demonstrating how SOC survive the embedded nature of racism, this study also highlights how they thrive by taking back their power and sense of agency. One response to racial oppression on college campuses is the construction of and participation in counter spaces (Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). In these spaces, study collaborators find community and carve out room for joy. Most notably, this research found that study collaborators seek out counterpaces in times of trouble as recommended by VIPS. Study collaborators understood that because racism shapes their lived experiences, there are added precautions that students must take to succeed such as seeking out resources and building community.

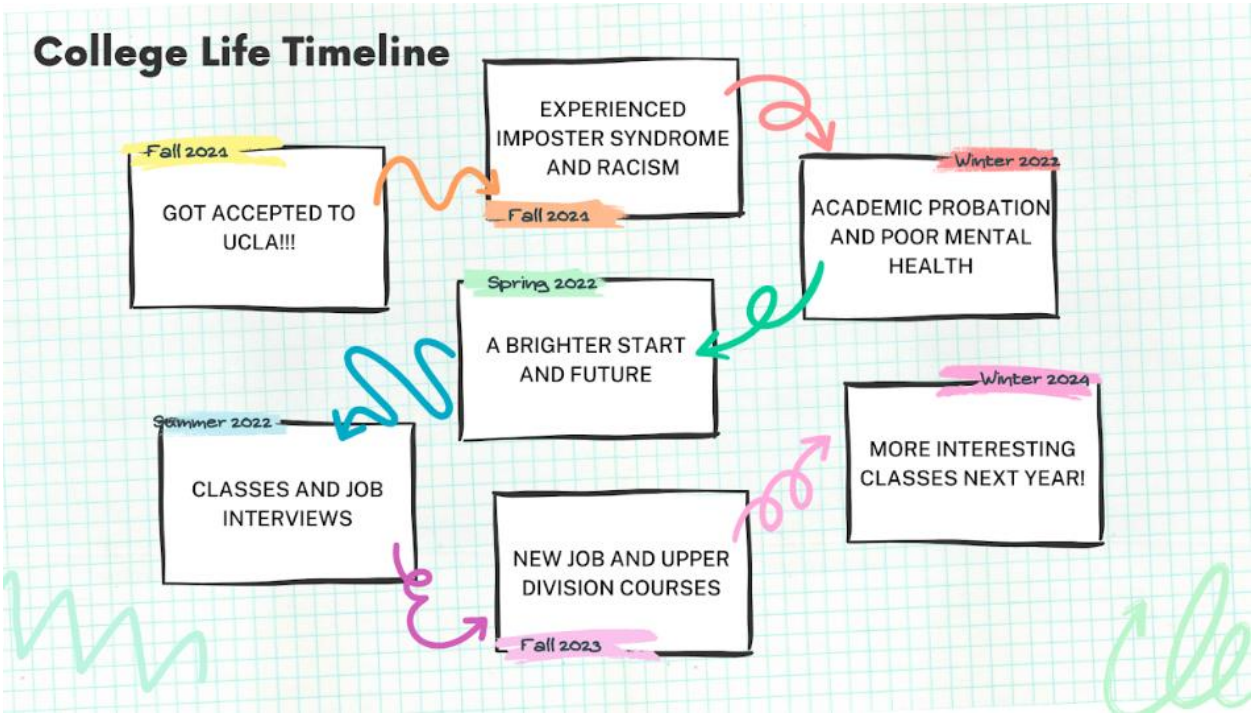
Sense of belonging is also tied to issues related to SOC retention and campus racial climate. Higher education scholars have demonstrated how negative perceptions of campus climate can reduce a student's sense of belonging (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Johnson et al., 2007). Higher education research states that a student's sense of belonging to their campus can affect their intention to persist (Hausmann et al., 2007). In recent years, scholars have problematized the concept of a "sense of belonging" alluding to the contradictory nature of aspiring to belong to an institution that actively inflicts racial harm (Stokes, 2021; Covarrubias, 2024). This research builds upon this body of scholarship by conceptualizing "taking belonging" to persist in P/HWIs. This concept is rooted in a sense of empowerment that allows SOC to unapologetically take advantage of the resources designed to support them instead of buying into false notions of

meritocracy. SOC can "take belonging" by showing up authentically to campus without fear of taking up space. This involves making the institution work for them as SOC by utilizing resources, advocating for their needs, and seeking community.

Methodological Contributions

One key contribution of this study is the "college life story" activity used to facilitate storytelling with study collaborators. As a methodological contribution, this activity asked study collaborators to create a timeline from their first day of college to the present noting their "highs" and "lows." This activity elicited vivid storytelling, as each study collaborator was asked to reflect on their racialized experiences at UCLA before meeting for our *platicas*. Below, I provide an example of the "college life" timeline that Destiny created.

Figure 5.4. Destiny College Life Timeline.



In it, Destiny noted experiences with racism and imposter syndrome early in her college journey. This led to a lengthy conversation about how quickly she recognized the lack of diversity within the student body at UCLA and how she was othered because of it. We talked in depth about how racial microaggressions manifested in social spaces like the dining halls as she was adjusting to college life. She also noted that she struggled academically for a quarter before seeking out help as emphasized by VIPS. She explained that at first, she wanted to navigate college alone before quickly remembering the lessons she had gained from VIPS to seek out resources and community in times of trouble. Each college life timeline took anywhere between 15 and 20 minutes, allowing study collaborators to document the pivotal moments (Espinoza, 2011) in their college journey both the bad (i.e., how they manage to survive) and the good (i.e., how they thrive).

Contributions to Critical Race Theory and Racial Microaggressions

CRT is more than a theory, it is a movement that is committed to challenging just as much as it is exposing racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano, 1997). I was reminded of this throughout this research study, but especially when a higher education scholar to me that "CRT is divisive." The results from this study serve as a reminder that not all challenges weigh heavily. In so many ways, study collaborators took control of their college experience and utilized the power within. VIPS SOC seek out counterspaces at UCLA to feel seen, to feel joy, and to share in community in the same way that I do. I thought of how Danny's RAC was described as "pedagogy and epistemology of community and joy" (Solórzano, 2023, p.92). I would not describe the action of finding peace, love, and joy within a family of like-minded individuals as "divisive"; unless the goal was to uphold the status quo. As such, this dissertation study has inspired a conceptual paper designed to bring awareness to all that CRT has built and

(re)imagined for communities on the margins. Counterspaces have made Communities of Color feel whole (Luedke, 2023), theories and concepts that began with CRT help the marginalized feel knowledgeable and seen (Hannagan-Martinez, 2023), and resistance can feel powerful (Raygoza, 2016). Light and love are happening through CRT work which is often left undiscussed and underexplored.

This dissertation also contributes to CRT discourse on racial microaggressions, specifically scholarship that is concerned with how Communities of Color respond. I offer "redirecting the weight" as a response to racial microaggressions and poor campus climates. This study emphasized how engaging the critical consciousness of Youth of Color can help them respond to racism on campus both at the structural and interpersonal levels. The first part of the theme title, "It's not me" emphasizes how study collaborators refused to internalize any dominant narratives. Instead, study collaborators redirected some of the weight that comes with racism (e.g., racial battle fatigue, internalized racism, etc.) towards the perpetrator(s). In this way, critical consciousness development within a college access program becomes a protective factor against racism in higher education. Other forms of responses include: (a) proving them wrong by defying stereotypes such as doing well in school (Moore et al., 2003); (b) self-preservation by remaining silent and avoidant (Griffin, 2006); (c) educating others using their knowledge (Harper, 2009; Morales, 2021); (d) centering and affirming Blackness through history and culture (Morales, 2021); (e) self-policing (Solórzano et al., 2020); (f) resistance (Solórzano et al., 2020); and (g) micro affirmations (Huber et al., 2021). With "redirect the weight," I expand upon this work by shifting ownership—including the labor involved—back onto the perpetrator as a form of self-preservation.

Recommendations

Race-evasive policies and practices in higher education do nothing but ignore the lived realities of Students of Color. Racism exists and continues to impact the experiences of SOC on college campuses. Why not prepare them to confront that fact? This study shows how race-conscious approaches to college readiness help SOC feel prepared and empowered as they navigate racism on campus. It serves as a counternarrative as VIPS SOC disrupt dominant ideologies by reclaiming their agency and belonging within higher education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In the next section, I provide considerations for policy, practice, and future research.

Considerations for Institutional Policy and Practice

The first recommendation from this study is to expand race-conscious college access programs. While the field has adapted "culturally relevant" language in their readiness approaches, there is a great emphasis on "culture" and not enough on critical consciousness. When Billings (1995) conceptualized culturally relevant teaching, it included critical consciousness or "sociopolitical development" where students could "both understand and critique the existing social order" (p. 476). VIPS integrates critical consciousness as a component of college readiness with positive outcomes, specifically as it relates to P/HWIs. As such, I recommend more programs like VIPS with the caveat that the curriculum be intersectional but rooted in anti-Blackness. This is based on the understanding that anti-Blackness has been and continues to be the central force in maintaining white supremacy (Dei et al., 2017). Additionally, de-centering Blackness has often led to the erasure of Black needs and watered-down social justice advocacy (Harris & Patton, 2019; Tichavakunda, 2024).

Secondly, if college access programs choose to take a race-conscious approach by integrating critical consciousness into their readiness efforts, a holistic approach must be taken as the topics discussed in programs like VIPS can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. For one, as with VIPS, there needs to be an element of positive racial identity development where students engage in concepts such as community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006), funds of knowledge (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2017), and counter storytelling (Martinez, 2020). Through the exploration of these topics, students can begin to build confidence in the assets that they come from while countering epistemological racism (Huber, 2011). Secondly, race-conscious access programs need to promote help-seeking behaviors with a special emphasis on mental health resources, counterspaces, and community building. As this study found, these elements were critical for the well-being of SOC who had engaged in a race-conscious college access program.

Counterspaces were critical for study collaborators in this research. Thus, I recommend that counter spaces (such as multicultural centers) be institutionalized and well-funded. As the VIPS GSR, part of my role was to help seek out grant funding to help pay for programming. Staff, who were already underpaid and overworked had to scramble every year to provide services to students. Furthermore, without sufficient funds, VIPS has had to limit participation in the program to 35 students per grade (i.e., 35 juniors, and 35 seniors). Additional funding would increase access to VIPS as well as sustain their efforts.

This study also found that student resources such as counseling and mental health services were important in supporting SOC through college. At the same time, there were issues connecting with a predominately white staff. As reflected in existing scholarship mental health services on college campuses reflect antiblack practices and attitudes (Grier-Reed, 2021). As

such, I recommend that higher education institutions recruit and retain more diverse personnel that utilize more culturally relevant practices.

Considerations for Research

From this research, I suggest several methodological considerations to move this work forward. First, as this study focused on one race-conscious college access program at UCLA, there could be more to explore at other sites. For example, the Chicano Latino Youth Leadership project takes a race-conscious approach but through a Latin/a/o/x cultural lens as opposed to focusing on Blackness and Antiblackness. Likewise, this study took place at a research-intensive institution with fewer Black and Latina/o/x students than say, California State University, Los Angeles. How might the experiences of VIPS SOC differ for those who may attend Minority Serving Institutions? Expanding this scholarship to include different research site types as well as other minoritized groups may provide a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon.

Finally, while topics around mental health and joy emerged in this study, it was not the focus. Given the magnitude of the topics discussed in VIPS, I recommend that future research also explore topics related to mental health more deeply. Many of this study collaborators in this research discussed going to therapy at UCLA, to process unresolved trauma. Almost all did so because VIPS encouraged it. Most had a good experience, but others did not. Those who did not have a good experience said that the UCLA counselors could not relate to their perspectives and needs as SOC. While this topic was captured in this dissertation, it could have gone more in-depth. In line with scholarship by Tichavakunda (2022) I argue for a more nuanced depiction of SOC—in particular Black students—in higher education, where joy and happiness are centered. Yes, these students experience racism, but they also experience laughter and joy.

Conclusion: On Racial Realism in an "Anti-Woke" Era

> We have to do more, not less, now that affirmative action has been banned.
>
> – Jayakumar, 2023

When I first began this research, the threat against affirmation action was still just that, a threat. And while I remained hopeful for some sort of miracle, I often referred to what Derrick Bell taught—racism is here to stay. It will always adapt, especially for People of Color to make any sort of headway. Admittedly, becoming a racial realist has brought me some comfort as I have continued to do race work. "There is beauty in the struggle" I remind myself. I need to focus on the "peaks of progress" or "short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance" (Bell, 1991, p. 79). Because that is all that we as activist scholars can do, is move the needle.

When the Supreme Court deemed it unconstitutional for higher education institutions to consider race in college admissions across the nation, I was not surprised by the outcome. What did surprise me was that in light of this decision, the Biden-Harris administration alongside the Office for Civil Rights within the U.S. Department of Education and the Civil Rights Division in the U.S. Department of Justice released a list of recommendations on how to enhance racial diversity within higher education while adhering to the new policy (2023). College access programs – listed as "pathway programs" within the document—were listed as a legal alternative to affirmative action practices. The document stated that access programs may be offered by higher education institutions with a "focus on increasing the pool of particular groups of college-ready applicants in high school" (p.4). Race may influence the way outreach and recruitment efforts are designed, such as which schools are selected. For instance, one strategy is to focus recruitment efforts in high schools that have high concentrations of Students of Color enrolled. This was a peak that the field of higher education could move toward.

The recommendation by the Biden-Harris administration described what the state of California has been doing since the passing of Prop 209 in 1996 which effectively banned the consideration of race in college admissions in the state. California has poured millions into outreach and recruitment efforts such as college access programs to increase diversity (Swail & Perna, 2002). VIPS—as a college access program or "pathway program"—was one of those programs. In 2005, a group of social justice advocates at UCLA created VIPS to address the declining enrollment of Black students and other SOC at UCLA (Howard et al., 2016). As demonstrated in this dissertation, the approach of VIPS has been to center race issues through the development of student's critical consciousness. Even with the ban on affirmative action in California, VIPS has been able to define "college readiness" to include readying SOC for hostile racial climates. In the context of race-evasive policies, this study emphasizes the positive outcomes that can come from being race-conscious in readiness approaches. As institutions across the nation heed the advice of the Biden-Harris administration to invest in access programs, this study emphasizes the benefits of centering race and racism within readiness efforts.

For nearly twenty years, VIPS has been a "peak of progress" in a sea of race-neutral approaches to college-readiness and I would be lying if I said that the recent attacks on CRT and DEI did not concern me. White supremacy could come for VIPS. But just as racism adapts, so do resistant efforts. As Jayakumar reminds us, "we [the field of higher education] have to do more, not less" because that is what social justice necessitates. If and when racists choose to target race-conscious programs like VIPS, it will be up to higher education scholars, practitioners, administrators, students, and community members to fight. The stories of this dissertation show how SOC use their critical consciousness to challenge and rise above racism. The field of higher

education must do the same. As Bell stated, “The fight in itself has meaning and should give us hope for the future” (p. 378). Witnessing how the study collaborators fight to make the college experience work for them gives the field of higher education, including myself, hope.

La lucha sigue.

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Subject: Seeking VIP Scholars for Study

Good [morning, afternoon, evening] [name],

I am currently seeking study participants for my dissertation which seeks to better understand the experiences of Students of Color at UCLA since being in VIPS as high school students. You have been identified as a possible participant in this important study as you have attended UCLA for at least 1 full academic year.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews. Each interview should take 90 minutes, and will be scheduled around a date and time that is most convenient to you. During these interviews, you can expect us to talk about your experiences in VIPS and how you've navigated UCLA since being in VIPS.

I really hope that you are interested in sharing your perspective with me! If you are, please fill out this short questionnaire [insert Google Form link) expressing your interest. If selected to participate in the study, you will receive a $15 gift card per interview as a token of my appreciation for your effort and time.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out!

In community,
Cynthia Estrada, M.A.

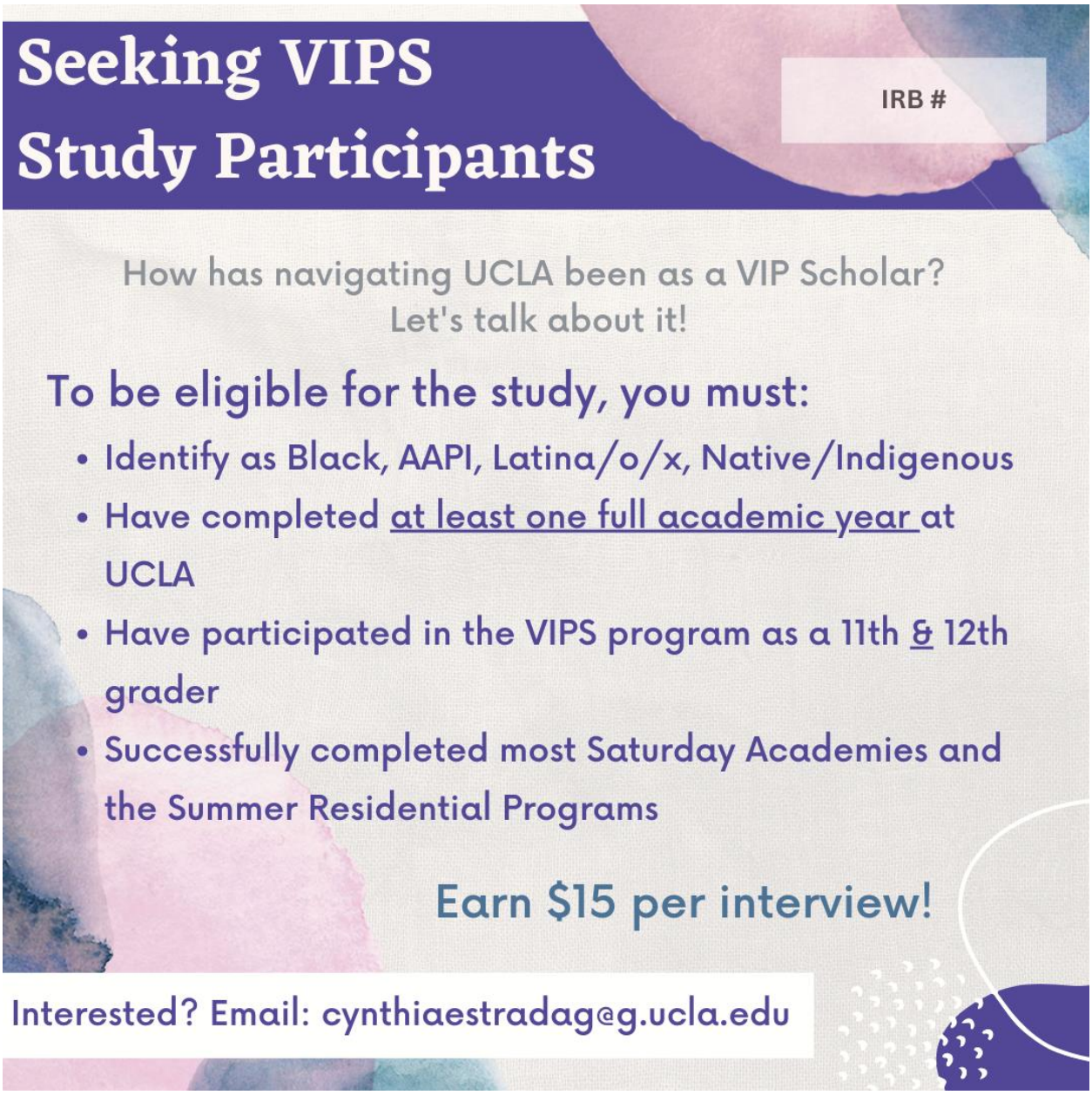
APPENDIX B. PRE-PLATICA QUESTIONNAIRE USING GOOGLE FORMS

Are you interested in participating in this study? Y/N
Name:
Email:
Phone:
Year in UCLA: Freshman (1st Year)/Sophomore (2nd Year)/Junior (3rd Year)/Senior (4th Year)
Transfer?:
VIPS Cohort #:
Major:
Minor:
Race/Ethnicity:
Gender:
Sexual Orientation:
First Generation?:
Other Relevant Identities:
Campus Organization Affiliations:
Select any/all VIPS events attended as a high school student:

- Junior Year Fall Saturday Academy
- Junior Year Winter Saturday Academy
- Junior Year Spring Saturday Academy
- Junior Year Summer Residential Program
- Senior Year Fall Saturday Academy
- Senior Year Winter Saturday Academy
- Senior Year Spring Saturday Academy
- Senior Year Summer Residential Program

Please list the fiat lux courses that you attended:

APPENDIX C. FLYER



APPENDIX D. SAMPLE PLATICA #1 GUIDING QUESTIONS

Platica #1 to address RQ1: What do Students of Color learn about race and racism as it relates to the college experience through race-conscious college access programs?

Good [morning, afternoon, evening] [Name],

Before we begin with questions, I wanted to start by saying muchisimas gracias/thank you so much for taking the time to be here with me today. I know you are very busy so it means a lot to me. As someone who was a part of a college access program somewhat like VIPS, I'm really thankful for the opportunity to get to know you and your story. We will get around to doing introductions in a minute, but first I just wanted to go over a couple of housekeeping items.

As I mentioned, my name is Cynthia Estrada and I am a doctoral candidate in the education department here at UCLA. I am also the Graduate Student Researcher for VIPS, so you may have seen me or heard my name around. This interview or *platica* as I like to call them, is a part of my dissertation study which seeks to look at the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color as they navigate UCLA after participating in VIPS. By engaging in a *platica* as opposed to a regular interview, I hope that you know that you can bring your full self to this space and I promise to do the same. Additionally, this should take somewhere between 60 and 90 minutes and I hope this will serve as an informal conversation as opposed to a rigid interview. In order to do that, I was hoping to record this so that we don't have to frantically write down everything we talk about. We will only use the audio in order to have this *platica* transcribed and will only be viewed by myself as the researcher. Please know that all of your answers will be anonymous and confidential. Do you consent to being recorded?

Lastly I just wanted to make sure that you know that you can stop your participation at any time. If a question makes you uncomfortable or is difficult to answer for whatever reason, please feel free to let me know or request to skip and come back. Any questions? If not, I'd love to start getting to know you.

1. Can you please tell me your name and pronouns?
2. Next, I'd like to move into artifact sharing so that we can get to know each other. How does that sound? I can go first.
    1. One artifact that represents your overall experience in VIPS
    2. One artifact that demonstrates how VIPS as a college access program encouraged conversations around racism and/or other forms of oppression
    3. One artifact that demonstrates how you have been able to navigate issues related to race and racism at UCLA
3. Tell me about your experience in VIPS.

    1. If you had to explain what VIPS is for Students of Color, what would you say?
4. Before VIPS, what ideas did you have about college and what it would be like for Students of Color?
5. How would you say VIPS prepared you for college?
    1. In terms of campus culture?
6. In VIPS, you took a class with Dr. Howard on the intersection of oppression and education.
    1. What lesson(s) stood out most to you in that class?
7. How does VIPS address issues of race and racism in their program?
    1. Why do you think VIPS incorporates these issues into their college prep efforts?
8. Tell me what that was like for you, learning about racism in a college prep program.
9. Did VIPS provide you with resources and/or training on how to navigate racism and other forms of oppression in college?

On Transition

10. I want to talk about your transition to college -
    1. What was that like for you as a [identity] student?
    2. Did you feel well represented as a student on campus?
        1. Why or why not?
    3. What kind of challenges did you face as a Student of Color on campus?
    How prepared were you as a [identity] to navigate racism in college?
        1. [PROBE IF NEEDED] How prepared were you to navigate racial microaggressions?
11. What question do you think I should ask others in this study? What would you want to know?

APPENDIX E. SAMPLE PLATICA #2 GUIDING QUESTIONS

Platica #2 to address RQ2 & RQ2a (listed in bold)

Good [morning, afternoon, evening] [Name],

Thank you once again for being here! I am especially looking forward to

RQ 2) What are the racialized experiences of undergraduate Students of Color who participated in a race-conscious college access program?

Life Story Activity

1. I want to start with the life story activity if that's ok with you. Would you like to go first or second?
    1. Thank you for sharing that with me. Next, I'd like to move into some questions if that's ok.

Questions

2. Can you tell me what it's like to navigate UCLA as a [identity] person?
3. [IF NOT ADDRESSED IN LIFE STORY] Can you tell me about a time where you experienced racism on campus?
    1. [PROBE IF NEEDED] At social events or settings?
    2. Academic settings? Such as the classroom?
    3. Directly? Indirectly?
4. Are there any ways that you see white supremacy function at UCLA?

RQ 2a) How do these Students of Color perceive that the college access program has influenced their navigation of their racialized campus experiences?

1. Last time, we spoke about [X] lesson that you learned through [VIPS activity]. I want to talk more about that.
    1. Did you take that with you as navigated UCLA? If so how?
2. How did VIPS help you to navigate issues related to race and racism at UCLA?
3. What are some strategies that you have learned and how have you applied them at UCLA?
4. What kind of resources are necessary for Students of Color to succeed in college?
    1. In what ways, if any, did VIPS provide those resources?
5. Are there any ways that learning about racism through VIPS prepared you to be an advocate for social justice on campus?

    1. For yourself?
    2. For others?
6. Now that you're a college student, what do you think Students of Color need from a college access program like VIPS to prepare for college?
    1. Academically?
    2. Socially?

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