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About the Journal

The Journal of College Access (JCA) focuses on the current trends, research, practices, and development of all types of programs, policies, and activities related to the access of and success in postsecondary education. Issues of college aspiration, qualification, application, enrollment, and persistence are the primary emphases.

The Journal was co-founded by Dr. Patrick O’Connor and Dr. Christopher Tremblay. O’Connor is Chief Strategist and CEO of College is Yours, an organization dedicated to expanding college opportunity. He is a board member and past chair of the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN). Tremblay is Executive Director of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs for the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan.

Launched in March 2014, JCA is a part of Western Michigan University’s ScholarWorks, a digital showcase of research, scholarly and creative output.

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The Journal of College Access is affiliated with the Michigan College Access Network, the Center for Postsecondary Readiness and Success (CPRS) and the Center for Equity and Postsecondary Attainment (CEPA).

MCAN is a statewide non-profit organization with a mission to increase college readiness, participation, and completion in Michigan, particularly among low-income students, first-generation college going students, and students of color.

micollegeaccess.org

The Center for Postsecondary Readiness and Success is to increase equitable and accessible pathways to postsecondary success for all people. Located at American University in Washington, D.C., the Center creates aligned systems, driven by student outcomes to disseminate new knowledge and discovery of college and career readiness and persistence models, while simultaneously connecting this new knowledge to K-12 and higher education policy formation.

american.edu/centers/cprs

The Center for Equity and Postsecondary Attainment (CEPA) focuses on promoting equitable access to viable postsecondary pathways and opportunities. Guided by diverse student and parent perspectives, CEPA aims to create college and career counseling and advising practices that reconnect with and elevate the voices of those who have been historically marginalized and excluded. All students deserve access to high quality guidance that supports both individual and collective needs, challenges inequitable and racist school-based systems and policies, and promotes postsecondary opportunities.

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Introduction to the Special Issue: Equity-Based Career Development and Postsecondary Readiness

Educational attainment is needed to achieve economic stability, enjoy better health outcomes, and the ability to be more civically involved (Ma et al., 2019). Moreover, individuals can make well over one million dollars over a lifetime with postsecondary training, especially a college degree (Carnevale et al., 2015). Former First Lady Michelle Obama’s Reach Higher Initiative and Better Make Room organization emphasize the need for individuals to pursue a postsecondary education to compete in the current economy (Better Make Room, n.d.). Moreover, current First Lady, Jill Biden has advocated for access to various postsecondary pathways, specifically free community college and other vocational training programs (Superville, 2021). Also, it is important to not only get students to college and other postsecondary institutions, but to also ensure they are retained and graduate from these institutions.

For students to persist at the postsecondary level, especially those from vulnerable populations, equitable programming and interventions should be a part of the equation for producing a diverse and inclusive graduation class. Pre-college programs along with programs that support postsecondary readiness must be accessible to ALL students if the U.S. is to produce the next generation of talent and an inclusive workforce. Hines and colleagues (2021a) noted how bridge and academic support programs assisted a group of Black males in pursuing and getting into college. Moreover, high impact practices such as study abroad and learning communities have been shown to retain and graduate students from college (Kuh, 2008).

Although we know the various programming and interventions can successfully prepare students for postsecondary opportunities, we must ensure K-12 educators as well as faculty and staff at postsecondary institutions know how to work with students of color, first generation college students, and students from vulnerable populations to create access, opportunity, and sustained pathways to and out of postsecondary institutions. We must address the barriers and obstacles that hinder students from achieving the American dream of pursuing a postsecondary education, a good career, and a great quality of life. Some of these challenges include stereotyping and
bias, anti-Black racism, lack of access to rigorous coursework (e.g., Honors, Advanced Placement courses), lack of college and career readiness, lack of cultural competence in understanding students who have been historically marginalized and discouraged from pursuing a postsecondary education, and lack of information about financial aid packages (Hines et al., 2021b).

A continuation of the latest research and best practices from an antiracist, culturally sustaining lens is needed to provide educators the solutions needed to ensure every student has an opportunity to get a postsecondary education. Thus, we present eight theoretical, qualitative, and quantitative articles that provide research on implementing equity based career development and postsecondary readiness for students in the K-16 educational system.

The first article titled, *Brown Bag to Lunch Buffet: A Case Study of a Low-Income African American Academy’s Vision of Promoting College and Career Readiness in the United States*, co-authors Edward C. Fletcher, Jr., Erik M. Hines, Donna Y. Ford, and James L. Moore, III discuss the unique leadership behaviors and initiatives that facilitate college and career readiness of African American students. They specifically highlight the role that urban school leaders can play in preparing students through career academies.

Article two, “*I Was Going to Work Full-Time at Roses Department Store*: The Need for College Readiness with Black and Latinx Students,” by Dana Griffin and Nicole Birkenstock discuss creating equitable college readiness practices in K-12 schools, particularly for Black and Latinx students who are at risk for not receiving college readiness knowledge and skills.

In article three, *Structured Pathways, Reinforced Plans: Exploring the Impact of a Dual Enrollment Program on the College Choice and Career Interests of Future Teachers of Color*, Jennifer M. Johnson, Joseph H. Paris, and Juliet D. Curci explain how to promote postsecondary access and teacher diversity through a dual enrollment program with a Grow Your Own emphasis using a case study analysis.

Article four, *Breaking Down Barriers: A Culturally Responsive Career Development Intervention with Racially Minoritized Girls of Color*, co-authors Marsha L. Rutledge and Philip B. Gnilka detail the challenges and opportunities related to the career development experiences for girls of color. Authors go on to discuss the impact of a
fifteen week culturally responsive after-school program tailored specifically to the needs of girls of color. In particular, authors discuss the impact of the career intervention on participants' career exploration, leadership, and career decision making self-efficacy.

Article five, Study Abroad: Perspectives from Historically Underrepresented Student Populations, authored by Meaghan E. Ecker-Lyster and Nazedya Kardash discuss improving access to study abroad for historically underrepresented students and through a qualitative research study, sought to understand how and abbreviated study abroad influence their decision to pursue this program.

In article six, Over the Rainbow: A Career Development Group for LGBTQ+ Teens, co-authors Anita A. Neuer Colburn and Isabella M. Herrera discuss the unique career development experiences of LGBTQ+ students. Authors build on the work of Pyle and Hayden (2015), to propose a six-session model for career group counseling which is intentionally collaborative with LGBTQ+ identified community members.

Article 7, Campus Visits as Predictors of Postsecondary Enrollment in Low-Income, Rural School Districts, co-authors by M. Corrine Smith, Ross Gosky, and Jui-Teng Li examine the relationship between visits to college campuses by middle school and high school students and postsecondary enrollment rates where campus visits are classified as both formal college visits and also informal campus visits, through GEAR UP. They found that both informal (Educational Campus Field Trip) and formal (Traditional College Visit) campus visits had an association with postsecondary enrollment rates, with formal campus visits collectively having a stronger impact than informal campus visits.

Last, article eight, He Needs to be in a Learning Community - Learning Community, a place of Respite and Brotherhood while Persisting in College, author Ngozi Taffe uses Community Cultural Wealth theory to discuss the impact of living and learning communities on the persistence of Black males in college. The author unpacks various components of one living learning community and provides specific recommendations for Black students and the college administrators who serve them. Specifically, the author stresses the importance of a holistic learning experience for Black males where their academic, social, emotional, and cultural development are attended to.

Our hope is that this special issue serves as a gate opener rather than a gatekeeper to improving access to education and ultimately career opportunities for minoritized and marginalized student populations.”

“From the Guest Editors

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From the Guest Editors

improving access to education and ultimately career opportunities for minoritized and marginalized student populations. The prolific, late Dr. Benjamin E. Mays said, “Every man and woman is born into the world to do something unique and something distinctive and if he or she does not do it, it will never be done.” With increased opportunities to receive postsecondary education and training, our students will be the next generation of doctors, electricians, entrepreneurs, beauticians, barbers, engineers, and lawyers. Lastly, as a tandem to this special issue, Drs. Erik Hines and Laura Owen have an edited volume titled, Equity-Based Career Development and Postsecondary Transitions: An American Imperative, slated to be released late Spring 2022.

REFERENCES

Better Make Room (n.d.). Reach Higher: Complete your own education. Own your future. bettermakeroom.org/reachhigher


EDITOR NOTES

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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From a Bag Lunch to a Buffet: A Case Study of a Low-Income African American Academy’s Vision of Promoting College and Career Readiness in the United States

ABSTRACT
The purpose of this research study was to examine the ways in which stakeholders at a low-income, predominantly African American STEAM academy implement initiatives that support the college and career readiness of their students. We found that a shift in leadership efforts to ensure that academy students were prepared to be both college and career ready provided equity and access to a quality and individualized curriculum through the implementation of career academies. As a result, stakeholders believed that students were more included, valued, and engaged in the school.

Keywords: African American education, career academy, career readiness, college readiness, urban education

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Introduction

The struggles of urban schools to ensure students become college and career ready in the midst of challenging conditions have been well documented (Green & Gooden, 2014; Milner, 2013). It is also widely understood that inadequate college and career readiness often prevents youth from seamless transitions into postsecondary education and the workforce (Loera et al., 2013). To be sure, it is quite difficult for schools to deliver curricula that meet the needs of diverse student bodies to promote their success.

In response to the challenges in preparing students to be college and career ready, career academies have emerged as promising programs after decades of implementation and documented positive outcomes (Stern et al., 2010). There is extensive evidence documenting the impact of participation in career academies regarding reduced dropout rates, improved attendance, increased academic course-taking and interpersonal skills, and positive labor market outcomes (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Kemple, 2008; Stern et al., 2010). The key components of the academy approach involve integrated and contextualized academic and career-related curricula, work-based learning experiences, and partnerships with business and industry (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Stern et al., 2010). The career academy model is a high school reform initiative that involves integrating career and
technical education (CTE) curricula into middle and high schools. The focus of career academies is to prepare students to be college and career ready with the implementation of small learning communities, work-based learning experiences, advisory boards, and college preparatory curricular courses and activities.

Despite the documented benefits of student participation in career academies, the general public is still reticent to embrace related programs given the lingering negative views regarding career and technical education (CTE). Some of the stigma stems from tracking students into differentiated curricular programs based on ethnic and racial backgrounds and socioeconomic status (Akos et al., 2007; Alvarez & Mehan, 2007; Fletcher & Zirkle, 2009; Gamoran, 1989; Lewis, 2007). Many parents still view CTE from the vantage point of their own K-12 schooling experiences, associating CTE programs with non-college bound students and preparation for entry level, low-wage jobs. Further contributing to this misconception is that the current “college for all” mindset has taught administrators, educators, school counselors, parents, and students that a four-year baccalaureate degree is the only pathway to prosperity (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Stringfield & Stone, 2017). Another issue preventing implementation is that career academies often demand greater resources in terms of equipment and software, and require access to worksites and employer support in the community to provide work-based learning opportunities to students (Sanders, 2005; Stringfield & Stone, 2017).

Under these conditions, what can urban schools operating in economically disadvantaged settings do to promote student college and career readiness? Research has demonstrated the critical role that community engagement plays in reforming urban schools for initiating more sustainable change (Green, 2017). Community engagement in schools refers to relationships between schools and businesses, individuals, formal and informal organizations, and postsecondary institutions (Sanders, 2005). Research has not addressed how ethnically and racially diverse, low-income, urban school stakeholders perceive and approach the implementation of the career academy model. Additionally, there is limited research describing how these schools partner with employers, postsecondary, and community members to promote students’ college and career readiness. We also know little about how urban schools are able to acquire resources needed for student success. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which stakeholders at a low-income, predominantly African American STEAM academy implement initiatives that support the college and career readiness of their students. The research question under investigation in this research study was: how can career academies help students become college AND career ready? Prior research on exemplary, high quality secondary programs has suggested that one
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of the factors of success is an organizational understanding of purpose (Newmann & Whelage, 1995). Thus, schools with a clear and shared understanding of college and career readiness would be more likely to emphasize rigorous and relevant curricula promoting academic, technical, and employability skills.

Review of Literature

In general, research has shown positive outcomes when schools and communities develop close ties in terms of more effective school functioning, additional fiscal and human resources, higher student academic achievement and well-being, greater parental participation, and better community health and development (Boutte & Johnson, 2014; Epstein, 2001; Sanders, 2005). Further, engagement from the community is mutually beneficial with schools often receiving donations and raising capital (e.g., small grants, equipment) as well as supports in a variety of ways, such as guest speaking, mentorship, and internships (Badgett, 2016; Engeln, 2003; Turnbull, 2015). To be clear, the facilitation of partnerships between schools and their communities require a great deal of coordination and effort on both parties involved, but the rewards for the school, students, and community can be quite worthwhile (Hands, 2010). In this context, principals have tended to lead school-community relationship efforts (Khalifa, 2012; Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004). However, to sustain school-community partnerships, the engagement of an entire team of stakeholders is often more successful than relying on one individual from a school (Sanders, 2005).

One form of community engagement is school-business partnerships. The emergence of school and business partnerships is predicated partly by chronic budget restraints and the shrinking fiscal environment of U.S. schools, particularly those in low-income, ethnically and racially diverse, urban environments (Molnar, 2005). In addition, the level of school and business partnerships across schools are uneven in that urban schools usually suffer from a lack of resources because they are typically situated within poor communities, thereby further exacerbating inequalities (Warren, 2005). Critics contend that these school-business partnerships often result in corporate exploitation and a mismatch of interests. That is, while schools focus on the needs of educating students for democratic and civic functions, corporations sometimes treat “students as consumers to be manipulated” (Molnar, 2005, p. viii) and to be obedient and uncritically minded (Hewitt, 2005). Challenging the negative views of school-business partnerships is an issue community stakeholders have to resolve in their quest to establish mutually beneficial relations.

College and Career Readiness

Schools need a clear and shared understanding of purpose to focus their efforts on meeting the needs of students
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regarding college, career, and future readiness. In response to the recent push for promoting “college and career readiness,” the term is now widely used across the country, but it is often interpreted in a variety of ways or defined with a narrow emphasis on college preparation (Stone & Alfeld, 2006). Although, it has been documented that the labor market is demanding workers with additional education beyond high school—but not necessarily a college degree, policy reports continue to equate career ready with being college ready only (Achieve, 2016; National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004). An alternative view of college and career readiness should take into account the reality of the labor market needs, suggesting that a college degree is not necessarily equivalent to being career ready (Barton, 2006; Cappelli, 2008; Symonds et al., 2011). A more nuanced definition of college and career readiness should involve an appropriate set of academic skills in addition to generalizable and specific occupational skills required in broad industry clusters (e.g., IT).

According to Stone and Lewis (2012), college and career readiness should refer to the extent of high school graduates’ academic knowledge along with employability and technical skills. Students should have mastery of core academics to ensure readiness for postsecondary education, without the need for remediation. As such, one indicator of readiness is enrollment in rigorous academic coursework that aligns with lower level postsecondary curriculum. However, academic preparation is not enough for a successful transition into the workforce (Stone & Lewis, 2012). Students also need employability and technical skills to be successful in their chosen careers (Achieve, 2016). Employability skills include critical thinking skills, personal responsibility skills, and technological skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011; Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991; Stone & Lewis, 2012). In turn, technical skills refer to the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed in specific fields. For example, students who obtain industry certifications demonstrate certain levels of technical skill attainment in specific occupational areas.

With this frame of reference, it is clear that the enactment of school-business partnerships is critical to promote college and career readiness for students through engagement in relevant academic content and career development opportunities through work-based learning activities (Cahill, 2016; Papadimitriou, 2014). Work-based learning experiences enable students to apply what they know in real-world settings, while building exposure to, preparation for, and experience in their interested career paths (Papadimitriou, 2014). Work-based learning experiences can include apprenticeships, guest speakers, job shadowing, mock interviews, paid or unpaid internships, and student-run enterprises (Cahill, 2016). In this regard, work-based learning experiences help students acquire both the employability and
technical skills needed to be college and career ready (Stone & Lewis, 2012). Implementing work-based learning experiences require coordinated efforts that are often complex and difficult to arrange, thereby, leading to ineffective programs for many schools. Nonetheless, work-based learning experiences are mutually beneficial as the student gains employability and technical skills needed for the careers they seek, while employers build a talent pipeline of potential employees (Griffin & Annulis, 2013; Papadimitriou, 2014).

**Method**

In this study, we employed a qualitative, case study design to explore the experiences and perspectives of school personnel and community partners (stakeholders) regarding the nature of organizational and implementation elements (mission, curriculum and instruction, and internal and external supports) of the academy (Stake, 2006). We use pseudonyms throughout the manuscript in place of names of individuals and settings.

**Research Design**

The case study approach allowed us to document thick and rich descriptive information about the setting in which the high school STEAM Academy operated, and factors and detractors (i.e., interpersonal and inter-organizational features) for implementing the curricular goals for students. According to Stake (2006), “qualitative case researchers focus on relationships connecting ordinary practice in natural habitats to a few factors and concerns of the academic disciplines” (p. 10). Thus, in this project the STEAM academy (the case) operates within unique contexts (e.g., community, predominately low-income African American/Black student body, all African American/Black leadership team, and predominately white teaching faculty).

**The Case: Johnson Academy**

Johnson Academy is a STEAM themed high school that focuses on promoting the college and career readiness of students through college visits, university lab research experiences, and work-based learning activities (job shadowing and internships). The academy also has extensive university and corporate partnerships as well as a high level of funding (over $2 million) from local and national corporate sponsors. Johnson Academy is located in an urban area within a Midwestern state. The academy has a small student population comprised of approximately 700 learners, and the school district has a student population of approximately 2,600 individuals. The ethnic and racial backgrounds of students at the Academy are 98% African American/Black. The socioeconomic status of the student population is 100% low-income. The gender makeup is 48% female. Johnson Academy had a 95% graduation rate (within four years) for the 2017 to 2018 academic year and a 100% college and/or career placement rate. The ethnic and racial backgrounds of the entire school leadership team were African American/Black.
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American/Black females led by an African American/Black male superintendent whom was raised within the city of Johnson. Johnson Academy shifted from being solely a one-size-fits-all college preparatory school to one that tries to meet the needs of all students with a variety of options and career pathways, in addition to the college preparatory path.

Based on their 100% low-income student status, the qualified as a “trauma-informed school” and receives funding from a state grant. The school mission is to make the students’ “whole” by meeting their basic needs to prepare them for learning in the classroom. Thereby, Johnson Academy attempts to meet students’ emotional, physical, and mental needs. As a result, the school provides free wraparound services to their students and families, including: a health-based clinic with a pediatrician, mental health counselors, and social workers to provide a host of services to students with behavioral, mental health, and truancy issues as well as birth control, immunizations, and physicals; two homeless shelters and food pantries within the community; two Hope Houses for students with housing needs; breakfast, lunch, and dinner for six days of the week; uniforms for students that are unable to afford them; and laundry facilities.

Curriculum. Students at Johnson Academy have a plethora of curricular programs to participate, including: a college preparatory curriculum, dual credit opportunities, music, sports, Project Lead the Way (PLTW), Junior Reserves Officer Training Corps (JROTC), Fine Arts, and career and technical education (e.g., animation, business and finance, construction, education, engineering, health sciences, hospitality and tourism, information technology). Students have the ability to select their courses and career pathways.

Context of the City of Johnson. The school is located in the city of Johnson (home to a population of approximately 15,000 people) that borders a large metropolitan city. It is a public school where student enrollment is based on where they are located (zoned). Johnson School District was established in 1871. The ethnic and racial composition of the city of Johnson is 90% African American/Black, 6% White, 2% Latinx, and 2% Multi-racial. The median income is approximately $32,000, and 25% of the community members live below the poverty line. A neighboring city next to Johnson captured national news as police killed an unarmed African American teenager. The police officer was not indicted based on the judgements of a grand jury. The law enforcement and government officials in the majority African American/Black community are majority white. The aftermath of the incident was severe and garnered massive violent and non-violent protests, demonstrations, and social unrest. It shook the community, and has arguably intensified negative racial relations between the African American/Black community and law enforcement. These tensions were sparked by concern for the
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insensitive and militarized tactics by law enforcement during the protests.

The site visit. We collected data through a five-day site visit. The academy principal and superintendent agreed to provide access to the school and assist with the coordination of interviews with district and school administrators, school board members, STEAM and core academic teachers, students, school counselors, parents, staff, as well as postsecondary, business and industry, and community partners. We gained IRB approval to conduct this study.

Participant Selection and Data Sources

To inform the iterative process, we conducted classroom observations and semi-structured interviews (and focus group interviews with teachers) with administrators, faculty, staff, and school partners (See Appendix A on page 33 for an example interview protocol). We used a purposive sampling procedure to identify key stakeholders who supported the academy and students within it (Stake, 2006). More specifically, we relied on the knowledge of two insider informants—the principal and superintendent—to provide us with a list of participants to interview during our five-day site visit. The stakeholders (participants) served in a variety of capacities within the school, and we selected them based on their contributions according to our insider informants. All participants received $25 gift cards as an incentive for participation. It is important to note that this study was a component of a larger grant research project.

During the first year of the project, we focused on the perspectives of key stakeholders and their contributions to the implementation of the career academy. During the second year of the project, we focused on students’ engagement and experiences. The focus of this manuscript was on the perspectives of key stakeholders. During the site visit, we engaged in six classroom observations to understand the instructional environments, teaching and learning processes, and types and levels of assessments administered in the academy (See Table 1 on page 18 for data collection efforts). We used a protocol to document our observations. These school and classroom observations were revealing as we noticed that the school was full of student artwork throughout the hallways depicting positive of African American/Black students and positive messages to encourage a productive learning environment in the school. We learned from the Art teachers that the principal enabled the school “to be a canvas” to showcase the talent of students in the school. Further, the Art teacher and local business partner taught students how to transform their artwork into animation—hence, the “A” within the STEAM theme. It was noticeable how invested the students were in the school simply by walking the hallways.

In addition, we conducted five off-site visits (tours and individual interviews) with business and industry partners and conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with 33 stakeholders. The interviews were with
district (n = 2) and school administrators (n = 4), school board members (n = 2), STEAM and core academic teachers (n = 9), a school counselor (n = 1), parents (n = 4), staff (n = 1), university partners (n = 2), business and industry partners (n = 7), as well as community partners (n = 1). Individual interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes in duration. Questions from the individual interviews related to the academy mission, school culture, curriculum and instruction, internal supports, and external supports. In addition, we conducted two 120-minute focus group interviews with STEAM and core academic teachers (n = 3 in each group).

Further, we conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with 15 African American/Black male students and 15 other African American/Black male alumni participated in semi-structured, focus group interviews. Thirty African American/Black males were included in the study. Further, the individual, semi-structured interviews were approximately 30 minutes, and the semi-structured, focus group interviews were between 60 and 120 minutes.

Data Analyses

We audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim all interviews. We then analyzed all data (curricular documents, classroom observations, and individual and focus group interviews) using thematic content analysis to capture contextual factors underlying program implementation (Boyatzis, 1998). We identified recurring themes by: (a) reading the transcripts in their entirety to seize a sense of the whole in terms of how participants talked about the academy; (b) re-reading the transcribed interviews and demarcating transitions in meaning in the content of the text utilizing a lens focusing on the implementation and curricular practices of the academy; (c) reflecting on the meaning of revelatory research content gained within each transcript as well as across participants’ experiences; and (d) synthesizing the themes into statements which accurately represent the perspectives of the interview participants (Wertz, 2005).

Researcher Positionalities

It is helpful to acknowledge our own inherent biases, perspectives, and frames of reference as researchers, which most likely influenced and shaped research encounters, processes, and findings. All authors are faculty (two African American men and one African American woman). We have professional
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backgrounds in the field of career and technical/workforce education, special education (with an emphasis in gifted education), counselor education, and educational psychology. All three of us have studied issues related to the impact of student participation in high school STEM-themed career academies as well as inequities in access to academically rigorous programs in schools, particularly for ethnically and racially diverse as well as students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Data Interpretations

Transition of Leadership Visions: Addressing Equity Issues
Johnson Academy was initially a failing high school lacking accreditation. When Dr. Sheila Thompson was appointed as superintendent, she had a new vision for the high school. Her vision focused on increasing academic achievement, providing wraparound services for students, families, and the community, developing a college preparatory academy, and earning school accreditation. Dr. Thompson achieved all of those goals, and when she resigned to pursue another career opportunity, Dr. Ray Henderson (current superintendent) continued with the initial vision. Upon getting started, Dr. Henderson also added career academies to address the needs of all students at Johnson Academy. According to Dr. Henderson, "...here, the philosophy that she [Dr. Thompson] had was to establish a college prep academy, which she did start...Our philosophy was unified on the college prep academy, but there was nothing for everyone else...Our philosophies were totally aligned as to how that [college preparation] should go, and also totally aligned as it relates to the wraparound services needed to focus on learning and doing more—100 percent alignment there; however, there was this void for everyone that was not in the College Prep Academy."

Johnson Academy’s use of wraparound services for their students is particularly noteworthy. Related supports are critically important as the majority of schools that serve predominately low-income, African American students do not have adequate resources to address families with needed services to help students persist and finish school (Fries et al., 2012). In urban settings with large concentrations of ethnically and racially diverse and low-income families, school staff generally face a daunting task helping students succeed amidst personal and family challenges (Levin et al., 2007). Thus, Johnson Academy’s vision to provide support services to their students and families is quite impressive.

Related to the development and implementation of career academies to complement the college preparatory focus, Johnson Academy stakeholders consistently stated that the previous focus on college preparation seemed to only be serving about
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30% of their student population in regard to students’ aspirations of pursuing a baccalaureate degree within a four-year university. Thus, according to stakeholders, the sole emphasis on college preparation created a sense of “the haves and the have-nots” for students in the school, which presented an equity issue for students who did not plan on pursuing a four-year college/university path. Ms. Kay Williams, an English teacher, explained the difference in mindset and culture of the school indicative of the transition in vision from Drs. Thompson to Henderson. She stated:

Yes. Before, we had an emphasis on the college prep program. Something that I really love about Dr. [Henderson] is...I really kind of had this weird taste in my mouth that there was these haves and have-nots. I was so excited when Dr. [Henderson] said, “We wanna’ [sic] start an Academy for All,” and I thought, “Wow, that’s what our kids need,” especially when I mentioned students who are labeled, maybe, “I’ve never been good at math. I’ve never been good at reading,” and so, showing them, “Well, that’s okay, but we’ve got this academy and all these avenues that you can pursue so that you can be successful in the future.”

Similar to Ms. Kay’s concern, many of the stakeholders we interviewed perceived the divide between the college prep students and the remainder of the student population as the “have and have-nots.” On this matter, the Johnson Academy stakeholders agreed that non-college prep students disengaged from the schooling experience, given the previous lack of alternative pathways within the school. However, the newly implemented curriculum under Dr. Henderson provided opportunities for all students regardless of whether they planned to pursue further education upon completion of high school or enter the workforce directly. Taneisha, a senior at Johnson Academy, told us that the school had a positive shift from its lingering negative reputation. She stated:

Honestly, maybe, it was the superintendent that we had. I know when they added in the whole college prep academy thing when we had Dr. Henderson, and I know there was a way to try to change things and better things. Honestly, I know he tried to make other programs added on to the college prep, so it wouldn’t just be college prep and then traditional.

Kaitlin, a senior at Johnson Academy, agreed with Taneisha. She explained:

They don’t make it strict like you have to go to college. You can go wherever you wanna’ go and do whatever you wanna’ do. You can go to a technology school or anything that you want to. You don’t have to strictly go to a four-year university, which is good.

Hence, the singular curricular focus on college preparation was transformed by providing various career pathways, including animation and digital design, business and finance, construction trades, health sciences, information technology, and STEM clubs and competitions.
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From a Bag Lunch to a Buffet. Teachers at Johnson Academy spoke of the expanded curricular options for students as a “buffet.” They explained that students, under the leadership of Dr. Thompson (prior superintendent), were provided a “bag lunch.” From the teachers’ perspectives, the bag lunch approach was a one-size fits all type of option for students as there was only one curricular option for students to choose—the college preparatory route. Those students who were not interested in pursuing a baccalaureate degree upon completion of high school, were left behind. Mr. Jones, a teacher, described the analogy of a bag lunch and buffet during one of the teacher focus groups. He shared with us:

If you wanna’ [sic] use an analogy, you could say we went from a bag lunch to a buffet. With the bag lunch it was take it or leave it, one size fits all which it didn’t serve the general population of our students. A lot of them just didn’t benefit from it or weren’t interested in it. Now, with our buffet style approach to educating our young people, there’s something for everybody. If you’re not that kid that is a strong academic, but maybe there’s some technical things you can do. If you’re one of those kids who are more hands-on, then we’ve got the construction program. There’s a little bit of something for everybody...I think they feel more included now and more valued cuz’ [sic] of that.

The “college for all” mantra has been reported as ubiquitous in K-12 schools with school counselors, parents, teachers, and administrators strongly encouraging students to enter four-year colleges and universities at the exclusion of preparing students for the workforce or to pursue two-year colleges (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Cohen & Besharov, 2002; Symonds et al., 2011). The shift to various career pathways for students is aligned with the federal government’s (U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services) strategic objectives for economic and workforce development (Castellano et al., 2016). Career pathways enable students to navigate between secondary and postsecondary education as well as the workforce with curricula that is in tune with labor market needs. Thus, the new curriculum is more closely aligned with the new vision of preparing K-12 students to be both college and career ready (Fletcher et al., 2018; Symonds et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, we are concerned by the divisive views of many stakeholders, some believing there should be a focus on those students with aspirations for college and others focusing on those with a desire to enter the workforce directly upon completion of high school. In this regard, it did not appear that the stakeholders viewed career academies as a viable venue for students who aspired to pursue a two-year or four-year degree. This is problematic as the current objectives for career academies and CTE programs are to prepare students for both college and careers (Stern et al., 2010). As such, we did not find that the stakeholders we interviewed fully realized that a student in a career academy interested in pursuing a four-year degree...
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could benefit from exploring and engaging in content related to their intended major (career) in college.

Results of the Change in Vision

Career Focused Programs Leading to Engagement. The new philosophy, vision, and expanded curricular foci under the leadership of Dr. Henderson were to enable all students to succeed based on their individualized interests and aspirations. According to Ms. Sandra Lee, a School Counselor at Johnson Academy, the new vision enabled school counselors to customize curricula and the learning experiences of students based on their own pathways of choice. Ms. Lee articulated:

*We still carry that piece [college prep]. I think that Dr. [Henderson] added onto it more, I remember with Dr. [Thompson], saying to her, "Dr. [Thompson]," it really was a struggle that first year with her, "Every student is not going to college and we have to be realistic. The first thing, you're wasting money for them and you're setting them up for failure." I said, every student, they got to have some type of training when they leave high school, but not every student wants to go to a four-year college. Her first year... every student had to take ACT. Every student is not—I mean, they're gonna’ [sic] skip it. They're just not gonna’ [sic] come on that Saturday. Some students are, you know, they'll go and just put anything down. We have to find what is the best fit for them.*

The Assistant Principal of Johnson Academy, Dr. Karen Banks, concurred with Ms. Lee in terms of the customized curricula based on students’ interests. Dr. Banks shared:

*I would say my Principal, Dr. [Jenkins], I feel like her overall vision is she wants kids to have some choices about their lives. If you want to go to college, here are some ways for you to get there. If you’re thinking you wanna’ [sic] learn a trade, you could learn that here, and graduate. That’s what I’m getting from her, like if there’s something you wanna’ [sic] do, we can find it. We can figure it out and make that happen for you. That’s what I’m seeing... kids wanna’ [sic] learn, so let’s figure out how to get here.*

Our interviews with teachers, school counselors, administrators, and parents all were positive when discussing the newly revised curricular emphases conceptualized and implemented based on Dr. Henderson’s vision. In their view, the newly formed curricula provide opportunities for all students in the school and help enhance their engagement in school, particularly as it relates to work-based learning experiences (e.g., job shadowing and paid internships) and research learning experiences (e.g., opportunities for students to work at a university during the summer within a research lab with faculty and doctoral students). In one of the teacher focus groups, Mrs. Gibson shared her perspectives on the change in curricular foci of Johnson Academy. She stated:
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I think part of it is that the opportunities in the programs in the school has changed. We didn't have a college prep program five years ago, for example. We didn't have some of the hands-on courses like robotics and STEM. It was a pretty narrow focus of math, science, English and social studies and that was basically it. There was not a lot of choices and opportunities for kids to do things that were more expressive of their personalities. We have a different curriculum. We have different staff, different programs. There are opportunities for the kids. They see value in what we're doin' [sic]. They've got a lot of buy-in so they can take apprenticeships and get jobs through the school. That makes a big difference. The opportunities are spread out for the general population of students. For a little while, we had programs just for college prep. All of the resources were available to them and you had the haves and the have-nots, which caused some resentment among the traditional population. In the last couple of years, we've implemented things that availed themselves to students who are not in the academy, the college prep academy. You've got other academies and other opportunities and they see that they're being valued and they're getting the same attention as the students who are deemed a better lot.

Parents too shared the same sentiments in terms of the better opportunities provided for their kids. They articulated the positive changes in maturity and insights related to career development their children had because of the expanded college and career options in the school. For example, Ms. Kathy Montane (a parent), shared with us that:

...the leadership, starting with Dr. [Henderson], is just awesome. He loves his students. This school just seems—this school district seems like it has a lot to offer in middle school and high school as far as options and letting them really experience what they may be into. She's [Ms. Montane’s daughter] really found a lot of things that she's into. She was one of those children that you ask her, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" She's just like, "I don't know." Now she's just like, "Oh, I think I'll go into computers. Oh, I think I'll do this." She's got so many options, and she's good at all of them. That's all come from the experience that she's had since she's been in this district.

In this context, Johnson Academy stakeholders expressed issues of inequity when the college prep curriculum was the only opportunity for students. Stakeholders noted that every student now has the opportunity to choose their own pathway, especially students who were at risk of dropping out of high school. Students and their parents also valued the opportunities for career awareness as means to understand which career pathways they were interested in exploring further. In this regard, prior research has demonstrated that students who participate in career academies benefit from increased student engagement and achievement as well as the ability to successfully transition from high school to postsecondary education, especially for
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students deemed at-risk (Castellano et al., 2016; Hemelt et al., 2019).

Urban School Leaders’ Role in Preparing Students

A Focus on Creating Partnerships and Raising Capital. Johnson Academy was home to an entire student population (100%) eligible for free and reduced lunch. Thus, in his role as Superintendent, Dr. Henderson also emphasized creating and developing partnerships with local and national corporations, universities, and community organizations (e.g., non-profit agencies). He particularly believed these efforts were necessary to help students succeed in school. The partnerships were fruitful as they provided a funding source for school initiatives as for enabling students to participate in a host of work-based learning and university research experiences. To that end, students from Johnson Academy participated in a plethora of activities and events provided by the school both locally and nationally. These activities included college and university trips—both in-state and out-of-state, college tours of ivy league institutions, research lab experiences at local colleges and universities with the assistance of doctoral students and faculty, and job shadowing opportunities with national companies. Students were exposed to opportunities to move beyond their zip code and network with community members, business and industry representatives, and college/university faculty. These opportunities represented transformative learning experiences for students at Johnson Academy, particularly given their life circumstances living in a low-income neighborhood.

Dr. Henderson spoke of his abilities to create partnerships and raise capital as well as the necessity to do so in a school district with limited resources. He commented about the acumen needed to successfully partner with local stakeholders as well. Dr. Henderson acknowledged:

I had touches with corporate leaders, which then made it a little bit easier to just utilize that leverage to get partnerships for kids and internships and programs. Advice would be: it’s all about relationship and results. If you have results that you can point to and you can articulate the need and the need aligns to their corporate responsibility mission, and then you have the relationship prior to an ask, then you will have some success in getting them to partner. That’s the formula. Results, alignment to their corporate responsibility, crisp message about the need, and relationship time spent together. As a personal goal of mine for the past, since being superintendent since 2010, I’ve always had a personal goal to raise one million dollars’ worth of private money every year. It’s not a board directive. It’s not been a requirement in any of my evaluations or anywhere. Not in any superintendent in the country, to be honest. When I teach superintendent courses, I let them know that that’s more of a college leadership model of capital campaigning than
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it is superintendent model. Superintendents raise taxes. College presidents raise capital. If you’re in an urban poor district or a rural poor district, it should be a no brainer. Raise private money, so that you could do private things, so that you could pay light bills, pay food, start shelters, pantries. It stretches further and engages the full community. My advice would be reach out and know those corporations that are there so that you can really help them in their R&D [research and development] by giving some of your time, student talent pipeline to them, and then they give you in return some of their pipeline of experts, and some of their treasure. That would be my advice to superintendents.

Dr. Henderson’s efforts underscored the importance of raising capital to implement college and career readiness activities and supporting the college and career readiness of students. Dr. Henderson further discussed the synergy that is created when school personnel and the community collaboratively share ideas on how to mutually benefit each stakeholder’s organization based on leveraging resources to meet real needs of the community. He also highlighted the importance of having an entrepreneurial and positive disposition toward creating possibilities and envisioning success. Dr. Henderson credited his school team in supporting ideas and initiatives as well as moving them forward to enhance the student experience. Mrs. Daniel, corporate partner of a national IT company, confirmed the synergistic outlook:

[Johnson Academy], they have been so grateful, but they’ve also taken what we’ve done and gone beyond that. It’s not just thank you, and they move on. They really reach out to us and talk about, what else can we do? How can we enhance the experience for the students? How can we further that connection with our employees? It’s a really great relationship. They seem to be very on top of exactly what they want their students to be able to achieve, which is great for us as well because we have our key areas of focus, STEM being one of them because this is our operations technology headquarters.

The school partners that we interviewed added insight into the student experience when students participate in job shadowing and paid internships with Johnson Academy. They noted the goals of the work-based learning and university research-lab experiences are for students to gain career awareness and exploration into possible careers that students are interested in pursuing. Mrs. Daniel talked about what it is like for the student to enter a national IT company’s headquarters during a job shadowing event. She said:

—they’re like, “Oh, I’m in a new space.” Most of the time, everyone is such in awe of the idea of being able to come to a place like this and to be able to experience and see.

As [David – colleague we interviewed in the same firm] was mentioning, anytime we have a STEM day, two big things that we do is we take them on a tour around the office. It’s really great for them to see what an office environment looks like now. It’s not
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necessarily something that students will ever be exposed to until they walk in for the first time. A lot of what we try to do is bring it to life for them so that it’s not just words on a paper or just us talking to them, but they can actually see it and feel it. That’s, I think, helpful just to translate it to, what could this mean if I wanted to make a career out of this.

We also asked Mrs. Daniel why her company chooses to spend time and resources in working with Johnson Academy and other K-12 schools. She noted:

part of our corporate mantra is “doing well by doing good.” Making sure that we balance those two things and making sure that we are continuing to give back to the community. It’s definitely part of who we are as an organization, for sure.

The literature on school-business partnerships acknowledges the mutually beneficial ways that partnerships with the community unfold. Similar to Dr. Henderson’s discussions, these benefits include curricular support, financial and equipment/supply donations, guest speaking in the classroom, mentoring opportunities, and work-based learning activities (e.g., internships, job shadowing, mock interviews (Fletcher & Tyson, 2017; Hernandez-Gantes et al., 2017; Badgett, 2016; Turnbull, 2015). Within that context, the school-business partnerships that Dr. Henderson created represent an important component of the strategy to prepare students to be college and career ready as students apply their academic content to a real-world problems and learn valuable employability skills (Alfeld et al., 2013; Hernandez-Gantes et al., 2017; Badgett, 2016). Further, Dr. Henderson shared how Johnson Academy’s partners were committed, sustained, and had a shared understanding of purpose, which are all needed for an effective and productive partnership (Council for Corporate and School Partnership, 2002). Thus, while research has demonstrated the difficulties and challenges of American urban schools (particularly those in low-income communities) to provide students with work-based learning opportunities through school-business partnerships, including the issue of convincing employers of its value (Hoffman, 2011; Molnar, 2005; Warren, 2005), Dr. Henderson managed to forge relationships with the local community to offer such opportunities to Johnson Academy students. While the new direction of Johnson Academy is quite promising, we wondered about the sustainability of Dr. Henderson’s efforts when the time comes for leadership turnover. As is often the case with school reform initiatives led by entrepreneurial and highly-focused leaders, we realize that Dr. Henderson was a charismatic and highly motivated school leader, and the basis of some of his success was because of his own personal characteristics and traits as a leader. Thus, what happens when the school district hires a new leader to lead the school district? Are the efforts and initiatives that Dr. Henderson developed at jeopardy?
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Discussion

A sole emphasis on preparing students for entry into a four-year college/university, the “college for all” phenomenon in schools, is all too familiar and widespread in schools across the country (Benson, 1997; Cohen & Besharov, 2002; Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Stringfield & Stone, 2017; Symonds et al., 2011). Nonetheless, efforts to ensure that Johnson Academy students are prepared to be both college AND career ready represent a pivotal and critical transition that has addressed issues related to equity and access to a quality and individualized curriculum; and aligned with the call to prepare students for a new knowledge based economy (Alfeld et al., 2013; Fletcher et al., 2018; Castellano et al., 2016; Symonds et al., 2011). In this community, stakeholders believed students felt more included, valued, and engaged by the shift from a “lunch bag” to “lunch buffet” of having both college and career preparatory curricula by way of academies. These views support the notion that college and career readiness should ensure that students have the necessary academic, technical, and employability skills needed to compete in a contemporary workforce (Stone & Lewis, 2012).

Despite prior research pointing out the challenges of low-income, ethnically and racially diverse, urban schools in ensuring their students are college and career ready (Green & Gooden, 2014; Milner, 2013), Johnson Academy provided students with integrated and contextualized academic and career-related curricula, work-based learning and research lab experiences at local universities, and engagement with the community through partnerships with business and industry. These are all quintessential elements of the academy model (Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Stern et al., 2010; Stone, 2017). With the development of career academies at Johnson Academy, students are likely to benefit from increased engagement in school, particularly for students that may be at-risk for dropping out of high school (Hemelt et al., 2019).

Also, while research has pointed to difficulties of schools engaging business partners and convincing them to invest in K-12 students (Hoffman, 2011), Dr. Henderson’s work of creating partnerships and raising capital in a low-income urban school district with limited resources was an effective avenue for supporting student engagement. Dr. Henderson’s collaborative partnerships with an extended network of support enabled the academy to leverage resources and carry out the mission of preparing students to be college and career ready.
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ready. Furthermore, the school-community partnerships enabled Johnson Academy to fully engage the community and provide wraparound services (e.g., academic, medical, and mental services) for students and their families. As stated previously, these initiatives are typically challenging for urban schools that serve large concentrations of ethnically and racially diverse and low-income student populations (Fries et al., 2012; Levin et al., 2007; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Sather & Bruns, 2016). Thus, it is likely that Johnson Academy will benefit from the development of close relationships in terms of more effective school operations, additional fiscal and human resources, higher student academic achievement and well-being, greater parental participation, and better community health and development (Boutte & Johnson, 2014; Epstein, 2001; Sanders, 2005).

Dr. Henderson’s abilities to engage stakeholders were derivative of his personality characteristics and traits, commitment and motivation to build relationships, and communication to onboard new partners. Further, he was able to articulate the needs as well as mutual benefits of sustained partnerships. In this case, Dr. Henderson’s work with the external community met the guidelines for effective and sustainable partnerships based on the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships (2002). That is, Dr. Henderson successfully communicated a shared understanding of purpose for collaborating, had specific goals to achieve, and created an action plan with defined outcomes. Similarly, Hernandez-Gantes et al. (2017) acknowledged the role of a “lynchpin” to maintain relationships with network partners, continue the development and growth of partnerships, and maintain active engagement of all stakeholders. Hence, Dr. Henderson certainly plays the role of a lynchpin in the context of school-community partnership development for Johnson Academy. His role and responsibilities entailed connecting the school with external stakeholders to provide supports for the academy and students. Dr. Henderson further provided opportunities for Johnson Academy students to move in spaces beyond their zip code, including traveling out-of-state to college visits, touring ivy league institutions, participating in research labs at local colleges and universities, and engaging in job shadowing activities with national companies. Nevertheless, we find the influence of one individual to be problematic in terms of sustaining such efforts. Instead, school-community literature calls for the work of multiple stakeholders in an organization to carry out such work (Sanders, 2005). Therefore, we recommend schools form a coalition of both internal and external stakeholders to provide school and student supports. This should represent an important strategy when the time for a new leadership transition comes to play.

During our interviews with stakeholders at Johnson Academy, we also noticed an issue with narrow perspectives on participation in various career academies established within
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the school. We heard many stories about career academies serving the needs of students that were interested in entering the workforce directly upon graduating from high school which is likely a contributing factor for the current lingering negative stigma of CTE programs. Instead, we believe it is necessary for administrators, teachers, and school counselors to embrace and acknowledge the dual emphasis of CTE programs (such as career academies), in preparing students to be both college and career ready. To that end, participation in career academies could be an opportunity for students to explore their interests in careers that they could envision themselves pursuing in college as a possible major.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on our findings in this case study, we recommend that school administrators and teachers customize curricula based on students’ interests and enable students to decide whether they desire to participate in college preparatory activities as well as work-based learning experiences. We believe that all students should be prepared to be college and career ready, given the need for them to transition into postsecondary education (e.g., two- or four-year colleges and universities) as well as into the workforce. We believe that students should have the options to select which curricular pathways they desire to pursue as well as which co-curricular and extracurricular events (e.g., university research lab, work-based learning) to participate in. Thus, we disagree with the practice of tracking students based on prior achievement and behavioral measures. Instead, students should be allowed to select which curricular pathway they enter and have opportunities to change as they see fit. Thus, we believe that all students should be encouraged to participate in rigorous and college preparatory curricula and activities.

Limitations

It is important to note some of the limitations of this study. This study focuses on one small school using a career academy model as well as a variety of college and career preparatory activities for students. Thus, analytic generalizations rest with identifying similar school contexts and curricular programs.
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REFERENCES


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Appendix A.

District/School Administrator Interviews

Date: __________________________ Location: __________________________________________

Interviewee: __________________________ Role/Title: __________________________________

Time: __________________________ Interview Team (Initials): __________________________

Debriefing and Assurances

- Summarize the purpose of the research and visit
- Summarize purpose of the interview
- Provide assurances of anonymity and voluntary participation
- Secure permission to record the interview

Personal Background: Describe your role in the academy and/or district.

Development Factors: Describe the development of the academy in terms of the initial conception and strategic planning.

- When was the academy first conceptualized?
- How long has the academy has been in existence?
- What led to the decision to start an academy?
- What was the rationale for selecting Engineering/IT as the occupational theme for the academy?
- What challenges did you face during the conceptualization and developmental phase?

Design Process and Vision: Describe what you were looking to establish an academy in terms of key components and learning experiences.

- What type of learning experiences were you hoping to provide for students?

Student Supports: Describe the conceptualization and development process used to identify student supports. Discuss any unique supports for African American/Black male students in the academy that were part of the conceptualization and development process.

- How and to what extent were any stakeholder groups (e.g., parents, community, business partners) involved in the conceptualization and development process?
- What differences, if any, have you observed related to the engagement of African American/Black male students compared to non-Black and females in the academy?
- How does the academy promote and support the interests and successes of African American/Black male students?

Closing Statement/Question. Thank you for your insights. Is there anything else you would like to add on the conceptualization and development process of the academy?
ABSTRACT
This article provides a summary of the literature and research justifying the need for creating equitable college readiness practices in K-12 schools, particularly for Black and Latinx students who are at risk for not receiving college readiness knowledge and skills. Written in a style to provide a bricolage of personal narratives, literature, and research around postsecondary readiness, the authors shift between first and third person to demonstrate that the entire postsecondary process in K-12 schools is in dire need of an upheaval. From the dialectical exchange presented, the authors develop strategies for developing equity-focused college readiness practices.

Keywords: college and career readiness, elementary school, antiracist practices

Imagine a Black female student, attending a rural Virginia high school. It is freshman year and all students are required to see the school counselor to plan out their four-year course schedule. The student has a visit with the school counselor to set up her four-year high school plan. As the student patiently sits and waits, the school counselor completes the high school planning sheet without once asking the student what her plans are for after high school, or her interests. The school counselor does not even engage in small talk with the student. When she is done with the planning sheet, the school counselor asks the student to sign it, signaling agreement to the four-year course plan. The school counselor puts the sheet in the student’s cumulative folder, and sends the student back to class. This entire session lasts roughly 10 minutes. It is unknown whether this situation occurred for every student in this high school, but it is the experience of this particular student, who at this point, had no inclination of going to college. Her mother, only having a high school degree, only reinforced the notion of getting good grades, graduating from high school, and getting a good paying job. The school counselor never discussed college opportunities with this student, nor did she engage the student in college going activities that scholars have deemed to be necessary for first generation, low-income Black and brown students, such as taking a rigorous course schedule. This student’s goal for after high school—to work at Roses, a major discount store prominent in the 1980’s and 1990’s, as this is where the student worked as a part-time employee and she assumed she would be able to transition to full-time after graduation. Because the school counselor never asked, or truly talked with this student, or got to know this student in any capacity other than a name on a list, even this goal of working at Roses went unexplored.
College Readiness with Black and Latinx Students

This special issue is on equity-based career development and postsecondary readiness. While we cannot attest that the above-mentioned scenario was inequitable based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status, the practice demonstrated by this school counselor was indeed inequitable. Other students from wealthier households, or with parents who attended college, may not have needed the school counselor to provide them with postsecondary readiness information. Other students may have had access to knowledge and resources that aided their career development and postsecondary readiness. Other students may have had discussions with their parents or teachers who encouraged them to enroll in advanced courses. Other students may have had the opportunity to take college entrance exam testing preparatory courses. In other words, other students may have had social capital around college preparation. However, the student described in this situation did not have social capital and as such, this practice by the school counselor was woefully inadequate in preparing the above-mentioned student for postsecondary opportunities. I share this story of what passed for postsecondary planning as the first author is the Black female who had this experience with her school counselor. This event occurred over 30 years ago. Unfortunately, these inequitable practices remain and are pervasive in our schools. The inequities are well-known and national initiatives have been formed espousing the need for school counselors to be more proactive in exposing all students to postsecondary planning and addressing the college and career readiness needs of students in K-12 schools (Bryan et al., 2011; Bryan, Young, et al., 2015; Bryan, Williams, et al., 2020; McDonough, 2005). For example, the College Completion Goal 2020 and the Reach Higher campaign initiatives propose that higher standards are needed to prepare students for success in college as well as guide students toward developing self-regulated behaviors that help them complete high school, attend college, and pursue career opportunities (Bryan, Williams, et al., 2015; The White House, 2014). At the 2014 American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Conference, First Lady Michelle Obama, creator of the Reach Higher initiative, highlighted the unique opportunity that school counselors have in promoting college readiness in students, stressing that school counselors have the training to support college and career readiness in schools (Hoyt & Wickwire, 2001; Knight, 2015; The White House, 2014). However, we see that in schools, these initiatives have not been put into practice. Indeed, this disconnect was noted by the second author while a school counseling intern at an elementary school in 2019. She recognized the discrepancy between what was taught in her school counseling program and what was occurring at her internship site. “The things you talk about and teach us do not happen at all. We are not discussing college readiness in meaningful ways at my school.”
College Readiness with Black and Latinx Students

School counselors can be an important resource in addressing the college and career readiness needs of students, but they can also be responsible for the continuation of inequities in the college-going process. For students with parents who have not attended college, as well as working and lower-income parents who may not have the knowledge and resources needed to help their children be college-ready (Hill & Torres, 2010; Welton & Martinez, 2014), school counselors are particularly important as they may be the first point or only contact for college readiness information for these students (Griffin et al., 2011; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; McDonough & Fann, 2007). The knowledge and skills consistent with college and career readiness include academic knowledge, critical thinking, social emotional learning, resiliency, community involvement, knowledge of technology, and identity development (National Office of School Counselor Advocacy [NOSCA], 2012); all areas in which school counselors should be trained, according to the 2016 Counseling and Counseling Related Program (CACREP) Standards (CACREP, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide a summary of the literature and research justifying the need for creating an equitable college readiness culture in K-12 schools, focusing on the needs of Black and Latinx students who are particularly at risk for not receiving the academic preparation and college readiness skills they need. We write this article as a dialectical experience, in which the authors dialogue about their experiences and knowledge of the issues related to postsecondary readiness as opposed to providing contrasting viewpoints and reconciling them. Tracing the literature and research around postsecondary readiness, particularly around college readiness, alongside our own experiences, we shift between first and third person to weave a discourse to demonstrate that the entire postsecondary process is in dire need of an upheaval. We end with strategies for school counselors to address the inequities in their college readiness practices.

Inequities in College Readiness Practices

Black and Latinx students are not provided with equitable access to knowledge, skills, and opportunities to prepare them for college as White, Asian, middle class and affluent students are (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). This gap between students of color and low-income students and White, Asian and middle class and affluent students draw attention to the conditions and obstacles that students face throughout their educational careers. This is even more disconcerting as the data show that Black and Latinx populations are significantly less likely to be academically successful than other racial/ethnic populations, and these two groups fall behind on every academic achievement indicator, such as test scores, honors and advanced placements course enrollments, and student attendance (Bryan et al., 2020; Dulabaum, 2016; Lareau, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Factors that increase disparities in
postsecondary enrollment for some Black and Latinx students include low English proficiency, low income, and a marked lack of knowledge about steps to college, especially for first-generation college students (Dulabaum, 2016; McDonough, 1997; Nunez & Oliva, 2009; Perna 2000, 2006). On top of these contextual factors, these students are also the ones with little support or guidance around college and career readiness (Dulabaum, 2016; Perna, 2006). This is evident in the first author’s experience of only receiving a four-year course taking plan.

I graduated high school with a 3.8 GPA and neither the school counselor, nor the teachers I had talked to me about postsecondary plans, let alone college. And according to my school counseling students, this still happens today. This is why we have our high school counseling interns conduct individual counseling sessions with students on college and career readiness. This includes more than just telling them the classes they need to take in order to meet state graduation requirements. It includes having meaningful conversations with these students about their futures.

Not only are Black and Latinx students less likely to be provided with the information they need for college planning, but their parents are often excluded from this information as well. If parents are included, the delivery of content and distribution of college information to them is marketed for parents who have a deeper understanding of the college readiness process than parents from racialized and marginalized populations may possess (McDonough, 1997; Welton & Martinez, 2014). For example, college readiness information for immigrant Latinx families may need to include information regarding college costs and financial aid information as these families may be unable or reluctant to apply for loans to pay for college (Bettinger et al., 2012); however, financing college may not be a part of the college information disseminated by school counselors. Paying for college often falls outside of the information that is traditionally shared with parents.

Parent sharing of information amongst each other is another form of inequity in the college readiness process as research shows that parents social networks also perpetuate inequities in the college going process. Parents from racialized and marginalized backgrounds may be situated in networks where the knowledge, flow of and access to information around college readiness is more limited than those of White, Asian and affluent parents (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Li & Fisher, 2017; Quinn et al., 2020; Ryan & Ream, 2016), and school counselor practices fail to consider these differences when engaging with parents.

My mom’s circle of friends included family and friends who they themselves did not attend college. From where was I supposed to turn to get the information I needed? How could my mom talk to me about preparing for college, applying to college, and getting to college if she herself had never done any of
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these things? When you need extra help with academic work, the norm is to go to your teacher who has the expertise in the subject matter. When you need extra help with college planning, what is the norm? Even now, with the knowledge I have gained about the college going process, I still feel excluded from pivotal pieces of information when helping my own daughter get to college. I would be in the same spaces with white parents, but it was abundantly clear they were not as open to sharing information with me as they were with each other.

Another example of inequity involves the spaces and locations of where college information is disseminated. The majority of college information is school-based, meaning that parents must come to the school to receive it. This practice perpetuates inequities in the distribution of vital information, as many racialized and marginalized parents are not involved in school-based activities, instead being more involved in home-based activities (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Bower & Griffin, 2011; Gonzalez et al., 2013), pointing to the need for school counselors to be proactive in using school-family-community partnerships to reach families in spaces outside of school. School counselors must also be proactive in finding and using assets in the community and building partnerships with families and communities. This allows school counselors the opportunity to gain an understanding of communities of their student populations, so that they can build equitable college-going activities built around the needs of students and their families, as opposed to the umbrella approach of having the same information provided to everyone in the school (Arriero & Griffin, 2018; Gonzalez, 2017).

The onus for these practices should be placed on school systems that allow for these inequities to flourish by blaming Black and brown students and their families for the lack of being college ready opposed to advocating against policies and practices that continue to oppress and exclude racialized and marginalized populations (Dulabaum, 2016; Nunez & Oliva, 2009), including, but not limited to a lack of role models or advocates for Black and Latinx students, stereotyping, low-expectations, miscommunication, lack of social support, lack of time management skill training, and lack of guidance on how to access college (Bryant, 2015; Dulabaum, 2016). Furthermore, these students are expected to persevere and persist despite these barriers, and when they do not, students and families are accused of not caring about their education, which allows this insidious and pervasive cycle of inequity to continue. Three of the most insidious practices harming our Black and brown students and creating barriers in college readiness include academic course work placement, discipline policies, and lowered teacher expectations (Bryan et al., 2020).

Inequities in Academic Course Work

Academic preparation for college includes several components. Taking higher level and challenging coursework is one part, but
students need the skills to do this coursework before they reach high school (Chlup et al., 2016; Conley, 2010; Nunez & Oliva, 2009). However, many students in low-income schools do not have access to rigorous courses, making it impossible for these students to gain the academic skills necessary to enter and be successful in college (Bryant, 2015; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Nunez et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2006). Data show that only 57% of Black students attend schools with access to college-ready courses, and if schools do offer these higher-level courses, Black students are often under-enrolled in these courses (Bryant, 2015). In addition to Black students, low-income students are also excluded from and are underrepresented in higher-level courses. Indeed, because this issue was so prevalent in the state of North Carolina, a three-part series was dedicated to this in a local newspaper: “Every year across NC, thousands of low-income students who have superior math scores are left out of programs that could help them get to college. Data in NC show that bright young children from low-income families are much more likely to be excluded from the more rigorous classes than their peers from families with higher incomes” (Neff et al., 2017, p. 1A).

It hurts reading this data out of NC regarding students left out of academically rigorous coursework. I also was never referred for academically rigorous classes. I vividly remember asking one of my smart White friends what classes she would be taking the following year and seeing that her courses were different than mine, I went to the school counselor’s office to ask to be put in those same classes. Immediate gate-keeping ensued with the school counselor telling me that the classes I wanted were only for gifted students. I asked how one becomes gifted and was informed I needed to test into the gifted classes. I then had to ask to take the test. Decades later, I had to repeat this process to get my own son enrolled in the gifted program1.

In addition to not having access or being blocked from taking more rigorous coursework, students who do enroll in college realize that they need academic strengthening before they can be ready for college-level courses, especially Black students (Bryant, 2015). Indeed, researchers have shown that college student success can be impeded due to not having the knowledge and skills for college-level work, which includes, but not limited to, having study skills and time management skills, but also extra and co-curricular involvement and social involvement with peers and faculty members (Strayhorn, 2010). However, students that are supported by highly qualified and experienced teachers have significantly less remediation rates entering college (Bryant, 2015).

Inequities in Discipline Referrals

Data show an increased gap between Black and White student discipline rates over the last 50 years (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Ritter & Anderson, 2018). Black students are found to have discipline consequences that exclude them socially, such as out of school suspension (OSS) and expulsion (Bryan et al., 2012; Ritter & Anderson, 2018). Researchers saw that the number of Black students attending a school influences discipline rates in that the more Black students, the higher the discipline rates (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). This data is disturbing, and the concern grows as outcomes are identified. Much of the current research proves there is a correlation between exclusionary discipline and low-test scores, dropout rates, grade retention, and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Morrison et al., 2001). However, researchers struggle to find a causal relationship in the data making it difficult to create systemic change (Anderson et al., 2017).

Ritter and Anderson (2018) also examined the difference within and between districts to determine the gap in discipline between Black and White students and found more variation between schools than within school districts. For example, some of the schools chose exclusionary discipline for guns, drugs, and alcohol, while others chose to respond differently for the same infraction (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). As their findings show, Black students were more than twice as likely, across the state, to be disciplined for nonviolent and minor infractions compared to their White peers. Ritter and Anderson (2018) assert that an intentional effort to identify and document inequities in discipline is the first step in closing the academic gap for students of color. The insidious nature of these inequitable discipline practices is that they begin early, as evidenced by the second author: “Even in my elementary school, most of the students being suspended, or referred to the principal or counselor for discipline issues are my Black and Latinx male students.”

Lowered Teacher Expectations

The expectations that teachers have of students can also play a role in college and career readiness, especially college aspirations (Bryan et al., 2012; Dulabaum, 2016; McDonough, 1997). Schools with large numbers of Black and Latinx students tend to have less certified teachers with less experience (Knight-Manuel et al., 2019). This can lead to students being less prepared for postsecondary success. For example, several “bad teaching” practices were recorded from students in low assistant and engagement schools (Dulabaum, 2016). Teachers were writing information on the board for students to passively read, not returning emails or calls, and creating a boring atmosphere by doing the same thing continuously in order to get a high passing rate (Dulabaum, 2016). Additionally, biased teacher views on Black and Latinx student motivation, work ethic,
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and family support persist due to the lack of investment in relationships (Bryant, 2015). Teachers and other school stakeholders that actively and continuously challenge their beliefs, biases, and understanding of race, gender, class, and masculinity are key to understanding and educating students based on their strengths rather than their deficits (Bryan et al., 2020). Teachers must build genuine and respectful relationships with students and hold high expectations that students of color are capable of success (Bryant, 2015).

I often wonder why none of my teachers saw college potential in me, even though I was a straight A student and was not the proverbial “problem student”; I was not a troublemaker. I just didn't have access to what I needed to develop a well-thought out postsecondary plan, pointing to the importance of social capital in the college readiness process.

Social Capital in the College-Readiness Process

Currently, scholars are focusing on the role of social capital in the college readiness process (Ryan & Ream, 2016), one particularly exploring the role of school counselors as social capital (Bryan et al., 2011). Social capital refers to the pivotal relationships and networks that provide access to more favorable outcomes (Coleman, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Concentrating on social capital in the college-readiness process is important as research shows that students’ whose social ties and networks are more limited have reduced postsecondary options and are the ones most at risk for not receiving the college information and preparation they need; these students, more often than not, are lower SES, Latinx and African American, and first-generation college students (Perez & McDonough, 2008; Terenzini et al., 1996; Warbuton, et al., 2001).

Although research addresses the need for social capital, more research is needed around exploring the link between parent social capital and college enrollment (Horvat et al., 2003; Ryan & Ream, 2016). Studies show that marginalized populations need programs providing social capital through systematically supporting students and their families navigating the college process, which in turn narrows the achievement gap (Dulabam, 2016). Further, Hill (2008) found that a combination of resources and college-going practices are influential in student decision-making around college-going. To account for the smaller and less resourced social networks, students may turn to those in schools for help in the college-going process. Indeed, in a study on where rural students turn to for college and career information, it was found that students often rely on school stakeholders, such as their counselors, teachers, and coaches (Griffin et al., 2011). In fact, Latinx students’ social networks were found to be critically important in students gaining access to college information (Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). Furthermore, teachers have been found to have much influence on students’ decision making around college, particularly African American students.
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(Bryan et al., 2009; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Just as important as teachers are the role of school counselors. For many students from marginalized populations, school counselors are the source of social capital (Bryan et al, 2009; McDonough, 1997). Indeed, McDonough (1997) found that more time on college counseling and the counselor-student relationship are factors in student decision-making on college going.

In summary, research shows that racialized and marginalized students do not have the same access to college readiness practices (Orfield, 2004; Teranishi, et al., 2004), and this presents a critical issue for students, particularly Black and Latinx students. Further, most of the research and literature that does exist focuses on the high school context. Indeed, Engberg and Wolniak (2010) state that high schools are the epicenter of college access and readiness. While high school practices play a large role in the facilitation or prevention of students’ college readiness and access (Conley, 2012; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hill, 2008; Jackson & Knight-Manuel, 2019; Perna & Titus, 2005), postsecondary readiness should begin in elementary school, and that school counselors are instrumental in providing elementary aged students with the basic knowledge they need to raise awareness around their postsecondary options. As Engberg and Wolniak (2010) assert, “the challenge in promoting school environments most conducive for college readiness lie in determining how, when, and where to allocate resources along the educational pipeline in order to address the complexities of achievement, participation, and involvement” (p. 150). We assert that truly creating a culture of college readiness for Black and Latinx students should begin in elementary school.

Theoretical Support for College Planning in Elementary School

Elementary school counselors are tasked with creating early awareness, knowledge, and skills that form the foundation for academic rigor, social and emotional development, and college and career readiness (NOSCA, 2012). While the Reach Higher initiative helped to strengthen postsecondary degree completion by pushing the creation of “career planning” as early as middle school (Reach Higher, 2015), more college and career planning is needed in elementary school settings. One of the most important reasons for creating a college-going environment in elementary schools is the amount of time it takes for planning and preparing for the future. Students need support and intentional exposure to college and career readiness interventions to develop aspirations for college and to make informed decisions. The National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) recommends producing a college-going culture early that is a part of schools and communities. Professional organizations and theorists would argue that not only should college and career readiness begin in elementary school, but it is also
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critical to the development of self-concept. Further, elementary school counselors must become involved in the process (NOSCA, 2012). For instance, NOSCA’s eight components of college and career readiness address the concern that lower SES students have far less social capital than those of higher SES, leaving them with less exposure to resources or skills (Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000). NOSCA’s sixth recommendation for college and career readiness states that college affordability planning is needed in elementary school, citing data that show early interventions increase financial literacy in planning for the expenses of a college education, and high school is too late to begin building a college-going culture (NOSCA, 2012).

ASCA (2014) also created specific mindsets and behaviors that encourage elementary school counselors to develop college readiness practices by asserting that postsecondary education is necessary for long-term career success. The overarching goal of the mindsets and behaviors are to describe a comprehensive school counseling program that addresses the needs of children from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade in their academic, career, and personal/social goals (ASCA, 2014). Children begin making career choices that influence their future career goals as early as elementary school; therefore, elementary school counselors must become more involved in college and career related interventions (Mariani et al., 2016). However, ASCA must grapple with the disconnect between the values espoused and how school counselors enact them. With the majority of school counselors being White, female, and middle class, ASCA needs to be more intentional in taking concerted steps to ensure that school counselors themselves do not enact and uphold racist ideologies in their practices.

The development of self-concept in children has been the focus of many theories, such as Erikson’s psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968), Vygotsky’s sociocultural development (Vygotsky, 1986), and Bandura’s social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Career development theorists like Super and Gottfredson expand on these theories by exploring how a person’s self-concept affects career choices. They also assert that the elementary years are critical to the development of self-concept.

Super (1990) was one of the first developmental theorists to see career development as a process that progresses gradually over a person’s life span and he was interested in explaining how a person’s self-concept affects their college and career readiness (Pulliam & Bartek, 2018). He considered self-awareness, self-esteem, self-concept, and self-knowledge as foundational to his approach. Super created nine dimensions of career development (Super, 1990). The first stage, Growth, is the period when students fantasize and develop likes, dislikes, and abilities related to future careers. This Growth period falls between birth and
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age 14 (Super, 1990). This theory is often mentioned as an argument for college and career readiness in elementary school. In the growth stage, children develop their self-concepts according to their interrelationships with peers, teachers, and other adults. This helps to build a positive attitude toward making career decisions, building self-awareness, and gaining confidence in their early career choices (Pulliam & Bartek, 2018).

Like Super, Gottfredson (2002) also believed self-concept to be essential in career selection. Her theory of Circumscription and Compromise (2002) focused even more on elementary-aged children, suggesting that people make compromises and create boundaries of acceptable careers based on how others perceive them or how they see themselves. While Super dedicates one stage out of nine to career development in elementary-aged children, Gottfredson includes elementary-aged children in three out of four stages. Her first stage, orientation to size and power (ages 3-5), states that children learn much of what they can become through adults around them. Stage two, orientation to sex roles (ages 6-8) is heavily influenced by gender development. Stage three is orientation to social evaluation (9-13), where development of concepts such as social class and preferences for level of work develop. Using this theory to develop a college and career readiness culture can be important as children as early as elementary school begin to make decisions on college and careers based on their unclear self-concepts or how others perceive them to be (Pulliam & Bartek, 2018).

What is often overlooked in these theoretical approaches and framework is the role of antiracism, and how schools and school stakeholders can perpetuate the anti-Black ideologies that continue to oppress Black and Latinx students and allows them to develop stereotypical beliefs around future selves. Further, despite being taught that there is inherent universality to these theories and frameworks, school counselors and counselor educators must acknowledge that Black and brown students have vastly different experiences, and blindly applying these frameworks, without understanding the lived experiences of the students is an inequitable practice that needs to be eradicated. For instance, the second author, interning as a school counselor in a small suburban elementary school, developed a career intervention for fifth graders which uncovered many unclear self-concepts about their ability to succeed. One of her young Black male students said he could never be a judge because he “was Black;” many of the Latinx students believed they could only be professional soccer players. These stereotypes around future aspirations can be held as truth in young minds and can negatively impact trajectories for the future (Pulliam & Bartek, 2018). Elementary students are developmentally ready to be exposed to career development and to build college aspirations during their development of self (Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000). Therefore, school
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counselors should be in ideal positions to aid students with this process and help build self-concept while dispelling stereotypes and myths around future aspirations.

To underscore the importance of the school counselor’s role in college readiness processes for Black and Latinx students, we apply McDonough’s (1997) conceptualization of high school organizational habitus of college readiness, which draws from Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. McDonough’s framework emphasizes that high school college readiness activities should reflect the structural and normative features of schools, which are shaped by the national, regional and local college admission processes, as well as the value of attaining a college degree based on employment opportunities available. These normative structures include how one identifies the students who are deemed college material and how parents are included in the college readiness process, as well as what information is disseminated to parents. Students of color and students from low-income families are often overlooked and dismissed from the college readiness process, even when students and families express high expectations around college-going (Arriero & Griffin, 2018; Auerbach, 2004).

McDonough (1997) asserts that high schools must have a formal college readiness curriculum, which includes the activities that help students and parents become college-ready by reflecting the experiences and academic profile students need for college admission, which are based on the admissions standards of the colleges and universities to which students plan to apply (e.g., course selection and grades; extracurricular involvement; standardized test scores) as well as knowledge around what students need to do for college admissions (e.g., personal essays; teacher and school counselor recommendations). The issue is that students waiting until high school to begin to develop an academic profile that is deemed college ready is too late, and school counselors often serve as “gatekeepers” (Hill Collins, 2009; McDonough & Fann, 2007) whereby they decide which college and university standards best applies to students, often using the terms, match school (student’s academic profile matches to college admission standards); reach school (student’s academic profile is not good enough for the college admission standards); and safety school (student’s academic profile is above the college admission standards). This is extremely troubling as findings from a national study of rural high schools underscores the importance of school counselors’ college readiness role enactment because they are a primary resource of information for students and families, particularly from low-income and members of racial-ethnic minority groups (Griffin et al., 2011). Indeed, another study found that students in high-poverty schools were more likely to see the school counselor for college information than teachers or other school personnel (Bryan et al., 2009), again, demonstrating the power of school counselors.
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in the college readiness process.

I was in the 11th grade when someone finally mentioned college to me. And it was not my school counselor, nor my teachers. It was a special education teacher, a young Black woman, who came up to me in the hallway one day and handed me an application for a summer enrichment program at The College of William and Mary in Virginia. This program, called Student Transition Enrichment Program or STEP, was developed to expose more students of color to William and Mary. I had never heard of William and Mary and did not even know where it was. I was also surprised that this teacher even knew enough about me to share with me this opportunity. I filled out the application by myself, sent it in, and was accepted. If it were not for this teacher, I don’t think I would have gone to college at all, only because it wasn’t even on my radar to attend. College was not a part of my lexicon. I heard my white friends talking about going to college, but I did not think it was for me. You may think that my experience, while disheartening, happened 30 years ago, and these things no longer happen. My students tell me different. Sometimes, my students are the first ones to talk to or even mention college to Black and brown students, especially those who are deemed not ‘college material.’ The question, which then follows, is who gets to decide who is college ready?

This experience aligns with McDonough’s (1997) emphasis on the need for a college readiness curriculum which positions school counselors, and their role enactment within the structural and normative features of their schools, as central to the college readiness process, but also needing to recognize that school counselor’s roles are often established by the realities of their school norms as well as their own subjective interpretations of their students’ and families’ college readiness needs. In essence, school counselors’ roles within the school positions them to control what information is transmitted to students and parents as well as how this information is disseminated. McDonough (1997) describes a “knowledge gap” that is often perpetuated for students of color and low-income students, reflecting misalignment in the information provided to parents, the means through which it is provided, and the practical information that parents actually need in order to support their children toward college readiness. The role of school counselors in implementing college readiness practices is crucial. Failure to directly address these inequities undermines the effective practice of school counseling (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Bower & Griffin, 2011; Griffin & Bryan, 2010). Further, college readiness practices must begin in elementary school; starting this work in high school can create barriers for students in getting the courses and experiences they need for their postsecondary college and university choices.

The 11th grade was way too late for me to just begin to realize that college was a choice for me. I know why college was not discussed with me at home, but it should have been an
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ethical violation to not discuss this with me at school. Not one conversation was had. Not one. Now that I am in a space where my words and my work places me in a position for change, I advocate for meaningful and intentional college readiness practices to begin in elementary school. These practices include working with parents. It goes beyond the traditional career day type of events nor do I want school counselors to ask the rote question, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” and count this as career exploration. I teach my students to talk to parents of their Black and brown students and ask them their goals for their children’s futures. I tell them that Black, Latinx, and parents with limited economic resources maintain high expectations for their children to attend college, but often lack the knowledge needed to help their children through the college-going process (Auerbach, 2004; Bryan et al., 2017; Bryan et al., 2019; Chlup et al., 2018; Farmer-Hinton, 2008). I teach them that any comprehensive school counseling program, that is built on a foundation of equity, involves interacting with each of their student populations and their parents around college readiness. We want our students to know they can be more than sports professionals, and there is more to the medical field than just being a doctor. I tell them field trips for elementary students should also include trips to nearby colleges and universities, including community colleges. My first visit to a college campus did not happen until the summer before my senior year of high school. I did not know what the SAT was and only after attending the program at William and Mary, did I realize it was something I needed for college acceptance. Start early and build on a strong foundation is a good first step in addressing inequitable practices in the college readiness process.

Toward this end, building on the work of McDonough (1997) and other scholars who provide strategies and practices for building college and career readiness cultures in schools, we present three strategies for school counselors beginning the work of developing an equity-focused postsecondary culture at their school.

Strategies for School Counselor Practice and Training

While Black and Latinx student access to college is increasing, there are still inequities in the college readiness process in schools (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Strayhorn, 2016). The data continue to show that students of color do not receive the same quality of college and career preparation as their White counterparts (Francis et al., 2019; Nunez et al., 2009). Coupled with the racial and ethnic stereotyped views of what their future holds, elementary school counselors must be more proactive in helping put Black and Latinx kids on the right path as it is even more difficult for students to get started with college readiness once in middle or high school (Bryan et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2021).

School counselors should be more proactive in addressing the college and career readiness
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of students, making it an integrated component of the school culture. One thing school counselors can do is showcase nearby universities and colleges, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), community colleges and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) in their counseling offices and around the school. Another, elementary school counselors could begin to have future-oriented conversations with all their students in every interaction. For example, when conducting classroom guidance lessons on character traits, they could discuss how those traits are useful in future careers. Further, school counselors need to start to combat the stereotypical beliefs that Black and Latinx students begin to accept as truth as early as Kindergarten. School counselors should also be proactive in partnering with the community in bringing college and career resources into the school. Community members can be instrumental in providing information about college and careers. However, it is important to solicit community members with various college degrees and different careers. Traditionally, parents of kids in traditional careers are invited into the school to share about their work—police officers, doctors, professors, lawyers. School counselors must be sure that all guests coming into the school should be racially, ethnically diverse, and include all genders, as well as all types of careers, from professional careers to those considered blue-collar jobs. Further, to prevent racial stereotyping, school counselors must work hard to prevent having only White individuals representing the professional careers, and people of color representing the more blue-collar jobs. This needs to happen in elementary, middle, and high schools.

My senior year after realizing I was going to college, I was asked what did I want to do. Be a doctor was my response. By the end of my senior year, my answer became more sophisticated, a general practitioner; I came across this field when I heard it mentioned on a TV show I watched, but really did not have a clue of what that meant. The more shocking part was when my friends laughed at me saying that Black people don’t become doctors.

Counselor educators need to provide more resources and training around career and college readiness. Further, in order for students to graduate from graduate preparation programs prepared to implement equity-focused college and career training activities in their schools, counselor educators need to provide more assignments around
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postsecondary readiness. There is an abundance of activities that can be created using readily accessible materials, and students need to be taught how to create lesson plans from these materials. Due to lack of funding in schools, students need to be taught how to be creative in developing activities to meet the needs of their population.

Counselor educators also need to teach students how to develop community asset maps to find resources that can aid them in developing equity-focused career and college cultures in their schools (Arriero & Griffin, 2019; Griffin & Farris, 2010; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). Community asset mapping can help school counselors locate, obtain, and map resources from various people and settings, such as businesses, educational institutions, and even individuals from the community (Dorfman, 1998; Jasek-Rysdahl, 2001; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Community asset mapping can be used to help school counselors in high poverty schools, as they often work with large caseloads and have limited time to provide to working parents with students around college planning (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Gast, 2016; Perna et al., 2008). Arriero and Griffin (2019) utilized community asset mapping to build a college-going culture for Latinx students in a rural high school, and both parents and students were more aware of their options and held higher expectations for their futures after the program than before. The same can be done to train students going into elementary school counselors as well.

Finally, school counselors need to be trained on how to evaluate the quality of their college and career readiness practices in the school as well as assess inequitable practices that exist. It is important that school counselors begin by strengthening their data driven program and assessing the culture of their school. All school counseling students and even practicing school counselors should be taught the evaluation skills to ensure that they are indeed, creating a robust college and career going culture in their schools, one devoid of stereotypes, and ensuring equity in the college and career going activities.

I personally fear that what happened to me 30 years ago, is pervasive and continues to permeate our school systems. Results of a recent national survey of over 2000 school counselors suggest that many maintain limited confidence in their capacity to effectively engage in college readiness practices. Of relevance to many rural schools, such as the school I attended, a sense of efficacy for college advising was significantly lower for school counselors in small schools (i.e., student bodies fewer than 1000 students). Over one-third of school counselors reported receiving no professional training in college and career readiness advising, and the majority reported receiving only a moderate level of training, which could contribute to minimal commitment to comprehensive college readiness support to students and parents (Parikh-Foxx, Martinez, Baker, & Olson, 2020). Moreover, over two-thirds of school counselors reported challenges in delivering college readiness activities,
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reflecting factors such as minimal time and lack of administrator support. We must do better. No student should still be experiencing what I experienced 30 years ago.

Summary

We presented a dialogical exchange between research and personal experiences with the goal of impressing the dire state of affairs as it relates to postsecondary readiness with Black and Latinx students. These students continue to experience racism and violence, discrimination, prejudice, classism, and oppression in every system in the United States, especially in education. The effects of these oppressive systems on Black and Latinx students are many: decreased outcomes in a number of different areas, including, but not limited to, decreased wealth, more physical and mental health problems, and lowered educational attainment. Often, the blame for the lack of their educational access and success is placed on the shoulders of these students, often citing poor parent involvement or not caring about education as the main factors for the educational inequities, and as scholars have demonstrated, one such way is to place these students on the path to college and career readiness early, and expose these students to a variety of careers before they begin to adopt limited views of their futures. “I was going to work full-time at Roses Department Store.”

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Structured Pathways, Reinforced Plans: Exploring the Impact of a Dual Enrollment Program on the College Choice and Career Interests of Future Teachers of Color

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ABSTRACT
In response to the critical shortage of a diverse teacher workforce, Temple Education Scholars is a “Grow Your Own” dual enrollment program model designed to promote access to postsecondary education and educator diversity. Grow Your Own programs have frequently been cited as a promising and potentially sustainable model for addressing the disparity between the racial identifications of students and those of their teachers. Using social cognitive career theory, we explore how three participants in the Temple Education Scholars program develop academic and career interests in teaching and make educational choices related to their career aspirations. Following case study analysis, we illustrate how three participants with interests in teaching described what attracted them to the program, how the program supported their college and career aspirations, and their visions for careers in education.

Keywords: teacher education, dual enrollment, college access, career readiness, social cognitive career theory

Postsecondary education serves as a primary vehicle for promoting social and economic mobility and meeting national goals of degree productivity, civic participation, and workforce development (Ma et al., 2016; Zumeta et al., 2012). For the United States to achieve the level of educational attainment required for workforce readiness and international competitiveness, disparities in higher education degree attainment that persist across demographic groups need to be addressed (Perna & Finney, 2014). Access to postsecondary education is of particular importance for minoritized and special needs populations that have historically been excluded from educational opportunities. The field of higher education must also grapple with barriers experienced by minoritized students as they pursue their educational and career goals. For example, scholars have noted the difficulties associated with the early identification of academically talented students with an interest in teaching (Bianco et al., 2011; Carver-Thomas, 2018). Disinterest in teaching and other barriers to degree completion (e.g., testing standards, field placement requirements, lack of mentorship) can result in low levels of representation of people of color employed as teachers (Carver-Thomas, 2018). For example, only 6.0% of public school teachers in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are people of color compared to a public school student population of 35.8% people of color (Shaw-Amoah et al., 2020). Pennsylvania ranks near last nationally in the percentage of educators of color (Fontana & Lapp, 2018). While there are many reasons for the current disparity in representation in the racial backgrounds of
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teachers in Pennsylvania, there are opportunities to increase the number of teachers of color by establishing postsecondary education initiatives that provide early exposure to teaching and meaningfully guide students to and through teacher-pathway programs. Initiatives that support people of color to pursue teacher education degree pathways can be effective interventions for diversifying the teacher workforce (Bianco et al., 2011).

Researchers who demonstrate concern for the representation of people of color in teaching have studied the recruitment of people into the profession through intentional pathway programs that engage students while enrolled in high school (Bianco et al., 2011). Additionally, research that focuses on dual enrollment shows positive impact for students (An, 2013; Hughes et al., 2012; Lile et al., 2017). However, few models combine early exposure to careers in teaching with opportunities for students to complete college-level courses while enrolled in high school. In response, we address the gaps in understanding the potential of dual enrollment programs in guiding students’ career exploration. Specifically, we illustrate how dual enrollment program participants with interest in teaching describe what attracted them to the program, how the program supported their college and career aspirations, and their visions for careers in education.

Literature Review

College and Career Readiness
Prospective undergraduate students are often concerned about investing in postsecondary education to attain career goals (Wambu et al., 2017). Initiatives that strategically structure programs for students from marginally resourced school districts may have a significant impact on the educational and career trajectory of “at promise” students (Hughes et al., 2012). Two approaches to support college and career readiness are early outreach and dual enrollment programs.

Grow Your Own Early Outreach Programs
Grow Your Own (GYO) early outreach programs are one of several possible strategies for addressing the critical teacher shortage and the teacher diversity gap (Goings et al., 2018). A review of the literature on various teacher pools (e.g., middle and high school teachers, paraprofessionals, community activists, parents, mentors) over the continuum of teacher development (i.e., recruitment, preparation, induction, and retention) found that GYO programs offer a promising model for the recruitment of teachers of color (Gist et al., 2019). Many early outreach programs are designed to recruit high school students into the teacher workforce, but not all focus specifically on recruiting students of color (Gist et al., 2019). One such model is situated within the high school setting and constitutes a series of courses taught by the high school faculty within a “Teacher Academy” concentration or
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program of study. In this model, students are introduced to topics in teaching and learning, often with a focus on the early childhood years, throughout a sequenced series of courses in which students participate as a cohort. There is typically a field experience or practicum component to students’ later courses in the program in which students shadow or provide support for teachers and students in classrooms at earlier grade levels in the school district (Council of Great City Schools, 2000). The limitations of such programs, like many other high school career academies, are that they often are not directly connected to post-secondary educational pathways into teaching majors at local colleges or universities; either college credits are not available for the high school coursework that students complete within the academy or there are no formal recruitment, admissions, or scholarship opportunities made available to students who successfully complete the academy (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). Though Teaching Academy programs are not typically exclusive to students of color, increasingly, programs with interest in recruiting students of color into teaching have adopted messaging and curricula grounded in social justice. Appealing to students’ desires to make a positive impact, address injustice, and present culturally relevant content and pedagogy has been effective for gaining students’ interest in such early exposure opportunities (Bianco, et al., 2011).

Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment (also referred to as dual credit or concurrent enrollment) has become a strategy for providing high school students with access to postsecondary education (Karp & Hughes, 2008). By completing college coursework while in high school, students can experience the rigor of college coursework, pace of class schedules and assignments, and situations in which social and self-advocacy skills are needed to effectively communicate with peers and faculty. Moreover, students can benefit from the potential savings of time and money if the credits earned transfer to their future college degree program. Dual enrollment opportunities vary in several ways: the settings in which courses are taught (i.e., high school or college campus); the instructor of the course (high school teacher or college faculty member); and the value of the college credits earned toward high school requirements (i.e., elective courses, core courses, or non-credit; Karp & Hughes, 2008). Often the dual enrollment opportunities available to students are not linked to a specific college or career pathway for students, and the transferability of credits earned to a student’s future degree program of interest is highly variable (Corin et al., 2020). A recent study found that students are more likely to continue their interest in the STEM career field when exposed to STEM-related dual enrollment courses while in high school (Corin et al., 2020). For high school students whose parents or guardians, school, or school district cover the cost of tuition, fees, and books, completing a dual enrollment
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course can be financially worthwhile. However, programs that lack intentional structure and supports may be unable to help students realize the maximum benefits of the experience such as the development of a strong college academic record and high academic self-efficacy.

Temple Education Scholars
Combining GYO and dual enrollment approaches, the Temple Education Scholars (TES) program provides School District of Philadelphia high school seniors with college admissions application guidance and the opportunity to complete up to 15 credits of college coursework instructed by Temple University faculty on its main campus. Informed by scholarship and practice, TES was intentionally designed to include components that cultivate participants’ academic and career interests. These components include structured course taking, near-peer mentorship from current undergraduate students, college admissions and scholarship application submission guidance, and a cohort-based community environment (Johnson et al., 2021).

TES participants complete five college courses in education that count toward the school district’s high school graduation requirements and the baccalaureate degree requirements at Temple. TES is free to participants and is funded by Temple University’s College of Education and Human Development and the School District of Philadelphia. The long-term objective of TES is for participants to return to the school district as teachers upon earning a bachelor’s degree.

As practitioners, researchers, and policymakers seek information about strategies for recruiting and retaining people from diverse backgrounds in a college and career pathway focused on teaching, a study focused on how students on that pathway describe their aspirations could inform the development, modification, or expansion of efforts to increase the number of people of color who pursue careers in teaching. The desire for this critical information resulted in the study described herein. The current study is guided by the following research questions:

How do Temple Education Scholars participants develop academic and career interests in teaching?

How do Temple Education Scholars participants make educational choices related to their career aspirations?

Theoretical Framework

Drawing upon earlier career development theories, Lent et al. (1994) developed the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to explain three interrelated models of career development: (1) how academic and occupational interests develop, (2) how educational and career choices are made, and (3) how academic and career success is obtained (Lent & Brown, 2006, 2008; see Figure 1 on page 59). Lent and Brown (2006) added a fourth overlapping model to understand educational and vocational...
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Figure 1.
Social Cognitive Career Theory Model

Adapted from Lent et al. (1994)

satisfaction and well-being. Using general social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997) as a unifying framework, SCCT integrates a variety of factors (e.g., abilities, personality, environmental context) to address the content and processes related to the formation of career interests and selection of academic choices. The model also helps explain the potential conditions that promote or inhibit pathways to career success. SCCT is based on three interrelated variables: self-efficacy (an individual’s beliefs about their capabilities to perform in a particular situation), outcome expectations (an individual’s beliefs about the consequences of performing certain behaviors), and goals (an individual’s intentions to engage in a particular activity or attain a particular level of performance; Lent & Brown, 2013). Interests in career-relevant activities (e.g., pursuing a given academic major that leads to a specific career outcome) and the career choice process are functions of self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Lent & Brown, 2013).

SCCT emphasizes that educational or career goals may be influenced more directly and impactfully by self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, or environmental conditions, rather than by interests alone. SCCT is an ideal framework for the current study because it focuses on both the content (e.g., the types of educational and vocational opportunities people are inclined to pursue) and process (e.g., how people make career-related decisions, navigate the transition from school to work, and pursue personal goals) of career development under a variety of environmental conditions (Lent & Brown, 2013).

Methodology

We used a descriptive case study design (Yin, 2003) to explore the development of participants’ career interests and their educational choices in pursuit of these interests. This methodological approach allowed us to generate an in-depth understanding of a complex issue within the context of participants’ experiences. Descriptive case studies are used to illustrate an intervention or phenomenon in the natural context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003). In this analysis, each study participant is a case bounded by their experience in TES. To generate the descriptions needed to understand our participants’ perceptions of their experiences, we collected data by
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conducting semi-structured interviews with students across the first three cohorts of TES (n = 24) between Spring 2018 and Spring 2021.

Participant Recruitment and Selection
TES participants were recruited by the School District of Philadelphia as part of its “Senior Year Only Program” (SYOP) initiative, an opportunity for high school seniors to complete college and career preparatory experiences. Principals and school counselors were asked to invite all high school juniors to apply to a SYOP program. Interested students completed a brief online application and indicated their preferred program. On average, according to school district officials, between 25-30 students (of the 200-400 who submit SYOP applications) indicated TES as their preferred SYOP program. School district and Temple University College of Education and Human Development administrators reviewed the following information to select Scholars: the contents of their application, responses to short-answer essay questions, unweighted cumulative high school GPA (a minimum 3.2 GPA was required for admission), recent high school course grades, and high school attendance records. A total of 38 students participated in TES across three cohorts.

Participants
All TES program participants were invited to engage in this research study to explore their experiences. Twenty-four agreed and engaged in semi-structured interviews with a member of the research team. Given the focus of our study, we reviewed the data and identified nine participants who specifically articulated an interest in pursuing a career in education and decided to highlight three of their profiles. Each participant represents a unique case, illustrative of the potential of TES as a Grow Your Own early outreach initiative and dual enrollment program designed to promote pathways to careers in teaching for students from diverse racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and academic backgrounds. The three participants from this subset, Morgan, Vinh, and Hawa (pseudonyms), attended three different Philadelphia public high schools. Morgan and Hawa attended “special admit” high schools while Vinh attended a “neighborhood” high school without admissions criteria. All participants self-identify as people of color. Specifically, Morgan and Hawa identify as African American and Vinh as Asian American. Vinh is also the only participant who identifies as a man. All are the first generation in their family to potentially earn a bachelor's degree.

Data Collection and Analysis
We developed semi-structured interview questions that asked participants to reflect on the formation of their career aspirations, their personal qualities and capabilities that perceivably make them a “good teacher,” and their educational choices and actions in pursuit of their career aspirations. We asked guiding questions such as “What experiences have influenced your thoughts about becoming a teacher?” and “What factors shaped your decisions about applying to and
enrolling in college?” Semi-structured interviews were conducted by members of the research team via video conference technology. These meetings were electronically recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy.

We coded the transcript data to identify trends in the data, informed by the theoretical framework and literature on college and career readiness (Saldaña, 2021). We began with open coding to understand the data and develop insights within and across participants’ experiences. This process led to the decision to focus on three individuals uniquely suited to address the research questions. Next, we reengaged the data, using a priori codes derived from SCCT. We used SCCT to understand the types of experiences and activities that formed the basis of study participants’ educational and career interests and choice paths. We were also interested in whether person inputs (e.g., predispositions), background environmental influences (e.g., social or familial connections to teaching), and learning experiences (e.g., exposure to teaching through extracurricular involvement) influenced participants’ career interests, goals, and choices. We considered the proximal environmental influences (e.g., family, financial, and emotional support) that shaped participants’ adaptive behaviors and self-efficacy expectations. Given the pre-college nature of TES, we focused on the first three models of the SCCT framework (i.e., interests, goals, choices). This information was used to create case profiles and then cross-case analyses of how TES participants develop academic and career interests in teaching and make choices related to their career aspirations.

Researcher Positionality
As colleagues within the College of Education and Human Development at Temple University, we engaged with TES and the students in the program in different capacities since its inception. At the time of this writing, Dr. Curci serves as the Assistant Dean of College Access and Persistence. In this role, she is the lead administrator responsible for all aspects of TES, including participant recruitment and selection, curriculum development, and hiring and supervision of program staff. Drs. Johnson and Paris are assistant professors in Temple’s Higher Education Program. Dr. Johnson teaches the Scholars in their first course in TES, serves as a mentor to students, and partners with the TES team to inform curriculum and present the program to diverse stakeholders. Dr. Paris has been involved in establishing the preliminary program logistics from an enrollment management perspective, and since has been engaged with the TES participants participated in the research interviews.

We acknowledge that our roles and relationships within the program shape both responses to interview questions and our interpretation of the data. To minimize this, the research team met bi-weekly throughout the data collection and analysis process to
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review and discuss our initial findings and confront our biases as program stakeholders. We engaged in memoing to document these conversations which served as an audit trail that detailed our decisions. Moreover, we endeavored to share rich, thick descriptions of participants by sharing their individual profiles and incorporating their own words in the reporting of the findings. That was done so readers can review the data and build their own understanding of participants’ experiences related to the research questions.

Findings

Next, we share the profiles of three participants in the program who expressed an interest in a career in teaching, then will illustrate the common themes that cut across their experiences: college-bound mentality; pre-program interest in teaching; and structured pathways, reinforced plans.

Participant Profiles

Morgan

Morgan is an African American woman and second-year college student at Temple University. She graduated from a “special admit” high school in Philadelphia. She learned about TES through her high school staff, although as a member of the first program cohort, there was little information available about the opportunity. By the time she was a senior, she was certain about becoming a teacher, yet less certain about which college she would attend to prepare for that career. TES seemed like an ideal opportunity to further explore her career interest. Morgan shared, “I was interested in [TES] because I was interested in pursuing education as a career path.” Although there were other options to take dual enrollment courses, she applied for TES “since it was geared towards teaching…not just the opportunity to take college courses that can fit any major.”

Academically, Morgan did well in high school and continued in that pattern of success as a dual enrollment student. She often talked about her network of support, inclusive of her family and friends, who helped her cultivate her college and career aspirations. TES provided her with structured support specifically as it related to applying for colleges and deciding where to attend. When asked what she liked best about the program, Morgan described its familial environment. She shared, “It’s just a great family atmosphere…and that wasn’t just the Scholars. [It] was the peer mentors, the counselor, the director…I mean, everyone!” She spoke of new relationships with peers in the program and connections with the program staff as an unexpected benefit of participation in TES. Conversations with her family, along with TES staff, helped her to “evaluate my different decisions—they told me that I had more than one choice…” She viewed the opportunity to participate in TES as the chance to deepen her interest and exposure to the expectations of a future educator.
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Based on her experiences, Morgan ultimately decided to continue her education at Temple as an early childhood education major. As she transitioned to full-time undergraduate studies, she commented on having realistic expectations for college success. Morgan explained, “not only did I have credits for my college, but I already had background knowledge about the material.” During her first year of college, she continued contact with TES faculty, had the opportunity to speak about her experiences in TES at a state-level education conference, and served as a TES student employee.

Vinh

Vinh is an Asian American man and senior attending a neighborhood high school in Philadelphia. Vinh learned about TES from his school counselor: “I was in my advisory class and my counselor walk[ed] in and said, ‘is there anyone interested in being a teacher?’ I instinctively raised my hand.” Yet, the main reason TES as a program intrigued Vinh was that it would prepare him for college. He shared:

*My cousins, my sister - they all talked about [how] they got really overwhelmed in their freshman year [of college]. They earned a really horrible GPA during their freshman year. I had to take a first step to stay on top of everything...to be well prepared before going to actual college.*

Vinh would be one of the first in his immediate family to pursue postsecondary education and he was concerned about the transition from high school. After being accepted into TES, he grappled with how to reconcile his interest in becoming a teacher with his family’s desire for him to pursue a STEM-related career. While in TES, Vinh’s conversations with the tutor-mentors and fellow students provided opportunities for him to consider his career interests and choice of college major.

As a participant in TES, Vinh gave presentations, asked questions in class, and engaged with his peers more so than he had in high school. He reflected, “TES helped me build my self-confidence...when I get into my high school classes I realize[d] that I became more confident as opposed to my peers.” Vinh acknowledged that this confidence will be helpful as an educator. He credited experiences in college-level classes and conversations with program staff as instrumental in affirming his decision to become a math educator.

Hawa

Hawa is an African American woman and senior attending a “special admit” high school in Philadelphia. Her school is considered academically competitive and well-resourced, with several college preparatory partners throughout the region. She learned about TES through a conversation with a school administrator: “I was just talking to our roster chair and telling her I want to teach, and she brought up this program [TES].” Hawa was very interested in TES, but doubted she was qualified to participate in the program because the other college preparatory
opportunities required a minimum 3.5 cumulative high school GPA. She shared, “for me, academically, that's very discouraging, especially being around a lot of other intelligent kids and just constantly being like, ‘oh, you can't do this because you don't meet the mark.’” Acceptance into the program came as a surprise, “in all honesty, I didn't think that I was going to be able to do it. So, when I got accepted, I was really excited because I do want to go into education.” For Hawa, being a part of TES was considered an important step toward making her a competitive college applicant and actualizing her goal of becoming an educator.

Although TES is sponsored, in part, by a four-year university, the program staff encourages students to explore all their college options. This was critical for Hawa; she wanted to become a teacher and was interested in attending a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), an institution of higher education founded with the explicit mission to support African American students. After attending a predominately White high school and spending the year involved in racial equity work in the city, she shared:

*I’ve definitely wanted to go to an HBCU since eighth grade when I found out what they were... and doing all of this anti-racist work makes me want to be at an HBCU even more because it's so draining... I want to be around Black people. I'm a little tired.*

Consequently, Hawa described the benefit of being in a program that supported students’ aspirations to become a teacher and provided support to help her make a college choice decision. Upon earning her degree in Secondary English Education at an HBCU, it is her plan to return to Philadelphia to teach.

**Themes**
As participants shared how they developed their interest in college and teaching, and their experiences in TES, the themes that emerged were illustrative of the ways academic and career interests are interrelated and uniquely shaped by individual characteristics and experiences. Each student could be considered a “high achiever” given their proclivity to seek advanced curricular opportunities and prior history of solid academic performance. Yet, they had different levels of access to supports that promoted the formation of interests in a career in teaching. Although they likely would have attended college in the absence of TES, the certainty of whether and where to pursue a degree in teaching may have not crystalized without structured experiences. These experiences were facilitated through several components of TES including specific college-level coursework in education and engagement with TES staff.

**College-bound Mentality**
The theme college-bound mentality reflects participants’ predisposition for pursuing postsecondary education. Each participant exhibited a college-bound mentality that pre-
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dated their knowledge of TES. This was evidenced by their enrollment in college preparatory coursework and their interest in taking dual enrollment courses. This college-bound mentality was further reflected in their attitudes about how they were able to manage the added responsibilities of being in a dual enrollment program. Morgan shared:

Being able to take college courses as a senior sometimes was stressful because I had my high school classes, I had my college classes, [and] I was working at the time, so, I had a whole bunch of stuff going on at once. That kind of forced me to procrastinate sometimes, but also made me motivate myself to keep going because I knew I wanted to finish the program. I wanted to graduate high school.

This was a similar experience for Vinh and Hawa, who also had to juggle multiple responsibilities as high school seniors. Their experiences were complicated due to the decision to participate in TES during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to state mandates, all Philadelphia high schools engaged in online instruction and Temple courses were also facilitated online. Nevertheless, these students chose to engage in a co-curricular program to prepare for college. Vinh, for example, took four Advanced Placement courses along with his dual enrollment coursework and related program assignments. Reflecting on his senior year experience, he noticed that many of his peers were focused on just “getting by” and doing the minimum while he was driven to stay on top of his tasks. He shared,

“sometimes I feel overwhelmed but…I always look back…was I productive or was I just like laying on my bed all day? That's what make [s] me proud of myself. Just being productive.” The willingness to maintain continuous academic engagement during a time when academic experiences were less structured is indicative of students’ commitment to academic success and college readiness.

These college-bound students also reflected on how they utilized school resources to gain access to the information needed to continue their education beyond high school. This realization led to decisions to seek opportunities to gain more support outside of the school context. For example, Hawa stressed the importance of cultivating relationships with school personnel, especially for students in large schools with few school counselors. She mused:

It's just too many kids, and that's not just at [my school]; that's happening at a lot of district schools. We don't have a lot of counselors. So, I think TES is even more important because a lot of students don't have that support system at their schools.

Vinh expected that he would be able to gain support with the college application process through his high school, but that was not his experience. Support from TES filled the gap. He shared:
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TES helped me out with the college essay, which is one of the most important steps when it comes to college applications. And then they also helped [with] how to fill out the FAFSA and how to [apply for] scholarships as well.

Participating in TES provided these college-bound students with information to which they would not otherwise have access. As Morgan described, “a few of my friends had taken a [dual enrollment] class their junior year, so I just assumed it would be another dual enrollment program. But it was way more than that; I’m definitely appreciative of it.” Similarly, Vinh shared, “Overall, I feel like TES is a good program for students who want to be a teacher. Or even if you don’t want to be a teacher, just like join TES to see how college looks.” TES was instrumental for students for gaining the experiences needed to make informed choices about postsecondary education and career pathways.

Pre-Program Interest in Teaching
The theme pre-program interest in teaching describes participants’ beliefs about the qualities of effective teachers and their futures as teachers. As illustrated, participants were attracted to TES because of their interest in becoming an educator. Interest in teaching seemed to have developed over time and was reinforced through personalized experiences in TES. For instance, Vinh talked about being attracted to teaching through his own experiences struggling to learn math concepts. He was committed to learning difficult topics, even if he earned poor grades along the way. He shared, “I want to be a high school math teacher. I want to have a strong impact on students. I often help my peers who are struggling with math problems, and it feels really interesting to me.” Scholars also reflected on how interactions with teachers shaped their thoughts on the type of educator they wanted to become. Hawa shared, “I think that I've had terrible teachers in Philadelphia, and I've had amazing teachers in Philadelphia. [I] definitely don't think I would be the kind of person that I am without the teachers.” Given her engagement in the community, and her identity as a Black student, she also reflected on the value of having teachers from her home community. She shared, “I want to teach in Philly…I want to teach Black kids in Philly” because she could relate to these students’ experiences in a way that those from other places may not. Still some questions remain about their future approaches as an educator. Vinh shared:

This really is a question I have not even answered yet...If I am too easy, would the students just be stubborn and would I get bullied? If I am too harsh on them, are they going to hate me? There is a lot of stuff to think about.

Morgan and Hawa talked about having long-held interests in becoming educators. Hawa, however, contemplated other career pathways before deciding teaching would be her chosen career path. She shared:
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I've always wanted to teach my entire life. But, in eighth to tenth grade, I kind of changed that because a lot of people are like, “don't teach, you're not going to make any money, you're going to be broke... Oh, you're so smart. Don't waste your time doing education.

Over time, other options such as law or dentistry did not resonate with her after she completed an internship at a law firm and came to the realization that “I hate science.” Despite the influence of others and after much deliberation, she re-asserted her interest in teaching. Participation in TES gave students space and structure to link their career interests with college opportunities.

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The theme structured pathways, reinforced plans describes how TES offers space for participants to gain firsthand experience and actualize their college and career plans. As an early outreach program, TES participants benefit from supports focused on the college choice process. Each participant described different types of supports that they found helpful: reminders to meet deadlines, making decisions about college majors, and understanding differentiated information in financial aid award letters. Hawa talked about how TES staff helped her secure the financial aid needed to attend an HBCU and how they modeled ways to advocate for yourself in college. For example, TES staff helped Hawa communicate with various institutions to appeal financial aid offers to attain her goal of attending a Black College:

I love Temple [University], but I need to be at an HBCU. That's what I need for my character development. So [the TES staff] just being supportive about [my decision to attend an HBCU] ... [They did not say], “This [college] will give you this much so you should go here” ... [They said], “Well this where you want to go. Let's try to make it work.”

The TES staff guided participants through the college choice process by placing their needs and interests at the center of decision-making as opposed to encouraging them to make choices based on a single factor such as tuition costs.

As stated previously, Vinh wanted to be a math educator, but was still grappling with how to reconcile his interest in becoming a teacher with his family’s desire for him to pursue a STEM related career. He shared:

So, at the beginning of the year, I wanted to be a pharmacist. But after having conversations with TES staff, faculty, and mentors, I figured out I just want to be a pharmacist because of my parents and the salary. I also experienced working the job and I didn't like it at all. I told myself, ‘Hey, just choose the right job and you're going to like working for your whole life. Just don't waste your time. I want to be a teacher.’

Vinh reflected on the various careers that align most closely with his interests and
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decided to pursue teaching despite the influence of his parents and his outcome expectations (e.g., compensation) of other professions.

Morgan’s positive experiences in TES helped affirm her college choice. Reflecting on her college choice, she shared:

*I wasn’t set on Temple in the beginning. I had choices...[but] I was already used to Temple’s atmosphere, campus, the classroom, and some of the professors. So, it really solidified my decision about coming to Temple which I am so happy about now. Having those courses in education made me realize I still want to pursue education. I still want to become a teacher.*

Morgan’s familiarity with the campus environment at Temple informed her choice about enrolling at Temple compared to other institutions. TES helped her solidify her chosen career in teaching and accelerated her path to becoming an educator through the completion of 15 college credits.

**Discussion and Implications**

This study explored how three participants in TES developed academic and career interests in teaching and made educational choices related to their career aspirations. In this analysis, we learned that participants were high achieving high school students and had developed predispositions for college prior to participation in TES. With the urgent need to diversify the teacher workforce, opportunities like TES should include students who have an interest in teaching but may not meet Conley’s (2012) four keys of college and career readiness: cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills. School staff should be mindful to not pre-select students based on their academic performance or other behaviors. Rather, they should share information widely so that students marginalized in educational spaces can learn about and express interest in programs like TES.

Although the program was designed to support college access for future educators, only a small subset of students who participated in TES since its inception held an interest in teaching. SCCT emphasizes that educational or career goals may be influenced more substantially by outcome expectations or environmental conditions, rather than by interests alone. This is of particular importance for the teaching profession as the value of becoming an educator is often associated with outcome expectations (e.g.,

“...without direct and impactful messages and experiences that interrupt the narrative or create a counter-narrative, racial disparities in the teacher workforce are likely to persist.”
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compensation, working conditions; Carver-Thomas, 2018; Harris et al., 2019). Interests in teaching must be cultivated, especially among talented students who have numerous career options. Negative messages and perceptions of teaching as a profession are pervasive. In the absence of supportive environments, students may make choices that are misaligned with established pathways to the teaching profession. Therefore, without direct and impactful messages and experiences that interrupt the narrative or create a counter-narrative, racial disparities in the teacher workforce are likely to persist. To expand the teacher pipeline, interventions such as targeted partnerships between higher education institutions, high school teacher academies, and other outreach efforts may provide opportunities for elementary and middle school students to learn about the teaching profession and how to proactively pursue a career in education (Bianco et al., 2011; Goings et al., 2018).

Within the current sociopolitical climate, messages about the possibility of impacting the next generation of students and teaching for change and social justice are of critical importance for addressing pervasive societal issues such as racial and socioeconomic injustice (Gist et al., 2018). For some students, learning the rich history and legacy of Black educators and their forceful displacement from the workforce due to school desegregation is also impactful as they consider career opportunities that position them to work for equity. Future studies should evaluate the impact of having educators and near-peer mentors of color in secondary and post-secondary spaces. Through discussion and coaching, these role models allow students to experience college and career content from non-White peoples’ perspectives and envision themselves in similar future roles.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the certification requirements as a potential barrier to accessing a degree in teaching. Across various teacher education programs, students must maintain a certain GPA and complete other certification requirements (e.g., licensure examinations, student teaching). However, for some students, attaining a bachelor’s degree in education may not be possible without academic support, mentorship, and the other types of support provided by TES. Programs such as TES are well-positioned to address two types of barriers: (1) postsecondary education barriers such as college readiness, financial aid, and the admissions process, and (2) teacher certification barriers such as standardized tests, field experiences, and academic performance requirements. Both types of barriers have noteworthy consequences for the racial diversification of the teacher workforce given the level of education required to pursue a career in teaching (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Efforts to diversify the educator workforce by recruiting people of color into teaching will only be successful if they have access to intentional efforts designed to promote their success in and completion of college and certification.
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requirements.

Conclusion

With the urgent need for initiatives focused on the recruitment of people of color into teaching, TES is a GYO early outreach and dual enrollment program that not only promotes college access, but also creates a pipeline for educator diversity. To inform future investments in initiatives that positively impact students’ postsecondary education and career trajectories, school districts and institutions of higher education need data related to outcomes for the participants of such initiatives. This manuscript was developed by a team of scholar-practitioners deeply invested in promoting college access and success among historically marginalized populations. Through our service, teaching, and scholarship, we promote and advocate for educational equity. Our combined areas of expertise bring a nuanced understanding of the college access process that was instrumental in developing TES and the refinement of policies and practices that shape the program.

REFERENCES


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ABSTRACT

Career development and professional identity remain critical areas that need addressing for young girls of color. Currently, racial-ethnic minorities continue to face disparities educationally and economically. Girls of color, in particular, are subjected to "double jeopardy" as they navigate a world still ridden with racial and gender discrimination. These barriers and other social and environmental factors have negatively impacted career self-efficacy, resulting in a lack of appropriate career decision-making. Through a lens of social justice and advocacy, school counselors can act as an ally and provide culturally appropriate interventions that address these issues. Career interventions based on the specific needs of racially minoritized students are necessary to reduce opportunity gaps and increase career options. This article explores the impact on career-related variables resulting from participation in a culturally responsive career development program. FLAME, a fifteen-week after-school program, was designed and implemented to foster growth and development in career exploration and leadership as well as career decision-making self-efficacy. Results provide initial support in suggesting that culturally responsive career development programs impact the career development of minority girls, especially in the areas of student motivation and engagement and perceived career barriers.

Keywords: career development, minoritized, culturally responsive, college and career readiness, school counseling

Career development is a vital component of today's educational system. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) offers counselors the ASCA National Model (2019a) as a framework for creating comprehensive school counseling programs that provide students with developmentally appropriate services with college and career readiness (CCR) as a main area of focus. To implement relevant programming, counselors should be knowledgeable about the diverse populations with whom they work. In turn, this knowledge should drive programs that meet the needs of the students. Currently missing from the literature is proper guidance on creating effective culturally relevant interventions, specifically for racial-ethnic minority girls in middle school. Evidence-based practices are needed to ensure that these students obtain the knowledge and experiences required to continue to overcome occupational barriers and be prepared for their future careers.

When considering barriers, school counselors are responsible for interrupting the pattern of normalized oppression found in education. Students learn to accept oppression as a standard way of life through experiences at
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home, school, and community (Chung & Bemak, 2012). Through a lens of social justice and advocacy, school counselors can act as allies and provide culturally appropriate interventions that address these issues (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019b; Falco, 2017).

Career development, especially relative to young women of color, remains a critical area of need. In 2014, the White House Council on Women and Girls released a report, “Advancing Equity for Women and Girls of Color,” which highlighted many barriers that hinder success for girls of color. Former President Obama acknowledged the progress made, but also noted the need for support to continue the advancement of equality for this population (Jarett & Tchen, 2014). In 2017, The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) conducted focus groups with young women of color. From this study, seven structural barriers to equity, such as low-wage work, financial strain, educational inequality, mental health, housing instability and homelessness, exposure to violence, and the justice system, were identified as “root causes of economic marginalization” (Center for Law and Social Policy, n.d.; West-Bey et al., 2018). These barriers have resulted in relegation, and therefore, this group is referred to as racially minoritized.

Currently, racial-ethnic minorities continue to face disparities educationally and economically. Girls of Color are subjected to "double jeopardy" as they navigate a world still ridden with racial and gender discrimination, negatively impacting career self-efficacy and resulting in a lack of appropriate career decision-making. The Center for Law and Social Policy (n.d.) further suggests that the root cause of these barriers must be understood and named before dismantling can occur. What may be missing is the early preventative and developmental work with young girls of color as early as middle school (Wang & Degol, 2017) as this is a critical developmental period where culturally responsive interventions are needed to address perceived career barriers (Kenney et al., 2007; Orthner et al., 2013). Based on the specific needs of racially minoritized students, career interventions are necessary to reduce opportunity gaps, increase student engagement and increase career options (Kashefpakdel et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2007; Orthner et al., 2013). Therefore, additional research is needed to understand how culturally responsive career interventions impact career and college readiness for students of color. This article explores the impact on career-related variables resulting from participation in a culturally responsive career development program as a means of addressing CCR with racially minoritized girls.

Career Related Variables

Career self-efficacy is proven to be predictive of future career choices. Self-efficacy, however, is lowered as career-related barriers become significant in the lives of students of
color, resulting in restricted career options (Lindley, 2006; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001). A study conducted by Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) found that self-efficacy for coping with career-related barriers was higher for White students than for students of color. This puts students of color at a greater disadvantage with an increased number of barriers coupled with the inability to cope. Although there are many domains related to self-efficacy, this research focuses on a culturally responsive program for minoritized girls and its impact on their career decision-making self-efficacy. In addition, other variables, such as ethnic identity, academic motivation and engagement, and perceived career barriers that have been proven to influence career decision-making self-efficacy, were also examined.

Ethnic identity is an important concept to consider during the late childhood and early adolescent stage in life. Wakefield and Hudley (2007) define ethnic identity as “the sense of belonging that an adolescent feels toward a racial or ethnic group as well as the significance and qualitative meaning that the adolescent assigns to that group membership” (p. 148). Ethnic identity includes an acceptance of one’s group despite stereotypes, discrimination, and racism (Phinney, 1996). As students of color move through this developmental stage and begin to explore their ethnic identity, their career/ vocational identity is being shaped as well. How parents and communities perceive career barriers, career options, and work values is typically the foundational information from which students begin to form their own vocational identities (Gushue & Whitson, 2006). The processing of information and experiences, relative to a group in which one identifies with, is related to how the group is represented in society. Therefore, if the group is viewed negatively, it will be important to equip members with the necessary resources and skills to protect them against the consequences of those barriers (Griffith & Combs, 2015; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). Many researchers have examined the relationship between ethnic identity and career decision making (Gushue, 2006; Gushue & Whitson, 2006; Lewis et al., 2018; Ojeda et al., 2012). Findings suggest that a positive ethnic identity results in greater self-efficacy, which in turn impacts better career decision making (Gushue & Whitson, 2006; Ojeda et al., 2012).

Another factor linked to career self-efficacy is academic motivation and engagement. When implementing programs in schools, it is important to keep the overall mission and vision of the school at the forefront which is the academic success of all students. Focusing on motivation and engagement has been found to increase academic achievement and focusing on career development is one way of increasing motivation and engagement (Lapan, 2004; Kenny et al., 2006). Many studies have found a positive connection between effective career exploration and planning, and an increase in student engagement (Kenney et al., 2006; Perry, 2008;
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Perry et al., 2010). A study conducted by Perry et al. (2010) examined whether career preparation would have a significant and positive effect on school engagement on 285 urban high school students. Results indicated that career preparation had a significant direct impact on school engagement, which in turn significantly and directly impacted grades. The implication for students of color is that academic success could increase vocational opportunities.

Lastly, perceived career barriers should be considered when examining career self-efficacy. Research has suggested that students are aware of the occupational and educational barriers that exist (Kenny et al., 2003). However, studies conducted on perceived career barriers have found conflicting results. Jackson et al. (2006), when studying minority youth from the inner city, found that higher beliefs in school and work barriers were significantly associated with lower educational and career aspirations. Mejia-Smith and Gushue (2017) studied the influence of ethnic identity, acculturation, and self-efficacy on the perception of career barriers on Latina and Latino college students. They found that students with greater self-efficacy perceived fewer barriers to achieving their career goals. Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) also found that minority women perceived notably more career and educational barriers and had lower self-efficacy to cope with such barriers.

Perceived Barriers to Career Development

Although many studies have been conducted on the career development of racial-ethnic minority youth, there is still a need for research regarding racially minoritized girls in the middle school years (Flores et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2018). Perceived career barriers identified by students of color negatively impact the formation of vocational identity, ultimately hindering appropriate career development (Gushue et al., 2006). This includes financial constraints, gender and racial discrimination, maladaptive career beliefs, lack of educational resources, lack of career development skills, limited life and work experiences, and classism (Code et al., 2006; Gushue et al., 2006; Kenny et al., 2007; Smith-Weber, 1999). These factors are thought to limit the learning experiences of students of color.

Specifically related to the educational setting, there are additional barriers identified. Noted consistently throughout the literature are instructional barriers such as standardized testing, lack of highly qualified educators, gatekeeping from higher level courses, limited resources, lack of access to CCR related knowledge and programs, underrepresentation in gifted and overrepresentation in special education and under-resourced schools (Bates et al., 2019; Bryan et al., 2020; Mayes & Hines, 2014; Welton & Martinez, 2014). These barriers illuminate the continued opportunity gap between students of color and their White peers as well as impede the ability for minoritized students to
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achieve “academic equity” (Harris et al., 2020, p. 43).

Role of the School Counselor

Seen as leaders in the building, school counselors can advocate for students as they address the needs of every student (ASCA, 2015, p. 19). In referencing the needs of all students, those of color and other marginalized groups are highlighted as specific targets for prevention, intervention, and remediation activities. Research has suggested that interventions used for these populations should be culturally responsive (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2018; Welton & Martinez, 2013). Dahir and Stone (2012), as cited by ASCA (2015), offers suggestions on how school counselors can provide this culturally responsive counseling. A few of those suggestions include: using data to close the gap among diverse student populations, practicing culturally sensitive advising and counseling, addressing the impact that poverty and social class has on student achievement, and identifying the effects of family culture on student performance.

Although introduced for the minority gifted population, Mayes and Hines (2014) suggest how school counselors can utilize College Board’s eight components of college and career readiness. Suggestions range from identifying and addressing barriers, supporting students in aligning academic curriculum and extracurricular activities to ability level and interest, working with students on career decision making, providing information on and guiding students and parents through the college application and financial aid process, to collaborating with stakeholders to improve the transition process from high school to higher education. These suggestions are useful for school counselors as they work to support their students of color through college and career related programming. As schools continue to close opportunity gaps, examining and revising existing programs should lead to new and innovative ways of educating children on career development, such as creative leadership and career development groups for girls of color (Learning First Alliance, 2018).

Comprehensive school counseling programs for all students should include targeted interventions based on data analysis and student need. School counselors, among other educators, are well aware that different learning opportunities must be provided to improve student outcomes for all students (Learning First Alliance, 2018). The implication is that interventions intended to assist in student success should focus on equity, indicating a need for culturally responsive programming (Learning First Alliance, 2018). ASCA prioritizes using culturally responsive counseling to engage in social justice and advocacy work for culturally diverse students (ASCA, 2015). In regard to career development, however, additional research is needed on the influence of culturally responsive programs for the
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career development of racially minoritized girls of color, specifically in their middle school years (Falco & Summers, 2017; Gushue & Whitson, 2006; Lent et al., 2018).

Current Programs and Interventions

Many school counselors have sought the literature for creative interventions that target underrepresented populations regarding college and career readiness. Although research informed, there still lacks evidence-based programs readily accessible for school counselors to use with minoritized populations. However, with the research that has been done, many similarities and themes are common among them and are applicable to working with the middle school population.

From CCR groups to specialized interventions, the consensus is that the majority of CCR literature is generalized to racial/ethnic populations and may not effectively consider the unique needs of minoritized students. Harris et al., (2020) implemented a CCR group (SPARCK) based on a life coaching model. The model focused on six aspects: self-definition (Story), student’s role in the world (Purpose) dreams and goals (Aspirations), how students are progressing towards goals (Reflection), support systems (Connect), and an action plan (Kick-Start). Aligned with ASCA’s Mindsets and Behaviors, this program combines familiar work of school counselors with the integration of cultural factors to strengthen college and career readiness. Programs such as the Youth Leadership Academy (YLA) have also been shown to impact CCR for minoritized youth. YLA is based on a positive youth development framework that focuses on three components: positive relationships with others, building life skills, and application of skills in community activities (Bates et al., 2019). The YLA specifically offered three phases: leadership development, applied internship, and culminating service. Results suggest positive CCR related outcomes for participants. Authors suggest that programs such as YLA “mitigate risk factors and build skills for vulnerable youth” (Bates et al., 2019, p. 177).

Williams et al. (2018) suggests customizing interventions based upon student need. Counselors utilized the STARS (Students That are Achieving Success) framework that utilized components from social cognitive career theory, cognitive information processing and the ASCA National Model. Specific aspects of the intervention were customized based on the external barriers relevant to the participant and both facilitator and participant worked collaboratively on established goals to overcome identified barriers. Results indicate positive trends with effect sizes ranging from small to large depending on specific factors. It is important to note that the population in this study included African American girls in the foster care system which may present unique
variables not necessarily applicable to other minoritized girls. The study, however, highlights the need for tailoring school counseling interventions to meet the needs of the population served.

Purpose of Study

This study examined the impact of a culturally responsive career development intervention (FLAME) on career decision-making self-efficacy, perceived career barriers, ethnic identity, and student motivation and engagement. The theoretical framework guiding this study was the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which asserts that career choices are made due to the impact of several variables that can encourage or impede career development (Lent et al., 1994). FLAME emphasized the four sources of information in which self-efficacy is developed: Mastery Experiences, Vicarious Learning Experiences, Verbal Persuasion, and Physiological Arousal. Each session included at least one of the sources for self-efficacy development. Most importantly, the study was grounded in cultural responsiveness, applying a cultural context to a school counseling career curriculum designed to address the career-related needs of minoritized girls. Research previously conducted found that culturally responsive programs offer significant benefits to students of color such as academic achievement, increases in self-efficacy, and improved coping skills (Banks & Obiakor, 2015; Jackson et al., 2011; Lent et al., 2002). Therefore, the current study continued this line of research by examining whether a culturally responsive program impacts the above-mentioned variables. This study added to the literature on minoritized girls, middle school career development, and the impact of culturally responsive programming while offering a potential intervention for practicing school counselors.

Given the need for evidence-based school counseling and culturally responsive interventions, we hypothesized the following: 1) participants will experience an increase in career decision-making self-efficacy during participation in a culturally responsive career development program; 2) participants will experience an increase in ethnic identity during participation in a culturally responsive career development program; 3) participants will have an increase in motivation and engagement during participation in a culturally responsive career development program; and 4) participants will experience a reduction in perceived career barriers during participation in a culturally responsive career development program.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) proposes that contextual variables shape career choices and that these variables can facilitate or impede career development (Lent et al., 1994). In the context of working with minoritized girls, SCCT focuses on the processes in which (a) academic and career
interests develop; (b) academic and vocational plans are created; and (c) varying levels of performance and persistence in educational and career pursuits are attained (Quimby et al., 2007). Many psychosocial factors related to career development are unique for girls of color (Smith, 1981), and SCCT provides a needed paradigm for taking these factors into account. SCCT serves as the framework for understanding the literature on the minority population of interest, as it considers “human agency” available for students to make career-related choices (Bounds, 2017). It specifically considers gender, culture, and other aspects of diversity (Lent & Brown, 2013). The theory focuses on self-efficacy, expected outcomes, and goal mechanisms and how they are shaped by barriers associated with career development (Bounds, 2017). Self-efficacy is the belief that one has in his or her own ability to perform definite career-related tasks (Lent et al., 2002) and confidence in making appropriate career decisions such as choice of occupation (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2014). SCCT suggests that limited exposure to career-related information, along with limited learning experiences, leads to a lack of self-efficacy in career-related decisions (Lindley, 2006). Further, self-efficacy is needed to mediate whether career interests, goals, and actions translate into appropriate career decision-making (Gushue et al., 2006; Mau et al., 2016). SCCT supports the notion that self-efficacy is derived from the four sources of information previously described: performance accomplishments, vicarious learning experiences, social persuasion, and emotional states. Lent et al. (1994) suggest that people choose to engage in activities that they believe will lead to positive outcomes and develop goals from expectations set purposely to attain a certain level of performance.

SCCT presents three models in which the core variables (self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals) operate (Lent & Brown, 1996). The interaction between these variables within this model framework is what guides career development. The three models identified are Interest, Choice, and Performance. According to SCCT, career interests develop based upon adolescents' exposure and participation in activities and experiences. It is also suggested that the activities depend on cultural, social, and environmental factors. Therefore, exposure to appropriate and relevant career development activities generates an increase in a variety of interests leading to expanded career choices. According to Lent et al. (1994), career choice is heavily impacted by self-efficacy beliefs, performance outcomes, and environmental factors and with supportive environmental conditions, interests could predict choices. However, due to socioeconomic status, discrimination, lack of educational resources, and non-supportive environments, that may not always be the case for minority women. Career choice may be restricted to specific career fields wherein the ability to choose is not always present. Finally, performance is also impacted by self-efficacy and outcome expectations. It is thought that the higher the
self-efficacy and outcome expectations, the higher the performance goals (Lent & Brown, 1996).

Methods

Participants
Participants were recruited from a public middle school in a rural southwest community. The middle school demographics were 69% White, 26% Black, 4% Hispanic, and 1% Other (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Pacific Islander). The percentage of student participants on free and reduced lunch was approximately 53%. Due to the school’s social class and the nature of the program, purposeful sampling was used to select the participants, which included any counselor or self-identified racial-ethnic minority girls in grades six through eight, yielding approximately 58 students that were eligible for participation. Parental consent was obtained, resulting in 34 racial-ethnic minority middle school female students with a racial-ethnic breakdown of 30 Black and four Hispanic students. The average age was 12.44 (SD = 1.07), with a range of 11 to 14.

Intervention
The Female Leadership Academy for Minority Excellence (FLAME) program was implemented in a rural middle school to address the need for a culturally responsive program in career development. FLAME, a fifteen-week after-school program, was designed and executed by the school counselor and facilitated by two additional faculty members. All three facilitators were women of color. The academy provided students with career-related knowledge and tools which they applied in practice exercises. The objectives of the program were to explore potential career options; understand how race and gender may affect career options; understand the job search and application process; research and meet prominent women in particular career fields; define and understand the concept of leadership development; seek to increase self-efficacy regarding becoming future leaders in their field of choice; and to understand how self-esteem, personal values, and positive image impacts the hiring process.

The goal was to empower these young women to become future leaders in their careers of choice. Group activities included mentorship, resume writing, career exploration, mock-interviewing, shadowing experiences, creating goals and vision boards, practicing public speaking, and building leadership skills. Details of each week of the group intervention are noted in Table 1 (see page 81). Participants were exposed to several racial-ethnic minority role models in various professional careers to vicariously learn from other women of color how they overcame career barriers.

Procedure
This study utilized a repeated measures single group, pre-, mid-, and post-test design, to examine mean score differences over time. The group intervention took place over 15
Table 1. FLAME Session Content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Intervention/Content</th>
<th>SCCT Alignment</th>
<th>Type of Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Program Overview</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Discussion on barriers and self-efficacy</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>College/Career Readiness</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role Model</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Role Model</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Goal Setting</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Positive Self-Image</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Role Model</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Girl Empowerment</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emotional</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Role Model</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mid data collection</td>
<td></td>
<td>Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Career Exploration</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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weeks. The pre-test was given before the first week of the group intervention, the mid-test after week 8, and the post-test given after week 15. The rationale for a pre, mid, and post-test design was to determine change over time due to content presentation.

Measures

Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy Scale - Short Form (CDMSES; Betz et al., 1996) is a 25-item scale that measures an individual’s degree of belief that she can successfully complete tasks necessary for making career decisions. The CDMSES comprises five subscales: accurate self-appraisal, gathering occupational information, goal selection, making plans for the future, and problem-solving. The scale utilizes a 5-point Likert scale where responses range from 1 = “no confidence at all” to 5 = “complete confidence.” Multiple studies have found the results from the CDMSES to be reliable (e.g., Austin, 2010; Betz et al., 1996) with Cronbach's coefficient alphas for the subscales and total scale ranging between .73 and .94.

Perceived Barriers to Education and Career Scale Revised (POB; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001) consists of 32 items broken into two subscales: Career-related barriers and Educational barriers. The current version utilizes a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree.” Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) report reliability statistics based upon the revised scale as a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .90 for the total scale and between .86 and .88 for the Career-related barriers and Educational barriers subscales. The validity of both subscales has been demonstrated in previous studies (e.g., Gnilka & Novakovik, 2017; Novakovik & Gnilka, 2015). For purposes of this study, only the career barriers subscale was used.

Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992) is a 14-item scale measuring ethnic identity and consists of three subscales: Affirmation and Belonging, Ethnic Identity Achievement, and Ethnic Behaviors. The scale utilizes a 4-point Likert response system ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 4 = “strongly agree.” Studies have shown that the MEIM produces reliable results in both high school and college samples (i.e., .81 and .90 respectively, Roberts et al., 1999, Worrell, 2000) and has shown to have strong evidence of validity (Roberts et al., 1999).

Motivation and Engagement Survey—Short Form Revised (MES; Lee et al., 2016) is a 21-question scale that measures motivation and engagement in science. The measure is divided into three categories: (1) goal orientations (mastery, performance-approach, and performance avoid), (2) self-efficacy, and (3) three types of engagement (behavioral, affective, and cognitive). The MES utilizes a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = “Not at all true” to 5 = “Very true.” Following previous studies (Lee et al., 2016), the wording of the questions was adjusted to be more focused on general academic motivation and engagement across all subjects. For example, the item “One of my goals is to show others that
Breaking Down Barriers

science classwork is easy for me.” was revised to read as “One of my goals is to show others that classwork is easy for me.” Previous studies have demonstrated that the MES has been shown to have good reliability and validity (e.g., Lee et al., 2016).

Results

Data was first reviewed for missing and incorrect information. Little’s MCAR test was conducted to determine the type of missing data. Next, with confirmed Missing Completely at Random or Missing at Random, a Full-information Maximum Likelihood was used to account for missing data. In addition, data were examined for any outliers and to ensure that assumptions of normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variance were met. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviations for each of the scales and subscales, were obtained to summarize data from this sample. Next, a series of repeated measure ANOVAs were conducted to determine if mean scores differed statistically significant between time points. A series of repeated measure ANOVAs were also undertaken to determine the mean score differences between time points on career self-efficacy, ethnic identity, perceived career barriers, and student motivation and engagement. As a result of a significant ANOVA, post hoc testing was completed, using pairwise comparisons to determine which means differed and answer the hypotheses. Correlations of all study variables are noted in Table 2 (see pages 84-86). In regard to the first and second hypotheses, there were no significant differences in CDMSE (p > .05) or ethnic identity scores (p > .05).

Regarding the third hypothesis, significant mean differences were found for some student motivation and engagement subscales scores. Significant results were reported for the Performance Approach Orientation (ME_PerfApproach) subscale between pre-group and mid-group and between pre-group and post-group scores (p < .05). Scores between mid-group and post-group were not found to be statistically significant (p > .05). Results of the self-efficacy subscale (ME_SelfE) suggest that there was a difference in mean scores between pre-group and post-group scores (p < .05). However, no difference was indicated between pre-group and mid-group and between mid-group and post-group scores (p > .05).

To account for the low reliability found on the Mastery and Behavior subscales of the Motivation and Engagement Survey, a paired sample t-test was analyzed to determine mean differences for affected subscales. A significant difference was found between pre-group and mid-group mean scores on the Motivation and Engagement Mastery subscale $t(33) = 2.05, p < .05$ as well as between mid-group and post-group scores on the Behavior subscale $t(33) = -2.25, p < .05$.

For the fourth hypothesis, significant results were found for the Perceived Career Barriers scale. Mean differences were identified
## Table 2a.
Within- and Across-Time 1 and 3 Correlations between Variables.

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## Table 2b.
Within- and Across-Time 1 and 3 Correlations between Variables.

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Breaking Down Barriers

Table 2c.
Within- and Across-Time 1 and 3 Correlations between Variables.

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Breaking Down Barriers

between pre-group and post-group and mid-group and post-group (p < .05). Mean differences were not identified between pre-group and mid-group scores (p > .05). However, although non-significant, the results indicate that POB mean scores did slightly increase between pre-group (m = 36.08) and mid-group (m = 37.17) then decreased for post-group scores (m = 32.77). Results of these analyses are reported in Table 3 (see page 88).

Discussion

In order to prepare students to become college and career-ready upon graduating high school, counselors should incorporate culturally responsive interventions in meeting those career related needs. Results of this study provided initial support in suggesting that culturally responsive career development programs can impact the career development of girls of color, especially in the areas of student motivation and engagement and perceived career barriers.

Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy

Pursuant to the first hypothesis, no significant differences were found between time points. Despite no statistically significant difference, the average mean self-efficacy scores increased over time for participants. For a counselor, this may suggest the intervention may be conducive to increasing self-efficacy. The FLAME program sought to increase career decision-making self-efficacy through experiences that allowed students access to information needed to help build confidence in their career decision-making. For example, vicarious learning experiences allowed students to learn from the experiences of women of color. These role models served as an example of future success and offered participants hope in their ability to make appropriate choices resulting in positive outcomes. Participants also had the opportunity to participate in several mastery experiences that could have contributed to increased mean scores over time. Students participated in mock interviews and received constructive feedback on their interviewing skills, which helped them become more confident in their ability to succeed in future job searches. Activities that contributed to the reframing of negative thoughts regarding themselves and future outcomes, such as creating vision boards, were utilized to address the physiological arousal source. Normalizing anxiety regarding future career-related decisions was critical to the student's increase in self-efficacy (Scott & Ciani, 2008). The results for this study contradicted some earlier studies that reported significant gains in career decision-making self-efficacy after
## Breaking Down Barriers

Table 3.
Means, Standard Deviations, Internal Consistencies, Repeated ANOVAs and Pairwise Comparisons for Scales.

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career-related interventions (Bounds, 2017; Falco & Summers, 2019; Miles & Naidoo, 2017). However, similar to this study, Kraus and Hughey (1999) examined CDMSE scores after participating in a career development intervention and did not find significant results. To strengthen the FLAME program, facilitators should consider the following activities to help build career self-efficacy. First, students can engage in career exploration that would include an interest inventory, research on various career options, college research, and career salary. This information would lead participants to complete a career action plan. Completion of this plan would allow students to practice making career-related decisions. Second, the program should focus on identifying and creating protective factors and sources of encouragement for participants. Students should leave the program with an understanding of the career-related resources available to them. Negative and self-defeating cognitions should be examined that may inhibit the development of self-efficacy beliefs. For example, self-defeating thoughts such as “I’m not good enough” or “I can never be this or I can never be that” often negatively impact career behaviors and decision making (Atta et al., 2013; Austin et al., 2010).

Ethnic Identity

In regard to the second hypothesis that there would be an increase in ethnic identity scores, the results indicated no significant change in scores between the three time periods. The MEIM examined two factors: ethnic identity search (search) and affirmation, belonging, and commitment (affirmation). Young adolescents are typically in the initial stage of development, where they have not thought about how they identify ethnically. This intervention was possibly the first consideration for understanding and giving value to their cultural group. Phinney (1992) indicated that ethnic identity was higher for college students than high school students and suggested that ethnic identity may become more assertive as students grow, mature, and age. This may indicate that scores could be lower for middle school students if findings are consistent with student development.

The purpose of the FLAME program was introductory in nature. Therefore, possibly implementing a follow-up measurement, offering students additional time to process the knowledge obtained and connect that information to their own personal cultural groups, would have been better in determining if there was growth in this area. It may have been helpful to begin the program with more information about cultural groups and increased work on understanding how students identify with their own cultural groups. For example, learningforjustice.org offers many developmentally appropriate activities that could be included, allowing for a deeper exploration into ethnic identity. This would enable participants to make mental connections between the program material being introduced and their own experiences.
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**Student Motivation and Engagement**

In regard to the third hypothesis, there was an increase in students' motivation and engagement on four of the seven subscales. Specifically, significant increases were identified for the Mastery, Performance Approach, Self-Efficacy, and Behavioral Engagement subscales. Mastery mean scores fluctuated between time points resulting in a decline from T1 to T2 and an increase in T3. Mastery orientation is viewed as a direct effort to learn and understand new material, and it is the ability to master a concept through strategies and skills. In relation to this study, an explanation for the decline from T1 to T2 could be attributed to the information presented at the beginning of the program. Weeks one and two of the intervention introduced complex material, including courageous conversations about the struggles of girls of color in the workforce and possible barriers faced. This information could have contributed to students' decrease in how they perceived their ability and motivation to learn (Usher & Kober, 2013). In turn, it may have been equally as hard to then link the importance of academic success to a future career barring the uncertainty of possible attainment.

The remaining thirteen weeks included access to pertinent career-related knowledge, motivational work toward self-growth, and experiential work that offered opportunities for students to build their self-confidence. This trend in scores implies that as students learned coping strategies and career development skills, their confidence in their ability to be successful returned or increased. This could be due to their ability to reframe negative cognitions about school to more positive ones, or it could have been their ability to apply coping strategies directly to academic scenarios within the classroom. The same declining trend was found for the behavioral subscale, which is the “conscientious completion of tasks” (Lee et al., 2016, p. 6). A probable reason for this initial drop is that participants were introduced during week two to barriers in career attainment, issues regarding discrimination, the idea of double jeopardy, and the impact of gender and race intersection on future career choice and achievement. This may have been new information for students who never considered how race and gender are viewed as barriers to personal career choices. These discussions could have resulted in a period of disengagement as students work through overcoming obstacles and succeeding. The middle part of the program, weeks five through eight, included motivational aspects such as goal setting, positive self-image, and empowerment strategies. The remaining time in the group, during weeks 10 through 14, was spent on practice and application activities. The increase in scores from T2 to T3 on the behavior subscale could be attributed to the skills and knowledge acquired in effectively dealing with barriers and practicing career-related activities. The disengagement period was replaced with a renewed sense of motivation and engagement.
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in pursuing recently created career goals. These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted on student motivation and engagement. Froiland and Worrell (2016) found in studying intrinsic motivation and engagement in a population of diverse high school students that motivation and engagement positively impact academic achievement. They suggested that the relationship between motivation and engagement is especially true for minority students, citing that “intrinsic motivation to learn provides the fuel for sustained engagement” (p. 332). Sustained engagement may lead to increased academic achievement resulting in more college or career options. This progression is crucial for students of color who have historically been subjected to negative experiences related to gaps in academic achievement.

Perceived Career Barriers

For the fourth hypothesis, perceived barriers were significantly lower at the end of the group intervention. Regarding the stable level of perceived barriers scores for T1 and T2, at this developmental stage, students may not be fully aware of how their gender and race play a part in their future career development. This awareness increases knowledge of perceived career barriers that could be faced in the future. Information about barriers due to gender and ethnicity was discussed explicitly during several group sessions. Additionally, the beginning of the program (week two) began with a rich discussion on possible obstacles they may face and how race and gender may impact their future career attainment. The exposure and exploration of these barriers may have resulted in a flat level of scores.

A different trend emerged as scores declined from T2 to T3. This component of the FLAME program from Weeks six to 13 allowed students to build confidence in their ability to still be successful despite possible barriers. Several specific interventions may have helped lower their perception of barriers they may face, such as creating positive vision boards, college and career readiness discussions, mock interviews and the interaction with role models. The role model component is consistent with earlier research which has previously found that discussion of various barriers in addition to how to cope with those barriers can be effective (Jackson et al., 2006; McWhirter, 1997; & Quimby & O’Brien, 2004).

Overall the findings in this study provide positive support for the use of culturally responsive programming. Although significant results were not identified for every variable examined, enough evidence exists that future research is warranted. Similar to some of the previous CCR interventions that focused on minoritized populations, FLAME shows promise for supporting the career development needs of girls of color.
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Implications for School Counselors

A comprehensive school counseling program guided by the ASCA National Model is designed to provide developmentally appropriate interventions that meet the needs of all students. However, the model does not speak to how these interventions should be constructed to be culturally responsive (Howard et al., 2008). School counselors should first participate in training and professional development to ensure that they have the appropriate knowledge and skills to provide culturally responsive counseling. School counselors should recognize that to effectively support the needs of racial-ethnic minoritized girls, disparities between students of color and their White peers must be addressed (Garcia & Weiss, 2017). In addition to understanding the impact of environmental and cultural influences on student achievement, consideration should also be given to ideas such as disparities in resources, funding, academic preparation, and school experiences. This study, among others, suggests the need for culturally relevant work that makes learning experiences more meaningful and effective for students of color (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Although culturally relevant teaching has been discussed in the academic realm, there is no evidence of similar conversations occurring in school counseling. As a result, school counselors are left to create their own opportunities for students to gain the necessary attitude, knowledge, and skills to overcome career barriers and build career decision-making self-efficacy. Authors have attempted to establish the need for school counselors to engage in culturally responsive work, offered suggestions on factors to consider, as well as provide ideas and examples of interventions and programs. Based on the study’s findings, additional suggestions are offered to school counselors who desire to be more culturally responsive in their interventions or who wish to include similar interventions such as FLAME, SPARCK or YLA:

1. In any culturally responsive work, you must first examine the needs of the students you serve and implement your interventions accordingly. Collect and analyze relevant data to determine exact needs.

2. Make sure you are knowledgeable regarding the racial-ethnic minority populations in your buildings. This includes cultural background, lived experiences, barriers to college and career readiness, and strengths and protective factors utilized in the intervention.

3. Specific to strengthening career decision-making self-efficacy, school counselors could include the creation of short-term goals. Having students set a current career-related goal may prove helpful in practicing decision-making skills (Falco & Summers, 2017).

4. Be specific about naming barriers. Students should be knowledgeable of the obstacles that they may face in their career pursuits as well
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as understand the career-related resources available to them.

5. Incorporate a job shadowing experience as a vicarious learning and mastery opportunity that could help bring together career-related knowledge presented within the program.

6. Consider utilizing a mentoring program. Mentoring has increased academic success, increased motivation, and decreased dropout rates (Hernandez et al., 2017).

7. Be intentional about teaching students about ethnic identity. These exercises would enable participants to make mental connections between the program material being introduced and their personal experiences.

8. Make connections with students’ homes, school, and community environments. Woolley and Bowen (2007) assert that environmental factors such as home life are associated with student engagement.

9. Connect course content to career examples. CareerStart is a career program that integrates career-relevant skills and core course content.

10. Intentionally include courageous conversations regarding stereotypes, racism, and discrimination; narratives from role models about how they overcame barriers; and participation in activities where necessary skills could be developed.

Limitations

Despite best efforts, there are limitations to the study that require mention. The current study was an extension of an existing program and therefore used the sample population and data that was accessible, which included 34 students of the 58 eligible. It should be noted that there may have been differences in students who chose to participate versus those who did not. Future research should include efforts to recruit a diverse group of role models to gain a more varied perspective. Experiences could have occurred throughout the intervention that may have impacted students’ knowledge or awareness outside of the intervention, affecting post-test scores. Lastly, the intervention should be thoroughly evaluated in content and structure to ensure that it meets the needs of the participants and provides adequate focus on each of the constructs intended.

Conclusion

As school systems continue to reform their curriculum to align with ESSA’s college and career readiness standards, school counselors should utilize this opportunity to strengthen their comprehensive programming. They should be intentional in closing the gap and meeting the needs of all students, especially racially minoritized populations. To break down the barriers faced by girls of color, school counselors must address the lived experiences of these marginalized students,
which is accomplished through the collection and analysis of data (Powell et al., 2020). This data should then be used to inform school counseling programming and interventions. As school counselors continue to focus on each of the three counseling domains, it is important to recognize that career development is receiving growing attention. Positive outcomes related to effective career development are delineated in the literature and offer counselors the support and rationale for implementing culturally responsive career development programs. The literature is also clear about the career-related barriers faced by women of color. With early prevention, young women of color can create and maintain a competitive advantage. The authors suggest that utilizing culturally responsive career development programs such as FLAME will assist in that effort.

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ABSTRACT
Research clearly outlines the many positive benefits associated with study abroad programs (e.g., Arghode et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2019). Unfortunately, the majority of undergraduate students who participate in these experiences are from affluent backgrounds. To increase access to study abroad opportunities for all students, including historically underrepresented student groups (e.g., first-generation college student, lower-income background), higher education institutions need to offer affordable study abroad options. To aid institutions with this task, the current qualitative investigation provides critical insights into students’ perceptions of an affordable, abbreviated study abroad model. The findings from this study highlight the overall program model as a key driver in a student’s decision to pursue a study abroad experience. Specifically, students indicated that a short travel experience designed specifically for underrepresented student groups was an ideal model, as this structure was affordable and welcoming.

Keywords: study abroad, underrepresented students, qualitative research

Preparing students for their transition from college into the “real world” is an essential task for higher education. Unfortunately, many college graduates report that they lack the necessary experiences and network connections to successfully make the transition from a college student to a gainfully employed adult (Murphy et al., 2014). This concerning lack of perceived preparation is especially prevalent among historically underrepresented student populations (Pulliam et al., 2017). To mitigate these concerns, higher education institutions should provide hands-on experiences and opportunities that are intentionally designed to serve and meet the unique needs of underrepresented students at their institution. To aid institutions in this pursuit, this paper provides an in-depth investigation of students’ interactions with and perceptions of a study abroad career exploration program.

Institutional Benefits of Study Abroad
Research has identified study abroad as an important strategy to increase postsecondary retention and completion rates. Students who participate in study abroad programs are more likely to persist in higher education and secure their postsecondary degree (Twobmly et al., 2012; Engel, 2017). For example, 93% of students within the Florida State System who participated in study abroad earned their degree compared to only 64% of non-participants (Posey, 2003). Similarly, students in Texas who studied abroad had a 60% chance of graduating in four-years compared to non-participants who had only a 45% chance (Barclay-Hamir, 2011). The benefits of study abroad transcend racial inequalities often seen within higher education, as research has documented the positive benefits of study abroad for diverse populations of students. For example, researchers examined the impact of study abroad within the University System of Georgia and found that the effects of participating in a study abroad
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program was especially pronounced for students of color whose graduation rates were 18% higher than their peers with alike demographic characteristics who lacked similar experiences (Redden, 2010). Given the significant impact study abroad has on retention and graduation rates, it is not surprising that this strategy is often cited as a high-impact practice within higher education (Kuh, 2009; Stebleton et al., 2013). This strategy not only serves to increase the desired higher education outcomes, but also provides an outlet for students to deepen their academic and personal development.

The Impact of Study Abroad on Student Development

Many undergraduate students choose to participate in a study abroad program as a method to enrich their college experience. Research supports the notion that study abroad can enhance students’ academic and personal growth and development (e.g., Arghode et al., 2020; Tillman, 2012; Movassaghi et al., 2014; Lokkesmore et al., 2016). Students who engage in a study abroad experience are provided an opportunity to compare their cultural norms and values to those of the host country, which helps students broaden their perspectives and cultural awareness (Soto, 2015). This expanded worldview can positively influence student’s decision-making skills, as it provides them alternative perspectives to consider during the decision-making process (Norris & Gillespie, 2008). Study abroad can also expand student’s social network and enhance their social capital. During a study abroad experience, students are exposed to peers and instructors from a wide range of backgrounds, and as a result, the interactions and friendships built through study abroad can serve as an avenue to broaden students’ social networks (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Horn & Fry, 2013). Furthermore, Petersdotter and colleagues (2016) found that a high number of social contacts made during a study abroad experience served as a mediating factor that influenced the developmental trajectory of student’s self-efficacy.

Study abroad has also been found to have an impact on students’ career choices, career adaptability, and career satisfaction (Arghode et al., 2020; Meyer-Lee & Evans, 2007; Franklin, 2010). For example, the networking opportunities created through study abroad experiences often spur interest in international careers (Murphy et al., 2014; Tillman, 2012). To better understand the long-term impact of these experiences, Franklin (2010) surveyed study abroad alumni a decade after they participated in a study abroad experience. Franklin’s study found that the majority of the respondents attributed their career choices and interests to their study abroad experience. This finding was consistent across the various study abroad formats (e.g., semester, yearlong, etc.). In addition to impacting career interests, study abroad experiences also enhanced students’ overall employability prospects after graduation (Di Pietro, 2015; Murphy et al.,
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Study abroad experiences are especially salient for historically underrepresented minority groups because these experiences provide an opportunity to potentially explore their heritage and develop a deeper understanding of their cultural and racial identities (Lee & Green, 2016). Such experiences may also help to develop a stronger national identity because minoritized students and students of color are first perceived as Americans when traveling abroad (Sweeney, 2013). In a study examining the perceived benefits of study abroad among historically underrepresented student populations, Milton (2016) found that growth in independence and the ability to step out of your comfort zone were the most valuable qualities cited from the study abroad experience. Not only do underrepresented students perceive themselves as more open-minded and autonomous after engaging in a study abroad program, but they also report stronger feelings of being better prepared to solve problems and understand global matters (Smith et al., 2013). Given the many advantages of study abroad education, it is necessary that this opportunity is accessible to any college student who may be interested, regardless of their socioeconomic status or background characteristics (e.g., first-generation college student, racial/ethnic minority).

Disparities in Study Abroad Participation

During the 2018-2019 academic year over 345,000 U.S. college students participated in a study abroad experience, which accounted for nearly 2% of all students enrolled at institutions of higher education within the U.S. (NAFSA, 2021). Unfortunately, the majority of students who are participating and subsequently benefiting from these opportunities are predominately white students (NAFSA, 2021). Roughly only 7% of study abroad participants are African American/Black, 11% are Hispanic, and less than 1% are American Indian/Alaska Native (NAFSA, 2021). There are many reasons that contribute to this unequal distribution of engagement with study abroad experiences. Socioeconomic status (SES) is one of the most pronounced factors that influence whether or not a student will participate in a study abroad program. The impact of SES is illustrated by the fact that high cost associated with study abroad experiences is one the primary reasons students cite for not participating in these types of experiences (Brux & Fry, 2010; Lörz et al., 2015; Presley et al., 2010; Relyea et al., 2008; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Lingo, 2019). As a result, students from lower SES backgrounds are significantly less likely to seek out study abroad programs as part of their undergraduate experience (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Thrush, 2016). Students from lower SES backgrounds have a palpable financial disadvantage compared to higher SES peers as they may incur not only a high
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program cost but face the opportunity cost of forgoing earnings while studying abroad (Gordon et al., 2014).

The literature also highlights family obligations, concerns around a lack of cultural and social capital needed to successfully navigate these experiences, and limited access to information about how to access these opportunities as other common barriers that preclude many students from pursuing study abroad (Brux & Fry, 2010; Salisbury et al., 2009; Salisbury et al., 2011; Lingo, 2019; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Thrush, 2016). A recent study on social stratification in study abroad participation (Lingo, 2019) found that the level of parental education plays a role in a student’s decision to seek study abroad opportunities. Students whose parents have college degrees are significantly more likely to engage in study abroad practices compared to first-generation college students (i.e., students whose parents or guardians did not earn a postsecondary degree). Since many students from lower SES backgrounds are also first-generation college students this specific sub-group of students tends to encounter a combination of these barriers (e.g., lack of parental knowledge/support, limited finances) making it very difficult for them to access study abroad opportunities. As a result, many students from historically underrepresented backgrounds often report feeling unwelcomed or unprepared to participate in study abroad programs (Lingo, 2019).

Due to financial constraints and high costs associated with studying abroad, institutions are seeking new, creative ways to offer opportunities specifically designed to meet the unique needs of students from lower-income, first-generation, and/or ethnic minority backgrounds. The duration of the study abroad program has often been cited as a consideration for whether or not a student will partake in the experience. Many students from lower-income backgrounds report that they cannot participate in a traditional semester or yearlong experience due to family and job responsibilities, along with concerns about the high cost associated with a longer-term program (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Thrush, 2016). To address this concern postsecondary institutions have begun to offer short-term study abroad opportunities (e.g., a few weeks during the summer or winter terms). Research indicates that these short-term study abroad experiences are also highly beneficial to students with regards to enhancing student’s self-confidence and widen their career outlook (Nguyen et al., 2014; Slotkin et al., 2012). Given these positive benefits, an abbreviated study abroad model is one way institutions can mitigate the financial and job-related concerns often associated with the longer-term models as a method to provide a more accessible option for all students. By offering students an opportunity for self-exploration in an unfamiliar environment and a possibility to investigate international career prospects at a lower cost, these programs could be instrumental in closing the opportunity gap.
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that currently exists with study abroad programs.

An Abbreviated-Study Abroad Model

The referred study abroad program included in this study was specifically designed to meet the needs of historically underrepresented student populations (e.g., low-income, first-generation, and minority college students) attending a predominately white institution (PWI). The program (i.e., International Careers Program) was developed as a collaborative effort between the University’s Career Center and TRIO Student Support Services Program (TRIO SSS). The University’s Career Center provided the expertise and infrastructure necessary to develop the career exploration side of the program, and the TRIO SSS program served as the vehicle to recruit students and provide support. Students’ TRIO program advisors provided one-on-one guidance and advising to help students navigate the study abroad process. The program was delivered as a two-part sequence: the first part required students to enroll in a career exploration course for college credit during the spring semester followed by a ten-day travel abroad experience that occurred right before the summer term began. The course curriculum introduced students to international careers and provided them the skills and resources needed to navigate traveling abroad. The second half of the program was aimed at providing students an opportunity to learn more about careers abroad through an immersive travel experience. The travel experience was held in Costa Rica, and students were provided structured opportunities to network with employers in the region, as well as international peers who were studying at the local universities and colleges.

Purpose of Study

This qualitative study examined students’ perceptions and interactions with an abbreviated study abroad program focused on career exposure and exploration. The findings presented throughout this paper help extend the study abroad literature by highlighting how historically underrepresented student groups experience these opportunities. The primary goal of this study was to understand students’ reflections on the impact of the short study abroad experience on their future career development and overall personal growth. The following research questions guided the development of this study:

1) To what extent did participation in the international career exploration program impact the participants’ views about their future employment opportunities?
2) How do participants’ think this experience influenced the development of their psychosocial skills?
3) What aspects of the program’s structure and format were appealing to the participants?
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**Methods**

**Setting and Participants**
This study was conducted at a large predominantly white institution (PWI) located in the Midwest region of the U.S. All participants included in this study were active members of the university’s TRIO SSS program (to be eligible for TRIO SSS students must meet one of the following eligibly criteria: qualify as a first-generation student, meet the federal guidelines for low-income status, or have a documented disability that is registered with the university). Students were recruited for the International Careers Program through informational fliers and advising sessions with their TRIO program advisor. Ten students participated in the program and 80% of participants reported that they had never traveled abroad prior to this experience. Demographic information was collected through a self-report survey.

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<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Pathologist</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aiden</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Chemical Engineering</td>
<td>Biomedicine</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
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</table>
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Table 1 presents students’ demographic information, year in college, major and minor degrees, and their intended careers. To protect students’ privacy and ensure anonymity, all participant’s real names were removed, and pseudonyms were assigned prior to analysis.

Data

The data used for this study were generated from three primary sources: student reflection essays, an online survey, and a focus group discussion. The ten students who participated in the program provided consent to participate in the evaluation study. All ten students completed the reflection essays; five students responded to the online survey; and four students attended the follow-up focus group session.

Procedures

The study utilized qualitative content analysis methodology (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to analyze the three data sources. Participants were asked to submit reflection essays within one week of returning from their travel abroad experience in Costa Rica. The essay format was designed to solicit student feedback on their perceptions of the experience, as well as how the experience impacted their career interests. The following excerpt highlights some of the open-ended questions that were used to guide student’s reflections:

- Discuss your assumptions and expectations you had about the program before you participated. How was the actual experience similar or dissimilar from those assumptions and expectations?

- Describe your career choices before you participated in the program.

- Describe how, if at all, your career prospects changed as a result of participating in this experience.

In addition to the essays, students were asked to complete a post-survey designed to solicit feedback on their perceptions of how the experience impacted their personal growth and non-cognitive skills (e.g., self-efficacy, communication skills). Finally, three months after students returned from the travel experience in Costa Rica, they were invited to participate in a follow-up focus group. The focus group was intended to produce a richer data source that could be used to gain a deeper understanding of students’ perceptions and interactions with the program. The focus group used a semi-structured protocol that was designed to obtain additional information on student’s expectations and perceptions, as well as an opportunity to follow-up on key preliminary findings from the survey and essay submissions. Specifically, discussion prompts asked students to further reflect on their overall experience with the International Careers Program, as well as how the program influenced their career prospects and personal
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development. The data collected from the three formats were triangulated and analyzed to identify emergent themes and response patterns.

The authors independently reviewed students’ survey entries and essay responses to identify emergent themes and patterns. Upon completion of the independent analysis, the authors met to discuss the outcomes and to compare their respective codes. When consensus was reached, the authors summarized the results and used that information to construct a focus group protocol. Questions included on the focus group protocol were intended to solicit additional feedback from participants to confirm key findings from the preliminary analyses of the survey and essay responses, as well as to provide additional details to further illuminate areas where preliminary findings were unclear. Four students participated in the focus group (Oliva, Linda, Elizabeth, and Sherry). The second author facilitated the focus group discussion, and the lead author took detailed observational notes. The focus group session lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded. Again, each author independently analyzed the focus group to identify emergent themes and patterns, and then compared findings and engaged in a discussion until a consensus was achieved regarding the final codes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analytic process member checks were conducted to confirm student claims. For the final analytic step, the authors triangulated all data sources to understand student’s perceptions and interactions with the abbreviated study abroad experience. Findings generated from the study were shared with key program stakeholders during a debriefing meeting to examine and verify the accuracy of the emergent themes and patterns.

Findings

In general, findings revealed that participants did not view the program as having an immediate or direct effect on their career decisions. However, the data indicated that the program had a larger impact on shaping students’ perspectives and interactions with a culture different from their own. Three broad themes emerged from the data that provided insights into participants’ perceptions of the study abroad experience. First, participants reported that the program helped broaden their outlook and understanding of the world around them. Second, participants indicated that the International Careers Programs was a positive experience because of the group dynamics created by the program. Finally, participants acknowledged the structure, and the length of the program as a key driver in their decision to pursue a study abroad opportunity as part of their undergraduate experience. The following section organizes the findings based on these three key themes and provides an assortment of illustrative quotes drawn from the raw data as a vehicle to represent the authentic voice of the student participants.
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Global Perspectives
The first major theme that emerged from the data revealed that the International Career Program provided participants an opportunity to broaden their understanding and perspectives of another culture. The majority (80%) of participants reported that they had never traveled abroad before this experience. Because this was the first-time many participants were able to immerse themselves in another culture, a large portion of the conversation in the follow-up focus group and in the reflection essays was centered on describing and reflecting on the various cultural differences they experienced while they were abroad. For example, participants were surprised and overwhelmed by the road conditions and driving infrastructure they experienced in Costa Rica.

“A cultural shock for me was the driving. It stressed me out. They honk to say you can go, which is different. It seems like stop signs are optional. It was overwhelming.” - Aiden

Participants were also surprised to discover that familiar cultural institutions (e.g., McDonalds) had variations that reflected the local context.

“They even had rice and beans on the menu at McDonalds!” - Olivia

“The McDonalds had a bakery inside; we don’t have that at home.” - Sherry

During several of the group outings participants said they noted that the local Costa Ricans were very accommodating to foreign tourist. As highlighted in the quotes below, these experiences prompted participants to reflect on their own experiences as a U.S. resident:

“In the high tourist areas they really accommodate you. Like they speak English, like that’s what we expect them to do being from the United States. You go into another country and expect them to speak your language. It lets you know our privilege and entitlement. I’m sure that can be annoying.” - Tom

As part of the experience, participants were able to visit the local university where they had the opportunity to interact and network with college peers. Through these conversations participants said they realized that the undergraduate experience in Costa Rica was different than their experience. Many participants were surprised to find out that the students they spoke with in Costa Rica did not work while attending university.

“I found it empowering that they [local university students] thought working and going to school – they thought it was crazy. And for us it is normal, it’s an everyday thing.” - Linda

“Talking to students at the university in Costa Rica was really eye opening. They were asking us if we work and how expensive school is and stuff like that. It was like no
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one in their classes worked, they had to travel like 2 hours on public transportation to get to school and most lived with their families. This is so different than what we do.”
- Elizabeth

“I want to work and go to school because my job gives me experience for what I want to do, but there are some semesters where I wish I could just go to school. But I don’t really have that option.” – Sherry

While the study abroad program had a well-thought out itinerary to guide the ten-day trip, participants noted several instances when things did not go according to plan (e.g., delayed flights, missed transportation). As a result of the external factors that impacted the travel experience, the consensus among participants was to embrace flexibility while traveling abroad. They all acknowledged that traveling abroad can be incredibly stressful as you learn the area and culture. The quotes below highlight how students coped with the unexpected interruptions to their study abroad experience:

“Use context clues in every situations. There will be times, mainly in the beginning, where you experience stressful situations because you are confused... you cannot expect to be around people similar to you all the time, so be prepared to use all of your knowledge to address situations appropriately.” – Nick

“Adaptability and flexibility were traits that I have struggled with for the majority of my life and not being in control was a challenge for me during some aspects of the trip. As time progressed, I learned to adapt and deal with what I cannot control and make the best of every situation I was placed in... this experience taught me that I am more mentally capable of handling adversity than I previously thought and I shouldn’t limit myself to opportunities within my comfort zone.” – Briana

Finally, a few students who participated in the program were minoring in Spanish and wanted to use the experience as an opportunity to practice their Spanish skills. Participants reported that they were surprised that their formal Spanish training did not always translate when they were attempting to engage in a conversation with a native speaker.

“Some of the things we learned in Spanish, that we’re taught, that’s more like their slang. Sometimes I’d say something and they’d [Native Costa Ricans] respond, and I’d think I thought that was something else.” - Sabrina

While students said they wanted to improve their Spanish skills through this experience, they indicated that the ten-day time period where they were abroad was simply not enough time to really impact the development of their Spanish skills. Additionally, participants indicated that many of the residents they interacted with in Costa Rica would speak English as a way to reduce the impact of the language barrier. The short time period coupled with limited opportunities
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where participants had to rely on their Spanish abilities resulted in little to no gains in this area.

“I was surprised that people here [Costa Rica] speak English so well... I am amazed by the fact that English is so common.”
- Aiden

“We weren’t there long enough for my Spanish to really improve. Also a lot of the people there spoke English really well and when they would interact with us they would just speak English. I wanted to try and practice my Spanish, but their English was a lot better than my Spanish so it made it easier for them to just talk to me in English.”
- Olivia

Group Dynamics
The International Careers Program was specifically designed for historically underrepresented student groups, and as such, focused recruitment efforts on TRIO eligible students (i.e., first-generation, low-income, and/or have a documented disability). This strategic recruitment effort was well received by participants. The majority of participants reported that the group dynamics created by the program was a key factor that contributed to the overall success of the experience.

“I really liked that this program was specifically for students who are in TRIO [first-generation, low-income, and/or have a documented disability].”
- Aiden

“Going through TRIO with people I knew, and from the same background as me. It was like oh for your first time studying abroad, I wanted that.”
- Sherry

The cohesive group dynamics helped create a supportive environment where participants felt supported and were able to express vulnerability during challenging disruptions during the trip (e.g., delayed flights, navigating the language barrier).

“Throughout the trip, I learned the significance of having patience and self-control. We went through so much together that could have been worse had we not been able to control ourselves.”
- Nick

The group structure also provided an opportunity for students to develop deeper connections with their home university peers as well as form relationships with new international peers.

“I was forced to talk to strangers, which helped me to make friends and be more independent.”
- Linda

Program Structure
The most salient finding from the current study centered around the program structure. Participants said the most important factor that influenced their decision about whether or not they could or would even want to participate in study abroad was the program’s model. At the top of their list of
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considerations for participating in study abroad program was cost. All participants reported that money was the most important factor they considered when looking at study abroad opportunities.

The second most important factor participants considered was the length of the program. Many participants said a semester or yearlong experience would not be possible with their schedules (both class and work).

“I chose this experience because of money. Realistically even with scholarships, I wouldn’t be able to come up with the rest of it [to pay for a full semester study abroad experience].” - Olivia

“I wanted to study abroad, but obviously I couldn’t afford to do that all semester. [My TRIO Advisor] recommended this to me as an alternative.” - Elizabeth

“When I first saw the email about this program I basically put it in my junk folder and didn’t really think too much about it. I never really wanted to study abroad because I knew it just wasn’t possible for me. But when I found out that I’d be able to get scholarships and it would fit in my schedule I thought it might be a good opportunity for me to see another culture, I’ve never been abroad.” - Linda

“They offered scholarships for us to even get our passport! They had all the resources we needed, made it super easy.” – Sherry

“I never thought I’d be able to afford it or have time for it and therefore may have unconsciously made myself believe I had no interest in traveling out of the country.” - Anna

“Because I work and have summer classes it was a good time – only 2 weeks - because I have to take Organic Chemistry and work this summer, I couldn’t do anything longer. That gap between spring semester and summer was perfect, it was really great.” - Linda

Finally, several students reported that having the formal class offered during the spring semester and the trip abroad as the culminating experience was an ideal model.

“I liked having the classes prior where we could all discuss everything and get to know each other. The instructors were able to tell us about their experiences too, which was helpful. We didn’t have to just read it out of a book.” – Elizabeth

“We did a lot of the work before, so we were able to enjoy the moment when we were there [Costa Rica]. I had a friend who did a semester study abroad in India where she had to take classes and do homework while she was there. I liked doing all of that before we left and just being able to enjoy the trip and reflect on the actual experience while I was there.” - Olivia
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Discussion

The data generated from this study provides insight into students’ perceptions and interactions with an abbreviated study abroad model. Like previous research (Brux & Fry, 2010; Lörz et al., 2015; Presley et al., 2010; Relyea et al., 2008; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012; Lingo, 2019), participants reported that money was the main factor they considered when deciding whether or not to participate in a study abroad experience. Participants indicated that they selected this abbreviated study abroad experience specifically because it was an affordable option. Findings revealed that cost of attendance was not the only financial consideration they factored into their decision, but also the opportunity cost related to employment. For example, several participants indicated that they appreciated that the travel abroad component of the program was shorter in length and offered in the interim period between spring and summer classes. This was particularly appealing because many participants said they need to work throughout the year, and traditional study abroad programs would not afford them the same opportunities to earn an income while going to school.

Another key finding from this study was the impact of the group dynamics on participants experience. Previous research indicates that historically underrepresented students often feel unwelcome or uniformed about study abroad opportunities, which often precludes their participation in these types of undergraduate experiences (Lingo, 2019). The majority of participants in this study said they appreciated that this opportunity was specifically designed for TRIO students. Students felt like the experience was more welcoming because it was specifically intended to serve student populations from similar backgrounds. Many participants said they felt more comfortable around this similar group of peers. Additionally, participants felt they were able to get the information and guidance they needed to successfully navigate the study abroad process. Leveraging the TRIO office and student’s respective TRIO advisors as a vehicle to recruit students severed as a strategic method to increase accessibility to study abroad opportunities for historically underrepresented student populations.

Previous research has found that study abroad can be an influential strategy to shaping students’ career development and interests (e.g., Arghode et al., 2020; Franklin, 2010; Murphy et al., 2014). A central tenant of
the referred study abroad program included in this study was centered on international career development and exposure. As previously mentioned, the study abroad program was a collaborative effort between the University’s Career Center and a TRIO SSS program. The program was specifically designed to expose historically underrepresented student groups to international careers. The data generated from this qualitative study did not support the notion that the study abroad experience had a direct impact on participant’s career development or interest. All the participants indicated that their career interests and plans had not changed over the course of their experience. Many of the participants indicated that they already had a strong understanding of their career interests prior to engaging with the study abroad program, and they already knew what they wanted to pursue as a career. This finding is interesting given that most of the sample were in the early years of their postsecondary experience. According to a study conducted by Strada Education Network and Gallup (2017) 51% of undergraduate students are not confident in their career path when they enroll in college, and more than half of students change their major at least once. While only time will tell if the students in the current study pursue the careers they described as part of this study, it was clear from participant’s responses during the focus group session and reflection essays they had a strong sense of their career aspirations which were largely unrelated and uninfluenced by their study abroad experience.

**Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this qualitative study. Specifically, the sample size of the students who participated in the study abroad program was relatively small, and the data were collected using a convenience sampling method. Drawing on a readily available sample reduces reliability of the data and limits generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the sample exemplifies one geographic location in Midwest that also reduces generalizability. Finally, the data generated from this study relied on student’s self-report analysis of the impact of the study abroad experience on their personal, academic, and career development. While the study offers a rich account of their perceptions of the impact of the program, future research should examine the impact of such a program using more direct assessment measures.

**Future Research Directions**

Despite the identified limitations the study adds to the existing literature on the value of study abroad experiences for underrepresented student populations. The study provides additional insights to understanding how an affordable, short-term study abroad opportunity can expand student’s global perspectives and enhance their non-cognitive development (e.g.,
practicing patience and adaptability). Future research using larger samples and geographical locations will allow for a more robust examination of the effects of various study abroad formats on student development and career choices for historically underrepresented student populations. Furthermore, quantitative methods may help illuminate the magnitude of the impact of study abroad on student’s academic, career development, and personal growth. Finally, a longitudinal investigation of a short-term study abroad program specifically designed for historically underrepresented students could shed light on the potential lasting impacts of this type of program.

Conclusion

This study offers insights into how a well-designed and structured program can help students form underrepresented groups expand their global outlook by providing unique opportunities for students to gain self-confidence, personal growth, and cultural awareness. This study further extends the area of research on specific strategies and practices that higher education can leverage to help raise better prepare students for the college-to-work transition.

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ teens’ career decision-making processes are confounded by LGBTQ+ identity development and negative experiences in school. The authors present literature identifying specific needs of LGBTQ+ teens involved in career planning and propose a specialized career group counseling model designed to address those needs. Potential application for counselors in schools and the community are discussed.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ career planning, group career counseling

It is not surprising, given the consistently high rates of campus violence, harassment, and bullying, (GLSEN, 2019; Rockenbach et al., 2017; Strear, 2017; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016) that many LGBTQ+ students report not feeling safe in their high schools (GLSEN, 2019). More than half of LGBTQ+ students are battling symptoms of depression (Singh & Kosciw, 2018), and these stressors only amplify already difficult career decisions that adolescents face. These barriers put upon LGBTQ+ students directly interfere with their abilities to engage in comprehensive career decision making (Chen & Keats, 2016).

Administrators and educators are aware of the problem but often report being afraid to intervene, even when they want to (Strear, 2017). School counselors and administrators have been encouraged to collaborate to make improvements for LGBTQ+ students (Beck, 2017; Boyland et al., 2018; Strear, 2017). Specific training for faculty and staff (Boyland et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2017), as well as mentoring programs have been discussed providing education and guidance (Singh & Kosciw, 2018). Scholars have also highly recommended integrating anti-LGBTQ+ bullying into curricula (Boyland et al., 2018; Strear, 2017) and normalizing the use of pronouns and inclusive language (GLSEN, 2019; Rankin et al., 2019; Simons et al., 2017). Despite these efforts, challenges persist. As gender identity becomes further understood as a spectrum of identities, individuals who identify outside of historically dichotomous features become increasingly marginalized (Rankin et al., 2019). Transgender students may struggle with a lack of support, which can leave them feeling both invisible and buried beneath heteronormative power structures (Rockenbach et al., 2017). This has generated cycles of underrepresentation and little social support (Beck, 2017; McMahon et al., 2017; Rankin et al., 2019; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). Moreover, LGBTQ+ populations typically find themselves needing...
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to discern when it is safe to disclose aspects of their identity (Rockenbach et al., 2017), as others’ adverse responses may put them at risk of harm (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). It is within this context that LGBTQ+ students must also consider post-secondary career decision-making.

Understanding these barriers to positive identity development allows educators to support LGBTQ+ youth and further understand the diversity of services required to meet their specific needs (Singh & Kosciw, 2018). At a time when teens are discovering their identities (e.g., sexual and gender identities), educators must analyze the impact of how biopsychosocial dimensions like gender norms have been socialized into their self-concept (Rockenbach et al., 2017). The aim of educators should be to expand opportunities; while little is really known about the career needs of LGBTQ+ youth (Chen & Keats, 2016), career planning is more of a challenge given the safety and security threats to LGBTQ+ people in the workplace (Baker & Lewis, 2017). Due to this stigma, LGBTQ+ adults must continually assess risk/safety of coming out (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). Additionally, in the presence of a polarizing political climate, corporations are increasingly taking stands on issues, adopting more conservative religious values or more liberal secular values, depending on the organization (Brown & Scott, 2019). Thus, LGBTQ+ students face difficulty in their current high school environments and can reasonably expect continued challenges, which further complicates the career decision-making process.

Career Planning and LGBTQ+ Teens

Almost 70% of students surveyed by Owen and colleagues (2020) reported wanting career information from school counselors, suggesting that today’s students are possibly not receiving that information. Students’ readiness to make career decisions has been seen to be largely influenced by how aware they are of opportunities and timelines (Gu et al., 2019). Student preparedness is also supplemented by trusted advisors facilitating conversations about careers and career decision-making that increase student confidence and motivation (Bolat & Odaci, 2017). Inclusive representation is one way to improve this, as LGBTQ+ students lack out role models when making decisions about college (Cheng et al., 2017). Bolat and Odaci (2017) also emphasized that students of higher socioeconomic standing made career decisions more confidently, and while funding may be available, LGBTQ+ students are especially affected by hurdles such as finances due to reduced access to grants and scholarships (Rockenbach et al., 2017). Complicating the financial issue, many teens lack appropriate financial literacy for moving into adulthood (Johnston-Rodriguez & Henning, 2019).
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Career Group Counseling

Career group counseling can normalize experiences that contribute to career anxiety, efficiently deliver career interventions, and foster enjoyment and connection among members and leaders (Pyle & Hayden, 2015). As a counseling intervention, career group counseling provides a setting for participants to experience Yalom’s (2005) curative factors of instilling hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis, and existential factors. Additionally, Falco and Shaheed (2021) suggested that career group counseling may be especially applicable in school settings, and Pyle and Hayden (2015) provide specific recommendations using their Group Career Counseling model with high school students (p.33).

Leaders of career group counseling should be intentional and specific about developmentally appropriate goals for the group, in addition to facilitating exploration, reflection, and decision-making (Falco & Shaheed, 2021). When considering implementation of career group counseling interventions, Falco and Shaheed (2021) further cautioned that “how a career counseling intervention is implemented is just as important as what is accomplished as a result” (p. 10). Brown and Ryan Krane (2000) suggested that successful career interventions include the use of written exercises, interpretations and feedback, world of work information, modeling, and building support. Additionally, by focusing on both cognitive and affective aspects of career decision-making, career group counseling may be particularly effective at reducing some of the real and perceived sociocultural barriers to career exploration and decision-making (Falco & Shaheed, 2021, p. 15).

Pyle and Hayden (2015) proposed a four-stage model for career group counseling that addresses both affective and cognitive goals at each stage. During the Encounter stage, group norms are established, the importance of participation is stressed, and members get to know one another. Affective goals include putting members at ease and cognitive ones include clarifying the purpose and expectations of the group. In the Exploration stage, leaders help facilitate increased self-disclosure among group members. The affective goals are for members to pay more attention to each other than to their own anxiety, and cognitive goals are geared toward exploration of self and the world of work. The third stage is the Working stage, during which members report on their out-of-group tasks and bring problems to the group in a confident manner. Affective goals include openness to change and acceptance of factors outside members’ control, while cognitive goals include provision of specific occupational information and evaluation of pros and cons for various careers. Stage four is the Action stage, during which members...
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begin taking steps toward realizing the decisions they’ve made. Affective goals include a sense of accomplishment and closeness with other members; cognitive goals include understanding what is meant by “learning how to learn,” in addition to gaining clarity regarding individual strengths and skills.

**Proposing “Over the Rainbow” Career Group Counseling Plan**

Based on the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth and the importance of post-secondary career decision making, we propose an extension of Pyle and Hayden’s (2015) Group Career Counseling model. We envision Over the Rainbow (OTR) as a career group counseling intervention specifically designed for LGBTQ+ high school youth. Pyle and Hayden (2015) presented their group career counseling model to take place over three, 90-minute sessions. In customizing their work for this purpose and in keeping with the importance of both how and what (Falco & Shaheed, 2021), we suggest a six-session group that will include both career and LGBTQ+ specific activities in each group session. We envision several foundational elements for the group, including engaging LGBTQ+ identified volunteer guest speakers from the local community, imploring group members to come to each session with two or three new ideas for possible realistic career options, and utilizing/customizing a variety of activities freely available online. In setting goals for a group like this, Pyle and Hayden (2015) highlighted the importance of group members developing an understanding of (1) the connection between their interests, abilities, and values to the world of work, (2) how to best make career decisions, (3) at least five potential realistic career options, and (4) action steps to take after the group has terminated. We would add that group members also experience increased: (5) sense of social support and (6) awareness of post-secondary support resources for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

**Pre-Group Planning**

OTR could be led by a school counselor, a pair of school counselors, a local career practitioner familiar with the needs of LGBTQ+ students, or by some combination of these and other qualified personnel. Group leaders who are new to this type of leadership should seek out an experienced group leader to co-facilitate with for their first time. Master’s degree programs provide training in group facilitation skills and knowledge, but unless they received strong supervision for group work during their internships, many counselors report a lack of confidence in
leading groups (Midgett et al., 2016; Springer et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2013). Given the vulnerabilities experienced by LGBTQ+ students, competence for group leadership is an important consideration. We recommend that the Association for Specialists in Group Work’s (ASGW) (2021) Guiding Principles for Group Work be utilized for tracking competency.

Group leaders should garner institutional support for OTR prior to any plans being formalized to ensure that school administrators are on board. The location where the group meets should be carefully considered. LGBTQ+ students may feel more comfortable attending a group like this if it was held in a community location away from school grounds. At the same time, parents may question a school-sponsored activity that doesn’t take place on school grounds. The program should be presented and promoted to faculty members first, before recruiting students, so that faculty are equipped to answer questions posed by their students. Eligibility criteria should be established, as well as plans for group size. We recommend this group for LGBTQ+-identified high school juniors and seniors and agree with Pyle and Hayden’s (2015) recommendation that the group not exceed eight members so that appropriate space for reflection and processing can be provided.

For the purposes of this article, we have grouped LGBTQ+ all together. At the same time, we recognize the unique needs of people identifying as trans or gender non-binary separate from those with a minoritized affectional orientation. Trans people can be silenced when grouped with other minoritized groups (Beauregard et al., 2016; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). Therefore, we recommend as a best practice that intentional efforts are made to include trans voices. The group might be planned as half LGB and half trans, or if there are enough trans people known to the group leaders, a separate group could be established specifically for them. In any case, group leaders should be well versed in the important differences between sexual orientation and gender identity. Such knowledge will improve leaders’ ability to be helpful to individual members of the group, which will also help representatives from both populations to better understand each other.

As a part of the planning process for the group, leaders should reach out to LGBTQ+-identified adult members of the local community to identify appropriate and available local resources for group participants. Additionally, guest speakers should be recruited to address the topics of being out at work, LGBTQ+ initiatives on college campuses, and basic money management skills. Guest speakers should be encouraged to connect students to various resources and supports for LGBTQ+ students in the community, on college campuses, and in the workplace. Finally, LGBTQ+ individuals who are willing to be contacted by group members should be recruited for
referrals to group members. The group leader should meet with each prospective member of the group to screen for appropriateness for group participation, answer any logistical questions, and conduct a pre-assessment. The questions asked on the pre-assessment should be the same for the post-assessment so that the success of the group can easily be measured and areas for improvement are easily identified. A suggested list of questions for this purpose is offered in Appendix A. In addition to summative evaluation, group leaders can conduct formative evaluations by gathering anonymous feedback from each session via a simple form asking the questions, “What did you like best/least about this session?” and “What reactions did you have to the group process today?” This feedback can help group leaders evaluate the efficacy of each week’s interventions and respond to any identified trends week to week.

Session #1: Program Expectations, Career Decision-Making, and LGBTQ+ Identity Development

The first session marks the beginning of the Encounter stage of the group (Pyle & Hayden, 2015). We suggest starting the session with a fun icebreaker activity that helps participants learn one another’s names and pronouns. Group norms should be collaboratively established, and confidentiality and its limits should be carefully explained. The goal of the career decision-making element is to help participants understand the complexity of and stages involved in career decision-making, including exploration, crystallization, choice, and clarification (Pyle & Hayden, 2015). Participants should be affirmed that making career decisions is not easy for anyone, and that many feel confused about their options before focusing in on a small number of options and eventually gaining clarity. The second part of the session should be focused on LGBTQ+ identity development. We recommend a review of key concepts and identities within the LGBTQ+ umbrella and a discussion of outness and decision-making about coming out to certain people. Again, participants should be affirmed that career decision-making is further complicated with the realities of LGBTQ+ identity development. Following a brief demonstration of the O*Net online, the session should end with two assignments: the first to complete a personality inventory before the next session, and the second to come back with one or two realistic career options. Utilizing the O*Net online, members should note for each career option selected the median wage, projected growth, education and training requirements, and other types of jobs that could be possible with similar education and training.

Session #2: Personality Type and Career Preferences and the Continuum of Outness

In Session #2, the group should be moving into Pyle and Hayden’s (2015) Exploration stage. The session should open with a discussion of the personality assessment process and identification of what members
agreed or disagreed with and what surprised them the most, followed by a discussion about how personality type can impact the kind of work a person is drawn to, the influence of type on relationships in the workplace, and impact of type on long term career management. Group members should discuss the career options they chose for consideration and how these seem to fit or not fit with what they learned about their personality type preferences. The LGBTQ+ part of this session should be a continuation from the first session, focused on the risks and benefits associated with being out. Leaders can use tools such as the Human Rights Campaign’s Corporate Equality Index (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2021) to inform students about workplaces that are actively promoting policies that benefit LGBTQ+ employees. The HRC website can be accessed to explore specific work-related issues, particularly for insurance for gender affirming healthcare. An LGBTQ+-identified guest speaker should be invited to this session to discuss their experiences of being out at work and the various considerations they weighed in making those decisions. The homework assigned at the conclusion of this session should be to complete interest and values surveys as an additional part of the self-exploration process and to select an additional one to two career options to explore using the O*Net online resource.

Session #3: The College Question, Support Networks, and Social Media Profiles

By the time this session begins, the group will have entered Pyle and Hayden’s (2015) Working stage. The leader should keep the group in the working stage until Session #5. At the beginning of the session, the leader should facilitate a discussion similar to the one at the beginning of Session #2, focusing on what was learned from the values and interests surveys. In this session, the group leader should stress the importance of soft skills for success in career and other important areas of life. In response to the earlier discussions about the potential risks and benefits of coming out, the leader should facilitate a discussion stressing the importance of building a strong network of people who they can trust will be supportive of them, and the importance of building appropriate social media profiles should be discussed in this session. The guest speaker for this session should be an LGBTQ+-identified person (or persons) who represent local colleges to explain the LGBTQ+ initiatives and supports on their campuses. The group leader should open a discussion about post-high school options, such as going to college right away, deferring college entrance, or choosing not to go to college. For homework, participants should continue to consider reasons to go to college or not and should conduct some of their own online research to help answer this question for their own unique situation. Participants should start a list of personal strengths they identify during the group process which they will use when preparing
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for interviews. Finally, members should select one or two more career options utilizing the O*Net online system.

Session #4: Networking and Safe Dating

At the start of this session, the leader should facilitate a follow-up conversation addressing participants’ thoughts and feelings about going to college. The conversation should include a report out from group members on any pertinent information they found regarding the college decision, along with the additional career options they identified. Participants should discuss the importance of networking and informational interviews as a method for continuing to build a support network, learning about new opportunities, finding solutions to career planning setbacks and other problems, and ultimately identifying potential job opportunities. The LGBTQ+ focus for this session is on safe dating practices and identifying general safety strategies. The safety information provided should include material on sex, substance use, and intimate partner violence. An LGBTQ+ guest speaker could discuss LGBTQ+-identified career role models. The homework for this session should be for participants to identify their top 3 career options among all the careers they investigated during the course of the program and to note any additional strengths they identified about themselves during the session.

Session #5: Cover letters, Resumes, and Money Management

In this session, leaders should help the group transition to Pyle and Hayden’s (2015) Action stage. The leader should help members construct a resume focused on the transferable strengths and skills of each individual student. A simple cover letter format should be provided for students to later customize for their own use. The LGBTQ+ portion of this session should address intersectionality, inviting students to discuss the various features of their identities. They may also choose to include facets of their status at school, such as team participation, leadership positions, or extracurricular activities. The guest speaker invited to this session should be an LGBTQ+-identified person from the community who is equipped to teach students about basic money management strategies, such as checkbook balancing, use of credit cards, and budgeting basics. The homework for this session should be for participants to research one or two more career options via the O*Net online system.

Session #6: Mock Interviews, Wrap-Up, and Next Steps

In this final session, participants will prepare for how they will individually move forward from having participated in the career group counseling process. Reflecting on identified strengths, the leader should facilitate a discussion about best practices for interviewing. Mock interviews might be
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conducted like a “speed-dating” exercise. Participants should be given the post-assessment questionnaire and some time to complete it. The leader should facilitate a discussion of the major takeaways from the program, specific things participants enjoyed and learned from, and any specific things they would recommend be changed. As participants leave, the leader should give each member a list of local resources they can use as they move forward in their own career development process.

Post-group Analysis and Evaluation

Group leaders should soon conduct a program evaluation to identify program strengths and areas for improvement. The most basic approach to program evaluation is to analyze the degree to which the program did what it was designed to do (Cresswell, 2018). Utilizing their own observations during group sessions, verbal reports from participants during the wrap-up session, and analysis of pre- and post-assessments completed by students, leaders should be able to identify the degree to which the program met its goals, along with strengths in the program and areas needing improvement.

Discussion

It is our hope that participation in a group such as OTR will help LGBTQ+ students feel more confident in themselves in terms of staying safe in their environments and will leave them better equipped for career planning. OTR may provide an effective response to the call for more career information for high school youth (Owen et al., 2020) and addresses the importance of role models for LGBTQ+ youth navigating college decision making (Cheng et al., 2017). This group structure provides an opportunity for collaboration amongst school counselors and administrators to improve the climate for LGBTQ+ students, which has been called for by previous scholars (Beck, 2017, Boyland et al., 2018, Strear, 2017).

The activities we propose for OTR directly address the original goals of the group and were suggested as a way of supporting the cognitive and affective goals proposed by Pyle and Hayden (2015). We purposefully utilized free online sources for session activities (shown in Appendix B) to make the group easy to adopt. By participating in the group, members will engage in a self-discovery process that includes inventories of their personality preferences, values, and career interests, and they will engage in meaningful discussion about how these relate to their own career development process. Through teaching and modeling, the group leaders and guest speakers will provide important information addressing career decision-making, and participants will engage in identifying a minimum of four to eight possible career options and ultimately choosing their top two to three. Participants will learn about important job search skills in preparation for future actions necessary in expediting career plans. They will have the
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opportunity to both provide and receive social support and would have been introduced to a variety of resources. Beyond the basic goals of the program, students will be connected with important information about financial aid to support their potential college education.

Counselors and other helping professionals interested in leading an OTR group may face barriers to executing their plans. Resistance may come from school administrators, school faculty, parents/caregivers, or some combination of these. Potential sources of resistance might include fear, denial, lack of awareness, conflicting priorities, and intentional/unintentional prejudice. We recommend that schools adopt the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) (2012) National Model to ensure that school counselors’ roles are clearly defined and understood by various stakeholders in the system. The quality of the school counselor-to-school administrator relationship cannot be understated when considering potential success or failure of new program efforts (Edwards et al., 2014). Counselors may need to provide some education around the experiences of LGBTQ+ students as a precursor to proposing the OTR group. Proceeding with the group without stakeholder support could lead to a variety of negative consequences for the group leaders, and especially for LGBTQ+ students.

Limitations

Students choosing to join OTR would be outing themselves to other group members who they may or may not know and also to the group facilitator(s) who they may or may not know. We hope that the benefits of mutuality and shared experience associated with group interventions outweigh the risks of students outing themselves to others who identify as LGBTQ+. As confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in group counseling, students should carefully consider their decision to participate, and leaders should emphasize the importance of respecting individual privacy at each session.

Implications

The unique combination of LGBTQ+ and career activities presented in OTR could provide a road map for practicing school counselors providing services to LGBTQ+-identified students. The interventions may also be useful to community based clinical mental health counselors working with LGBTQ+ adolescents individually or as a part of family counseling. Counselor educators and supervisors can utilize the OTR career group counseling intervention to support inclusive training of mental health and school counselors. The information could also be used in preparing doctoral students as they become educators of future practitioners. Since there is very little scholarship addressing the career needs of LGBTQ+ identified teens, and very little scholarship
evaluating group career counseling interventions, researchers should conduct empirical inquiry to identify the efficacy of OTR in achieving its desired results.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ teens face significant challenges in navigating both identity development and career development. In this article we presented a career group counseling intervention to address both identity development among LGBTQ+ teens and improve their college and career decision making. We encourage utilization, testing, and refinement of this model.

REFERENCES


GLSEN (2019). Supporting safe and healthy schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students: A national survey of school counselors, social workers, and psychologists. GLSEN. www.glsen.org/research
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Appendix A: Questions for Use on Pre-and Post-Assessment

Name at least 2 interests you have when it comes to your future career.

Name at least 2 of your best skills/abilities.

Name at least 2 work values you have.

Do you understand the relationship between your interests, abilities, and values and the world of work? If so, please summarize. If not, what questions do you have?

What do you know about career decision-making?

Name at least 5 realistic career options that you have considered.

What actions are you aware of that you can take to learn more about certain careers?

Please rate the amount of social support you feel you have, with 1 being the lowest amount and 10 being the highest.

What resources in your community or in a college that you are considering are available to support your identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?
Appendix B: Suggested Resources for Session Activities and Homework

Assessments
Barrett Values Centre. (n.d.). Personal Values Assessment
https://www.valuescentre.com/tools-assessments/pva/

College Information
https://www.thebalancecareers.com/should-you-go-to-college-525564

General Career Resources
Mulvahill, E. (2021, March 19). 12 awesome classroom activities that teach job readiness skills. We Are Teachers.
https://www.weareteachers.com/9-awesome-classroom-activities-that-teach-job-readiness-skills/
Reality Works (n.d.). 20 key soft skills that all students need.

Job Search Skills
Career One Stop. (2021). Do informational interviews to learn about a career or company.
https://www.careeronestop.org/JobSearch/Network/informational-interviews.aspx
Indeed Editorial Team. (2021, April 5). 8 interview questions for teens with examples and tips.
https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/interviewing/interview-questions-for-teens

LGBTQ+ Specific Resources
https://www.naceweb.org/career-development/special-populations/career-considerations-of-lgbtq-students/

Safety Resources
https://www.rainn.org/articles/safety-planning
ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between visits to college campuses by middle school and high school students and postsecondary enrollment rates, where campus visits are classified as both formal college visits and also informal campus visits. Specifically, Traditional Campus Visits and Educational Campus Field Trips are categorized as two distinct service types sponsored by the GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) grant program in 11 rural, western North Carolina school districts. The participants were 2,274 students who started the GEAR UP program in 7th grade and remained enrolled at a participating GEAR UP school through high school graduation. Using logistic regression analyses to estimate the effects of two different campus visit types, and the year in which the visits occurred, the results indicated that both informal (Educational Campus Field Trip) and formal (Traditional College Visit) campus visits had an association with postsecondary enrollment rates, with formal campus visits collectively having a stronger impact than informal campus visits. We also found that visits taken earlier in a student’s academic career had an important association with postsecondary enrollment rates.

Keywords: college visits, postsecondary enrollment, college-going culture

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
This study was made possible through the support of the Appalachian State University GEAR UP grant program (award #P334A014205 and #P334A014206), the department of College Access Partnerships, and the students, teachers, parents, and administrators of the 11 GEAR UP school districts without whom this work would not have been possible. We wish to also acknowledge Molly Martin from the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Appalachian State University for her work with organizing the data received from the National Student Clearinghouse.

The value of a postsecondary degree has been studied as the economic needs for an educated workforce increase (Carnevale et al., 2013). As such, a review of factors that underlie differential postsecondary enrollment rates is of interest. Research by Fraysier et al. (2020) showed that secondary school engagement, and in particular future goals and aspirations, are significant predictors of postsecondary enrollment. Their review suggests that student engagement is a construct made up of demographic, achievement, behavioral, and cognitive/affective components, and that student engagement is predictive of postsecondary enrollment and retention. There are multiple frameworks for the college decision making process, including those
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described in Chapman (1984), Conley (2008), Jackson (1982), and Litten (1982). Each framework describes the decision-making process as having distinct stages, and while the focus of each framework is a bit different, exposure to colleges by visiting campus has a role in each of them. Programs that provide access to college for secondary students are important in helping shape their view of themselves as college students (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Swanson et al., 2021). These programs may also include early college coursework and other rigorous learning opportunities.

College visits are recognized as an important component of a student’s college choice, as described in King (2012), Secore (2018), and Swanson et al. (2021). Campus facilities are an important part of that selection, particularly academic facilities related to a student’s intended major (McDonald, 2019).

Okerson (2016) found that students’ impressions of college are affected by a college visit, and that several aspects of a college visit that are noteworthy to students during a college visit are somewhat intangible, such as campus aesthetics and a general feeling of comfort on the campus. Okerson (2016) also found that some aspects of students’ impressions of a campus visit were not directly under the college’s control relative to the visit, such as weather, bulletin board material, and construction projects. Students from rural high schools face significant challenges related to college access.

Morton et al. (2018) identified concerns among rural students about attending college through a series of interviews, and suggested that a lack of resources for college planning and research existed as a barrier to college for rural students. Providing services such as college and career counseling, learning resources, and access to college-level coursework for students in rural districts is associated with increased college enrollment rates and some other academic measures of college readiness, but not all outcome measures had statistically significant changes associated with the services offered (Mokher et al., 2019). High school students from low-income backgrounds or whose parents did not attend college face challenges in college access and may benefit from additional support services to increase college access (Choy et al., 2000).

GEAR UP Background and Grant Program

Administered by the U.S. Department of Education, GEAR UP is a competitive grant program authorized by Congress under Chapter 2 of the 1998 amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965. In 2014, Appalachian State University was awarded two 7-year GEAR UP partnership grants to support 11 rural school districts, staff, students, and families in western North Carolina. Using a cohort model that follows students over the course of seven years, GEAR UP aims to expose students to a variety of career and college options starting in sixth
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grade and seventh grade and supports them on their journey through their first year of college. With the goal of improving student access to and preparation for postsecondary education, our GEAR UP program has established partnerships with Institutions of Higher Education to provide services to over 15,000 students, in particular college campus visits. Though North Carolina has experienced rapid population growth in recent years, the state ranks second in the U.S. for having the largest rural population, after Texas, signaling the growth has not taken place uniformly across the state (State of Demographer of North Carolina, 2020; Tippett, 2016). The 11 school districts in the GEAR UP program in western North Carolina are considered rural districts, consisting of 55 total schools (24 high schools and 31 elementary/middle schools). According to the rural locale code definitions of National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (NCES, 2006), all districts in the GEAR UP program are classified as either rural fringe (n = 5), rural distant (n = 3), or rural remote (n = 3). Students from rural school districts have been studied frequently with regard to college access and postsecondary education, and their rates of enrollment in college are often lower than students from nonrural areas according to the NCES (2015). Research suggests this difference may be due to socioeconomic reasons, cultural factors, and a lack of resources and programs designed to expose students to opportunities for postsecondary enrollment (e.g., Morton et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2015; Webber & Boehmer, 2008). For students in rural and low-income areas, there are barriers to college access, such as limited access to nearby colleges and varied rates of parental involvement, resulting in low exposure to college campuses at a younger age (Beamer & Steinbaum, 2019; Morton et al., 2018).

GEAR UP services in other states have been studied and shown to be effective in increasing postsecondary enrollment rates. In particular, Bowman et al. (2018) showed that GEAR UP in Iowa was associated with higher postsecondary enrollment rates for students in lower-income high schools, although not with college persistence. Some additional research by Kim et al. (2018) explored which GEAR UP services were associated with higher postsecondary enrollment rates. Among the services associated with higher enrollment were college visits and college campus activities, but information about the timing of those particular services were not analyzed.

Within our GEAR UP partnership grant in western North Carolina, two specific types of services offered to rural students in the GEAR UP program occur on college campuses. The first are official campus tours, which are district-sponsored visits to colleges and universities in North Carolina and beyond. For purposes of this study, we will refer to these as Traditional College Visits. These tours are facilitated by admissions staff or other college departments (e.g. financial aid, academic departments, athletics, residence
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life, multicultural affairs) traditionally responsible for recruiting students to the institution. These Traditional College Visits are specifically designed to help students learn more about their options for postsecondary enrollment at the host institution. A second type of service offered to students is what we refer to as Educational Campus Field Trips. Educational Campus Field trips are district-sponsored field trips that take place on a college campus but are not intended to recruit students to the host institution; rather, they are meant to expose students to new academic experiences and broaden their views on career opportunities. For example, attending a STEM Expo event on a college campus, where students are exposed to a variety of faculty, staff, and community partners each hosting different experiments, demonstrations, and discussions, is classified as an Educational Campus Field Trip rather than as a Traditional College Visit.

Each of these services may encourage rural students toward postsecondary enrollment in somewhat different ways. Traditional College Visits are generally aimed at students who are closer to their high school graduation and are likely thinking about educational plans after high school. This service allows those students to visit schools that may be a good fit for them and to learn very specific things about each school regarding its size, academic programs, and culture. Often, the purpose of these visits is to help high school students make a decision on which college to attend, and often assumes they have made the decision to attend at all.

Educational Campus Field Trips are more common in middle school but can be taken throughout middle school and high school. These visits can be impactful by allowing students to begin developing a college-going mindset at an early age. They may plant seeds in students’ minds about possibilities for their future education, and can also help students have positive educational experiences on campus. Familiarity with college campuses earlier in a student’s academic career may provide motivation for a student to engage more fully with their high school’s guidance process to help them complete coursework and to engage in other experiences to help increase their chances of acceptance into postsecondary schools of interest. This is particularly important for students in rural areas where access to college campuses is minimal.

In summary, Traditional Campus Visits and Educational Campus Field Trips could help enhance students’ self-determination regarding college going and postsecondary enrollment rate. However, little research discusses how these two types of campus visits are linked to rural students’ postsecondary enrollment. In addition, prior college visit studies have primarily focused on formal college visits and tours. However, to the extent that the student impressions from these visits are somewhat intangible, exposure to college campuses in different
settings beyond formal campus visits may be important in a student’s aspirations to attend college.

Okerson (2016) pointed out the need for additional research in the field, such as examining if different types of college campus visits influence students’ postsecondary enrollment. Also, in consideration of the collective impact of campus visits, it is critically important to understand if timing and quantity of each type of campus visit may help predict these students’ postsecondary enrollment. Therefore, our study aims to explore the relationship between rural students’ campus visits and postsecondary enrollment while considering visit type, visit timing, and other demographic variables. Our research question is:

What is the relationship between rural student campus visits and postsecondary enrollment while considering visit type, visit timing, and other demographic variables?

Method

The GEAR UP program at Appalachian State University focused on providing multiple services (e.g., FAFSA application, college and career exploration) to students in rural, high-need school districts in which all feeder schools represent a greater than 50% population receiving free and reduced lunch. These services aimed to help rural students to be college and career ready as well as to enhance their college-going mindset and postsecondary enrollment. While rural school districts are not homogeneous, increasing the likelihood of college access among rural high school students is nevertheless an important step as more jobs require college degrees in the future.

Participants

Our program used a cohort-sequential design, with four cohort groups of students:

Cohort 1: 2020 high school graduating class
Cohort 2: 2021 graduating class
Cohort 3: 2022 graduating class
Cohort 4: 2023 graduating class.

Cohort 1 was the first group of students who had access to GEAR UP services, and was the focus of our analysis (7th graders in the 2014-2015 academic year; n = 3539). These students received services, including access to sponsored Traditional Campus Visits and Educational Campus Field Trips, from their seventh-grade year through their senior year. More specifically, we aimed to focused on the ‘True’ student who did not move into or out of the partner schools, or who did not otherwise receive services until high school began. The final sample size was 2,274 (n = 1,216 male students; n = 1,058 female students).

Data Collection

Two types of data were collected: GEAR UP campus visits and postsecondary enrollment.
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GEAR UP Campus Visits
The GEAR UP services data collected during the project describes the type of service and the date the service was received. From this information we created a profile for each student that includes the number of each type of service received by grade level. Of particular focus for us was determining how many services occurred on college campuses and in what grade level they occurred on a student level. Our study looks at the relationship between the type and timing of campus visits for Cohort 1 and postsecondary enrollment rates.

The college choice process is multi-faceted, as suggested by the established literature in the field. Traditional College Visits and overall familiarity with college campuses through Educational Campus Field Trips expose students to environments that familiarize them with postsecondary educational options and foster discussion among faculty and students on the trips. This discussion, though it may seem minimally impactful, is known as “College Talk” and represents one of the nine critical interrelated elements of establishing a College Going Culture as identified by McClafferty and colleagues (2002). These experiences on college campuses can help students from rural communities increase their college exposure. This was the intent with GEAR UP college campus experiences; to increase exposure so that students can first begin to imagine themselves as college students, an important step in the early years before a student can begin asking and answering questions about which institution they will attend.

Postsecondary Enrollment
Students’ postsecondary enrollment data were retrieved from the National Student Clearinghouse to determine their postsecondary enrollment status for the graduating classes of 2020. For students in Cohort 1, our outcome measure of enrollment was defined similarly for the Summer 2020, Fall 2020, or Spring 2021 semesters. We did not differentiate between full-time and part-time enrollment, nor did we differentiate between the different types of postsecondary schools. This decision was influenced partly by the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential impact on student decisions for that cohort group.

Data Analysis
We focused on postsecondary enrollment as an outcome measure for this study period. Over time, our data collection will allow us to measure persistence toward and eventual achievement of postsecondary degrees for each of the groups and assess the role that Traditional College Visits and Educational Campus Field Trips and their timing had in predicting those levels of achievement.

To answer our research questions, we used logistic regression as the main analysis method. The primary goal of this analysis was to determine whether the type and timing of each of the two types of campus visits was
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predictive of postsecondary enrollment for the first GEAR UP cohort group.

Additionally, we considered whether there were effects for demographic variables such as race and gender.

Results

We conducted three sets of logistic regression analyses to estimate the effects of the two different visit types and the year in which the visits occurred for Cohort 1, the class of 2020. For Cohort 1, services began in the academic year of 2014-15. In our analysis, we counted the number of Traditional College Visits sponsored by GEAR UP during each academic year for six years between 2014-2015 and 2019-2020, and the number of Educational Campus Field Trips for the same set of academic years as well. Summary statistics for these different visit counts are given in Table 1. From these summary statistics, we note that the visit counts of both types for most students is fairly low in a given

Table 1.
Summary Statistics of Traditional College Visits and Educational Campus Field Trips by Year for Cohort 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year (Grade)</th>
<th>Traditional College Visits</th>
<th>Educational Campus Field Trips</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015 (7th)</td>
<td>0.27 (0.67)</td>
<td>0.32 (0.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016 (8th)</td>
<td>0.86 (0.99)</td>
<td>0.95 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017 (9th)</td>
<td>0.24 (0.44)</td>
<td>0.27 (0.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 (10th)</td>
<td>0.34 (0.73)</td>
<td>0.42 (1.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019 (11th)</td>
<td>0.15 (0.46)</td>
<td>0.31 (0.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2020 (12th)</td>
<td>0.21 (0.67)</td>
<td>0.20 (0.70)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Campus Visits as Predictors

year. Although not listed in the table, the median visit count of both types is zero for all years, and the third quartile is 0 or 1 for all years as well. In looking at the maximum values in Table 1 for each variable, in the first year of services as the grant was being launched, overall visits were lower before increasing in the years afterward as the grant progressed. In the 2017-2018 year the maximum number of Traditional College Visits was 14 due to previously mentioned visit events that stopped at multiple campuses, which led to a larger maximum value in that academic year. No limits were placed on the number of visits that a student could take. However, the vast majority of students took five or fewer visits that academic year.

For our first logistic regression modelling process, we included 12 potential predictor variables, specifically yearly visit counts for each visit type across the six-year span. We used Akaike’s Information Criterion (AIC) and a backward selection process to determine which of the individual predictors should be included in the chosen model. From that selection process, the predictors in the model chosen by AIC were Traditional College Visit counts in the years 2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2019-2020, along with the Educational Campus Field Trip count in the year 2015-2016. Each of these predictors had a positive association with enrollment probability.

Because the visit counts in some years varied a bit and showed some right skewness, we conducted the same model selection process, but with each predictor transformed to the square root scale to reduce the right skewness in the distribution of the predictors. From the AIC model selection process on this transformed scale, we ended up with the same set of predictors in the final model that we mentioned previously, and again all of them were positively associated with postsecondary enrollment rates. With this verification that our results were not affected by the skewness of the predictor variables, we built our models on the original variable scale to allow for an easier interpretation of the resulting model.

In the second logistic regression modeling process, we added race and gender as potential predictor variables to the previously chosen model. We found that gender had a statistically significant association with enrollment rates, with female students having a higher likelihood of postsecondary enrollment. A summary of the logistic regression coefficients, standard errors, and Z statistics for this model are listed in Table 2.

In the third logistic regression modeling process, we focused strictly on first visit timing by recording the year of each student’s first Traditional College Visit, and the year of their first Educational Campus Field Trip for Cohort 1, and used these variables as categorical predictors of postsecondary enrollment. This approach allowed us to focus on the effect of the timing of the first college
Campus Visits as Predictors

Table 2.
Logistic Regression Output for Counts of Traditional College Visits and Educational Campus Field Trips Predicting Postsecondary Enrollment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Traditional College Visits</th>
<th></th>
<th>Educational Campus Field Trips</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estimated Effect</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>z</td>
<td>Estimated Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015 (7th)</td>
<td>0.24*</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016 (8th)</td>
<td>0.09*</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017 (9th)</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 (10th)</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019 (11th)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2020 (12th)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender: Male</td>
<td>-0.75*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-8.69</td>
<td>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. . = not significant in our first analysis so we did not include in this logistic regression analysis. *p < .05.

Baseline of students who did not take Traditional College Visits or Educational Campus Field Trips, statistically significant increases in postsecondary enrollment rates occurred when students took their first visit of both types, and their predictive effect on postsecondary enrollment. We also included race and gender as potential predictors in this modeling process, and we used AIC with a backward selection approach to select the best model from the candidates.

The minimum AIC value occurred with predictors based on the first year of a Traditional College Visit, along with gender. In this particular model, compared with a Traditional College Visit in the academic years of 2014-15, 2017-18, or 2019-20. These correspond to the students’ seventh grade year, the sophomore year, and the senior year for Cohort 1. We also note that while the year of the student’s first Educational Campus Field Trip was not in the model with the minimum AIC value, when it is added as a predictor to the model, a statistically significant positive effect on postsecondary enrollment rate is seen when the student’s first Educational Campus Field Trip occurred in 2014-2015 (7th grade), early in the student’s academic career.
Campus Visits as Predictors

Otherwise, the effect of the year of the student’s first Educational Campus Field Trip was not statistically significant, leading to the factor overall not being chosen in the final model. Gender was again associated with postsecondary enrollment rates, with males being less likely to enroll than females. In this step, we explored the possibility of interaction between gender and first visit years, to allow for the possibility that visits for males and females have different yearly predictive effects on postsecondary enrollment. When we added potential interaction terms between gender and year of first Traditional College Visit, and gender and year of first Educational Campus Field Trip, only one of the interaction terms was statistically significant at the 5% significance level, and the overall AIC for this model increased, indicating that the simpler model without interaction terms was preferred by AIC.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the influence of two types of college visits with rural students’ postsecondary enrollment (Traditional College Visits and Educational Campus Field Trip). Overall, our results showed that both types of visits were associated with higher postsecondary enrollment rates. This indicated that rural students with higher participation in these campus visit services, and especially students who participate in these services earlier in their academic careers, might have a higher possibility of enrolling in college. This finding is consistent with King’s study (2012) that college visits could help rural students understand the college environment and campus life, and could enhance their self-determination for college going, which in turn helps increase postsecondary enrollment rates.

In terms of participation rates, our results presented that Traditional College Visits were collectively more positively associated with postsecondary enrollment than Educational Campus Field Trips. One exception to this tendency in Table 2 should be noted, in that Traditional College Visits in 2016-17 were not significantly associated with enrollment rates, although this year was fairly early in the student’s academic career. During this particular year when fewer college visits were being taken overall, Cohort 1 was just transitioning to high school, and campus visit services were being offered through the high school for the first time. This led to fewer Traditional College Visit services being offered in the first year of high school and likely contributed to the lack of significance of the college visit count in that particular year.

“Our results showed that both types of visits were associated with higher postsecondary enrollment rates. This indicated that rural students with higher participation in these campus visit services, and especially students who participate in these services earlier in their academic careers, might have a higher possibility of enrolling in college.”
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To sustain the linkage between rural students’ Traditional College Visits and future postsecondary enrollment, rural high schools are strongly suggested to collaborate with middle schools and colleges to ensure that college visits can be continuously offered to these students in a systematic and tangible way (Radcliffe & Bos, 2011).

The fact that the number of Traditional College Visits was a more consistently significant predictor of postsecondary enrollment than Educational Campus Field Trips is another finding in our analyses. For Traditional College Visits, we see the impact of both the quantity and timing of these visits on predicting rural students’ postsecondary enrollment. These visits have a direct academic focus, and thus participants experience the campus more deliberately as a potential student. We found that the number of Traditional College Visits per year was also significant with the exception of one academic year. In terms of timing, we found that first visits in the student’s seventh grade year, and sophomore or senior years of high school were significant predictors of postsecondary enrollment. These findings suggest that a large number of Traditional College Visits is associated with increased postsecondary enrollment rates. The impact of timing is a little less clear. Students who take Traditional College Visits early may also have ample time to take a larger number of them, but also students who take Traditional College Visits for the first time in their high school career (specifically their senior year) are strongly considering postsecondary education. Less clear is that first Traditional College Visits in a student’s junior or freshman year are less predictively impactful than the total number of visits at those stages. This combination of findings is plausible in that a larger number of Traditional College Visits is an important predictor of enrollment, but when we look at a student’s first visit date, those who start early are likely engaged in the college selection process, while those who start late may indicate that a decision is still being carefully considered. Both factors may be important because a student who starts visiting colleges as a senior may not have sufficient time to take many visits, but those individual visits may be more impactful given the student’s upcoming high school graduation.

Finally, we observed that the number of Educational Campus Field Trips from 2015-16 (the eighth-grade year for Cohort 1) had a statistically significant association with postsecondary enrollment. 2015-16 was the one academic year where the number of Educational Campus Field Trips during eighth grade had a significant association with students’ later postsecondary enrollment. These findings indicated that Educational Campus Field Trips could be one of the services provided for rural students for enhancing their college-going mindset. While Educational Campus Field Trips may help rural students gain exposure to college campuses, they appear to be less associated with postsecondary enrollment rates unless they occur early in a student’s academic
Campus Visits as Predictors

career. This corresponds with Raudenbush and Bloom’s (2015) and Swanson et al’s study (2021) that eighth grade may be a year when students are thinking about the next phase of their life when they will enter high school, making an Educational Campus Field Trip more impactful at that time. In our results, we also see some additional evidence of this assertion, because the model that focused on the timing of the student’s first Educational Campus Field Trip showed a significant effect when the first visit occurred in the seventh grade year, although the effects of first Educational Campus Field Trips for the other years were not significant.

Taken together, our data provide evidence that Educational Campus Field Trips, when taken in middle school, play a critical factor in predicting rural students’ possibility of postsecondary enrollment.

Educational Implications

Our study suggests that providing early access opportunities to college campuses can be beneficial for students as early as their middle school years. From a practical standpoint, Traditional College Visits are stronger predictors of postsecondary enrollment for most grade levels, but Educational Campus Field Trips do have a positive relationship with postsecondary enrollment in the middle grades. For both types of visits, timing is important because students who take their first Traditional College Visit or their first Educational Field Trip in middle school may have higher postsecondary enrollment rates. An additional benefit of Educational Field Trips is that they may be easier to organize for large groups of middle-school students, allowing more students to be exposed to college campuses and providing a strong foundation for future postsecondary enrollment.

Limitations

There are three limitations in this study. First, an important consideration in our data is the potential for confounding factors to exist. Educational Campus Field Trips in middle school are often taken by all students in a particular grade level or school. At the high school level, students who participate in both types of visits may simply be interested in college if they are from families that prioritize postsecondary education or have higher academic achievement rates. Hence, higher raw visit numbers may not directly impact postsecondary enrollment but may simply signal a student’s interest in postsecondary options. However, early Educational Campus Field Trips are less likely to be self-selected by the participants, and hence their significance suggests that they are a valuable part of a student’s college selection process.

Second, we do not know how many Traditional College Visits and other informal campus visits the students took outside of the GEAR UP grant program. It is difficult to speculate exactly how independent college visits correlate with those offered through GEAR UP services, but more reliable data might be obtained by knowing about all
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college visits that students take.

Third, we did not include a control group of students due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students’ learning and their postsecondary enrollment. The emergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic impacted enrollment rates for the class of 2020, as stated in the NSC Blog (2021). Undergraduate enrollment experienced a 5.9% decline during the pandemic, with community colleges experiencing an even steeper decline of 11.3%. This is particularly applicable to our western North Carolina GEAR UP population given that students from our participating schools aspire to attend a community college at higher rates than the overall student population of North Carolina. Thus, a direct comparison of postsecondary enrollment rates between the two graduating classes (the class of 2019 for the control students; the class of 2020 for the Cohort 1 students) is unlikely to be informative as to the predictive ability of college visits on postsecondary enrollment rates. For this reason, we chose to focus in our analysis on Cohort 1 and on the rates of the two different visit types as differential predictors of postsecondary enrollment.

Conclusion

Overall, our research suggests that offering middle school students opportunities for Traditional College Visits and Educational Campus Field Trips has benefits. The students in our cohort group are from rural school districts, and early visits may provide an important opportunity to increase college knowledge and begin developing a college-going mindset. Our work also shows that sponsoring college visits throughout high school may be beneficial for students who are still deciding on their options during their senior year.

Collectively, we believe that the college decision-making process is multifaceted, but also that exposure to college campuses helps students with important parts of this process, beginning with helping students decide that they want to go to college. This exposure may be more important for students from rural school districts, for whom having sponsored visits may play a bigger role in the decision-making process than students who are from non-rural parts of the country.

It is important to note that our study focuses on enrollment as an outcome measure. We have not yet collected data regarding college persistence or degree attainment, but those will also be important measures of postsecondary success. At this stage, we focused on a simple outcome measure (postsecondary enrollment, the first year of college) due to the likelihood of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the location of enrollment. Students who at other times may have chosen a four-year university after graduation may not have done so in 2020. Therefore, we suggest that future studies should focus on a longer-range view of a student’s college career (e.g., the predictive impact of campus visits on college retention or persistence, as well as degree attainment).
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REFERENCES


National Center for Education Statistics (2015). *Percentage of persons ages 18 to 29 enrolled in colleges or universities, by age group, 4-category local, and sex*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables/b.3.b.-1.asp


Campus Visits as Predictors


He Needs to be in a Learning Community – Learning Community, a Place of Respite and Brotherhood while Persisting in College

Author: Ngozi Taffe (University of Connecticut)

ABSTRACT
Black males encounter significant microaggressions and race related challenges as students in Predominantly White Institutions. These encounters negatively impact their college learning and social experiences. In the face of these challenges, college retention rate of Black males falls behind those of other racial and gender groups (Toldson, 2012). Notwithstanding, statistics point to the success and persistence of Black male students in such oppressive environments and the role of learning communities in fostering successful outcomes for students. Using the Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) framework, this qualitative study explores the experiences of eight Black males living in a same race same gender learning community while attending a predominantly white institution. Findings from this study highlight brotherhood and respite as contributing to the success, persistence and retention of Black male college students.

Keywords: Black males, brotherhood, community cultural wealth, living and learning community

Additionally, only a third of Black males graduate from college (Cose, 2014; Harper 2012; NCES, 2019).

The low college retention rate of Black males is no accident. Instead, it is an outcome linked to a wide range of factors, from students’ pre-college experiences, to their experiences in college—both those that enhance college persistence and those that constrain it. Exploring and illuminating experiences and structures that have led to inequitable levels of college retention of Black males is extremely important (Harper, 2015), as it sheds light on structural, personal, and environmental challenges that influence educational outcomes. In the same regard, identifying practices, academic, and social support structures that contribute to the college retention of the one-third who persist is equally as important, for it can highlight and document practices that higher education might scale up to reach more students at risk. Brooms and Davis (2017) highlight that even when Black males get to college, the challenges continue. Black male students face and endure challenges during their college education in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Some of the challenges include social isolation, and micro-
aggressions, all of which can negatively affect students’ learning, social experiences, and ultimate persistence (Brooms et al., 2017). Microaggressions are defined as intended or unintended slights, snubs, or hostile messages that demean a marginalized group and create physiological stresses (Steele, 2010). For example, thinly veiled slights like, “You are so articulate,” imply it is unusual for someone of that race to be intelligent; or “You must be here on affirmative action,” imply the student did not earn their admittance to college. According to Kim et al. (2013), students’ perceptions of, interpretations of, and reactions to microaggressions contribute to their level of success, thus these microaggressions can hamper students’ ability to excel academically and earn degrees. To combat these microaggressions and persist through to graduation, Harper (2013) asserts successful Black male students develop meaningful peer and mentor relationships on campus, engage in leadership opportunities, including culturally relevant experiences, and receive support from family members and others. Clearly, though, this is a systemic problem, and one that needs to be addressed on multiple fronts, through the duration of student learning. There exists no one solution, no panacea to redress the abysmally low college retention rates of Black males. Instead, institutions of higher education employ a range of strategies to address low retention rates in their colleges. Some strategies combat stressors and microaggressions while others aim to attract and retain a diverse group of students. One example of these strategies is “themed” housing or learning communities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Black males who participated in a living and learning community and how engagement with the learning community contributed to their college persistence.

Literature Review

A growing body of research explores a variety of structures that foster successful college experiences for Black males. This study focuses on such themes that emerge from this scholarship: living and learning communities and their influences on student satisfaction.

Learning Communities

According to Tinto (1993), the current day practice of learning communities has three things in common. The first practice is shared knowledge. Students engaged in learning communities are encouraged to take similar courses, usually around a central theme. In so doing, they foster a higher level of “cognitive complexity” (p. 2) working and learning together. He argues this high level of cognitive complexity would not easily occur if the courses were dissimilar. The second is shared knowing: learning communities enroll students in similar classes and often times the students reside in designated residence halls, so “they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately, in a way that is part of the academic experience” (p. 2). By asking students to live and learn together, students engage socially and intellectually in ways that promote their learning and discovery of self when engaged with other experiences and
Learning Community

thoughts beyond their personal experience. The third is shared responsibility. Learning communities ask their students to be responsible for each other. Collaborative groups are encouraged, and the emphasis is on the success of the collective group. Students typically participate in learning communities during their freshman and sophomore years in college and the communities are typically set up around a theme, e.g., social justice, ecology, women in STEM, engineering, foreign languages, or culture (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). An innovative interpretation of this learning community movement is “affinity housing,” which has enabled students who share common identities, or cultural identities, to live together. For example, some universities promote living and learning communities for students interested in Latino and Latin American cultures, as well as students who are interested in studies related to Black/African American males’ experiences. These learning communities are designed to build peer networks and act as a conduit for engaging in scholarly discussions relevant to the communities. In some cases, these communities attract and cater to same-race students and provide an avenue for same-race students to find respite from micro-aggressions they face while engaged with the larger campus community (Grier-Reed, 2013). These affinity communities or culturally relevant spaces, combined with mentoring programs and other student engagement groups, create peer support systems for students, thereby offsetting challenging environments students face and increasing their persistence and retention.

Learning Communities for African American Male Students

One of the strategies colleges and universities use in addressing Black male college retention, is the creation of learning communities dedicated to promoting successful college outcomes for Black males. One such example is the creation of the African American Male Initiative (AAMI) in 2002. This initiative was formed by the University System of Georgia (USG) to address issues of Black male achievement in their university (Thomas Hill & Boes, 2013). According to Thomas Hill and Boes (2013), the purpose of the AAMI learning community is to “increase the likelihood that African American males are retained during their first year of college” (p. 39). USG accomplished this by designing a learning community with formal support structures such as mentoring, educational and social programming, academic advising, tutoring, and networking opportunities with business. Thomas Hill, and Boes (2013) conducted a study on the AAMI learning community to determine to what extent degree earning students participating in the learning community were satisfied with the services provided, the effectiveness of the learning community and to learn of any improvements that needed to be made. Findings of the Thomas Hill and Boes (2013) study indicate students were satisfied with the resources and services provided by the learning community. The students also
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reported positive relationships with other learning community participants, faculty and staff. Finally, the study participants credited the AAMI learning community with “keeping them motivated and focused on their academics” (Thomas Hill & Boes, 2013, p. 54). These findings reported by Thomas Hill and Boes (2013) are consistent with prior research by others including Strayhorn, (2010) and Zhao and Kuh, (2004), which report that supportive campus environments and structures such as learning communities enable successful outcomes for students.

Theoretical Framework

I use Community Cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2005) to inform this study and to highlight various embodied capital or assets Black male students possess that contribute to their persistence and college retention while facing challenging environments.

Community Cultural Wealth Theory
Yosso (2005) asserts community cultural capital encapsulate values, skills, assets and other forms of capital possessed by minority groups or People of Color (POC). Yosso (2005), using a Critical Race Theory (CRT), conceptualizes these various forms of community cultural wealth. These forms of community cultural wealth include: 1) aspirational capital which refers to the ability to allow oneself or children to develop resiliency and maintain hopes or dreams of a better future even in the face of opposition; 2) linguistic capital, the intellectual and social skills attained through the ability or lived experiences of communicating in more than one language or style; 3) familial capital, a commitment to family – nuclear and extended, to a community that builds on shared history, a shared commitment to the communities’ resources including caring and providing coping mechanisms for members of the community; 4) social capital, including community resources, peer groups, churches, youth groups, mentoring groups that provide emotional support, financial support or academic support as the student pursues higher education; 5) navigational capital, skills of maneuvering through social or academic institutions – in particular, institutional structures that are hostile to People of Color (POC); and 6) resistant capital, the motivation to challenge inequity and fight for social justice. These six forms of community cultural wealth challenge the deficit thinking of cultural capital as it relates to Black men in college and brings to light the various forms of cultural wealth/capital Black male students possess and capitalize on to persist through college.

Methods

In this qualitative study, a phenomenological design is used to inform the experiences of Black male students living in a learning community while attending a PWI. According to Neubauer et al. (2019), phenomenology is “an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (p. 91). Essentially, this method of inquiry focuses on the study of an
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individual or a set of individuals’ lived experiences in the world and allows researchers to describe what certain experiences are like for participants (Neubauer, et al., 2019). The goal of this type of inquiry is to describe the meaning of the experience from the perspective of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Question

The objective of this study was to explore the experiences of Black male students living a culturally relevant and gender specific learning community, and to understand how peer, cultural, and gender specific institutional structures can influence the experiences of Black males in PWIs, the research question explores the interconnectedness between retention rates, and the living and learning community. The research question guiding this study was:

What are the learning and social experiences of Black male students living in a Black male learning community while attending a PWI?

Setting

The setting for this study is a Black male learning community – “Webster House,” in a large U.S. public research university located in the northeastern part of the United States. For the purpose of this study, I refer to this institution as “Winchester College,” which is a predominantly white institution (PWI) enrolling approximately 18,000 undergraduate students. An estimated 15,000 students are enrolled in the main campus and about 3,000 at other locations within the state. The university includes several schools and colleges with various undergraduate degrees and over 100 majors, as well as graduate and professional degree programs.

The Webster House learning community, which was established four years ago, consists of freshmen and sophomores, a cohort of 40 to 50 students split somewhat evenly by graduating class. Members of Webster House reside on a single floor in Bryant Hall, an eight-story building dedicated to housing various learning communities on campus. This approximately 200,000 square foot residence hall provides students many opportunities to engage with each other and pursue interests based on their academic majors, interests, or background. A team made up of a faculty director, graduate assistants, peer mentors, student leaders, and staff from residential life (student affairs) led the learning community.

Students apply to join Webster House once they are admitted to Winchester College or after their freshman year. Once accepted, new students are welcomed during a pinning ceremony. Alumni, upperclassmen, and parents are encouraged to participate in the welcoming ceremony. The faculty director, Dr. Ogem, welcomes incoming students, using the opportunity to set the vision for the new class. The vision is focused on promoting a culture of excellence, accountability, and brotherhood. Upperclassmen pin new students, an experience a participant
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described as “passing of the torch” to the next class, “We are keeping the legacy going.”

Participants

As this study targeted a specific group, I used purposeful sampling to select study participants. Purposeful sampling is used to identify and select individuals or groups who are knowledgeable and have experienced the studied phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The participants were selected from the PWI’s population of males living in a learning community for Black males. During the 2018-19 academic year, Black undergraduate males comprised of about two percent of the total undergraduate enrollment in the main campus of this university. Of this number, 40-50 students lived in Webster House.

Prior to initiating the interviews for this study, I requested and received approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once I received approval from the IRB, first I contacted target recruitment participants who consisted of faculty, staff, and students in the target institution. Some of these individuals I met previously, and I identified others based on my familiarity with the Webster House. I purposefully targeted these individuals, because: 1) they worked directly with potential study participants, 2) knew students who would be interested in conducting the study, and 3) could provide me with information about peer group and mentoring sessions where I would conduct observations. Using information obtained from target recruitment participants, I used snowball and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2007) to contact potential study participants via email. Pseudonyms are used in referring to the participants.

Eight students participated in the study: one sophomore, two juniors, one senior and four students currently in graduate school. The distribution of the graduating class in this study is significant because it speaks to the length of time the students have been in the PWI and potentially the breadth of their experiences. The inaugural freshman class of Webster House graduated with a four-year degree in May of 2020. Seniors and graduate school study participants who were members of the learning community from the onset of the program spoke of their experiences prior to, during, and after participating in the learning community.

Three of the eight participants self-identified as African American, one as African, one as Caribbean, and one as “other.” I collected ethnicity data with the understanding Black Americans are a polyolithic group. The diversity among Black people and Black males in the study may account for potential differences in experiences. Participants self-reported their GPAs, which ranged from 1.9 to 4.0 with a mean of 3.17. The demographic data are self-reported.

Half of the study participants self-reported engaging in pre-college experience programs. In this study, pre-college experience is defined as academic programs participants engaged in on a college campus.
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Table 1.1
Demographics—Household Income Level

<table>
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<th>Upper Middle</th>
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<td>$199,999 +</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</table>

Total number of Participants = 8

(Table HINC-01, 2018 Household Income Survey, U.S. Census.)

Table 1.2
Demographics—First Generation College Student

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<td>3</td>
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</table>

Total number of Participants = 8

Table 1.3
Demographics—Mother’s Education Level

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<th>Demographics - Mothers Education Level - Highest Completed</th>
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<th>Assoc./Undergraduate degree</th>
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</table>

Table 1.4
Demographics — Father’s Education Level

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of Participants = 8
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as a high school student prior to enrollment at the university. Five of the study participants reported living in a dual parent household, while the remaining three reported belonging to a single parent household. Six grew up in urban settings, two in a suburban setting. All participants reported coming from low or middle income households. Family education level of participants ranged from no formal education to graduate degrees. Participants pointed to mentors, counselors, faculty members, success coaches, and parents as sources for inspiration and but relied on student support services and mentors from the learning community to navigate the nuances of academic structures.

Data Collection and Analysis

This phenomenological method of inquiry involved interviews and observations. Using Seidman’s (2006) interview techniques, I conducted separate interviews in private offices or spaces with each participant. In the interviews, I asked open-ended questions, which enabled the participants to engage in the interview process freely, articulating their experiences in voice and on their terms (Creswell, 2009). In the initial interview, I discussed the context of the study with participants. This allowed me to build rapport and allowed the participant to feel at ease prior to delving into the interview questions. Following the first set of interviews, I reviewed collected data and interview protocols, for the benefit of modifying subsequent interview protocols if needed (Creswell, 2009). After each interview was completed, I transcribed the audio recordings, reviewed the transcription for accuracy, and using file locker, I then made available the transcribed interviews to participants for the purpose of member checking. About half of the participants accepted this offer, while the other half did not.

The second interview allowed participants to follow up on the initial interview and expand on questions I had asked in the initial interview. The third interview was reserved for any follow up questions I had. However, I achieved data saturation after the second set of interviews. Each interview ranged from 45 to 180 minutes.

Using techniques by Miles and Huberman (1994), while reviewing and analyzing the transcribed data, I made notes of repetitive key words, phrases, sentences, highlighting or underlining them in the transcribed documents, and making remarks alongside the margins of the printed documents. I repeated this process for each interview and all transcribed data. Then, I created a table linking key words, phrases or sentences to common themes and then to broader categories. I also looked for possible connections, and linked key words and phrases such as satisfaction, mentoring, perception of self, academic and social experiences to the transcribed data. With this process, I noted the connections and documented common themes and categories. In addition to interviews, I conducted two informal observations. The first observation
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was at a Webster House team meeting. The team meeting was in preparation for an arranged trip to D.C. The meeting, which lasted for a little over an hour, was used to discuss details of the trip including the specific functions the group was to attend, networking opportunities. The meeting included instructions for preparations the students had to make in advance of the trip such as informing their professors of their whereabouts and staying on top of their academic work while traveling. The second observation was a three-hour community building retreat at the start of the academic year. This retreat consisted of a series of activities. Participants congregated in smaller groups and were asked to engage in a series of team building activities. For both observations, using memoing techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994), I drew parallels between themes or salient concepts in the data collected from my field notes, highlighting key takeaways from discussions, and capturing student-to-student interactions and interactions between students and their advisors. Outliers or unusual experiences were noted, documented and highlighted in the findings and I repeated the same process outlined above.

Trustworthiness

Credibility. As in all qualitative and quantitative research, the researcher’s personal biases, lens, or perspectives may influence the research methodology, interpretations, results and, therefore, affect the credibility of the results. This takes several forms in this study. First, the same race positionality of the study participants and researchers as Black persons, presents benefits and challenges. One such benefit is that participants may feel more comfortable to discuss racially sensitive experiences with a same race researcher. That said, sameness in race or ethnicity goes not guarantee similarity in lived experiences. In this study, participants names are withheld, as well as the names of the schools and colleges involved in the study. Steps such as these ensure the confidentiality of the students and institutions. Alternatively, the personal experiences of the researchers as members of this ethnic group may have influenced data interpretation. To address this, I used bracketing technique to limit the assumptions and preconceptions held prior to engaging in the study. Moreover, I performed participant member checks; wrote detailed memos; and kept documentation for an audit trail (Patton, 2002).

Findings

Study participants discussed their experiences in Webster House. They describe a sense of brotherhood felt within the group of students, their ability to make connections within and external to the community, and their use of Webster House as a place of respite—a place where they can re-charge and learn constructive ways of dealing with microaggressions. They credit mentors, advisors and the Webster House faculty director for providing guidance, academic support, and for driving them to seek out and
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stay focused on their academic and professional goals.

Two salient themes emerged across the participants’ experiences. The themes are (1) brotherhood and (2) respite.

Brotherhood
A common theme among study participants is the role Webster House played in supporting their holistic development as students, including the support of their academic, intellectual, emotional, and social needs. In particular, by being a space where the students can return to after navigating uncomfortable or unwelcoming spaces on campus, Webster House is a place of refuge, a place where Black male students can meet with and develop friendships with students that are like them, students and advisors who understand the unique challenges they face, and a safe environment where they can recount their experiences, gain affirmation, and receive guidance. For the study participants, Webster House catered to these needs by providing formal and informal support structures, which filled a gap that was largely unmet by the larger campus community. Formal structures includes mentors, advisors and counselors, structured study sessions. While informal structures includes the formal interactions with same race same genders peers who are present and understand challenges you may be going through. By catering to this need, Webster House positively altered students’ experiences in the institution.

While academic support was central to the Webster House mission and appreciated by staff and students alike, also important were the different kinds of social support that students received to get through their daily lives. “You are not invisible.” “Someone cares.” These messages – “we’re family,” “here’s how you do this,” “here are the resources you need,” address needs of these young Black male students that may be ignored by the larger university. Essentially, Webster House strategically uses several mechanisms to build social cohesiveness.

Consider one meeting I attended, which was held to reconnect with students after the first week of classes and to prepare them for an upcoming networking trip to Washington, DC. Punctuality and personal accountability are highly emphasized. The meeting was mandatory. As students filed into the meeting room, they signed in using an iPad passed around from student to student. The graduate assistant, Stanley, facilitated the meeting. In preparation for the upcoming trip, no detail was spared. Stanley went through a detailed agenda for the entire multi-day trip, including arrival times, departures, and the itinerary of various events students were expected to attend. The students learned what items on the trip agenda were optional, and which were mandatory.

You will need several dress shirts, ties, dress pants, and a suit or dress jacket. Make sure your shirts are ironed well! Do not forget your tie! Who needs a tie? Do you all know how to tie a tie? I need a couple of volunteers to help tie ties.
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One student suggested, “You can look up on tying ties on YouTube! Once you have it tied, when you take it off, loosen it a bit and slip it off your neck, then hang it up so you do not have to tie it again the next time.”

Stanley continued, You can certainly look up tying your tie on YouTube, but if you need help, I and these other folks (pointing to the volunteers) can help you tie your tie. I will also bring extra ties and shirts in case you guys forget to pack them. If you need any help on the trip, come see me.

Drawing from Yosso’s Community Cultural wealth theory, students’ navigational capital are built by learning to prepare for and engage in a networking event. Students are expected to engage in discussions and are taught how to approach professionals in a networking event, how to engage in meaningful conversations during the event, how to dress, and what to wear. But there’s a back-up plan, as well. A staff member will be there with extra ties and the knowledge of how to tie them – there is a system of support whenever help is needed. The advisors and Stanley also counseled students on conduct at the networking event.

After the students and their advisors returned from the trip, Stanley sent an email to students, reminding them to follow up with the individuals they met during the series of networking events. In his email, he embedded a written template with prompts on how to initiate conversation with prospective mentors.

The “brotherhood” like social support structure in this community of Black male students includes providing students a safe space with mentors and advisors who share the same or similar experiences as members of the learning community. The sense of brotherhood, all for one and one for all, “I got you,” “I have got your back” was evident. The unspoken creed of Webster House was that of solidarity, trust, and unwavering support - I will provide all the necessary information to you but if you fall short, I am here for you, as evidenced in Stanley’s actions and words. “Do not forget to bring your dress shirts and your ties, but if you forget, I will have extras for you.” Participants saw the level of caring and mentoring provided by their advisors as further evidence of strong investment in the group’s success, helping to make it cohesive. The support structure fostered a feeling of belongingness, an expected standard of excellence, and a space where students can “let their mask down,” open up and share their personal and academic concerns with peers and advisors, knowing that “they will not let them fail.”

Respite

An important factor in shaping students’ educational outcomes is the social support present at the academic institution (Hallinan, 2006). Social support systems include friends, family, peers, and advisors who play an important role in supporting and encouraging students in times of stress, and also celebrating with students in times of triumph. The mere presence of a supportive peer group is a source of comfort to the student –
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knowing that the support structure is there when it is needed.

At the start of the academic year, Webster House organized a retreat, a team-building event aimed at fostering relationships between the incoming freshmen and returning sophomores. All participants highlighted the sense of belongingness and social support in Webster House as one of the factors that has contributed to their positive experiences in college. Randall, a junior, recalled his experiences:

*I was so excited to start school here. However, when I went to freshman orientation, everyone in my orientation group was White. There literally was not a single Black person in my group. I felt alone and out of place... like I did not belong because I could not relate to anyone there. But when I finally went to Webster House, it was welcoming. It was filled with people that looked like me, that have the same culture as me, that understand where I come from. It was move in day and the older students helped us move in. It was a very welcoming experience. I got to meet everyone on my floor and learn about their majors. I also had help from the student support center on campus, so it made my transition from high school to college a lot easier. Being able to have a conversation with someone and to have that person relate to you on some level is very important. Being a first-generation college student, I did not have a lot of knowledge as to how things work on campus. The advisors and older students at Webster House would provide guidance on when to add or drop a course, how to change majors, they would reinforce that I belong on this campus, but they also saw beyond the academics. They would ask how you are. “How is your family? How is this? How is that?” They have worked with students like me and they understand my struggle. If I did not have Webster House, or the support, I definitely would not live on campus.*

Randall’s engagement with Webster House enhanced his navigational capital. It helped him access student support services, learn from other young Black men about their majors and their experiences on campus, offered him emotional support and access to resources.

Study participants regularly referred to Webster House as a place of respite. Dwayne describes this as the sense of “I see you.” I understand you. I am here to listen, I support you, not necessarily that we are going through the same thing, but I acknowledge that you are going through something. You are not invisible. Your pain is visible, it may not be visible to everyone, but I see you, and you know that I see you, you can talk to me. Dwayne describes it as the ability of “letting one’s mask down” - the ability to be in a space where one is comfortable enough to share one’s voiced accounts and narratives of racist incidents targeting Black males such as incidents dealing with microaggressions, false accusations, or stereotypes. Dwayne describes his experience:
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Sometimes, the day-to-day life on campus can be challenging. Even as a leader in various campus organizations, there have been times when I found myself falsely accused, I am the default suspect when things go awry. Each time I have to make a conscious decision to put these incidents behind me and not let it escalate or physically affect me. In sharing these experiences with my advisors, they suggest ways I can respond to or deal with those situations. I also share my story is a way to de-stress. It provides an avenue for other students like me to learn from my experiences and hopefully develop their own mechanisms of dealing with it. My job is to focus on my school work, and be the best I can be, in spite of what is happening around me. I go by a motto: “If there’s no enemy within, the enemy on the outside can do me no harm.”

The social support created by this learning community provides a haven for high achieving Black male students, a place where they can gain peer support, commiserate with others and develop mechanisms for responding to racism or racist stereotypes (Harper, 2015).

Discussion

Black male students in Webster House are actively engaged in their learning community. Referencing the research question, the experiences provided by the formal and informal structures such as study halls, formal networking sessions, create a feeling of connectedness among members of this group. In addition, the presence of same race, same gender mentors who can relate to the students’ experiences appeared to help offset and assist students in navigating microaggressions and other unpleasant experiences the students endure while attending the university.

Study findings highlight that students participating in the various programs offered by the learning community are supported academically and socially as they strive for excellence in their academic pursuits. Indeed, while engaging in the various programs offered by Webster House, the young men were building on and leveraging various forms of capital. For example, in learning to strive for excellence, they strengthened their aspirational capital by way of developing or surpassing the academic and professional goals they had prior to engaging in Webster House. The participants aspired to graduate college prior to Webster House, however after being part of Webster House, their aspirations included graduate level work and professional degrees. They compounded their social capital by networking, engaging and leading several organizations, and expanding their peer groups. In learning to effectively network and navigate the structures within their university, they strengthened their navigational capital, by way of developing the necessary skills to maneuver organizational structures that may be unwelcoming to them. For example, navigating through their PWI. Essentially, in being part of Webster House, and engaging in various programs, Black male students leveraged their experiences to strengthen the capital they had and accrued.
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new forms of capital.

Yosso (2005) uses Community Cultural Wealth to describe social capital as the ability to leverage community resources such as mentoring groups, peer groups, and other resources within the community to form networks, gain emotional or academic support. The presence of formal and informal support structures offered by Webster House is consistent with this framework. While the participants brought considerable capital with them to Webster House, the formal and informal structures created, the experiences offered, and the norms and expectations established expanded the young men’s cultural capital in significant ways. In addition to developing their social capital by reaching out to peers, faculty members and strengthening those relationships, they were able to develop a web of networks within Webster House and spanning outside the university through the various networking engagements they were involved in.

Themes drawn from the study demonstrate participation in Webster House enriched students’ social and academic experiences. In creating a home away from home, strengthening their cultural capital and creating a sense of brotherhood among students, Webster House created a path for Black male students to thrive and persist in their academic pursuits.

Recommendations

In addition to navigating social and environmental obstacles, Black male students strive to perform well academically, develop meaningful relationships with peers and instructors. According to Strayhorn (2016) the best opportunities for academic development and growth occur when student social and academic experiences are in concert with an atmosphere of nurturing, inclusivity, and support. Contrary to studies which attribute Black male college achievement to academic underpreparedness, this study highlights social factors, including cultural inclusiveness, belongingness, positive peer advisory relationships as contributing to the success, persistence, and retention of the Black male college students. It also points out that the needs of Black male college students are distinct from other populations, and so, efforts and practices targeted to the masses may not address the specific needs of this population of students. As such, the role of culturally relevant learning communities in fostering a holistic college experience for Black male students is noteworthy.
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In addition, findings from this study point to the role of institutions in fostering the success of their students. In essence, to combat these unique challenges, it is useful for institutions of higher learning to implement intentional and empirically studied practices aimed at reducing challenges Black male students face in PWIs (Cintron, Hines, Singleton, II, & Golden, 2020). To that end, I offer recommendations for practice below, and call for additional studies that further explore these best practices and their long-term benefits.

Post-Secondary Learning as a Holistic Experience. Colleges should view Black male students’ education from a holistic perspective, as a seamless progression from secondary learning to postsecondary schooling. This includes providing an environment, such as a learning community where students are fulfilled academically, socially, emotionally, and culturally. It becomes imperative for high school counselors, college counselors, advisors and mentors to direct students to engage with learning communities – in particular during the first two years of college and as an arsenal to foster their college persistence. Support systems solely targeting the intellectual development of Black male students are insufficient. Rather, support systems should include provisions for inquiring about the physical and emotional health of the student and any stresses students may have, including financial stress and stresses from family back home. One way to do this is by making accessible, relatable mentors - as described in this study, who inquire about the health and well-being of the student and their family during advisory meetings (Brooms, 2018, Cintron et al., 2020). As Randall, a study participant highlighted in reference to the support he receives from his mentors and advisors, “They inquire how I am doing personally, how are you? How this, how is that? They have worked with students like me and they know my struggle.” Some students, particularly low income and first generation students, carry the additional burdens of being caretakers of their family back home, a burden that must not be ignored and one that may compound challenges students face. Understanding the unique circumstances of Black male students may also offer insights on specific areas in which these students may need the most support.

Limitations

Transferability concerns a study’s generalizability (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Several limitations may constrain the study’s transferability. First, it was conducted using a small sample size involving eight Black male students living in a specific learning community. Additional institutions were not sampled for this study nor were other geographical locations studied. In addition, the study was conducted over a three-month period. In inquiries with small study samples and a condensed timeline, the objective is not to generalize; rather, by providing thick descriptions documented from observations and interviews, a certain degree of transferability can be drawn from the detailed
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account of study participants’ experiences and readers can assess transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Future Research

Findings from this study highlight challenges student face as well as current practices that positively influence the experiences of Black males attending PWI’s. In addition to highlighting challenges Black males face in PWIs, this study focuses on Webster House as a culturally relevant learning community, the strengths or capital students have embodied, and strategies that have yielded student success and positive outcomes. I recommend future studies continue the exploration of Black male college experience though the lens of Black males while concurrently exploring institutional structures and practices that shape these experiences. This future inquiry through the lens of Black male students has the potential to provide insights on successful practices and systems that aid in students’ success. Similarly, such inquiry will also shed light on practices or structural impediments to their learning, social experiences, and sense of belonging.

Finally, I recommend additional studies on similar learning communities dedicated to Black male students and issues concerning Black males. Future study samples size should be increased, and a mixed methods research design used to better understand academic attainment during and after engagement with learning communities. Future studies could also benefit from increasing the geographical locations of participants to include other regions of the United States. This will allow for a comparative analysis in the experiences of Black males and success of similar programs in varying geographical locations.

Conclusion

Colleges should create and invest in culturally relevant spaces and learning communities that provide opportunities for Black male students to build social networks, engage in culturally relevant experiences and, as students in this study describe, a place where they can lay their mask down - in other words, a home away from home. The benefits of mentors, advisors and counselors students can relate, engage with is equally as important.

Participants in this study describe Webster House as a place where their voices are heard, a place where they can easily seek help and have their academic needs met, and a place that offsets negative stereotypes by offering various images of successful Black males. These culturally relevant spaces also provide a place where they can self-affirm, learn from mentors, advisors and counselors, foster a sense of brotherhood, and develop peer and mentoring relationships lasting past their academic journey (Cintron et al., 2020; Hines, Borders, & Gonzalez, 2015).


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