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Stories of Success: High Minority, High Poverty Public School Graduate Narratives on Accessing Higher Education

Journal of Advanced Academics
XX(X) 1–25
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DOI: 10.1177/1932202X11414133
<http://joa.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

Students of color in high minority, high poverty (HMHP) schools are less likely to attend college than peers in wealthier schools. To address this inequity, it is important to understand how these students leverage forms of capital to successfully create pathways to college. This study communicates how attending such schools in an urban Texas area affects the attitudes of students who successfully reached college. Students found support via invested community and school/university personnel, though unsupportive examples existed in these populations. Students negotiated stereotypes about their schools and communities, while holding positive attitudes about their communities. The participants and authors make recommendations to rectify structural barriers for students in these schools.

Keywords

college access, high poverty, high minority schools, social capital

Summary

Worrisome trends in achievement have been identified for students of color in high minority, high poverty (HMHP) schools. Students in these schools are less likely to

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graduate and attend college than their peers in wealthier schools. With labels such as “low performing” or “at risk,” it is important to understand how students at HMHP schools utilize social capital to navigate pathways to college. This research seeks to communicate how these schools affected the motivation and attitudes of students considering postsecondary education and examines the postsecondary trajectories of students from HMHP high schools in an urban Texas area. Students found support for their higher education goals via invested teachers, counselors, community members, and peers, though they encountered unsupportive examples from these populations as well. Students additionally negotiated negative stereotypes about their schools and communities and held positive attitudes about their home communities and peers. However, significant structural barriers remain for these students and their peers due to diminished resources. The participants and authors make recommendations for the educational and policy making community to rectify these challenges.

Research indicates that students attending high schools with high levels of racial segregation and concentrated poverty (termed *high minority and high poverty* schools) encounter greater challenges in accessing higher education compared with their peers in integrated schools with less concentrated poverty. Given the fact that Texas, California, Hawaii, and New Mexico are emerging majority–minority states (Bernstein, 2005) and residential segregation is increasing across much of the nation (Orfield & Lee, 2005), researchers should investigate how students from HMHP schools successfully access capital to achieve college at a time when the more complex issues of desegregating schools and communities continues to be discussed in the public policy arena. Therefore, this study provides information to researchers, educators, and parents illustrating how students leverage capital in the HMHP school environment to access college pathways.

Educational Importance and Relevant Research

Although college attendance rates for students of color have increased since the 1960s, students in HMHP schools are less likely to graduate and attend college than peers elsewhere (Horn, Chen, & Adelman, 1998; Orfield & Lee, 2005). These findings are applicable across the United States, including this article’s district of study, where 58% of public high schools report non-White and economically disadvantaged populations greater than 50% (SchoolMatters, 2007). Several are identified as “drop-out factories” (Zuckerbrod, 2007). In the school year 2006–2007, 83% of students attending these schools were students of color (Texas Education Agency, 2007).

Previous research indicates that peer and parental encouragement, engagement in extracurricular activities, outreach programs, and assistance with financial aid are all factors increasing the chances of at-risk youth attending college (Horn et al., 1998). To further complete the picture, precollege entry factors, institutional factors, and personal experiences contribute to students’ decisions to enroll in and to depart from college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). High school graduation, college enrollment, and degree completion remain strongly related to income and race

(Pathways to College Network, 2007). The experiences of at-risk students assist in identifying successful institutional and individual strategies of importance to all students, especially those attending HMHP schools. The college access literature has tended to view HMHP students from a deficient perspective, noting that these students lack access to resources and academic preparation for college. This study corroborates existing research on unequal access to college resources in HMHP schools; however, this study rejects deficit-oriented research by depicting ways in which graduates of HMHP schools disrupt institutional barriers to access capital for entry to college.

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

Postsecondary access and choice research utilizes theories of capital to frame variables relevant to the postsecondary educational pipeline. This study adapts definitions of capital—social, cultural, and community—to explore ways in which networks and resources assist HMHP graduates with college access. In this section, we define forms of capital that students utilize and possess to successfully navigate their college pathways within an HMHP school context.

Cultural capital. This capital is comprised of information networks often privileged to middle- and upper-class families and transmitted to succeeding generations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Fewer HMHP graduates may enroll in college because they lack some of the cultural capital variables many middle- and high-income students possess. McDonough's (1997) analysis of cultural capital variables in student college choice takes into account class-based differences in values that shape students' college-choice process. High student poverty found in HMHP schools hinders access to middle-class networks and access to cultural capital needed for college access.

Social capital. This capital identifies how factors such as family, peers, and a school's structure and personnel both positively and negatively affect students' college enrollment decisions (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Examples of social capital variables that help students access college are effective and knowledgeable counselors, mentors who motivate students toward college aspirations, and networks of college-bound peers. Furthermore, students with college-educated parents may have more access to cultural capital variables because their parents can share information and college-going experiences not available to first-generation collegians. Increased social capital variables can positively affect low-income students' college access (Horn et al., 1998; Hossler et al., 1999). Students' social context impacts their perceptions of postsecondary opportunity and choice. For instance, McDonough (1997) utilizes Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus* to explain how students' college aspirations are shaped by their environmental experiences and systems of beliefs about the social world.

Although a useful conceptual tool to understand how students utilize networks to access higher education, the conventional social and cultural capital definitions cast a deficit lens on persons of color with low-income status. Bourdieu's (1977) research on social and cultural capital discusses the resources and networks beneficial to the pursuit of higher

education. These resources are contrived from a dominant middle- and upper-class Western perspective. Some contemporary research indicates that HMHP graduates have limited access to educational resources and hence lack capital. However, researchers examining *community capital* argue that such students do in fact possess valuable capital—just a different kind (Yosso, 2002).

Moll and Greenberg (1990) ~~find~~^{found} that Mexican American families utilize a community approach to learn and share information. They termed this process “funds of knowledge” and use it to describe “social sharing knowledge [occurring] as part of household functioning” (p. 320). González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) state these families’ interactions are indeed a form of social capital, as they exchange valuable knowledge and resources. The word *funds* is used as families engage in a reciprocal information exchange, sharing individual areas of expertise. Moll (1990) suggests that teachers can better relate to students and create innovative instructional methods by leveraging preexisting funds of knowledge in the educational process.

In this study, we use “funds of knowledge” to conceptualize the approach by HMHP students in pursuit of higher education. HMHP students possess a body of knowledge from their home and neighborhood environments. However, the possession of this knowledge does not compensate for the fact that these students often face greater curriculum inequality than their White upper-class peers (Anyon, 1980; Carter, 2005; Yosso, 2002). Yosso (2005) recognizes the role of “aspirational capital”—the ability to maintain dreams for the future in the face of barriers. Community cultural wealth is a form of capital consisting of knowledge, networks, and beliefs that help persons of color navigate the perceived hostility in educational systems (González & Moll, 2002). However, educators and society often ignore this capital. Traditional conceptualizations of capital draw schools as isolated from the social world and community resources that students possess, and teachers rarely consider how students’ community can compliment classroom experiences (González et al., 2005). The study detailed in this article recognizes that funds of knowledge often contribute to students’ successful college enrollment.

This study particularly highlights the community cultural wealth students use to achieve success against challenging odds within a HMHP school context. Despite perceived lower levels of conventional social and cultural capital in HMHP public schools, many students of color rise above these barriers and find success in part due to resilience and aspirational capital—positive aspects of the participants’ habitus, contributing to these students reaching college.

Methodology and Data Explication

The following research questions anchor the investigation:

Research Question 1: How do graduates of HMHP high schools in an urban Texas area make meaning of their path to postsecondary education?

Research Question 2: What forms of capital are accessible (or inaccessible) via peers and adults in the community that contribute to students' access to college?

Research Question 3: What academic and social challenges do students at HMHP schools face regarding their academic self-image as they access college?

Descriptive data for this study were obtained from Texas Education Agency data, campus report cards from 2007-2009, and a self-reported survey. The second stage of the study included phenomenological in-depth qualitative focus group interviews of HMHP graduates enrolled in higher education (see Table 1 for a description of participants and their former schools).

Survey

A survey with 16 items gathered participant demographic information prior to the start of the interview. Of the 21 survey participants, 57% were female and 43% were male. Participants were asked to select the category that best describes their racial identity. Latinos were the largest group represented at 57%, and Black students represented 33% of the focus group sample.

Entering freshmen were the largest classification in the sample (48%), with sophomores comprising 24%, juniors 19%, and seniors 9.5%, all of whom attended Texas colleges. Overall, 67% of participants were high-achieving students in high school (grade point average [GPA] ≥ 3.5). Of the group, 95% of the students were enrolled in advanced placement (AP) courses in high school and 57% received college credits prior to entering college. More than half of the focus group members participated in an outreach program (TRIO, GEAR UP, or a college-sponsored program) before starting college.

Focus Group Interviews

This study employed a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) to describe how graduates made meaning of their lived experience attending a HMHP school and accessing forms of capital to reach college (Creswell, 1998). Reflection constitutes a key aspect of this study. We chose to interview students who had already accessed college, as their reflections would yield greater insight. Seemingly inconsequential events before college may have taken on new meaning postgraduation; conversely, some activities may seem less significant months later.

The goals of the study were to understand how students made meaning of their path to college, how they accessed (or did not access) resources and networks to reach college, and what academic and social challenges they faced regarding their academic self-image attending their school. To address these goals, we conducted focus group interviews with students who had graduated from HMHP schools in an urban Texas community. Focus groups were selected because this format would allow participants

Table 1. Student Participants (*N* = 21)

Focus group	Student	Age	Gender	Race	Classification	Texas college attended	High school	High school GPA	Had college credits?	Outreach program
August 7, 2008, 6:30 p.m., Flagship A classroom	Jaime	20	M	Latino	Junior	Flagship A	Albert ^a	>3.5	Yes (AP)	Yes
	Gwen	20	F	Black	Sophomore	Flagship A	Lawrence ^b	3.0-3.49	No	Yes
August 12, 2008, 6:30 p.m., Flagship A classroom	Rosa	18	F	Latina	First year	Flagship A	Sidney ^c	>3.5	Yes (AP)	No
	Stefania	19	F	Latina	First year	Flagship A	Albert	>3.5	Yes (AP)	No
	María	18	F	Latina	First year	Flagship A	William ^d	>3.5	No	Yes
	Pedro	18	M	Latino	First year	Flagship B	Charles ^e	>3.5	Yes (AP)	Yes
August 18, 2008, 6:30 p.m., Flagship A classroom	Vincent	19	M	Black	Sophomore	Flagship A	William	>3.5	Yes (by exam)	Yes
	Dahlia	18	F	Latina	First year	Flagship A	David ^f	>3.5	No	No
	Deon	22	M	Black	Sophomore	Community college	Lawrence	2.5-2.99	Yes (AP)	Yes
January 9, 2009, 7:00 p.m., community college	Carl	18	M	Black	Sophomore	Flagship A	Lawrence	3.0-3.49	Yes (AP)	Yes
	Deon	22	M	Black	Sophomore	Community college	Lawrence	2.5-2.99	Yes (AP)	Yes
January 19, 2009, 10:00 a.m., Charles High School	Michael	19	M	Latino	First year	Flagship A branch	Charles	3.0-3.49	No	No
	Sharon	20	F	Black	Junior	Public, historically female	Charles	2.5-2.99	No	Yes
	Henry	22	M	Latino	Senior	Flagship A	Charles	>3.5	Yes (by exam)	Yes
	Jacob	18	M	Latino	First year	Flagship A	Charles	>3.5	Yes (AP)	No
	Helena	18	F	Latina	First year	Flagship B	Charles	>3.5	Yes (AP)	No
	Lauren	21	F	Black	Senior	Private Lutheran	Charles	>3.5	Yes (AP)	No

(continued)

Table I. (continued)

Focus group	Student	Age	Gender	Race	Classification	Texas college attended	High school	High school GPA	Had college credits?	Outreach program
February 19, 2009, 6:30 p.m., Flagship A classroom	Will	18	M	Black	First year	Flagship A	Lawrence	3.0-3.49	No	Yes
	Becky	19	F	Asian	Sophomore	Flagship A	Charles	>3.5	Yes (AP)	Yes
March 26, 2009, 6:30 p.m., private Catholic classroom	Angela	20	F	Native/ White	Sophomore	Private Catholic	Lawrence	2.5-2.99	Yes (dual credit)	No
	Eliza	21	F	Latina	Junior	Private Catholic	William	>3.5	Yes (dual credit)	Yes
	Karla	21	F	Latina	Junior	Flagship A	Albert	>3.5	Yes (by exam)	Yes

^aAlbert: 80% Latino, 19% Black, 1% Asian. 3% gifted, 91% economically disadvantaged, 24% limited English proficiency.

^bLawrence: 50% Latino, 49% Black, >1% Asian. 6% gifted, 79% economically disadvantaged, 20% limited English proficiency.

^cSidney: 81% Latino, 12% Black, 2% Asian. 4% gifted, 84% economically disadvantaged, 36% limited English proficiency.

^dWilliam: 82% Latino, 11% Black, 1% Asian. 4% gifted, 79% economically disadvantaged, 26% limited English proficiency.

^eCharles: 71% Latino, 11% Black, 2% Asian; 7% gifted, 62% economically disadvantaged, 15% limited English proficiency.

^fDavid: 68% Latino, 9% Black, 1% Asian. 6% gifted, 61% economically disadvantaged, 14% limited English proficiency.

a degree of control during the interview (Morgan, 1996) and would provide participants with an empowering experience discussing their achievement of attending college (Magill, 1993). In addition, it allowed the researchers to capture more voices in one setting.

The students were purposely selected (Patton, 1990) and recruited to the study via lists of students in an academic support program at a state university and snowballing (potential participants were asked to refer high school classmates). Initially, we received strong interest and many responses via email; however, scheduling interviews proved to be difficult, as many potential participants had packed class and work schedules. We were mindful of the significant efforts expended by students to reach college and did not push students to abandon their responsibilities for our project. A total of 21 students completed an online survey to collect baseline demographics (i.e., age, ethnicity, graduation year, and college attended) and participated in a focus group interview. Participants were remunerated with dinner.

Seven focus groups were convened from fall 2008 to spring 2009, with participants ranging from 2 to 6 in a group. A total of three research team members were present at each interview: Two researchers asked questions from the protocol and clarifying questions, while another member of the research team tracked student responses. Pseudonyms were assigned to students, their high schools, and the colleges they attended.

Explication began immediately after the focus group interviews. The research team shared memos after each focus group (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Following Groenewald's (2004) research process, we engaged in data *explication* (investigating the phenomenon's constituents while keeping the context of the whole), rather than *analysis* (breaking into parts, therefore often losing understanding of the whole phenomenon; Hycner, 1999). This was a five-phase process, a simplified version of Hycner's (1999) explication process.

Phase 1 involved bracketing and phenomenological reduction, in which the researchers listened to and read the transcripts, suspending our meaning and interpretation in an effort to enter the world of the study participants (Miller & Crabtree, 1992). Although the research team brought experiences as graduates of HMHP schools, college counselors in HMHP schools, directors of college support programs, and leaders of peer leadership programs in HMHP schools, we endeavored to set aside our subjectivities and listen to the data. Phase 2 focused on delineating units of meaning, where we scrutinized and isolated statements in each interview that discussed the phenomenon of accessing capital and networks toward higher education, not only independently open coding the transcripts starting with emic codes from the data (keeping in line with the phenomenological approach) but also later integrating etic codes developed from social capital theories and previous studies (Bourdieu, 1977; McDonough, 1997). Phase 3 involved the clustering of units of meaning to form themes, again bracketing our presumptions and examining the list of units of meaning to derive the essence of these units within the holistic context, then identifying themes

two... six

expressing the essence of the clusters (Creswell, 1998). In Phase 4, the researchers summarized each interview and, using the notes of the three research team members who attended the focus group, validated the summary. This method was employed because it was deemed impractical to ask the participants to participate in postinterview member checks. The final phase focused on extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary after executing Phases 1 to 4 for each focus group, seeking themes common to most of the interviews (Hycner, 1999). We then wrote a composite summary of the findings.

We worked to ensure trustworthiness in our research by digitally tape recording interviews; having interviews transcribed by either a member of the research team or a professional, which ensured that student perspectives were accurately heard; and referencing these sources when they were in conflict regarding meaning (Maxwell, 2005). We also engaged in the process of bracketing and suspending our own perspectives as much as possible during analysis. Whenever possible, we present direct quotes from the participants. In addition, we shared preliminary findings and explication of the study with colleagues engaged in similar research in courses, university-wide conferences, and a national meeting of scholars engaged in research pertinent to populations of color.

Limitations

Like most qualitative studies, this research project exchanges a high level of access, trust, and commitment between the researcher and participants for the benefits of a wider research technique, such as surveys (Connell, Lynch, & Waring, 2001). Many potential participants were interested in participating in our study but were unable to commit to the study—the 21 participants were those who were able to spend 90 minutes in a focus group. An additional limitation is that most interviewees still reside in or near the research site and attend schools in the area; students who attended institutions a significant distance from the study site were not well represented in the sample. Findings from this study must take these factors into account.

Findings

The findings from the qualitative data point to a complex process for HMHP school graduates in accessing higher education. However, supportive relationships from peers, school officials, and family mitigate some confusion and complexity in the college-choice process. Students pointed to the importance of college support programs for new students and stayed connected to family and peers to maintain a positive academic self-image. Students also received help from college access programs that aided with applications and financial aid. All students exhibited self-motivating qualities that helped them excel in high school and took courses that prepared them for college. Students were aware of negative stereotypes placed on their high schools but sought positive resources within their schools and communities for guidance.

Making Meaning of the HMHP Experience: School Reputation Sending Students to College

We learned that the study participants' schools successfully sent a number of students to college, but participants noted that this was due to those students' own initiative. Maria stated that her school sent a "good number" of students to college, but "they didn't really set a bar. If you want to go to college you should. It wasn't an expectation. You had to want it" (Group interview, August 12, 2008). Students also revealed that schools were perceived by many to have lower standards than non-HMHP schools. Helena discussed how transferring students attempting to enter the top 10%¹ of the senior class targeted her high school:

A lot of people wanted to transfer thinking that they'd get into the top 10, but I said, "There's no way you can just transfer and be in the top 10 percent . . . It's not easy here." The people who really want to work for it get it, but everyone has this attitude, "Oh, you went to Charles. That was an easy school, wasn't it?" (Group interview, January 9, 2009)

Jacob added, "I heard that too . . . I just want to choke those people." The consensus among the sample was that students felt that the upper echelon of their school, regardless of neighborhood or background of the student body, was competitive.

A further finding suggested that students' choices for college were contingent on cost, location, and selectivity. Hence, local community colleges were the beneficiary of many college-bound seniors. Although a potentially positive finding, this raises questions about the information and choice that students have. Is the community college a choice that students make after analyzing their options given their individual circumstances or is it a "fall back" due to limited access to information about the diversity of 4-year colleges, locally and nationally?

Challenges to Academic Self-Image: The Need to Share the Whole Story About Their Community

These generally positive reports about college-going stood in contrast to many students' remarks about their schools' perception by the public. Students mentioned attention on issues they considered blown out of proportion and noted that more affluent schools experienced similar situations. "We see stabbings at supposedly better schools. They've had the bomb threats. We've had what—fights and pregnancies?" remarked Deon (Group interview, January 9, 2009). Other participants were quick to present the "whole story" regarding widely reported, salacious stories: Students fondly recalled a fired teacher's efforts to help students. Helena made reference to the fact that her school had many positive attributes that simply did not receive attention or recognition and were not readily apparent from a discussion of low high-stakes test scores at her HMHP school.

[There] was real pride in our school. We embrace each other and view each other as family . . . We look out for our teachers and our students [despite a] bad reputation . . . it's a common feeling, "Hey, this isn't a bad school." (Group interview, January 19, 2009)

For some students, the negative attention about school only served to strengthen resolve and pride in their school. Understandably, this was not always the case. Some respondents reported the presence of socially maladaptive activities in school and the surrounding environs, evidenced from a student's reflection. Gwen stated, "My aunt didn't want my little cousins to come to [my high school] because it's like, right in the middle of the hood or whatever. [There] was a lot of drug activity going on around there" (Group interview, August 7, 2008).

Gwen further observed how the school's perception differed by race. From her view, her former high school, which houses a magnet program, was perceived negatively by Blacks because of the school's location in an economically depressed community, whereas White parents knew the program's reputation and allowed this to color their opinion of the school: "[Black people] looked at it as 'that school is bad,' whereas White people looked at it as 'that's a magnet school, my child [goes there]'" (Group interview, August 7, 2008). This comment points to a perception gap, where Black parents have concerns about the physical location of an institution, whereas White parents prioritize the school's academic reputation.

Challenges to Academic Self-Image: Stereotyping

A troubling finding in our study dealt with student reports of stereotyping from teachers, community members, parents, and other students, an issue also analyzed in the research literature on urban youth (Bhimji, 2004). The research team heard many narratives from student participants about how people viewed them when they discussed their communities and their high schools—often receiving a certain look, a shaking of the head, or a sarcastic smirk. Students varied in their concern about "defending" their school, but it was evident that participants expended ample energy disproving negative stereotypes, evidenced in Henry's exasperated comment:

I would just get tired of having to defend myself and the school from the stupid people that would give us a bad name. Sometimes you just go, "Hey, I just whupped your kid's ass in grades, and I got into college." (Group interview, January 9, 2009)

The effort expended defusing these negative assumptions are a burden that students from other schools may not share.

A striking feature of the focus group discussion was the permanence of negative stereotypes regarding HMHP schools and communities. As one student marveled, in a matter of years, each of the schools had negative reputations and students were unable

to change these stereotypes, regardless of their own and their peers' successes. This finding sadly reinforces previous research suggesting that news media engage in a discourse of ethnic blame independent of actual conflict (Romer, Jamieson, & De Coteau, 1998) and scrutinizes the media's responsibility of fairly portraying such communities. Further research notes that teens rarely appear in the news; however, when they do, it tends to be related to violence. Youth of color fare worse in these portrayals than Whites (Dorfman & Shiraldi, 2001). Although many media outlets focus on sensationalistic reporting, the effect on students, who must overcome a dysfunctional image before they are considered equal to students from other communities, can be devastating.

Positive (and Absent) Forms of Capital: Expectations Within the High School

Some participants reported that stereotyping also came from within their school communities. HMHP graduates often felt teachers had low expectations of students, and in turn, students had low expectations of the teachers, administrators, and themselves. Yet students felt there were examples of excellent teachers and counselors who held them to high standards. At one school, six students credited one teacher with playing a significant role in their collegiate success through his authentic care and high expectations of them.

Stereotyping and negative perceptions of HMHP high schools may impact the expectations teachers and administrators have of students. Lackluster expectations and a nonchallenging curriculum from some teachers diminished students' respect for their school. Gwen discussed how the lack of concern and low expectations from some teachers generated a self-fulfilling prophecy of underachievement among students:

[Some] teachers, it was babysitting to them. [They were] like . . . "There are too many Black kids. They're ghetto, and none of them are going to graduate." So their expectations were [low] . . . other students felt good if they made a C in a class . . . we're watching *Shrek* and you want us to write a summary about it and you made a C?

Gwen further stated, "Black students always felt like, '[The school] is sorry'" (Group interview, August 7, 2008). In many ways, such concerns point to Steele's (1997) **AAQ: 2** concept of *stereotype threat*, in which students underperform because a stereotype exists suggesting they will not do well due to some aspect of identity beyond their control, such as race, socioeconomic status, and community of origin. Further reflecting on stereotyping, Gwen shared the experience of taking her grandmother to her school's open house:

She was like, "What class is this?" They thought it was 'cause of the neighborhood . . . then they get inside and, "Okay, the students [aren't] bad, they just

dumb.” Then they get further in, and “Okay the students aren’t dumb.” (Group interview, August 7, 2008)

Although Gwen surmised that low expectations from some teachers and a weak curriculum were to blame for students’ lack of academic success, we wonder how many students have internalized and accepted a self-fulfilling prophecy of academic failure. This finding is supported by researchers who have unearthed the deleterious effects of low expectations on student achievement and confidence, especially in communities of color (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2008; Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torre, 2004; Rist, 1970). The consequences for such thinking are dire: If students are in a toxic environment of low expectations and subpar self-esteem, how is it possible to expect any but the most resilient and resourceful to succeed? In this scenario, students are saddled with the extra challenge of overcoming a deficit of confidence in addition to the rigor of the high school curriculum. Students recognized several excellent teachers, counselors, and administrators who had a great impact on their success, but school leaders should ensure that all staff are committed to high expectations for students.

From these data, the effect of one’s school reputation means much more than school colors and the alma mater. For students in HMHP schools, their school’s perception by the public, and even their own teachers, created yet another challenge for a population that navigates significant roadblocks toward higher education. Participants discussed how their achievements were often overlooked in favor of age-old stereotypes about communities, racial groups, and youth. Students need support from schools, public safety officials, and the media to lessen these negative experiences so they can focus on successfully mastering college preparatory courses.

Academic and Social Challenge to Self-Image: Within-School Segregation

Some students, like Jaime, recognized their HMHP high school had “two schools within one roof” (Group interview, August 7, 2008). Several students described their high school settings as academically segregated by “regular” classes versus AP/honors classes. Even within their school, these students experienced a racial divide: Most were enrolled in AP/honors courses where they were in the minority of students of color among a majority of Whites, whereas students of color filled the seats in regular classes. Our findings reify the nationwide underrepresentation of Black and Latino students in AP courses, who are ~~three times~~ less likely to enroll compared with White students (~~National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2006~~). These same students, especially those from low-income families, are overrepresented in lower track courses (Martin, Karabel, & Jaquez, 2005; Oakes & Wells, 1998; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004).

Most research on tracking examines the phenomena in racially and economically integrated school settings. Even in integrated settings, segregation can still occur within the school by tracking minority students to less rigorous courses (Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2005). Being academically

qualified and enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum is the gateway to accessing college for low-income students (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000a, 2000b). It is problematic when low-income students and students of color have unequal access to courses essential for college preparation because of in-school segregation via tracking.

Several participants experienced tracking in their racially segregated schools. Gwen navigated two worlds: She was an honors course enrollee in the magnet program, but students of color were the majority in her “regular” courses. Her school was segregated into two—regular and magnet. She assigned herself a label based on the academic track where she took most of her courses. “I’m not in the magnet program. I’m with the regular kids.” Gwen observed inequality in instruction between the regular and AP/honors courses. In her magnet courses, teachers implemented an engaging pedagogy, but in regular classes teachers appeared less engaged:

The teachers when I had magnet classes were very hands-on . . . whereas the other classes the teachers had a harder time trying to begin a lesson, because of other students were just in class, because they had to be there. (Group interview, August 7, 2008)

Although school counselors encouraged both regular and magnet students to participate in college trips, according to one student, the magnet students visited colleges outside of the state and regular track students only visited schools in the state. Teachers who taught regular classes spent most of their time preparing students for the state assessment test and ensuring students met the basic academic requirements. Teachers instructing AP/honors classes prepared students for the AP test and spent more time discussing college access.

Accessible Forms of Capital: High School Counselor Support

Participants shared mixed sentiments when discussing the level of assistance from high school counselors and support staff. Many found counselors unhelpful with college planning, interacting with counselors only during junior or senior year. For students who did meet with their counselor prior to junior or senior year, the focus was on class scheduling. Vincent recalled, “I think I only went to her office one time and it was about changing my schedule . . . only my teachers helped me” (Group interview, August 18, 2008). Students who initiated contact with counselors had more positive relationships. Gwen concurred, “The counselors were really good, they had college trips and took all the students, whether they knew they were going to college or not” (Group interview, August 7, 2008).

Counselor roles were critical for first-generation collegians new to the college process. Karla stated, “I thank the [high school counselors] because my parents really didn’t do too much . . . it was kind of a learning experience for [student and parents]” (Group interview, March 26, 2009). College field trips planned by support program counselors also proved beneficial.

Accessible Forms of Capital: High School–Based College Outreach Programs

Participants mentioned several high school–based college outreach programs, including Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), Project ADVANCE, GEAR UP, and Communities in Schools (CIS). High school–facilitated and grant-funded college preparatory programs are typically designed to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This designation is often defined by first-generation status or being from a low-income household (which often correlates with being students of color). One participant was in AVID, an elective class focusing on early exposure to college. Rosa related that “we had CIS, GEAR UP, AVID, and Project ADVANCE. Those were the only people that helped” (Group interview, August 12, 2008). These programs were discussed as playing a role in college preparation, providing support, and assisting students in completing college applications and applying for financial aid. The programs also provided travel opportunities as Stefania noted: “We went to [a local college] . . . it was all through the counselors or GEAR UP” (Group interview, August 12, 2008).

Accessible Forms of Capital: Local College–Based Outreach Programs

Area institutions provided outreach programs to recruit and retain students from HMHP schools. Outreach and early intervention programs provide a venue for narrowing the college access gap by doubling the college-going rates for at-risk youth, expanding students’ educational aspirations, increasing students’ educational and cultural capital, and boosting college enrollment and graduation rates (McDonough, 2004). As Gándara’s (2002) research illustrates, students who participate in well-designed student support or intervention programs have access to information to prepare for college, and as a result, they show statistically higher rates of planning and enrolling in college. María similarly reported these positive results:

The [programs] that helped me the most were Educational Talent Search² and University Outreach because they were most constantly calling me . . . “Do you need me to come up to the school and check your essay?” (Group interview, August 12, 2008)

Outside of University Outreach, other programs mentioned support curricula in the colleges of liberal arts and natural sciences, and in the diversity and community engagement division, all at the nearby state flagship university. In the words of Pedro, “Before I came to orientation I was scared, but now I am [just] a little scared, because . . . I am going to have a mentor, and I think that will help me some” (Group interview, August 12, 2008). This connection to the university, formalized in the student’s membership in a mentoring program, suggests that he or she possesses a resource network assisting in high school to college transition.

College advisors and counselors assist students in acclimating to the college environment and identify ways for students to become academically successful. Carl explained how support was meaningful once he found a person and a place on campus: “My GPA isn’t that great but I’ve met a good counselor at [college] . . . He’s been through some of the same stuff that I have . . . that’s why we connect and he wants to help” (Group interview, January 9, 2009).

Deon mentioned a university program providing peer support in the group discussion. Continuing students at the university serve as mentors to the ^{first-}first-year students who are transitioning from high school to college. “We had peer mentors . . . I believe that if you have a group of upperclassmen, even if they’re just sophomores, kind of mentoring students that are coming in, it really makes a big difference” (Group interview, January 9, 2009).

These findings point to an application of Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model of academic and social integration, which explores student stages in formal and informal academic and social college systems. In Tinto’s first stage, individual preentry college attributes such as family background, ability, and prior schooling form individual goals and commitments. Here is where parental involvement, high school–based programs, and curriculum factor in strongly.

Next, an individual’s goals and commitments interact over time with institutional experiences. College-based support programs are relevant in this stage as they can assist a student in transitioning to the institution and in establishing positive experiences. The last stage, and the most crucial one for higher education personnel, is the extent to which an individual becomes integrated into an institution’s academic and social systems; the level of integration may determine one’s decision to depart from or drop out of an institution (Seidman, 2006). Students’ adaptation to the environment, positive experiences, and reliance on effective support programs all play a role in students’ decisions to remain at an institution, as evidenced in Will’s statement about a relationship that persuaded him to return to campus after a disappointing semester: “Through my counselor now, I feel like I can talk to somebody that can help me” (Group interview, February 19, 2009). Therefore, high schools and higher education institutions should collaboratively build relationships with and disseminate information to students and their families early about postsecondary educational options, preparation, application process, and financial aid (McClafferty, McDonough, & Fann, 2001).

Variable Forms of Capital: Parental Support and Involvement

Parental support, involvement, and encouragement are the most important influences in students’ decisions and aspirations to attend college (Gándara & Bial, 1999; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). Actions such as engaging in conversations about college, setting an expectation from an early age, and asking questions throughout the process have proven to be beneficial to students. Some students, like Rosa, had such an experience and shared the role their

parents played in their decision to go to college. She commented, “They were very supportive and they asked how my day was and they gave me advice in all my classes and all my teachers” (Group interview, August 12, 2008).

Other participants reported a contrasting experience and relied on independence and self-motivation. Dahlia explained, “My family . . . never knew my teachers and they never knew what I wanted to do. Like, I do everything for myself” (Group interview, August 18, 2008). We found that still other students are somewhere in the middle and are more vague regarding the role of their parent(s)/family in their educational endeavors—evident in comments such as, “I think my dad is behind me,” where the student himself is unsure if he is receiving support.

However, research shows that specifically academically based parental involvement is beneficial. Perna and Titus (2005) state that parent-initiated contact about academic concerns is associated with a greater likelihood that students will enroll in college, whereas contact regarding behavior is associated with a lower likelihood of attending college. Despite this, some students still reached their goal of college, even if their family was unaware of how to assist, as Gwen shared: “They just wanted me to get out of high school” (Group interview, August 7, 2008). In this case, Gwen’s first-generation status limited her understanding of college. This statement illustrates a lack of conventional social capital and limited access to funds of knowledge. This is a challenge particularly relevant to Black and Latino students, who tend to have less capital at home and attend schools where those networks are limited (Perna & Titus, 2005).

Accessible Forms of Capital: Examples Set by Role Models

Our data show that in some cases, siblings and extended family members play a more direct role in students’ quests for college, particularly for first-generation college students whose parents lack direct, firsthand experience or knowledge, exemplified in Stefania’s observation: “My parents [helped], but my brothers especially . . . because they all went to college, and they tell me their experiences. And that helps a lot” (Group interview, August 12, 2008).

The more social capital a student has, the more likely he or she is to enroll in post-secondary study. Therefore, developing more college preparatory programs and structuring them in ways to promote and increase that capital are beneficial to students who attend HMHP schools and who may not have a surplus of capital (Perna & Titus, 2005). However, the authors caution against dependence on programs and encourage parental involvement in supporting their child to attend college, which has benefits for other children in the same social network.

Community Support

Participants’ comments suggest that communities can fulfill a greater role in regard to students’ college aspirations. When asked whether the community played a role in assisting with her college goals, Becky commented, “Yeah, people from my church

wrote me letters of recommendation [for scholarships]" (Group interview, February 19, 2009). Deon even explained that he received help because in the past he had offered help. "I was an active participant in the community. I mentor students, so they [adults at the mentoring program] wrote letters of recommendation" (Group interview, January 9, 2009). Community—people, organizations, and resources outside of students' homes, tied to the local area—can provide capital in different ways. Gándara's (2002) research on community recognizes the importance of resources and the quality and quantity of such available to families. Positive role models can be identified from a greater community. Without such, students remain at a stagnant level of social capital.

One student shared information on the lack of community-based involvement. After discussing a number of school-based college access programs, Gwen opined, "Those were the only people who helped. There's a booster club, but it was part of the magnet program" (Group interview, August 7, 2008). The school's magnet program, comprised mainly of White students from outside of the school's neighborhood, provides its students with access to community leaders and involved parents; the regular nonmagnet students, who are arguably more in need, lack that access. This acknowledges how those from HMHP backgrounds are at a disadvantage compared with those from more affluent neighborhoods (Gándara, 2002).

An Essential Form of Capital: Self-Motivation

Successful students from HMHP schools tended to have strong personal drive by exhibiting qualities of self-motivation, independence, assertiveness, and resilience. Gwen reflected on this:

I could have been in the streets, had a baby, done all that stuff. But I saw how my mama was. She was in the streets, had her baby young, and I was like, "She's in jail, so not that path [for me]." That's how I got interested in school. (Group interview, August 7, 2008)

Although some lacked guidance navigating their environment, others had strong parental influences that helped shape their motivations. Henry stated, "My main motivation was my environment and looking at my friends, cousins, and how they ended up. At the same time, my parents were telling me, 'you're going to college.'" Another student, Sharon, from the same school stated, "In my household, not going to college was not an option" (Group interview, January 9, 2009).

Despite their surroundings, and in some cases despite negative influences at home and in the community, these students envisioned education transforming their lives. The possibility that Jacob articulated—of "making something out of themselves" (Group interview, January 9, 2009)—provided strong motivation for many of these students. Several students described themselves as being "independent," seeking college information unaided, completing applications with minimal help from others, and

assertively asking questions and networking. All participants shared a trait of self-motivation to accomplish what was necessary to enroll in college.

Conclusion: Advice From HMHP Graduates

As authors, we have proposed recommendations and implications from the qualitative data collected in this study. We believe that these successful graduates of HMHP schools should also make recommendations with implications for educational leadership and policy.

Participants suggested that counselors, teachers, and administrators help students set high expectations and goals. Several students said their schools waited until senior year to help students set college goals; these students recommended that schools help students set goals and plan for college much earlier. Students also recommended that college-bound peers connect to mentors outside the school and further suggested that colleges make more personal contact with students beyond college fairs. Students further appreciated campus visits and enjoyed shadowing students and attending courses—recommending the visit be more than visiting landmarks but also presenting the reality of a college classroom. Finally, focus group participants, specifically those who identified as first generation, suggested that students talk to their parents about their college aspirations, helping their parents understand the benefits of obtaining a college education.

Implications

The HMHP high school graduates in the study accessed college because they found ways to accrue valuable social capital *in situ*, largely because of individual agency and initiative. Much of this success was directly attributable to the “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) brought from home regarding the value of education and the significance of persistence. The students, in turn, applied these assets and skills to accrue capital to help them achieve their higher education aspirations. Although the students expressed this sentiment in varied ways, it was evident in our analysis that the participants brought significant aspiration capital to their pursuit of a college education, despite considerable structural challenges (Yosso, 2005). Most students, virtually all of whom were high achievers, sought resources consistent with middle-class values such as teachers, counselors, and mentors who could provide the support needed for college. The caring traits that successful teachers, counselors, and community mentors—who represent what de los Reyes and Gozembera (2002) refer to as “pockets of hope”—possess have implications for educational leadership. Each student identified a few school faculty members who made the greatest impact on his or her transition to college. Therefore, it would benefit school leaders to identify the methods successful faculty use to help students from HMHP schools progress through the college pipeline as well as ensure that all faculty are implementing care and providing resources to aid students.

Because most student participants were high-achieving, self-motivated learners with significant funds of knowledge, they found it necessary that teachers, parents, and administrators also hold them to high expectations. Students in focus groups recognized varied expectation levels among their family members, peers, and teachers. Participants felt many teachers and peers in AP/honors courses set higher academic expectations and higher expectations for college when compared with teachers and peers from regular courses. Though research suggests that attending college immediately after graduation is the best option for low-income students (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007), various postsecondary options should be available, such as acquiring technical skills or community service. However, regardless of the options, students at all academic levels should be given equal motivation to learn. Participants were successful in accessing college through relationships with family members, peers, counselors, and teachers, all of whom set high expectations.

One of the authors' major findings and concerns centers on the structural inadequacies endured by students at HMHP schools. As invested as we are in student success stories, we were troubled to learn the efforts students expended to reach a middle-class lifestyle—a requisite of which, in the words of Vice President Biden, is a college education (Kates, 2009). Structural interventions such as college support programs sponsored by high schools and colleges are instrumental in providing students information and tools needed to access college. Such efforts must be expanded and enhanced to reach not only the top strivers but also their peers of varying levels of achievement. Troubling structural deficiencies, like inadequate counselor-to-student ratios, disengaged teachers, and a curriculum emphasizing basic skills over engaging instruction, are obstacles that students negotiated on their way to college. It is our concern that the students not included in our study (i.e., those who did not pursue college) had their potential succumb to these challenges.

Students possessed varying levels of cultural capital: Some had supportive parents and others had parents content with high school graduation. A few students had greater cultural capital because they had a college-going parent or sibling who could share experiences about applying to college. Several students shared that their families had neither knowledge of the benefits of college nor information about how to apply. This study leads us to delineate a need across the P-16 continuum to provide specific outreach programs for students unfamiliar with college access, such as first-generation collegians.

The high drop-out rates, low college attendance, and stereotyping of HMHP schools is concerning, but this study reveals that students in these schools have positive experiences, gain valuable resources, and establish essential relationships with persons who aid them in accessing college. This research demonstrates that college is achievable, even with the challenges of attending a HMHP school. At the same time, it is imperative that educators, policy makers, and the community dismantle structures that perpetuate inequity in social capital and informational networks. These avenues of opportunity must be democratized to make college accessible to all students, regardless of family origin, race, and socioeconomic status.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **[AQ: 3]**

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **[AQ: 4]**

Notes

1. Texas students in the top 10% of their class are guaranteed admission to any state college.
2. A federal TRIO program to increase college access to low-income students, not to be confused with the gifted education use (see Lee, Matthews, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2008).

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