

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

A Critical Race Ecocultural Agency Theory of Education Framework:

(Re)Conceptualizing African American Students'

Transitions from High School to College

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Ifeoma Ann Amah

2009

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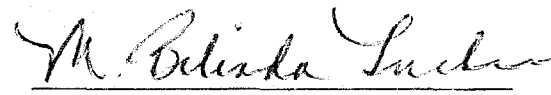
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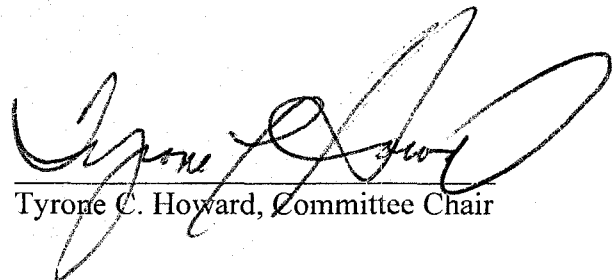
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This dissertation is dedicated to my family, friends and most importantly, the young African American scholars who shared their experiences with me and challenged the discourse about their lived realities and the high school-to-college transition process.

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#### PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

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Amah, I. A. (April 2006). Redefining Academic Achievement in Urban Schools: African American Students Perspective, Paper presented at the 2006 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting- San Francisco, CA

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Amah, I. A. (April 2007). The Silenced Speak Out: African American Students Perspectives on the Conditions Critical for Success at an Urban High School. Paper presented at the 2007 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting- Chicago, IL.

Amah, I.A. (March 2008). Re)Defining Our Pathways to College: African American Students' Critical Race Ecocultural Agency. Invited poster session for AERA Minority Fellows. Poster presented at the 2008 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference, New York, NY.

Amah, I.A., Buenavista, T.L., Jain, D., and Rodriguez, E. (March 2008). The Race to Higher Education: Critical Race Theory, Access, and Retention. Individual papers presented in a session at the 2008 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference, New York, NY.

Obidah, J., Kim, P., Gildersleeve, R.E., Marsh, T., and Amah, I. A. (February 2004). Increasing College Access for Urban School Students: The Impact of Parents, Teachers and School Policies. Papers presented at the University of Pennsylvania Center for Urban Ethnography Graduate School of Education: Ethnography in Education Conference- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Critical Race Ecocultural Agency Theory of Education Framework:  
(Re)Conceptualizing African American  
Students' Transitions from High School to College

by

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Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Chair

African Americans remain underrepresented in U.S. institutions of higher education despite a generation of national policies and programmatic efforts designed to increase college access and equity for all. This crisis represents the failures of various institutions to improve disparities at a critical point of the K-16 educational pipeline---the high school-to-college transition process. The experiences of African Americans fail to be counted among those individuals with the authority to critique and reform their pathways to college. Therefore, it is imperative for educational policymakers and

officials to interweave African Americans' voices into policies and practices about ways to facilitate their college-going outcomes.

My dissertation integrates African American students' experiential knowledge into current education discourse to illuminate ways to replace systemic inequalities in K-16 education with equitable outcomes. Through a longitudinal qualitative study, I examined the high school-to-college transition process of twenty African American students at an urban public high school in Southern California. I specifically explored factors in multiple contexts that facilitated and hindered their transitions to college. Using a *Critical Race Ecocultural Agency Theory in Education (C.R.E.A.T.E.) model*, an integrative framework of Critical Race Theory, Ecocultural Theory and student agency, I explored the various factors that shaped the choices students made over time in their pathways to higher education. Through interviews, informal conversations, site observations, and document analyses, I created counter-narratives to frame the interconnectedness of the students' agency and their actions and decisions towards college.

Findings from this study revealed: 1) the importance of using a qualitative methodological orientation that captures the complexities and diversity of African American students' experiences over time; 2) the ways agency was asserted on individual and collective levels across multiple contexts to achieve post-high school goals; 3) the dexterity involved in navigating and negotiating their lived realities and postsecondary goals; and 4) how students developed critical understandings of the connections and disconnections between their academic, social and personal realities. In addition,

throughout this study the students provided recommendations for educational policies and practices about improving African Americans' college access, preparation and participation.

## FOREWARD

*I met Nia during her sophomore year while she participated in the GEAR UP Summer Intensive Enrichment Program at Western Metropolitan University, Los Altos (WMULA). Unlike most of the students in this study, who were very outgoing and sociable, Nia was introverted and shy. Yet, over the course of our interviews together she became comfortable enough to open up about some of her difficult experiences. Although I did not get to know Nia as well as I did the other students, the few interactions we had together allowed me to learn about how her familial realities and peers shaped her high school-to-college transition process. During our first interview together, I learned that she was the daughter of Belizean immigrants and had grown up in a low-income, single parent household. Although many of Nia's immediate family members had never attended college, she said, her mother continuously encouraged her to take advanced placement courses, participate in extracurricular activities such as GEAR UP and maintain good grades. Also Nia said her mother pushed her to do well in school in order to be eligible to gain access to higher education.*

*While Nia was involved in a few extracurricular activities during school hours, she was seldom able to participate in any after school activities because she had to go home to attend to her familial responsibilities. As the oldest child, she was expected to help take care of her four siblings as well as cook and clean prior to starting her homework, often times finding herself at 9:00pm with her schoolwork yet to be touched. During the times Nia acquired part-time jobs, she also was expected to contribute financially to her household. Although Nia was able to maintain above a 3.0 G.P.A. throughout her high school career, she often missed school because of chronic asthma and stomach problems. Trying desperately to not fall behind academically, she often relied on her friends for assistance to stay focused on achieving her educational goals. For instance, every time Nia was sick, her friend Peyton would call or visit her to provide updates about missed homework assignments and school activities. With so many daily obstacles and hardships, Nia never committed to pursuing higher education; that is, until her sophomore year when she started hanging out with Peyton. She said that it was Peyton, along with some other friends, who made her enroll in advanced placement courses, brought her along to participate in college preparation activities and helped her pass her classes.*

*During Nia's senior year, she and her friends spent every spare minute with one another as they prepared to apply for college. When Nia felt overwhelmed with her responsibilities both at school and at home, her friends would step in to make sure she was properly filling out and submitting her college applications. As a participant of GEAR UP since the second semester of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Nia, like most other program participants, hung out in the GEAR UP office during lunchtime; however, unlike the others she seldom sought direct assistance with academic and college preparation from staff members. Because she was shy, Nia often relied on her friends to go to a GEAR UP or GSFS staff member for her questions to be answered.*

*One day while I was working in the office, Nia came to me and informed me that she would no longer be applying to college. She surprisingly confided in me that her mother was an undocumented immigrant who did not feel comfortable about including the personal information required for college applications. I directed her to other GEAR UP staff members who helped her understand her options. Finally, Nia did apply to college with minimal information about her mother. A month later, Nia informed me that since her father was in the military, she would be able to obtain financial aid through his benefits.*

*Nia successfully graduated from high school and gained admission to several State University (SU) campuses. She decided to attend the SU, Newberry, which was 40 minutes away from Golden State, and was planning to commute from home using public transportation once the academic year began. Yet, before the fall semester started, Nia learned that her father's military benefits were not processed on time and that she would have to wait until the spring semester to enroll in college. Nia's story represents that of one of the 20 African American students I followed over the course of three years. Through the following dissertation I aim to shed light on the complexities and diversity of the high school-to-college transition process as exemplified by the lived realities of these 20 young adults.*

## **1- Introduction**

Despite a generation of concerted national policy, programmatic effort and three decades of affirmative action, African Americans remain underrepresented in U.S. institutions of higher education (Allen et al, 2002). The state of California personifies this paradox. African American students who aspire to college--particularly the state's 4-year institutions--face an uncertain future. Consider the case of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) freshmen class of 2008, where only 235 out of the 4,749 students enrolled are African American (UCOP 2008). While this number has slightly increased since 2006 when 96 out of 4852 students enrolled were African American, there continues to be a simultaneously greater enrollment for this population at *lower* tier institutions such as the California State University (CSU) system and especially at the California Community College (CCC) level (Allen et al, 2002). The California Postsecondary Education Commission (2008) revealed that 49.2% of African American public high school graduates are entering public colleges and universities. Of these students, 32.7% are enrolled in the CCC system, 12.5% in the CSU system and only 4.0% in the UC system. These figures clearly illustrate the gravity of the situation of California's system of higher education and serve as a microcosm of the larger crisis we are facing in our nation. Given that a significant proportion of the African American population in the United States resides in California (Allen et al, 2002), these inequalities signal ongoing challenges to their representation in higher education.

Each year, the rates of college enrollment for African Americans increase nationwide, yet with unnerving consistency, they still lag behind their white counterparts

in the percentage of college-age high school graduates enrolled in higher education. The persistence of systemic disparities, inequitable K-12 school conditions and federal and state policy trends such as the repeal of Affirmative Action, are the primary factors influencing the lingering challenges to the college-going rates for African Americans (Comeaux and Jayakumar, 2005). For instance, there are more African American males in prison than in college across the U.S. In California, they make up 3% of state's population, 25% of the prison population and 1% of the undergraduate student population (Allen et al, 2002). Given these challenges to the educational and social advancement of this marginalized population, few studies have sought to examine this issue from the perspectives of the students themselves, who confront the obstacles and initiatives that characterize their educational experiences. If we are to better address the bleak prospects African American students are facing, it is no great stretch to affirm that a critical connection must be made between their lived realities and the policies and practices that shape their academic experiences and outcomes as they move through the K-16 educational pipeline.

This study is an attempt to go directly to the source and gain first-hand perspectives of the roots of the problem and their various manifestations. Furthermore, it is an attempt to better recognize and address this problem at one highly critical juncture of the educational pipeline --- the transition from high school to college<sup>1</sup> --- as a means to

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<sup>1</sup> ***High school-to-college transition process***- the experiences and changes that occur for students, especially during their high school years, which shape their postsecondary decisions, actions and outcomes.

understand African American students'<sup>2</sup> underrepresentation in public higher education institutions. More specifically, I seek to answer the following questions:

- 1) How does using a Critical Race Ecocultural Agency Theory in Education (C.R.E.A.T.E.)<sup>3</sup> model help us understand the high school-to-college transition process for African American students?
- 2) How can African American students' voices and experiences inform K-16 educational policies and practices to increase their access to, preparation for, and representation in higher education?

I examined twenty African American high school students' experiences to explore how factors in their multiple contexts (e.g. school, family, community and peers) facilitated and hindered their transitions from high school to college.

Using a longitudinal qualitative research design, I used interviews, informal conversations (e.g. text messaging, phone calls, etc), multiple site participant observations, and document analyses to follow the lived realities of the students from their sophomore through senior years to examine how they conceptualized and contextualized their pathways to higher education as racialized, classed and gendered beings. I created counter-narratives of the students' voices and experiences not only to challenge the deficit ideologies and practices that shaped their lives, but also to illuminate the complexities of their stories about their diverse pathways to higher education.

The major goals of my study were to explore: 1) the complexities of the students' high school-to-college transition process; 2) the connections and incongruities between

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<sup>2</sup> I centered my dissertation study on the lived experiences and outcomes of twenty *African American students* from diverse academic, socio-economic and familial backgrounds who attended a Southern California urban public high school, Golden State High School (GSHS).

<sup>3</sup> *Critical Race Ecocultural Agency Theory in Education (C.R.E.A.T.E.)* is conceptualized as an intersection of critical race theory (CRT), ecocultural theory (ET) and agency to examine students' responses to factors in multiple contexts with strategies, skills, routines and decisions necessary to take action(s) on individual and collective levels to achieve postsecondary goals.

their academic, personal and social realities; 3) ways to redefine traditional notions of their potential and abilities to pursue postsecondary education; and 4) how current education policies, reform initiatives and practices impact these students' access to, preparation for and participation in higher education. In order to connect these goals, I utilized an integrative framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Ecocultural Theory (ET), and student agency to examine the interconnectedness of African American students' subjectivities (e.g. race, class, gender, etc), agency, and experiences across multiple contexts, as well as between their meaning making, actions, and decisions towards college. In this chapter, I discuss: 1) My Personal Connection to the Study, 2) the Statement of the Problem, 3) the Purpose of Study, and 4) the Organization of the Dissertation.

### **From the Personal to the Political**

While my own Southern California high school offered a plethora of academically challenging courses and extracurricular opportunities, there were numerous institutional constraints that affected the educational experiences of African American and Latino students, including myself. These inequities became evident to me in the ninth grade while visiting the college counselor's office to inquire about information on gaining admission to UCLA. Without considering my academic record or accomplishments, the counselor advised me to look into a local community college instead. While my counselor did point me towards college, she diverted me to a non-selective community college that would not require the same preparation as would be necessary for admissions to the selective UC system. Other school officials (i.e. teachers, administrators, academic

counselors, etc) voiced similar sentiments. This collective advice suggested that I would not need college preparatory courses and programs to fulfill my academic goals. I soon understood that heeding this advice would effectively limit, if not entirely preclude, access to selective higher education institutions for my peers and me.

I began to more clearly see the structural design, whether overt or not, that was creating the self fulfilling prophecies of those higher up with respect to Students of Color<sup>4</sup> like myself. While there were an abundance of college preparatory opportunities available at my high school, African American and Latino students were not being given access to these learning spaces, which in turn assured that such students, who otherwise could, would not be competitively eligible for admission to higher tier universities. For example, when outreach programs were invited to our campus to recruit students, the representatives were never sent to classes that were predominately African American and/or Latino. The only way to for the “excluded” students to participate in these programs was through substantial assistance from a certain school staff, parent(s)/guardian(s) and community members, another considerable obstacle for many of them whose parents did not have the time because of work or feel comfortable to take such a stand. I, however, with guidance from family and friends, fortunately managed to fight my way into the college preparation track and other related activities.

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<sup>4</sup> **Students of Color-** “intentionally capitalized to reject the standard grammatical norm. Capitalization is used as a means to empower this group and represents a grammatical move towards social and racial justice” (Perez-Huber, Johnson & Kohli, 2006; Johnson- Ahorlu, 2008; Kohli, 2008). This rule will also apply to “People of Color,” “Communities of Color,” “Families of Color” and “Scholars of Color” used throughout this paper.

Unfortunately, this was not the case for many of my African American and Latino classmates. While many had high college aspirations and support from various individuals in their lives, the institutional barriers present at our school limited their access to a quality four-year institution and pushed them towards dropping out of school, entering the workforce, enlisting in the military, or enrolling at a local community college. The consequence of these actions was reflected in my graduating class--out of a class of 427 students, only six students were admitted to UCLA and other highly selective four-year institutions. Of these six students, there were four Asian Americans, one Latina and one African American. I am that African American student.

The situation was discouraging, and regrettably, current educational research suggests that my experience was not an isolated incident. Many African American students today face varying challenges created by systemic orthodoxies, which are “mistakenly couched in terms of a single, uniform and invariable experience” (Rubin and Silva, 2005, p.2). More specifically, images of these students continue to be characterized by cultural deficiencies (Valencia, 1997), low achievement rates (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2003), differential patterns of expulsions and suspensions (Epps, 1997) and curriculum inequities (Oakes, 2005). In turn, their educability is stereotyped in fixed and monolithic ways that are linked to inferiority, underachievement and academic failure.

These static notions are currently used to support policies and practices that supposedly aim to address issues in African American education such as their underrepresentation in higher education, but instead only “blame the victim” (Valencia,

1997). Not only do these attempts ignore the role of socio-economic, ecological, political and institutional factors, but also the voices of those most affected by and pivotal to the success of any program or initiative are excluded—those of students themselves. This divide between African American student perspectives and the framing of discourses, policies and practices about their educational experiences excludes the possibility of heterogeneity within this group and often the possibility for real change for this group. Therefore, it is important to complicate these standard depictions, and to shed light on the true agency and complexity of these students and their daily realities in multiple contexts, especially as they relate to college access and participation. This dissertation utilized a student-centered lens to contextualize the multitude of ways in which African American students at a California urban public high school negotiated more equitable, relevant and successful school experiences and postsecondary opportunities.

Through my personal experiences as an African American student in the public school system, I have been able to move, as Patricia Hill Collins (1994) describes, from the personal to the political as I have used my experiences to shape my future actions as a WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP<sup>5</sup> practitioner and researcher. When I crossed the line from student to research-practitioner, deconstructing the discourse about African American students' higher education access and participation became even more pertinent.

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<sup>5</sup> For the past seven years, **Western Metropolitan University, Los Altos-Golden State Unified School District Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (WMULA-GSUSD GEAR-UP)**, a federally funded program sought to establish a college-going culture by providing rigorous academic programs, high quality teaching, intensive academic and college-going support, multicultural college-going identity, and parent/ community connections for two urban secondary schools to address issues of inequities.

My relationship with GEAR UP began five years ago when I was hired as a program representative to establish a college preparation program at Golden State High School (GSHS). As I immersed myself in this learning community, I constantly heard the school staff complaining about their African American and Latino students' low achievement rates, limited preparation in core subject areas such as math, science, and language arts, and perceived lack of concern for postsecondary pursuits. During the after school program, I noticed that these students had different perspectives on their educational experiences that were not being considered. For instance, many students expressed that teachers and administrators did not attempt to learn about their postsecondary plans and instead just assumed that they did not care about going to college.

As I transitioned from practitioner to researcher the following year, I learned to go beyond questioning the daily challenges that took place at GSHS. Through my interactions with and observations of the GEAR UP participants, particularly the African American students, I learned that these students had unique and dynamic stories to tell about their lived realities both inside and outside of school, and that these perspectives often challenged the current discourse about their educational experiences. These powerful interactions influenced me to embark on a longitudinal study to capture the voices and experiences of twenty African American high school students in their quest for academic achievement. Therefore, this dissertation study was driven by my desire to shed light on the multiple dimensions shaping African American students' learning and

pathways to higher education, especially those aspects that have been ignored or overlooked in the current educational literature.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the United States, education has long been characterized as the vehicle for upward social mobility, a fundamental part of the professed “American Dream.” Most often it is those who achieve in the academic arena that are granted access to social and economic prosperity. Yet, for centuries, the educational experiences of African Americans have represented the denial and contradictions of the “American Dream.” From the inception of slavery when reading and writing were forbidden for African Americans, to the current systemic inequities in access to higher education and educational resources, U.S.-based education has been a long denied dream for this marginalized population (Allen, 2005; Anderson, 1988; DuBois, 1903; Siddle Walker, 1996).

Legal cases such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)<sup>6</sup> did facilitate in dismantling the dual and inequitable system of U.S. education, improving access and opportunities for African Americans. Since this landmark ruling, the number of African Americans graduating from high school and enrolling in higher education, especially in predominately white institutions (PWI), has increased significantly (Jones, 2001). However, despite seeing the legal end of de-jure segregation in U.S. schools, racial division, economic inequality and a host of related social problems continue to

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<sup>6</sup> Other court cases such as the *Alvarez vs. Lemon Grove School District* (1931), *Mendez v. Westminster School District* (1945), *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State University Board of Regents* (1950), and *Adams v. Richardson* (1973) also helped dismantle the dual system of education in the United States.

undermine any veritable pursuit of quality educational opportunities for African Americans (Watkins et al, 2001). Presently, what remain primarily problematic in the U.S. education system are the enduring barriers to *quality* and *equitable* opportunities and outcomes for African American students, especially for those in pursuit of elite higher education—an institution where they continue to remain decidedly underrepresented and marginalized.

#### *An Overview of African Americans' Educational Inequalities*

In order to examine the experiences of African American students in U.S. public schools, it is important to first contextualize their stories in light of the larger educational patterns and trends. Various scholars continue to examine how educational inequalities impact these students' academic experiences, opportunities, and outcomes. Allen, Bonous-Hammarth & Teranishi (2002) take a comprehensive approach to examining and addressing a national crisis on race and educational achievement--- the many obstacles to access to and equity in institutions of higher education for African Americans.

While many African Americans are overrepresented in jails and in poor neighborhoods, this population continues to be increasingly underrepresented in higher education, as is revealed through the research finding of Allen et al (2002). At the secondary school level, African Americans trail behind their peers from other racial/ethnic groups on many key indicators of academic achievement such as standardized test scores, college preparation coursework, and high school completion rates. At the college and graduate levels, African Americans continue to exhibit a disturbing trend towards further decline in enrollment and degree attainment.

These statistics describing critical points throughout the educational pipeline demonstrate the realities of the inequities in U.S. public schools that remain for certain groups more than others. A devastating number of African American students being siphoned from higher education suggest the failures of current policies and practices to improve educational disparities at critical points in the K-20 academic pipeline. Allen et al's (2002) report provides a foundation to further examine the status of, challenges to, and strategies for improving the school experiences and outcomes for this population. In the following sections, current national and state trends such as the re-segregation of public schools, the academic achievement gap, and college attendance rates for African American students will be explored.

#### *The Re-segregation of U.S. Public Schools*

Despite the growing diversity of the school age population, over the past decade U.S. public schools have become characterized by increasing re-segregation (Frankenberg, Lee and Orfield, 2003). The Harvard Civil Rights Project has conducted various studies to examine how common it is for minority students to attend "intensely segregated minority schools" that enroll more than 90% minority students. Their findings reveal that at the national level, segregation within and between schools have increased over the past decade, with two-thirds of minority students attending schools that are predominantly minority (Orfield, 2001).

At the state level, California's education system has been described as one of the most segregated in the U.S. for African American and Latinos students (Orfield and Lee, 2006). For example, one third of California's public schools are majority white and one

quarter is comprised of segregated minority schools. The rest of California public schools enroll 50% to 90% minority students (Rogers, Terriquez, Valladares, and Oakes, 2006). While this state has about 7% African American students, 87% of these students attend predominantly minority schools (Orfield and Lee, 2006). Research continues to demonstrate that in segregated public schools across the U.S., unequal educational experiences are widespread, a fact reflected in the amount of resources and opportunities available to students (Oakes, 2004a; Terenishi et al., 2004). These disparities affect every aspect of these students' academic preparedness, creating disproportionate outcomes in high school graduation and college-going rates, particularly for African American and Latino students in urban schools.

The case of *Eliezer Williams, et al., v. State of California, et al. (2000)* exemplifies just how current inequitable conditions in segregated schools impact these students' lives. The plaintiffs, nearly 100 San Francisco County students, filed a lawsuit to force the state of California to address the unequal conditions and opportunities in many of its public schools. They argued that the state of California failed to provide thousands of public school students, particularly in low income communities and Communities of Color– which were often segregated – with the bare minimum requirements (i.e. quality instructional material, qualified teachers, and safe and clean facilities) deserved by all (Oakes, 2004a). They argues that the states' failure to provide these necessities to all public school students in California violated the state constitution, as well as the state and federal requirements that all students be given equal access to public education without regard to race, color, or national origin (Oakes, 2004a). The

case was finally settled in 2004 in favor of the plaintiffs, resulting in the state allocating \$138 million in additional funding for standards-aligned instructional materials for schools in the first and second ranks (i.e. deciles), as determined through the 2003 Academic Performance Index (API) Base<sup>7</sup>. The settlement included an additional \$50 million for implementation costs and other oversight-related activities for schools in deciles one through three, schools that were in many cases, segregated, resource deprived and underperforming. Another \$800 million was to be provided in future years for critical repair of facilities for schools in deciles one through three. Up to 2.3 million California public schools were projected to benefit from these changes (California Department of Education, 2006c). The Williams case effectively demonstrates how educational equity and access for all students in the U.S. are still not prioritized at the federal and state levels.

A majority of these schools as described in the Williams case are located in urban, resource deprived, and segregated areas that are funded at levels substantially below those of neighboring suburban, resource rich districts. For example, the wealthiest (suburban) 10 percent of school districts in the U.S. spend 10 times more than the poorest (urban) 10 percent, and spending ratios of 3 to 1 are common within some states (Darling-Hammond, 2001). At the state level, California is ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> among states in educational spending per student. Ninety four percent of California's students attend public schools in school districts that spend less than the national average of \$8041 per

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<sup>7</sup> **Academic Performance Index (API)** utilizes a school's statewide rank that compares school to other schools of the same type in the entire state. Each decile contains 10% of all of the 100 similar schools in the comparison group (California Department of Education, 2006a).

student (Education Week, 2006). Not only do funding systems allocate fewer resources to poor urban districts than to their suburban neighbors, but studies also show that within these districts, schools with higher concentrations of African American students receive fewer instructional resources (i.e. high quality curriculum, well qualified teachers, etc) than others in the same district (Darling-Hammond, 1998). These resource inequalities are typically linked to the political economy of urban cities, enforced sanctions based on state and federal standardized testing (e.g. NCLB), property tax revenues (e.g. California's Proposition 13), the educational and economic status of residents, mismanagement of city and educational funds and the resegregation of urban neighborhoods (Anyon, 1997, 2005).

*The Academic Achievement Gap: The Saga Continues*

This growth in segregation and unequal distribution of resources must next be understood as it translates into the widening gap in learning, a finding based on critical academic measures such as test scores, graduation outcomes and college entrance rates. For example, when examining school outcomes along racial and class lines, a clear division emerges highlighting those who receive and thus benefit from educational opportunities, and those who do not. During the 1960s when President Lyndon B. Johnson launched national efforts to equalize opportunities and reduce poverty through the War on Poverty, this country saw unprecedented initiatives such as compensatory funding in elementary and secondary schools and school based reforms (e.g. desegregation) (Grissmer, Flanagan and Williamson, 1998). These efforts led to a steady rise in scores on national reading and math tests for African American and Latino

students between 1970 and 1980, while gaps in scores that separated minority students and Whites narrowed. These results, although heartening, received virtually no national publicity (Anderson, 2004). According to Anderson (2004) it was not until the publication of "*A Nation at Risk*" in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education that most Americans awakened to the national problem of underachievement in primary and secondary education. However, the commission misguidedly prescribed remedies aimed not at poor and minority students' needs in urban schools, but rather at those of white students in the wealthier suburban and rural schools. The test score gap continued to widen into the 1990's as scores for White students flat-lined while scores for African American students declined in reading and mathematics. It was then that educators and policymakers began to redefine America's achievement gap as "the difference in the academic performance between different ethnic groups" (Anderson, 2004). This framing of the national phenomenon of the achievement gap has been distorted and intractable since the 1970s and remains so in the new century.

Today, almost 40 years later, Federal and state based tests results continue to demonstrate how few students in schools can read or perform mathematics at proficient levels. For example, California's record is still reportedly poor in helping students, especially in urban schools, meet high academic standards. Not only is California ranked 44<sup>th</sup> in mathematics achievement at both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels, but also 48<sup>th</sup> in reading at the 4th grade level and 49<sup>th</sup> at 8<sup>th</sup> grade level (Rogers, Terriquez, Valladares, & Oakes, 2006). These achievement levels are a few of many system-wide inadequacies that play a significant role in students' transition to high school and in turn their prospects

of pursuing post-secondary education. The type of high schools (e.g. gifted magnet schools) these students attend as well as courses and programs they are placed in once in high school are often determined by their performance in previous grades. The high school they attend and curriculum they receive then go on to play a considerable role in whether and where they will attend college.

### *The Impact of the Academic Achievement Gap in High Schools*

The nation's failure to invest the necessary resources in education translates into an especially perilous situation for certain minority groups. First, across the nation, many African American students disappear from the educational pipeline before graduating from high school. African American and Latino students are three times more likely than White students to attend high schools where graduation is not the norm and where less than 60% of ninth graders obtain diplomas four years later (Balfanz and Legters, 2004, Orfield et al, 2004; Pathways to College Network, 2003). Second, for those African American students who do make it through high school, most are not being taught the knowledge and skills necessary to prepare for and pursue postsecondary opportunities.

At the state level, California is one of only seven states where the overall graduation rate has improved modestly from 1990 to 2000 (from 63% to 79%) (Barton, 2005). Nonetheless, graduation rates in individual districts and schools—particularly those with high concentrations of low income Students of Color—remain at crisis levels. In Los Angeles, the state's largest district, less than 50% of African American and Latino students who start in the 9th grade are able to complete grade 12 four years later (UC/ACCORD Indicators Project, 2005). As schools with a high concentration of

African Americans continuously lack the appropriate resources and opportunities to meet high academic standards and increase high school graduation rates, the percentage of these students who are prepared for enrolling into a 4- year college also suffers significantly. While the number of African American high school graduates across the U.S. is already low, the persistent, pervasive and disproportionate inequities will continue to have a significant negative impact on college prospects for these students.

#### *African American (Under)representation in Higher Education*

The primary postsecondary institution for 46% of all undergraduates in the nation, including 45% of all first-time freshmen, is the public two-year college (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). More specifically, there are approximately two million Students of Color (e.g. Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and African Americans) at community colleges, including nearly half of all African American college-going students (47%) (American Association of Community Colleges, 2004). While Students of Color constitute the majority of community college enrollment across the nation, large numbers of these students leave college and fail to transfer to more selective four-year institutions (Bailey, 2005; Dougherty, 2002; Hagedorn, 2004; Nora, 1993; Rendón, 1994; Rhoads and Valadez, 1996;). In addition, community colleges with a higher percentage of either African American or Latino students have lower transfer rates, even after controlling for academic preparation and socioeconomic status (Wassmer, Moore, and Shulock, 2004).

Perhaps the most troubling finding is that Students of Color who start their academic path at a community college have lower chances of getting a B.A. degree at all

when compared to those students who enter four-year institutions after high school graduation (Dougherty, 2002; Nora, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). “In a society that views a college-based education [as] the ticket to the top of the academic and social ladder” (Rendón, 1994), a society that believes in meritocracy, competition, and economic development as the keys to success, a two-year degree is not enough for African American students to be successful in that society (Bowen and Bok, 1998). In such a society, African American students’ unpreparedness and lack of opportunity to transfer to a 4-year college, especially the highly selective institutions will continue to hinder their pursuit of upward mobility.

Various arguments have been made and explanations provided to elucidate the drastic threats to African American students’ educational trajectories and the lack of diversity in colleges and university campuses. While many African American students aspire to pursue higher education, many of them lack sufficient resources and opportunities to prepare for and transition into college (McDonough, 2004; Oakes et al, 2006; Rogers et al, 2006; Trent et al, 2003; Walpole et al, 2005;) These critical conditions include but are not limited to: a rigorous academic curriculum, exposure to a college-going culture, access to qualified teachers, a safe school environment, and intensive academic and social support (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Oakes, 2003;). Recent federal [*Hopwood v. State of Texas* (1996) and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003)] and state [California’s Proposition, 209 (1996), Washington State’s Initiative 200 (1998), and Michigan’s Proposition 2 (2006)] legal and political developments appear to have also seriously hampered institutions of higher education from taking affirmative action

initiatives designed to increase the representation of African American students and other deserved yet underrepresented candidates (Horn and Flores, 2004).

Directly after the passage of Proposition 209, the number of historically underrepresented students admitted to California public higher education institutions precipitously declined. The disparities in college admission rates for this population, especially African Americans, were magnified at the most selective tier of public higher education institutions—the UC system. For instance, the admissions of African American freshmen for fall 1997 through 2008 to the two UC flagship institutions, UCLA and UC Berkeley, experienced sharp declines (UCOP, 2008). While the number of African American student admits at UCLA decreased from 485 to 377, the UC Berkeley numbers dropped from 525 to 294. Federal and state policy shifts continue to affect the access and participation rates of African American students to institutions of higher education across the United States. Therefore, given these inequitable realities, it is important to understand if and how African American students are able to counter these trends and their own experiences towards pursuing higher education.

### **Purpose of Study**

I hope that this dissertation study contributes new knowledge to the literature on the high school-to-college transition process of African Americans in three significant ways. My first goal is to examine the educational experiences of African American students, especially those individuals within the urban school context. The educational abilities of this student population continue to be discussed in deficit and monolithic ways by academic scholarship, mainstream media, social institutions (e.g. schools),

federal and state policies, and research statistics. Too often, we see an incomplete picture of African American students' lives in schools. Therefore, it is important to create legitimizing and valued spaces for these students' interpretive frames of analyses to understand their educational realities and how their experiences in schools can best be improved.

Second, it is my hope that this research also contributes to the field by advancing the discourse on college preparation, access and participation of African American students. Many studies on these students' representation in higher education have focused on issues such as how their aspirations do not translate into college participation (Carter, 2005; MacLeod, 1996;), the college choice process (Horvart, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c) and the retention, matriculation and campus climate they experience in higher education (Allen and Epps, 1991). Some scholars have understood the importance of incorporating the voices of African American students to better understand issues of college access, choice and participation (Feagin and Imani, 1996; Freeman, 2005; Tierney and Colyar, 2006), using these students' stories to capture their academic realities and paint the pictures behind the low college enrollment numbers. Yet more in-depth research is needed that addresses *why* so many African American students fail to make this transition to college in the first place. Implementing a *critical race ecocultural agency* theory in education framework to capture the varied ways in which African American students navigate through high school itself is necessary to understand the factors needed to increase their college-going outcomes. Therefore, I hope that my dissertation will contribute to this area of research by presenting a study that uses the interconnectedness

of African American students' subjectivities such as race, class and gender, identities and agency along their pathways to college.

The third contribution of this study involves the examination of the connections and disconnections between African American students' multiple contexts (i.e. families, peers, schools and community) that impact possibilities for creating college-going outcomes. For instance, during this era of diminishing federal funding and state economic hardship, educational institutions, programs, families and communities continue to be challenged over their effectiveness in improving student performance and outcomes, especially for African Americans. In many cases, educational funding is being cut to the point of extinction, services are being completely shut down, or schools are being taken over by the state—and we do not yet know what the full impact of these cuts will be.

While various quantitative and evaluative studies continue to provide a broad picture on the impact of such practices and reform initiatives, these studies overlook the voices of student participants who are the ones most directly affected by these “policies in practices.” African American students fail to be counted among those individuals with the authority to participate in the critique and reform of educational practices and policies. While it is necessary to have discussions about why these students' achievement rates are often low, it is also important to identify practices and structural policies in these students multiple contexts that are necessary to reverse their “underachievement” and increase access for and admission rates of African American students into colleges and universities. Exploring the successes and challenges of urban school policies, practices and reform initiatives by understanding these students' lived realities is critical to

challenging the artificial lines that have been drawn between research, theory and practice.

These goals collectively are important in order to increase knowledge about a specific population that continues to be misrepresented in educational discourse and underrepresented in U.S. institutions of higher education. More specifically, investigating how a C.R.E.A.T.E. framework can be used to understand African American students' experiences in multiple contexts and their pathways to college is crucial for improving the high school-to-college transition process for such students. As such, designing the discourse based upon students' voices and experiences is necessary to identify veritable and effective ways to replace systemic patterns of schooling inequalities in access to higher education with equitable conditions and outcomes for African American students. To these ends, I use qualitative methods to elicit and analyze counter-narratives of how twenty African American students navigate their academic pathways towards future educational outcomes.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

In this introduction, I present my personal connection to the study. I then discuss the problem under investigation – the persistent underrepresentation of African American students in higher education. I situate my study within a vitally needed understanding of the high school-to-college transition process and show how using a *critical race ecocultural agency theory in education framework* can be used to understand how African American students' experiences within multiple contexts influence their navigation of this critical transition process. I present my specific research questions that

guide my study, and discuss the practical and theoretical contributions that I expect to make.

The literature review affords a historical examination of African Americans' struggle for educational inclusion and their present obstacles to higher educational access and equity. The latter literature focuses on the high school-to-college transition process. Where available, I include studies specific to African American students.

Next, I explain in detail the theoretical framework for my study. Drawing upon an integrative framework of Critical Race Theory, Ecocultural Theory, and student agency, I re-position the study of the transition from high school to college into a model for understanding higher education opportunities for African American students. Specifically, I explain how the intersectionality of African American students' racialized, classed and gendered subjectivities are also shaped by ecological and cultural influences, which together come into play as these adolescents consider their educational and occupational futures.

Subsequently I put forth my research design. Herein I introduce the steps I take to complete my study. I relate qualitative methodological foundations to my research questions and theoretical framework. Perhaps most importantly, I then demonstrate how my methods and methodology, as informed by CRT, Ecocultural Theory and student agency, are appropriate to yield the data necessary to answer my research questions. I also detail my sample population, the data collection and analysis processes by which I proceed in my study.

In order to answer the first research question of my dissertation study, I create counter-narratives of the students' experiences in their formal (e.g. schools, social service agencies and after school programs) and informal (e.g. families, peers and community) contexts during their high school-to-college transition processes. In Chapters 5 through 7, I highlight the lived realities of ten students in their formal contexts. I specifically focus on their lives in schools to examine how they: 1) encounter the politics of their school experiences (Chapter 5), 2) negotiate pathways in their formal contexts (Chapter 6) and 3) create counterspaces in their learning communities (Chapter 7). In order to capture the students' experiences in their informal contexts, I create counter-narratives of their familial realities in Chapters 8 through 10. Nine students' stories center on the ways in which they: 1) challenge the discourse about their familial experiences (Chapter 8), 2) strategically navigate challenges in their informal contexts (Chapter 9) and 3) develop critical understandings of their familial realities (Chapter 10).

In the final chapter, I summarize my dissertation study and its theoretical contributions, methodology and findings. I then utilize the students' voices and experiences to answer my second dissertation question. Through their responses over the course of three years, they discuss their understanding of policies and practices as well and ways to improve their access to and participation in higher education. To conclude this chapter, I provide my own recommendations for research, policies and practices, as well as my reflections as a researcher and suggestions for future research.

## **Conclusion**

My dissertation study about the high school-to-college transition process for African American students at an urban high school can make significant contributions to the ways in which scholars understand the issues that surround educational opportunity. Through my qualitative inquiry of the sense making, actions, routines, and decisions of African American students during this critical juncture in the educational pipeline, I work towards a critical race ecocultural agency theory in education conceptualization to understand higher education access, preparation and participation for this population. This new and dynamic framework can benefit researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who are concerned with educational opportunity for underrepresented students in U.S. higher education. Finally, I hope my study will be an important contribution to the literature on African American students' educational experiences.

## 2- Literature Review

Race continues to play a significant role in determining who has the power and resources to have the greatest impact on society. Within the context of academic experiences, African Americans' quest for access and equity has centered on the function of *schooling* and *education*. While these terms have been used interchangeably, various scholars have argued that the U.S. school system is not designed to educate this marginalized population, but rather to teach (or school) them in order to serve the needs of the political, social and economic demands of society (DuBois, 1903; Shujaa, 1994; Watkins, 2001; Woodson, 1933).

Shujaa (1994) makes a distinction between *schooling* and *education*, especially as it relates to the experiences of people of African descent in white societies. He distinguishes these terms as the following:

*Schooling* is a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relations and institutional structures that support those arrangements... *Education*, in contrast to schooling is a process that locates the members of a culture within their history, facilitates their transmission of cultural knowledge and affirms the cultural identity (15).

While Shujaa (1994) suggests that these terms, while not mutually exclusive, may overlap, he argues that too many African people continue to receive more schooling than education (15).

Other educational scholars echo this sentiment, noting that educational institutions continue to be an outlet for the reproduction of unequal power relationships among different groups in society (Hayward, 2000; King, 2005; Oakes, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). These scholars suggest that society has consistently failed to create schools that provide

resources and opportunities that take into account the diverse academic needs and cultural orientations of students. As a result, there are limited opportunities for African American students, especially those in urban schools, to successfully navigate through the K-12 pipeline and emerge prepared to graduate from high school and enter college. The failure to educate these students contributes to the perpetuation of inequitable and often dismal conditions (e.g. poverty, violence, unemployment, educational disparities, etc) for themselves, their families and their communities.

For this literature review I will utilize Shujaa's notion of schooling and education to discuss: 1) the history of African Americans' struggle for educational inclusion, 2) situating this struggle within the context of the current barriers impacting African Americans access to and participation in higher education and 3) examining research on the high school-to-college transition process for this population.

### **A Historical Overview of African Americans' Struggle for Educational Inclusion**

"The conditions of today have been determined by what has taken place in the past, and in a careful study of this history we may see more clearly the great theatre of events in which the Negro has played a part. We may understand better what his (or her) role has been and how well he (or she) has functioned in it" (Woodson, 1933).

In the statement above, Carter G. Woodson, a historian and educator, powerfully argues that history provides an outlet for understanding the current conditions of African Americans in the United States. While different historical events have influenced diverging systems, discourses and practices in society, a consistent theme has been salient—that of "who gets what, when, and how" (Laswell, 1936). The fight for educational inclusion for people of African descent in the U.S. has been a long battle that

began as early as 1619 with the enslavement of Africans and their forced emigration to the colonies (Shujaa, 1994). Keeping them at work on plantations for the economic development of the dominant class was forcibly prioritized over any possibilities for social and educational advancement for these enslaved Africans. In addition to having their fundamental humanity, personhood and citizenship status challenged, laws and customs made it illegal for enslaved Africans to learn or teach others to read and write. Slave and ex-slave narratives, such as those by Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, provided vivid recounts not only of African Americans' intensive desire to become literate, but also of the immeasurable barriers they suffered to become educated (Douglass, 1962; Jacobs, 2000). These narratives described how the land-holding white men prevented people of African descent in the United States from being educated in order to maintain the existing power relations and institutional structures between the slave owners and the slaves.

The Reconstruction era (1861-1872) marked a time when slavery was officially abolished through the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and the Thirteenth Amendment (1865). Yet, government officials struggled with the concept of social freedom both in its meaning and implementation in regard to the future of Southern ex-slaves (Colby, 1985, 220). The establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau campaign<sup>8</sup> was one example of the nation's attempt to grapple with vast problems of race and social conditions of this time (DuBois, 1903, 14). With ex-slaves gaining power in the labor

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<sup>8</sup> The main role of the **Freedmen's Bureau** was to provide federally mandated social welfare programs to assist and protect ex-slaves in their new social status by setting up work opportunities, providing legal services, political mobilization and universal schooling.

market by insisting on educational and economic changes in the South's social hierarchy, the planter class felt their financial status deeply threatened (Anderson 1988). The passage of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment (equal protection clause in public enterprise) not only gave the white southerners more opportunities to gain control of state governments, but also further increased their supervision and control over the ex-slave class, including over their education and labor rights (23).

The Freedmen Bureau's widespread corruption and failure to rebuild a supportive relationship between Southerners and the national government, ultimately led to its demise (Anderson, 1988; Colby, 1985). While the Freedmen's Bureau did not explicitly promote the philosophy of segregation, the agency's staff implemented social programs that helped frame a social structure of a "separate but equal" national agenda (Colby, 1985). Thus, the Bureau served as a primary vehicle for the development of segregated and unequal social relations between African Americans and whites during the post-Reconstruction era.

The era represented a critical juncture, where again white southerners submitted African Americans to a racial regime of highly restrictive laws. While many states enforced their own laws permitting racial segregation, the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment became one of the most important national-level tools used to influence the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision of a "separate but equal" doctrine on the basis of race (Thomas, 1997). This legal principle coupled with Jim Crow laws resulted in de-jure segregation, which affected public accommodations such as educational facilities (Sewall and Witcher, 1998). The federal courts upheld the rights of the states to determine their method of

education and supported unlimited state power in maintaining a separate system of education for races (3). As pointed out by the courts, segregation in public education was an established practice at the time that the Plessy case was decided. It pointed out that this practice existed in schools within the District of Columbia and some Northern States (e.g. Kansas and Delaware) even before the Civil War, and thus chose to defer to the decisions of the state courts regarding sustaining this practice (Irons, 2002; Kauper, 1954). Despite the numerous segregated, and supposedly “equal” southern schools that emerged as a result of the Plessy ruling, there continued to be great disparities in educational conditions, resources and opportunities available for African American versus white children. The judicial system allowed access to separate school facilities to educate African Americans, but failed to acknowledge issues of equity and equality, which further reinforced the explicit barriers to their educational progress.

After 60 years of legalized segregation, the U.S. Supreme Court took a decisive stance on a nationwide system that had perpetuated separate and *unequal* schools for students who were understood to be racially different, especially for African Americans. In the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954), the courts struck down elements of the nearly century old *Plessy* decision, which had served to legitimize the concept of “separate but equal” in public schools throughout the country (Deever, 1994). African American plaintiffs sought equal educational opportunities by requesting an equitable distribution of resources for their schools and a more inclusive society for both African American and white children to be treated equally under the law and in the eyes of the people. It was unanimously held by the courts that separate is inherently unequal in

public education and that segregated schools denied African Americans their constitutional rights guaranteed to them in the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment.

In addition, this ruling mandated the desegregation of all public schools across the United States with deliberate speed. This historic decision, however, did not abolish segregation and discrimination for African Americans in arenas outside of public education, nor did it erase the long-term effects of almost 100 years of school segregation and exclusion (Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum, 2005). In addition, not only was there no set deadline in place for schools to desegregate, but also there was widespread individual and institutional resistance to desegregation in the north, which was not under court order as in the South (Irons, 2002). It ultimately took decades to break down the majority of the walls of segregation and move towards physical integration for African Americans with the most progress being made in the south between the early 1970s and 1991 in states such as Florida (Orfield et al, 2004).

Fifty years after the Brown decision, the full implementation of this decree has yet to be fulfilled, both physically and ideologically speaking. For decades, subsequent cases such as *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), *Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell* (1991), and *Missouri v. Jenkins* (1995), have worked to dismantle the original intent of *Brown*. The *Milliken* decision, for example, exempted suburban districts from assisting in the desegregation of urban school systems, and subsequently reinforced the existing trend of "white flight" from cities to suburban school districts. Further, the 'non-discriminatory' clause of the 1954 *Brown* decision has continuously been used to unravel the remedies that had been set forth to make opportunities equal. In other words, the

desegregation language has cunningly been used to re-segregate schools. As a result, a new system of segregation has emerged in large urban areas and communities serving African Americans and many other People of Color (Orfield and Lee, 2006).

Research has illustrated that schools attended primarily by African American students are often classified as high poverty with low achievement rates, and more often employ a significant number of uncertified teachers, have high instructional staff turnover, inadequate access to resources, limited extracurricular opportunities, and suffer from dilapidated physical environments (Darling-Hammond, 1998, 2001; Kozol, 2005; Oakes and Saunders, 2002). On the other hand, schools that have a mostly white student body are often located in wealthy suburban or rural areas and labeled high performing, have highly certified instructional staffs, and possess state of the art instructional and extracurricular resources (Orfield et al., 1996). Despite numerous calls for local, state and federal policymakers to respond to the fiscal needs of urban schools through tax increases and other proposals to increase funding, many of these schools remain under funded (Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum, 2005). The continued failure to provide African Americans, especially those in urban schools, with a high quality college preparatory education has been identified as one of the major factors contributing to their underrepresentation in post secondary education (Allen et al, 2002; Rogers et al, 2006).

### **African Americans Struggle for Higher Education Access and Equity**

Our nation's higher education system has the highest participation rates in the world—with over 17 million students enrolled in two and four year institutions (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). On the surface, the U.S. education system seems

to work because it is structured to provide access and equity to any individual who seeks postsecondary education. Yet, the access and opportunity gap for historically underrepresented groups in postsecondary education, particularly African Americans, reveals otherwise. While African Americans have historically been denied an equitable education, federal court cases (i.e. *Brown v. Board of Education*) and college admissions policies (i.e. affirmative action, outreach programs, etc) have improved educational opportunities for this population. Even with these advancements, however, scholars suggest that more schooling than education is occurring, with profound educational inequities persisting for African Americans ---one of which is their alarming underrepresentation in postsecondary education, a situation arguable created by the existence of other inequities throughout the educational pipeline and in society at large (Allen et al, 2002).

Improving college participation among underrepresented and socio-economically disadvantaged students has dominated much of the research, policies and practices in higher education for over three decades (McPherson and Shapiro, 1998). These outlets persistently reveal that enrolling in a four-year college requires the completion of at least three critical tasks: meeting minimal college qualifications, graduating from high school, and actually applying to a four-year college or university. Yet, a vast array of institutional barriers continue to play a significant role in the perpetuation of unequal school practices and African American students' subsequent battle for inclusion in higher education

*Educational Policies as Roadblocks to College*

The standardization of the academic curriculum has been significantly influential in perpetuating unequal education for African Americans, thus limiting their access to higher education opportunities. Severely inadequate national policies such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 continue to drive the discourse and practices of U.S. public schools. In order to combat the disparities in academic performance of different student groups, the NCLB Act was designed to help all students meet high academic standards through assessments, accountability, and qualifications for teachers and paraprofessionals (Bush, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Under this act, schools and states must ensure that all students have the opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach proficiency on challenging annual academic standards and assessments in math, reading/language arts, and science by 2013-2014 (US Department of Education, 2002; Welner, 2005). To accomplish this goal, states and schools are required to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)<sup>9</sup> that monitors the performance of all public schools and different subgroups of students<sup>10</sup>.

Unfortunately, these programs place direct sanctions on the greatest victims—urban schooled African American students, and their teachers and school administrators. For example, under NCLB, publicly funded schools, in many cases urban schools, are

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<sup>9</sup> Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) refers to the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts and schools must achieve each year as they progress toward the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) goal of having all students reaching the proficient level on state tests by 2014. ( NEA <http://www.nea.org/esea/eseaayp.html>)

<sup>10</sup> Subgroups include such demographics as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. It is important for schools to look at both the gaps between subgroup performance and the progress of each subgroup individually, as well as overall trends. Further, schools must ensure that at least 95% of students belonging in each subgroup are tested (NCLB Act).

constantly in danger of losing federal funds if they do not raise test scores continuously over a two-year period (Bush, 2000). This act enforces mandates that centralize curriculum discourse around test preparation to eradicate inequalities and change students (Meier and Wood, 2004). As a result, this act rewards schools' artificial approaches to teaching that require more test preparation and short-sighted remediation to save their reputations and their funding rather than increased college preparation to improve the future of their students.

Going beyond secondary education, higher education policies also play an important part in understanding the barriers to college access for African American students. Policies such as affirmative action were established during the civil rights era to help equalize the historical underrepresentation of Students of Color and women in higher education and the work force. During the period of the 1970s to the early 1990s the number of African American students gaining admissions to colleges and universities throughout the country significantly increased, largely as a result of this policy (DeSousa, 2001). Yet, for over a decade, affirmative action has become a highly controversial topic and opponents have been successful in banning it in several states.

In the mid 1990s, detractors of race-conscious social policy called for the end of all affirmative action programs, arguing that such programs failed to equally uphold and protect individual rights. These critics embrace "colorblind" rhetoric and advocated for race-neutral and purely "meritocratic" policies (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997). For example, in 1996 California voters passed a purportedly "progressive" proposition, "The California Civil Rights Initiative" (Proposition 209), to end affirmative action in the

state's public higher education system. While private institutions were not impacted, the inability to consider race and ethnicity in admissions decisions resulted in a considerable decline of Students of Color in public colleges and universities. For example, in 1998, the year immediately following the removal of affirmative action policies in the University of California (UC) system—one of the most selective set of institutions in California—the number of African American freshman admitted to UCLA declined from 488 to 292. The California initiative influenced other states such as Texas, Florida, Washington and more recently Michigan, to implement similar policies ending affirmative action in public institutions of higher education.

#### *Standardized Tests Restricting Successful Pathways to College*

Standardized tests such as the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) and Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) continue to be important gatekeepers that restrict African Americans' access into higher education. Researchers suggest that these K-12 accountability measures and achievement tests are misaligned with college admission requirements (Kirst and Venezia, 2004). For example, at the state level, California has required students to take the CAHSEE since 2001. While the results are used for California's accountability system (i.e. Academic Performance Index), current state law mandates that diplomas be withheld from students who do not pass either the math and English or language arts sections of the exam, a standard that began with the Class of 2006 (California Department of Education, 2006b). A certificate of attendance is given to students who complete high school but are unable to pass the exam. In other words, those who do not pass the CAHSEE will not be able to receive their high school diploma, and

thus even if they are college eligible, therefore will not be able to go to college even if admitted. Not only can these sanctions push Students of Color in urban areas, especially African American students who persistently “fail” the CAHSEE, away from possible higher education pursuits, it can also shatter the plans of students who have already been accepted to college. This policy also states that it is the responsibility of school districts to “prepare pupils to succeed.” Yet, for many urban school districts that serve a large number of African American students, there is a lack of sufficient funds and basic learning conditions necessary to achieve this task (Holmes and Rogers, 2005). This exam and others contribute to the perpetuation and maintenance of society’s existing power relations and institutional structures that limit African American students’ opportunities to pursue post secondary education.

At the national level, all students interested in applying at a four-year college from high school are required to take college admissions exams such as the SAT. While African American high school students struggle with the anxiety of taking the SAT along with their White, Latino, Native American and Asian American peers, African American students historically and currently score lower on standardized tests, including the SATs, than their peers (Allen et al, 2002; Hacker, 1992; Hedges & Nowell, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Wightman, 2003). These lower test scores are persistent barriers to pursuing postsecondary education for African American students, particularly those from low-income urban areas. Various scholars have argued that African Americans are not being adequately educated to take standardized tests (Bowen and Bok, 1998; Jencks and Phillips, 1998; Meier et al, 2004; Steele and Aronson, 1995). While culturally biased

questions were eliminated from the SATs in the 1980s, the removal of those questions has not been enough.

Some colleges and researchers have begun questioning whether the SAT is doing more harm than good to many in the pool of potential college students—mainly to low income, minority and women students who are often inadequately prepared by their schools for such tests. In 2001, the former University of California (UC) President Richard Atkinson proposed that the UC system eliminate the SAT I requirement for applicants (Patterson, 2001). As one of the nation's largest users of the SAT test, the UC system's announcement brought the issue into the national spotlight, with many more critics emerging. In response to these various criticisms, the College Entrance Examination Board announced a restructuring of the SAT, which took effect in March 2005. While changes continue to be gradually made to the SAT in an attempt to be aligned with the standard curriculum and meet the needs of the ever-changing student population throughout the U.S., there are other factors, especially within educational settings that continue to impact marginalized groups' abilities to successfully participate in these exams.

School administrators, teachers and guidance counselors often believe that African American students are less capable of successfully participating in these exams (Irvine, 1990). Therefore, these students are routinely tracked into courses that are not college preparatory ones (Oakes, 2005), often leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy. By the time they are juniors and seniors they are typically far behind their white counterparts in critical subject areas necessary to perform well on standardized tests. Claude Steele

(1997) introduced the notion of “stereotype threat” to describe how, if an individual is constantly exposed to negative images of his/her race/ethnicity, religion, age and gender, this person begins to internalize the associated social and personal characteristics of these images. As a result, such students are at great risk of confirming a negative stereotype about their own group and further imbibing it into their own self-perception when placed in settings in which they are treated according to a specific social identity. In schools, African American students are often aware of the fact that society expects them to perform poorly on tests. In addition to affecting their self-image, the added pressure placed upon them to achieve success in order to invalidate the racial stereotypes makes it more difficult for them to perform well (Steele, 1997). These low SAT scores can impact African American students’ opportunities to win merit-based scholarships and attend first tier higher education institutions, as it also often affects the decisions of schools operating under a strict race neutral admissions policy where SAT becomes the most important qualifying yardstick (Wightman, 2003).

#### *Pre College Factors Impacting Higher Education Access and Participation*

In the United States, there continues to be educational inequalities in terms of the availability of resources and opportunities necessary for higher education access and equity. These inequalities are especially glaring when we look at the gross deficiencies in schools that are located in urban areas and predominately enroll Students of Color. As a result of such deficits, there is a dramatic contrast in both economic and social opportunities for these students as opposed to those who attend schools in wealthier suburban or rural areas and that are predominantly white. The bottom line is that a large

number of African American students are enrolled in urban public schools that fail to provide them with conditions necessary to successfully transition them from high school to college (Oakes, 2004b; UCLA/IDEA, 2005).

For example, the responsibility of providing students with the necessary information and resources to prepare for college has fallen to school counselors (McDonough, 2004,1997; Hossler, Schmidt and Vesper, 1999). However, research reveals that urban schools are grossly understaffed in this department, while those that are employed are highly overworked and offer less advisement due to the disproportionate counselor to student ratio, which can be as high as 1 to 1056 (Hawkins, 2003; McDonough, 2004;). As a result, there is an undersupply of access to academic and college counseling, a situation strongly compounded by the racist attitudes and socioeconomic biases in whatever advising that does occur (Gandara, 2002; Gandara and Bial, 1999). In turn, many African American students are provided with insufficient information, which can deter them from successfully graduating from high school and gaining admissions to colleges (Lee and Ekstrom, 1987; Oakes, 2005; Plank and Jordan, 2001).

Insufficient academic preparation is another chief factor in the low college-going rates of African Americans, as college entrance exams and Advanced Placement programs play an increasingly important role in determining higher education eligibility. The gap in K-12 academic preparation and college participation rates between white students and African American and Latino students has widened over the last several decades (Gladieux, 2004; Oakes, 2004b). African American students in urban schools

have less exposure to high quality curriculum and other academic resources, very often effectively limiting their access to college. With a significant number of uncredentialed teachers and high teacher turnover rates in many urban schools, these students have fewer opportunities to enroll in advanced level courses, as there is no one to teach the classes, and are more likely to spend each academic year with teachers not credentialed in subjects being taught, substitute teachers and teachers with low expectations of these students' academic abilities (Oakes et al, 2002; Obidah et al, 2004; Solorzano and Ornelas, 2004).

Inadequate funding also impacts the amount and quality of resources available to create a college-going culture for all students at these schools. For example, inadequate funding leads to overcrowding in classrooms, limited access to supplies needed to facilitate a successful teaching and learning environment, and dilapidated and unsafe facilities. The conditions can have adverse psychological and academic effects that substantially worsen the already existing social inequities impacting African Americans (Fine, 2002). For those students who are college eligible, they are constantly being compared to and competing against students at suburban schools who have greater access to funding, resources, and college preparatory opportunities.

### **The High School-to-College Transition Process**

In the wake of the African American higher education crisis, it is important to examine the discourse on their transitions to college. While the literature on the transition to college process often focuses on students' first year experiences in higher education (Hurtado et al, 1996; Terenzini et al, 1994), I center my research on the

discussion around the transition *from high school* to college, which I define as the experiences and changes that occur for students, especially during their high school years, which shape their postsecondary decisions, actions and outcomes. Research on this process has been conceptualized based on those students aspiring to, applying for and enrolling in postsecondary education. Scholars have examined this critical juncture of the educational pipeline through complex processes involving student aspiration and achievement, learning opportunities, intervention programs and institutional admission policies and practices (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith, 1989; McDonough, 1997; Oakes, 2004b; Tierney and Hagedorn, 2002). For several decades the phenomenon of college choice has been used to examine factors that influence students' ultimate decisions to transition into college (Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) argue that decisions to go to college are the result of a three-stage process that begins as early as the seventh grade and ends when the high school graduate enrolls in an institution of higher education. Each stage has particular cognitive and affective outcomes that cumulatively prepare high school students to make certain decisions regarding their college education. In undergoing each phase of the college-choice process, students develop predispositions to attend college (predisposition), search for general information about college (search), and make choices leading them to enroll at a given institution of higher education (choice).

The *predisposition stage* involves the development of occupational and educational aspirations as well as the emergence of intentions to continue education beyond the secondary level. Planning for college begins as early as middle school, and by

the ninth grade most of these students come to value a particular occupation and begin to see attending college as crucial in securing their occupational goals (Eckstrom, 1985; Stage and Hossler, 1989). Early college plans seem to play the role of a trigger mechanism in securing critical “cultural capital,” a notion that enables middle school students and their parents to plan for college-track curriculum and extracurricular activities, to maintain good academic performance, and to secure information about ways to finance college (Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997).

The *search stage* involves the accumulation and assimilation of information necessary to develop the students’ short list of institutions. This choice set, often heavily influenced by parental encouragement (Flint, 1992; Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith, 1989), consists of a group of institutions that students want to consider and learn more about before making a matriculation decision. This stage usually begins during tenth grade and ends by the middle of twelfth grade (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith, 1989). The choice set is largely dependent on the level of sophistication and thoroughness of the search process. This degree of sophistication appears often to be determined by socioeconomic factors (McDonough, 1997). In addition, at this stage students begin to interact actively with potential institutions through activities such as college tours and preparation programs (Attinasi, 1989).

Most investigations of the student college choice model have focused on Hossler and Gallagher’s final stage—the actual choice stage. Applying to college and actually enrolling have been scrutinized under two lenses: one is economic in nature while the other is sociological (Hossler et al, 1989; St. John, Paulsen, and Starkey, 1996). The

economic perspective regards enrollment as the result of a rational process in which a student estimates the economic and social benefits of attending a particular college, comparing it with those of competing alternatives (Manski and Wise, 1983). The sociological approach examines the extent to which a high school graduate's socioeconomic characteristics and academic preparation predispose him/her to enroll at a particular type of college and to aspire to a particular level of postsecondary educational attainment. As noted by St. John, Paulsen and Starkey (1996), both approaches converge in portraying low-income students as sensitive to financial considerations and academic preparation for college.

*African American Students' Transitions from High School to College*

Hossler and Gallagher's model of college choice has influenced mostly quantitative research explaining the transition to college decision for the dominant group of students: White, middle and high socioeconomic status, suburban male students (Muhammad, 2006). While these scholars have paved the way for higher education research to focus on how students prepare for and choose to participate in post secondary education, factors that are culture specific, for example, have been overlooked or not included in this discourse (Freeman, 2005). Also, the nuances in the lived realities of Students of Color and low-income status whose educational experiences continue to be marked by vast disparities in college access and equity have not fully been captured through quantitative studies (Anderson and Hern, 1992; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Stage and Hossler, 1989). Many researchers have begun to acknowledge college choice

and transition variances on the basis of race and socioeconomic status, and a few highlight gender differences (McGrath et al. 2001; Perna, 2000).

Qualitative researchers have drawn upon the sociological concepts of social and cultural capital to describe the ways in which knowledge and information about college, as well as the value placed on obtaining a college education, may influence college enrollment decisions (Freeman, 1997; McDonough, 1997). For example, McDonough's (1997) study of four high schools from across the strata of social class in California, found that individuals' social class and the schools' organizational habitus<sup>11</sup> were defining mechanisms in structuring educational opportunity. She identified differences in the educational ethos of various schools that fostered or discouraged college-going outcomes among students. She described the college choice process as a model with multiple influential factors; depending on the individual as well as socioeconomic status, family education, and type of school, various factors would weigh more heavily on a student's transition to college. Also according to McDonough (1997), where a student went to high school could greatly determine what postsecondary opportunities would be available to him/her, a fact tied closely to the cultural capital of individual students. McDonough (1997) held constructs such as race and ethnicity constant and focused on white women's experiences to shed light on the impact of diverse economic strata on college-going outcomes. Yet, it would also be important to examine how social class is diversified across other areas such as race and ethnicity.

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<sup>11</sup> **habitus:** a Pierre Bourdieu concept that refers to "a deeply internalized permanent system of outlooks, experiences and beliefs about the social worlds that an individual gets from his or her immediate environment." (McDonough, 1997)

Research on issues in higher education for African Americans have typically centered on their experiences (e.g. transition, adjustment, retention, campus racial climate, etc) within colleges and universities (Allen and Epps, 1991; Feagin, Vera and Imani, 1996; Nettles, 1988). Scholars have recognized that barriers remain for African American students during their transition from high school to college and have begun to investigate these students' college choice processes to dismantle these barriers. For example, some scholars have observed that the parental influence in the college choice process in African American families is qualitatively different than in white families (Freeman, 2005; Smith, 2001, 2002; Smith & Fleming, 2006;).

Smith and Fleming (2006) specifically found that low income and working class African American parents encourage their sons to make decisions necessary for "survival," while encouraging their daughters to make decisions necessary for development and sustenance of independence. These findings added nuances to cultural understandings of the three-phase model, a model that originally posited parental encouragement as simply parents setting high expectations for children at an early age. Several researchers have also found that African American students from low-socio-economic Status (SES) families attending low-SES urban schools were less likely to receive important, timely information about attending college (Horvat, 1996a; Rogers et al, 2006;). This unequal distribution of information effectively limits these students' potential to successfully transition from high school to college.

In an attempt to explore how schools foster or hinder African American students' investment in the transition from high school to college, Horvat (1996a, 1996b, 1996c,

1997) examined how the college choice process, specifically the options that students envision for their futures and how they come to these choice sets, is influenced by the combination of race and class. Employing a Bourdieuan theoretical framework, Horvat examined 14 female African American students at three distinct racially and socially classified high school environments (e.g. private versus public, predominately African American versus predominately white, etc). She utilized ethnographic data collection which included: interviews with selected students and one of each of their parents, as well as with their best friends, college counselors and principals at the schools; observations of the college counseling operation in action at the schools; and document analysis. Horvat's research revealed that: 1) the schools these students attended acted as templates that encouraged particular kinds of postsecondary access, preparation and choice and 2) race and class differences in these distinct environments combined to create different types of opportunities. For example, college choice behaviors involved students choosing colleges where they could see students like themselves already attending that college. Horvat's (1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997) research demonstrated how institutional and societal structures interact with individual characteristics to perpetuate race and class inequities. She found that race functions most effectively in these environments as a marker of class membership.

Freeman (1997) utilized qualitative inquiry across a range of cities, schools and family circumstances to examine African American high school students' perceptions of barriers to this population's participation in higher education and possible ways to create effective programs for addressing this problem. Findings revealed that students'

perceptions of obstacles to attending college often hindered their participation in higher education. More specifically, perceptions of economic (i.e. lack of funds and lack of job opportunities equal to higher education) and psychological barriers (i.e. never having viewed college as an option, loss of hope, and the intimidation factor) impacted African American students' decisions to participate in higher education. In regards to effective programs to address this crisis, students suggested: 1) improving school conditions, 2) providing the students with interested teachers and active counselors, 3) instilling college-going awareness in early grades, and 4) emphasizing cultural awareness in the curricula.

Freeman (1999) also gave African American students an opportunity to voice their perceptions of the influences on African Americans' college choices, specifically on their process of deciding to participate or not participate in higher education. The study concluded that to address the issues relating to African Americans' college choices, there was a great need to better understand the following factors within a racial/cultural context: (a) family (i.e. college education), (b) self influences (i.e. self motivation), (c) psychological (e.g. college never an option) or social barriers, and (d) cultural awareness (culturally relevant curriculum).

More recently, Freeman (2005) further complicated the three-phase model, explicitly addressing the need for this model to take cultural differences into account when assessing the predisposition, search, and choice practices of African Americans. She found that the influences of "significant others" and "school contexts" as described by the three-phase model do not acknowledge, nor allow for, analysis to account for how

different cultural influences shape experiences differentially across populations. Through her longitudinal and nationwide qualitative study, she found that African American students came to be disposed to higher education through context-specific influences of family and kinship as well as through school environments that informed individual and cultural characteristics in the formation of postsecondary educational aspirations. Freeman concluded by offering a “model of predetermination” to illuminate how the interactions of aspirations, ability, cultural (i.e. family and community) reinforcement, and school support predetermine who goes to college.

Research on African American college choice has also focused on the differences between students who choose a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) and those who choose a Predominately White Institution (PWI), as well as differences between African American women and men. Findings have shown, for example, little difference, academically speaking, between African Americans choosing HBCUs and those choosing PWIs; however, African Americans choosing PWIs, it was found, came from lower-SES families and were more likely to choose a college close to home than students attending HBCUs (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997). While these studies focus on the factors impacting African American students’ access to and participation in higher education, they also provide alternative ways to think about the experiences of these students as they transition from high school to college.

*Reconceptualizing the High School-to-College Transition Process for African Americans*

As the number of African Americans attending college continues to decline, especially in highly selective four-year institutions, their voices and lived realities remain

excluded from K-16 educational practices, policies, and reform initiatives. Scholars over the past decade have begun to note the absence of these students' perspectives and are calling for greater attention to students' experiences in navigating their educational pathways and future outcomes (Hollins & Spencer, 1990; Howard, 2001, 2003; Rubin and Silva, 2003). Quantitative studies have provided a broad understanding of the factors influencing the college participation rates of African American students. A handful of qualitative studies have also attempted to expand on what quantitative studies have not--- the rich and in depth accounts of these students' perspectives as they transition from to high school to college (Freeman, 2005; Walpole et al, 2005). These studies have highlighted how many subtle nuances in African American students' lives and their access to postsecondary education are framed and structured by race, SES, gender, school and other factors, which impact their educational trajectory and future outcomes (Freeman 1997, 2005; Horvat, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997; Smith, 2001). While these studies are important for understanding the African American higher education crisis, there is not nearly enough research on this topic. Capturing the diversity of these students' experiences, especially as it relates to the high school-to-college transition process, is necessary. Specifically, more studies are needed that get at the complexities of regional differences, familial structures, socioeconomic status and academic experiences for African American students. In addition, it is important to move beyond the short-term investigations of these students' voices and experiences on their pathways to college, to examining their changes over time.

Some scholars argue that these students' experiences need to be delved into in a holistic manner rather than looking at one particular area (Cooper et al, 2005; Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1991). To this end, exploring the interconnectedness of African American students' multiple subjectivities (e.g. race, class, and gender), contexts (e.g. school, family, peers, and community) and experiences during this critical juncture of the educational pipeline is crucial. Finally, more studies need to highlight the academic and interpersonal strengths that these students use to navigate their transitions from high school to college. As Shujaa (1994) argues, "Education is a process that locates the member of a culture within their history, facilitates their transmission of cultural knowledge and affirms their identities" (15). Thus, research on African American students' access to, preparation for and participation in higher education can provide an outlet for centralizing student agency as these students navigate across multiple contexts in their lives. It can also provide an outlet to examining ways to create learning environments where these students are being educated, affirmed and supported in their academic endeavors.

### **3- Theoretical Framework**

Underachievement, unprepared, and unqualified are terms synonymous with mainstream depictions of African American students and the K-16 educational crisis for these individuals. While these terms highlight systemic inequalities that continue to persist in the U.S. education system, they also represent the perpetuation of a discourse that further excludes and misrepresents an already marginalized population. For most African American students, particularly those attending urban schools, conversations about their high school-to-college transition process overemphasize their “catastrophic” lived experiences. These often times deficit depictions are the center of consequentially deficient debates about ways to improve educational reform and practices, and they provide seemingly sound reason to question these students’ educability and readiness for college. More importantly, what fail to be addressed are the complexities in their lives during this critical juncture of the educational pipeline. Rarely do these discussions explore how African American students navigate and respond to adversities in order to achieve their postsecondary goals. Therefore, my longitudinal dissertation study centralized twenty African American students’ voices and experiences to explore their diverse pathways towards higher education.

Research on the high school-to-college transition process seldom examines how African American students’ agency is utilized to mediate various factors (e.g. race, class, gender, challenges, etc) in their lives to achieve college-going outcomes. Throughout this study, these students revealed how individual, societal, ecological and cultural factors facilitated and hindered their pathways towards higher education. In order to develop an

integrative framework for understanding African American students' transitions from high school to college, I used aspects of Critical Race Theory, Ecocultural Theory and student agency to develop a *critical race ecocultural agency theory in education* (C.R.E.A.T.E.) framework. The C.R.E.A.T.E. model considers the interconnectedness of African American students' agency, their experiences across multiple contexts as racialized, classed and gendered beings, and their meaning making, actions, routines and decisions towards higher education.

In this chapter, I review theories of student agency, critical race theory and ecocultural theory as well as highlight these theories' contributions to the examination of African American students' postsecondary pathways. I introduce the *critical race ecocultural agency theory in education* framework to present counter-narratives of the twenty students' lived realities during this critical transition process. More specifically, I discuss how the C.R.E.A.T.E. model can be used to help us understand the diverse ways African American students with varied academic backgrounds assert agency in their multiple contexts to gain access to, prepare for and participate in higher education.

### **The Emergence of Student Agency in Education**

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory <sup>12</sup> provides one of the earliest psychological accounts of human agency. He describes human agency as a combination of human capacity and potential that assists a person to exercise some control over the nature of the quality of his or her own life. Social cognitive theory distinguishes between

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<sup>12</sup> **Social cognitive theory** adopts an agentic perspective to human development, adaptation, and change (Bandura, 1986).

three modes of agency: personal agency, which is exercised individually; proxy agency, in which people secure desired outcomes by influencing others to act on their behalf; and collective agency, in which people act in concert to shape their future (Bandura, 2002, 270). While human agency has received increased attention in various disciplines, I will center my discussion on its developments in education.

In education, human agency has been discussed as individual or group interactions with and responses to societal and institutional forces impacting lives in schools. Specifically, critical theorist scholars such as Antonio Gramsci (1971), Michael Foucault (1977) and Paulo Freire (1985, 1970) have influenced the notion of human (i.e. student, teacher, etc) agency in education. Gramsci's discussion of hegemony<sup>13</sup> has influenced the theorizing of the possibility and the need for counter hegemony; that oppressive cultural institutions (i.e. prisons, schools) and ways of understanding the world could be transformed into sites of revolution and changed through individual and group agency (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci sees this process as connected to resistance. In order to effectively develop counter hegemonic structures, he states, the unconscious act of resistance must be replaced by agency. Michael Foucault challenged Gramsci's notion of agency, arguing that since power is everywhere local, there is little room for agency or its potential to alter hegemonic order. Foucault contends that resistance *within* structures of oppression reinforces spaces where the individual can be the oppressor or the oppressed. Therefore, to create change, one must be outside these existing structures, not

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<sup>13</sup> **Hegemony**- coercive forces of the dominant class' social and ideological control and domination of subordinate social class

complying or accepting others' positioning of himself/herself as a social subject (Foucault, 1977).

Some critical theorists espouse that freedom is present in individual and collective struggles against oppression by the capacity of actors to make themselves subjects, thus allowing for acts of agency (Apple, 1982; Freire, 1970, 1985; Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 1995). For example, Paulo Freire (1970, 1985) argues for the existence of teaching communities that allowed for the capacity of students to display actions of agency. The goal of his pedagogy is student (historically oppressed subjects) liberation from oppressive realities they face in their daily lives (Freire, 1985, 1970). He defines education as a political project in which students assert their political right and responsibility to not only read, understand and transform their own experiences, but also to reconstitute their relationship with the larger society as critical analysts and agents through the development of "conscientization" or critical consciousness (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 7). Freirean's pedagogical theory then represents a move towards critical student agency, an agency that is characterized by the critical way of viewing and acting on the world (Pruyn, 1996). These scholars have played a significant role in the direction of future research on student agency in education.

#### *Empirical Studies on Student Agency in Education*

One way research in education has explored student agency (i.e. the confidence and skills to act on one's behalf) is through the phenomenon of resistance in schools. Resistance has been examined based on the relationships between schools and the dominant society as well as on the complexities of student lived cultural and social

experiences in school. Numerous studies on resistance (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1987; McLaren 1993; Willis, 1977) have focused on self-defeating resistance in which student behaviors send them even further into their domination by another.

For example, MacLeod (1987) investigated the aspirations and attainment of two adolescent gang groups, the Hallway Hangers (whites) and Brothers (blacks) in a low-income housing project. For the Hallway Hangers, family, work, and school socialized these kids from working class families into working class jobs and low aspirations. The Brothers, on the other hand, reflected on the positions of their parents due to discrimination. Yet, they had high hopes for the future since they viewed the possibilities of upward mobility as likely within a non-discriminatory social system. Eight years later when MacLeod (1987) returned to the projects, members of both gangs were struggling in the labor markets or on the streets. For the Hallway Hangers, the shift from an industrial to postindustrial economy coupled with their lack of education had a direct effect on their class position, leading them to unemployment, imprisonment, alcoholism and gender and race based violence. For the Brothers, their aspirations were crushed over the years as racism impacted their social mobility, making their class experiences similar to that of their parents. Overall, MacLeod's (1987) research demonstrates how class and race are interwoven and operate in ways that reproduce inequality.

While the U.S. public high schools boast about having achieved equal opportunity to educational access, Fine (1991) highlighted the provision of student resistance to inequitable school conditions, especially for Students of Color and those of low socioeconomic status. Her critical ethnography on dropouts revealed chilling patterns of

social inequities. Dropout rates not only differed depending on factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, gender and disability, but they also influenced the rise in unemployment, poverty, crime, homelessness, and drugs. She explored the primary tactic of “silencing” in schools, a tactic perpetuated through textbook publishers, corporations, administrators, teachers, and even students. “Silencing” is defined as the corporeal discharging of adolescents from their schools based on them defying rules and practices that prevent individuals from speaking. For example, Fine (1991) revealed, students who did not question school officials and practices were shown to be more likely to remain in school and graduate than those who did. The complaints of students labeled “troublemakers” who ended up leaving the system involuntarily eventually were turned upon themselves, resulting in self-blame, loss of academic aspirations, feelings of personal inadequacy as well as depression. Together these studies demonstrate how schools allow students to be active participants in social reproduction of inequalities through resistance, making them powerless to implement change.

Recently, scholars have begun to critique the notions of self-defeating resistance to focus on the transformative potential of resistance and its internal and external dimensions. For example, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) introduced the concept of transformative resistance to describe resistance in which a student has a higher critique of oppressive structures and works towards social justice to change those structures. In addition, resistance has also been critiqued for not fully capturing student agency or the subjective experiences of school life as disclosed by the students (Gilligan, 1993; Miron and Lauria, 1996; Miron and Mickey, 1998).

In a comparative case study of two inner city schools, Miron and Mickey (1998) examine how students' racial/ethnic identity becomes both a means of resistance and accommodation to the hegemony in inner city schools. They argue that human agency (i.e. the intentional capacity to identify and implement alternatives) is most readily evidenced by the presence of student resistance. They assert that inner city secondary students are not powerless; rather, they vigorously wish to compete for academic excellence and decry the school when its practices and policies deny them the opportunity to do so. By choosing to stay in school instead of dropping out or allowing themselves to be pushed out, students are making strategic choices to improve their future. It is important to recognize that in this study, emphasizing students' voices allowed Miron and Mickey (1998) to look at the nature of how students develop cultural life in urban classrooms.

Studies that embody these notions of resistance are attempting to reframe student agency even further (Collatos and Morrell, 2003; Mercado and Moll, 2000). Collaborative efforts between various individuals (e.g. teachers, university researchers, parents, etc) have provided opportunities for students to participate in the critique and improvement of reform and practices that impact their lived realities in schools. Mercado and Moll (2000) demonstrated how collaborative research activities could become an important tool for human and community development, especially for marginalized populations. They documented the experiences of first and second-generation Puerto Rican middle school students as educational ethnographers in an attempt to find alternative ways to improve the students' reading scores. Students had the opportunity to

create their own questions, allowing them to enter a qualitatively different relationship with family, friends and professionals. Through these experiences, students learned to value the knowledge that resides in their homes and care about and understand the social problems in their community. This example provides insight into how student agency is demonstrated through students increased confidence to take control of their own development and broaden their learning opportunities in and out of school.

Collatos and Morrell (2003) described the James Madison Futures Project that a team of university researchers, high school teachers and administrators implemented to increase college access and disrupt the education status quo that perpetually provided unequal access to low-income Students of Color. This team engaged a group of thirty incoming ninth grade students from a regular tracked humanities class in research to study the trajectories of the senior class at their high school. Seeing the changes in the student participants' knowledge and views of their school, the Futures Project team decided to create a new kind of community of practice that allowed students to work side by side with school and university agents and use their own expertise to make sense of what they learn in light of their own school and life experiences (Oakes and Rogers, 2006). Futures researchers and practitioners systematically documented the students' day-to-day project experiences in an attempt to capture the factors that influenced their education and learning (49). The social studies classes and the summer research seminars at UCLA provided these students with internships as researchers, allowing them to assert a sense of ownership over their research projects and take on significant new

responsibilities to have a personal hand in improving their academic performance, school conditions and outcomes.

The Futures Project created a space that gave these students an opportunity to: 1) shape, construct and negotiate their academic, social and political identities, 2) capitalize on their knowledge, experiences and commitments to themselves, their education and their community, 3) share critical knowledge about their inquiries through public presentations, and 4) open up their high school's English department's restrictions for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade honors English classes (Oakes and Rogers, 2006). The Futures Project shed light on the power of students' critical awareness and on their abilities to use their personal experiences to become powerful political agents of change. While the discourse on student agency has focused on the ways schools impact students' actions and experiences, examining how students utilize agency as they prepare to transition from high school to college is also important.

#### *Student Agency in the High School-to-College Transition Process*

Research on the high school-to-college transition process continues to utilize both qualitative and quantitative methods to address the conditions, opportunities and challenges to pursuing postsecondary education for students in K-12 schools across U.S. These studies have highlighted the various societal, institutional, local and individual level factors that impact students' decisions to transition to college (Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000; Freeman, 2005; McDonough, 1997). The findings of such studies persistently suggest that systemic educational inequities present in public schools, policies, and reform initiatives continue to stifle students' access to and preparation for college

(Rogers et al., 2006). In the wake of the higher education crisis for African American students, transition studies that specifically focus on these students' successes and plights have emerged (Freeman, 1997, 1999, 2005; Horvat, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997). As these students' lived realities are becoming central to understanding this critical juncture of the educational pipeline, more research is needed that illuminates the agency involved in their pursuit of college-going outcomes.

Tierney et al. (2006) documented a yearlong ethnography of five Adolescents of Color preparing for college, one of which was of African descent. Through an examination of these students' diverse situations (i.e. poverty, inequitable schooling conditions, and first generation college student status) and pathways leading to their senior year, Tierney and his colleagues shed light on the challenges faced by these students en route to college. The methods the authors employed to capture these students' lived realities implicitly illuminated the role of student agency during the high school-to-college transition process. They highlighted the "individual and the cultural contexts as well as the individual within the cultural context" (p. 149). Therefore, they utilized cultural biographies on these students to examine college preparation in the urban setting and the role of the participants in navigating the college process and their social sphere. Not only did the authors place students' narratives, experiences and ideas at the center of their investigation, but they also used cultural biographies to provide frames for understanding students' lives and the nuanced details that emerged from within them. In addition, they used ethnographic methods (e.g. life history and life story strategies) to

culturally situate these students and articulate how they navigated relationships in their social lives to achieve their future educational goals.

There are a few studies that have focused on African American students' high school-to-college transition process and explicitly and implicitly highlighted the agency involved in their pathways to higher education. In one such dissertation study, Jones (2000) examined the social agency utilized as African American students navigated their high school experiences. In order to understand African American students' lives both inside and outside of school, Jones (2000) studied the complex interplay of school tracking structures, school cultures and students' identity and actions in school. She used a qualitative case study to explore the ways in which tracking structures and cultural norms about ability, race, and merit shaped the schooling of twelve African American high school students. Jones (2000) explored how these students made sense of themselves, their lives and their experiences in school. Her findings revealed that tracking and school culture impacted these students' participation in school – both inside and outside the classroom –in unpredictable ways. Students' complex lives (e.g. family, peers, church, etc) and identities mediated the impact of tracking placements and school and classroom cultures (i.e. norms about ability, race, and merit). All of the students' participation in school broke from the limitations of G.P.A., track placement, class or family background. Some students demonstrated how their identity and lives helped them find alternative ways to access upper track courses and information about college, as well as to challenge cultural constructions around race, merit, and ability.

Studies in higher education on African American students' experiences during the transition from high school to college seldom discussed student agency explicitly. For example, Horvat (1996c) gathered 53 interviews of African American female college bound students and their parents, counselors, teachers and school staff, in order to examine the college aspirations and decision-making factors of these students. She briefly highlighted how these college bound seniors knew that both individual effort and external organizational support are necessary components for school success, and for cultivation of the desire and ability to continue postsecondary education. In other words, Horvat (1996c) argued that both agency (individual initiative displayed by students) and a supportive family and school structure are integral components of these students' school success and future orientation towards college, especially at schools with limited resources and opportunities. Therefore, schools and families act as guides for encouraging types of action and allowing students to envision certain types of futures for themselves. Horvat's article does not explicitly but rather implicitly address how agency is asserted among these African American female students during their high school-to-college transition process.

In an attempt to explore factors influencing African American students' decisions regarding college, Freeman (2005) further complicated the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-phase model (i.e. predisposition, search and choice). She explicitly addressed the need for the three-phase model to take cultural differences into account when assessing the predisposition, search, and choice practices of African Americans. "Channeling" was one concept utilized by Freeman (2005) to describe the factors impacting African

American students' aspirations and decision-making about attending college. Channeling was defined as the environmental forces (i.e. individuals, institutions, or circumstances) that influence the direction of student choice. Channeling cuts across cultural, social, economic and financial capital, which can be influenced by factors (e.g. environmental, familial, and community) both inside and outside of the home (529). As Freeman (2005) demonstrated the impact that family, school, community and home have on the decision-making process, her findings implicitly point to the importance of examining the student agency involved in college choice process. While these studies implicitly highlight the role of student agency in the transition from high school to college, studies that centralize the role of student agency during this critical transition process are needed.

### **(Re)conceptualizing the African American High School-to-College Transition Process**

The purpose of this dissertation study was to examine how twenty African American students at an urban high school navigated their transition to college despite the challenges they faced in their lived realities. To this end, I defined the high school-to-college transition process as the experiences and changes that occur for students, especially during their high school years, which shape their postsecondary decisions, actions and outcomes. Although this process was most intense during their senior year, the students in my study had the opportunity to longitudinally reflect on the academic, personal and social experiences that had been pertinent to their transition process. Too often such students' voices and experiences are lost or at least understated in the discourse about their participation in higher education. Therefore, I placed African American student agency at the center of this study to critically examine these students'

pathways toward or away from college. In order to reconceptualize African American students' transitions from high school to college, their voices and experiences were also examined through additional lenses based in critical race theory and ecocultural theory.

### *Critical Race Theory*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was introduced in the mid 1970s by a group of legal scholars, lawyers and activists, most of whom were Scholars of Color interested in examining how the relationship among race, racism and power was constructed and represented in American legal culture and society (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller and Thomas, 1995, 2). Since the inception of CRT, a number of scholars have utilized this theory to contextualize the ideological dimensions of race and racism as they relate to the inequitable experiences of People of Color in education (Ladson Billings, 1995, 1998, 1999; Ladson Billings and Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997, 1998; Tate, 1993, 1996). Solorzano (1997) identified five tenets of CRT that can inform theory, research, pedagogy, curriculum and policy: 1) the intersectionality of race and racism and other forms of subordination, 2) the challenge to dominant ideology, 3) the centrality of experiential knowledge 4) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches, and 5) the commitment to social justice in education. These themes represent a collective challenge to the existing methods on educational research and previously unanswered questions about race and inequalities inherent in educational policy and practice throughout the United States.

CRT challenges the micro (i.e. individual) and macro (i.e. societal) levels of inequities that impact Communities of Color. This theory foregrounds race and racism as

endemic, central, permanent and fundamental factors that define and explain how US society functions (Bell, 1992). While CRT acknowledges the intersectionality of race, gender, class and other social constructs, race alone continues to be a significant factor in determining educational inequalities (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). CRT is an important tool for dismantling the traditional paradigms, methods and texts of neutrality and objectivity in educational policy, practices and research. In addition, CRT challenges dominant ideology and white privilege as the normative standards, and grounds a conceptual framework that validates and centers the experiences of People of Color. It embraces subjective perspectives through storytelling, which allows for racialized, gendered and classed experiences to inform research, policies and practices (Delgado, 1989). In order to push a social justice agenda into the educational and public discourse on race, gender and other social divides, CRT utilizes transdisciplinary knowledge and methodological bases (i.e. sociology, law, ethnic studies, women's studies and other fields) to analyze race and racism within both historical and contemporary contexts (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). Overall, CRT provides a framework for examining the marginalization of Students of Color in education and ways to address this and its related issues.

A common theme in contemporary American educational discourse is that everyone has a fair opportunity to succeed in school and the effectiveness of policies and practices is measured on the basis of whether they improve success regardless of race (Parker, Deyhle, and Villenas, 1999, 33). Yet, the reality of the U.S. education system is that schools too are examples of institutions that maintain an existing system of racial

hierarchy between white middle and upper class students and low socio-economic status Students of Color. A CRT framework recognizes the social construct of race by examining the ideology of racism. This framework reaffirms previous race/culture based critiques of schooling and minority power relationships with white authorities.

CRT allowed, for example, for the analysis of Shujaa's (1994) arguments, which suggested that educational institutions continue to be an outlet for the reproduction of inequitable power dynamics among different groups in society and schools. This theory offered a link between ideological and normative principles and practices that seemed fair and race neutral (i.e. colorblind initiatives) but turned out to have a discriminatory impact on racial minorities. A critical race analysis provided an outlet to address the systemic inequities that defined the educational experiences of marginalized groups. This framework pointed to issues of access and equity that continued to impact these students' higher education participation and how disguised rhetoric in policies and practices were in place at the expense of Students of Color.

Deficit informed paradigms, such as those used in Shujaa's (1994) arguments, have been used to illustrate the root causes of the damaging and long-standing disparities in educational opportunities for Students of Color. For example, deficit thinking takes the position that Students of Color fail in school because of individual, familial, and community problems, limits that hinder their academic performance and future outcomes (Valencia, 1997). In this narrowly constructed view, historical legacies of race and racism as they relate to these students' experiences have been largely undertheorized, marginalized, and muted from public discourse (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Using

a CRT lens allows for the critiquing of deficit discourse that sees deprivation in Communities of Color experiences and facilitates the omission of their voices. Therefore, CRT provides the necessary context for understanding, feeling and interpreting the experiences of Students of Color by centralizing their voices and lived realities (Delgado, 1989). Providing opportunities for these students to present counternarratives of their lived realities will facilitate the challenging and transformation of schooling designed to perpetuate inequalities for those at the margins of society—in many case urban Students of Color.

### *Ecocultural Theory*

Rather than oversimplifying concepts such as culture, many scholars have argued for the importance of repositioning static categories related to culture to understand their multiple dimensions (Weisner, 1984; Weisner, Gallimore, and Jordan, 1988; Whiting, 1976). Therefore, ecocultural theory (ET) proposes that an integration of ecological (e.g. ecology, resources, constraints) and cultural (e.g. values, beliefs, schemata) perspectives offers a way to begin this shift. This integrative framework assumes that there are multiple cultural, ecological and individual influences on human development. The student experiences culture and ecology (the student's connection with the environment) through the ecocultural niche, the particular environmental space to which the student adapts and, at times, helps construct (Gallimore, Goldenberg and Weisner, 1993). While families' construction of daily routines is important, this framework suggests that other ecocultural niches also shape youth, including schools, peers, relatives, religious communities and governments.

Everyday activities provide opportunities to learn and develop. Youth and their families in all cultural communities work to adapt to changing ecologies through their routines of everyday life. Similarly, ecological and cultural factors are mediated through the activity settings of daily routines (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Weisner, 1997). These routines, described in the literature as activity settings, have been examined as interdependent dimensions, which include their participants or personnel (i.e. key relationships), the values and beliefs that give meaning to their lives and the scripts or recurring patterns of communication (Reese, Gallimore, Goldenberg & Balzano, 1995).

Most research using ecocultural approaches have focused on the period from infancy to childhood (Levine, 1988; Rogoff, 1990; Tharp and Gallimore, 1988). Yet, other scholars studying aspects of this model find it important to study individuals and their ecocultural niches during the transition from childhood to adolescence (Cooper et al., 1995; Phelan, Davidson, and Yu, 1991). Transition involves increased mobility and interaction beyond the family; more specifically, it speaks to how adolescents move across family, school, peer and community contexts. Overall, the ecocultural theory offers a conceptual and methodological tool for moving beyond the oversimplified stereotypes and deficit models of marginalized student achievement. This framework can help instead illuminate how adolescents move across multiple contexts of their lives to achieve their postsecondary goals.

Since mobility and interactions for adolescents extend beyond the family, the ecocultural theory has influenced the development of the Multiple Worlds Model. Phelan, Davidson and Yu (1991) followed a group of adolescents from their first to second year

of high school. The authors described multiple worlds of family, school and peer relationships of high school students and how these youth struggled to integrate their experiences across these worlds with their views of themselves. Phelan et al (1991) defined the concept of world as the “ cultural knowledge and behavior found within boundaries of students’ particular families, peer groups, and schools...[E]ach world contains values and beliefs, expectations, actions and emotional responses familiar to insiders” (53). They found four prototypes of boundary crossing that adolescents’ encounter: a) compatible and therefore easy to cross; b) distinct but manageable; c) difficult to negotiate and d) incompatible, thus impenetrable.

Cooper et al. (1995) also utilized the ecocultural framework to map the bridges and barriers across students’ multiple worlds. They used the three dimensions of ecocultural theory—goals and expectations, personnel, and activity settings – to understand the viewpoints of Latino and African American students participating in academic outreach programs, as well as those of the personnel (i.e. directors and staff members). These dimensions offered valuable ways to identify resources and challenges in students’ lives and in their networks of relationships in their multiple worlds that may be important as they consider their future occupations. Cooper et al. (1995) findings revealed that: 1) developmental shifts could be seen in the quality of students’ experiences with their goals, challenges, and resources as they progressed from junior high through college, 2) while students navigated through worlds of peers, families, schools and communities seeking academic, career and personal goals, barriers may divert or stop them, and 3) academic outreach and support programs that offered bridges across gaps in students’

educational pathways were fragile, especially with recent state budget crises.

Too often the educational values of Parents and Students of Color, especially of those in urban communities, are misrepresented and undervalued. For example, when African American students fail to perform well in school and continuously get into trouble, the blame is immediately placed on the students and their parents/guardians. The lack of parental involvement is also assumed to be the common cause for African American students' underachievement. School agents (e.g. teachers, administrators, counselors, etc) and society often assume that schools are not the problem, and that students and their parents/guardians need to change in order to conform to the already "effective and equitable" system. Unfortunately, the powerful experiences of African American students as well as their families' commitments to educational advancement and change are omitted, and these individuals thereby silenced, from the mainstream discourse. This exclusion only reinforces a system of ignorance and exploitation and power differential used to oppress these individuals. An integration of ecological and cultural perspectives will allow these students to reconstruct, across multiple contexts, the representations of the individuals in their lives who impact their educational experiences and outcomes. The ecocultural model unpacks the multiple dimensions of African American students' goals, relationships and communicative scripts that influence their daily activities as they move through the K-12 educational pipeline toward college.

### **The Connections between Critical Race Theory, Ecocultural Theory and Student Agency**

While Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Ecocultural Theory (ET) highlight the factors that shape the experiences and educational trajectory of Students of Color, these

theories are distal from the agency these students display. Therefore, the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) (Lee et al, 2003; Spencer, 1995; Swanson et al, 2003) and theories on African American achievement (Horvat and O'Conner, 2006; Perry et al, 2003) inform the importance of connecting CRT, ecocultural theory and agency in order to examine African American students' postsecondary pathways.

Margaret Beale Spencer's (1995) PVEST model helped explain the links between student agency, CRT and ecocultural theory. This model combined a phenomenological perspective with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1989) by linking life course human development within context and perception. In doing so, this framework allowed for analyzing the meaning making process that underlies identity development and outcomes. PVEST served as a model for examining normative human development framed through the interaction of identity, culture and experience, for youth of all ethnicities. It accounted for the differences in experience, perception, and negotiation of stress and dissonance or the lack thereof. This theory utilized an identity-focused, cultural and ecological perspective, which integrated issues of social, political and cultural contexts with normative development processes.

PVEST consisted of five components: 1) Net vulnerability level- context and characteristics that may pose potential risk during an individual's development; these risk factors (e.g. poverty, fragile health, racial subordination and discrimination, etc) can also be offset by protective factors (e.g. cultural capital); 2) Net stress engagement - the actual experience of situations that challenge an individual's well being (e.g. social support can

help youth combat challenging experiences); 3) Reactive coping methods- used to resolve conflict-producing situations (e.g. problem solving strategies that can vary in duration and lead to either adaptive or maladaptive solutions); 4) Emergent identities- how individuals view themselves within and between their various contexts of development (e.g., family, neighborhood, school, peer group, etc); these identities can produce either positive or negative coping responses; 5) Adverse or productive outcomes, which emerge from the identities that are developed and lay the foundation for future perceptions, self-appraisal, and behavior.

For this dissertation study, PVEST allowed for the inclusion of African American students' identities within multiple contexts to explore the factors that shaped these individuals' developments and outcomes during the high school-to-college transition process. In addition, while this model recognized the issues impacting these students' social, political and cultural contexts it also accounted for the heterogeneity in their experiences and for the changes that occurred within this marginalized group.

Horvat and O'Connor's (2006) reconceptualization of the Black-White achievement gap implicitly drew attention to the connections between student agency, CRT and ecocultural theory. The authors explicated the limitations of the Cultural Ecological Theory (CET) and the "acting white" hypothesis used by academics and the general public to explain African Americans' underachievement in schools. Throughout their edited book, interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners utilized empirical research to address how these theories failed to explain: 1) the theoretical unpacking of race as a

social phenomenon, 2) the heterogeneity of African American students' experiences and 3) the culture and organization of schools and communities.

For example, the section entitled *The Organization of Schools and Student Agency* examined the intersection of school structures, race and individuals' processes. Scholars such as Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, Anne Velasco and Karolyn Tyson focused on the role of school structures (e.g. tracking and ability grouping) in perpetuating the racial disparities in the achievement gap. Mickelson and Velasco (2006) examined the experiences of black high achievers to demonstrate how structural factors influenced their lived realities, the decisions they made in schools, the ways they viewed their peers abilities and future trajectories, and how they responded to their peers' judgments of them. The authors complicated the dichotomous conversations about "acting white," illuminating how, when and what this label meant for these students. In addition, these scholars highlighted the complexities of not only the participants' experiences within schools but also the nuances in the ways race and achievement was constructed in these spaces.

While Tyson (2006) also emphasized the role of school structures in perpetuating the achievement gap and raced notions of abilities within the schooling context, she explored the developmental stages and academic shifts of students' experiences. She revealed how younger black students have positive orientations towards schooling and achievement and see low achievement as negative. By the time they reach adolescence, their attitudes towards schooling and achievement change based on developmental needs and specific school structures and experiences that sort and label their educational abilities and outcomes. Also, Tyson (2006) demonstrated how African American

students' actions were not based on cultural values, but rather on their ideas about their chances for success and perceptions about the options available to them under a particular set of circumstances. These chapters illustrate how school structures and student agency work together to perpetuate the black-white achievement gap.

Perry, Steele and Hilliard (2003) also informed the link between CRT, ecocultural theory and student agency when they addressed the deep structural inequalities that are the main causes of the achievement gap. Specifically, in Perry's essay, she utilized stories, narratives, messages, and folk wisdom to challenge the misconceptions about the achievement values of African Americans. She centralized slave and contemporary narratives (e.g. Frederick Douglas, Malcolm X, etc.) of resistance and achievement that challenged racist ideologies and shed light on cultural differences that create persisting African American underachievement.

Perry introduced an African American philosophy of education involving a freedom of literacy and literacy of freedom, racial uplift, citizenship and leadership, stating, "This philosophy of education emerged out of limitations, out of constraints, out of the struggle for education and out of the lived experiences of African Americans" (93). The meaning is encoded in the African American narrative tradition, providing answers to persisting dilemmas that have plagued this population as they continued to commit themselves to academic achievement. Whether these stories of achievement were passed on formally, informally or institutionalized in schools, Perry provided counterstories that focused on the power, determination, and agency involved in African Americans achieving excellence despite the burdens of racist stigma and stereotype. In addition, the

author highlighted the agency displayed by this marginalized group to develop collective identities as literate and achieving people focused on meeting their goals.

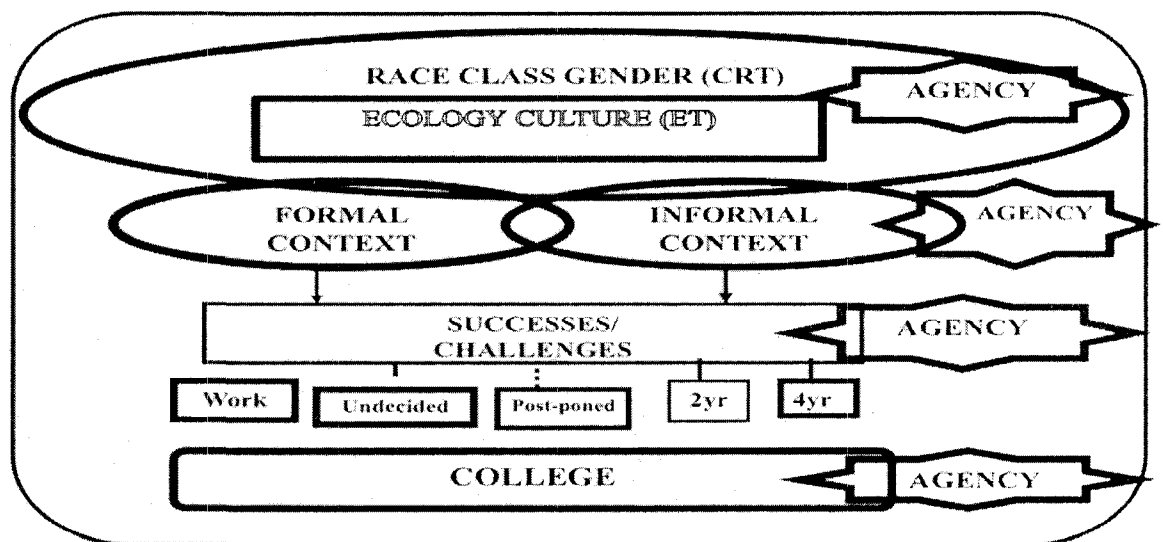
The researchers in each scholarship informed the integrative framework for this dissertation study because they highlighted both the similarities and unique differences that exists within the African American community. Second, these authors considered various factors such as class, gender, and systemic conditions of neighborhoods as influential to academic achievement and outcomes. Also central to each study are the impact of racism in schools and broader political and economic forces. Further, the authors explained how nurturing relationships with adults in multiple contexts mediates how students interpret their experiences in schools and neighborhoods

*Critical Race Ecocultural Agency Theory in Education Framework:  
An Integration of Critical Race Theory, Ecocultural Theory and Student Agency*

For this longitudinal dissertation study, I integrate Critical Race Theory, Ecocultural Theory, and student agency to examine the factors that facilitate and hinder African American students' high school-to-college transition processes. Critical Race Theory relies on experiential knowledge of race and racism to dismantle social institutions that perpetuate the marginalization of African Americans in higher education. Ecocultural theory asserts that multiple ecological, cultural and individual factors impact these students' pathways to college. Student agency allows for the exploration of the strategies, routines and skills that individuals use to act on their own behalf and on the behalf of others to achieve their postsecondary goals. I integrate these theories in order to make meaning of the complexities and heterogeneity in African American students' high school-to-college transition process.

In combining these theories, I introduce a *critical race ecocultural agency theory in education (C.R.E.A.T.E.)* framework (See Figure 3.1) to describe and analyze how in every step of the way, these African American students assert agency to respond to the factors and challenges that impact their high school-to-college transition process.

Figure 3.1. Critical Race Ecocultural Agency Theory in Education (C.R.E.A.T.E.) Framework



Based on the theories that inform this model and students' lived realities during this critical transition process, C.R.E.A.T.E. is defined as: responses to factors in multiple contexts with strategies, skills, routines and decisions necessary to take action(s) on individual and collective levels to achieve postsecondary goals. These factors include issues of race, racism and other forms of subordination as well as individual, ecological and cultural experiences. Based on the decisions of the students in this study, postsecondary goals not only refers to transitioning to 2-year and 4-year colleges and

universities, but also entering the workforce, being undecided about one's post-high school plans and having postponed plans entering college due to personal, academic or social reasons (See Figure 3.1).

Throughout this study, the African American students demonstrated how they asserted agency on individual and collective levels to achieve their postsecondary goals. For example, many students revealed how they were pursuing higher education to achieve economic and social mobility for themselves, their family and their community. Whether these students encountered adversities that were self initiated or beyond their control, they shared the various ways that individual actions, routines and decisions impacted their ability to achieve post-high school goals.

The students highlighted how their agency was not only utilized on an individual level, but also on a collective level within multiple contexts. Collective agency involved collaborating with others to reach individual and shared goals. This form of agency was displayed between students and their families, peers, schools and communities. For some students, families played a significant role in helping them achieve college-going outcomes, in which case, successful transitions to higher education represented more than an individual accomplishment; they symbolized a shared achievement among family members.

They also demonstrated a sense of collective agency among their peers to achieve postsecondary outcomes. Their agency within this context involved collaborating to help one another achieve individual and shared goals. If a student encountered challenges, peer groups served as supportive, constructive and motivating spaces for assisting each

other in successfully transitioning from high school to college. In addition, within these peer groups, individual successes and struggles were viewed as a collective process that could be achieved and improved upon together.

Both forms of agency occurred for the African American students in multiple contexts. For the purpose of this study, multiple contexts were conceptualized based on formal and informal spaces. Formal contexts refer to spaces such as schools, social service agencies, and educational programs. While systemic inequities persist in formal contexts – though they are gradually being addressed in research, policies and the media – these spaces are still recognized for improving African American students’ achievement and outcomes. Informal contexts involve families, peers and communities. These spaces are often times blamed for the challenges these students experience throughout their K-12 education. Rarely are informal contexts recognized for contributing to African American students’ academic successes.

Overall, the C.R.E.A.T.E. model allows for: 1) a reconceptualization of the discourse on African American students’ high school-to-college transition process, and 2) a longitudinal qualitative and methodological orientation that frames and embraces the interconnectedness of African American students’ multiple subjectivities, identities and ecological contexts. Overall, *critical race ecocultural agency theory in education* provides an outlet for understanding these students’ experiences and challenges over the course of this critical transition process.

*(Re)defining Our Transitions from High School to College*

The *critical race ecocultural agency theory in education (C.R.E.A.T.E.)* model allows for the reconceptualization of the discourse on the high school-to-college transition process for African Americans. First, this model provides an outlet for students to contextualize their experiences in gaining access to and participating in higher education. It centralizes issues of race, racism and other forms of subordination to gain a better understanding of the lived realities and needs of African American students in urban areas. Therefore, for three years, the students in this study had the opportunity to discuss how they made sense of and navigated their experiences within multiple contexts to achieve their post-high school goals.

Second, using a C.R.E.A.T.E. framework challenges the dominant discourse that influences the development of policies and practices that determine the educational pathways of students, especially challenging the dialogue over which individuals should be prepared for college. Conversations about improving African American students' postsecondary pathways usually focuses on the needs of those individuals who are considered "high achieving" and "college bound." Rarely are the needs of students who many not fit these criteria included in discussions about reforming this critical transition process. While these students may have low achievement rates or discipline problems, their college-going abilities are constantly overlooked and opportunities to help them gain access to higher education limited. As such, this dissertation study documents the experiences of twenty African American students with varied academic backgrounds to explore the factors that facilitate and hinder their postsecondary participation.

Third, this model also demonstrates the need to critically examine student agency during the high school-to-college transition process. Research on higher education access for African American students in urban areas typically draws attention to the challenges they face to achieve post secondary goals; the agency these students utilize to navigate such challenges in their lived realities is seldom addressed. As such, this dissertation study emphasizes African American students' agency to examine the ways in which they respond to the actors, successes and obstacles that facilitate and hinder this critical transition process.

*Embracing the Interconnectedness of Our Multiple Identities and Contexts*

The *critical race ecocultural agency theory in education model* calls for a longitudinal qualitative and methodological orientation that frames and embraces the interconnectedness of African American students' multiple identities and ecological contexts. Within the educational context, these students are continuously described in monolithic and static ways. As a result, "cookie cutter" policies and practices have been set in place to improve educational conditions for these students, failing to consider the diverse needs within this group. This longitudinal study provides rich accounts of the complexities and heterogeneity within African American communities. While the students lived in the same community and attended the same school for most of their high school careers, their experiences preparing for and gaining access to higher education were unique.

Various studies have examined how society, families, peers, communities and schools impact students' educational experiences and outcomes (MacLeod, 1987; Oakes,

2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Yonezawa, Wells and Serna, 2002;). Fewer studies have explored how these factors have influenced the high school to college transition for Students of Color and students of low-income status, especially African Americans (Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000; Freeman, 2005; Horvat, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Smith, 2001). While it is important to investigate how these factors independently and collectively affect students' college participation rates, more studies are needed that capture how African American students assert agency within these contexts to achieve their postsecondary goals. Examining the students' lived realities not only captures how African American students can navigate across different contexts, but also how various factors facilitate and hinder their college-going outcomes.

The C.R.E.A.T.E. framework also allowed for the examination of relationships that come into play as adolescents consider their educational and occupational futures. As African American students continue to lag behind their white counterparts on standardized tests, high school graduation and college-going rates, conversations about their disassociation with academic success continue. While many of these research-informed conversations have pointed to African American students' peer groups as some of the main culprits in these students' "academic disengagement," "underperformance" and "underachievement" (Ogbu, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003), the students in my study have expressed how their peer groups played an instrumental role in their *positive* experiences in school. African American students who develop longstanding and supportive peer relationships through their extracurricular involvements both on and off campus challenged these misconceptions about their academic potential, beliefs and

actions. For example, a cohort of students who have participated in GEAR UP since the sixth grade have been able to sustain mixed gender and ability relationships with one another, which persisted into their senior year of high school.

My study revealed that since these African American students made a personal commitment to collectively graduate from high school and enter college, their relationships allowed them to provide each other with the academic, social and personal support necessary to be successful both inside and outside of school. For instance, if a student was struggling with an academic or personal challenge, his/her peers would meet during lunch or after school to discuss possible ways to help. These collaborative efforts have included working together on homework assignments and projects, meeting with teachers and administrators to voice their academic concerns, setting goals to make honor roll each semester, and participating in activities that would help them meet their academic and personal needs. The potential of individuals in informal contexts to emancipate and empower each other to rise from the challenges they continue to face through oppressive educational structures, practices and discourses needs to be further examined.

#### **4- The C.R.E.A.T.E. Framework and Qualitative Methodology**

I utilize a Critical Race Ecocultural Agency Theory in Education (C.R.E.A.T.E.) framework and qualitative methodology in my examination of African American students' high school-to-college transition process. I use critical race theory (CRT), ecocultural theory (ET) and student agency to understand the factors that facilitate and hinder these students' pathways to higher education. Yet, the ways in which my integrative framework plays out is informed by qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is directly concerned with how individuals make sense of their worlds and the experiences they have in these spaces (Merriam, 2001). In combination with the C.R.E.A.T.E. model, I conducted a longitudinal qualitative study to explore the complexities of African American students' lived realities in their pursuit for higher education participation.

Qualitative studies are important for interpreting a phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to it. Too often African American students' voices and experiences are not included in conversations about their higher education participation crisis. CRT is aligned with qualitative methods because it recognizes race, racism and other forms of subordination as central factors that define and explain how African American students' college participation rates shape U.S. society. Qualitative studies are a multi-method approach that provides a "complex holistic feature" for understanding various dimensions of a problem (Maxwell, 1996). CRT is an important tool for dismantling the traditional discourse about the African American educational pipeline and grounds a conceptual framework that validates and centers these students' diverse realities. It embraces their

marginalized perspectives through storytelling, which allows for their multiple subjectivities and experiences to inform research, policies and practices. In addition, to push a social justice agenda, CRT uses a transdisciplinary methodological basis to analyze historical and contemporary contexts impacting college access and equity for this marginalized population.

Qualitative studies can be used to illuminate the meaning of events, situations and actions that occur during the high school-to-college transition process. Ecocultural Theory adds an additional layer to qualitative research because it proposes that there are multiple cultural, ecological and individual influences on African American students' pathways to college. This theory allows for the examination of particular contexts in which the students act and how these contexts influence the students' pathways to higher education. Documenting their experiences in multiple contexts over time can also illuminate unanticipated events and influences that occur during this critical transition process. For three years I was able to witness various factors that influenced the changes that occurred as the students attempted to achieve their postsecondary goals. Using a longitudinal qualitative study approach allowed me to conceptualize and contextualize the actions, decisions and routines that impacted their college-going outcomes.

Qualitative studies can employ inductive approaches that build new theories to explain data. By following these 20 African American students for three years, I was able to develop an integrative framework that centralized the students' lived realities in multiple contexts and utilized their voices and experiences to provide suggestions for improving their college participation rates. Qualitative research also highlights the

processes by which some events influence others. Throughout this study, the students demonstrated the importance of examining how they asserted agency on individual and collective levels to help them achieve their postsecondary goals.

One of the main goals of qualitative research is to utilize multiple methods of inquiry to study a social phenomenon—in this particular case, the meaning making of the African American students' experiences during this critical transition process. Examining their agency allowed me to explore their interactions and responses to societal and institutional forces that impact their college-going experiences and outcomes. The intersection of the C.R.E.A.T.E. framework and a qualitative study approach provides a space for individuals who continue to be misrepresented in educational discourse and marginalized throughout the K-16 educational pipeline to redefine the discussions about ways to improve their access to and participation in higher education. In this chapter, I will provide information about the site selection and description, participation selection, and data collection methods and analysis.

### **Site Selection and Description**

#### *Golden State, California*

Golden State is a city in the southwestern part of California. This city is the home to one of the busiest major U.S. airports, a combined thoroughbred racecourse and poker card room, a cemetery, and a sports stadium, which over the years has been converted into a space for religious worship and musical concerts. A row of fast food chains, religious institutions, and small businesses are present on every other block in the city, while a handful of local libraries and parks provide opportunities for residents to remain

intellectually and physically active. In the educational arena, public, private, and charter schools compete against each other to increase their student enrollment. In recent years, Golden State has received urban development funding for economic and social revitalization projects. While there has been an increase in job opportunities and economic revenues, this city has also experienced the negative effects of gentrification---higher property taxes and rent forcing residents to move away and small businesses to close down.

Established in 1888, the city of Golden State was transformed from an agricultural area to an urban community when activities stimulated by World War II brought in a wave of workers and their families (Waddingham, 1994). Because of a history of segregation-inspired restrictions during the 1960s and 1970s, Golden State was one of the American cities especially targeted for integration, fair housing and school busing policies (Waddingham, 1994). Even with some objection by white residents, Golden State experienced major demographic changes and ensuing white flight as the residential and business communities became racially integrated. Golden State soon became the largest predominately African American city in California.

According to the U.S. Census of 2000, there are 112,580 people, 36,805 households, and 25,837 families residing in Golden State. While African Americans remain the largest population at 47.13%, this city is also comprised of 46.04% Hispanic or Latinos of any racial/ethnic background, 19.1% Whites, 1.14% Asians, 0.69% Native Americans, 0.36%, Pacific Islander, 27.38% other races, and 4.20% mixed races (U.S. Census, 2000). In addition, of the 36,805 households, 42.7% include children under the

age of 18, 38.5% include married couples living together, 24.9% include a female householder with no husband present, and 29.8% are non-family households. Although the socioeconomic status for Golden State residents varies, the median income for a household in this city is \$34,269, and the median income for a family is \$36,541. Males have a median income (\$28,515) that is less than females (\$30,096) (U.S. Census 2000). The Census of 2000 also revealed that about 19.4% of families and 22.5% of the population in Golden State are below the poverty lines, including 30.1% of those under the age 18 and 11.8% of those ages 65 or over.

With the socioeconomic and demographic shifts in Golden State, mainstream conversations center on the persisting “problems” impacting this urban community. Various media outlets have built a “culture of fear” (Glassner, 2000), utilizing deficit ideologies to misrepresent this city and its residents. Poverty, corruption scandals, high crime rates, low academic achievement rates and racial tension continue to be associated with this urban Community of Color. For example, one of the issues frequently used to describe the challenges in Golden State is the tension between African Americans and Latinos. Between 1989 and 1999 several high schools in Golden State experienced media defined “race riots.” These small altercations were portrayed to have begun in mid February during Black history month and have culminated into full-blown riots by the week of Cinco de Mayo (Thorn, Garcia, and Olive, 1998). Over the years, these incidents have been used to define the current conditions in Golden State. In addition, these deficit descriptions often times blame People of Color for the systemic problems in their communities. Contrary to popular belief, I have witnessed how Golden State is a diverse

and culturally rich city where many residents take pride in community preservation, social advancement and the various qualities that make it unique from other cities—cities that are considered to be wealthier and safer. Therefore, I utilized twenty African American students' voices and experiences to challenge the discourse that fails to capture the complexities and heterogeneity of Golden State and its residents.

*Golden State High School (GSHS)*

The demographics of Golden State are also reflected in the city's K-12 education system. While there are many charter and private schools emerging, the Golden State Unified School District (GSUSD) is made up of a head start program, ten elementary schools, three K-8 schools, two middle schools (grades 6-8), four high schools and one adult school. GSHS is a comprehensive high school serving students in grades nine through twelve and had an enrollment of approximately 1,893 during the 2006-2007 academic year (California Department of Education, 2008a). The ethnic composition of the GSHS student body was 49.0% African American, 49.9% Latino, and 1% other (California Department of Education, 2008a). The ethnic representation of GSHS teachers during the 2006-2007 academic year was drastically different from the students, with 61.1% African Americans, 17.8% Whites, 14.4% Latinos, 4.4% Asians/Filipinos and 2.2% American Indians (California Department of Education, 2008b).

Similar to other urban schools, this high school suffers from the myriad of social and educational ills that prevent most African American and Latino students from gaining access to a quality education. Besides being considered a critically overcrowded school, 35.6% of the teachers at GSHS are not fully credentialed (California Department of

Education, 2008b). In addition, GSHS trails the county, state, and national averages on standardized tests. For example, the Academic Performance Index (API), which summarizes a school's academic progress and performance on statewide assessments, reveals another disheartening trend: based on the ranking of ten categories of equal size called deciles, from one (lowest) to ten (highest), GSHS has a statewide rank of 1 in comparison to similar schools that are ranked at 4 (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2008). As a result, this school has failed to meet its target API growth for several years and has been under Program Improvement<sup>14</sup>.

GSHS suffers from issues of college access and equity as revealed through their poor high school graduation rates, A-G college preparatory course completion rates, and higher education enrollment rates. The California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) illustrated that while 9<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment at GSHS during the 2003-2004 academic year was at 609 students, only 390 students enrolled as seniors four years later.<sup>15</sup> These statistics support research suggesting that of those 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who enroll in urban public high schools, only half of them enroll in school four years later (Saunders et al, 2008). As far as graduation rates, only 338 students graduated by the end of the school year and only 147 students completed the A-G course requirement to be

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<sup>14</sup> **Program Improvement**-A Title I school is identified for PI when, for each of two consecutive years, it fails to make AYP in the same content area (English-language arts or mathematics) school-wide or for any numerically significant subgroup, or on the same indicator (Academic Performance Index [API] or high school graduation rate) school-wide (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ti/programimprov.asp>).

<sup>15</sup> The difference between 9th Grade Enrollment and 12th Grade Enrollment does not determine a dropout or graduation rate. A dropout or graduation rates may under- or over-estimate the actual rates to the extent that some 9th graders repeat that grade and students may transfer in, or out of this school (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2008).

eligible to apply to college. In Table 4.1, I provide a break down by race of the high school graduation rates, completion of the A-G course requirements and GSHS Class of 2007 enrollment during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades.

Table 4.1. 2007 College Destinations of Golden State High School Graduates by Ethnicity- High School Statistics

<b>High School Statistics</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Latino</b>	<b>Asian/Pacific Islander/Filipino*</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>H.S. Graduates</b>	180	153	2	3	338
<b>A-G Requirements</b>	93	53	1	0	147
<b>2006-2007 12<sup>th</sup> grade Enrollment</b>	214	171	2	3	390
<b>2003-2004 9<sup>th</sup> grade Enrollment</b>	315	285	5	4	609

\* The enrollment numbers for Asian/ Pacific Islanders and Filipinos were combined.

The CPEC High School Data reveals that 315 Black students were enrolled in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade during the 2003-2004 academic year and only 214 were enrolled four years later. Also, there were only 180 Black students from this GSHS class who graduated during the 2006-2007 academic year. In addition, only 93 of these 180 students passed the courses required for admission to the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems with at least a C grade or higher. The number of GSHS students entering institutions of higher education, especially at the four-year level, is also disheartening as we look at the college-going rates for the class of 2007.

Table 4.2. 2007 College Destinations of High School Graduates College-going Rates to Public Colleges and Universities by Ethnicity- Higher Education Institutions

Higher Education Institution	African American	Latino	Asian	Whites	Other	No Response
CCC	82	38	1	1	0	0
CSU	36	13	0	0	0	6
UC	7	1	0	0	2	3
<b>Total</b>	125	52	1	1	2	9

Table 4.2 above reveals how a higher number of African American students are pursuing higher education when compared to other students at GSHS. Yet, this number represents only half the number of African American student graduating from GSHS. While 82 African American students enrolled at a California Community College and 36 students entered the CSU system, only 7 students enrolled in the UC system (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2008). These statistics represent a critical situation, and point to the existence of the many challenges GSHS students face as they attempt to prepare for and gain access to institutions of higher education.

#### *Site Description*

Golden State High School (GSHS) is located at the intersection of Greenville and Mansfield Avenue, the latter of which is a major street that runs through various socioeconomic communities. Across the street from the GSHS entrance is Golden State Adult School and one of many charter schools that continue to emerge throughout the city. The surrounding neighborhood is filled with more apartment buildings than homes, and several small businesses, churches and, as the GSHS principal Ms. Thompson informed me during the second year of this study, four different African American and

Latino gangs. While the exterior part of GSHS is painted green and white with a hint of beige to represent the school colors, the campus is enclosed by metal and wired gates. A large mural of the school's Native American mascot, Sam Sentinel, is painted on the side of the building facing Mansfield Avenue. Several times during the week, the maintenance staff attends to the trees and grass as well as to the exterior portion of the school building. Located at the corner of the school entrance is an electronic announcement board that displays important messages to students, parents, and community members.

Upon entering the two level main building of GSHS, students, staff and visitors are immediately greeted or questioned by a security guard monitoring the tall brawny, grayish metal detector. While this is the only metal detector present at GSHS, many students in this study expressed their concerns with campus safety. They said illegal items (e.g. guns, drugs, etc) are still brought on campus through the parking lot and side gates before, during and after school hours. Despite the prison-like environment, there are breathtaking oak floors that seemed to be glowing at the entrance of the school's foyer and wrapped around the main, counseling and administrators offices, student and teacher cafeterias on the first floor as well as the College and Career Center (CACC) and some classrooms on the second floor. There are white mosaic arched walls lined with window display cases that include CACC information, the senior class calendar of events, a GSHS sports schedule, motivational quotes, as well as African American and Latino cultural heritage posters and artwork. The grimy and dim basement level of the building houses a few classrooms.

Leaving the main building, and outstretched over four acres, are several single story buildings: they house the attendance office and several classrooms with porches facing out and wrapping around the U-shaped, black tar courtyard. On some of these buildings, murals are painted to display the school's mascot and motivational terms such as "dignity," "respect," "academics," and "building champions." Many of the students I interviewed felt that these terms were not practiced reciprocally between school administrators, staff and their peers. In and around the courtyard are benches and a few trees that offer a peaceful retreat away from the classroom or office. Yet, this courtyard also serves as a space that divides the underclassmen from the upperclassmen, the popular from the unpopular, the African American from the Latino students and the school administrators and staff from the students they monitor. A 100-square foot long, unoccupied cage at the center of the courtyard was once used for vending machines, lockers and a make shift store to sell food and snacks during lunch. Over the past couple of years, sales of this food came to an end when school officials decided to provide more nutritious district-sponsored meals in the cafeteria, which according to the students, never happened.

There are two additional two-story buildings on campus, one where the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program and some social science courses are located, and the other, which is home to the school choir and the nationally recognized marching band. Right below the performing arts building is the staff and student parking lot as well as the Consolidated Office, which deals with standardized testing and Title I funding. In addition to the courtyard, GSHS has seven tennis courts, six basketball courts,

a swimming pool – recently reopened –, two gymnasiums, a batting cage and a softball field. In 2001, the softball field and parking lot were partially taken over by another high school, Academic City, a school designed for gifted and talented students in Golden State. Four years ago, the erection of a large yellow and blue bungalow over part of the basketball courts and physical education area received some resistance from students and staff. This bungalow housed WMU- GSUSD GEAR UP, a school-university partnership designed to increase high school graduation and college-going rates at GSHS. Tucked away at the corner of the campus is the school's auditorium with seven hundred seats. This building is used for daily tardy sweeps, holding two or more classes with no permanent teachers for the academic year and accommodation of the large student body for various assemblies that occur throughout the day.

GSHS classrooms are decades old. It seemed as though most of the renovations occurred when GSHS was preparing to be reviewed for their annual school accreditation. Even after the successful victory of the *Eliezer Williams et al. vs. the State of California* (2004) case, state and district officials still have not allotted enough funding to underserved schools such as GSHS for campus improvement efforts. As a result, many of the GSHS classrooms have damaged wooden roofs that do not shelter the students from the city's poor air quality, unbearable hot or cold weather nor from the shadows of planes from the nearby airport. Broken windows, exposed pipes, deteriorating furniture, basement level classes and insect/rodent infestations are found in some buildings. Like many other California urban schools, temporary bungalows have been added to accommodate the increasing student population. Depending on a given course's

availability, popularity and the number of returning teachers in the academic year, over 40 students can be found in one classroom. These overcrowded conditions often create limited opportunities for a successful teaching and learning process to be achieved. Due to the small custodial staff available at GSHS, there are one or two working and unlocked bathrooms for 1893 students. While there are four to six campus security guards present on any given day, unattended gates and doors are still accessible to outside intruders. Despite the deficiencies at GSHS, many of the students feel that this school provides unique experiences that prepare them for the postsecondary pursuits and the challenges they will experience outside of their community.

I centered my dissertation study on Golden State High School (GSHS) because it is a Southern California urban public school with a significant African American student population and low college-going rates. In addition, GSHS is continuously the center of deficit conversations about the problems and failures of urban schools and the communities they serve. Race riots, low achievement scores and poor high school graduation and college-going rates are a few of many negative issues highlighted in the dominant discourse. While it is important to highlight the challenges that hinder African American students' achievements and outcomes, it is also critical to discuss the diverse experiences and interactions that occur in this learning community. This study illuminates the various ways GSHS facilitated and hindered these students high school-to-college transition process.

## *WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP*

In order to improve public education and increase low-income students' access to postsecondary education, former President Bill Clinton signed the Higher Education Amendment of 1998 (Public Law 105-244). One of the programs that emerged from this law was GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), an early intervention and college awareness program to support middle school reform efforts for low-income students. The mission of GEAR UP is to: a) improve the academic performance of all students; b) increase educational expectations of participating students; c) improve student and family knowledge regarding postsecondary education preparation and financing; and d) work to improve high school graduation and college-going rates. Another objective of GEAR UP is to translate research into systemic changes to the structures, processes, and discourses about urban schools. More specifically, GEAR UP centers upon research-based early outreach strategies that include: academic support, information about post-secondary education and financial aid, scholarship, counseling services, and other relevant strategies such as professional development for teachers.

The U.S. Department of Education awards competitive six-year grants to states and partnerships between colleges, school districts and two other entities such as businesses, professional organizations, community based organizations and state agencies. Grantees are required to serve an entire cohort of students at high poverty middle and high schools, beginning no later than seventh grade, and follow the cohort through high school. Over the past decade, GEAR UP has served more than 1.5 million

students and funded over 40 state and 175 partnership grants with average state and partnership awards of 2.8 million and 1.1 million respectively (NCCEP, 2004).

GEAR UP was established in Golden State in 2000 through collaborative efforts of Western Metropolitan University, Los Altos (WMULA), a research I public university on the west coast, and Golden State Unified School District (GSUSD). The goal of this school-university partnership was to establish a college-going culture at Golden State Magnet Middle School (GSMMS) by providing rigorous academic programs, high quality teaching, intensive academic and college-going support, multicultural college-going identity, and parent/community connections.

WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP lasted at GSMMS from 2000 to 2003. In order to increase college aspirations, attendance and success for GSMMS students GEAR UP established relationships with several cohorts of students, working with their first cohort of 6<sup>th</sup> graders in 2000. Through collaborative efforts of school staff, parents and community members, this program created a learning community that focused on academic excellence for all students, developing a college-going culture, and helping students in successfully transitioning to high school. In addition, GEAR UP provided professional development for the adult community—administrators, teachers, counselors and families—that most impacted student development. For instance, in order to build awareness about and preparation for college, GEAR UP staff worked closely with families through a Parent Leadership Institute, college preparation workshops and creating job opportunities to work as a parent liaison for the program. GEAR UP was also

available when school staff needed assistance with the daily activities such as proctoring exams and speaking to district officials.

The 2002-2003 academic year marked the time when the first cohort of GSMMS students were preparing to transition from middle school to high schools in Golden State and surrounding cities. At this time, the GEAR UP staff also relocated across the street to GSHS, a neighboring high school where a majority of the GSMMS students planned to attend.

WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP was a part of the GSHS community from 2003 to 2007. While the programmatic goals remained the same, the type of support GEAR UP provided GSHS was different from support provided to GSMMS. GEAR UP now seemed to center on a more comprehensive school reform initiative to address various issues impacting GSHS. Throughout this study, I learned that the school district was facing many challenges with the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE), which took effect in 2006. This was the first year in which students were required to pass both the English and mathematics portions of the exam in order to receive their high school diploma (there was an exception for special education students). If students did not pass this exam but completed high school, they simply received a certificate of attendance.

To assist with the dilemmas faced as a result of the CAHSEE, GEAR UP worked intensively with the GSHS principal, teachers, and counselors to offer CAHSEE tutoring because an alarming percentage of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students were not passing the exam. As part of the CAHSEE day tutoring program, students were pulled from pre-approved classes to work one-on-one with undergraduate GEAR UP tutors to prepare for

the exit exam. GEAR UP also offered intensive tutoring through the Reading Pilot Program, which worked with 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders to test, assess, and increase reading comprehension. This computer-based program complimented the CAHSEE tutoring program by reinforcing the areas in which students needed help to pass the English portion of the CAHSEE exam. In addition, the after school program component provided workshops on test taking skills, specifics of the California High School Exit Examination, and study skills in general.

Various students in this study shared how WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP played a critical role in responding to their most immediate needs. GEAR UP not only provided academic and college enrichment activities, but also peer counseling, mentoring sessions and workshops that focused on their community, leadership skills, academics, and personal development. GEAR UP was very helpful when GSHS itself was unable to provide its students with the assistance they needed during this critical transition process. GEAR UP worked closely with GSHS college counselors <sup>16</sup> providing students with additional postsecondary knowledge and opportunities, including information about scholarships and summer programs, workshops on financial aid, college visits and preparatory help for AP exams. While GEAR UP supported all GSHS students throughout its tenure at GSHS, the last two years centered on more intensive sessions for juniors and seniors on college preparation and career development in an effort to better prepare them for their postsecondary pursuits.

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<sup>16</sup> Through WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP's tenure at GSHS, this school had two different college counselors over the course of 4 years.

GSHS staff members and families had opportunities to participate in educational and professional development activities. I observed various teachers providing recommendations for program improvement, participating as staff for tutoring, college preparation courses and summer programs, and encouraging student participation in programs by creating extra credit incentives. Parents were also encouraged to participate in the GEAR UP parent workshops twice a week, where they learned how to navigate the GSHS and school district bureaucracies to obtain services they needed for their children.

As previously mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, I have worked as a WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP research-practitioner for the past five years. This position allowed me to actively collaborate with various members of Golden State High School to help improve issues impacting the K-16 educational pipeline for African American students. By working with the GEAR UP and GSHS staff, we were able to develop a learning community that enabled students to succeed in high school as well as be competitive and eligible to gain access to higher education. Through these experiences, I witnessed the impact a school-university partnership had on the lives of marginalized youth, their families and their schools. I selected WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP for this study because this program allowed me to highlight alternative learning spaces within an urban school context that impacted these African American students' high school-to-college transition process.

### **Participant Selection**

Through my work with WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP, I witnessed the program serve the entire GSHS student body. The GEAR UP staff provided opportunities for

students with diverse academic needs in honors, advanced placement, regular education, English Language Learning and special education courses. GSHS students' level of participation in GEAR UP varied, ranging from one to seven years, with some students entering the program as early as middle school. The students were seldom all present in the GEAR UP office or participating in GEAR UP activities at the same time. While some students were involved in all GEAR UP activities, others only entered the office with specific questions or to participate in one activity such as CAHSEE tutoring.

I observed 5 to 10 students hanging out in the office daily, especially during lunchtime. Over the years, this group grew to 15 or 20 students on any given day. Most of these students were African American, part of GEAR UP's first cohort at GSMMS, and highly involved in the program's activities. Although these students were from diverse backgrounds, they all had common goals --- to successfully graduate from high school and gain admission to college. Through various conversations, they informed me that the GEAR UP office served as a space that allowed them to step away from challenges in their lived realities in order to achieve their academic goals. Because of the diverse student population GEAR UP served and the rapport I developed with various individuals at GSHS over the course of five years, this learning community was an ideal space for me to recruit participants for my dissertation study.

With the assistance of the GEAR UP full-time staff, my recruitment efforts for this study began during the 2004-2005 academic year. Through several informal meetings, I discussed my project ideas, obtained feedback about my work and gained permission to utilize this space as one of my research sites. Since GEAR UP provided

services to the entire GSHS student body, potential students were identified, recruited and selected purposefully. As elucidated by Merriam (2001), I understood that researchers “must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). GSHS students are rich subjects for substantive critical and conscientious inquiry, especially as it relates to their pathways to higher education. Because my longitudinal study explored African American student experiences during the high school-to-college transition process, GEAR UP provided me with opportunities to thoroughly explore this unit of analysis.

The selection criteria for this study required: 1) racial identification as African American based on the GEAR UP database information, 2) participation in WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP, and 3) GSHS high school sophomore status during the 2004-2005 academic year. Tenth grade African American students were selected because this was a crucial moment in their academic career where academic performance (e.g. grades, test scores, extracurricular activities, etc) began to be counted towards college admissions. With freshman year finished, many students expressed that they were beginning to become more serious about their academic trajectory in terms of college preparation as sophomores.

After meeting with the GEAR UP administrative assistant Corina, I obtained a list of names of and contact information for all the African American student participants. This list was based on those individuals who completed a GEAR UP application that was inputted into the program database. After reviewing this list, I was able to create a list of 60 students who met the selection criteria. After obtaining IRB approval, I sent out recruitment letters to 60 potential African American students. A week later, I made

phone calls to ensure that each student and their parent(s)/guardian(s) received the information, and to answer any questions about this study. I also distributed recruitment letters and consent forms to parent(s)/guardian(s) of potential participants during GSHS students' departure for a GEAR UP Summer Intensive Enrichment Program at Western Metropolitan University, Los Altos (WMULA). Through this program, students spent a week living in the WMULA campus residential halls, taking math, English and computer courses to prepare them for the following academic year, and participating in various extracurricular activities.

Given that the goal of this dissertation study is to utilize qualitative methods to centralize the lived realities of African American students during their high school-to-college transition process, I had to ensure that I had a manageable sample. Therefore, with parental consent, the first twenty 10<sup>th</sup> grade students, 11 females and 9 males, who agreed to participate in this study, were selected (See Table 4.3, p. 107-108). While 17 of 20 students were the typical age for their grade level, one female student, Candice, was a year younger and two male students, Jabreality and Wendell, were a year older than the rest of the participants. All of the students identified themselves as African American and Black interchangeably. Yet, over time, one female student, Nia, began to describe herself based on her ethnic background --Belizean-American. Another participant, Jerome, recognized his lived realities as a young Man of Color in an urban community, but also shared that he identified himself as multiracial-- Black, Italian, French and Jewish. Throughout this study, I collected demographic information from the students as it pertained to their lives in Golden State and GSHS. The students' demographic

backgrounds as they related to their personal, familial and academic realities are summarized in Table 4.3. I include gender, socioeconomic status (SES) classification, familial type, number of high schools attended, academic performance based on meeting the A-G college preparatory course requirements and the number of years participating in WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP.

**Table 4.3. Student Demographic Information**

<b>Name<sup>17</sup></b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>SES</b>	<b>Familial Type</b>	<b>Number of High Schools Attended</b>	<b>Academic Performance</b>	<b># of Years in GEAR UP</b>
Adrian	Male	Low	Single Mother	1	UC/CSU/Private*	7
Alisha	Female	Working	Single Father (Remarried)	1	CSU**	7
Amaya	Female	Low (Unemployed-Chronic Illnesses)	Single Mother	2	CCC****	6
Ashley	Female	Middle	Two Parents	1	CSU/CCC**	7
Ayana	Female	Working	Single Mother	1	UC/CSU/Private**	7
Brianna	Female	Low (Disabled)	Single Mother	2	CCC****	4
Byron	Male	Low (Ward of the Court)	Foster Care (Guardians)	2	UC/CSU/Private*	3
Candice	Female	Low (Disabled)	Single Mother	2	UC/CSU/Private*	4
Corey	Male	Working	Single Mother	1	CCC****	5
Dania	Female	Working	Single Mother	1	UC/CSU/Private**	4
Elijah	Male	Working	Two Parents	1	UC/CSU/Private*	7
Jabreality	Male	Low (Ward of the Court)	Foster Care (Independent)	2	CCC****	3
Jerome	Male	Working	Divorced (Remarried-Father)	1	CSU/CCC***	2

<sup>17</sup> Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the student participants, school district, school, university and other members of the GSHS community.

Keisha	Female	Working	Divorced	2	UC/CSU/Private**	4
Nia	Female	Low (Undocumented)	Single Mother	2	CSU***	3 ½
Paige	Female	Low (Ward of the Court)	Foster Care (Guardian)	1	UC/CSU/Private**	4
Peyton	Female	Low	Single Mother	1	UC/CSU/Private*	7
Raheem	Male	Working	Single Mother (Widowed)	1	CSU/CCC***	5
Reggie	Male	Working	Single Mother	1	UC/CSU/Private**	3 ½
Wendell	Male	Low	Single Mother	1	CSU/CCC***	7

**Students' academic performance indicators:** \* = 3.5 G.P.A. or higher; \*\* = 3.0 - 3.5 G.P.A. ; \*\*\* = at or below a 3.0 G.P.A; \*\*\*\*= below a 2.5 G.P.A.

The household experiences of the students were represented through diverse familial types. Thirteen of the students were from single-parent households. While many of these students lived with their mothers, Alisha was raised by her father since the age of two. Elijah and Ashley were from two-parent households. Keisha and Jerome's parents were divorced but both parents continued to be involved in their children's lives. Three students, Byron, Jabreality and Paige, had been a part of the foster care system since primary school and lived under the care of legal guardians. During Jabreality's junior year, he requested to live on his own through the Department of Children and Family Services Transitional Housing Program<sup>18</sup>.

The vast majority of the students considered themselves to be from low-income backgrounds, a notion based on their experiences as African American youth in Golden State. Yet, various discussions with the students and their parents or guardians revealed

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<sup>18</sup> This **DCFS Transitional Housing Program** provides services for foster care and homeless youth between the ages of 17 to 21 with no other housing options. These young adults are given free housing and emancipation status as long as they work and save 50% of their income.

further details about their varied socioeconomic background. Of the nine individuals who were from low-income backgrounds, Adrian had a mother who worked occasionally and received public assistance to care for her three children, as well as her niece and nephew. According to Amaya, her own mother was unemployed due to chronic illnesses and often relied on public assistance or money from her boyfriend and family members. While Brianna and Candice's mothers were unable to work because of permanent disabilities, Nia's mother was an undocumented immigrant who occasionally worked jobs that did not require legal identification. Ten of the students were from working class backgrounds. Ashley was the only student from a middle class background, and she lived in a suburban community 30 minutes away from Golden State.

All of the students spent their first two years at GSHS. Over time, six students – Jabreality, Byron, Candice, Corey, Amaya and Brianna— left the high school for personal or academic reasons. The two foster care youth, Jabreality and Byron, had to leave the school because their guardians moved to another city. Personal challenges forced Byron to move back to GSHS by his senior year. When Candice's mother moved to Iowa, she was able live with her father in Riverdale, which was an hour away from Golden State. She eventually moved back to Golden State by the second semester of her senior year to live with her sister. Corey was sent to a continuation school by the end of his tenth grade year because his behavior (i.e. "class clown") prevented him from meeting the academic credit requirement to transition to the next grade. Amaya and Brianna transferred to the adult school by their senior year. Amaya decided to attend this school because of the challenges she faced at home. Brianna was sent to adult school her

senior year after learning that she was behind on academic credits, still had not passed her CAHSEE exam and would not be able to graduate with her classmates.

While many of the students thought similarly about their postsecondary pursuits, they had varied academic backgrounds. Using their academic transcripts and course schedules, I found that 15 of the 20 students were enrolled in regular education, honors and advanced placement courses that prepared them to meet the California A-G Subject Area Requirements. These courses were designed to help students be eligible to gain admissions to California public and private universities. Five of the 15 students – Adrian, Byron, Peyton, Candice and Elijah – were able to maintain above a 3.5 G.P.A in their classes; seven – Ashley, Alisha, Ayana, Dania, Keisha, Paige and Reggie – maintained a G.P.A that ranged between a 3.0 and 3.5; and Jerome, Nia, Raheem, and Wendell were at or below a 3.0 G.P.A. in these courses. The four remaining students – Amaya, Brianna, Corey, and Jabreality – spent most of their time taking regular education and remedial courses. While Corey and Amaya began their high school careers enrolled in college preparatory courses, Corey ended up taking courses at the continuation school, which did not focus on preparing students for college, and Amaya, by her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, was unable to fully engage in her GSHS courses because of personal issues. Amaya decided to obtain her high school diploma in adult school. After Brianna's 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, she felt that her teachers were not creating a learning environment that embraced her academic needs. As a result, she had to repeat many courses that she did not pass due to poor attendance and subsequent failing grades. Because of Jabreality's personal experiences,

which kept him out of middle school, he spent most of his time at GSHS playing catch up in various subjects.

Interestingly, nine of the twenty students had participated in GEAR UP since middle school. The other 11 students entered the program at different points during their GSHS career. While all of them were involved in GEAR UP at the beginning of this study their levels of involvement and commitment to the program varied over the course of the study. For instance, some students were actively involved in the program throughout their GSHS career; other students utilized this program only for a short time period (e.g. grades 9 and 10).

I selected African American students because they are systemically marginalized in the K-16 education system and misrepresented in the dominant discourse. In addition, this population continues to be used as a scapegoat to describe the challenges to ameliorating school inequalities, closing the achievement gap, and improving access to higher education. These students are seldom given opportunities to contribute to conversations about their lived realities and about ways to reform policies and practices designed to improve their “problems.” Although the students in this study come from the same community, each of their stories provides unique approaches to understanding African American students’ experiences during the high school-to-college transition process. Even with their diverse academic backgrounds, they shared common goals—to successfully graduate from high school and participate in higher education. Whether these students successfully transitioned to college or encountered roadblocks that prevented them from achieving their goals, this study served as an outlet for the students’

voices and experiences to be heard. I selected these African American students to provide a space for them to challenge the discourse that fails to recognize the complexities and strengths of their experiences during this critical transition process.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Qualitative research seeks to understand questions of process and meaning making (Merriam, 2001, 2002). Understanding how insiders interpret their experiences remains a main goal of qualitative inquiry. My interest in exploring African American students' transitions from high school to college appropriately requires that I call upon qualitative methods and methodologies. Therefore, I collected data over the course of three years through various methods: interviews, informal conversations, multi-site observations, and document analysis.

#### *Interviews*

I conducted three in-depth interviews with each of the twenty African American students from 2004 (YEAR 1, grade 10) to 2006 (YEAR 3, grade 12). I used semi-structured protocols with open-ended questions in order to ensure organization, consistency and flexibility in the narration of their responses (Merriam, 2002). The interview questions, especially during their senior year, were aligned with my integrative framework of critical race theory (CRT), ecocultural theory (ET), and student agency. A *critical race ecocultural agency theory in education (C.R.E.A.T.E.)* model was used to understand these students' high school-to-college transition process, which has not been examined in the current literature in higher education.

During YEAR 1, I examined the students' self-conceptualizations as well as their perceptions of the influences of school agents (i.e. teachers and administrators), practices, and policies on their academic achievement (See Appendix A, p.326). The findings from this study prompted me in YEAR 2 to further explore the cultural processes and structural forces in urban schools that supported or hindered their educational experiences and outcomes (See Appendix B, p. 330). The findings from these first two years of my study which shaped the trajectory of the final year were the students' expressions of how multiple contexts such as families, schools, peers, and community impacted their academic performance and outcomes. This particular finding prompted me to further investigate the interconnectedness between African American students' agency, various social constructs such as race, class and gender, and ecocultural factors such as ecology, cultural values and beliefs involved in their transition from high school to college. Therefore, I developed the C.R.E.A.T.E. model for understanding this critical transition process.

Before the students' senior year interview (YEAR 3) they were asked to participate in a pre-interview activity (See Appendix C, p.334). The goal of this activity was for the students to share the various experiences that helped shape their understanding of themselves, their education and their community (Note: *however they chose to define community*). More specifically, each student was asked to respond to the following prompt in a creative way (e.g. poetry, collage, drawing, story, painting, reflective essay, etc): *How did you become the person that you are today? Create a visual representation of what you might consider to be the people/places/events/turning*

*points/successes/challenges that have positively and/or negatively influenced your life, your identity/identities (e.g. race, gender, student, sibling, etc) and your future plans.* The students' creative pieces were used to respond to the interview questions asked by the researcher. Formal interview questions centered on: 1) past and present experiences that influenced their higher education objectives, 2) daily routines, interactions, and patterns of communication that may have facilitated and hindered their access to college and 3) perceptions and alternatives to the discourse, policies, and practices impacting African American students' higher education participation (See Appendix C, p.334).

In relationship to CRT, I explored these individuals' micro (i.e. individual) and macro (i.e. societal) level experiences as raced, classed and gendered beings, and how these experiences may have shaped their educational achievement and outcomes, especially as they attempted to transition from high school to college. Also, students were asked about their perceptions and alternatives to the dominant discourse on African American education, their educability and their potential to pursue postsecondary education. Questions related to the ecocultural theory centered on the students' past and present experiences in multiple contexts (i.e. school, families, peers, and communities) to understand their lived realities and networks of relationships that have influenced their current postsecondary objectives (e.g. college attendance vs. non college attendance, 2 year college vs. 4 year college/ university, etc.). Through the students' accounts of their lived realities, I explored how individual and collective agency was asserted as they attempted to gain access to, prepare for and participate in higher education.

All interviews took place at locations such as the GEAR UP office, homes of the students' families, and local restaurants that were most convenient for each participant, and lasted approximately 1 to 2 ½ hours. After each interview, follow up phone calls were made as needed to clarify their responses. Interviews were not just a means of consciously collecting facts and information about who African American students are and what they experience, but also a methodological tool that provided opportunities for the students to narrate the individual and collective agency they were asserting during this critical transition process. Overall, interviews provided the unit of analysis that guided my interpretation of data and allowed me to present the voices of African American students---those continuously unheard in educational discourse, practices and policies.

#### *Informal Conversations*

My informal conversations with these African American students at GSHS, inside the GEAR UP office, and via phone, text message, email and AOL instant messenger (AIM) also served as data sources for this dissertation study. For example, the summer before college is a critical period that is currently overlooked in higher education research. Even when students gain admissions and commit to a college or university of their choice, they are still making decisions about their participation in postsecondary education until the very last minute. Therefore, informal conversations were necessary to follow up with these students' final decisions. These discussions provided another perspective on which to interpret and document the experiences, challenges, and transformations that influenced these students' educational trajectories. For example,

since the inception of this study, I contacted these students via phone two to three times a month to check in on them. Our conversations centered on issues impacting their lives (e.g. disconnections between family responsibilities and academic demands), inquires about their educational endeavors (e.g. college preparation), and the daily routines, values, and relationships that informed their lived realities (e.g. collectively working to make honor roll with friends).

After each conversation, I wrote reflective summaries of my conversations with each of the students and entered this information into a telephone log database. In relationship to my C.R.E.A.T.E. framework, having informal conversations with each student allowed me to capture the multiple ecological, cultural and individual influences as well as the agency asserted in their pathways towards their postsecondary pursuits (i.e. college and non-college-going outcomes). Also, this method provided alternative ways to examine the daily experiences that shaped the students' decisions, actions, routines and outcomes during this critical moment in the educational pipeline.

#### *Multiple Site Participant Observations*

Since the 2004-2005 academic year some of the participants in this study had transferred to other schools. In addition, those students who remained at GSHS had diverse experiences, which limited opportunities for them to frequently be at a central location such as the GEAR UP office at the same time. Therefore, I was unable to conduct traditional ethnographic observations at one particular site. Yet, as an onsite GEAR UP staff member, I conducted multi-site participant observations based on the encounters I had with the students at various locations such as GSHS, GEAR UP, and off

campus events such as family functions and award ceremonies to name a few. Merriam (2001) highlights how observations: 1) allow outsiders to notice things that may become routine for participants in order to understand the context, 2) can provide knowledge of a context and be used as a reference point for interviews and 3) allow for an activity, event, or situation to be viewed firsthand, especially when a participant is not willing to discuss a particular topic.

In relationship to the C.R.E.A.T.E. framework, these observations enabled me to become familiar with some of the routines, scripts and relationships that influenced the agency that the students asserted and that informed their pathways to college. Also, these observations allowed me to capture some of their daily experiences on and off campus, as well as their responses and actions towards issues of race, racism, power and other forms of subordination. I documented, described and analyzed the everyday nature of these students' interactions and activities that occurred as they prepared for their postsecondary goals. Following my participatory experiences, I wrote up my observations and interactions in fieldnotes from notes and jotting down at various sites.

### *Document Analysis*

I documented and archived materials produced by the students, GEAR UP, GSHS and the GSUSD. Through the GSHS and school district databases, I collected these students' academic (e.g. transcripts with academic grades and test scores) and personal information (e.g. home address, phone, parent/guardian name(s), schools attended). Their academic information allowed me to keep track of their performance over time (i.e. 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade) and gain a general understanding of the evolution of their

academic careers as they prepared for their postsecondary plans. In addition, these databases provided me with their most recent personal information, allowing me to keep in contact with the students. Through the GEAR UP office, the staff constantly kept me informed about any information they received or had on the participants in my study. Therefore, I was able to obtain documents such as program application information, progress report cards, scholarship award letters, and senior portfolios to name a few. The informal conversations I had with the students provided me with a glimpse of the daily activities and events that took place in their lives. When students disclosed significant moments (i.e. receiving their first college acceptance letter), they often provided me with a copy of their information. Overall, these types of materials represented unassailable and situated artifacts of meaning making that remained unaffected by me as a researcher (Merriam et al., 2002).

### *Analytical Memos*

I utilized analyst strategies to assist with the meaning making of my experience in the field as well as how my personal history as an African American woman might influence my research study. The analytic memo is a method to systematically capture such reflections (Emerson, 1995; Strauss, 1987). Analytic memos are texts, produced by myself as the researcher, which focus on salient topics to my experience collecting and analyzing of data. More than journal entries, analytic memos are focused pieces that serve to document specific feelings, attitudes, perceptions, and emergent ideas that I confronted throughout the research process. I incorporated analytical memos as part of my research design during participant observations, data collection and analysis.

### *Counter-narratives*

Master narratives (Lyotard, 1984) have been utilized for centuries to create contrasting categories that support the maintenance of dominant groups (Giroux, 1993). These scripts specify and control how some social processes are carried out in society. Members of marginalized groups, such as African Americans, have had little or no input into the shaping of these master narratives. Therefore, research on African Americans by members of this marginalized group often reveals experiences that counter master narratives and is thus often compared against the White norm (Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997). Stanley (2007) describes counter-narratives as perspectives that run counter to the presumed order and control. These narratives, which do not agree with and are critical of the master narrative, often arise out of individual or group experiences that do not fit the master narratives. Stanley (2007) also argued that counter-narratives: 1) act to deconstruct the master narratives and offer alternatives to the dominant discourse in educational research, 2) provide multiple and conflicting models of understanding the experiences of marginalized groups and 3) challenge the dominant culture that is held to be normative and authoritative.

This study is grounded in counter-narratives. Counter-narratives provide spaces for me as the researcher to share the experiences of African American students' transitions from high school to college in ways that have not necessarily been told thus far. Critical race theory in education advances the idea that counter-narratives, especially those told by People of Color, are central to understanding the nature of their lived realities (Lopez, 2003) and can contribute to illuminating the experiential knowledge base of those often

pushed to the margins in education. From critical race theory perspectives, knowledge can and should be generated through narratives and counter-narratives emerging from and written by People of Color. Critical race theory allows for race, racism and other forms of subordination to be placed at the center of the narrative and counter-narrative. Emphasis and value are placed on knowledge construction and the multiple voices of People of Color. Communities of Color are empowered to tell a story often much different from the ones that have been portrayed in the past (Chapman, 2007).

Milner (2008) argues that a counter-narrative provides space for researchers to disrupt or to interrupt pervasive discourses that may portray Communities and People of Color in deficit ways. Therefore, counter-narratives can be used as an analytic tool to counter dominant perspectives in the literature such as discourses that focus on the negative aspects of African American students' lived realities, educability and outcomes. I used tenets of counter-narratives in that I studied and observed phenomena and experiences of African American students—essentially their stories—in order to convey them in this study. I employed tenets of the narratives in that I was deliberate in the study to tell different types of stories, different than the archetypal negative portrayals of African American students' high school-to-college transition process. I attempted to illuminate narratives that paint the complexities and heterogeneity of African American students' lived realities instead of their deficiencies.

Telling narratives that focus on the racialized, classed and gendered experiences of African American students challenge deficit discourse that silences and distorts their lives. For the purpose of this study, I share the counter-narratives of twenty African

American students' experiences with and responses to the factors that impact their high school-to-college transition process. While these African American students are a part of the same communities –Golden State, GSHS and GEAR UP – counter-narratives can bring forth the nuances of their lived realities and shed light on their diverse pathways towards achieving individual and collective goals—in this case, gaining access to higher education. Counter-narratives not only provide spaces to challenge the deficit ideologies and practices that shape African American students' lives, but also can illuminate the complexities of these individuals' stories as they relate to this critical transition process.

Through this study, counter-narratives allowed for the integration of African American students' experiential knowledge into current educational discourse to help promote equitable reform and practices that take into account these students' unique cultural, historical and social positions in K-16 education and society. This study could improve educational practice by gaining widespread acknowledgment of the complex realities of African American students. Using the students' counter-narratives can provide education officials, researchers and policymakers with alternative ways to understand the nuances in the successes and challenges of college access for underrepresented populations.

### **Data Analysis and Validity Concerns**

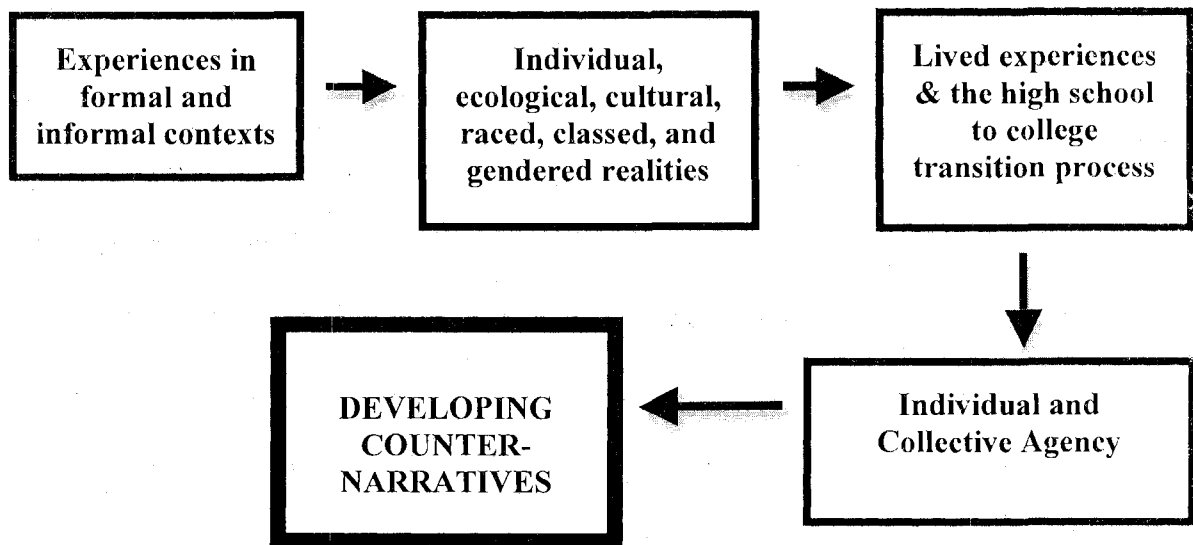
Data collection and analysis were iterative and ongoing throughout the time of this study. The constant evaluation of data allowed for adjustments to be made as different themes and patterns emerged (Maxwell, 1996). As stated by Merriam (2001), "Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research" (p. 178).

Qualitative data analysis of my respondents' meaning making, actions and decisions in transitioning from high school to college provided critical interpretations of the data. Before transcribing the interviews, I listened to students' responses and wrote memos about the general and significant themes, ideas and emotions that emerged. This process allowed me to listen for continual evaluation of any questions that needed further clarification and the inclusion of additional questions that may have not be captured initially. In addition, I asked the students at the end of each interview whether they had any questions, comment or concerns. I then transcribed all the interviews, observation notes and any additional data verbatim.

I coded the data for emerging themes and prevalent ideas both during and after the data collection process. In addition, I utilized a grounded theoretical approach to generate theory from the data I collected from the students. For instance, their lived experiences during the first two years of this study influenced the development of the C.R.E.A.T.E. model in order to gain a more in depth understanding of their high school-to-college transition process. Through this method, I allowed each student to present their own personal perspectives-- revealing how they made sense of the world given past and present experiences in multiple contexts. It was through their individual accounts over time that I was able to move from specific to more general findings. In addition, I coded for themes related to their experiences in multiple contexts, issues related to higher education access and equity, educational policies and practices impacting their lives and the agency asserted during this critical transition process.

Storytelling is integral to understanding lives in which people build narratives as a process of constructing and reconstructing identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). I used the C.R.E.A.T.E. framework as a starting point for my analysis. Codes from this model served as a structure from which to conduct a multi-level analysis, primarily of interviews, multi-site observations, informal conversations and document analyses, which was used to present data in the findings chapters (See Figure 4.1).

**Figure 4.1. A C.R.E.A.T.E. Analysis**



I first analyzed the descriptive characteristics and accounts of each student's experiences in their formal and informal contexts over three years. I then examined how they made sense of their individual, cultural and ecological realities as racialized, classed and gendered beings. The C.R.E.A.T.E. model allowed for the consideration of unique details

about who these students were and how their experiences shaped their educational trajectories.

Second, I analyzed student's conversations about their lived realities as they related to the high school-to-college transition process. I considered their framing of the factors that facilitated and hindered their higher education pathways. In particular, I looked at strategies and skills, key relationships, value and beliefs, patterns of communication and developments that occurred throughout this study. Third, given the experiences discussed, I analyzed how the students asserted agency on individual and collective levels to achieve their postsecondary goals. Whether the students entered college immediately after high school or took alternative routes, a multi-level analysis provided more in depth interpretations of how they navigated their experiences, successes and challenges over time during this critical transition process.

As a GEAR UP staff member for several years, I had the opportunity to meet a few of the participants of my study at GSMMS in 2003. While I had the benefit of entree into the lives of the students, at the same time my relationship with the program and these students posed a validity threat. There was a possibility that the participants altered their behaviors and responses based on my positionality. This required that I write reflective memos about my experiences, thoughts, and feelings on the ways that participants responded to me. I continuously demonstrated to participants that my main concern was remaining as true as possible to their lives and perspectives as I attempted to understand them.

For accuracy and consistency, the triangulation of data was conducted using a variety of methods to collect information from a range of individuals and settings. This data collection method allows the researcher “to gain a better assessment of the validity and generality of the explanations” developed through the study’s findings (Maxwell, 1996, p. 76). In other words, triangulation techniques were employed to prevent my personal experiences from significantly affecting the data collection and analysis process. This technique allowed me to compare interviews with other forms of data including fieldnotes and analytical and document analysis memos. In addition, I utilized data collected on these students during their sophomore and junior years in high school to compare and make connections between past and present experiences as they related to their high school-to-college transition processes.

Member checks enhanced this study and involved participants in the research. As the interviewer, it was important to constantly reiterate my understanding of what the respondent had shared, and check to verify if it was what they intended. These member checks provided the opportunity for subjects to submit alternative explanations and critique the interpretation for negative evidence. This feedback was incorporated into the final analysis. I provided rich descriptions of the students that attempted to create a clear picture of the results, so they could determine the applicability to their situation (Merriam, 2001). Member checks decreased the likelihood of misinterpreting the information or misrepresenting the participants, and enabled me to deal with major validity threats to my conclusions.

My relationship with the students was consistent with the emancipatory agenda of critical race research. To this end, I offered my expertise in college preparation, admissions and financial aid to my participants. In concert with my formal and informal conversations, I assisted students by helping them make sense of their pathways to higher education. More specifically, I supported and personally aided their efforts to gather information about colleges and universities, to understand admissions requirements and financial aid opportunities, as well as to gain general advice about the successes and challenges to consider as they confront higher education. The analytic memos served as a space to document the assistance I provided my participants. These activities informed my understanding of the students' sense-making processes and provided additional topics/sub-topics for me to introduce into interview encounters.

### **Conclusion**

Through my research, I utilized the *critical race ecocultural agency theory in education* model to centralize the factors that facilitated and hindered these African American students' academic performance and postsecondary pursuits. Although findings regarding the students' transitions from high school to college will not be representative of all youth, they can be used to challenge practitioners and researchers to think differently about student agency, college access, preparation and participation, and the interrelated links between students' multiple contexts and their pathways to higher education. Also, it is important for policymakers and practitioners to correlate policies and practices with the lived realities of students to better facilitate equitable and effective educational reform. Therefore, this study can inform current reform initiatives aimed at

increasing access to higher education for historically underrepresented groups such as African Americans.

## **Introduction to Chapters 5-7: The Formal Context**

We were in the GEAR UP office one day and the new Assistant Principal came in there and he was like, “Umm, all these kids going to all these colleges?” And Corina [GEAR UP Staff] says yes. He was like, “Oh, maybe they'll get into WMUs [Western Metropolitan Universities] one day.” And I looked at him... and I'm saying first of all you're an Assistant Principal at Golden State High School. You mean to tell me that a WMU degree got you here... There's people who go to community colleges that have better jobs than you... I wanted to say something so bad and Corina knew I was about to ...I was like wait a minute your an Assistant Principal where? Where did you graduate from? You're not a Beaumont Hills High School Assistant Principal...I don't believe that schools make the people. I believe that people make the schools. [If] you make the best out [of] State University, La Villa more than a person ...at [WMU], Bridgeport, you are a better student. You know your school should not determine how great you are. You should determine how great you are.

**Raheem, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

Although GEAR UP was a school-university partnership affiliated with a highly selective university, one of the program's goals was to help low income students successfully transition to 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities after graduation. During the 2006-2007 academic year, I had the opportunity to assist with the college preparation program component of GEAR UP. The GEAR UP staff provided various services for GSHS seniors applying to college. Besides providing workshops, programs, and field trips to assist them during this critical transition process, we kept individual files on their college application information and displayed their college decisions on a large dry erase board in front of the office. While many students came to the office daily to turn in their acceptance letters, there were still a handful of students who received several rejection letters and were anxiously waiting to hear back from other schools. Raheem was a part of the latter group, but was still optimistic. Although he was actively

involved in his school and community, he received low grades and test scores throughout his tenure at GSHS. He took college preparatory courses, but did not meet the academic requirements to be considered for the regular application review process. While Raheem was scared that he was not going to gain admission to a college, he eventually secured an interview at State University, La Villa (SULV) through the Academic Opportunity Program (AOP). The following week, Raheem's college decision was included on the GEAR UP board with the rest of his peers.

In the excerpt above, Raheem was informing me about an incident that occurred during his senior year when one of the GSHS Assistant Principals, Mr. Moore, stopped by the GEAR UP office. Mr. Moore immediately looked at the board with all of the colleges and universities that the GSHS seniors planned to attend. Mr. Moore expressed his concerns with the lack of seniors attending WMU campuses and how these students needed to work on getting in "one day." These comments were made in front of Raheem and another student, Octavia, who were both planning on attending SU campuses.

Although Raheem stated that he wanted to respond to the administrator's comments, he said Corina and Octavia prevented him from speaking out so that he would not get into trouble. Raheem shared his disappointment with Mr. Moore's failure to recognize the accomplishments of all GSHS seniors no matter what postsecondary decision they made.

The formal contexts of this study are spaces such as schools, social service agencies, and educational programs that are recognized for improving student achievement and outcomes. This account represents one of many incidents within the formal contexts that continue to impact the high school-to-college transition process for

African American students. This particular incident demonstrates the differences between students and school officials' notions of academic achievement. Too often, the teachers and administrators' conceptions of academic success dichotomize students. In this particular case, the Assistant Principal explicitly described the difference between those students who, by his estimation, worked harder to transition to prestigious universities, and those students who were unsuccessful at accomplishing this goal, thus ending up at less selective 2-year and 4-year colleges. This school official failed to consider the context in which these students attending "less selective" institutions made their decisions. Although the students in this study spent their first two years at GSHS, several of them spent their last two years at different schools (e.g. continuation school, adult school, and schools in different districts). All of these students shared diverse, yet some similar accounts of their high school experiences during this critical transition process. More specifically, they shed light on the various ways their school contexts impacted their pathways to college. *A critical race ecocultural agency theory in education* (C.R.E.A.T.E.) framework provided an outlet for examining the complexities that emerged for these African American students in these formal spaces during their transitions from high school to college.

Schools play a critical role in facilitating and hindering opportunities for African American students to gain access to and participate in higher education. Therefore, the C.R.E.A.T.E. model is important to utilize to explore these students' lived realities as racialized, classed and gendered beings in their formal contexts during the high school-to-college transition process. In chapters 5 through 7, I examine the following question:

*How does using a C.R.E.A.T.E. model help us understand the high school-to-college transition process for African American students?* I centralize these students' experiences to examine how they asserted agency within these formal spaces as they attempted to navigate their pathways towards higher education. The purpose of these chapters is not to focus solely on the challenges they encountered in high school; rather, using a C.R.E.A.T.E. lens, the goal is to highlight these students' experiences as counter-narratives to the dominant discourse on college access and equity in order to demonstrate how these students respond to the various factors and challenges they face during this critical transition process.

Too often the educational experiences of high achieving, "college bound" students are used to make sense of, and examine ways to improve, issues such as college access and equity. Whether students are on successful pathways to college or encountering roadblocks that may hinder their higher education participation, one story should not be prioritized over another to generally understand the high school-to-college transition process. It is important to examine these students' realities within the formal context of school to highlight factors that impact their critical transition process. The formal context allows us to document and examine explicit and implicit practices, policies, people, and circumstances that exist in schools, all of which can play an enormous role in aiding or obstructing students' paths to postsecondary education. The voices and experiences of African American students with varying academic backgrounds and postsecondary goals are placed at the forefront of this study to explore how their agency played out on individual and collective levels as they attempted to

achieve their postsecondary goals. In chapters 5 through 7, I use the C.R.E.A.T.E. model to demonstrate how these African American students: 1) encountered the politics of their schools (Chapter 5), 2) negotiated pathways in their formal contexts (Chapter 6), and 3) created counterspaces in their learning communities (Chapter 7).

## **5-Encountering the Politics of Our Schools**

Throughout this study, the students discussed various experiences that positively and negatively influenced their high school-to-college transition process. While these students recognized the inequalities that impacted their lived realities, they also described how schools influenced the successes and challenges they encountered during their pathways to higher education. They described how aspects of their schooling experiences allowed them to utilize the resources and opportunities available to achieve their postsecondary goals. While some of these students occasionally blamed themselves for the challenges they faced, many also described the ways in which their schools prevented them from successfully transitioning to college. More importantly, they shared how their experiences were influenced by the politics – individuals, policies and practices – of their schools. Using the C.R.E.A.T.E. model I will create counter-narratives of four students—Brianna, Corey, Ashley and Raheem – to demonstrate the various ways they encountered the politics of their formal contexts.

### **Brianna**

“That’s what I want to do. I want her [my mother] to be proud of me... and see me walk the stage. The only thing that’s stopping me is the exit exam... I passed the English. I passed that two years ago. But the math is harder.”

**Brianna, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

### *College Aspirations Persist while Academic Performance Shifts*

During our first interview together, Brianna informed me that her mother suffered from collapsed lungs and fell into a coma for a couple of days while Brianna was in middle school. This incident impacted Brianna’s academic performance and she almost

did not graduate from middle school. Although her mother was permanently disabled and could no longer work, Brianna was determined to improve her academic performance when she transitioned to GSHS in order to achieve her postsecondary goals. She informed me of her desire to attend Folsom University or New Haven University (NHU) so that she could pursue a career as a social worker for children and adolescents. Throughout this study, Brianna described how certain individuals and policies at GSHS impacted her high school-to-college transition process.

In Brianna's sophomore year, I asked her to define and discuss a time when she experienced academic success and failure at GSHS. She first defined academic success as getting good grades such as As and Bs and having good conduct in class. She explained: "In the ninth grade I did [achieve academic success]... because I was getting really good grades.... Like As, Bs and Cs." Brianna said that her freshman year was the last time she felt academically successful at GSHS. She defined academic failure as being more social and less engaged in school, as the way she was during her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year, according to her. More specifically, Brianna described the different individuals, policies and practices at GSHS that impacted her academic trajectory there. Although her desire to pursue higher education remained the same throughout this study, her academic performance took a different route from her sophomore to senior year.

Brianna stated that her sophomore year marked a critical turning point when her level of engagement and performance at GSHS began to decline. Brianna said that she began to notice these changes and how it impacted her pathways to college. When I inquired about how she felt she was doing academically, she replied:

I can do better. I have like a 1.7 GPA... It dropped... I should have started paying attention... and turned in the work... I was talking and I...sleep in class. I [was] kicked out.

The dominant discourse on school failure would blame Brianna for her “underperformance” and “academic failure.” She would be described as a student who lacks the motivation and effort to achieve her post secondary goals. Although Brianna planned to pursue higher education, she would not be considered for programs and opportunities targeting “college bound” students because of her grades. In addition, while Brianna’s mother was involved in her education, she too would be blamed for not helping Brianna successfully navigate her high school-to-college transition process. Throughout this study, Brianna described events at GSHS that facilitated and hindered her ability to reach her maximum potential during this critical transition process.

#### *Less Positive and More Negative Learning Communities*

At GSHS, Brianna was enrolled in regular education courses designed to help her successfully graduate from high school. Within these learning spaces, Brianna described two different settings that impacted her actions and decisions towards college. In the courses where Brianna had positive experiences with her teachers, she explained that despite the decrease in her academic performance, they still motivated her to do well in class. For example, she told me about her 10<sup>th</sup> grade World History teacher, Mr. Gaston who always made sure she was doing her work. She explained:

Mr. Gaston, he would tell me that I was slacking and I need to do my work... and sometimes he asked me what I wanted to be and I’ll tell him. And he would tell me that’s a good goal and to just keep trying and don’t let anyone stop me... If he thought I wasn’t paying attention, he would ask

me a question and see if I was answering it. And if I didn't answer it, then he would move my seat away from my friends so I could really focus.

Mr. Gaston was one of the few teachers at GSHS that Brianna described as being passionate about educating and helping students with diverse academic backgrounds achieve their goals. She also described her government teacher, Dr. Simpson, as someone who created a college-going culture for all his students. She stated:

Dr. Simpson would tell me all the time what's a good college to go to and he's one of my favorite teachers... because I had a lot of fun in his class... my grade never went lower than a B... He would tell the class what you have to do for your goals and he lets us say whatever we wanted. We didn't have to hold back when we didn't want to.

Not only did Dr. Simpson connect the course content to his students' lived realities, but also, Brianna said, he created opportunities for students to interact with one another. Brianna spoke about her experience conversing with Candice, a high achieving student in a sociology class that Dr. Simpson also taught. Although they were both GEAR UP participants and occasionally saw each other on campus, Brianna said she never spoke to Candice until this course. Since Candice got into several highly selective colleges and universities, Brianna decided to ask Candice questions about the college application process and financial aid. Brianna stated: "I would hear her name being called when... the kids got accepted to college and I would tell her congratulations.... That made me want to get my name on there too, but I didn't fill out my FASFA and I stopped caring about it." These positive classroom experiences demonstrated the ways in which school agents were concerned about and positively involved in Brianna's educational trajectory. Specifically, these teachers created learning communities that were academically, socially and personally relevant to her needs. Even during difficult times for Brianna,

they encouraged her to participate in class and stay focused on her postsecondary goals. Brianna's accounts support research that discusses the importance of creating a culturally relevant, caring and college-going environment for students with diverse needs, especially African American students (Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billing, 1997). Although Brianna shared how a few teachers motivated her to do well in school, she described more negative experiences at GSHS that hindered her pathways to college.

Throughout this study, Brianna discussed various negative interactions she had with her teachers and occasionally her peers. During her senior year interview, I asked her to describe the classes in which she received her lowest grades. She replied:

They were boring and...the teachers would just mainly kick people out or wouldn't teach or just have work on the board and then when you didn't get it... some teachers will make you feel bad because you didn't get it.

In the previous excerpt Brianna described the type of learning she received in regular education courses. She explained how these classes were wastes of time because the teachers did not seem to genuinely care about helping students understand the course content. She said: "The teachers, they just want to give you a grade. They don't care if you understand it or not. They just want to give you a grade and get paid." Brianna explained how these teachers either taught lessons that were unclear or they did not teach at all. For example, mathematics was not Brianna's strongest subject in high school. Although she successfully completed pre-algebra in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, she had to repeat Algebra I several times. During Brianna's sophomore year when she attempted to get help from her math teacher Mr. Sullivan, she was immediately put down and asked to attend GEAR UP tutoring. She stated:

In my third period, I needed help and the teacher [Mr. Sullivan] was like “why don’t you understand it and you have had the class twice!” And I was like but I did not understand it the first two times. I don’t understand it now. He was like well “you need to get to a tutor or something.” But instead he should just help me...He just told me to go to GEAR UP, and if I didn’t go to GEAR UP, he would just give me an F.

Because Mr. Sullivan did not want to help her, Brianna said she did not feel the need to participate in class. Although Brianna attended GEAR UP tutoring, she was kicked out of class daily for talking to her peers. Since there was no way for her to pass this math class, she ended up giving up. By the end of Brianna’s sophomore year, she made plans to attend a community college and then transfer to a 4-year university. Brianna explained that that even if she tried to improve her grades, she felt that there was only a slim chance that she would be able to successfully gain admission to a 4-year university.

As Brianna entered the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, she continued to face challenges in another Algebra I class. During her junior year interview, she described an incident that occurred between her and her class, most of whom were ninth graders. She explained:

I was telling them how the school was... and then the boy...Ricky...was like oh, what grade are you in? I said eleventh...He was like why are you a junior in a ninth grade class. I was like cause I didn’t pass last year... He was like oh you’re dumb...I cursed him out and I got kicked out... I was upset, and...embarrassed ‘cause I was in the class.

Brianna tried to inform the teacher about the incident, but said that he was “too old to care” about what was going on in class because the students were in control. Brianna stated that she felt so uncomfortable after this incident that she stopped coming to class. She stated: “I didn’t like the students and the math was confusing too. So I didn’t want to go some days. I would start going all week, but at the end of the year it was too

late.” Also, Brianna said her math teacher informed her that if she did not have so many absences in this course, she could have passed the class with a B-. Brianna ended up failing the classes because of the GSHS policy that allows teachers to automatically fail students who have 15 or more days of unexcused absences.

### *Struggling to Transition from High School to College*

Because of the difficulty Brianna faced in her classes, she said it was difficult for her to pass the math portion of the CAHSEE exam. While she successfully passed the English portion of the exam in her sophomore year, she had trouble passing the math component even with one-to-one CAHSEE tutoring through GEAR UP. Although Brianna came to school every day and her mother was a frequent parent volunteer, she still lost interest in attending some of her other classes. For example, Brianna was required to attend the Southern California Occupational Center (SCOC) to make up 30 credits. She informed me that she decided not to go to this after school class because it was boring.

Brianna’s negative classroom experiences shed light on a few of the many challenges persisting in urban schools. GSHS continues to suffer from the lack of qualified teachers in core subjects such as mathematics and science, teachers using outdated, standardized and deficit teaching practices to educate a diverse student body and limited resources to help students successfully learn subjects such as mathematics. While standardized testing continues to influence the direction of the teaching and learning process at GSHS, this frequently limits opportunities for innovative teaching methods to be used to meet the diverse needs of students. Brianna’s teachers not only

failed to successfully teach mathematics, but also, they did not create supportive learning spaces for students with varied academic backgrounds. In addition, Brianna's inability to pass Algebra I several times demonstrates the limited resources and opportunities available to help students in urban schools master the core subjects necessary to successfully transition through the K-16 educational pipeline.

Brianna entered her senior year with a new attitude because she wanted to graduate from high school and go to college. She explained how she tried to apply herself in her classes because she wanted to obtain her high school diploma. Brianna stated, "It's the last year of school and I wanted to walk the stage." When I asked Brianna why she did not apply herself the previous years, she explained that she did not think it mattered because she could make up her classes in summer school. Although her counselor made sure that Brianna enrolled in summer school each year, Brianna stated that he did not inform her about the two years of mathematics she did not complete. Although Brianna attempted to improve her academic performance in her final year, she learned that she was behind on academic credits, and still had not passed her CAHSEE exam. Therefore, she was not able to graduate with her classmates in June. She said:

My senior year started out good. I thought I was going to do all my work and graduate... but the counselor found out that I still didn't have enough credits. I didn't have enough math credits. So even if I tried, I couldn't graduate. So it started off pretty crappy and ended crappy too.

Once Brianna was informed about her academic status, she said her mother and counselor thought it would be best for her to attend adult school to see if she could still graduate with her classmates. In order for her to graduate on time, Brianna found out that in addition to passing her CAHSEE exam, attending day, night and Saturday school, she

would still be behind on academic credits. Therefore, she decided to wait until the summer or December (depending on when she passed the CAHSEE) to graduate.

Although Brianna said that this news hindered her senior year goals, she did not let it stop her from working towards her high school diploma so that she could enroll in a community college.

During her senior year interview, Brianna described how she went to school everyday, was more focused, participated in class, asked for help when she needed it and completed her assignments on time. In addition, she went to the GEAR UP office on several occasions to inquire about her college options. For instance, Brianna and her mother entered the GEAR UP office one-day afterschool while I was helping students with their college application process. As I greeted them, Brianna expressed her concerns with not being able to attend Folsom University. I informed her about community college and the opportunity she had to start with a clean academic record. Also, I walked Brianna and her mother over to speak to a fellow GEAR UP staff member who had successfully transferred from a community college to WMULA. While Brianna planned to attend Lexington City College, she was unable to graduate with her peers in June.

Since Brianna was unable to graduate from adult school in June, she continued to take classes, try to pass the CASHEE, and work toward obtaining her GED. Brianna attempted to get a job at a day care center since she enjoyed working with children. Yet, she said this job did not work out because it required a high school diploma. During her senior year interview, Brianna informed me that she could not wait to obtain her high school diploma so that she could attend college. She was ready to enroll at Lexington

City College and transfer to Folsom University to major in social work. Although this community college was far away from home, Brianna felt that being away from her friends would allow her to stay focused on achieving her goals.

Through a C.R.E.A.T.E. model, Brianna's counter-narrative of her experiences in the formal context demonstrates how schools play a critical role in shaping students' pathways during the high school-to-college transition process. Although Brianna provided a few examples of positive student-teacher interactions, her negative experiences dominated her time in high school. Specifically, she shared how unsupportive learning spaces could prevent students from fully participating in class, successfully graduating from high school and transitioning to college. Despite these challenges, Brianna also demonstrated instances where she was able to assert individual agency in order to obtain the help she needed to do well in school, try to pass the CAHSEE exam, and remain committed to achieving her postsecondary goals.

### **Corey**

"Disappointment in myself. I got to high school and started getting bad grades. Everyone was telling me that they were disappointed in me. But I'm probably the most disappointed in myself than everyone put together."

**Corey, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

### *A Disappointing Transition Period*

Corey is from a low-income, single parent household and has been a participant of GEAR UP since the sixth grade. Upon reflecting on his high school experience during his senior year interview, Corey said he had "raw intelligence" that came naturally, but what held him back was his failure to stay focused on achieving his goals. When I first

interviewed Corey, he vividly spoke about his experiences during his sophomore year. He specifically described how he spent more time being a “class clown” than doing his schoolwork. Corey expressed that before high school, he was able to maintain a balance between his academic and social lives. He said:

I never had any problem with it [being a class clown] before. I just don’t understand what happened when I got to high school. It happened like 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Ninth grade I was actually doing good and then from the middle of 10<sup>th</sup> grade...I fell off.

In the excerpt above, Corey stated that he maintained good grades until his sophomore year at GSHS. Even on the first report card of his 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, he had a 3.5 GPA. After this point, Corey said he prioritized his social life over academics. Although he came to school everyday and set goals to successfully complete his sophomore year, he spent more time socializing in class, and stopped participating in extracurricular activities such as football, AVID and the GEAR UP boys group. Corey said that his behavior not only impacted his grades, but also his test scores. He missed three points on the math section of the CAHSEE because he was busy entertaining students during the exam. Despite the academic challenges he faced, Corey shared his plans for improving his grades and behavior in his junior year so that he could achieve his postsecondary goals.

Immediately after our first interview together, I learned that Corey failed to inform me about an important change that would occur the following school year as a result of his academic performance in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. When the interview ended, his mother asked to speak to me. Before she could get a word out, she began crying. She explained that Corey was being sent to Hillford Continuation High School (HCHS) his junior year, because he was not doing well in school, and he had missed a lot of academic

credits. When she spoke to his counselor, she learned that Corey might be able to reenroll in GSHS once he successfully completed his academic credits. After talking to Corey's mother for thirty minutes, I asked him why he left out this important information during our interview. Corey explained that he thought I already knew about this situation through GEAR UP.

Corey also described how the individuals in his life noticed his changes as well. He said that everyone told him, "You're a smart kid. You're a good kid. You just got to focus and buckle down." Students and staff in GEAR UP, AVID, and his advanced placement courses were concerned about his academic performance. For example, through my conversations with Raheem, Adrian, Byron and Elijah – participants in this study as well as Corey's friends – I learned that they tried to intervene when they saw Corey's grades and extracurricular involvement decline. After several attempts to help him, they stated that they backed off when they realized he was not listening. Yet, they still called him to make sure he was on the right track to graduate from high school and enter college. Corey also described an incident that occurred when he tried to give his AP Biology teacher, Mr. Sawyer, a folder that he put together at the last minute.

You know Mr. Sawyer that used to work at GSHS... He was good... He didn't really accept anything lower than what he knows you could have done. And he'll tell you. He'll make you do it over. He'll humiliate you. And nobody don't like to be humiliated. Like this journal we had to do and we filled it up. And I got it back and it was like a D+ and it had... highlighted definitions and quotes... he was just like I know you can do better so here's your notebook back. Next time don't come to me with that. I'm not stupid.

Although Corey said he was upset when he received his folder back, he appreciated Mr. Sawyer for pushing him to work to his maximum potential.

### *Adjusting to a Different Academic Reality*

Corey began his junior year at Hillford Continuation High School (HCHS). He immediately disassociated himself from this school because he said his attendance was temporary. He distinguished himself from the HCHS students who he called “degenerates,” which he defined as individuals who were involved in gangs, did not care about their education, and left school daily to smoke marijuana. The term Corey used to describe his HCHS classmates is consistent with the deficit conversations that place students in alternative schools into a separate category of exclusion. Also, Corey discussed the differences between his experiences at HCHS and GSHS. Unlike GSHS where most teachers taught lessons and distributed various individual and group assignments, he said, HCHS teachers gave out packets of worksheets for students to complete in order to receive academic credit. “I just learned from the book and did my work. Like if you did 18 assignments, you would get 5 credits... The 18 assignments consist of page 15, numbers 20 through 60.” In other words, Corey expressed that HCHS student had to push themselves to achieve their goals, because he felt that many of the staff members were not passionate about their jobs and did not care about helping students learn. For example, Corey described an incident that occurred between him and an African American HCHS teacher during his junior year. He stated:

I was doing my work and I stopped to ask a student for a pencil. And the teacher was like no talking. And I said I was just asking for a pencil. He said I don't give a “F”... He said don't talk in my class you ugly black kid...I said excuse me? And I said a couple of cuss words and then I walked out.

Although Corey said not all of the HCHS teachers were bad, there were some teachers that he felt did not respect students. This particular teacher mentioned above impacted Corey's ability to stay focused in class. After walking out of the classroom, Corey said that he did not come back for two weeks. Corey explained, "You can be gone for two months, then come back and still be on the same track as other students, that doesn't make sense." Because Corey missed school, he lost his academic focus and was not able to make up all of the credits he needed to transfer back to GSHS.

Corey described the various encounters he had with the HCHS principal who did not like Corey's behavior. For instance, after hearing about an off campus incident that involved Corey and another student role playing in the streets of Golden State wearing women's clothing, Corey said the principal called them "flaming faggots." Corey said he pushed the principal and his mother was immediately asked to come to campus for an intervention, for which the principal was not present. As demonstrated through these incidents, students at urban continuation schools are often treated in unfair and disrespectful ways. Many times, these students are seen as individuals who do not care about their education and postsecondary goals. These unequal school practices eventually force students to disengage from and leave these formal spaces.

Although Corey said that the HCHS principal told students to go to college, there were no resources on campus to assist students with their postsecondary options. Although Corey felt that college preparation opportunities would be a waste of time at HCHS, he also highlighted the need to promote a college-going culture for this population. Although the HCHS principal worked to get GEAR UP tutors to help

students in classes, there was no request for workshops and events to inform students about their postsecondary options. Since Corey was not involved in college preparation activities during his two years at HCHS, he had limited access to information about transitioning to college.

*A New Attitude: Planning for the Future*

Although Corey missed having access to GSHS opportunities such as GEAR UP, AVID and college preparatory courses, he critically reflected on how his experience at HCHS shaped his high school-to-college transition process. During his junior year interview, Corey expressed that HCHS gave him a new attitude and perspective toward life. He said:

I saw life from another point of view, I saw different people's cases and I've seen people... do the exact same thing I was doing and seen where they ended up and I was like oh my God. An example is this guy, he was a goof off in class ... He didn't graduate and he's here this year. He was in the 12th grade last year and he's here this year and he's doing the same thing. That's how it happens. I'm not going to for it. I'm getting out of Hillcrest this semester."

As Corey continued to struggle with his behavior at HCHS, there were individuals and opportunities he encountered that pushed him towards the right direction. For instance, during his junior year he was selected to participate on a planning committee for the Golden State Martin Luther King Day Parade. He, along with his friend Stanley, got to collaborate with various community members such as the mayor, business executives and members of the clergy to work on program logistics and planning of the event.

By his senior year, Corey realized the mistakes he had made throughout his high school career. He began to see what his family, teachers, GEAR UP staff and friends

were saying to him when he was at GSHS. He said, “I figured that this is my 12<sup>th</sup> grade year and if I do give up, I’m not going to college.” Therefore Corey made a commitment to successfully graduate from HCHS so he could pursue his postsecondary goals. After graduating from HCHS a semester early, Corey spent the second semester of his senior year helping his mother out with household chores. He also informed me of his plans to enroll at Westlake College and try out for the football team. By the summer, Corey started strength and conditioning training with the football team and was ready to enroll in classes during the fall semester. In addition, Corey said he hoped that after spending two years at Westlake College, he could transfer to SU, Fremont and join a black fraternity.

Corey’s counter-narrative demonstrates how the C.R.E.A.T.E. framework can be used to highlight his experience in two different school contexts during his high school-to-college transition process. His experiences show that simply because students begin their high school career academically strong or weak does not guarantee a similar ending four years later. As Corey recognized the ways in which he himself had hindered his academic trajectory, he also shed light on the disparities that exist between regular and continuation schools. Although Corey did not associate himself with HCHS, he spoke about the challenges he faced in this formal space trying to transfer back to GSHS and achieve his postsecondary goals. Also, he demonstrated collective and individual agency during this critical transition process. Not only did Corey’s family, GSHS teachers and peers try to help him stay on track to achieve his goals, but also, he himself began to

realize how his actions and failure to take control of his own education would limit future opportunities to participate in higher education.

**Ashley**

“I’m in band and then I live so far... I don’t have time when I get home.  
It’s like 7:00 pm and I don’t even have time to study”

**Ashley, 11<sup>th</sup> grade**

*A Commitment to GSHS Band*

Although Ashley was a participant of GEAR UP since her GSMMS days, I did not meet her until she agreed to participate in this study. During our first interview together, I learned that she was from a middle class, two-parent household, and that many of her immediate family members had obtained college and graduate degrees. Although Ashley lived in the suburban community of Dotson, 30 minutes away from Golden State, she spent the majority of her secondary school experiences in Golden State Unified School District because her father was the GSHS band director. As the youngest of four children, Ashley spent most of her time with her father. Through Ashley’s GSHS experiences, I learned how being a school staff member’s child could impact one’s high school-to-college transition process.

During our first interview together Ashley informed me that her paternal great grandfather was a well-known band director at Grover State University (GSU), a historically black college and university (HBCU) in the South known for its prestigious marching band. Therefore, Ashley said, she wanted to attend GSU or Savannah University not only to pursue a college degree, but also to join the marching band. Ashley’s father taught her to how to play the clarinet and trumpet when she was in

elementary school. Although there were no marching bands at her elementary and middle schools, she joined her father's award winning marching and jazz band once she entered GSHS. Ashley explained, "He made me be in band because I remember not wanting to do it. Now I know why he made me do it, it was a good experience." Ashley briefly was a representative for the GSHS Associated Student Body (ASB) government and played softball her sophomore year. But, Ashley said, she could not continue with these activities because there was a time conflict between band and ASB and she lived too far away to fully commit to softball. Depending on her course load, Ashley would spend at least two class periods, especially during the last two years of high school, as well as after school and weekends practicing with the band. During her senior year, she stated:

Just band... that's all I could do 'cause I don't have time to do anything else. We practice... about 30 minutes in class. And about three hours after school. And now that he has jazz band, which is fifth period, now it's even more. Now it's like fifth period, sixth period and three hours after school.

Besides performing at football games, the GSHS band also performed at local competitions and events. For example, during Ashley's 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, the band won \$10,000 and was invited to perform in the Disneyland parade for their first place victory at the Battle of the Bands Competition, an annual competition between high schools across the country.

#### *GSHS Staff as Parent: The Cost and Benefits*

One of the benefits of having her father work at GSHS was that Ashley had opportunities to have the challenges she encountered in school handled immediately. On several occasions, Ashley also used her father's position to get out of situations, an advantage she had over many GSHS students. For example, Ashley said that when she

was late to classes she would obtain notes from her father to avoid being caught in tardy sweeps and receiving detention. Also, Ashley shared how she would get her father to meet with teachers who taught courses she struggled to pass. While some teachers were receptive to this strategy, Ashley said others blatantly told her that they refused to treat her differently because her father worked at GSHS.

Ashley shared several incidents that occurred with her AP World History teacher, Mrs. Thyme, during her sophomore year. She said that Mrs. Thyme picked on her both inside and outside of class. For instance, after seeing Ashley holding hands with her boyfriend on campus, Mrs. Thyme told her, “I saw you acting slutty after school.” On another occasion, Ashley had a doctor’s note for her bladder problem. Although Mrs. Thyme was hesitant to let Ashley go to the restroom, as she needed, she finally allowed Ashley to go as long as she returned before the tardy bell rang. Ashley said:

I came back to class and she told me to leave because I didn’t have a pass.  
So I went to my dad and got a pass and brought another doctor’s note...  
Then she said in front of the class just because your dad works here  
doesn’t mean you can get excused. You think you’re this and that.

Since the bathroom line was long, Ashley made it back to class after the tardy bell rang and was not let back into class. After several other incidents with Mrs. Thyme, Ashley decided to check out of the AP World History class and enrolled in a regular course. In other words, despite her issues with the teacher, she could have persevered in the class yet chose to leave because of the continual conflicts.

Because Ashley was highly committed to the GSHS band, she had limited opportunities to participate in other extracurricular activities to help her achieve her postsecondary goals. She said, “In the 11<sup>th</sup> grade I just did regular GEAR UP [tutoring]...

But I couldn't go all the time because of band." Although Ashley did well in many of her regular and honors courses, she struggled to pass her math classes. Throughout her time at GSHS, she was always in summer school for math. When I inquired about the particular challenges she faced in math, she replied:

Well it was not only... hard for me to understand, but the whole time I was here I never had one settled math teacher. Either we didn't have a teacher or the class was out of control... The only actual math class I had was Mrs. Moore-Robertson in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and then Mr. Baker...Mrs. Moore-Robertson was the highest grade I got a out of her class. She was always on it. She controlled the class. And she just stuck with you no matter what. And then Baker, he was hard. But, I believe I got a D out of his class. But I'm surprise to even get that 'cause it's Mr. Baker.

Ashley not only shared the challenges she faced in mathematics, but also problems she saw with teacher retention and tenured teachers who failed to help students master core subjects. For example, Ashley, along with many other students in this study who had Mr. Baker for Algebra, complained about his teaching practices. She said, "He'll explain something on the board... he'll just keep explaining. He doesn't stop. He'll just keep going. Like it'll be ...a long math problem and he'll just solve it and be like this is how you did it." Through several conversations with GSHS students, I learned that Mr. Baker gave the majority of his students Ds and Fs, rarely giving out higher than a C. When I worked as a program representative for GEAR UP a year before graduate school, I would interact with Mr. Baker once a week to borrow math books for after school tutoring. I noticed that many students who were enrolled in Mr. Baker's class and participants of GEAR UP would have one D or F on their report cards, from his class.

Also, every time I entered Mr. Baker's classroom during school hours he complained about his students not being at honors level. He always seemed to blame

students for the challenges they faced in his class. In the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Ashley stated, “He does [help], but then after a while he was irritated so he just gives up...He makes a lot of mistakes while he’s teaching and we always have to correct him.” Since she was unable to attend GEAR UP tutoring sessions, teachers’ office hours or group study sessions with classmates, her father hired an independent tutor, a GSHS alumnus, to help her at home. She explained, “I had a private tutor... It was good...It worked best like in the tenth and ninth grade... I learned a lot from her. It was better than regular class. It was just that one-on-one tutoring.” While the tutor helped her complete homework assignments, she said she still struggled to pass her quizzes and exams in class.

#### *Unexpected Outcomes Transitioning to College*

Being highly involved in the band also impacted the amount of information and services Ashley received to prepare for college. Although she met with her academic counselor when she had problems with her schedule, only by her senior year did she learn that she had not fulfilled her A-G requirements to gain admission to college. As she attempted to fill out State University (SU) system and HBCU applications, Ashley also found out that she did not meet the math and visual/performing arts requirements. She said:

Well I did everything I could do for math. But to me it doesn’t make sense because we have students who ...graduated last year...who are at [CSU], Dover [Heights] where I tried to attend, students who graduated two years ago who are at WMULA, all those different State Universities and their saying it’s just for the year 2007 that...GSHS band wasn’t counted as a requirement...we only needed one year of performing arts and I’ve been in band since the ninth grade.

While Ashley thought she had made up the math classes that she did not pass, she actually still needed one additional year of math. Also unbeknownst to her was that all of the time and energy she had devoted to the GSHS band did not fulfill her visual/performing arts requirement. During previous years and under a different college counselor, band not only counted as a physical education class, but also a college preparatory course requirement. As a result of being uninformed of the change in policy, Ashley was not qualified to apply to the four-year colleges she wanted to attend. Ashley felt that if her academic counselor would have placed her in the appropriate courses she needed, she could have fulfilled her A-G requirements. Since Ashley was unable to attend many of the college preparatory workshops and events offered by GEAR UP and the GSHS College and Career Center due to her band commitments, she was also unaware of important deadlines (e.g. FAFSA, Educational Opportunity Program, etc) and was unable to receive assistance on her applications and essays.

Due to the changes to her postsecondary pathways, Ashley now had to attend a local community college in order to transfer to Grover State University. Before completing her senior year, Ashley went to La Posada College to meet with a counselor about academic planning and to learn about the resources available for her transfer to a 4-year college. Ashley also informed me that she was considering joining the Army Reserves to in order to help pay for her college education. During her senior year, she was selected to be the Queen of the Martin Luther King Jr. Day Parade in Los Altos. This opportunity not only afforded her a book scholarship for college, but also the chance to attend community galas with prominent leaders and entertainers, volunteer for a

community program that provided free eye care services to low income children, and participate in meetings with community officials. After Ashley successfully graduated from GSHS, she continued to volunteer and attend community events to fulfill her responsibilities as the 2007 Martin Luther King Jr. Day Queen. In addition, she worked at a local fast food restaurant until the fall semester began.

Through a C.R.E.A.T.E. analysis, Ashley's counter-narrative highlights the politics of her formal context as she shared the cost and benefits of having a parent who worked at her school. Although her father immediately handled the challenges Ashley encountered at school, she was also in a privileged position that allowed her to avoid the repercussions of not abiding by school rules (e.g. serving detention for being tardy). She also faced a similar situation as Brianna—having to repeat several math courses. Throughout this study, Ashley emphasized the difficulty she experienced in math courses where teachers did not help students fully understand the material. As a result, she ended up not meeting the math requirements to apply to a 4-year college. Her involvement in band demonstrated how the various extracurricular commitments of students often go unrecognized during the college application process. For Ashley, this meant band not being counted towards her college course preparation requirement. Through these experiences Ashley revealed how she was able to assert both individual and collective agency. Ashley made a commitment to actively participate in the GSHS jazz and marching bands in order to perform at the collegiate level. Collective agency was illustrated through Ashley's use of her father for assistance when she encountered challenges in school that would potentially hinder her postsecondary goals.

## **Raheem**

“When you deny somebody... the opportunity to enhance themselves, it does nothing for our country or people as a whole. What are you doing if you’re only letting the one’s who are already ahead of the game get there? What about all those other people who don’t get that opportunity? That’s just dragging us down...you need to build everyone up... build everyone together not just the ones who already have it.”

**Raheem, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

### *The Trajectory of my Academic Performance*

I first learned about Raheem while he participated in GEAR UP at GSMMS. Several GEAR UP staff members informed me about a book of poetry he published during the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. When I briefly inquired about the publishing process, he informed me that his mother found a publisher who was interested in publishing his work. It was at this point I became interested in learning more about Raheem’s educational experiences. Raheem was raised by his widowed mother in a working class household. After his father passed away during his elementary school years, Raheem, his mother, and his older brother lived in various cities throughout Southern California. They moved to Golden State in the middle of Raheem’s 7<sup>th</sup> grade year. Since there were no open spaces at GSMMS during that time, Raheem had to be home schooled until the following year. During his senior year interview, he reflected on this experience. He said:

Having a teacher come to your house while your chillin is really not a good feeling. Even though people say... home schooling is tight you could sleep longer hours. I wanna be in a class to learn.... It was beneficial that you got that one-on-one attention... ninth grade ... I’m like... okay I got to get ready for something new cause I knew that my future was approaching, every grade level, every next step. So once I realized that...I gotta get on it.

Raheem shared how his home schooling experience in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade allowed him to make sense of his future educational trajectory. Although his mother was enrolled in a community college to obtain her nursing degree, Raheem would be the first person in his family to attend a four-year college. While we had brief encounters at GSMMS, I did not learn about the connections between Raheem's lived realities and pathways to college until he entered GSHS.

Conversations about "college bound" students usually center on those individuals with strong grades, test scores, and extracurricular involvements. When looking at Raheem's academic transcripts through this traditional lens, one would immediately question his college-going potential. Although he was actively involved in school, his grades and test scores appeared to show otherwise. His GPA ranged between a 1.8 and 2.9 throughout his tenure at GSHS. During Raheem's junior year, he shared about how his GPA improved from the previous year: "Academically, I did improve, by changing certain strategies. I learned that with some teachers, you just have to say okay... 'cause it's a lose-lose situation... ultimately they're going to give you the grade... Now I have a 2.5 and last year, I had a 1.87." Although Raheem's GPA was still below a 3.0, he demonstrated how he was able to learn specific strategies in order to improve his grades. Each year I inquired about Raheem's academic performance, and he spoke about personal challenges such as not working hard enough and poor time management skills that partially contributed to his low grades. He explained:

Sometimes I cheated myself. I may not feel like putting in all that extra effort.... I had so much potential and so much time to do so much. But being honest, keeping it real with myself, I get lazy and that will hold me back from something. But I've been breaking that habit this year more so

than any year because I done a lot and received a lot. I think you can't always blame it on what you're going through cause even though I was struggling... I kind of sat myself down on my own and I was like I'm going through this [challenge], but let me get this done.

Too often we blame African American students for their low academic performance and outcomes. Seldom do we shed light on the ways in which these students make sense of, and take action on individual and collective levels to achieve their maximum potential. Raheem's excerpt above highlights how he was able to conceptualize his academic struggles at GSHS and attempt to persist through these challenges and work towards his goals. Not only did Raheem recognize his own role in his high school-to-college transition process, but also, he described particular problems he encountered with GSHS officials, policies and practices that facilitated and hindered his postsecondary pathways.

*Understanding the Politics of GSHS, Understanding My Rights*

At GSHS, Raheem encountered several challenges that impacted his high school-to-college transition process. After his grades dropped in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Raheem said he made a commitment to improve his grades during his junior year. He stated:

I really started to improve as far as my GPA. I improved basically by just making it a point to make sure all of my assignments were done... I did homework instead of just watching TV when I'm home and making sure that if there was an assignment that I missed, that I made it up or did extra credit.

In the excerpt above Raheem demonstrated how he was able to recognize the need to improve his grades. As a "low achieving" student, he challenged the discourse that may have suggested otherwise about his ability to commit to and assert agency towards increasing his academic performance. Raheem revealed the strategies he utilized and decisions he made in order to achieve his academic goals.

While Raheem briefly discussed teachers who helped him achieve his goals, he mostly shared stories about the many teachers who did otherwise. For example, for the pre-interview activity during his senior year, Raheem wrote a poem that focused on his GSHS experiences. In one verse of his poem he described his junior year: “Junior year was cool. It was a breeze, but then again you had your struggles. I learned the hard way that no matter how much work you do or how well you do it... if a teacher doesn’t like you, your gonna get a C.” In this verse, Raheem specifically spoke about his experiences with his AP English Literature teacher, Mr. Hayat. Raheem felt that this teacher either did not like him and his classmates or took out bad experiences with prior students in his current classes. He continued to share how Mr. Hayat blamed the whole class for one student’s misbehavior and used classroom citizenship to determine their grades. Although Raheem started off with an A in the class, he along with many of his classmates received Cs by the end.

He also had a similar experience with his Algebra II teacher, Mr. Baker. He explained how Mr. Baker’s teaching methods were not easy for students to understand. His teacher did not thoroughly explain concepts and methods to solve problems and yelled when the students had questions. Raheem expressed:

All the time, we would come back from break, we would always get what I call the inferno speech... he’s like if you do this... you’re going to get an F automatically and that really dispirits all of the students cause.... it’s so easy to fail.

Raheem said that he and his fellow classmates discussed how they would rather take Algebra II over or attend summer school since Mr. Baker “planned on failing every student.”

When Raheem felt like he was being disrespected by GSHS staff members, he used the power he had as a student to implement changes, sharing with me two such incidents. The first was of an encounter with his P.E. teacher, Mr. Amarillo, who cursed at him on several occasions and then “failed him for no reason.” The other was of a campus security guard who grabbed him inappropriately and threatened to beat him after a water balloon fight occurred between students. He explained, “When one form of authority is taking advantage, then you got to go to another authority, a higher authority.” In both cases, Raheem and his mother went to the district office to file complaints. They were able to successfully get Raheem immediately checked out of his PE class, and the security guard fired.

#### *A Commitment to My School and Community*

From our first interview together, Raheem consistently shared about his commitment to pursuing higher education. During his junior year he said, “What’s helped me accomplish my goals was the realization that high school is the foundation. Everybody is talking about college and careers, and what they want to do after high school... you can’t help but think well what am I doing to prepare for that?” In addition to taking regular education courses, Raheem made sure he enrolled in Advanced Placement and Honors classes, participated in various extracurricular activities such as Track, GEAR UP, and Drama, and associated with students who had similar goals. For example, in school Raheem was actively involved in various GEAR UP programs. For any college preparatory workshops and events that were offered, he was one of the first

students to sign up. Raheem also spoke highly of his involvement in the GEAR UP Boys Group since the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He said:

The boys group is special to me because we get together... we talk, we build each other up, we focus on our goals. If some one is slippin' or slackin' in one area, we constructively...criticize ...him to build him up...'cause we keep it real in the boys group. Even though we get a little carried away with the criticism and ...become sarcastic... we been through a lot and we've all grown.

He went on to share how this group allowed him to reflect on his academic, personal and social realities as a young African American male in the inner city. Outside of GSHS, Raheem participated in the Golden State Law Enforcement Explorer Program from the 8<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. During his sophomore year, he said:

It's a pre police academy training program. It's basically like a boot camp.... We have to study penal codes...laws. We get to run, get some classes such as traffic control because it is a community based program...We go out in the community and help people as much as we can...

Since he was interested in pursuing a career as a detective, Raheem had the opportunity to learn about many facets of law enforcement, personal development and teamwork. Not only did he hold several leadership roles such as sergeant and lieutenant, allowing him to supervise and train other youth, but he also earned from this experience several opportunities to participate in summer leadership and citizenship programs in Sacramento.

#### *I am still College Bound*

In his senior year when he was applying for college, Raheem encountered several challenges. Due to his low G.P.A. and test scores, Raheem only applied to the State University (SU) system. Because of his academic performance, he applied for

admission through the Academic Opportunity Program (AOP)<sup>19</sup>. He would go to the GEAR UP office to obtain help from staff members and his peers. While he met the A-G requirements, he soon learned that he did not meet the GPA requirement. When many students started receiving acceptance letters from various colleges and universities, Raheem received mostly rejection letters. He told me, “What is so crazy is every college that I applied to saw my grades and was like nooooo.” When Raheem called one of the SU campuses to inquire about his application status, an AOP coordinator informed him that with his grades he was not eligible for a regular university and should consider a community college instead.

Determined to gain admission into a four year college, Raheem patiently waited for responses from other schools. To his luck, SU, La Villa (SULA) called him for an AOP admissions interview. Raheem said that during his interview, the AOP director and counselor told him that they were impressed with his powerful and eloquent responses. He shared:

I had an interview at SULA and they got to know you. And when I had that interview... they were both firing questions at me. I was firing answers right back. And after that interview they were so impressed. And it was like you are a college bound student...and it's amazing cause... you can't know a student from looking at their grades.

They informed him that he did a better job responding to the questions than students with higher GPAs and tests scores. They only offered Raheem provisional admissions to SU,

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<sup>19</sup> **Academic Opportunity Program (AOP)** is designed to improve access and retention of historically low-income and educationally disadvantaged students. AOP students have the potential and demonstrated motivation to perform satisfactorily at a SU, but they have not been able to realize their potential because of their economic or educational background. The program provides admission and academic assistance to AOP-eligible undergraduate students. In many cases, the program offers financial assistance to eligible students. Campuses tailor their programs to accommodate the needs of their student population.

La Villa and a Summer Bridge Program spot because of his GPA. In addition, the AOP director offered to mentor him once he entered college. Under the provisional admission contract, Raheem was required to successfully graduate from high school and complete the Summer Bridge Program. After graduating from GSHS, Raheem continued to work at a Louisiana Cajun Style Seafood Restaurant in Golden State until the summer program began.

Raheem's counter-narrative provides another example of where the C.R.E.A.T.E. framework illuminates how a student challenged the discourse about his college bound potential at GSHS. Throughout this study, Raheem demonstrated that despite what people might say about his academic performance and test scores, he was still college bound. Not only was he enrolled in college preparatory courses, he was actively involved in extracurricular activities both inside and outside of GSHS, and highly committed to achieving his postsecondary goals. Also, he critically reflected on the inequities such as mathematics classes at GSHS that impacted his and his classmates' college-going outcomes.

Raheem also demonstrated individual and collective agency as he responded to the obstacles he encountered during his high school-to-college transition process. He asserted individual agency through his extracurricular involvements, taking on leadership roles in drama and the Explorers Program. Raheem constantly told me that he was determined not to give up on his academic goals no matter what challenges he encountered at GSHS. Collective agency was revealed through his discussion about students recognizing their ability to impact change if they were being disrespected at

school. On several occasions Raheem and his mother went to the school district office to ensure that problems were immediately being addressed. The GEAR UP Boys group also served as a space where Raheem and his peers were able to collectively work together to stay focused on achieving their goals.

## **6- Negotiating Pathways in Our Formal Context**

What does the high school-to-college transition process look like for African American students with varying academic backgrounds? This question became clearer to me as I learned about students' lived realities in their formal contexts over the course of three years. Whether they were high achieving and "college bound," low achieving and not considered "college bound," or actively deciding not to pursue college by their senior year, I witnessed the unique ways these students made decisions about and took actions towards achieving their postsecondary goals. Despite their diverse academic backgrounds, these students shared successes and challenges in school that impacted their high school-to-college transition process. The C.R.E.A.T.E. model will be used in this chapter to create counter-narratives of how three students—Peyton, Jerome and Wendell – negotiated their postsecondary pathways at GSHS.

### **Peyton**

"I would rather see somebody achieve their goals and know that I helped them than to see myself above...and just realizing ...I didn't help these people when I know they can be up there with me... Instead of going up alone, I'd rather take people up with me... Even if I have to go down to push them up myself and then rise later... I would rather do it because I feel like it is going to help me in the long run, to just make me feel better and I really enjoy helping people."

**Peyton, 11<sup>th</sup> grade**

### *A Balancing Act: Home and School Life*

During the time GEAR UP was at GSMMS, I briefly observed the interactions between student participants. One student that vividly stood out to me was Peyton. She seemed to be involved in various school related activities. Before moving to Golden

State, she was a self-described “average student who constantly got into trouble.” Peyton told me that once she entered GSMMS in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, however, she spent more time trying to adjust to her new environment. Whether she attended GEAR UP activities or decided to act out in class, Peyton said she wanted to fit in with her fellow classmates. It was not until Peyton transitioned to GSHS that she gradually began to find her niche. She said:

I went to GSMMS in the seventh grade... I didn't know who these people were and started to act like them. Then high school was when I realized I didn't have to act like them anymore, but I still wanted to...in the tenth grade I realized it's not going to get me anywhere, so I became my own person. I started doing the things I wanted to do and people started following me 'cause I was no longer following. I was leading.

Peyton explained how at GSHS she began to see herself as young woman motivated and determined to set her own pathways to college. Throughout this study, Peyton highlighted the importance of capturing how African American students conceptualize their developments over time to understand their current realities. From our conversations about her transformation, I began to reflect on the connections between her daily realities, extracurricular involvements and her high school-to-college transition process. More specifically, I witnessed how Peyton utilized GSHS as space to improve college access and equity for herself and her peers.

Peyton was from a low income, single parent household and would be the first in her family to obtain a 4-year college degree. Although her mother, Lorena, dropped out of high school at the age of 16 to have Peyton, she eventually went back to school to obtain her G.E.D. and Associates of Arts Degree in Child Development at La Posada College. Through a brief telephone conversation with Lorena, I learned about her plans to

transfer to a four-year university once her son was older and Peyton graduated from college. During Peyton's junior year interview, she informed me that when she joined GEAR UP in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, her mother was also inspired by the program staff to pursue her own higher education. Peyton explained, "They [GEAR UP Staff] haven't spoken to her directly... they just said these are goals you need to have. She just looks to them as the role models she needed... she wishes she had a program like that in high school." Peyton expressed how her mother's educational experiences and extracurricular involvements at GSHS influenced her own commitment to achieve postsecondary goals.

Peyton strived to be a well-rounded student who was able to balance her academic and personal responsibilities. While her mother was a full time community college student, Peyton said she was expected to cook, clean, and care for her younger brother, while still maintaining high academic marks. She stated:

She [my mother] couldn't get a full time job 'cause she had to go to La Posada [College]. And I had to balance my schedule cause I had to take Myron [my brother] with me sometimes, like if I had practice... she would have to bring him up there with me... I was thinking like mom... I have to do activities because I won't get into college... they'll look at me and think I'm plain and ordinary. I can't do this... Every night I had to get home... clean the house, if he made a mess... My mom sometimes, wouldn't get from school till 10:00pm... so I made the decision to cook... sometimes have some bath water ready, so she could just come home and relax. I thought I wasn't going to have time for all that, but I proved myself wrong... If I say I can't do it, I'm going to challenge myself even more.

The discourse about the multiple responsibilities that Students of Color have to take on in their familial contexts often describes them as barriers to their academic achievement and outcomes. This form of involvement is rarely included in discussions about ways to understand the factors that shape these students' level of engagement within their

schooling contexts. Peyton demonstrated how these commitments could actually motivate students to work harder to achieve their goals. Although Peyton's familial responsibilities were occasionally challenging, she still made honor roll each year and remained actively involved in various extracurricular activities at GSHS.

*A Leader, A Mediator, A Change Agent*

I learned about the diverse ways Peyton prepared herself to successfully transition to higher education. Each time I worked at the GEAR UP office or explored the GSHS campus, I always observed Peyton running to her college preparatory courses or extracurricular activities. Although it seemed as if Peyton was over committing to so many activities, I was amazed to see how she seldom complained to me about it. For example, during her sophomore year, Peyton said she was involved in activities such as AVID, GEAR UP, tennis, score keeping for the boys' basketball teams and fixing computers for the district with the GEAR UP Technology Team, to name a few. At one point, she successfully made it on the football team, but was unable to participate because her mother thought it was unsafe.

In order to make sure that she was fully involved in all of these activities, Peyton said that she had to pick one activity to attend each day. If an activity ran late, she had to balance between completing her homework and participating in a club meeting for example. As I inquired about whether her involvement impacted her academic performance, she replied:

Sometimes I regret joining so many organizations because it takes away from the time I have to do my homework. But then again I like the pressure on me because it makes me feel like I am a college student... So whenever I do work...I put pressure on myself like if I don't do this I am

not going to college... I just think if I don't do this one assignment it's going to affect my grades... Then...come years later I am going to look ...and say why didn't I do that assignment.

During Peyton's 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, she further explained that through college preparation programs and conversations with university representatives, as well upon reviewing college applications, she learned the importance of being a well-rounded student. She said, "I know I could have stopped a few things, but I push[ed] it over the limit...I'm just trying to leave the best impression on colleges." Despite the responsibilities Peyton had at home, she maintained a level of commitment to her schoolwork and college hopes, an experience rarely discussed in the discourse on African American students attending urban schools. Peyton also demonstrated how she was able to negotiate her way through the school context despite her home responsibilities.

From all of the activities Peyton participated in, I learned about her ability to take on leadership roles. For example, during an 11<sup>th</sup> grade interview Peyton discussed how the GSHS Activities Director called her to strategize about ways to recruit students to fundraise for her senior class. Peyton immediately sent messages out to her classmates about possible fundraising ideas. She stated:

I thought it was really helpful because she [activities director] used me as a resource... I posted a bulletin on myspace and everybody is on myspace... I was calling them up, like we need to do this and that. I am happy because I didn't hear those lazy excuses...I am hearing responses like oh ok, I'm going to bring in recyclables tomorrow.

This example highlights how Peyton was able to utilize her leadership skills to impact change at GSHS. While working in the GEAR UP office, I was able to witness Peyton in action during her senior year. As the GSHS Academic Decathlon team captain, Peyton

expressed her concerns with the faculty advisor's failure to fully prepare the team for local competitions. Therefore, Peyton said, she took it upon herself to organize practice sessions for the team in the GEAR UP office and asked a few of the program staff members to be judges. She also worked closely with the decathlon advisor on team logistics, fundraising and event planning.

There continues to be discussions about why students should be included in the reform of educational policies and practices. Students, especially those in urban schools, are rarely given opportunities to be involved in this process. Peyton's leadership skills demonstrate how students can serve as powerful agents for impacting change within their schools.

While Peyton described GSHS as a family, she recognized the inequitable conditions and opportunities impacting students' pathways towards higher education. Therefore, Peyton seemed to be quite adamant about making sure that the educational needs of students were being met. As a junior, she expressed that students have the power to change their school experiences, but many do not feel comfortable doing so. Since Peyton wanted to see immediate change happen, she often went to the school district office to discuss the concerns of the GSHS student body. She stated:

We should take control of our environment ourselves because we can. I mean, if we really want to... Students have so much power in their voices...and just so much to say, it's just that they choose not to say it...I've been down to the district a few times. They just know me now, but nothing actually happens... Like I've gone and put in a few complaints about the [GSHS] office and like the general staff or just about how things need to be done. Just some recommendations and some opinions... Nothing happens, no changes.

In the previous excerpt Peyton illustrated how students could be involved in improving their educational conditions. Yet, she believed that many students were often unaware of or felt uncomfortable about the power they had to impact change. Even when students were aware of their role as agents of educational change, their suggestions were often times ignored; Peyton's efforts were a stark example of this issue.

At GSHS, Peyton also tried to mediate the tension that occurred between teachers and students. For example, if there was a disconnect between the teaching and learning process, Peyton spoke to teachers about her classmates concerns, re-explained lessons to her peers, and discussed alternative solutions with school officials to improve the resources, classroom conditions and academic opportunities for all. In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Peyton described the relationship she had with her Geometry teacher, Mrs. Sampson. Although many students complained about Mrs. Sampson's Caribbean accent, Peyton tried to help the teacher explain math problems so that her classmates understood the material. She said:

She likes the way I think because I always try to find new ways for students to understand the information. Like geometric means, some students didn't understand it so I put it in the number form and I showed her the example and she said okay that's a great idea. She showed the class and everyone ...passed that part of the test... I find different ways so I can share them in the class that way it won't be that difficult...our class was rowdy at the beginning of the year. I mean seriously we did no work because everyone would argue with the teacher that she was too hard and she is from the Bahamas.

As the teaching-learning process is often the center of the educational discourse, it is important to highlight how both students and teachers can work together to facilitate better learning conditions for all students. Peyton's example demonstrated how students

could serve as mediators to the tensions that emerge from misunderstandings in the classrooms. Peyton continuously discussed her commitment to help create a learning community at GSHS to assist herself and her classmates successfully graduate from high school and gain access to college.

During Peyton's junior year she spoke about the perceptions many students had about utilizing GEAR UP services. She explained, "They're like, I can't be caught going to GEAR UP. I can't be caught by the blue building... I don't want to mess up my reputation." Despite these sentiments, Peyton said she persistently encouraged them to utilize this program to get the help they needed to achieve their most immediate goals. For example, Peyton once described how she got two friends to reconsider joining GEAR UP. She said:

I don't know if it's Jesus or Jose... both of them had that problem. They were afraid to come to GEAR UP because they thought that their popularity was just going to be shot down ... Jesus was telling me about his family and how they don't have a lot of money and how they have one source of income and how they struggled to get this job... I was like oh ok, so you want to go to college? And he was like no. I want to go straight into the workforce to help my family... And I told him that he can do both. You can get your job and go to college and increase your income.

Immediately after Peyton informed Jesus about possible job opportunities through college, she said he began to inquire about the necessary steps he had to take to achieve these goals. Since his grades were not strong, Peyton reminded him about the resources available through GEAR UP. A few days later, Peyton said she saw Jesus and his friends going to the GEAR UP office for assistance. She recalled, "I was happy... I felt like I accomplished the goal of both the teacher... by helping students. If I could get to one person from each group... they can help other people in their groups." This was one of

many examples Peyton shared with me throughout the study about the various ways she made herself available to assist her fellow classmates when they faced academic, personal, and social challenges.

### *Roadblocks in My Journey towards College*

Even when Peyton's faced challenges in her academic performance, she made sure that her grades did not affect her chances of gaining access to college. For example, during her junior year, she struggled to pass Mr. Baker's Algebra 2 class. She remembered, "He always wanted to teach from his way, his point of view.... but the book was always different." She described how he told a majority of his students at the beginning of the year that they would be receiving a D or F in his class, and to those students who ended up with these grades, Mr. Baker told them, the final exam would not make a difference. After hearing these words, Peyton sought assistance from both her GEAR UP tutor and track coach. Even with this assistance, she was not able to understand his problem solving methods and could not pass the tests. She recalled saying, "I can't give up. I need this [class] to get into college." She immediately decided to go to Mr. Baker for help before school, during lunch and after school before he raced out of the classroom. While many students gave up and ended up with a D or F in this class, Peyton believed that even though she was unable to fully learn Algebra 2, she received a C because Mr. Baker knew she tried her hardest.

Peyton was one of many students in this study who struggled to pass Mr. Baker's class. Their stories highlight the challenges that many urban schools continue to face not only with the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers in core subject areas, but

also with the hiring of teachers whose pedagogical practices are actually aligned with the diverse needs of students. Deficit conversations about this classroom situation might place the blame on students for not being committed to their education or having a poor supportive foundation to achieve high academic performance. But what fails to be at the center of these discussions is how educators' teaching practices can hinder these students' postsecondary opportunities.

Since the beginning of this study, Peyton seemed to be committed to finding various resources and opportunities that would facilitate her successful transition to college. Not only was she enrolled in A.P. and honors courses since the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, she was also involved in programs and activities both inside and outside of the GSHS campus. Peyton shared with me how her extracurricular involvements provided spaces for her to cultivate important relationships during her high school-to-college transition process. For example, on several occasions she described how her involvements in programs such as GEAR UP, AVID and College Summit allowed her to network with university officials about the admissions process, academics and campus life. For example, during her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year she spoke about the interactions she had with a university official during the summer program component of GEAR UP. She said:

I know through GEAR UP we went to colleges and I've gotten some [business cards]. I keep in contact with people... Hughes from Palms [College], he helps me... I told him I'm trying to get into any college. He says make sure they have centers to help you, make sure you feel comfortable... It's not about the college, it's all about you. .. So he tells me the things I need to do, the questions... I should ask so I feel comfortable... just the steps I need to take.

College preparation programs were initially designed to improve issues of access and equity for historically underrepresented and low-income students. Yet, the effectiveness of these programs is constantly questioned during federal and state budget crises. While these programs serve to increase college participation rates, they also serve several other purposes. From the excerpt above, Peyton's experience demonstrates how programs such as GEAR UP provide an outlet for students to develop connections with university officials. The GEAR UP college tours allowed Peyton to develop relationships with various university officials. Through these encounters she was not only able to inquire about university requirements and campus life, but also to meet individuals who could provide her with information to help guide her through the college application process. In addition, many offered to serve as references for college and scholarship applications.

Peyton began preparing for the college application process in her junior year. She not only requested applications, but also started working on her personal statement, scholarship applications and letters of recommendation requests. Although Peyton seemed to be on a successful pathway to college, she also encountered several educational challenges that impacted her high school-to-college transition process. During her senior year, she decided to apply to over 20 colleges and universities throughout the U.S. and abroad. Each application required her to obtain the signature of the GSHS college counselor, Ms. Kentwood. Peyton said that since, however, Ms. Kentwood was constantly away from the College and Career Center (CACC), she was unable to complete her applications in a timely manner to be considered for admission. She stated:

Ms. Kentwood has never been there... When I need stuff, I can't go to her cause she is not there and that has stopped me from a lot of things... She used to come to my class to bring me scholarships. Now she tells me oh come by this day and I come by and she is not there... So its' not just me that needs her, and AVID-it's the whole school and that puts a hold on people when she is not there-when we can't get the resources we need.

Peyton said she received several rejection letters from colleges and universities because of her incomplete application. Research on the critical conditions necessary for improving college access and equity for underrepresented students continues to describe the lack of academic and social support (Oakes, 2003), in this particular case, of college counselors. Within urban schools, there is generally one college counselor available for the entire student body. Occasionally, there may be university outreach representatives or Americorps volunteers available to assist with the college counseling. Peyton's and other students in this study's experiences with the GSHS college counselor support the need to look at a critical issue in the discourse on college access—those counselors who are inundated with other school responsibilities and/or otherwise unavailable to their students (McDonough, 2004). As a result of having to bear too much responsibility themselves, these counselors often fail to provide students with the resources and opportunities necessary to successful transition them to college.

Another challenge that Peyton shared with me was the anxiety she experienced during exams. During her sophomore year, Peyton described the emotions she felt when taking tests. She said:

Multiple choice and writing, I'll know it so well I just don't know what happens. Whatever I put down is whatever's in my mind at the moment. I don't even know what I am writing. I am a different person when I write or take a test. I talked to my mom about it and she took me to the doctor.

And the doctor said nothing was wrong. But it's strange 'cause I am in a different zone when I take...any test.

Although Peyton was able to pass many class tests and the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), she encountered difficulties obtaining high scores on the SAT. She explained, "I am going [to a SU campus] because I didn't get into Pricetown [University]... It has to be my test scores there is no other reason... I know I lack in that [testing] field, but my...grades...my activities are overwhelming." Peyton planned her GSHS career around preparing to gain admission to highly selective private and public institutions of higher education. Despite all of her hard work and commitments to achieving her postsecondary goals, she believed that her low SAT scores hindered her chances of successfully transitioning to the university of her choice. "I am way better than...the many denial letters that I have," Peyton felt. She recognized that her low SAT scores played a critical role in determining her admission status. Peyton expressed that if students' SAT scores are a critical component of the college admissions process, then these tests need to be incorporated into the curriculum as early as middle school. She also suggested that improvements be made in the recruitment and selection of application reviewers.

Since Peyton did not gain admission to the institution of her choice, she decided to attend SU, Newberry (SUN). After she successfully graduated from GSHS, she was selected to participate in the SUN AOP Summer Bridge Program. As her grades and test scores met the university admission requirements, she was informed that she could participate in this program as a commuter. Since Peyton wanted to get acclimated to the university settings, she caught 3 buses and a train from Golden State to Newberry

throughout the duration of the program. Peyton said that she planned to stay at SUN for two years before transferring to Pricetown University, the college she originally wanted to attend.

Peyton's counter-narrative demonstrates how the C.R.E.A.T.E. model allows us to see the ways in which her GSHS experiences centered on creating learning communities conducive to helping students, including herself, achieve postsecondary goals. Specifically, Peyton illustrated how she was able to assert individual and collective agency in this formal context to do so. Her collective agency was revealed through her desire to help improve the conditions of GSHS for herself and her peers. Whether it involved complaining to GSHS and district officials or helping a teacher to clarify a lesson, Peyton saw her peers' successes as part of her own. She also demonstrated the ways she asserted individual agency in her attempts to balance her familial and school responsibilities. Peyton revealed how she was able to utilize particular strategies to remain a well-rounded and high achieving student at GSHS, as well as attend to her responsibilities at home. As Peyton was unable to gain admission to highly selective institutions because of her low SAT scores, her experiences epitomize the roadblocks that even high achieving students encounter during this critical transition process. Also, she highlighted the importance of redefining notions of merit and achievement used to determine who can and cannot attend college.

## Jerome

“I like coming to school. But ...the only reason I want to finish school and go to college is so that I can have a ...real nice paying job. I want to be in ...business, real estate... I like coming to school because I know what I am (going to) get out of it. So even if I may not take it seriously, I know it’s good for me and (I) can get several jobs with it.”

Jerome, 10<sup>th</sup> grade

### *My Commitment to Succeed*

During our first interview together, I inquired about Jerome’s development as an African American male. He immediately informed me that he identified himself as a multiracial (i.e. Black, Jewish, French and Italian) young man from a working class background. While Jerome’s parents were divorced and both involved in his life, he lived mostly with his father while his mother was in jail. Although his parents did not attend college, his paternal uncle was a college graduate and his older sister was enrolled at a State University (SU) campus. In addition to his familial influences, Jerome described how his experiences in middle school shaped his desire to attend college. He said:

Nobody likes doing work in middle school. I ain’t gonna say if you do your work you’re a nerd, but...when your twelve you’re not all excited about doing work... You’re not thinking about college. I wasn’t. Some kids are, but I wasn’t thinking about college... I wasn’t even thinking about high school. I was just running wild.

Jerome described how he did not work to his maximum potential in middle school.

While he was promoted to the next grades even with Ds and Fs, it was not until his 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, he said, that his teachers and counselors informed him that he would not graduate unless he successfully completed additional assignments. Jerome described a conversation he had about his future plans with his math teacher, Mr. Gross. It was

during that conversation, he said, that he began to realize the importance of pursuing higher education. Jerome remembers, “He [Mr. Gross] was like what are you gonna do five years from now? I thought about it ... I had no plans of college... Then he really started talking to me like everyday... that’s how I got more serious.” Although this event occurred in middle school, the interaction between Jerome and his teacher influenced his commitment to succeed at GSHS and pursue higher education. More specifically, this interaction demonstrated the power school officials have to impact change in students’ lives. Students of Color disengagement, misbehavior and low academic performance are often misinterpreted by school officials and dominant discourse as the students as well as their families and communities not valuing education. As demonstrated through this example, school officials taking time to learn about students lived realities could help students improve their academic performance and outcomes.

*Finding My Niche: GEAR UP Boys Group*

Jerome described how his ninth grade year was challenging because he struggled to balance his academic and social life. It was not until the end of his ninth grade year that he began to take school more seriously and learn more about college. Although Jerome was not actively involved in GSHS activities, he said his friends introduced him to GEAR UP. During his 11<sup>th</sup> grade interview, Jerome stated:

We all know GEAR UP is good. You have the college students who come and help you and tell you about college... ninth and tenth grade... I like the tutoring program... its people fresh out of high school, like freshmen and sophomores and juniors...in college and they come and help you out and they know what they’re talking about.

Although Jerome did not participate in any of the GEAR UP college preparation activities and events, he was involved in the GEAR UP Boys Group. Jerome shared how this group, which was comprised of many of his peers, helped him develop academically, socially and personally. Not only did Jerome attend field trips that allowed him to learn about the cultural richness of and issues impacting Communities of Color, he said that through individual and group meetings he was able to mature and feel comfortable interacting with others. “You know you’re in a tight shell... it [the GEAR UP Boys Group] helps you break out of that shell and be more open,” explained Jerome. The Boys Group also provided a space for Jerome to improve his grades, time management and goal setting skills. Jerome said that he performed his academic best during the first semester of his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. He recalls, “It [G.P.A.] was like a 3.2. That was the highest grade I ever had and like Masai and LeRoy [Boys group instructors] were all happy for me.” Although Jerome participated in this group only for a year, he described how he learned the importance of community development, cultural awareness and self-respect.

Several of the other young men in this study shared how gender specific programs were important in helping them achieve during their high school-to-college transition process. While GEAR UP was designed to increase the number of low-income students gaining access to higher education, this particular sub-program also considered ways to address social and personal issues impacting students’ lives. Many of the program staff and students in this study informed me that the Boys Group emerged as a result of the challenges African American and Latino males faced on a daily basis. This group

provided a space for the boys to collectively reflect upon, improve and embrace their academic, social and personal realities in order to achieve their goals. In developing a learning community that helps all students successfully graduate from high school and transition to college, this program demonstrated the importance of also considering alternative ways to address the complexities of students' lives.

*Keeping My Personal Experiences to Myself*

Jerome's involvement in the Boys Group abruptly ended when he encountered familial issues during the second semester of his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. As a result, Jerome said his G.P.A. suffered because he had a difficult time focusing in school. Also, Jerome was unable to pass the CAHSEE the first time around because in addition to the challenges he faced at home, he felt that this exam was not reflective of the content he learned in his classes. During several conversations throughout this study, I inquired about whether there was anyone at school he could speak to about his personal challenges. As a sophomore, Jerome stated:

I am a loner so I don't like to hang out with people. I am really lonely but I don't like being around people ...If I see them passing by I'll say something. I am not that type of guy that just don't say nothing to people you know.... I don't really walk around and socialize with everybody.

Although Jerome knew a lot of students at GSHS, he did not hang out with a specific group of students. During his senior year, Jerome further explained why he did not get too close to people at GSHS. He informed me that he saw home, work and school as separate entities. He explained, "I keep home at home...work at work and school at school... That's something you should keep personal and to yourself. I don't believe in telling...your homeboys and homegirls what goes on at home. You know keep that at

home.” He explained that no matter what went on at home, school was not the place for him to discuss his familial issues. Jerome stated that GSHS staff only cared about improving the school’s reputation through higher standardized test scores and that “they don’t really care about students.” As I inquired about whether or not he went to his teachers for support during personal hardships, he said that it was not their job to get involved in students’ personal lives. Yet he did share that if he had the same teacher for four years, he would feel more comfortable sharing his problems. “When you know you’re going to have this teacher and ... you’re only going to have them for like eight months...eight months is nothing to tell them ...personal issues.” Jerome felt that if it were easier to develop a relationship with a teacher over several years, such an interaction would have not only changed *his* education, but that many other students would also have higher academic performance.

Jerome, along with several other students in this study, described how GSHS was not a place for them to share their personal challenges. He continually reiterated that personal issues should be handled outside of school because it only disrupts students’ academic performances. Urban schools are usually comprised of limited counseling staff to help an overpopulated student body with academic planning. Occasionally, a part time school psychologist may be available to assist with crisis interventions and develop individualized educational plans for students with special needs. Yet, these students highlighted an issue that is seldom addressed in urban schools— the psychological and social needs of students. While some school staff members are able to build a rapport with students, it is also crucial for schools to consider ways to create safe spaces to help

students cope with even non-academic issues impacting their high school-to-college transition process.

*(Re)Defining My Postsecondary Pathways*

Jerome's first job experience began during his freshmen year. He worked with his uncle on weekends and during summer months distributing class rings, yearbooks and graduation accessories to local high schools. It was not until his 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, when Jerome began working for a major electronic store, that he encountered problems balancing his academic and work commitments.

I need some more hours cause I wanted more money....it's was like man I got to go to school. I ain't going to make money later on. Got to drop the hours and come to school... I was coming to school...I wouldn't do my homework. I would just go straight to work after school... I got out of school at 3pm. I wouldn't go to work till like 4:30pm to like 9pm. I came home....and then went to sleep. I wasn't thinking about homework.

It was when Jerome received 2 Ds and 4 Cs on his progress report card that he began to realize that his postsecondary plans were at risk. He immediately informed his job that he could only work Friday through Sunday. Although Jerome spent four days a week studying and was able to maintain nothing lower than a C in each of his classes, he encountered another challenge on his final report card. Although he was supposed to get a C in his English class, his teacher mistakenly gave him a fail, which impacted the academic credits he needed to officially be considered a senior. Since Jerome was confident that he did not fail this course, he contacted his teacher to get his grade changed. Jerome demonstrated the agency students assert to get themselves back on track to achieve their goals. More specifically, he realized that working more hours could prevent him from successfully graduating from high school and achieving his post

secondary goals. Therefore, he immediately cut back on the amount of days and hours he worked in order to focus on school. Also, he illustrated the power students have to make sure they get the credit and recognition they deserve—in Jerome's case, receiving a passing grade in his English class.

Although Jerome was not enrolled in AP and honors classes, he took regular education courses that still prepared him to meet the academic requirements necessary to graduate from high school and transition to college. While Jerome's future career interests in business remained the same throughout this study, his postsecondary goals changed. By Jerome's junior year, I noticed that his postsecondary goals shifted. While he still was considering a four-year college, he expressed that attending a highly selective institution was not his priority. He explained, "I think SCU [Southern California University], WMULA are just colleges...It doesn't make me less than you if I got to [SU] La Posada or [SU] Dover [Heights]." He stated that students who attended WMU campuses were not better than those students who attended SU campuses. Although Jerome had planned to attend a 4-year college from his freshman to junior years in high school, by his senior year he began to reconsider his higher education plans. When I inquired about his postsecondary goals, Jerome expressed that he may possibly enroll in a 2-year trade/technical school or real estate school to have some postsecondary education background. While Jerome's senior year G.P.A. was good, he said that he was instead interested in spending his post-high school years exploring the opportunities available through the workforce. He stated:

I kinda just wanna... see how it works out.... 'Cause you know sometimes it works for some people and sometimes it don't...I am young now. I

wanna...explore a lot of stuff. I love to travel but I ain't got the time.... I wanna sell cars. I'll work at a car dealership...I think sometimes people... limit themselves to what they can do... Honestly I don't see myself [in college]...It's probably not a good thing for me...cause when I'm at school, I really don't like being at school.

To support his argument about why college was not a necessity, Jerome described the successful African American entrepreneurs in the entertainment industry who did not pursue higher education. He expressed that simply because individuals may not have college degrees did not necessarily mean they were less likely to be successful.

Jerome shared a story about attending college classes with his sister and how the college classroom culture was similar to high school. The only difference, Jerome observed, was the maturity level of students and the lack of sympathy from college professors. He recalled, "I was sitting in class and I was feeling the same way as if I was sitting in one of these [GSHS] classes. It's just bigger and older people. It's just the same exact way." While Jerome was unsure about attending college immediately after high school, he recognized the benefits of pursuing higher education and did consider attending a trade technical school in order to have some college experience. Yet, he believed that at this particular time in his life he was ready to directly enter the workforce. Therefore, he felt that he did not necessarily need a college degree to meet his most immediate goals; Jerome's senior year goals now centered on completing his course requirements so that he could graduate from GSHS. He shared that he was more interested in entering the workforce to explore his career options in business, obtaining his real estate license, selling cars or working in the marketing sector. After Jerome

graduated from GSHS, he continued to work at Electronic Warehouse on a full time basis with health benefits until he figured out further plans.

Jerome's counter-narrative represents another example of how the C.R.E.A.T.E. model can help explain the ways a student negotiated his/her pathways in a formal context to achieve his/her postsecondary goals. Through Jerome's secondary school experiences, he demonstrated how he utilized individual and collective efforts to achieve his goals. His interactions with school staff and the Boys Group allowed him to further develop academically, socially and personally. These experiences also shed light on the collective agency that emerged within his formal contexts, which allowed him to make sense of his most immediate and future goals. The discourse on this critical transition process often does not capture the experiences of those students who make alternative decisions about their post secondary pursuits. Jerome's story illustrated the individual agency that is often involved as individuals come to make decisions about their post-high school plans.

### **Wendell**

"[My] academics don't really reflect on the knowledge that I...have...'cause I really don't focus. My focus is not really all that serious at times. But...I noticed that I just don't...apply myself especially...during school time...first I thought I had...a learning disability... I don't know how to get checked"

**Wendell, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

### *Defining my College-going Identity*

Wendell was actively involved in the GSHS community and took several college preparatory courses. Yet, his G.P.A. and standardized test scores did not necessarily reflect a student who was considered to be "high achieving" and "college bound."

Wendell was from a low income, single parent household and would be the first in his family to attend college. His mother raised him with assistance from other women in his family. For most of his life, he was the only male in his family. As such, he expressed that it was his responsibility as a young man to keep his family safe. Given his lived realities, he expressed that pursuing his postsecondary goals would allow him to be the successful and responsible African American male his father failed to be for him.

Wendell said of his father, “I don’t want to be like him... [I want to be] more responsible to do the total opposite of what he did to me.” Over the course of three years, I observed the successes and challenges Wendell faced as he attempted to graduate from high school and gain access to college.

As I examined Wendell’s academic transcripts, I noticed a transformation that had occurred in his academic performance between middle school and high school. Although he was involved in various GSMMS activities, his grades did not reflect the student I came to know at GSHS. While he described how his desire to pursue higher education began in middle school, his transcripts revealed otherwise. Wendell received Cs, Ds and Fs in his classes. Since I started working for GEAR UP during his 8th grade year, I was unable to witness the challenges that impacted his academic performance until he transitioned to GSHS. Although Wendell did not get straight As after joining high school, there were far fewer Ds and no Fs on his academic transcripts.

During our first interview together, I inquired about what academic achievement meant to him. Wendell first defined academic success as passing all of his classes with a C or better, maintaining a 3.0 GPA or higher and being on academic honor roll. He did

not associate academic failure with receiving a D grade, but rather with receiving a failing grade on his report card, getting into trouble and not doing work in class. Also, Wendell did not view academic failure as a permanent problem nor as an entirely individually created state of affairs. He did feel, however, that an individual could improve his or her academic performance by hanging around the right people. Through Wendell's conception of academic achievement, I gradually began to make sense of his pathways to college.

#### *Developing Networks of Support at GSHS*

Those students with high academic performance are usually associated with being actively involved in extracurricular activities. As for those individuals not performing at their maximum potential, they are often assumed to be less involved in school overall. Wendell and a few other students in this study would not typically be considered high achieving, thus challenged these notions of correlated school involvement. Wendell participated in various extracurricular activities such as basketball, football, cross-country, GEAR UP, AVID, and academic decathlon. When he got involved in these activities, it was often times a collective decision with his peers to do so. For example, he spent most of his time in the GEAR UP office hanging out with program staff and friends. Whether GEAR UP was hosting an event, fieldtrip, or program, Wendell made sure he was one of the first to sign up. As a participant of GEAR UP since the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Wendell saw GEAR UP as a family and support system. As a senior, Wendell stated:

They're basically like a big support system ... it is a family. It provides the support that I probably wouldn't have gotten if I wouldn't have moved to Golden State when I was younger. And if I wouldn't have moved to Golden State ... I probably... wouldn't have graduated... Since I've been

in GEAR UP...they helped me stay in school... 'cause they knew my abilities. They knew what I can do.

Programs based on campus can be beneficial to students' educational trajectories. While these programs can provide additional opportunities for students to achieve their postsecondary goals, their members can also serve as mediators or advocates when problems emerge between students and school officials. When Wendell had a problem in school, he would go to GEAR UP staff members and peers for assistance. As a senior, Wendell described how his mother always pushed him to do well in school, but it was not enough for him. He said GEAR UP provided additional support and resources to help him make his post-high school dreams a reality. For example, even though Wendell knew that he wanted to go to college ever since he was in middle school, he did not begin to take these goals seriously until he went on college trips with GEAR UP towards the end of his sophomore and junior years.

Wendell also surrounded himself with friends who had similar postsecondary goals, many of whom he had met in middle school. He explained, "The people I associate with, they help me do better. 'Cause they do better than me and they help me to be on the same level as them." Although many of Wendell's closest friends such as Elijah, Byron, and Adrian, had higher grades, test scores and took more advanced level courses, Wendell expressed how they still helped him with his homework, as well as helped him to improve his grades and stay committed to his post-high school goals at GSHS. When students have low GPAs and test scores, there is an assumption that they are not trying hard enough. Wendell demonstrated how despite his academic performance, he tried his

best to surround himself with individuals and programs that assisted him during his high school-to-college transition process.

*Understanding the Inequalities within GSHS*

Although Wendell made sure he took the A-G course requirements necessary to successfully transition to college, he was enrolled in regular education classes during his freshmen year at GSHS. In our first interview together, he discussed the differences between regular education and advanced level courses. He stated:

The honors and AP [courses] have teachers that will push you and say if you need help come by after school or during your free time and come get help or they'll say you can go to the GEAR UP tutoring and get some help... The other teachers in regular classes...they'll just give you the work and then they'll just go on with it. And some students who want to want to achieve in those classes, they'll go to the extra tutoring themselves.

In regular classes, Wendell said, there were a limited number of teachers available to teach courses. He said, "You might not have a set teacher, like a lot of teachers [in regular classes] are gone this year." Those teachers that were present barely taught lessons, according to Wendell; instead they distributed handouts, had problems with classroom management and only assisted the students they favored. As a result, Wendell said, students in these classes were less engaged and settled for passing the class with a D.

When describing the AP and honors courses on the other hand, Wendell said that those teachers seemed to care more about teaching, had higher expectations and prepared "all" of their students for college. Therefore, these students were more eager to learn, felt Wendell. "Kids learn stuff quicker in the honors and AP classes. They go quicker into

the lesson plan and finish the lesson during the year.” Since Wendell did not enjoy his experiences in regular courses, he wanted to take challenging classes. When he joined AVID in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, he learned that he was required to enroll in AP and honors courses. Since Wendell wanted to challenge himself, he went out of his way to ensure that he was able to get the college preparatory courses he wanted. He said:

I heard stuff about the [AP Chemistry] teacher. I didn’t think I would like the class or I would try my best to be in the class. It’s just that ... a hard teacher like Ms. Atkins. I wanted to be in her class in the beginning of the year, but they didn’t put me in her class, so I had to transfer to her class. I just switched to her class ‘cause I didn’t want to be in the other class because we wasn’t really doing nothing except copying stuff off the board.... That was [not] an honors class.

Wendell’s experience sheds light on an issue that continues to be discussed in the research literature—the differences between regular education and advanced level courses (Oakes, 2005). According to Wendell, while the AP and honors teachers created a college-going culture for all students, the regular education teachers only helped a select few. In order to better prepare himself to successfully graduate from high school and transition to college, Wendell took the initiative to ensure that his counselor placed him in advanced and honors college preparatory courses the following year.

#### *Negotiating the Challenges in my Pathways to College*

Although Wendell had the opportunity to experience AP and honors courses, he encountered some challenges with them during this transition process. Wendell aimed to maintain a 3.0 G.P.A., but struggled to do his work and pay attention in some of his classes. During his sophomore year interview, Wendell described the three stages he went through as he attempted to achieve his academic goals: “At the beginning of the year, I

am the person who does all my work. At the middle of the year I just slack off. And at the end of the year I try to finish all my work and get a higher grade. I just have to do all my work all through the year.” In other words, Wendell said, he did not finish his classes in the same way he had started them.

One of the courses Wendell struggled to pass was Spanish. He said that the teacher had problems with classroom management and helping students learn the material. Wendell said that he, along with many of his classmates, ended up talking to each other and rarely did their work during class. Because Wendell did not understand the course content he sought assistance outside of the classroom from GEAR UP and AVID. Even with this academic support, Wendell said that he and other students who the teacher did not like ended up getting Ds in the class. Since he did not achieve his academic goals in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, he began to consider attending a community college as a postsecondary option. Through this example, Wendell demonstrated how students are able to recognize the challenges they experience in school and how they must find alternative ways to improve their academic performance.

The CAHSEE exam was designed to assess whether students who graduate from high school can demonstrate grade level competency in the state content standards for mathematics, reading and writing. This exam was created with the assumption that all high school students have equal access to the resources and opportunities necessary to help them learn these content standards. Yet, many students, especially those individuals in urban schools, do not pass the CASHEE because they had limited opportunities to experience a strong foundation in these subject areas. Wendell encountered another

challenge his sophomore year, that is, he did not pass the English and Math sections of the CAHSEE. He missed each section by ten points. Although Wendell felt students should be informed about and preparing for this exam from their freshmen year, he attributed not passing the exam to not working hard enough. Since this exam determined whether students could obtain their high school diploma, the GEAR UP staff and his AVID teacher were concerned about Wendell's postsecondary future. Through months of intensive one-to-one CAHSEE tutoring with a GEAR UP tutor Wendell was able to pass the exam the following academic year.

Wendell began his junior year with a different attitude. Since he played football, he had to maintain a certain GPA to be eligible to play. Although football took up a lot of his time, he still attended GEAR UP activities. He explained, "I was with GEAR UP, but I only went once a week because of football. That's why I really stayed at a 3.0, because I wanted to play football, so that's what I had to do." Not only did Wendell stay focused, but also he received a 3.0 G.P.A. the first semester of his 11<sup>th</sup> grade year. He furthermore made the honor roll for the first time in his K-12 educational experiences. Wendell said he was at a point where he wanted to study more to improve his grades.

He also attributed his academic success to his involvement in the GEAR UP Boys Group since the ninth grade. Wendell described how goal-setting sessions occurred in addition to cultural and community awareness activities. He recalled, "Masai...he helped everyone set their goals in the beginning of the year...I wanted to make honor roll this year... I really stepped it up that semester to keep it like that." However in the second semester of his 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, he got a job, which impacted his ability to maintain his

grades. Wendell was unable to keep his G.P.A. above a 3.0. During the first semester of his AP Chemistry class, he was involved in study groups, turned in assignments on time and participated in class discussions. By the second semester, Wendell said, he was less engaged in the course, which eventually impacted his ability to earn high academic marks.

Wendell entered his senior year with the intentions of improving his grades once again, in order to successfully transition to college. He told me, “I just don’t want to be here after high school.... I want to be at a college or university.” Yet, he encountered more challenges as he attempted to achieve these goals. During the first semester of Wendell’s senior year, I witnessed his AP English and AVID teachers drop by the GEAR UP office on more than one occasion. They informed the GEAR UP staff that Wendell was not performing to his maximum potential in class. Specifically, he was being disruptive and failing the course because of missing assignments. When I later asked Wendell about his academic performance in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, he replied, “[There was] something that kept me back ...it was probably me not applying myself... and not wanting to do work.” While he was aware of how his actions and attitude impacted his post secondary future, I noticed that Wendell seemed to not seek assistance. Through our conversation together, discussions with GEAR UP staff and observations, I learned that the GEAR UP staff assigned one of the tutors to help him with his work. Even with this assistance, his grades suffered the first semester of his senior year.

Since Wendell attended every college preparatory workshop available at GSHS, he confidently submitted his SU system and AOP applications on his own. While many

students received college acceptance letters, I observed Wendell avoid group discussions that centered on this topic. When a GEAR UP staff member inquired about Wendell's application status, he informed her that he did not submit his transcripts to the schools that requested it because of the grades he received the previous quarter. He said:

I didn't know what was going on... Why my acceptance wasn't coming in. It was really my fault because I wasn't sending in my transcripts... cause I didn't want to send them...because my grades. I wanted to see what... fall semester was doing to my grades... I didn't get no Ds. So I knew that was good... but what really had me trippin' was cause I didn't have an art class.

Jorge, a GEAR UP staff member, looked through Wendell's application online and realized that he did not fulfill a Fine Arts course requirement. For the next few weeks, Regina, a GEAR UP Program Assistant, and Wendell called various colleges and universities as well as the Academic Opportunity Program (AOP) to find out where he could still submit his transcripts in order to be considered for admissions.

The State University, Hempstead (SUH) AOP allowed Wendell to submit his transcripts in order to still be considered for admission. After several phone conversations with an AOP representative, Wendell was provisionally admitted to SUH. Specifically, he was required to graduate from GSHS and successfully complete the SUH AOP Summer Bridge Program. Since Wendell knew that his admission to SUH was dependent on his academic performance during the second semester of his senior year, he ended up doing better in his classes, received the GEAR UP scholarship he applied for and successfully graduated from GSHS.

Merit based factors such as test scores and grades are continuously used to distinguish which students should be admitted to exclusive outreach programs and

institutions of higher education. Students like Wendell are often times overlooked and not selected to benefit from college-going opportunities. The C.R.E.A.T.E. framework helps us see that although students like Wendell may not exemplify the traditional “college bound” and “high achieving” student, he was able, as his counter-narrative demonstrates, to utilize strategies, resources and opportunities on individual and collective levels to achieve his postsecondary goals. His grades and test scores may not be used to define his “college bound” potential, but his ability to be actively involved in extracurricular activities, utilize networks of support to improve his academic performance and outcomes, and maintain his commitment to achieving his postsecondary goals should be considered. In other words, Wendell’s story demonstrates the need to provide opportunities that include students with varying academic backgrounds during the high school-to-college transition process.

## **7-Creating Counterspaces in Our Learning Communities**

Golden State is not how it looks on TV and movies... [In] all the movies they may look like Golden State High School or Golden State the city in general is...a bad place. Everybody is gang banging, it's not safe to walk down the streets. You have gang bangers but it's like at Golden State High School they realize that ... you don't have to do that 24-7. If you're gonna do it, do it outside of school. ... It's like most people they're starting to realize that you need to get into college or... at least do well in high school 'cause there's a lot of gang bangers on honor roll.

**Byron, 10<sup>th</sup> grade**

When I interviewed each student during his or her sophomore year, I asked them the following question: “How would you describe GSHS to someone who knows nothing about your school?” Many of the students immediately began to reflect on the ways in which society defined their school and community. In the excerpt above, Byron, a high achieving foster care youth, described deficit conversations about their school and greater community that continued to center on issues such as gang activity and crime rates. He challenged these stereotypes by highlighting how positive aspects of GSHS were found in this formal context that is constantly seen in a negative light by outsiders. He revealed that most GSHS students, including those individuals considered to be menaces to society, were committed to improving their academic performance and outcomes.

While the students in this study recognized the systemic inequities impacting their daily experiences at GSHS, they also revealed the importance of understanding how their school provided spaces that facilitated their high school-to-college transition process. In this chapter, I will use the C.R.E.A.T.E. framework to describe counterspaces: particular spaces at GSHS that embraced these students lived realities and helped them navigate

their pathways to college. More specifically, I will use this chapter to create counter-narratives of three students – Reggie, Paige and Adrian – to illuminate the various ways GSHS teachers, extracurricular activities and school-university partnerships created counterspaces for these students to achieve their postsecondary goals.

### **Reggie**

“Last year when I was in my A.P. U.S. History class my teacher, Ms. Zanderson, she was like, ‘I want you guys to succeed. I don’t want you guys to just be behind ...because we’re at Golden State. You should be learning at the same speed as Clover City and all these other [wealthier] high schools.’ Like some of these [GSHS] teachers are setting you up for failure because they’re teaching at their own pace instead of trying to get [students] to learn the information.”

**Reggie, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

### *Golden State: A New Space, A New Place*

During Reggie’s interview, I was immediately struck by his description of his experiences in Golden State. Unlike many of the students in this study, Reggie grew up in mostly white, working and middle class communities during his primary school years. In middle school, he experienced a drastic change when his family moved to Golden State.

During his senior year, he said:

It’s [Golden State] really weird. It’s just not what I’m used to, so it kind of took me out of my comfort zone... I had to get use to the forms of grammar out here and then after I adjusted, it was pretty cool. I used to live in Corolla and Monte Verde. I could just go outside have some friends over and play baseball... basketball... Right now [in Golden State]... I’m more cautious about myself being out on the main street for too long because people [gang members] are always going to be looking for trouble...

In the excerpt above, Reggie shared his experience of transitioning from a suburban to urban neighborhood. Although he moved to a community that had a larger number of

people from his own racial and ethnic background, he still had to familiarize himself with the practices, routines and daily realities of living in Golden State. Reggie demonstrated that diversity also exists within groups, including African American communities in urban areas. Reggie also revealed how he utilized particular strategies to not only learn about Golden State, but also to make important decisions that would allow him to navigate particular challenges present in his community.

While Reggie discussed his frustrations with the socio-economic disparities that existed between Golden State and wealthier neighborhoods, he did not express having a desire to move back to the suburbs. Instead, Reggie revealed how various individuals in his new formal context created conditions that allowed him to achieve his post secondary goals, an aspect far greater than the low socio-economics of his new community. More specifically, Reggie shared how several GSHS teachers in particular provided counterspaces that facilitated his academic, social, and personal development during his high school-to-college transition process.

#### *The Arts: Academic, Personal and Social Support System*

Reggie had been involved in theater arts since the age of 10. He said that being involved in this extracurricular activity helped him develop social and personal skills. He explained, “It [theater arts] actually teaches me a lot about myself. It brings out qualities I didn’t know I had in me. ... It helps me with self control and self discipline... It also helps me with my social skills...like my etiquette.” Besides actively participating in a community based theater company, Reggie was also involved in the GSHS Drama

Club/course. Through this activity, he had opportunities to take on leadership roles, as well as audition for and perform in various plays.

This space not only allowed Reggie to learn about ways to improve his acting skills, but it also became a place where he was able to build a rapport with Mr. Smith, an African American drama teacher. Reggie explained how Mr. Smith helped him with his personal and academic development during this critical transition process. For instance, Reggie acknowledged, prior to taking the drama class, he was short tempered around others, especially in the theater arts setting. He stated that Mr. Smith also recognized this problem and was able to teach Reggie about self-control, helping him to understand that this was especially important given that Reggie planned to pursue a college degree and career in theater arts, where such behavior would simply be unacceptable. Reggie said:

I've just been having lots of experiences acting at school and it's going to help me in the long run...I found out more stuff I didn't know about myself and... it's teaching me more self control... we don't always get what we want acting at the time that we want it. Since I am working for the best of the team, I have to just persevere and make the best out of the experience because in the end, were going to have a good performance.

In the excerpt above, Reggie's words demonstrated how Mr. Smith helped him develop his personal skills in drama class. He collectively worked with Mr. Smith to find alternative ways to respond to situations that he encountered in the theater arts setting. In addition, Reggie said that the lessons he learned from Mr. Smith were helpful not only to improve his relationships with others in drama class, but also, to acquire the skills necessary to pursue his postsecondary and career endeavors in theater arts.

Reggie also described how Mr. Smith played a critical role in creating an environment conducive to helping him navigate his lived realities as an African American male while achieving post-high school goals. Although Mr. Smith's course was designed to expose students to various aspects of theater arts, Reggie described, Mr. Smith also informed his students about the inequitable conditions that continue to impact People of Colors' educational and social advancement. In order to combat this issue, Reggie said, Mr. Smith collaborated with the college counselor, Ms. Kentwood, and a local religious institution to host a series of weekend workshops to help GSHS seniors with their college application process. Reggie stated:

Mr. Smith said that the system [the U.S. government] was made against us [People of Color]... He was saying how we need to listen to him because he did a workshop for the FASFA and the college applications... And he was saying how if you were in the program, you would know the ...scoop on how colleges do certain things...if you didn't go...you didn't get the real [information].

The excerpt above demonstrates how educators, as individuals within formal contexts, can create counterspaces that inform students about the systemic inequalities impacting their lives, and thereby facilitate successful college-going outcomes for their students in light of these challenges. Through collaborations with other school staff and community members, college application workshops were made available to help the GSHS senior class achieve their postsecondary pursuits. Although Reggie was unable to attend these workshops, he heard that many students received a multitude of information about the college application and financial aid processes. In addition, Reggie said he was still able to utilize Mr. Smith's services during and after school hours to inquire about college and pursuing a career in theater arts.

### *Academically Rigorous and College-going Culture*

Reggie also shared how other teachers created spaces that nurtured his academic development. Although he encountered challenges in some of his courses, he described a few teachers who created a college-going environment for him and his peers. During his sophomore year he described two African American teachers, Ms. Atkins (AP Chemistry) and Mrs. Zanderson (Honors Psychology), who besides attending the same Historically Black College and both being members of the same Black sorority, had similar teaching pedagogies. Reggie explained:

Ms. Atkins... she was kind of strict, which was good 'cause it kind of forced me to learn. And my psychology teacher Ms. Zanderson... was also strict and she also made me learn... We had a very rigid schedule. We would be going through chapters quickly—almost like going through a chapter everyday...It was like they didn't have time for all the jokes and messing around...It was mostly teaching. They wanted us to learn. You know, do this to help you study....They were like one in the same.

Reggie described how these teachers did not expect the minimum from their students but instead treated them like college students. He said that there was no down time in their classes because students were required to take notes, engage in discussions, and turn in assignments on time.

Reggie also had Mrs. Zanderson for AP U.S. History during his 11<sup>th</sup> grade year. In this setting, he said that she also pushed students to achieve at their maximum potential. Although many students in this study said that Mrs. Zanderson assigned a lot of work, they also felt they were being prepared for college. Reggie said Mrs. Zanderson constantly reiterated that she expected her students to succeed at the same level as students who attended predominately white, wealthier and high performing schools. She

also made sure her students were involved in community service. For example, it was Mrs. Zanderson who was responsible for affording Reggie and his classmates the opportunity to work at a local polling station to familiarize themselves with the voting process and strengthen their college applications. Mrs. Zanderson and Ms. Atkins created counterspaces that allowed their students to challenge the deficit notions about the academic abilities of Students of Color. The teachers not only created learning communities that required their students to work at their maximum potential at all times, but also provided them with the knowledge and dexterity they need to be competitive with students in other communities and at the college level.

One of Reggie's academic goals was to receive high grades in all his courses in order to achieve a 4.0 GPA. Due to the demands and rigor of these advanced level courses, Reggie was unable to meet this goal. He explained, "With these classes being how they were, I got a good education...I'd rather get a B or a C in a class and learn something, than to get an A and not really learn nothing at all." Although Reggie did not receive the grades he desired in all of his courses, he said that through his teachers, he was able to fully learn the content and develop the skills necessary to enhance his academic performance. As revealed through Reggie's accounts, teachers play a critical role in creating academically rigorous and supportive learning communities that help facilitate successful college-going outcomes for African American students.

#### *Teachers as Information Gateways*

Reggie stated that he did not learn about GEAR UP until his Algebra I teacher, Mrs. Moore-Robertson [African American], made it mandatory that her students

participate in this program. Those students receiving a C or lower in her classes were required to attend GEAR UP's academic tutoring for a designated number of hours.

Reggie said:

Mrs. Moore-Robertson....said...if we got a C or lower, then we had to go there [GEAR UP] for .... six hours. If you got a D, you have to go there for nine hours. It was early in the school year... So I started going there, I did my hour, but I kept on going because I liked it there. I was meeting new people, they was helping me out with stuff I had trouble with [homework]... so I stayed to participate in the GEAR UP program.

The excerpt above demonstrated how Reggie's Algebra I teacher provided an outlet for students to utilize alternative spaces on campus to improve their academic performance. Not only did Mrs. Moore-Robertson go out of her way to ensure that her students received additional help to do well in her class, she unknowingly exposed Reggie to a program that would also help him achieve his postsecondary goals. Mrs. Moore-Robertson's actions showed that she did not blame her students for the academic challenges they experienced in her class; instead, she took a proactive role that required her students to utilize campus resources such as GEAR UP as an additional way to improve their grades.

Even after Reggie completed his mandatory tutoring hours, he continued to participate in GEAR UP tutoring and other activities. Reggie felt that GEAR UP was a counterspace at GSHS that allowed him to interact with GSHS students who had similar postsecondary goals "in a more peaceful environment," utilize resources (e.g. computers) that were not readily available on campus, and attend workshops that helped him take actions and make decisions towards college. He stated:

It [GEAR UP Adelante Summer Program] made me feel like I gotta prove something 'cause they [society] already looks down on minorities. And it doesn't help if they're [minorities] not going to college and if they do go to college, they drop out. So I gotta basically prove something, prove myself worthy, that I'm not going to drop out or be a part of the statistic that you think I'm a part of.

The excerpt above illuminated how the GEAR UP activities helped Reggie make sense of the inequalities impacting higher education access and participation for Students of Color in particular. Reggie contended that he refused to be a part of the dominant discourse that assumes the worst about African American students' college-going potential and abilities, especially of those individuals in urban communities. Mrs. Moore-Robertson's actions allowed Reggie to find a counterspace that helped him to not only improve his academic skills, but also to continue participating in a learning community that helped him challenge the discourse about his ability to achieve his post secondary goals. Reggie continued to reiterate throughout this study that it was educators like Mr. Smith, Ms. Atkins, Mrs. Zanderson and Mrs. Moore-Robertson who introduced him to, and provided counterspaces that facilitated, a successful transition from high school to college.

Reggie participated in the GEAR UP College Preparatory Summer Program, which prepared GSHS students who were entering their senior year to apply for college. He informed me during his senior year interview that one component of the program he benefited from was the weeklong trip to Northern California public and private colleges and universities. He said this trip allowed him to learn about other institutions of higher education outside of Southern California. Through the Northern California college tour, he became interested in applying to more colleges and universities. While Reggie was

WMU/SU eligible, he decided to only apply to the SU system. Accepted to the SU campuses to which he applied, he was deciding between SU, Edgewood (SUE) and SU, San Joaquin. He decided to attend SUE because he was interested in the opportunities available through the theatre arts department and wanted to minor in business in order to keep his career options open. He left Golden State a month before SUE school year began because he signed up to participate in the AOP Summer Bridge Program.

Reggie's counter-narrative demonstrates the importance of using the C.R.E.A.T.E. model to understand the power educators have to create counterspaces for African American students to achieve college-going outcomes. More specifically, he described how a few GSHS teachers played a critical role in helping him successfully navigate his high school-to-college transition process. These educators utilized their classrooms as counterspaces, which not only embraced students' lived realities, but also challenged students to work to the maximum level of their potential. Through these teachers' pedagogical practices, they explicitly and implicitly revealed the importance of not conforming to stereotypes about the academic potential and outcomes of Students of Colors. Reggie revealed how these educators accomplished this goal by working with students to enhance their academic, personal and social development.

Reggie's accounts also illuminated the various ways he asserted individual agency within these spaces to achieve his post secondary goals. In drama class, Reggie took on several leadership roles and worked closely with Mr. Smith to improve his personal, social and acting skills as well as learn about pursuing a career in theater arts. Through his advanced level courses he recognized the importance of challenging himself in order to

better prepare himself for college. Following through with his Algebra I teacher's requirement for students to attend GEAR UP tutoring paved the way for him to be involved in other college-going opportunities through this program.

**Paige**

The only thing I ...actually...got involved for the past year is really the dancing and the dancing was basically [during] class time... and plus... after school for other things... It keeps me positive cause I come out of dance and I'm happy and I'm ready to... learn more not just from dance but from other things.

**Paige, 10<sup>th</sup> grade**

***College-going Outcomes for the Children***

Since Paige attended elementary and middle school in another district, I did not meet her until she entered GSHS as a freshman. Through our various conversations, I was impressed by her desire to pursue a college degree so that she could become a social worker. During Paige's senior year, I inquired about her decision to pursue college. She replied:

I wanna help...kids out of poverty. I wanna ...do so much...for...the kids and the family so I chose social work ...People don't understand that ...they [foster care youth] really need someone to talk to... not to just come and just be like okay I see you okay bye... They need somebody who's going to be there and they can depend on them. They don't wanna talk to different people every month about ...their situation because maybe they don't feel comfortable with that new person.

In the excerpt above, Paige highlighted a critical issue – the high turnover rates and lack of support from social workers, which impact the lives of foster care youth, especially Youth of Color who make up a large portion of the system. When Paige's mother passed away during her elementary school years, she informed me that she

entered foster care under the guardianship of her maternal aunt. Through her experiences with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), she described how many foster care youth do not receive the support and services they need to successfully achieve their educational goals. Therefore, Paige shared she had made a commitment to impact change for this marginalized population through social work. Although Paige received familial support from her aunt and older sister, she discussed how she sought additional assistance at school to help her during the high school-to-college transition process. She explained, “It’s like people at home they [provide] support but it’s only [during] certain times.” More specifically, Paige utilized counterspaces at GSHS to navigate her reality as a young, low income, African American female committed to achieving her postsecondary and career goals.

Discussions about foster care Youth of Color often focus on the problems they face adjusting to society. Rarely do these conversations highlight how these individuals assert agency and utilize counterspaces in their formal contexts to facilitate their high school-to-college transition process. As I got to know Paige, I observed her ability to balance her academics and extracurricular activities. In order to fulfill her college preparatory requirements, Paige made sure she excelled in AP, honors, and regular education courses. Even when Paige encountered challenges, she tried her best to maintain high academic marks. For example, when Paige spoke about achieving her academic goals during her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, she said:

I think [I achieved] all of them [goals], ‘cause ... I still have my high GPA... I just kept to them, especially trying to stay focused in that math class ... I stayed focused and tried to understand the work, like I just sat there and took the time to go over it and asked for help.

The underachievement of African American students continues to be the focus of education debates. While reform initiatives and policies are being implemented in an attempt to ameliorate this issue, it is also important to understand the ways various students conceptualize the successes and challenges they encounter in their school contexts. In the excerpt above, Paige challenged the discourse that questions African American students' commitment to their academic achievement and outcomes. In particular, Paige revealed the agency she asserted to achieve her educational goals despite the challenges she encountered in her lived realities.

*Dancing: My Passion and My Safe Space*

Besides Paige's determination to excel academically, she utilized extracurricular activities at GSHS to help her during this critical transition process. From the time I met Paige, she informed me about her love for dancing. She said that dancing allowed her to step away from the challenges in her life and express her creative talents. During her senior year, she decided to create a collage to respond to a pre-interview activity prompt that asked students to create a visual representation reflecting on how they became the person that they were today. This collage included pictures of Paige's immediate family, different entertainers, and a young child, which symbolized her desire to pursue a career in social work. A section of her collage that especially stood out contained three pictures of different dance styles (e.g. modern dance, drill team and ballet). When I asked her to describe these pictures, she replied:

I put dance [on the collage] ...these are dance styles from Savannah University and I put this on there for drill team. I just love band... and then

dance team because dance is just the way I express myself when I'm angry or sad. I just love to dance. Like I can dance to anything... I just really like to dance' cause it helps me ...see myself. It feels so relaxing. It feels right to dance.

At GSHS, Paige was actively involved in tall flags, drill team, and the dance team to fulfill her passion in performing arts and her course requirements. In order to ensure successful performances throughout the academic year, Paige committed herself to practicing with her teammates after school, on weekends and during the summer months. The dance team was not the only outlet that allowed Paige to be at her best, as she also engaged in activities that ranged from seeking advice from her dance instructor and teammates to taking on several leadership roles. For example, Paige enjoyed using her leadership skills to assist with the logistics, planning and implementation of performances and events for the dance team to ensure that everything ran smoothly. In addition, when problems arose between Paige's teammates, she would intervene in order to resolve the issues.

During an informal conversation with Paige in her senior year, she informed me that she felt that GSHS officials prioritized standardized testing over trying to create a balance between academic and extracurricular activities for the student body. Because students' test scores had not met state and federal standards, the principal had taken away many activities and incentives (i.e. pep rallies) that were previously available during school hours. In addition, Paige expressed how she felt that extracurricular activities were crucial to improving GSHS students' daily experiences and outcomes. Paige said her involvement in school activities not only allowed her to strengthen her academic skills and dance techniques, but also allowed her to be a part of safe spaces that created

opportunities to share her experiences with others. For example, despite the occasional conflicts that occurred on the dance team, Paige developed close relationships with her instructor and teammates. During her 12<sup>th</sup> grade year, she explained:

This year it's like the first time we really got to... stay in the dance office...during lunchtime... And like...everybody talks to each other. You can sit there and talk about personal things and all...They listen to each other, understand each other.

Paige discussed how she became close friends with one of her Latina teammates, Reyna. She said that they balanced each other out. While Reyna helped Paige learn dance routines, assisted her in get ready for school dances and provided great advice about personal issues, Paige made sure Reyna was doing well in school so that they could both achieve their post-high school goals. This interracial friendship challenges mainstream discourse that emphasizes the racial tension between African Americans and Latinos in urban communities, especially in Golden State. Paige's friendship with Reyna would seem to illuminate the positive relationships that can and do exist between these groups in formal spaces such as schools, and which help facilitate successful college-going outcomes.

*GEAR UP: More Resources and Opportunities than GSHS*

Unlike many of the other students in this study, Paige became a GEAR UP participant when she entered GSHS in the ninth grade. Although she had a strong academic background, I noticed that she continuously described the various ways GEAR UP positively impacted her high school-to-college transition process. When Paige was not in the dance office, she spent most of her time in the GEAR UP office. This program was another space where she sought assistance to meet her various needs. For example,

Paige not only built a strong rapport with GEAR UP staff members, she also developed a support network with GSHS students from diverse backgrounds. She stated:

The peers in the GEAR UP office and then the GEAR UP office staff like they're close to the same because mostly everybody is positive in there and they want to see the others...do well. Like everyone is helping each other... Like yeah you guys got your own to do... but you're helping...the other person. It's like something I'll do too.

Inequitable funding, resources and opportunities continue to impact students, teachers, and other school officials in urban public schools. These educational inequalities also affect the academic trajectories of many African American students. School-university partnerships such as GEAR UP that are based on school grounds can play a critical role in helping to fill this void. Throughout this study, Paige described how GEAR UP was a comprehensive program that not only catered to students academic, personal and social needs, but also collaborated with the GSHS community to implement college-going activities and mediate conflicts between students and school staff.

Paige, along with many other students in this study, expressed her frustration with the limited college preparatory opportunities available at GSHS, and especially with the new college counselor, Ms. Kentwood. During her senior year, Paige said:

The school [GSHS] doesn't do anything. The CACC [College and Career Center] office is suppose to be there for us...The lady is always gone... She's never there so it's never any point in time to go up there and talk to her. If you do, she has an attitude anyway...it's like nobody is there to help us.

Paige highlighted one of many challenges that continue to persist in urban schools – the limited counseling staff that are available to help student during this critical transition process. Despite these inequalities, Paige challenged the deficit assumption

about this population by demonstrating how she and her classmates continuously made efforts to obtain assistance with their postsecondary goals. Yet, most often the GSHS CACC office was either closed or the college counselor was unavailable (i.e., absent, away from her desk, etc), and if she was present, she would hurriedly distribute information with little explanation. Paige went on to explain how students found alternative spaces on campus such as GEAR UP and in the confidence of certain teachers to obtain information about college and to acquire the support and resources GSHS was unable or simply failed to provide students. During her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year, Paige described how GEAR UP influenced her decision to pursue higher education. She said:

GEAR UP really made me want to go [to college]... Like I knew I wanted to go from the start. But GEAR UP...gets you ready for college and all the programs that I went to like the Adelante [Summer Program]. It makes you really want to go to college and it prepares you for college. Like all my tutors...who helped me they make me...really get ready and... make me excited for college.

Paige expressed that GEAR UP provided activities, workshops and resources to help the GSHS student body achieve college-going outcomes. Throughout this study, I also noticed how GEAR UP seemed to help Paige with changes that occurred in her decision towards college. During her sophomore year, Paige seemed to be quite confident about pursuing higher education, and specifically, rather adamant about attending a highly selective WMU campus. Paige explained, "I definitely want to go to WMU, Los Altos [WMULA] or WMU, Bridgeport [WMUB]. But I rather [go to] WMULA 'cause WMUB is far out." Although Paige was WMU/SU (State University) eligible, it appeared that her confidence level about attending college declined by her senior year. She seemed nervous and uncomfortable about the college application process. When I informally inquired

about why she felt this way, she kept saying, “I don’t know. I’m just scared.” Fortunately other GEAR UP staff members also noticed this change and we were able to collectively help Paige feel comfortable about the process, and assisted her with her college applications.

I also noticed that she was only applying to the SU system and even then, only to six campuses. I found out that this was because this was the amount of schools that the application fee waiver covered. Although Paige was WMU/SU eligible, she informed me that she did not apply to the WMU system because she did not feel ready to attend a WMU campus. As the admission letters were being sent, Paige learned that she was admitted to all of the SU campuses to which she applied. She decided to attend SU Newberry (SUN).

Although her financial aid was immediately handled as a foster care youth, Paige then waited to find out if she was admitted to AOP and selected to participate in their Summer Bridge Program as well as received housing for the academic year. Paige successfully graduated from GSHS and continued to patiently wait to hear back from AOP and university housing. A week after Paige graduated she was admitted to AOP. Although Paige was also admitted to the AOP Summer Bridge Program, she was informed that she would have to commute to SUN to participate. Since this meant spending several hours on public transportation, Paige decided to stay at home instead. Towards the end of the summer, a space became available for her to live in university housing during the academic year.

Paige's counter-narrative is another example of where the C.R.E.A.T.E. model helps us understand how extracurricular activities in the school context can help African American students during the high school-to-college transition process. As a foster care youth, Paige could use these activities as counterspaces that provided her with different forms of support that she did not receive through the Department of Children and Family Services nor from her family. Through her involvements in dance programs and GEAR UP, she revealed the individual and collective agency she asserted in order to achieve her goals. These counterspaces allowed Paige to display individual agency through her commitments to pursuing her passion as a dancer, strengthening her academic abilities as a scholar, and focusing on her postsecondary pursuits. In addition, she was able to collectively create a space that allowed young Women of Color to reflect on and support each others' experiences as racialized, classed and gendered beings. Through Paige's accounts of her involvement in GEAR UP, she challenged the discourse that seldom describes the collaborative efforts that emerge in learning Communities of Color focused on increasing college-going outcomes for all students.

#### **Adrian**

"GEAR UP has kept me on track since the sixth grade... as in going to college, staying focused on my school work, like not getting an attitude for everything, like just being a better person."

**Adrian, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

#### *In Search for a Support System*

Although Adrian had participated in GEAR UP since middle school, I did not get to know him until he entered GSHS. Through several conversations, I learned that he was

from a low-income, single parent, West Indian immigrant household. As the first person in his family to pursue college, Adrian saw higher education not only as means towards achieving his future career goals in business and law, but also as an opportunity to get away from his home life, which he often described as less than desirable. On various occasions, he informed me that his mother prioritized household chores over his schoolwork. During his senior year, Adrian stated:

My fam bam [family] doesn't really... care about my school life. Just as long as I am doing what I am supposed to do at home, they're fine... She [my mother] may check in [on my academics] every now and then...it's cool because she has a whole list of other things to worry about.

Adrian described how he had to attend to household responsibilities such as cleaning and using money he earned from his part-time job to help pay the bills, all before his schoolwork. He recognized the challenges his mother faced as a single parent and legal guardian to his cousins. Yet, he stated, arguments often occurred over this situation in his home, and many times prevented him from completing his homework. Although he turned to GSHS for additional support, he encountered several roadblocks in school, especially within the classroom setting. During his 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, he expressed that several GSHS teachers were not open to addressing the needs of their students within the classroom. He said:

They [teachers] don't consider what you have been going through outside of school and give you a break because somebody can look at your grades and judge a C [as]...Oh he's not working towards what he can be working towards.

Adrian explained that certain teachers at GSHS did not try to understand how his lived realities impacted his academic performance. More specifically, he stated that these

teachers did not provide him with the assistance he needed to achieve his desired academic outcomes. Therefore, Adrian found alternative spaces on campus to assist him during his high school-to-college transition process.

*GEAR UP: A Home Away From Home*

Adrian said that GEAR UP played a critical role in facilitating his daily experiences at GSHS. He stated that the program staff and students served as his second family, his home away from home. During Adrian's senior year, he wrote a short essay to respond to the pre-interview activity prompt. In his essay he spoke about his lived realities and the individuals who have helped him become the young African American man that he was today. When describing how GEAR UP has supported him, he said:

Another group of individuals that helped me become who I am today would be the ever-changing GEAR UP staff. There have been many people come in and out of the office: some for money and some for the kids. Either way it goes, each individual has helped me become who I am today...I have learned from this and changed for the better.

Unlike many other college preparation programs, GEAR UP was located on the GSHS campus. This program was open before, during, and after school hours, which allowed various members of the GSHS community to utilize services and collaborate on programmatic and community based efforts. Adrian said that this space allowed him the opportunity to navigate his experiences both inside and outside of GSHS. He explained, "You can always go to the GEAR UP office like if you need help with anything...like life, or school, or whatever." Adrian was not only able to complete his work through GEAR UP; he also took naps in the office, got assistance with college preparation and planning as well as discussed various issues going on in his life with staff members.

Through this study, I learned that Adrian was a high achieving student who did not have to study much to understand the course material and receive high academic marks. He expressed that he easily absorbed the information he learned in his classes and only took notes on the most relevant information. Adrian informed me that if teachers did not make their courses interesting, he would immediately stop listening, procrastinate on completing his assignments and seek assistance elsewhere. In addition, his inquisitive nature often got mistaken for sarcasm and got him into trouble in his classes. As a result, even though Adrian produced high grades and test scores, tension often emerged between him and his teachers, which caused his grades to suffer. Regarding these conflicts, he once said, "I learned that to get good grades, it's not about academic performance, but how well you get along with the teachers." For example, Adrian described the problems he encountered with his French teacher, Ms. Pearlman (Caucasian), during his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year.

She never gives me a break. I told her my life story, but she doesn't care. Because she doesn't explain the things, I have to teach it to myself all over again. And then that takes up time. And then I have to do homework and I have to know everything by the next day.

Adrian informed me that he took this course not only to fulfill the A-G requirements for college, but also to learn a new language in order to be highly competitive for the business world that he wants to be a part of after completing college. Although he was unable to achieve his goal of completing the French class, he refused to settle for a low grade. Because there were limited French books available for students to take home, Adrian said he was unable to complete many of his homework assignments in a timely and efficient manner. Therefore, he decided to seek assistance from GEAR UP

tutors who spoke French. In the excerpt above, Adrian demonstrated the power that teachers have to positively or negatively impact students' academic performance and outcomes. More specifically, he sheds light on the need for teachers to learn about their students' experiences outside of school in order to make sense of the academic performance and behavior in class. Although Ms. Pearlman did not attempt to learn about Adrian's lived realities and help him learn French, he took the initiative to ensure that his academic needs would be met in an alternative learning community—GEAR UP.

*A Place for Me and 'My Boyz'*

School-University partnerships can do more than provide opportunities for improving student performance and outcomes in urban schools. These programs can also create spaces that allow students from various backgrounds to interact with one another, collaborate with each other to achieve individual and collective goals and challenge the discourse about their lived realities. Throughout this study, I saw how the GEAR UP office served as a space for Adrian and his friends to hang out together and focus on achieving their goals. His “boyz,” as he called them, was a group comprised of mainly African American males who had known each other since elementary and middle schools. In his pre-interview activity response, he described his “boyz” as being the first group to have significantly impacted his life. He stated, “We have been through it all and have been there for each other since day one... All [friends] aren't considered to be equally significant in my journey, but all are considered to be my brothers.” Although his friends were from varied academic, socioeconomic and familial backgrounds, they had common goals that kept them together-- to successfully graduate from high school and

gain access to college. They were enrolled in similar courses, participated in the same extracurricular activities and collectively worked towards transitioning to college.

During an informal focus group meeting with Adrian and his friends at Denny's, they reiterated that it was not GEAR UP that brought them together, as many of them were already friends before they joined this program. Rather, they described, GEAR UP provided them with a space to collectively take the steps necessary to successfully transition to college as well as to be themselves while doing so. While interviewing Adrian during his senior year, he said:

It's [peer group] like a support system. Like anytime we slip up in school or something like we know how to help each other. Like it's been a couple of times when I did other people's homework [in GEAR UP]. It's like they could [have did their work] but they just don't have the time.

While Adrian and his friends were popular at GSHS, he said that what set them apart from others students was that they were "cool, smart, and about business." They could hang out anywhere they wanted to on campus, but they chose the GEAR UP office because they did not have to fit in with other students, and could work on assignments together and get assistance with their college preparation process. Adrian and his friends' use of the GEAR UP office also influenced other students with similar goals to hang out in there as well.

#### *The Boys Group: A Transformative Space*

African American students continue to encounter issues of race, class, gender and other social constructs in their daily realities that positively and negatively impact their academic trajectories. Therefore, it is crucial for schools to consider ways to address their experiences in order to facilitate successful college-going outcomes. GEAR UP

developed opportunities for Adrian to reflect on his role as a young African American male living in an urban community. The program staff collaborated with Masai Kuti, an African American independent consultant, to create a Boys Group. This group was established towards the end of Adrian's ninth grade year in order to respond to the needs of African American and Latino male participants. During his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year, he described the Boys Group as a mentoring program that transformed students' lives both inside and outside of school. He said:

Masai has a program where he takes a couple of students... and ... mentors them and shaping up their lives from not doing nothing after school to being involved in the community... He'll take us places to find out about the community... he took us to the health clinics, the One Stop [employment center].

In the following excerpt, Adrian demonstrated how the Boys Group allowed him to understand the importance of being involved in his Golden State community. Through field trips to Communities of Color, Adrian said he was able to critically reflect on the challenges of and explore the cultural richness of his community. In addition, he felt that the Boys Group taught him various ways to balance his academic and personal experiences: "It teaches you time management and how to face different things in your life in certain spaces depending on the importance." When I inquired about how Adrian planned his academic goals, he discussed Masai's involvement in this process. Each week, Masai met with the students individually and collectively to help them plan realistic goals each semester that they would be able to meet. Through these meetings, many students were able to improve their grades. Adrian stated:

Like everybody raised... their grades to like A's. Like before we even started at the beginning of the year, the semester, I expected [these] grades

at the end of the year to be all As...I was able to get As... [and] change it throughout the year.

The Boys Group not only helped students maintain stellar academic grades, it also prepared them to successfully gain access to higher education. Masai worked with the GEAR UP staff to ensure that each student was academically eligible to transition to college. He was also involved in facilitating dialogues with students and their families about college planning, the financial aid process and networking. For example, when Adrian and two of the other GEAR UP participants gained admission to a WMU, Los Altos (WMULA), Adrian explained, Masai was very instrumental in helping them understand how best to finance their education.

See just this year alone Masai pretty much got me a free ride to WMULA... Like I met a couple of people I can network with through Masai...like the financial aid lady... She asked me a couple of questions and said I can have the Blue and White Scholarship.

Collaborating with university and community affiliates can also create opportunities for African American students to solidify their decisions about and participate in higher education. Adrian was one of the six African American males at GSHS admitted to WMULA. This was the first time in GSHS history that more than two African American males were admitted to a highly selective institution. As a community activist and the Black Alumni Association President, Masai was able to utilize his connections with university officials to help obtain scholarships for these kids to be able to pay for college. These connections likely made a difference for Adrian and his fellow peers given that they were eligible for and eventually selected to receive four-year scholarships to WMULA. Adrian decided to attend WMULA because of a four-year Blue

and White Scholarship he received. This scholarship money came from the millions of dollars raised by the WMULA Black Alumni Association to increase the number of African American admits attending WMULA.

During his senior year interview, Adrian also shared how Masai provided him with opportunities to network with other individuals in the WMULA community. Not only did he get to converse with university administrators but he was also paired up with two African American professionals/ WMULA alumnus who would serve as his mentors once he transitioned to WMULA. Through the Educational Advancement Program (EAP) Scholars Day event, Adrian learned about and applied to the Freshman Summer Program (FSP). This six week intensive program prepared incoming students to succeed by exposing them to the rigor and demands of academic life, undergraduate programs, services, and learning resources. Once Adrian was selected to participate in EAP, he spent his summer working until the program began.

Adrian's counter-narrative revealed how the C.R.E.A.T.E. framework can be used to demonstrate how school-university partnerships such as GEAR UP can provide counterspaces for African American students to navigate the successes and challenges of their lived realities to achieve their goals. This space provided opportunities for Adrian to consider ways to overcome the challenges he faced both inside and outside of school. Adrian and his friends were also able to utilize the GEAR UP office to collectively stay focused on their higher education pursuits. Through the Boys Group, he developed the skills necessary to learn about himself and his community as well as to work with individuals who would help him transition to college.

Individual and collective agency was also revealed through his accounts of how GEAR UP created a space that facilitated his successful pathways to college. Individual agency was demonstrated through Adrian's ability to seek assistance to ensure that he passed his French class as well as in his commitment to being actively involved in the Boys Group in order to achieve his goals. Collective agency was illustrated through the instances of Adrian and his friend working together in a space that allowed them to focus on and get the help they needed to participate in higher education and collaborating with members of the Boy Group to improve their academic, personal and social development.

### **Introduction to Chapters 8-10: Informal Contexts**

“She is her mother’s strength, her grandmother’s heart, her grandfather’s courage, her father’s fear of commitment, her brother and sisters’ words of encouragement. But she, just as God intended, is an individual, with an attempt to be independent... She is the reflection of her parent’s complications. She is the statistic of her single family home with her mother raising three kids on her own. But not one of the statistics- sex, gangs, violence and suicide replaces the love of her father. Not the replacement for the working mother, not the replacement for the stress. And although her life is not diamonds and roses, the beauty in her is still shown. And unfortunately, known to just her and the world, she is a singer, dancer, replacement for the mother that her job sees more than her children... “A strong mind and determination equals you” and so as she looks in the mirror, there forms a puzzle- where her family, friends and sisters past, present and future goals create a life for her that reflects off of the mirror as me”

#### **Dania, 12<sup>th</sup> grade Excerpt from Poem “The Reflection Underneath”**

Before conducting senior year interviews with the African American students in this longitudinal study, I distributed a pre-interview activity for them to reflect on the following prompt: *How did you become the person that you are today? Create a representation of the things (e.g. people, places, events, turning points, successes, challenges, etc) that have positively and/or negatively influenced your life, your identity/identities (e.g. race, gender, student, sibling, etc) and future plans.* While a few students decided to verbally respond to the prompt, many others created collages, poems and reflective essays. The creative piece above was an excerpt from Dania’s poem, “The Reflection Underneath.” Throughout this poem, Dania centralized her experiences as a racialized, classed and gendered being in her informal context. She mainly focused on her family, with whom she spends most of her time. Despite the deficit conversations about

African American families, especially those in urban communities, Dania demonstrates how her agency during the high school-to-college transition process is strongly influenced by the complexities of her family. In other words, it appears as though Dania's agency is shaped by her family who helped her make sense of ways to navigate this critical transition process.

Dania's poem represented one of many stories these students shared about their experiences during their high school-to-college transition process. While they described how formal contexts such as schools, social service agencies and educational programs facilitated and hindered their agency during their journey toward college, they also shed light on informal contexts that are seldom addressed, at least in any positive manner. Informal contexts refer to spaces such as families, peers and communities. Such spaces are continuously placed at the center of controversial debates and seen as some of the main culprits of the crisis in African American education. While these students reflected on the successes and challenges they faced in their informal contexts, using a *critical race ecocultural agency theory in education* (C.R.E.A.T.E.) model can help draw attention to the nuances in their pathways towards higher education.

In order to examine the *high school-to-college transition process* using the C.R.E.A.T.E. framework, it is important to discuss these students' experiences within their informal contexts. As such, I will continue to explore the following question in chapters 8, 9 and 10: *How does using a C.R.E.A.T.E. model help us understand the high school-to-college transition process for African-American students?* I centralize these students' voices and lived realities to highlight how their agency was asserted in their

various informal contexts. The goal of these chapters is not to solely focus on the challenges these African American students face in their informal spaces, but to also demonstrate how their lived experiences inform the way in which a C.R.E.A.T.E. model can be used to illuminate the complexities and developments that occur for these individuals during this critical transition process. More specifically, I look to show how these students mediate and respond to the various factors and challenges in their familial context in order to achieve their postsecondary goals.

Family<sup>20</sup> played a critical role in facilitating and deterring most of these African American students' high school-to-college transition process. Dania's poem highlights how, despite the familial support that she received during this process, dominant discourse that continuously focuses on discouraging factors that link African American families, especially single parent households, to problems such as "*sex, gangs, violence and suicide,*" also affected her process and outcomes. These deficit ideologies influence unfair school practices and policies that determine these students' educational trajectories. As a result, the diversity of their families and the agency that they assert to respond to factors and challenges impacting their familial context are ignored or at least mitigated. In the next three chapters, I will use the C.R.E.A.T.E. model to demonstrate how these African American students: 1) challenged the discourse about their familial experiences (Chapter 8), 2) strategically navigated challenges in their informal context (Chapter 9), and 3) developed a critical understanding of their familial realities (Chapter 10).

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<sup>20</sup> Based on these 20 African American students' familial backgrounds can be comprised of one to two parents, siblings, extended family members, legal guardians and/or community members.

## **8- Challenging the Discourse about Our Familial Experiences**

The dominant discourse continuously describes how college educated, middle and upper class, and typically white families produce college-educated children, while non-college educated, lower to middle class, and often Families of Color do not. What is often not described is how the former group often has far greater access to resources, opportunities and social networks to help their children successfully transition into higher education than does the latter group. In other words, the families described by the first set of circumstances are depicted as being more involved, proactive and supportive in helping their children get into college as opposed to families described by the second set of categories. The latter group is presumed to be less educated, economically disenfranchised and seldom involved in their children's education. These deficit descriptions are persistently used to define African American families, especially those living in urban communities. These families are constantly being compared to White families. More specifically, they are blamed for lacking educational values, being unsupportive, and not taking advantage of the "opportunities" available for their children in school. If an African American child pursues higher education, he or she is seen as the anomaly, the exception to the rule.

Throughout this dissertation study, the students I observed challenged the dominant discourse about their familial experiences. Not only did they demonstrate how many of these assumptions about their families were false, but also how their familial contexts more often than not positively contributed to their high school-to-college transition process. In this chapter, I will use a C.R.E.A.T.E. framework to create counter-

narratives of three students—Elijah, Dania and Keisha – to highlight how they challenged the discourse about their families’ experiences during their high school-to-college transition process.

### **Elijah**

“Seeing that constant flow of success aroused the amusement of my parents made me only want to bring more positive things within my household.”

**Elijah, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

Mainstream conversations continuously describe how African American families, especially in low-income areas, fail to be actively involved in their children’s education. If they are unable to attend every school event, be involved in the Parent Teacher Association or volunteer on campus, they are blamed for not being supportive of their children’s academic achievement and outcomes. These rigid definitions of familial involvement do not consider the diverse ways these families are involved in their children’s education, especially during the high school-to-college transition process.

When I began my work with GEAR UP five years ago, I was immediately amazed to see the various collaborations that occurred between program staff, school officials, parents, students and community members. While many families enrolled their children in this program, there was one family in particular, a mother, father and two children, who stood out to me. They seemed to attend every GEAR UP program, meeting and event, and took advantage of all the opportunities Golden State Magnet Middle School (GSMMS) and GEAR UP had to offer. Once, when a GEAR UP colleague introduced them to me, I was informed that their oldest child, Elijah, had been

in GEAR UP since the sixth grade and that their daughter, Ebony, had just entered the program that year. While I briefly met Elijah during his 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, I did not learn about his lived experiences until I began this dissertation study. As I got to know Elijah, I was able to make connections between his academic trajectory, familial realities and high school-to-college transition process.

I learned that Elijah was from a working class background and would be the first in his immediate family to pursue a college degree. Although his parents only obtained their high school diplomas, they were able to secure jobs that allowed them to be fully involved in their children's education. While Elijah's parents had jobs that were flexible, many African American families in urban areas usually have jobs that effectively limit their opportunities to attend to their children's needs during school hours. Missing work means having to sacrifice a day's worth of pay – money necessary to provide food and shelter for their families – and sometimes even risking losing their job entirely. For the pre interview activity, Elijah decided to write a reflective essay on the individuals, especially within his family, who had shaped his academic trajectory. In the following excerpt from his essay, he stated:

The person that I am today is created via the presentation of many other individuals... I enjoy this trait that I have because I feel as though I've become more and more aware of their actions and the things that revolve around me... I find that the things that really shape my persona are the affects of different events upon my immediate family. For example, if someone does something drastic and my parents approach it with a dramatic amount of concern, I try to ensure that I don't become the person to take a drastic step because I would not want to be a target within my family.

In the excerpt above Elijah's comments seem to suggest that his parents had influenced him to think about his decisions before taking action. Through this lesson, he was able to recognize the actions that brought happiness and disappointment to his family. For instance, he described how as early as elementary school, he realized that bringing home good grades made his parents proud. Therefore, Elijah made a commitment to doing well in school to continue making his parents happy. This excerpt challenges the deficit conversations about the lack of concern African American families have about their children's education. Elijah's parents demonstrated how they did not settle for less when it came to their children's academic achievement. They expected Elijah and his siblings to perform to their maximum potential in school.

When his family encountered challenges, Elijah stated, he found ways to help improve their situation. For, example, when his older sister dropped out of college to be with her boyfriend, he recalled, her actions created negative tension amongst his family members. In addition to being extremely disappointed, Elijah maintained, his parents found every opportunity to put down his sister, especially when she was at home. In order to alleviate the tension in the house, Elijah decided to bring home a "constant flow of success" to make his parents proud and draw attention away from his sister. He made this point when he stated:

I constantly brought in good news that drew the attention towards myself as opposed to being emphasized on her. However it seemed as though my efforts only made things worse. I became a symbol of success within my household, causing an imbalance of treatment among the offspring.

This excerpt demonstrates the power students have to mediate challenges that may occur in their familial contexts. Elijah's parents expected successful academic performance and

outcomes in their household. Yet, his sister did not fulfill their expectations and instead took an alternative route. Since Elijah sister's actions created tension at home, Elijah made a commitment to maintain high academic marks in order to improve this situation. As Elijah attempted to help his sister and parents, his plans soon backfired. He had become the symbol for success causing his parents to make comparisons between him and his siblings. While this situation has not stopped Elijah from excelling in school, he expressed that he did not enjoy being used to make his sisters feel less than him. He stated during one of our interviews:

I am unaware of where this belief came from, but I do believe that the value of self-esteem of an individual is very important. If one thinks highly or lowly of themselves this will be reflected in their personality as well as their level of performance. Someone with a high level of self-esteem will have a higher potential to reach for the higher goals in life. These goals may seem far beyond reach for some individuals, but in the eyes of individuals with high levels of potential, anything is possible.

The relationship between Elijah's sister and parents gradually improved, and Elijah became even more actively involved in helping his family members and friends achieve their goals. For instance, during an informal conversation with his mother via phone, I learned that Elijah used the knowledge gained in previous classes to help his younger sister in school. Specifically, his mother said, Elijah tutored his sister in various subject areas to ensure that she understood the material in order to do well in her courses. When I inquired about his reasons for doing well and trying to help others, Elijah replied:

I kinda wanted to do well for the well being of everybody else [family, friends and community] ...instead of just having this one picture of a person or a community who emphasizes on doing the minimum. Why... stay at that minimum when you could ... be above and beyond....like be something equivalent to ...another person in another community ...especially when this community is looked down upon. And if you...do

something like equivalent to another person at a community that's looked highly upon..., that brings...a more positive...vibe back on to your community.

In the excerpt above, Elijah sheds light on important issues about his lived realities as a racialized, classed and gendered being in the informal contexts of his household and community. He expressed his awareness of the continuous misrepresentations of his community and the individuals that reside in that informal context. Specifically, he described how mainstream conversations persistently focus on the Golden State community—mainly African Americans and Latinos – “doing the minimum” to achieve educational and economic advancement. He began to question why his community cannot be seen in the same light as wealthy, white communities, especially in regards to their educational advancements. Therefore, Elijah was committed to successfully graduating from high school and transitioning to college, helping as many others as he could along the way, to bring a more positive and respectful image back to his community.

Elijah was able to achieve these educational and personal goals. During the second semester of Elijah’s senior year, Elijah received the highest G.P.A. in his senior class. He said that he was working harder this year to make sure he got into the colleges and universities of his choice. He submitted applications to SU campuses, WMU campuses, HBCUs and Ivy League colleges. Elijah received early admission letters from all of the SU campuses. Also, he interviewed with a Harrisburg University alumni at a local coffee shop in Golden State, which he said went well. When final decisions were made, Elijah learned that he was not selected to attend this Ivy League college. Elijah got into all of

the WMU campuses he applied to, especially highly selective schools such as WMU, Los Altos (WMULA) and WMU, Bridgeport (WMUB). He was of the six African American males in his senior class admitted to WMULA. Elijah was also one of four students admitted to WMU Bridgeport.

Elijah's final college decision was between WMULA and WMUB. He enjoyed his admit weekend experience at WMUB. Yet, one of the reasons why he did not want to attend that campus was because, as one of the current students informed him, there were more African Americans at WMUB than WMULA. Elijah decided to attend WMULA because he felt that there needed to be a stronger representation of African American students at this highly selective institution.

Another dealmaker was the several scholarships he received from WMULA. Besides receiving several schools, community and corporation based scholarships. Elijah also received the Jackie Robinson Foundation Scholarship and the WMULA Blue and White Scholarship, both of which were 4-year college scholarships. He received these scholarships at just the right time given that his parents had recently been laid off work because their company relocated to New York and they did not want to leave Golden State. Elijah finished his senior year as one of the top five students of his graduating class. Also, he attended the WMULA EAP Scholars Day Program, where he learned about and applied to the Freshman Summer Program (FSP). After graduation, Elijah worked at a local park until FSP started.

Through a C.R.E.A.T.E. lens, Elijah's counter-narrative revealed how academic excellence and pursuing college were notions encouraged in a household where his

immediate family members had not pursued postsecondary education. His lived realities also illuminated his parents' involvement, dedication and determination to help their children successfully transition to higher education. His experiences in his informal context demonstrated how agency was asserted on individual and collective levels during his high school-to-college transition process. First, Elijah described the collective efforts involving his family helping him to achieve his postsecondary goals. Specifically, he described the collective agency asserted by himself and his parents to create a supportive environment conducive to helping him and his siblings do well in school. His experience in his familial context also demonstrates how parents can influence students to assert agency. In Elijah's case, his parents' behavior towards his sister's actions motivated him to maintain good grades in order to improve tensions that emerged because of this situation. His commitment to using his high academic performance to counter the deficit representations of his community highlights the individual agency he asserted to achieve educational advancement for himself, his family and community.

### **Dania**

"I think poetry helps me 'cause I get to look at stuff in a different way"

**Dania, 10<sup>th</sup> grade**

Spoken word poetry is an artistic performance in which lyrics, poetry or stories are spoken rather than sung. It provides an outlet for students to make sense of their classroom assignments as well as move away from the formal academic writing requirements and be creative. For some students, spoken word poetry allows them to write rhymes, while others use it to critically reflect on issues in their lived realities. This

form of poetry is the context in which I was first introduced to Dania. I met her towards the end of her ninth grade year while she was an active participant in GEAR UP's College Preparatory Program and spoken word poetry class. Through my dissertation study, we were able to engage in several discussions about her lived realities, social issues impacting her community and the world as well as her post high school plans. During our conversations, Dania specifically discussed her relationship with family members and their involvement in her high school-to-college transition process. During one of our conversations during her junior year, she stated:

My family is goofy but they really, really take education seriously...I think my grandma...my uncle...my sisters... my brothers and my mom, they're like education is really important...so you got to focus on education and make sure God, education and family is your main priority.

In the excerpt above, Dania's described the importance her family placed on education. While a few of her extended family members had attended college, she would be the second person in her immediate family, with her brother being the first, to pursue higher education. Her accounts challenge the discourse that questions the educational values of African American families, especially those living in urban areas. She explained how in her family, education was valued just as much as religion and family. In other words, Dania demonstrated how her family's faith, wisdom and support influenced her educational experiences and outcomes.

She is the fourth of five children and lives in a working class, single parent household with her mother, older brother and younger sister. It was not until Dania's 11<sup>th</sup> grade year that I learned about her familial roles and responsibilities. Many families in

urban areas are comprised of parent(s) or guardian(s) who have to work long hours to provide for their households. While these caregivers are involved in their children's lives, their work schedules may require them to get assistance from other family members, hire a babysitter or leave their children at home to care for themselves. It seemed as though many of the young women in this study had several responsibilities in their informal contexts. Not only were they expected to do well in school, but also to care for their siblings while their parent(s) and guardians were at work, school or tending to other household responsibilities. In order to provide for the family, Dania's mother worked 13-hour night shifts at a local post office, 6 days a week. As a result, Dania had been watching her siblings (older brother and younger sister) and cousin after school, as well as doing household chores, all since the age of 12.

Initially Dania stated that she felt a bit overwhelmed about having to balance her school and familial responsibilities. She expressed, "I had to...watch over the house and the kids, and make sure my mom had all of her stuff to go to work." As Dania got older, she was able to critically reflect on ways to work around her familial responsibilities to achieve her postsecondary goals. Although Dania was unable to participate in many after school activities, she informed me that she still found ways to maintain good grades and be actively involved during school hours in order to be eligible for college. In other words, she highlighted her ability to work with her familial responsibilities to achieve her goals.

While it appears as though Dania did not view her roles and responsibilities at home as a challenge to her high school-to-college transition process, the dominant

discourse might suggest differently. These conversations would blame Dania's mother for requiring her take on these household duties. These responsibilities are viewed exclusively as challenges to Dania's pathways to college. Her mother's level of parental involvement would also be questioned since most of her time was spent away from home. When I inquired about these mainstream depictions of parents like Dania's mother's lack of involvement in her education, she immediately responded:

People who say that...have to look at the fact that ...she raised us all mature enough to be... on our own so far... I mean we're doing kind of good...I think...the fact that she instills so much determination in us and so much strength in us...we already know what we are supposed to do-so all we have to do is do it now ...for them to say that about her not really being involved in my life-- then you would have to look at what she already did...Don't just...look at it like oh she's not here. You have to look at ...what she is saying to us when she leaves the house, or what she is saying to us...when she calls at night and says I'm here, or when she calls us to say did you guys eat, what's going on...

In the excerpt above, Dania challenged the deficit discourse that uses monolithic and Eurocentric definitions to describe parental involvement in low income and working class Communities of Color. While Dania only saw her mother before and after school, she continued to reiterate that she was not "the replace for her mother." She went on to explain that her mother was actively involved in making sure Dania and her siblings achieved their goals. For example, even when Dania's grades began to slide, she said, her mother was right behind her. Diana recalls, "She was like 'the only D I ever want to see is in your name.' She just gave me that mother look [of seriousness] like don't ever do that again...I wanted to do it [get better grades] to get that face out of my head." Because her mother does not give up at work even when she is experiencing the worst health conditions, Dania stated, she also pushes herself not to quit, but rather to work to

her maximum potential to do well in school. Through Diana's example, we see how parents or guardians can influence their children to assert agency during this critical transition process. In this case, Dania saw her mother struggle to make sure her and her siblings' needs were met, which served as her own motivation to stay committed to achieving her postsecondary goals.

Discussions about parental involvement during the high school-to-college transition process centers on the role of students' most immediate caregivers. While these individuals play a critical role in facilitating and hindering this critical transition process, the students in this study also spoke about other family members who were equally invested in ensuring that they achieved their postsecondary goals. What normally would be described as parental involvement was instead a familial investment in these students' academic trajectories. Dania also spoke about other family members such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins who were involved in helping her during her pathways to college. For example, she described how her family constantly pushed the younger children, especially Dania, to go to college because she was the next female in the family to graduate from high school. Dania stated:

They are like trying to push more of us to do better and get our education, and since I'm next in line, I'm the biggest influence to the younger ones... We all are pretty much going to help each other...and it's going to keep going on until everybody has a higher degree.

Dania described how her older family members encouraged the younger children to go to college because historically they had limited access to higher education. As one of the oldest children, Dania said they continuously informed her of the powerful position she was in to influence the young family members to attend college. In addition, as a young

African American woman, Dania expressed how each day she reminded herself, “If I am stereotyped, I have to break through the stereotypes or if I am challenged, I have to just succeed.” She explained that she used this motto to achieve her postsecondary goals and to be a role model for her younger sister and cousins. For example, she described an incident that occurred during a tutoring session with her younger cousin. While venting her frustrations about high school, Dania briefly expressed that she did not plan to attend college anymore. Her younger sister overheard this conversation and immediately replied, “You’re not going to college? How is that going to help me? ... Go to college? ... You're supposed to be my influence...what am I going to do?” At this moment, Dania stated, she began to make sense of what her older family members were telling her all along. Dania realized that she had to achieve her post-secondary goals for her younger sister and cousins.

Dania continued to take care of her younger sister and cousin throughout her senior year. She was able to maintain stellar grades and participate in various school and senior class activities. Although she was WMU/SU eligible, she decided to only apply to the SU system because she was not interested in attending a WMU campus. Dania was admitted to all of the SU campuses that she applied. Although she was undecided about her career path, she had interests in nursing, teaching and journalism. She decided to attend SU, La Villa (SULV) because of its nursing, education and creative writing programs.

After successfully graduating from GSHS, Dania and her mother decided that it would be best for her to live at home and save money while in college. They realized that

there would be a long commute from Golden State to SULV in La Villa, especially because Dania did not drive. Dania's decision quickly changed. She decided not to attend SULV but instead SU, Dover Heights (SUDH) because it was 30 minutes away from her home. Since Dania's mother was home during the day, they began to plan her transportation to SUDH in the fall. Dania said that her mother would drop her off at SUDH in the morning and she would catch the bus back home after class. She spent her summer relaxing at home before the school year began.

Dania's counter-narrative is another example of how the C.R.E.A.T.E. model was used to illustrate how an African American student challenged the dominant discourse about her familial experiences during the high school-to-college transition process. Dania demonstrated the ways in which individual and collective agency was asserted in her informal context. Dania's individual agency was revealed through her ability to balance her home and school responsibilities in order to achieve her postsecondary goals. More importantly, Dania described how her pathway to college was not only an individual process, but also a collaborative effort with family members. Although her mother spent countless hours at work, Dania described the unique ways parental involvement played a significant role in her gaining access to higher education. Her mother's strong work ethic motivated her to stay committed to successfully graduating from high school and transitioning to college. In addition, Dania discussed other family members who were also involved in helping to facilitate her college-going outcomes. Specifically, she described how they emphasized the importance of attending college and accomplishing this goal not only for herself, but also for her younger family members. Dania also

highlighted the need for the dominant dialogue to be inclusive of the complexities of African American families' involvement during this critical transition process.

### **Keisha**

“I became the person I am today by being me with the help of my family.”

#### **Keisha, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

During the summer of 2005, many GEAR UP students got to participate in a two week Summer Acclimation Program, which entailed living at the WMULA residence hall, taking courses to prepare them for their 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, and participating in extracurricular activities. It was through this summer program that I had opportunity to meet Keisha and her mother. During our brief conversations, I learned that while Keisha was preparing herself to gain admission to college, her mother had recently transferred to SU, Dover Heights to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree in Human Resources. In other words, they were both working toward achieving similar goals—obtaining college degrees.

As I spoke to Keisha about her post secondary goals, I was immediately impressed by her commitment to pursuing a career as a scientific researcher or Criminal Scene Investigator. During our first interview together she said, “I want to go to WMULA. I want to major in Biochemistry. I want to be a scientist and you know, make it big.” Her career objectives played a critical role in the decisions she made during her high school-to-college transition process. As a GSHS student, Keisha was able to

maintain good grades and a great resume with the help of extracurricular activities such as GEAR UP, Choir, Step Team<sup>21</sup>, and especially with the help of her parents.

Various types of familial structures in urban communities that facilitate or hinder African American students' college-going outcomes are discussed. These conversations often center, however, on the challenges of single parent households on students' educational performances and outcomes. As various familial structures were represented in this study, these students demonstrated how each of their different informal contexts impacted their high school-to-college transition process. Throughout this study, Keisha stated that her family played a significant role in helping her gain access to higher education. Although her college-educated parents had been divorced since she was in elementary school, they were both involved in her life, a fact that did not go unnoticed by Keisha. She stated:

They all want me to be better than all of them...my mom...she helps me because I'm with her most of the time. You know, she helps me run my errands to Pacific Coast [College] to do the [math and English placement] test[s], to do the financial aid [application]... and to GEAR UP...and without her, I wouldn't know what to do. And my dad... he helps out with financial stuff. If I need anything...he's getting my car for college... my laptop ..., which helps...going into my college process. He's always there for money. He's always there for a talk and he talks forever, but it's OK because I know it'll help me in the future.

In the excerpt above, Keisha's words demonstrated the unique roles her parents played to support her during this critical transition process. Although Keisha did not live with her father, she stated that he provided a different kind of support to help her achieve her goals. More specifically, she informed me that he was always available to provide

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<sup>21</sup> **Step Team:** a performance group where high school students emulate dance routines similar to that of black fraternity and sorority at colleges and universities

financial support and advice as needed. While Keisha's father was not physically present in her life on a daily basis, his support was nevertheless crucial to helping her successfully transition to college.

Since Keisha had lived with her mother most of her life, she told me, every task they engaged in together was a collaborative effort. Whether a project was due or there was a GEAR UP parent meeting or step team competition, her mother was very involved in her academic and extracurricular endeavors. For example, while working in the GEAR UP office, I had the opportunity to observe Keisha and her mother completing the GEAR UP scholarship application together. One of the requirements involved students designing a poster board about their journey towards achieving postsecondary goals. After work, Keisha's mother came to the GEAR UP office with supplies for Keisha's poster board. As they sat down in the computer lab, I observed Keisha working on the board while her mother provided assistance as needed. They worked on the board together for several hours until it was completed. This assistance was reciprocal as Keisha helped her mother study for college exams. She commented about this saying:

Even though I want to major in biology... she [her mother] had a biology class and I would help her. She had a whole bunch of index cards with just words and she had to study these like [in] two days and there was just so many of them, but she got it done and she passed the class, and when I see her doing it, I'm like, "If she can do it, I can do it, and I'm younger and I can do it."

This excerpt represents the powerful relationship that emerged between Keisha and her mother to achieve common goals—helping each other reach their postsecondary objectives. This aspect of relationships between African American students and their families is often not captured in the transition from high school to college discourse.

Many other students in this study also demonstrated that while their families helped them achieve their postsecondary goals, they too were very supportive of and assisted their family members with personal challenges and successes.

Watching her mother go back to college inspired Keisha to pursue higher education even more: “My mom, she’s influenced me and ...she makes you want go to college, makes you do better than what she did. She’s like, ‘You gotta push yourself. Don’t ever give up.’ ” Keisha continuously described how her mother’s college experiences played a critical role in helping her make decisions about her own postsecondary plans.

Throughout her tenure at GSHS, Keisha prepared herself to be eligible to gain admission to the WMU and SU system. Yet, by her junior year she began to reconsider attending a 4-year college immediately after high school. One of the reasons why Keisha was now considering a community college was that she had had the opportunity to observe her mother’s positive experiences attending a 2-year college and transferring to a 4-year college. Another reason was that while Keisha wanted to be a Criminal Scene Investigator or Biochemist, she did not feel that GSHS had prepared her to take college level courses in mathematics and the sciences. Therefore, she believed that community college would provide a smaller learning community that would allow her to master these subject areas.

During the college application process, Keisha submitted her application to one SU campus – SU, Lexington (SUL). Although I suggested that Keisha fill out her application online, she decided to submit her application via mail. When admission letters

were being sent out, Keisha called SUL to inquire about her own. An admission officer informed Keisha that they had not received her application. Instead of further pursuing this issue, Keisha and her mother decided that she should enroll at Pacific Coast College (PCC), a local community college with a high transfer rate. A few months before Keisha graduated from GSHS, they went to PCC to inquire about the admissions and enrollment process, meet with an academic counselor, take placement exams and learn about the opportunities available on campus (e.g. honors program).

Keisha's counter-narrative provides another example of how the C.R.E.A.T.E. model was used to demonstrate the ways in which a student challenged the dominant discourse about African American parental involvement during the high school-to-college transition process. Keisha revealed that familial structures do not determine how involved families will be during this critical transition process. Although her parents were divorced, they were both significantly involved in helping Keisha achieve her postsecondary goals. For instance, as stated above, without her mother's assistance, Keisha would not be familiar with the steps necessary to get into college. In addition, Keisha revealed how collective agency was asserted as she attempted to prepare for and gain access to higher education. Throughout this study, Keisha's discussion about her familial experiences centered on collaborative efforts with her parents. Successfully graduating from high school and transitioning to college was not discussed as an individual process; rather, Keisha expressed how her parents were involved each step of the way. Not only did Keisha benefit from her parents' involvement in her education, but also, she was able to help her mother achieve her postsecondary goals as well.

## **9- Strategically Navigating Challenges in Our Familial Contexts**

The discourse about African American students' lived realities in urban areas centers on how their families often hinder their high school-to-college transition process. While this itself is not always true, what is most often overlooked is how student agency is utilized to navigate these familial challenges. The students in this study demonstrated the diverse ways they navigated challenges in their informal contexts during their pathways to college. The skills that many of the students developed to overcome these challenges often helped them in this critical transition process. For those students whose familial challenges prevented them from pursuing college, participation in higher education was still a priority. While the students did not face all the same challenges as one another, what they did share were the various ways they asserted agency during these experiences to achieve their post secondary goals. In this chapter, I will use the C.R.E.A.T.E. model to present counter-narratives of how three students – Amaya, Byron and Ayana – utilized their agency to strategically navigate challenges in their familial contexts during this critical transition process.

### **Ayana**

“The whole family...expects me to graduate from high school... that would be one of the first graduations out of ...the immediate family”

**Ayana, 11<sup>th</sup> grade**

When I first met Ayana, I was immediately impressed with her ability to balance her roles and responsibilities at home and school. Ayana expressed that because her mother had two jobs, she had to learn how to take care of her family, herself and be both “book and street smart” in order to achieve her postsecondary goals. It was not until an

informal conversation with her mother that I was able to make sense of her lived realities as a young African American woman from a working class background, who would be the first in her family to pursue higher education. I learned that her mother did not obtain a high school diploma, but eventually received a G.E.D. in order to acquire a decent job to provide for her children. Although Ayana's mother and other family members did not attend college, they provided the support and resources necessary to encourage the younger children to pursue higher education. Since Ayana's older brother and cousins had not been able to achieve this goal, there were high expectations for Ayana to be the first one in her family to successfully graduate from high school and enter college. She stated:

Ever since I was younger, it's my job to be the smartest one ... Everybody is expecting me to go to college and succeed ...they praise me. But then it's like...if I come home with a C on my report card, she [her mother] went crazy...I was on punishment for like two weeks..."

In the excerpt above, Ayana highlighted how her family members noticed her academic potential at an early age. Contrary to the discourse about African American families who are not college educated, in Ayana's family, she was expected to achieve academically and pursue higher education even though the others had not. In other words, she was seen as the individual who would redefine her family's educational pathways by successfully graduating from high school and transitioning to college. Many other students in this study also discussed similar experiences with family member who did not attend college reiterating the importance of obtaining a postsecondary degree.

In order to ensure that Ayana was doing well in school, she stated, her family would reward her for each good grade she received. For example, her grandmother

always gave her money for a good report card. “When I was younger, it was like five dollars, but...as you got older, it was more.” The familial support and encouragement Ayana received helped her strategically navigate the challenges she encountered during her high school-to-college transition process. While Ayana’s commitment to pursuing her postsecondary goals remained the same throughout this study, she experienced a change in her familial roles and responsibilities.

During her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, Ayana’s brother and his then girlfriend had a child together. While her brother’s gang activity had landed him in jail indefinitely, his girlfriend was nowhere to be found as she ran the streets with friends. Ayana and her mother immediately decided to raise their niece and grandchild, whose name was Chanel. While Ayana’s mother watched Chanel during the day, Ayana had to come home immediately after school in order to take care of her niece, usually from 6:00 pm to 3:00 am. With this new addition at home, Ayana had to reorganize her life to be inclusive of her niece. She talked about this:

I had certain goals this year...But when a baby comes into the house...Everything changes... when I go home...I practically raise that little girl...I would come home from school, like from doing all my work ... and [attending] GEAR UP...to having to change diapers, feed the baby and burp her...But, I still managed to pass all of my classes...But it’s hard doing your homework with her because like now she’s got to that stage where she wants you to play with her.

Although Ayana’s new responsibilities required better time management skills, she reiterated her determination to maintain good grades, participate in activities and make sure her niece’s needs were met. For instance, on the days she had to attend school meetings, she told me that she would bring her niece with her, find a baby sitter or get

information from a friend if she had to stay home. For the pre-interview activity, Ayana decided to create a collage about the personal, academic and social experiences that have influenced the person that she was today. She placed three pictures of her niece under the word “family.” As I inquired about this picture, Ayana replied:

I put my niece [there] because...she’s present right now. But she’s the future ‘cause she is going to grow up- and she walks around calling me mommy all the time. I figure whatever I do she is going to look at me so I have to be a good role model for her because in the end, I might actually have to take care of her.

While the changes in Ayana’s roles and responsibilities impacted her level of extracurricular involvement, she seemed to have gained new insight about this critical transition period. Rather than pointing the blame at family members, she saw her niece as a part of her journey towards higher education. Not only was she attending college to achieve her educational goals and meet her family’s expectations, but also to set an example for her niece, whom she planned to take care of for the rest of her life.

Towards the middle of Ayana’s senior year, her niece’s maternal grandmother offered to help raise the baby. Since Ayana would be entering college in a few months, she and her mother made a collective decision to send Chanel to live with her other grandmother. Although Chanel now lived a 1 ½ hours away from Golden State, they visited her on weekends, holidays and occasionally during the week. While Ayana was WMU/SU eligible, she did not apply to any WMU campuses. As I inquired about her reasons for not applying to WMU campuses, Ayana informed me that she did not feel ready for the rigor of this system. But, Ayana said, she would transfer to a WMU campus

in two years when she was more acclimated to university life. She only submitted applications to several SU campuses in Southern and Northern California.

While Ayana was admitted to all of the SU campuses she applied to, she decided to attend SU, Newberry. With the university housing shortage at SUN, Ayana was placed on the waiting list. She now had to live in an apartment until housing was available. Also, she was given the opportunity to participate in the AOP Summer Bridge Program. Yet, since her grades and test scores met the SU admission requirements, they offered her a spot as a commuter. Because Ayana did not want to take buses and a train from Golden State to Newberry, she decided not to participate in the program. She spent the summer looking for a job in order to save money for school.

Through a C.R.E.A.T.E. model, Ayana's counter-narrative demonstrated how she was able to navigate challenges and expectations in her informal context during the high school-to-college transition process. In addition, Ayana shed light on the individual and collective agency that she asserted through her experiences. Individual agency was revealed through her ability to balance her school responsibilities and the unexpected challenges of her familial situation. While she encountered changes to her roles and responsibilities at home, she demonstrated how she was able to help raise her niece and still, if not better, focus on gaining access to college. Collective agency was revealed through her family's involvement during this critical transition process. Her educational achievements were a collaborative effort influenced by the academic expectations of her family members. This support network helped Ayana redefine her family's educational pathways as they expected a commitment from her to working at her maximum potential

and achieving her postsecondary goals. Overall, Ayana's narrative makes evident that traditional indicators such as merit cannot fully capture the strengths of African American students' accomplishments and challenges, especially within their familial context.

### **Byron**

"A lot of people in my family died that are close to me... because of that I really don't let anything bother me anymore... There are more important things than arguing with that person or being mad at the person. So I just need to move on."

**Byron, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

Byron had been in the foster care system since elementary school when his mother passed away. When he was placed into this system, he was also separated from his three younger siblings. While he spent most of his elementary and secondary school years with guardians in Golden State and neighboring cities, it was not until his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year that his maternal uncle was awarded guardianship of Byron and his young sister. Living with his uncle required Byron to move an hour away from his life in Golden State to Corolla, a suburban community approximately 53 miles from his previous home. Since Byron wanted to remain at GSHS, he spent several hours on a train and buses to get to and from school during his sophomore year of high school. He talked about this:

When I was going to Golden State, it was... real tight...wake up at 4:00am in the morning, leave by 5:10am...if there was some homework I didn't do the night before, do it then...or like I would go to sleep because I set an alarm on my cell phone to wake me up like five minutes before the next stop...I would get to school at like 7:30am. Go to all of my classes, then go to track practice for an hour, then I would leave in the middle of track practice everyday, go to the bus stop [and] start doing my homework. I wouldn't eat until I was done with my homework.

In spite of his commute, Byron maintained close to a 4.0 G.P.A. while participating in two sports. Byron stated that his uncle never agreed with his decision to stay at GSHS and was adamant about checking him out of the school as soon as possible and enrolling him in a school in Corolla. The day Byron's uncle decided to pull him out of GSHS to attend school in Corolla was the day Byron's relationship with his uncle gradually began to change, according to Byron. He stated:

The whole year when I was traveling from Corolla to Golden State, he kept saying that he was going to check me out of Golden State, then he showed up like the night we had the AVID night...and sat down with all of my teachers and was like "Byron is making it hard for me by traveling down here"...he came during my last day of finals, and lucky for me, I had finished my Physics final early, and he just pulled me out.

After his withdrawal from Golden State, Byron stated, arguments about finances, work and school instigated by his uncle began to occur frequently, especially during his senior year. While problems continued to escalate at home, Byron utilized his extracurricular involvements at his new school and his 20 to 30 hours a week job as his supportive spaces. For example, for the pre interview activity, Byron made a collage on his computer. He created a spider web, which he said symbolized perseverance. He explained how spiders create webs to survive on a daily basis. In relationship to his life, Byron stated that he believed that despite the challenges he continued to face, he must persevere in order to achieve his goals. Inside of his spider web, Byron included different factors such as GEAR UP, AVID (a college preparation program for average students), a religious cross, his job, sports (e.g. football and track and field) and transportation services, all the things that have allowed him to persist during his high school-to-college transition process.

To offer another example of the challenges that he faced in pursuit of academic goals, Byron stated that one-day while he was working on college applications, his uncle started another argument about contributing to the household finances and chores. While Byron suggested helping out after his college applications were submitted, his uncle insisted that he help out immediately. When Byron inquired about the money his uncle received each month from the state for taking care of him and his sister, his uncle decided to kick him out of the house for questioning him.

With no other family to stay with, Byron said he tried calling his social worker for assistance. As a researcher for this study and mentor to Byron, I got my own father, who is also a social worker, involved to call his social worker on Byron's behalf because Byron had already missed two weeks of school and work. After several failed attempts to reach his social worker, Byron sought shelter with friends and coworkers. Once his social worker finally called him back he was able to stay with one of his childhood friend and GSHS classmate's family in Los Altos, before being reassigned to another house. He also was able to transfer back to GSHS to finish the second semester of his senior year. Even with all the challenges Byron encountered during this critical transition process, he was still able to maintain a high G.P.A., participate in extracurricular activities, and work to financially support himself and his sister.

The challenges Byron encountered as a foster care youth impacted his academic performance. Despite these issues, Byron made sure he was academically competitive and eligible to apply to colleges and universities throughout the U.S. He applied to the SU system, WMU system and an Ivy League college. Since he wanted to pursue a career

as an architect, he learned that majoring in Engineering would make him more marketable in the field. Therefore, Byron applied to engineering programs and related fields at highly selective institutions such as Harrisburg University, WMULA, and WMU, Bridgeport. Since engineering programs have specific test score requirements that freshmen applicants must meet, and Byron was unable to meet these requirements because of his low SAT scores, he was not admitted to these universities.

Byron was also thinking of attending WMU, Irwindale to attend an undergraduate program that combined architecture and engineering, and so that he could stay near his younger sister who lived in Corolla with their uncle. Due to similar test requirements he was not admitted to this program either. Luckily, Byron applied and was admitted to the Mathematics departments at several other WMU and SU campuses. Of these universities, he decided to attend WMU, Dublin (WMUD). After successfully graduating from GSHS, he continued to live in a foster home and work at a video game store until the WMUD Freshmen Summer Program began.

Through a C.R.E.A.T.E. lens, Byron's counter-narrative highlights the ways he was able to strategically navigate the challenges he faced in his informal contexts during the high school-to-college transition process. As a foster care youth, Byron found ways to balance his familial and academic realities in order to stay focused on achieving his postsecondary goals. Even as he encountered these challenges, Byron did not lose sight of his commitment to successfully graduate from high school and transition to college. Throughout this study, Byron revealed the individual agency he asserted when faced with the several challenges posed by his uncle. He shared the strategies utilized, skills

developed and decisions made to achieve high academic marks, be actively involved in extracurricular activities and achieve his postsecondary outcomes.

**Amaya**

“When I go to school, I’m going to stay in school and I’m going to finish because I want to have that degree and get that job...I’m going to do it. I’m not going to listen to nobody. I’m just going to do it.”

**Amaya, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

Each time I met with Amaya, she always came to our meeting location with a smile on her face, no matter what was going on in her life. What stood out for me during our first interview together was her desire to go to college so that she could pursue a career in the sciences. She told me, “I’ve liked science for so long. Even during breaks... I’ll do something science related.” Also, Amaya described how her chemistry teacher, who was a former biochemist, inspired her to study biochemistry. While she took regular courses, her schedule was designed to help her graduate from high school and gain admission to college. She not only did well in these courses, but also was involved in extracurricular activities such as GEAR UP, the science club, spoken word poetry and tennis. Amaya said her mother allowed her to participate in activities only if she had a C or higher in all of her classes.

By the time Amaya was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, events in her life started to change-- she became less involved in school and wanted to pursue a career as a flight attendant. When I inquired about her change of plans, she replied, “I’ve always wanted to be a flight attendant. I just never followed through with this plan.” This meeting was the last time Amaya and I were in contact with each other for the next six months. Concerned about

her whereabouts, I requested her contact information from the GSHS and school district database. I also spent several months calling and visiting her mother, grandparents and father's homes and the responses I continuously received were "she's not here" or "she's out there running the streets." It was not until a couple of GEAR UP colleagues saw her at a bus stop that I was able to obtain her new contact information. As they surprised me with her information, they also informed me that she was three months pregnant, attending adult school and no longer living with her mother.

After several attempts to schedule an informal meeting with Amaya, we were finally able to meet during the middle of her senior year. In order to catch up on the last six months, I had to spread out her interview over a two-day period. I first inquired about her pregnancy and she informed me that she lost her baby after being jumped by a group of girls. Through our conversations, I soon learned about how her lived realities impacted her high school-to-college transition process. For the pre-interview activity, Amaya created a collage of words on a piece of tissue paper that centered on her relationship with her mother. She had phrases such as "under influence," "your stupid," "escape completely," "raising kids is a tough job," and "the difference between being listened to and being understood" to describe her mother. When I asked Amaya why she chose those phrases, she replied:

Because she's the most impactful thing in my life... Like the most... negative things about me are because of my mom. Everything that's negative is...because of my mom...I do what I'm supposed to do...I try my hardest...Everything in my life is about my mom and she makes it that way. That's the bad thing, she makes it that way.

Towards the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Amaya explained, she began to lose interest in school and started working at a nightclub bussing tables. Due to her mother's constant battles with alcoholism and other illnesses, Amaya said that she was kicked out of the house for six months.

Because Amaya did not want to bother her grandparents, who had raised her for the first 15 years of her life, she ended up living with different people such as her father's girlfriend, and her boyfriend, who was a gang member. While Amaya had been around gangs all her life, with her mother and father being former gang members, she said that she decided to join a local gang because they were her "other family" during this critical period. Even while Amaya was away from home, she still took care of her younger schizophrenic sister's educational and personal needs as well as her own. For example, Amaya said that she prioritize the challenges her sister faced in school, especially when her sister would called her to attend school meetings that required familial representation.

When Amaya lost interest in GSHS, she decided to transfer to the adult school to make up her credits and obtain her high school diploma early. She talked about this:

I'm going to finish school. I'm not going to for y'all [family and friends]. I'll do it for myself... I really want to go to [the] 12<sup>th</sup> grade ... I had five classes in summer school, and then for [the] regular school year... I can take the first semester classes in the daytime and the second semester at nighttime, so I ended up finishing...in December.

After graduating from adult school early, Amaya wanted to pursue a new passion – becoming a pre-school teacher. Therefore, she enrolled at La Posada College to take child development and psychology courses as well as worked at a childcare center. She stated

that when her mother discovered that she was employed, she called and came to her job demanding that her daughter come home. She spoke about this, saying:

I got fired a week before the graduation. My momma, she kept coming up to the school because she wanted me to come back home. And then my sister ran away. She thought I knew where she was, but that's my sister and we're close. She would come to my job early, early in the morning before I'd get there...and they'll call the police and tell her to leave...She came about four times, but she'll call every other day. "Is Amaya in there? Did Amaya come to work yet? Is she off today? Is she there?"

After several altercations between her mother and childcare center staff members, Amaya said that she was released from her job. Amaya stated that she tried to braid hair and baby-sit for extra money, but was unable to make enough money to continue her community college courses. She eventually decided to moved back home because her younger sister would not come back unless Amaya was there. Ideally, Amaya stated, she would have loved to move away to another state to begin a new life and attend college. But Amaya expressed that she wanted to be there for her sister. Although Amaya remained in the gang, she said she was looking for another job so that she could reenroll at the community college.

Amaya's counter-narrative represents the way in which the C.R.E.A.T.E. model helps us understand how she strategically navigated the challenges in her familial context. As Amaya encountered different roadblocks in her informal context, she revealed how she was able to make decisions about addressing her academic and personal needs. She also demonstrated how individual agency was asserted as she encountered problems with her mother. Even when she was kicked out of her home, she had to immediately find shelter, a new support system – even if it meant joining a local gang –

and work in order to financially support herself. Although some of Amaya's decisions may not be considered to have been the best, she still found ways to ensure that she was able to successfully graduate from high school, enroll in a 2-year college and obtain a job related to her career aspirations. While issues with Amaya's mother prevented her from continuing with her postsecondary pursuits, her desire to continue participating in higher education to achieve her future goals remained.

## **10-Developing Critical Understandings of Our Familial Realities**

Many of the African American students in this study faced challenges in their familial context that positively and negatively impacted their high school-to-college transition processes. Some students experienced temporary roadblocks that were eventually resolved, allowing them to proceed with their postsecondary plans. Other students who encountered challenges beyond their control were able to persist through their adversities to achieve higher education outcomes or continue to aspire towards college participation even with the obstacles they continued to confront. Despite the diverse responses, strategies and decisions that were made in their informal spaces, many students developed a critical understanding of their familial realities as they encountered challenges. The C.R.E.A.T.E. model will be used in this chapter to present counter-narratives on three students – Candice, Jabreality, and Alisha – and their pathways towards developing critical understandings of their families' experiences during this transition process.

### **Candice**

“Okay I talk back, Okay I’m rebellious. Okay I have personality flaws, I’m materialistic. But you people allow me to be this way. You make me who I am, which is why I am also dedicated, strong-minded, strong-willed. Which is why I am going to succeed. Because you made me who I am. I just learned to humble my heart.”

**Candice, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

Before meeting Candice, other students in this study informed me about a situation she initiated during their sophomore year. They explained how she wrote a letter to the principal on behalf of her classmates to complain about their AP U.S. History

teacher. While she ended up bringing an important issue to the principal's attention, she also experienced repercussions from her mother and teacher. During our first interview together, I found out that Candice was from a low income household where, although her mother and father were not college graduates, she would be the second person in her immediately family, after her older sister, to pursue higher education. Many extended family members on her mother's side, however, did have college and graduate degrees.

Candice expressed that she was a very opinionated young woman who did not have a problem speaking her mind to obtain what she needed and to prove a point.

During an interview in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, she explained:

Honestly I am naturally rebellious and it took me a while to be able to admit that kind of stuff about myself because I like to talk too much and I like to be noticed. But, I'm opinionated... "What do you mean don't go that way? Don't do this?" I'm a do it anyway just cause you told me not too. So you might as well just not even tell me.

Although, Candice was not always able to achieve her intended goals through her actions, she was satisfied with just getting her point across. Throughout this study, Candice shared similar stories of incidents that occurred during her high school career, especially as she worked towards achieving her postsecondary goals. It was through these interactions that I learned about the ways in which Candice developed a critical understanding of her family's experiences and about her actions as she prepared to transition from high school to college.

During Candice's middle school years, her mother suffered a brain aneurism which limited her ability to work and drive. Although she was unable to fully participate in school events, she still monitored Candice's academic progress from home. Even with

support from family members, Candice said that she realized she had to be proactive about achieving her educational goals and helping her mother. She stated:

Since my mom can't work...she can't drive. I just happen to learn how to go from here to there. I had to grow up faster than everybody else... You know people say you won't be able to make it on your own. You can't provide for yourself. I'm not that stupid. If I have to help my mom...If I handled all my mom bills and stuff, I can sign her name and pay bills.

Although Candice was a high achieving student, her attitude appeared to impact her ability to reach her maximum level of potential. Whether she had disagreements with her mother, questioned school officials about unfair policies and practices, or challenged her friends to a competition to see who receives the highest G.P.A., she always had to be right or have the last word. As a young child, she explained that no one corrected her actions perhaps to avoid hurting her feelings. Yet, once she entered high school, she said that she disapproved of her mother and teachers' suggestions to improve her attitude.

During her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, Candice's mother informed her about the family's plans to move to Iowa by the end of the school year. Since Candice wanted to complete her senior year at GSHS, she tried, but was unsuccessful, at being able to stay in California. After two months in Iowa, Candice's stated that her resistant behavior got her a trip back to California to live with her father. This move not only brought Candice and her father closer together, but also, she was able to reevaluate her attitude towards others. After years of listening to her mother's negative comments about her father, Candice stated, she was finally able to learn a different story of his experiences. More specifically, he explained to her how his past actions as a teenager impacted his future plans. She spoke about this, saying:

He just brought out all of his hood pictures and jailhouse poses. I just looked up all the information like “Oh, he can’t get that job at the bank or he couldn’t get his real estate license. “ He has two strikes....So he’s been running the same liquor store for eight years. .. He can’t get his real estate license because he has a criminal history.

Because her father received two strikes for illegal gang activities as a teenager, she said, these repercussions impacted his opportunities to pursue careers in banking and real estate, the fields he was interested in pursuing for years. Through various conversations with her father, Candice said she began making connections between her father and grandfather’s pasts and her current experiences.

My dad and grandfather... what they were at my age isn’t what they are later ...It’s like you can’t really do anything about it. That’s just who you are, unless you want to change yourself and work on it, then you’re going to be like that unless something changes you...like what changed for my dad when he stopped... gangbanging.

Candice felt that despite an individual’s past actions, there were opportunities for development. These changes happened for her father and grandfather because they wanted these changes for themselves. In relationship to her own experiences, Candice explained that although the people in her life wanted to see changes in her attitude, this transformation had to happen by her own accord. During our last interview together, Candice had begun to make sense of her mother and teachers’ complaints about her problems with authorities. She explained:

They just told me I have problems with authority. Like I do. I didn’t ever realize that, but I do... if I never had to be kicked out of Mrs. Zollar’s class or they checked me out of her class, I wouldn’t even know. Like, “Oh, maybe it’s not just my mom telling me I talk back,” and it probably is true.

When Candice described how being removed from her A.P. U.S. History course could have been prevented, I inquired about whether she planned to change her attitude in the near future. She expressed that she did not want to be “an unpleasant person for people to be around,” especially when she entered college. Candice had begun to recognize the reasons for the advice she had been receiving for so long about her attitude and how not listening would eventually impact her postsecondary pathways. She explained:

I take what they say and I’m going to change it so I can get... there [to college]. If you guys would have never said anything to me, if you guys would have tolerated it, then I wouldn’t be where I am [going to college].

As Candice transitioned to higher education, she planned to “be more mindful” of her actions, others and situations, no matter how wrong she thought someone was or how much she wanted to argue with them. Overall, Candice said, she had learned the importance of picking and choosing her battles especially as she worked towards achieving her post-high school goals.

While living with her father, Candice attended Rubin High School in Riverdale, California during the first semester of her senior year. Her father drove 1 ½ hours to take her to GSHS after school to get help with her college applications from GEAR UP. Since Candice maintained a high GPA throughout her high school career, she confidently applied to various public and private universities throughout the U.S. During the second semester of her senior year, her father and stepmother were divorced. Since Candice’s father was unable to care for her financially, she moved back to Golden State to live with her sister and reenrolled at GSHS to complete her senior year.

During this time, Candice received acceptance letters from many SU campuses, HBCUs, private schools and WMU campuses. Although she would have preferred to stay in Los Altos, she was admitted to WMU Bridgeport but not WMU Los Altos. Candice was one of four students from GSHS admitted to WMUB. Since she received a low grade in one of her math classes from a previous year, she was admitted under provisional conditions. In addition to successfully graduating from GSHS, Candice was required to attend and complete the Summer Bridge Program. After graduating from high school, Candice worked at a local restaurant until it was time for her to leave for the summer program.

The C.R.E.A.T.E. framework allows us to see how Candice's counter-narrative highlighted the ways in which familial experiences can bring about a critical awareness of one's lived realities during the high school-to-college transition process. In Candice's case, it took reconnecting with her father to help her make sense of how one's past behavior and actions can impact his/her future outcomes. Candice's narrative also revealed how individual and collective agency was asserted in her informal contexts. Candice not only asserted individual agency in stating her opinions, make decisions and taking action towards achieving particular goals, she also recognized how transforming her attitude must be self initiated in order for the change to fully occur. Collective agency was highlighted through her parent's supportive efforts to make sure she stayed committed to academic achievement in order to successfully graduate from high school and transition to college.

## **Jabreality**

“What really helped me succeed is ...God and remembering my mom. I feel like that’s why I’m alive because I know she would have wanted me to be...I mean, she told me, she wants me to be the best that I can be, so obviously I’m going to be the best that I could be...”

**Jabreality, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

I heard about Jabreality’s talents as a spoken word artist through a GEAR UP colleague, Thomas, who was a co-instructor for the Spoken Word Poetry club. After a poetry event, I had the opportunity to listen to Jabreality recite a poem. With each line he read, I saw how he had carefully selected the words that would powerfully capture the critical issues he had faced in his lived realities. Although we did not officially meet again until the inception of my study, I was interested in learning about the story behind his words. During his sophomore year interview, Jabreality informed me that he started writing poetry at the age of 13. Also, he told me that he was motivated by his father and older brother, who were also poets, to write poetry. It was through informal conversations and future interviews that I learned about the connections between Jabreality’s familial experiences, work as a spoken word artist and high school-to-college transition process.

Jabreality described his collective familial experiences as a bona fide “riches-to-rags” story. One moment his family was living a comfortable suburban lifestyle; then, he stated, all of a sudden, they lost everything and were separated from each other. While his father was put in jail and his mother was in and out of hospitals, Jabreality was placed in the foster care system beginning at the age of 9. He explained:

Being in foster care changed me ... When me and my brother were separated that changed me... Like being away all by myself, I was like “Oh my God, look at how young I am and I’m in foster care”...and it was

stressful and depressing. I thought that nothing was going to happen so I cried every single day.

From that moment, Jabreality described that he and his brother were in and out of foster care. Due to the instability of his family's life, he stated, they collectively decided to place him and his brother back into the foster care system permanently. This meeting was the last time Jabreality would see his parents and grandmother before his mother mysteriously passed away. While living in several foster homes, Jabreality said that he continued to encounter several instances of neglect, exposure to gang activities and negative comments about his academic potential from his caregivers and their families.

During Jabreality's high school career, he stated that he gradually began making sense of his unique realities as a foster care youth and his desire to pursue higher education. With a critical awareness of his experiences, Jabreality said that he became determined to improve his grades, pass all the required tests, and participate in extracurricular activities that would help him successfully graduate from high school and transition into college. He talked about this:

As I grew three years older ...I started to understand that my past life happened for a reason that only God knows for sure, yet my opinion on it is that some of the best people that walk the earth today have had or do have lives that challenge them to become the person that they are destined to be. It takes some time to see things as they are when you are too young and not mature enough to take hardships or obstacles to your advantage. You never learn. I believe that I have much potential and that it is my responsibility to accept the challenges and to never deny an opportunity that may be able to assist me.

By his junior year, Jabreality said, he made a commitment to obtain his high school diploma so that he could attend a two-year college and transfer to a four-year university to double major in theater and journalism. In addition, his artistic talents paved the way

for an opportunity of a lifetime. He was the lead star in a documentary that examined the impact of gang violence in urban communities. Jabreality traveled throughout California to interview former and current gang members, community members (e.g. pastors, gang intervention specialist, students, etc), parents of victims of gang violence and mainstream and independent artists (e.g. musicians, poets, etc). His documentary was well received at various film festivals across the country.

It was also during this time that Jabreality decided to look into independent living options because he “couldn’t deal with another foster home and nobody else’s mess.” He talked about how his involvement in the Transitional Housing Placement Program provided him with an opportunity to live on his own under the care of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

Being on your own, I feel like I’m at peace now... I have time to work on myself...work on my character...being ...a person with better integrity and ...personality... I’m doing good with that.

Despite the numerous challenges he had to face in the past 18 years of his life, and continued to face, it appeared as if his inner strength and determination to persist in the face of adversity allowed him to achieve his most immediate and long-term goals. He was able to balance his work and school responsibilities to ensure that he would be able to successfully graduate from high school and transition to college. Since Jabreality wanted to pursue a career as an actor and producer, he planned to attend college to major in creative writing or theater arts.

Because of his academic performance, Jabreality knew that he would have to attend a community college before a 4-year university. Through help from his CAHSEE

tutor, Jabreality had the opportunity to observe classes at Pacific Coast College (PCC), meet with an academic counselor and learn about the services available to students. After graduating from high school and receiving numerous corporation-based scholarships, Jabreality was also given another opportunity to work with actors and directors to produce, direct and act in his own film. Jabreality continued to work at Starbucks until the fall semester began at PCC.

Using a C.R.E.A.T.E. model Jabreality's counter-narrative demonstrates how critically reflecting on his lived experiences provided an outlet for him to persist during his high school-to-college transition process. Throughout this study, he shared alternative views about the ways in which foster care Youth of Color make sense of their lived realities. Jabreality illuminated the individual agency he asserted in his pathways to college. He highlighted critical transformations that occurred as he attempted to make sense of the connections between his lived experiences and achieving his postsecondary goals. He made important decisions about his academic, social and personal lives, as well as sought assistance and support from individuals who embraced his talents and abilities and helped him achieve his goals. In addition, Jabreality recognized the strengths and uniqueness of his lived realities and how these experiences had empowered his commitment to his post-high school plans. Despite the challenges he faced in his informal contexts, he was able to commit to working at his maximum potential to successfully graduate from high school and participate in higher education. Jabreality's counter-narrative highlights the importance of reconceptualizing notions of merit in order

to be inclusive of the diverse lived realities and academic abilities of African American students.

**Alisha**

“I am my family’s first generation to go to college... At first, I use to feel like I was pressured into it [going to college]...but then I realized how important it is...I’m not doing this for me, I doing it for my cousins after me and my little brother.”

**Alisha, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

I met Alisha at GSMMS when she was involved in GEAR UP and basketball. While basketball seemed to be her passion, once she transitioned to the GSHS, I soon learned, getting into college also became a priority for her. In addition, I was able to make connections between Alisha’s lived realities, her journey as a scholar athlete, and the high school-to-college transition process. Alisha grew up in a low income household where none of her family members had attended college. Due to the instabilities in her mother’s life, her father had raised her with support of her stepmother since the age of two. As a result, Alisha said, she and her father had a very close relationship. Because her father had never gone to college, he was very involved in making sure that she was committed to her extracurricular activities and maintaining good grades in order to be eligible for college. For example, for the pre-interview activity, Alisha created a collage with words, quotes from African American figures, phrases and pictures to represent the factors that have shaped who she is today. One of the phrases she included was “high achiever.” When I inquired about the significance of this phrase, she replied:

That goes back to my parents, my dad especially, he helped me with a lot of decisions I made and I thank him because ... he just put me in the right direction and I just followed it.

Alisha described how her father played an instrumental role in the decisions she made, especially during the high school-to-college transition process. Since he did not go to college, he was even more determined to provide the support and resources necessary to help Alisha achieve her post secondary goals.

Alisha was on honor roll during her freshmen and sophomore years. But in her junior year, her academic performance drastically changed. She wanted more freedom in her life, but she said that her father refused to let her live by her own rules. She stated:

He was just like, "You quit basketball. You're hanging around all these bad people and you're doing this, and you're doing that. Do you want to go to college?"

She said that this disagreement put a strain on their relationship. Alisha said that she immediately decided to move out to live with her grandmother and mother where she would have a lot more freedom. After moving out of her father's house, Alisha said that she started hanging out with the wrong crowd, missing school and participating less in her extracurricular activities. By the end of her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, her grades suffered and she had to retake some classes in adult and night schools. It was at this moment, Alisha stated, that she began to realize how her actions may hurt her chance of getting into a four year college. She explained:

I think what really made me get distracted was because I was surrounding myself with people with different goals than I had... Some of the friends that I had they'd party all the time, they didn't play sports...they weren't trying for scholarships and applying to colleges. They didn't know about the... deadlines...I used to get distracted by that...

By her senior year, Alisha said, she had developed a critical awareness of her experiences, education and future. As she reflected back to her junior year, she stated that

she regretted not listening to her father. She realized that he was trying to help her make the right decisions so that she could achieve her post high school plans and have a better life than her family. For the pre interview activity, Alisha wrote a reflective essay where she made connections between higher education and her lived realities.

Having a higher education is most important in my life because I have witnessed what life is like without it. From a young age, I have seen my parents work really hard to support our family. Because they had no higher learning, the struggle of working long hours and living from paycheck to paycheck became very stressful.

In this excerpt from her essay, Alisha vividly described what she viewed as the economic impact of not having a college degree. She shared the struggles her family continued to experience on a daily basis as racialized, classed and gender beings in their community. For example, Alisha explained, her family continuously reminded her to think about the current conditions of her family's living situation (e.g. seven family members in a two bedroom apartment) if and when she ever decided to question the importance of pursuing higher education. As a "young, gifted, and black woman," she also reflected on the power she had to improve the life of her family and her community.

I feel that becoming a positive role model will give me a chance to possibly change someone's life and better my community as a whole. Gaining a higher education will bring me one step closer to creating positive change in all economic, educational and political levels of my environment.

For example, she planned to pursue higher education not only for her own academic and social advancement, but also to improve the lives of her younger family members. Furthermore, Alisha realized that in order for her to successfully transition into college the following year, she had to get her act together in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Therefore, she said

she made a commitment to raising her GPA, retaking the courses from her junior year in adult and night schools, and fully participating in extracurricular activities such as GEAR UP and track and field.

Although during the first two years of this study Alisha had said she wanted to apply to the WMU campuses, SU campuses and private colleges, her plans changed by her senior year. While I was meeting with Alisha on several occasions to work on her WMU personal statement, during one of these meetings she informed me that she would only be applying to the SU system. In the end, she did not apply to the WMU system nor complete her Southern California University (SCU) application. Alisha said she struggled to write about and reflect on the successes and challenges that had shaped her experiences.

As she received her acceptance letters from various SU campuses, she immediately decided to attend SU Newberry (SUN). One of the reasons why she selected SUN was because her GSHS track coach connected her with the track program at SUN. She filled out the team application because she wanted to continue participating in this sport during college. Once Alisha graduated from GSHS, she spent her summer hanging out with friends and family before the school year began.

Alisha's counter-narrative also provides another example of how the C.R.E.A.T.E. framework was used to demonstrate the ways an African American student strategically navigated the challenges she encountered during this critical transition process. While Alisha had a strong relationship with her father, she described how, during her junior year, they had had conflicting views about her level of commitment to

her academic versus social life. It took a drastic change in Alisha's grades, extracurricular involvements and the group of peers she hung out with for her to realize that her college plans were at stake. Throughout this study, Alisha revealed the individual and collective agency that she asserted to achieve her higher education goals. Alisha asserted individual agency as she began to realize the importance of her father's continuous advice, support and expectations in helping her achieve her postsecondary goals. Alisha also demonstrated individual agency through her ability to make connections between pursuing higher education and her social and economic advancement, as well as her family and community. Collective agency was revealed through Alisha's father's continuous efforts to work closely with her to ensure that she had the resources, support and guidance necessary to achieve college-going outcomes.

## **11 – Discussion Section**

They said we wouldn't make it. They said we were good for nothing but eating cold bacon. Education was prohibited to us, because they were afraid of our potential. However slavery ended and guess what? We made it, now we getting degrees with teaching credentials. They said we weren't designed for college. They said we wouldn't make it to or through college. Yo' check it, we so good that we made it, through it, finished it and then we back to build our own HBCU. And in our college we don't discriminate, but we live each and everyday for you. Statistics, judgments, so called history and stereotypes were all designed to dumb us down. But wait, we not gone stop there. We gone go back to our communities and homeland countries to help our people. They said the system was created to break us. Well I have a question, what the fuck is a system? Can someone please let me know? This is a must. Well it really doesn't matter, because we gone beat the system. Now that I have a chance, Now that I'm around, I'm gone flip the script and now the majority is the minority. Act college bound. MLK, Malcolm, Rosa Parks and many more. Yes they started it. However, today I am here to finish it.

**Peyton, 11<sup>th</sup> grade**  
**Poem entitled *Flipping the System***

Many of the students in this study participated in the WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP Adelante Summer Program before they began their senior year (2006-2007 academic year). This four-week college intensive program was designed to prepare Golden State High School (GSHS) students for the process of applying for and transitioning to college through seminars, workshops, counseling sessions and fieldtrips. One of the courses that student participants took was entitled *Race Awareness and Higher Education*, a course that I had the opportunity to co-teach with a colleague. This seminar focused on race, class, and gender based experiences of marginalized communities in higher education and U.S. society. For one of the final assignments, students were required to contribute to a section of a classroom identity quilt made of 100 pieces of blue and yellow felt cloth that

were sewn together. Students were asked to use a 5 X 7 cardstock to reflect on not only what they learned in class, but also their identities as People of Color preparing to transition into higher education. They were to do so in any manner (e.g. images, words, phrases, quotes, poetry, lyrics, etc) with which they felt most comfortable. Once they completed their pieces, an identity quilt was put together to represent the collective and diverse identities of the Scholars of Color in the classroom. While many students created collages, Peyton, a well rounded, high-achieving young African American woman and spoken word artist, decided to write the poem reprinted above.

I asked Peyton to explain the poem when she decided to expand on it for the pre-interview activity for this study during her senior year. She began by describing the historical and contemporary ways in which deficit discourse continued to impact the lives of African Americans. For instance, Peyton expressed how issues of race and racism were central to mainstream conversations about the daily realities of this marginalized population. She also discussed the major role of the government in the systemic inequities that persistently limit opportunities for People of Color. Even with these challenges, Peyton emphasized, African Americans were still able to rise beyond expectation. More importantly, she said, these misconceptions had empowered many African Americans to fight for equitable opportunities and conditions. She expressed that the struggles endured by past generations of African Americans allowed her to make sense of her own lived realities and the importance of being an agent for change in her community. Peyton explained, "If I want to change this world for the better, I've got to get an education." She believed that one of the major ways for her to impact change as a

young African American woman was by pursuing higher education. “I want to go to college ‘cause I feel like a lot of people [in Communities of Color] are not aware of a lot of things.” She explained that obtaining a college degree would allow her to “flip the system,” placing People of Color’s experiences and needs at the forefront of the majoritarian discourse, and continue the social justice commitments that prominent African American leaders such as Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks started. Peyton said that achieving her postsecondary goals would allow her to gain the power necessary to help impact long-lasting change through a career in psychology, and develop the knowledge needed to help inform Communities of Color about the rights and opportunities available to them.

Peyton’s reasons for pursuing higher education were some of many reoccurring themes shared by the other students in my study. Over the course of three years I learned about how twenty African American high school students’ diverse experiences shaped their pathways to higher education.

African Americans continue to be chronically underrepresented in colleges and universities across the United States. As a result, they have been at the center of educational debates about issues of college access and equity. While education officials gradually attempt (e.g. comprehensive review plan) to increase African Americans’ participation in higher education, they sadly continue to discuss these students’ college eligibility and potential in deficit ways. A significant aspect of these conversations that is seldom addressed is the importance of using the voices and experiences of this marginalized population over time to examine ways to improve their access to and

participation in higher education. It is imperative for education officials to interweave policies and practices with African Americans' lived realities over time to better facilitate ways to replace systemic inequalities in college access with equitable outcomes. I therefore assert that faithfully analyzing, understanding and incorporating the findings of a longitudinal qualitative study that places student voices at the forefront of educational discourse is imperative in order to improve this critical juncture of the K-16 educational pipeline.

### **Summary of Study**

African Americans' marginalization in the U.S. higher education system as well as their individual, ecological, social and cultural experiences, particularly as they relate to college-going outcomes, together serve as the basis for this dissertation. I conducted a longitudinal qualitative study of 20 African American students (11 females and 9 males) who attended Golden State High School (GSHS), an urban public school in Southern California, and were participants of GEAR UP, a school-university partnership designed to improve high school graduation and college-going rates. I examined factors in their lives that facilitated and hindered their high school-to-college transition process. For the purpose of this study, I define this transition process as the experiences and changes that occur for students, especially during their high school years, and shape their postsecondary decisions and outcomes. Further, I studied African American students' subjectivities (e.g. race, class, gender, etc) and agency, and how such information can contribute to improving educational policies and practices centered on increasing college access and participation for historically underrepresented populations.

I used a Critical Race Ecocultural Agency Theory in Education (C.R.E.A.T.E.) Framework, which is a combination of critical race theory (CRT), ecocultural theory (ET) and student agency, to explore the complexities of African American students' high school-to-college transition process. CRT refers to a framework used to examine and challenge the ways race, racism and other forms of subordination implicitly and explicitly shape social structures, practices, and discourses; ET proposes that there are multiple cultural, ecological and individual influences on students' life trajectories; and student agency has been discussed as individual or group interactions with and responses to societal and institutional forces that impact lives in schools. As such, I define C.R.E.A.T.E. as: *responses to factors in multiple contexts with strategies, skills, routines and decisions necessary to take action(s) on individual and collective levels to achieve postsecondary goals*. Multiple contexts were conceptualized for this study as students' formal and informal spaces. Formal contexts refer to spaces, such as schools, social service agencies, and educational programs, which are formally recognized for improving student achievement. Informal contexts involve families, peers, and communities, spaces that are seldom recognized for contributing to student success. I argue that this integrative model allows for: 1) a reconceptualization of the discourse on African American students' transitions from high school to college, and 2) a longitudinal qualitative methodological orientation that frames and embraces the interconnectedness of these students' multiple subjectivities, identities and ecological contexts. For these reasons, I examined the following questions:

1. How does using a C.R.E.A.T.E. model help us understand the high school-to-college transition process for African-American students?

2. How can African American students' experiences and voices inform K-16 educational policies and practices to increase their access to, preparation for, and representation in higher education?

Overall, C.R.E.A.T.E. provides an outlet for understanding these students' experiences over time as they attempt to gain access to and participate in higher education.

In relationship to the C.R.E.A.T.E. model, I used qualitative methods---interviews, informal conversations (e.g. phone calls, text messaging, etc), multiple site observations and document analysis---to ensure that African American students' voices and experiences were the focal point of this study. The data analyses for this study were iterative and on going, allowing for adjustments to the data collection process as different themes and patterns emerged; furthermore, I employed transcribing, triangulation and member checking. Through my integrative framework, I was able to utilize students' responses over time to create counter-narratives. This form of narrative provides an outlet for the study of the stories that African American students come to experience, live, represent, and tell within their multiple contexts. My role with the students evolved through my involvement in GEAR UP as a researcher, practitioner, mentor and friend. Therefore, consistent with the emancipatory agenda of critical race theory, I shared with the participants my expertise about the college preparation and participation process, which was an important part of my applied-research agenda. I wrote analytical memos to document the assistance that I provided my participants, to assist with the meaning making of my experiences in the field, as well as to show how my own personal history may influence my research study.

## **Using C.R.E.A.T.E. to Understand the High School-to-College Transition Process**

With every action taken and decision made by African American students during the high school-to-college transition process, especially in their senior years, there are always accompanying stories that can serve to illuminate their unique journeys. What fails to be captured in mainstream conversations about these students' pathways to higher education, are the complexities and diversity of their experiences, even when the individuals are categorized under the same racial and socioeconomic groups, live in the same urban community, attend the same high school and participate in the same college preparation program. Furthermore, students are seldom followed over an extended period of time, something necessary to gain a more in-depth understanding of their lived realities and how these experiences impact their college-going outcomes in unique ways. As I began this study during the students' sophomore year of high school, they informed me in our first formal interviews together that the 10<sup>th</sup> grade marked a significant time when a critical transition emerged. More specifically, they said, it was when they began to take their postsecondary goals more seriously and realized the importance of pursuing higher education.

In order to answer the first question of my dissertation, "*How does using a C.R.E.A.T.E. model help us understand the high school-to-college transition process for African-American students?*" I used counter-narratives to capture these students' lived realities in multiple contexts as they attempted to achieve their postsecondary goals. I had the opportunity to build a rapport with the students over the course of three years—from their sophomore to senior years. Through our interactions and conversations, they

gradually revealed and I observed the experiences, events, and developments that facilitated and hindered their postsecondary pursuits. Since I was familiar with the stories behind their actions and decisions about their post high school plans, the counter-narratives were the best tool to not only capture the nuances of their experiences over time, but also, to challenge the discourse that often categorizes the K-16 educational trajectory and educability of African Americans in monolithic and static ways. Whether the students were successful at or struggling to achieve college-going outcomes, a common theme was revealed through their personal accounts over the years: their demonstration of how they asserted individual and collective agency at various points of their high school careers, regardless of whether they decided to pursue higher education or take alternative routes. Through these counter-narratives, the voices and experiences of these African American students became central to understanding ways to improve their college access and equity.

I began this longitudinal study with the intention of only examining how school officials, policies and practices impacted the students' high school-to-college transition process. Yet, the students immediately informed me through their responses that their lived realities were shaped by more than just their school contexts. As a researcher, I was making assumptions about their lives and not allowing them to share the various contexts that had shaped their pathways to college. I learned that, depending on the student, some combination of their schools, families, communities and peers played a critical role in helping or impeding their abilities to navigate between their daily experiences and postsecondary pursuits.

In order to shed light on the students' lives in their multiple contexts, I created counter-narratives based on their formal and informal contexts. For the formal, I focused on the students' experiences in schools, since these learning communities were spaces that they reflected on and critiqued throughout the study. I used the C.R.E.A.T.E. framework to develop counter-narratives based on the students' informal contexts, mainly familial realities, to illuminate the strengths and complexities of these spaces, spaces that are seldom discussed in the dominant discourse, except in a negative fashion. Three themes were presented under each context, with each theme represented in its own chapter (Chapters 5-10). These themes highlighted the general experiences of the students in this study. Yet, in order to capture the essence of the themes, three to four students' counter-narratives were presented in each chapter. Although there were several overlaps between their stories, these accounts exemplified the similarities and differences in the students' lives that shaped their postsecondary pathways.

The themes presented in the formal contexts chapters were as follows: 1) Encountering the Politics of Our Schools (Chapter 5), 2) Negotiating Pathways in Our Formal Contexts (Chapter 6), and 3) Creating Counter-spaces in Our Learning Communities (Chapter 7). Throughout my preparation for these chapters, I learned that while the students did reflect on the educational inequalities present at GSHS and other high schools they had attended, they did not express a desire to transfer to resource-rich schools. Often times the students described certain individuals, groups and spaces within GSHS as a "community" and "second family." In addition, they shared both positive and

negative accounts of their experiences in schools and how they impacted their college-going outcomes.

The themes that were used to represent students counter-narratives of their informal contexts were the following: 1) Challenging the Discourse about Our Familial Experiences (Chapter 8), 2) Strategically Navigating Challenges in Our Informal Context (Chapter 9), and 3) Developing Critical Understandings of Our Familial Realities (Chapter 10). While exploring these themes, I learned about the ways in which the students made sense of their daily experiences in informal contexts and how these spaces played a critical role in shaping their postsecondary pathways. The students also revealed how agency was asserted at individual and collective levels within these spaces to achieve their goals.

General findings from this study revealed: 1) the complexities and diversity of African American students' high school-to-college transition process, 2) the ways in which individual and collective agency were asserted across multiple contexts and transformed overtime, 3) the dexterity involved in navigating and negotiating their experiences in formal (i.e. school) and informal contexts (i.e. family), and 4) how students developed a critical understanding of the connections and disconnections between their academic, social and personal realities.

The critical race ecocultural agency theory in education (C.R.E.A.T.E.) framework helps us understand the high school-to-college transition process for African American students in several ways. This model uses a longitudinal qualitative methodological orientation that frames and embraces the complexities and diversity of

twenty African American students' perspectives and experiences overtime. Too often research on the high school-to-college transition process examines the actions taken and decisions made about college during students' senior year. Based on their post-high school outcomes, assumptions are often made about the academic abilities and level of commitment of those students who are able to successfully transition to college and those who make alternative decisions that may not include pursuing high education. Following African American students' experiences longitudinally allows for the exploration of the commonalities and heterogeneity in developments that occur in their pathways to college.

The C.R.E.A.T.E. model illuminates the various ways individual and collective agency was asserted by students during this critical transition process. Based on traditional discourse on the college choice theory, students' academic background would dictate differences in their actions and decisions about their college options. Yet, my dissertation study revealed that many of these students thought similarly about their postsecondary options. While the students' grades and test scores may have not been the same, these students took similar steps towards preparing themselves to gain access to college. One of the connections they demonstrated throughout this study was the various ways they asserted agency in their formal and informal contexts as they attempted to transition to college. They illustrated that in the midst of the successes and challenges that occurred in their multiple contexts, they were able to make decisions about or take actions towards accomplishing and staying committed to achieving their postsecondary goals. While their agency was often asserted on an individual level, the students also

revealed how they collaborated with others in their multiple contexts that helped them make sense of and navigate this critical transition process.

Students' experiences during the high school-to-college transition process are often seen as a linear process. Policies and practices geared towards improving college access and equity for all students, especially for those individuals from underrepresented and underserved backgrounds, fail to capture the complexities of these students' lived realities. The C.R.E.A.T.E. model allows us to conceptualize and contextualize their experiences in multiple contexts. For the African American students in this study, their experiences with their families, peers, school and community played a critical role in facilitating and hindering their pathways to college. While the impact of each context varied for the students, they revealed the dexterity involved in navigating and negotiating their experiences in various spaces. Not only did the students have to prepare themselves to achieve their postsecondary goals in their formal contexts, they also had to find ways to balance their experiences in their informal contexts.

The C.R.E.A.T.E. framework demonstrates how these African American students developed a critical understanding of the connections and incongruities between their academic, social and personal realities. These spaces are often seen as separate entities that play different roles in students' lives, especially during this critical transition process. In Communities of Color, one context (e.g. school) is often described as playing a stronger role in contributing to students' academic success and outcomes while the other context (e.g. family) is blamed for not providing the conditions necessary to help students' transition to college. What this integrative framework illuminates is the

importance of exploring students' experiences in their formal and informal contexts to understand ways to develop policies and practices that meet their most immediate needs. As the African American students demonstrated throughout this study, various school agents failed to invest time into learning about students' experiences in their informal contexts. This limited opportunities to create learning communities that embraced students' multiple subjectivities, identities and ecological contexts. Therefore, the students stressed the importance of bridging the gap that exists between the academic, personal and social realities of students in order to better facilitate successful college-going outcomes for all students. In the following sections, I will present the students' recommendations for policies and practices, then my own implications and reflections from the field as well as future research ideas.

### **Students' Perspectives Overtime- Implications for Educational Policies and Practices**

"We already got people saying that our school [GSHS] is a bad school. I don't think it's bad. I just think it needs a little work, making up.... It's just a school, a place to learn, a place to sit down and study. I don't think the school is bad because we have things to help us. We have everything other schools have... And we may be better. Some school don't even have a tutoring program on campus."

**Jabreality, 11<sup>th</sup> grade year**

One of the main goals of my longitudinal study was to utilize student-centered initiatives to understand ways to improve the high school-to-college transition process for underrepresented communities. By making twenty African American students' voices more relevant to discourses about their school experiences, I illuminated the numerous interventions and practices that facilitated and hindered their educational trajectories.

From the students' sophomore to senior years, I asked them a series of focused questions whose answers would be used to construct suggestions for creating lasting reforms, policies, and practices that were *relevant* to their lived realities, academic experiences and outcomes. A unique aspect of the students' responses was that they did not express interests in transferring to a resource- rich, "high performing" school. In addition, when asked in their junior-year interviews to describe their ideal school, they all essentially felt that while resources, opportunities and practices would be better in this ideal school, the location of their school would remain same.

In order to capture the meaning of their responses over the years, I used this section of the study to attempt to answer the second research question: *How can African American students' experiences and voices inform K-16 educational policies and practices to increase their access to, preparation for, and representation in higher education?* The students' responses revealed the many developments and transformations that had emerged during their attempts to make sense of and provide recommendations for improving major leaks in the K-16 educational pipeline for African Americans, especially as such leaks related to their high school graduation and college-going rates.

Based on the findings from this study, I will now highlight their recommendations for the policy and practice that impact African American students opportunities to learn, achieve and pursue postsecondary education. First, I focus on the participants' suggestions made during their sophomore and junior years about school agents such as teachers, school administrators and counselors, school curriculum, and school conditions. I will then discuss their recommendations as seniors, which centered on ways to improve

the educational experiences of African American students, especially at the high school level, and issues of college access and equity for African Americans.

### **Students' Recommendations during their Sophomore and Junior Years**

Teachers need to take more classes... [like] Psychology ...so they could understand some students and Sociology so they could understand the things that are going on in the students' daily lives... Sociology talks about things that are going on now at this point in time with young kids. If they [teachers] don't know what the kids are going through, or they can't relate to what they're doing, then they can't teach them.

**Ashley, 11<sup>th</sup> grade**

Ashley's suggestion represented one of the many responses the students in this study provided for improving their educational experiences and outcomes. The recommendations that emerged during their sophomore and junior years centered on three themes: 1) school agents, 2) school curriculum, and 3) school conditions. Throughout this study, the students demonstrated how these factors impact African American students' pathways to college.

#### *School Agents*

Try to get more down to earth teachers that will work with you. One that you talk to and don't have problems with...you can object to what a teacher's saying and they won't look at you in a bad way.

**Adrian, 10<sup>th</sup> grade**

With the quote above, Adrian discussed the critical role that *school agents*, more specifically teachers, played in influencing his academic achievement and outcomes. He, along with other students in this study, described the need for teachers who took time to make sure their students were able to successfully graduate from high school and transition to college. The other characteristics of an ideal teacher, the students shared,

included having an expressed desire to learn about students' lived experiences and having high expectations for students with diverse academic abilities. The students highlighted the need for unique pedagogical practices that allowed teachers to help students beyond designated classroom time (i.e. before, lunchtime or after school hours), create intellectually stimulating and engaging activities, and make connections to culturally relevant and personal experiences. Byron provided an example of his A.P. Chemistry teacher's classroom practices that facilitated successful teaching and learning outcomes. He explained:

My A.P. Chemistry teacher [Ms. Atkins], she made the class exciting. Instead of just teaching us about science we had labs all the time. She said...if you get 85% or higher on three out of five tests I'm gonna give you before your final, including the final, you can go on a trip with me...She said she'll pay for the food and the trip... It's just a night on the town. So she did that and we had about ...40 to 50 students.

Byron demonstrated the importance of teachers going beyond the general teaching requirements to facilitate students' learning and academic achievement. In this particular case, his teacher used innovative lessons and incentives to ensure that students were committed to mastering and excelling in chemistry. One specific recommendation the students provided for improving issues related to teachers was to recruit more Teachers of Color, especially African American educators who may better understand these students' lived realities. Jerome, for example, stated the need for "more black teachers" that could "relate to black students": "Say if you had a black teacher who came up struggling...he can relate to black students now." While there were quite a few African American teachers at GSHS, many of the students in this study said that they either did not have many of these teachers in their core classes or did not encounter many African

American teachers who were able to take the time to embrace their lived experiences. Other recommendations included: Ensuring that all teachers were credentialed in their designated subject areas, and providing professional development workshops and courses for these teachers that focused on creating student-centered teaching practices and teaching students with diverse needs and experiences.

In order to combat some of the other issues impacting the GSHS student body, some of the students recommended that fewer police officers be present at GSHS. In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade Elijah said, “On our campus after school, everyday we walk outside and there are cops across the street just waiting for something to happen.” Elijah understood that while school security is necessary, officers’ presence often makes students feel uncomfortable and can create an atmosphere of added tension, which may boil over causing some individuals to react who otherwise may not have. The students also suggested that school agents should inform all students about all programs and resources, such as GEAR UP, that provided a multitude of services to help them achieve their goals. Further, students sought the establishment of offices on campus with counseling staff that were trained to provide students with psychological and personal support services.

While deficit discourse continues to highlight the lack of parent involvement in Communities of Color, the students expressed that school officials needed to do a better job of outreaching to parents and informing them of the best ways and opportunities to provide scholastic support for their children. Culturally relevant and community based programs were also suggested as outlets to expose students to the history of and

opportunities in their communities, as well as ways to encourage and allow them to be actively involved in change.

### *School Curriculum*

The students also made recommendations for the *school curriculum*, a curriculum, they said, that should be focused on meeting students' diverse needs and preparing them for their postsecondary pursuits. Creating small learning communities (Meier, 1995) was described as a possible way to achieve these goals. For example, as a junior, Peyton described the changes she would make to the GSHS curriculum:

A dream GSHS would be a mimic of College Summit<sup>23</sup> where... we start off by developing a family first and then we work on academics...cause most people won't work with other people unless they feel comfortable. So we start off where we can hit people, we got to get that emotional side...we need small schools...classes.

Peyton's words demonstrated the importance of creating small learning communities that provide opportunities for teachers and students to get to know and understand each other more intimately. Through these spaces, she said, students would be able to learn about one another's commonalities and diverse experiences as well as feel comfortable sharing their own academic strengths and improving upon their weaknesses; teachers, in turn, would be able to find ways to tailor their teaching practices and curriculum to meet students' diverse needs.

The students also discussed how the A-G course requirements necessary to gain admission to a 4-year university should be required for all students. This initiative could provide students with various options after high school, even if they decided not to

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<sup>23</sup> College Summit: a non-profit organization that provides districts with a strategy and tools to transform college enrollment throughout the district.

pursue higher education. Students also described the necessity of skill based (vocational) courses available to all students. As an aspiring architect, Byron learned the importance of being exposed to skill-based courses during his time at Corolla High School. He said that there were various courses such as Architectural Drawing and Visual Arts available for students to take at this school. Given the number of students in Golden State that Byron knew who wanted to be architects, he said, "If we were able to take an architectural drawing class [at GSHS] then you know what is required of you. And you won't go to college learning how to do this, you will be...one step ahead." He explained that such courses would help students not only to be competitive applicants for specialized undergraduate programs, but also to be strong candidates for internship opportunities.

### *School Conditions*

The students' descriptions of their *school conditions* support research literature arguing that urban public schools continue to be under-resourced, underfunded, and understaffed, which in turn contributes to underperformance and low college-going outcomes (Meier et al, 2004). The students emphasized how limited school funding impacted the facilities, resources and opportunities available to the GSHS community. Dilapidated buildings and classrooms contained outdated furniture, graffiti, chipping paint, broken windows, and no air-conditioning. Peyton described how many of her peers felt about their school conditions. She said:

The students are like why do the buildings look like this? If it was cleaner, I wouldn't mind walking in here. Why is this here? Why is there graffiti here? ... It makes a difference. If these are all crummy, and glass broken and ... windows broken and there's graffiti everywhere students are not

going to want to go here. And they get inside the classroom and don't feel comfortable... I wouldn't want to walk in a school where there's mostly just graffiti ... metal detectors and people looking at you.

Peyton and other students in this study suggested that school improvement efforts as simple as painted buildings, clean classrooms and windows, as well as picking up trash could improve students' educational experiences.

Due to the limited numbers of classrooms available and credentialed teachers hired each year, the students said, classes were often overcrowded, making it difficult to learn and pay attention. Many of these classes were AP and honors courses, courses that students wanted to take to be eligible to gain admission to college. There were already a limited number of classrooms and teachers available for these courses. Furthermore, in many GSHS classrooms, there were not enough books or other resources available for students to use both inside and outside of the classroom. Also, since a majority of the computers in the school library and the computer labs did not work, the students said, they often relied on the GEAR UP computer lab and other off campus sites (e.g. public library) to complete their assignments. The students wanted better resources, cleaner schools, smaller class sizes and more available A.P. courses with experienced teachers. Despite the inequitable school conditions at GSHS, the students reiterated, they found alternative ways to obtain the resources they needed to help them achieve their goals during this critical transition process.

## **Senior Year: Students' Recommendations for Improving the High School to College Transition Process for African Americans**

“If they had better teaching methods. You know as small as that is it could really affect how students learn or their will to want to learn. Don’t have teachers who are highly irritable... We’re teenagers. Don’t come to work mad everyday and then take it out on us when you get that red pen in your hand. That’s not gonna work.”

**Raheem, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

The students had reflected on their high school-to-college transition process throughout this study; however, conversations during their senior year appeared even more focused on their attempts to make sense of their experiences, actions, and decisions towards their postsecondary pursuits than had our earlier exchanges. As a critical part of this sense-making-process, the students used their deeper understanding of the factors that had helped and hindered them along their paths to initiate recommendations on ways to improve this critical transition process for African American students. More specifically, they provided recommendations on ways to improve: 1) the educational experiences of African American students, especially at the high school level and 2) college access and equity for African Americans. In the following sections, I will present their responses to these themes.

### *Recommendations for Improving African American Students Educational Experiences*

Teachers, they view us as “You’re not going to get far,” or, “You’re just going to have a baby and that’s it.” Just help us and tell us anything that we want to do is possible...

**Brianna, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

The students reflected on their educational experiences during the high school-to-college transition process. Based on these experiences and reflections, they provided recommendations about ways African American students’ educational experiences and

college-going outcomes can be improved. While the students reiterated some of the recommendations about school conditions that were addressed in the previous sections, I will highlight their specific suggestions for: 1) teachers, 2) administrators, 3) creating culturally relevant programs and 4) redefining African American student academic experiences.

### *Teachers*

The students shared how they were able to recognize the differences between teachers who were passionate about education and those who were only there because they had to be. A teacher's level of commitment, the students felt, was revealed through his or her ability to create a fun yet challenging learning community, not through mechanical methods such as the disinterested distribution of packets of worksheets.

The students expressed that all teachers have the ability to create a college-going culture in their classroom. Wendell said, "We need more college motivated teachers. Teachers that really want to...send kids to college. I mean not all teachers want that ... It's just that all teachers have the ability to say...I wanna see you in college." As demonstrated through Wendell's words, just a few encouraging words about college from a teacher could help facilitate students' pathways to college. To create a college-going learning community, the students said, teachers needed not only intelligence, but also the ability to have control of their class. As Candice described her experiences in her AP Physics class, she explained that her teacher, Mr. Bautista, was unable to control the class, which impacted students' abilities to focus and participate during lessons. Candice stated:

Mr. Bautista, I think he's the smartest man at our school. As a physics teacher he is intelligent, but nobody takes him seriously. Nobody cares. Nobody appreciates his intelligence because he can't control his class. Anytime he talks and he tells us to be quiet and he keeps talking anyway and he lets us go. The whole rest of the school year is ours.

As Candice discussed the importance of classroom management, she also suggested that teachers too needed assistance, and perhaps should be required to attend workshops and courses that focus on issues such as classroom management and ways to work with diverse student populations. The bottom line, she said, is that GSHS needed educators who could take charge of their classroom from the first day of school.

The students also discussed the need for teachers with better teaching methods. They expressed that successful methods involved teachers taking time to get to know and listen to students, addressing students' diverse needs, and utilizing creative yet challenging ways to engage students in the learning process. For example, Dania described how her Pre-Calculus teacher, Mr. Powell's, teaching methods helped students learn about and engage in mathematics. She stated:

My teacher does not keep going if somebody says oh I don't understand cause he's like if somebody doesn't understand then that means more than one person doesn't understand... He'll explain it as much as he can and the he'll ask can somebody else explain it or we can't go any further... that's how we get a lot of our questions cause we break it down ...I think that if a lot of teachers like that...I think that will make us understand better.

Unlike some of the other GSHS teachers, Dania said, Mr. Powell demonstrated exemplary teaching methods. He not only went out of his way to ensure that his students felt comfortable with the material presented to them in class, Dania explained, he also helped students get reacquainted with concepts from previous math courses to strengthen

their mathematics foundation. The students in this study said that Mr. Powell created a learning community that allowed them to ask questions as often as they needed in order to understand the lessons. In addition, he also engaged students in the learning process by having them demonstrate their knowledge of the material to their classmates.

The students described the importance of moving beyond state and federal content standards as prime determining factors of the learning process. In responding to this question about how to improve the educational experiences of African American students, Elijah said,

If you're in a class and you just follow the standards that...the state of California gives you then your gonna disinterest the students. And in doing so your gonna run into a lot of problems as a teacher. Then your gonna blame the students for doing this and doing that...but...they have no interest in the subject that your teaching or the way you teach.

While Elijah recognized that GSHS teachers were required to follow the content standards, he said that teachers should be able to do so in ways that allow students to relate to the material and be actively involved in the class. The students suggested that when working with African American students, school staff must consider developing academically rigorous yet culturally and personally relevant learning communities (Ladson-Billings, 1994). One recommendation on ways to accomplish these goals was by creating scholarships for Africans Americans who wanted to be teachers, thus creating greater incentives for more African Americans to become credentialed teachers. Adrian explained why the recruitment of these teachers is important. He stated, "There needs to be more African American teachers we can relate too and school will be much easier.... it's not necessarily their skin [color], but... their upbringing." He goes on to explain that

besides recruiting more African American teachers, there needed to be a variety of teachers that this student population could relate to and learn from.

The students also described the importance of school agents, such as teachers, informing African American students about the various opportunities available to them on campus. Raheem shared, “ Let them know, make them aware that there are places where they can go to get help like after school programs...cause a lot of people don’t know that.” He continued to explain that African American students are often times not informed about or familiar with the resources and opportunities at their schools that can facilitate successful high school graduation and college-going rates.

#### *Administrators*

Throughout this study, the students continuously described how they felt that GSHS administrators prioritized student discipline and meeting testing mandates over helping students achieve their postsecondary goals. Although the College and Career Center (CACC) and GEAR UP provided college preparation opportunities and resources, the students felt that helping students successfully graduate from high school and transition to college was not on the top of the administrators’ agenda. Elijah shared his suggestions about ways to address this issue. He said:

In terms of GSHS I would say emphasize more on education and achievement as oppose to disciplinary acts... GSHS staff focus way more on no this and no that than they focus on... making sure you do this on time, [they are not] making sure you meet all the A-G requirements... Because the only stuff we hear is through GEAR UP and the CACC office if we go there...outside of there we all we hear is no white tees, black tees, hats...

In the following excerpt Elijah expressed how he felt that school staff, especially administrators, needed to focus on helping students be prepared for their post high school pursuits. The students recognized that the administrators took specific actions to create a safe learning environment for the GSHS community and meet state and federal mandates to avoid losing funding and being taken over by the state; yet, they emphasized the importance of school agents creating a learning community where academic success and pursuing higher education were reiterated to students on a daily basis through supportive methods. Keisha also supported this argument when she said, “ You’re [administrators] always talking about you want the school to get high test scores, but push students towards college, push students towards the future.”

The students also suggested that the administrators take a proactive role in ensuring that programs were available year round. With GEAR UP ending after their senior year, students voiced their concerns with younger students not being able to benefit from this program. Keisha stated, “It could be so much better high school wise if they [administrators] had...more programs. They need more programs. All the programs won’t last forever. If one program leaves, make sure you have a back up program.” Many of the students felt that the only space at GSHS that focused on creating a community of academic excellence, student development and successful postsecondary outcomes was GEAR UP. Raheem described GEAR UP as “somewhere they [students] can get help with something no matter what it is, because it’s not always academic struggles that stop somebody.” The students recommended that GSHS administrators could also achieve these goals through daily inspirational messages on the intercom, college preparation

activities such as field trips and college fairs, and more programs that addressed students' diverse needs.

### *Creating Culturally Relevant Programs*

The students also suggested programs that centered on learning about one's history and academic achievement. They described how these programs could help students learn about where they came from and appreciate past generations who have paved the way for equitable conditions and opportunities for African Americans. When describing the Black Student Union organization that Ashley and her best friend Adrianna started at GSHS, Ashley said, " We wanted to make kids more aware of who they are because a lot of kids don't even know what's going on...We come together to learn more about ourselves. To know that we're all one." In this space, Ashley said, they were also able to discuss ways to help out their community. The students also recommended the involvement of community members as role models and mentors. They described how these individuals could provide opportunities for African American students to obtain support, advisement and encouragement as they attempt to achieve their postsecondary goals.

### *Redefining African American Student Academic Experiences*

The students' recommendations for improving African Americans' educational experiences were also focused on centralizing this marginalized population's voices and challenging the dominant discourse about their educational experiences and outcomes. For instance, Jerome shared that in order to address African American students' most immediate needs, researchers, policymakers and practitioners needed to listen to their

voices. He said, "You can't really ask a teacher, administrator ...how... would you help African American [students]? How would you educate them? You gotta ask the kid how would you like to help get yourself educated?" Other students reflected on how African Americans continue to be the target of negative educational discourse and blamed for the problems during their K-16 educational experiences. Keisha expressed her frustrations with this issue by stating,

The only thing I could really say is not putting them down so much. When they do speak to African American kids or people...they read statistics saying, "African Americans don't get this kind of education," or ...we're the group that doesn't go to college. We know that, we hear it, but we don't need to constantly hear it to the point where kids...it gets stuck in their mind like, "There ain't no point in me even going [to college].

Keisha suggested that practitioners should work on instilling positive images in African American students' minds about people in their communities who were able to achieve academic and social advancement. She described how GSHS alumnae with advanced degrees came to her English class for Career Day to share their accomplishments and discuss the possibilities of students achieving their own goals. Keisha, along with other students in this study, recommended that similar programs involving community members be implemented to help African American students stay committed to graduating high school and achieving their postsecondary goals, allowing them a forum to learn from the successes and challenges faced by individuals with similar experiences.

### *Transforming College Access and Equity for African American Students*

In providing recommendations for improving college access and equity for African Americans, the students focused on two issues: 1) early intervention and 2) creating a college-going culture.

#### *Early Intervention*

The students described early intervention as a critical component for success in their pathways to higher education. Whether the students were informed about pursuing higher education from their peers, families, school officials or community members, they revealed how this exposure, if given early on, tremendously helped them make decisions about and take actions towards achieving their postsecondary goals. Candice reflected on her own experiences of being exposed to academic success and the pursuit of higher education at an early age. She said,

I think it starts when you're... younger...if you've been told all your life that you're smart, that you can do this, you could do that and then that's all it takes... I promise you...this is exactly what happened to me. Elementary and preschool I was always told you are really smart. I don't know what I was doing to be smart but when I get to my class all my teachers.... Would say you are smart. Move on down the line.

In the preceding excerpt, Candice described how her academic abilities were nurtured and supported by family members and teachers. Through their support, she was able to skip a grade and continue to excel in school. She recognized that every student might not have had the opportunity to experience what she did at an early age. Therefore, Candice and other participants in the study explained that though early intervention was invaluable, it was never too late for African Americans students to be provided with the support and encouragement needed to achieve their goals.

Half of the students in this study had been participants of GEAR UP since middle school. Many of them reiterated how important it had been for them to be exposed to college-going activities and information as early as middle school. As a participant in GEAR UP since middle school, Corey said, “Implant it in their heads from like the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> grade that going to a four year college is important for a successful future.” Many students described how their family members instilled in them the importance of pursuing higher education, and provided them the support needed to achieve these goals. Yet, they said, programs like GEAR UP provided a different type of support. Not only did this program provide academic and college preparation opportunities for all students, it also provided a space where students’ social and personal needs were addressed. Even those students who started participating in GEAR UP in high school suggested that this type of program was necessary for all students during the high school-to-college transition process, even for those students who were undecided about college.

#### *Creating a College-Going Culture*

Let them know that a high school diploma is not enough... I’ve seen graphs on how much a person with just a high school diploma makes as opposed to somebody with a Master’s. Now if they know ...that’s where the money is really at... that’s where the success is really at. I think that they will be more college driven. Have an assembly and keep it real. Let them know that hey if you get a high school diploma this is where your gonna be financially... you won’t be able to get this. You won’t be able to get that. And a chance of being well off financially is little to none with a high school diploma.

**Raheem, 12<sup>th</sup> grade**

Raheem, a participant in GEAR UP since the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, said that it was from a class presentation that he was able to make a stronger connection between pursuing higher education and his future. He said that one of his teachers had brought in a chart that

illustrated different income levels based on educational background. This chart revealed stark differences between individuals who obtained only a high school diploma versus those with advanced degrees. Examining this chart, Raheem said it hugely reaffirmed his commitment to pursuing higher education and achieving his career. The excerpt above represented Raheem's understanding and one of the recommendations he made about ways to inform African American students about the importance of pursuing higher education.

Throughout this study, the students discussed the need for African American youth to be exposed to a college-going culture within their school contexts. According to them, the characteristics of a college-going culture included: providing college-going opportunities, inspiring and encouraging students about their college-going abilities and potential, connecting higher education to students' lived realities, and making the A-G course requirements necessary for all students.

The students discussed the importance of exposing all students to college-going opportunities such as workshops, mentoring and counseling services, fieldtrips, and events involving community members. They described how, many times, Students of Color in urban schools like GSHS have limited opportunities to learn about and experience what colleges and universities have to offer before they decide to apply. While these students, especially those who were actively involved in GEAR UP, had opportunities to participate in residential summer programs and college tours and network with various college representatives, many African American students at GSHS were not even aware that such opportunities exist. In light of this fact, the students made

suggestions on ways to keep students informed about and involved in college-going opportunities. Dania spoke to the obligation that K-12 schools and universities have to do a better job developing activities to improve African Americans students' access to higher education. She said,

I think at our school, they need to have a day where we actually go in and sit –like a day in a life type thing where you sit in the college campus... or you do the college campus tour ... during the fall semester-cause that's when everyone is out... and ... you get to see everything...when the students are there and faculty is there... You're sitting there and you get to talk to the teacher...in class.

Dania went on to further explain how that opportunity could provide an outlet for students to familiarize themselves with the university setting, find activities and programs that would cater to their diverse needs and interests, as well as interact with college students who would be willing to share their first hand experiences on transitioning to college. This recommendation stemmed from Dania's experience during the summer before starting college. She was getting ready to attend State University, La Villa (SULV). When she finally got to visit the campus with her mother, she realized that the school was not what she expected. She explained, "The photo galleries on the internet... made it [SULV] look all nice and pretty...but it's completely different from what's on the internet...I don't like the campus. They have no grass and they have spider webs all over the place." Dania also said that she was unable to observe the lecture halls or speak with current students to gain a more complete and accurate picture of campus life. It was through this visit that Dania made a last minute decision to attend State University, Dover Heights.

Although the students in this study had diverse academic abilities, many of them had common goals---to successfully graduate from high school and pursue higher education. They also believed that every student should have a chance to access opportunities to achieve their postsecondary goals. While school officials often prioritized other issues such as discipline and higher standardized test scores, the students said, they also needed to make sure that every GSHS student met the A-G course requirements for college admission and was involved in activities that would help them achieve college-going outcomes. Elijah discussed the need for school officials to ensure that African American students were enrolled in the appropriate college preparatory courses and programs. He stated,

Make sure...they [African American students] get all the requirements met because...there's a lot of students here [GSHS] that are eligible but they wasn't involved in this program [GEAR UP] or met this A-G requirement or even taking the SATs or the ACTs or it's to late to take the exam. So make sure they get the prerequisites met before you can tell them to actually focus, get involved in A.P. classes.

In the excerpt above, Elijah described an important barrier to college access and equity in urban schools—students not being informed about the resources and opportunities available on campus to help them achieve their postsecondary goals. While at GSHS there were college preparation programs, academic counselors to help students plan their course schedules and a college counseling office to obtain information about college, not every student had the opportunity to utilize these services, as not every student was even aware of their existence and importance. As a result, many GSHS students were unable to meet the requirements to successfully transition to higher education, especially a four-year college.

## **My Recommendations for Educational Research, Policies and Practices**

### **Implications for Research**

- *Longitudinal Qualitative Studies*

As I entered the field on a quest to understand African American students' high school-to-college transition processes, I realized the importance of getting to know students over time in order to understand their pathways to college. For instance, before my first interview with Jerome he asked me several questions about this study: "Why are you conducting research on African American students?", "What is this interview going to be used for?", and "Is this interview going to be given to the government?" These questions immediately caught me by surprise because he was the first student to request additional details about this study. Yet, I was also glad Jerome asked me these questions, for this was our first encounter together and I admired his proactive, inquisitive nature. While it took a while for Jerome to feel comfortable opening up to me about his lived realities, the formal and informal conversations we had over the course of three years allowed him to gradually share with me the first-hand details of his experiences. It was not until Jerome's senior year that he began revealing more information about his life. While a short-term investigation of Jerome and the other student participants' high school-to-college transition process would have provided more time efficient results, I would have not been able to gain an in-depth and rich understanding of their complex and varied experiences.

Deficit discourse continues to shape perceptions about African American students' high school-to-college transition processes. What fails to be addressed in these

conversations are the stories behind the events that occur, actions taken and decisions made by these students during their pathways to higher education. Whether they are able to successfully transition to college or they encounter roadblocks that prevent them from achieving their goals, it is important to examine the multiple facets of their experiences during this critical transition process. Longitudinal qualitative studies provide opportunities to explore the complexities of their lived realities. I was able to learn about the various factors in these students' multiple contexts that facilitated and hindered their postsecondary pursuits. When researching issues of higher education access and equity for this marginalized population, it is crucial to invest the time into exploring how they conceptualize and contextualize the process.

- *Using Integrative Theoretical Frameworks*

As stated in earlier chapters, I entered this study with the intention of only exploring how these African American students' experiences in schools impacted their high school-to-college transition processes. It was not until after my interviews with them during their sophomore year, however, that I began to realize the importance of allowing *them* to define the factors and contexts that shaped their educational trajectories.

Therefore, I knew I had to consider a framework that would allow me to centralize their subjectivities, capture events, routines and actions that occurred in multiple contexts and examine how they were able to individually and collectively make decisions about and take actions towards achieving their postsecondary pursuits.

Critical Race Theory provided a tool for examining these African American students' experiences with race, racism and other forms of subordination during this

critical transition process. Ecocultural Theory explored the individual, ecological and cultural factors in multiple contexts that shaped their experiences and outcomes. Student agency highlighted their confidence and skills to act individually on their own behalf or in collaboration with others to achieve postsecondary outcomes. Through these theories, I was able to develop a Critical Race Ecocultural Agency Theory in Education (C.R.E.A.T.E.) framework, an integrative model that argues for the recognition of the commonalities yet heterogeneity of African American students' lives. While the C.R.E.A.T.E. model provides an important and useful framework for centralizing the voices and experiences of African American students within research, it can also create an outlet for connecting theory to practice. Not only does this model provide opportunities to challenge discourse that continues to misrepresent such students' lived realities, it also illuminates the factors that facilitate and hinder their pathways to higher education. It allows for the examination of how students assert individual and collective agency in an attempt to achieve their postsecondary goals. Overall, using theoretical frameworks that centralize African American students' unique positions in the K-16 educational pipeline and society allows for critical reflections on how current educational policies and practices can improve these students' access to, preparation for, and participation in college.

### **Implications for Policies**

- *The Importance of K-12 School-University Partnerships*

Through my experiences working with WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP as a research practitioner, I learned how important this program was for the entire GSHS

community—students, families, school officials and community members. While this program was originally designed as an early intervention college preparation program, it evolved to also take a comprehensive reform approach to assisting GSHS. Not only was the entire student body provided with opportunities to help them successfully graduate from high school and transition to college, GEAR UP also collaborated with various individuals both inside and outside of the Golden State community to address issues such as the high school exit exam and low math achievement scores to name a few. Too often school-university partnerships that focus on producing college-going outcomes exclusively outreach to students who are already considered high achieving and college bound. Those students who are low performing and whose college-going abilities are questioned often get overlooked and excluded from these programs. What made WMULA-GSUSD GEAR UP unique was that this program provided services to the entire student body at GSHS to ensure that all students were exposed to the resources and opportunities that made higher education participation a tangible reality.

K-12 School-University partnerships such as GEAR UP are important reform initiatives for improving the high school-to-college transition process in urban schools. Through my work with GEAR UP and conversations with the student in this study, I learned about the various ways this program is critical to facilitating successful college-going outcomes, especially for underrepresented populations. First, the students in this study revealed both directly and indirectly how early intervention programs play a critical role in providing intensive academic and social support to help students navigate their pathways to college successfully. Second, in order to achieve intended programmatic

goals, school-university partnerships must collaborate with school official to help address other pertinent issues that could impact the program's desired outcomes. Third, these programs need to be located directly in the spheres within which the students move. When programs are based on school grounds or in the communities they serve, they are seen as more than just academic preparation programs. They can provide additional support services that address students personal and social needs, serve as mediators and advocates for various individuals in the learning communities, and help facilitate successful teaching and learning processes. Fourth, school-university partnerships can also help students develop "multicultural college-going identities," a notion that Oakes (2003) looks to define as "[when] students see college-going as integral to their identities...[and] they have the confidence and skills to negotiate college without sacrificing their own identity and connections with their home communities." When students are exposed in these spaces to individuals who can serve as models for achieving postsecondary goals, they develop identities that also define these choices as important to their families and communities.

- *(Re)defining Achievement within Federal Education Policies*

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 continues to be utilized as a vehicle to hold K-12 public schools accountable for raising the bar of student achievement, especially for underrepresented populations (Bush, 2000). As required by that law, the *NCLB* Act attempts to: "1) hold high schools accountable for student success, 2) improve conditions in high poverty high schools, 3) place a qualified teacher in every classroom, 4) expand options for parents and students, 5) raise the rigor of the

high school curriculum, 6) focus on what works and 7) prepare America's future" (Bush, 2000).

Unfortunately, this law has had a significant negative impact on GSHS, a low performing, Title I, urban high school. First, although NCLB promised a large increase in Title I funding for state and local agencies, it failed to acknowledge the federal budget deficit, the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, state fiscal constraints (Sunderman & Kim, 2004), and most importantly, the enormous inequalities in the provision of education offered in the United States, such as the spending ratio between advantaged and disadvantaged schools (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Karp, 2004). While NCLB advocates for placing urban schools in the "spotlight" and providing support and quality instruction, these school continue to suffer from limited access to quality teachers, high teacher turnover rates, poor funding, and overcrowding and deteriorating facilities. Second, like many other urban schools, GSHS has unfortunately failed to meet their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) objectives for several years and has been placed on "school improvement" status. Under this status, continued failure to meet these objectives could result in replacement of GSHS staff, implementation of a new curriculum, offering students the opportunity to attend another public school and supplemental educational services, and school restructuring (e.g. reopening as a charter school).

As the students revealed throughout this study, these increased challenges placed on their school through the NCLB added pressure on the GSHS administrators and staff to improve student test scores. Achievement was defined by a student's ability to help

GSHS meet their AYP objectives---increasing test scores in mathematics and reading or language arts. Because students were not able to meet these testing mandates, they lost various extracurricular privileges. While the NCLB Act attempts to help high schools by raising the rigor of the high school curriculum, placing qualified teachers in classroom, and improving graduation rates, helping students transition to college is not included as part of the law's main goal, namely closing the achievement gap. With strict mandates being placed on high poverty schools such as GSHS, school officials rarely have time to prioritize increasing college-going outcomes. As we develop these federal mandates such as NCLB that attempt to "prepare America's future," it is also important to consider ways to incorporate long-term sustainability in terms of providing higher education knowledge, opportunities and access for students and their families, especially for underserved and underrepresented communities.

### **Implications for Practice**

- *(Re)examining Notions of Merit for College Access and Equity*

As I wrote several letters of appeal to highly selective colleges and universities for a few of the students in this study, I immediately began reflecting on the various ways the students navigated their pathways to higher education. For instance since middle school, Peyton was exposed to college-going activities through GEAR UP, which influenced her commitment to work to her maximum potential to achieve her postsecondary goals. As a result, by her senior year at GSHS, Peyton was the ideal applicant for gaining admissions to highly selective universities. She had a high G.P.A., honors and award recognitions, active involvement in many extracurricular activities both

on and off the GSHS campus, and a part time job even with her familial responsibilities at home. Yet, one roadblock she encountered during this critical transition process was her low scores on college entrance exams, an obstacle that finally excluded her from gaining admission to highly selective universities. Peyton said that she felt that, in the end, her low-test scores were what determined her achievement and eligibility for college. Although Peyton ended up pursuing higher education at a less selective university, she felt that the time she invested into making sure she was eligible to gain access to highly selective universities was not valued. Peyton's story represents one of twenty of African American students' experiences as they attempted to gain access to higher education. Their stories highlight the importance of examining how standardized notions of merit do not take into account students', especially Students of Color's, diverse experiences, and can exclude them from achieving their postsecondary goals.

Within the context of higher education access, student achievement continues to be narrowly defined based on G.P.A. and college entrance exams. Seldom are students' life circumstances and the resiliency involved in their attempts to navigate between their lived realities and achieving college-going outcomes included as part of their achievement. Fortunately, some universities have begun to develop race neutral schemes to improve underrepresented students' access to higher education. There is, for instance, the "holistic review" admission process in which applicants are assessed in terms of the full range of their academic and personal achievements, and viewed in the context of the opportunities and challenges they have encountered. The "admission by exception policies" is another example of some universities' attempts to assist individuals who may

not meet the regular admission requirements, but who demonstrate in other ways their abilities and potential to succeed at the university. While these policies have benefited some students, inclusive of few from this study, education officials must still consider alternative ways to address not only the successes and challenges of college access for underrepresented populations, but also how institutional notions of merit can be inclusive of diverse forms of knowledge and learning abilities. In other words, institutions must create and sustain diverse models for reconceptualizing the criteria for selecting “college bound” students, the recruitment strategies for exclusive outreach programs as well as college admission processes.

- *Using Student Voices to Improve Educational Practices*

The students revealed several instances where their voices played a critical role in impacting change for themselves and their peers. For instance, with the assistance of his mother, Raheem was able go to the school district office to complain about being disrespected by school staff. His concerns were immediately addressed and appropriate actions were taken against the school staff. Unfortunately, this type of situation does not always end as smoothly for students. This study revealed other instances where school officials and practices forced students and their families to be silenced. During Candice’s tenth grade year, she wrote a letter on behalf of her classmates to complain about their A.P. World History teacher’s unfair practices. After a meeting was held between Candice, her mother, the teacher, and the school principal, the teacher immediately retaliated against her. Candice was not only treated differently from other students, but she became the center of class discussions and received lower grades on her assignments.

Candice's choice to voice her dissatisfaction negatively impacted her experience in A.P. U.S. History, a course she eventually dropped. As Candice reflected on this situation, she informed me that she wished that she had never written the letter. These students' accounts of their academic realities demonstrate the need to supportively incorporate their voices into the dialogue for improving their educational experiences and outcomes.

Behind every student's academic performance and outcomes, there are stories that need to be shared in order to understand the factors that facilitate and hinder their abilities to achieve college-going outcomes. In the education of African American students, these students' own voices fail to be counted among those of the individuals with the authority to participate in the critique and reform of education, and more specifically, of their high school-to-college transition processes. Excluding these students' perspectives on the daily effects of educational "policies in practices" presents an incomplete picture of life in school and classrooms, and of how that life can be improved. Various scholars have noted the absence of student perspectives and called for greater attention to students' experiences with respect to their own schooling (Cook Sather, 2002; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992; Rubin et al, 2003;). These perspectives provide important insight into ways to create veritable improvements to educational environments and outcomes that might otherwise be overlooked. For example, studies on the perspectives of African American students have revealed the importance of effective teaching and classroom climates that promote culturally relevant teaching practices (Howard, 2001) and positive and interactive teacher-student relationships (Hollins and Spencer, 1990; Miron and Lauria, 1998; Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996;). As African American students'

marginalization in higher education continues to be at the center of national discussions about education, it is important that we create spaces both inside and outside of school that integrate their experiential knowledge into decisions and practices about ways to improve their postsecondary outcomes.

### **My Reflections from the Field**

I decided to embark on this research journey not only to explore ways to improve college access and equity for African American students, but also because I wanted to directly address and value these students' cultural epistemologies through educational research. As young adults who are so often faced with adult problems yet not empowered with the full range of rights and privileges available to most adults, the voices of African American youth, especially those in urban communities, have something significant to add to conversations about educational experiences and outcomes. Through my work in the field, I learned the importance of creating spaces that valued the experiential knowledge of this marginalized group and allowed them to challenge the discourse about and provide suggestions for improving their high school-to-college transition process. Stories of their lived realities influenced the development of the C.R.E.A.T.E. model, an integrative framework that accounted for the ways their multiple subjectivities, identities and contexts shaped their educational trajectories.

After my first interview with these students, I informed them that since they were helping me achieve my educational goals by participating in my study, I too would be available to answer questions and help them find resources and opportunities needed to achieve their goals. In order to follow through with my promise, I decided to start calling

them twice a month even though my next round of interviews did not start until the following, their 11<sup>th</sup> grade, year. These informal conversations served as a powerful tool that allowed me to build a rapport with them and learn about how their lived realities impacted their high school-to-college transition process. While some students were open to sharing their experiences with me during our first encounter together, others did not reveal important details about their lives until their senior year. What began as conversations intended to last 30 minutes, eventually became dialogues that lasted for up to two hours, as the students shared with me stories about their academic, personal and social realities. When I was unable to call these students due to my own academic obligations, I would later learn that I had missed out on important information and significant events that had occurred in their lives. Through our conversations, my work in the GEAR UP office and interactions with the students in their multiple contexts (i.e. school, home, family and community), I began to realize that my work was more than just to complete a research study. I too was now a part of their high school-to-college transition processes, and my role evolved from being just a GEAR UP researcher and practitioner to also being these students' mentor and friend.

Our discussions not only revolved around their lived realities and developments that occurred during this critical transition process, but also allowed the students to inquire about my own experiences and knowledge about higher education. The methodology of my research study now included a method of intervention which centered on: 1) helping students see college as a tangible reality, 2) explicitly discussing the social and inter-personal challenges that uniquely face marginalized communities in higher

education, and 3) addressing issues of power around race, ethnicity, class and gender to engage students in developing the dexterity they will need to navigate their postsecondary pursuits. Thus, through this longitudinal study, I have learned the importance of creating spaces that embrace students' experiential knowledge, validate their stories by acknowledging the uniqueness of their experiences and allow me to share my own stories.

### **Directions for Future Research**

As I inquired about the students' fears and concerns about their postsecondary pursuits, many of them illuminated the concerns that they had about persisting through college. For example, during a conversation with Paige (a high achieving foster care youth), when I asked her about the various admission letters she and her peers received, she responded with mixed emotions: "*We can be happy that we got the help we needed to get into colleges, but what we need to be worrying about is if we will stay in college.*" Several other African American student participants also voiced similar concerns about their college retention. While students like Paige were eligible for the Western Metropolitan University (WMU) system (highly selective institutions), they applied to less selective institutions such as State Universities (SU) and community colleges for fear of not succeeding at the former. Based on traditional college choice theory, one would expect these students to think about their college options differently because of their varied academic backgrounds. Yet, my dissertation study revealed how many of these students thought similarly about their college options. Overall, these African American

students' concerns about not persisting through college shed light on the chasm that exists between higher education access, retention, and these students' lived realities.

While the number of African American students on college campuses has definitely grown, many times these students do not reach the same levels of academic achievement and success as their peers once in college. Persisting to graduation also continues to be a greater obstacle for African American students than for their peers (Cabrera et al., 1999). Research has identified the various factors that contribute to persistence, including pre-college characteristics, cost and financial aid, and social and academic experiences while in college (Feagin et al., 1996; Jones, 2001; Smith et al., 2002; Terenzini et al., 1994). Also, various scholars have developed theories to explain the retention of students, especially Students of Color, in higher education. For example, Vincent Tinto (1993) developed a Student Integration Model, which suggests that an individual's decisions to depart from college results from the inability of the student to integrate his/her pre-college socio-cultural characteristics with those cultural characteristics of the university. Multicultural theorists, however, challenged Tinto's model, arguing that a student's departure is not based on his/her ability to assimilate, but rather on the failure of institutions to demonstrate a true commitment to campus diversification (Rendon, Jaloma, and Nora 2000; Tierney, 1999).

Research on these marginalized students' transitions to college is extensive. Yet, few studies acknowledge that success in higher education does not end with getting one's foot in the door by way of a college acceptance letter. College access as a form of educational equity is about being admitted to college, but success is ultimately measured

by obtaining a college degree (Kirst and Venezia; 2004); Yamamura, 2006). By looking at college access as an issue of educational equity, we see that there is a need to capture the long-term implications of the transition to college process for underrepresented students. In order to fully understand the long-term effectiveness of African American students' college access, post-high school studies addressing the transition to, persistence in, and ultimately completion in higher education are necessary.

For future research, I propose to identify factors (e.g. academic, personal, institutional, etc) that are most salient to these African American students' success during their first two years of college. A key assumption in this study is that equity issues are linked to retention, a significant but often ignored component of the K-16 educational pipeline. Therefore, documenting the developments, strategies, relationships, and events that impact their opportunities to persist through higher education is necessary. I will utilize my dissertation data to longitudinally examine the possible connections and disconnections between access, retention and these students' experiences.

This study can highlight whether the connections that these African American students made and skills that they developed in GEAR UP (or other contexts that were most significant to them) contribute to their persistence in college. If we find that programs such as GEAR UP play a critical role in these students' persistence through college, this research could highlight the need to fund more school-university partnerships. These collaborative efforts could also be utilized as spaces for developing possible strategies to bridge the gap between college access and retention for marginalized groups in higher education. Also, the similarities and differences between

the strategies the students utilize to gain access to and persist through college can be explored. The possible interconnectedness of these critical transitions have the potential to illuminate the conditions necessary to help bridge the gap between access and retention for African Americans. Overall, it is important to follow these African American students through college to examine how to better prepare them for successful transitions to and persistence in institutions of higher education.

**Appendix A: Interview Protocol (YEAR 1)**

***INFORMATION SHEET***

**1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_ yrs**

**2. What is your racial or ethnic background?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**3. Please circle your gender?**                      Male                      Female

**4. How long have you attended schools in the Inglewood Unified School District?**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 3 years or less  
\_\_\_\_\_ 4 to 7 years  
\_\_\_\_\_ 8 or more years

**5. How long have you been at Inglewood High School? \_\_\_\_\_**

**6. What is your current grade point average (G.P.A.)? \_\_\_\_\_**

**7. When I finish high school, I plan to:**

- ☐ Attend a 4-year College (for example, UCLA or Cal State LA)  
☐ Attend a 2-year Community college (for example, Los Angeles Community College)  
☐ Attend a trade/technical school  
☐ No longer attend school and find a job  
☐ Probably won't finish high school  
☐ Don't know

**8. Did you participate in GEAR UP at Crozier Magnet Middle School?**

\_\_\_\_\_ yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ no

**9. Did you qualify for the federal lunch program in elementary or middle school?**

\_\_\_\_\_ yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ no

**10. How many family members live at home? \_\_\_\_\_**

**11. What is your parent(s)/guardian(s) highest education level (*check highest level attained by each parent/guardian*)?**

	Father	Mother
Less than 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	_____	_____
12 <sup>th</sup> grade	_____	_____
Some college	_____	_____
4 year college grad.	_____	_____
Post-graduate	_____	_____
Unknown	_____	_____

## **Interview Prompts**

### ***High School Experience***

1. How would you describe IHS to someone is in another state? academically? socially? Classes? teachers ?students?
2. How do you feel about coming to school? Do you enjoy coming to school? Why or Why not?
3. What kind of extracurricular activities are available at your school?
4. What kind of activities are you involved in at school? Why?
5. Do you think your school involvement affects your academic performance? Why or Why not?
6. What classes do you take? Why? Did you choose the classes or were they chosen for you?
7. How are you are doing academically in school?
8. How do you think your teachers think you are doing?
9. To the best of your knowledge, how do the teachers at your school grade assignments?
10. How do you feel about the grading process at your school? Why?
11. Do you think your grades reflect your academic abilities? Why or Why not?
12. How do you feel about the tests you have to take at your school? Why?
13. Have you taken the PSAT or SAT exam? If yes, where? How did you do?
14. Have you taken the California High School Exit Exam? If yes, How did you do?
15. Do you think your test scores reflect your academic abilities? Why or Why not?
16. Do you get into trouble at school?
17. What happens to you when you get into trouble?
18. Do you think people are treating you fairly?

### **Academic Achievement**

19. What does academic success mean to you? Based on this definition, do you feel you are succeeding academically?
20. What does academic failure mean to you? Why? Based on this definition, do you feel you are failing academically?
21. How do you think the administrators at your school define academic success? academic failure? Why?
22. How do you think the teachers at your school define academic success? academic failure? Why?
- What would a teacher say is a good student? a bad student?
23. Do you think that your school's way of measuring the academic success and failure of students is fair? Why or why not?

*Aspirations*

24. What are your academic goals for this school year?
25. Do you think your school creates a learning environment that allows you to achieve goals? Why or Why not?
26. Where do you see yourself after high school?
  - If college, do you think your school prepares students to get into college? Why or why not?
  - If not college, do you think your school prepares students for a career? Why or why not?
27. If you had the opportunity to tell others about ways to improve the academic achievement of students, especially African American high school students, what would you say?
28. Do you have any other comment or questions?

***Thank you so much for participating and sharing your experiences with me. I look forward to seeing you at our follow up meeting.***

**Appendix B: Interview Protocol (YEAR 2)**

***Information Sheet***

**1. Name:**

\_\_\_\_\_

first name	middle initial	last name
------------	----------------	-----------

**2. Date of Birth:** \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Current Address:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**4. Home Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Cell Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Email:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**5. Parent(s)/Guardian Name:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**6. Parent Education (circle highest level attended for each parent):**

<b>Mother:</b>	Elementary	Middle School	High School
	2 Year College	4 Year College	Graduate School
	Unknown		

<b>Father:</b>	Elementary	Middle School	High School
	2 Year College	4 Year College	Graduate School
	Unknown		

**7. How many family members live at home?** \_\_\_\_\_

**8. What is your current grade point average (G.P.A.)?** \_\_\_\_\_

**9 When I finish high school, I plan to:**

- ☐ Attend a 4-year College (for example, UCLA or Cal State LA)
- ☐ Attend a 2-year Community college (for example, Los Angeles Community College)
- ☐ Attend a trade/technical school
- ☐ No longer attend school and find a job
- ☐ Probably won't finish high school
- ☐ Don't know

**10. If college: What type of college do you plan to attend FIRST when you graduate from High School: Check all that apply.**

UCLA

University of California (UC) campus other than UCLA

California State University (CSU)

California Community/Junior College (JC)

California Trade/technical School

Private college/university in California

Out of State Public College

Out of State Private College

Historically Black College/University (HBCU)

Undecided, but planning to attend college

Not planning to attend college

**11. Do you qualify for the federal lunch program?**

\_\_\_ yes

\_\_\_ no

**12. How often did you participate in GEAR UP this academic year? (Please circle one)**

Never

Rarely

Frequently

Always

### Interview Prompts

1. Tell me about your experiences in school this past academic year?
  - a. *Anything memorable happen to you while at school this past year?*
  - b. *Any stories that you want to share about your teachers, friends, administrators?*
  - c. *Did you face any particular challenges or have any significant triumphs?*
2. Tell me about the extracurricular activities you were involved in this past year?
  - a. *What activities did you continue to participate in (i.e. on and off campus)?*
  - b. *Were you involved in any new activities?*
3. Tell me about some of your goals this past year? Academic? Social? Personal? Etc.
  - a. *Who helped you create these goals?*
4. Tell me about the goals that worked out for you?
5. Why do you think you were able to achieve these goals?
6. Tell me about the goals that didn't work out for you?
7. Why do you think you were unsuccessful at achieving these goals?
8. Did you change your goals during your junior year?
9. Were your junior year goals the same or different from your freshman and/or sophomore years?
10. If you could do this year all over again, what would you change (i.e. goals)?
11. What advice do you give to your friends when they struggle with their goals?
12. Why do you think some students are not achieving their goals?
13. Tell me about the kind of learning environment you think your school creates to help students achieve their goals (*i.e. in class, in the hallways, in teacher's offices, etc?*)
14. What helped (i.e. people, places, opportunities) you accomplish your goals? Anything stand out in particular? What has been hard for you as you tried to make your goals happen?
15. What about your school made it hard for you to meet your goals?

16. What do you plan to accomplish next as you enter your senior year?
17. How do you think you can accomplish these goals? Will the same people, places, opportunities help you with your senior-year goals?
18. How do you think your school can help you accomplish these goals? or What would you like your school to do that they haven't done already to help you accomplish these goals?
19. If you could create your dream high school/program/teaching staff, what would it look like?

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol (Year 3)

### **Pre-Interview Activity**

#### *A Creative Piece of my Past, Present & Future*

The goal of this creative piece is for you to share the various experiences that have helped shape your understanding of yourself, your education and your community (*however you choose to define community*). Specifically, I would like you to create an original piece (e.g. poetry, collage, drawing, story, painting, reflective essay, journal reflection, etc) that attempts to answer the following question to the best of your knowledge.

**How did you become the person that you are today? Create a visual representation of the things (e.g. people, places, events, turning points, successes, challenges, etc) that have positively and/or negatively influenced your life, your identity/identities (e.g. race, gender, student, sibling, etc) and your future plans.**

The interview that will take place after you complete this creative activity will be based on your response(s) to the question above. Therefore, you are in no way restricted to respond to this prompt in one particular way and can be as creative as you want to be in order for this prompt to makes sense to you. **You will be given up to two weeks from the time you receive this handout to complete this activity. (Note: If you need more time to complete this creative activity, let me know!)**

Please let me know what you want to do and if you need me to help you get any resources/ materials (e.g. poster board, markers, magazines, construction paper, glue, etc). I will call you a week after you receive this handout to check in on the progress of your creative piece and to schedule an interview with you. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns please do contact me via phone or via email.

### Information Sheet

**Directions:** Please fill out the following information sheet to the best of your knowledge

**1. Name:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**first name**

**middle initial**

**last name**

**2. Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Current Address:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**4. Home Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Cell Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Email:** \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Parent(s)/Guardian Name:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**6. How many family members live at home?** \_\_\_\_\_

**7. What high school(s) did you attend this academic year?**

☐ Inglewood High School    ☐ Other (Please Specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

**9. How often did you participate in UCLA GEAR UP at Inglewood High School?**

☐ Always    ☐ Sometimes    ☐ Rarely    ☐ Never

**10. What activities /events/ programs did you participate in UCLA GEAR UP ?**

<input type="checkbox"/> Day Tutoring	<input type="checkbox"/> After School Tutoring	<input type="checkbox"/> Summer Program
<input type="checkbox"/> College Preparation Program	<input type="checkbox"/> Girls Group	<input type="checkbox"/> Boys Group
<input type="checkbox"/> Poetry Spoken Words	<input type="checkbox"/> CASHEE Tutoring	
<input type="checkbox"/> Camping/ Backpacking	<input type="checkbox"/> College Tours	<input type="checkbox"/> Incentive Trips
<input type="checkbox"/> Lunch time at the GEAR UP Office		

**11. What is your current grade point average (G.P.A.)?** \_\_\_\_\_

**12. If college: What type of college will you attend immediately after high school.**

**Please select one answer:**

- University of California (UC) campus (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- California State University (CSU) (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- California Community/Junior College (JC) (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- California Trade/technical School (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Private college/university in California (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Out of State Public College (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Out of State Private College (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Historically Black College/University (HBCU) (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Undecided, but planning to attend college (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Not planning to attend college (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

**13. If college: How do you plan to pay for college (Check all that apply)?**

- |                          |                               |        |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|--------|
| Federal aid (i.e. FASFA) | Scholarships                  | Grants |
| Loans                    | Work Study                    | Family |
| Job                      | Other (Please Specify: _____) |        |

**14. Who has helped you achieve your postsecondary goals (e.g. college) this academic year (Check all that apply)?**

- |                                |            |                  |         |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------------|---------|
| Teachers                       | Counselors | Administrators   | GEAR UP |
| Family                         | Peers      | Community Member |         |
| Others (Please specify: _____) |            |                  |         |

**15. Who has been MOST involved in helping you achieve your postsecondary goals (e.g. college) this academic year?**

- |                                |            |                  |         |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------------|---------|
| Teachers                       | Counselors | Administrators   | GEAR UP |
| Family                         | Peers      | Community Member |         |
| Others (Please specify: _____) |            |                  |         |

### Interview Prompts

1. Tell me about the piece you created? Why did you choose to respond in this way?
2. Tell me about the experience(s) you decided to include in this piece?
  - academic
  - personal
  - social
  - successes and challenges
  - individuals/ groups/places (e.g. family, peer, community, school, etc)
    - relationships
    - positive and/or negative influences
3. To what degree are parts of your life related to one another? Are they connected, is there overlap? So for example, is your school life and the people who support you in school completely separate from your home life?
4. As you reflect on the experiences you discussed, how does it relate to the person that you were in the past? are today? hope to be in the future?
  - academically
  - socially
  - personally
  - racially/ethnically
5. Given the experiences you discussed, what would you say are the conditions that have:
  - supported and encouraged your educational experiences?
    - success in school
    - meeting your goals (i.e. college)
  - hindered your educational experiences?
    - limited opportunities for success
    - not meeting your goals
6. What are going to be some important things that you think will be happening to you after high school? Can you describe those things?
  - post secondary plans (e.g. college, workforce, military, etc)
7. What do you think life after high school is going to be like? Do you have any fears and/or concerns about college/ workforce/military? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
8. Do you think the experiences you discussed have prepared you for college/workforce? If so, how? If not, why not?
9. Have you set any goals for yourself, as you get ready to enter college/workforce? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
10. How do you plan on achieving these goals? What people/ resources/ programs/ opportunities do you hope to utilize to help you achieve your goals?
11. What do you hope to gain from your college/work/military experience?

- goals and purpose
- skills, talents and abilities
- people and things you hope to bring with you and/or utilize while in the college/workforce/military

12. What would you tell a ninth grader about your high school experiences?

- lessons learned: academic, social, personal, etc
- preparing for college

13. Based on your experiences, what recommendations do you have for policymakers, school officials (i.e. teachers, administrators, counselors, etc), and researchers on ways:

- a) your educational experiences could have been better?
- b) the educational experiences for all African American students could be better?
- c) to increase the number of African American students participating in college directly from high school?

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