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## ***Mo' Money, Mo' Problems? High-Achieving Black High School Students' Experiences with Resources, Racial Climate, and Resilience***

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*The lower rates of college enrollment for Black students make it important to understand both how different high school environments affect college preparation and matriculation and how some students are able to succeed despite the environmental barriers faced in school. This multi-site case study explores the college preparatory processes of nine Black high achievers attending a well-resourced, suburban high school and eight academically successful Black students attending a low-resourced urban school. Findings indicate students at both schools encounter barriers (i.e., racial climate and a lack of resources) that inhibit their college preparation. Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated resiliency, which kept them focused on their educational goals and desire to attend college.*

I don't know. . . sometimes it's hard when you're in honors or AP classes and there are not very many minorities in it. 'Cause it, psychologically, it's like you can't afford to be wrong. 'Cause then everybody's like, he don't know what he's talking about. He's another, you know.

*Black Male, Twin Oaks High School*

Some of the counselors they kind of like learn right along with us. And our counselor in particular she tries really hard to make sure that we have the information that is needed to us, but sometimes, you know, she may not have all the information.

*Black Female, Bennett High School*

The disparity between the matriculation rates of Black students and their peers is a nationwide concern; however, the gap in access to higher education, especially at public colleges and universities, is particularly wide in California. Black students make up 8% of the California student population, yet only 3% of Californian public school students enrolled at institutions in the prestigious University of California system are African American (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2005). Much of this under representation is rooted in the disparities between Black students and their peers in college preparation and eligibility. A third of California high school students met all eligibility requirements for the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems in the 2003-2004 academic year; however, only 25% of Black students fulfilled the UC/CSU eligibility criteria while 56% of Asian students and 40% of White students were UC/CSU eligible (Education Data Partnership, 2005).

This study is a contribution to the wider effort to learn more about and to address the sources of this gap in college preparation and attendance by examining the experiences of Black high school students across different educational contexts. Factors such as cultural differences, peer influences, and socioeconomic status (SES) have been cited as having a negative influence on Black students' college attendance rates (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1998; McDonough, 1998; Ogbu, 1994). However, in addition to acknowledging the importance of these factors, it is imperative that the role school environments and resources play in shaping Black students' college preparation processes are explored. As an attempt is made to determine environmental factors that contribute to the achievement gap between Black students and their peers, it is also important to gain a greater understanding of how talented minority students have managed to translate their struggles and limited access to opportunities into academic success. The experiences of high achievers, especially those who are African American, have received limited attention from

researchers; most of the research done on gifted students has reflected the experiences of middle-class, White students (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002). Recent research has begun to address how social and educational environments influence the performance of high-achieving Black students (Datnow & Cooper, 1998; Harmon, 2002; Hébert, 1998; Hemmings, 1996; Lee, Winfield, & Wilson, 1991). However, there has been little scholarship that compares the experience of Black high achievers across different educational contexts.

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to explore the experiences of Black high achievers at two Southern California high schools to gain greater understanding of how a low- and high-resourced educational environment influenced their college preparatory processes. For these purposes, "college preparation process" refers to students' comprehensive experiences with developing academic skills, acquiring knowledge, and gaining access to college information in an effort to facilitate college choice and readiness. The authors argue that Black high achievers at both high- and low-resourced high schools face factors that inhibit college preparation in different ways; however, despite environmental obstacles, Black high achievers' resiliency keeps them focused on goals that keep them college-bound.

## BACKGROUND

Understanding the experiences of Black students at low-resourced, high-poverty schools holds particular importance considering their overrepresentation in the nation's most impoverished schools (Kozol, 2005; Peng, Wang, & Wahlberg, 1992; Trent, Owens-Nicholson, Eatman, Burke, Daugherty, & Norman, 2003). According to the Harvard Civil Rights 2002 report, school districts across the nation have been "resegregated" over the last two decades, with Black and White students increasingly unlikely to attend the same schools (Frankenburg & Lee, 2002). Furthermore, the report notes that the size of the minority population at a school is negatively correlated with available school resources (Frankenburg & Lee, 2002). Trent and colleagues' (2003) analyses revealed that over half of students in high-poverty school districts are Black and Latino, whereas only 9% of students in low-poverty school districts were Black and Latino. Similarly, Chang (2000) found that as the proportion of students who received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) increased, so did the percentage of the student population that was Black or Latino.

When compared to schools in more affluent neighborhoods, the urban schools where Black students are often concentrated tend to have lower per-student expenditures, fewer resources, and are more likely to have classes taught by less experienced and out of major instructors (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; Frankenburg & Lee, 2002; Trent et al., 2003). Kozol (1997, 2005) highlights that inner-city urban schools are starkly underfunded when compared to the schools in wealthier, White suburbs. Due to significantly lower-per-student expenditures, students at urban schools are enrolled in larger classes and have access to smaller and more outdated libraries than their peers in more affluent communities. These schools also often lack rigorous courses, frequently measured by the number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses offered. AP courses are deemed some of the most challenging (and valuable) courses available; offering students the opportunity to strengthen their academic record in preparation for college admissions as well as to earn college credits (Furry & Hecsh, 2001). In their analysis of African American and Latino student enrollment in AP courses in California, Solórzano and Ornelas (2004) found that Black and Latino students were underrepresented at the schools that offered the most AP courses, and schools with large Black and Latino student populations have minimal enrollment in these courses.

There are significant connections between school resources and student outcomes such as academic performance, educational aspirations, and access to higher education. McDonough (1998) found that schools with more resources put greater emphasis on going to college and had more graduates who were college bound than schools with fewer resources. Lee, Winfield, and Wilson (1991) found that school affluence was connected to achievement for Black students in particular. Attending a school that was well-resourced, offered a rigorous curriculum, and was located in the suburbs was associated with higher grades and achievement for African American

students. In addition to shaping students' interest in college and school achievement, school resources can also influence students' success in competitive college admission processes (Chang, 2000; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004). Colleges and universities often consider rigor of a student's high school curriculum, including the number of AP courses taken, in making admissions decisions. Most students admitted to the University of California-Berkeley in 1998 and 1999 attended high schools where a larger percentage of the student body had taken honors or AP courses and where more advanced courses were offered (Chang, 2000).

Clearly, schools with increased resources offer their students more college preparatory opportunities. However, more affluent high schools may also present environments that are uncomfortable for underrepresented minority students. White and Asian students are generally the majority population at most highly resourced schools, and the African American students who attend these schools are often highly underrepresented, making them distinct structural minorities (Carter, 2005; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004). Black students entering well-resourced, predominantly White environments can face discrimination and racism they do not encounter in majority environments. For example, a study by Harmon (2002) of gifted African American children, who briefly attended an affluent, predominantly White elementary school as part of a desegregation effort, uncovered that these students frequently experienced racism. Students recounted being taunted by White classmates and felt their teachers assumed the Black students were not intelligent. The experience was so upsetting that some students expressed significant skepticism about entering predominantly White environments in the future. Many were happy to return to their poorer neighborhood school despite losing access to the nice library, bigger and cleaner campus, and new books offered by the predominantly White school (Harmon, 2002).

Few studies have considered how Black students' encounters with stereotypes and racism in high-resourced, predominantly White high school environments can shape their experiences and efforts to prepare for college. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen (1999) present a conceptual framework which helps to understand the experiences of students who are structural minorities in predominantly White environments. They assert that an institution's campus climate for racial and ethnic diversity is shaped by that institution's legacy of inclusion and exclusion, psychological climate, cross-racial interactions. Many higher education researchers have found more hostile campus climates, particularly where students are subject to overt and subtle racism, negatively affect the academic achievement, retention, and satisfaction of Black students (e.g., Allen, 1985; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Turner, 1994). For this project, the authors will apply the concept of campus racial climate to the high school context, using this term to describe the racial dynamics and interactions with the potential to shape the college preparation process of African American high achievers.

In addition to exploring the role school context plays in encouraging and limiting the success of African American students, some researchers have concentrated attention on African American students who are able to achieve high levels of academic success and remain focused on attending college, despite the challenges they face. The academic success of high-achieving African American students has been attributed by some to their resilience. A theory formulated out of developmental psychology, psychiatry, and clinical psychology research, resiliency attempts to account for differential outcomes among individuals exposed to adverse environments (Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1994; Winfield, 1991). Resiliency has been studied in and outside of educational contexts. It is best understood as an individual's ability to adapt successfully to difficult, challenging, or threatening environments and experiences, also referred to as risk situations (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005; Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1994). Wang and colleagues define educational resilience as "the heightened likelihood of success in school and in other aspects of life, despite environmental adversities, brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1995, p. 5).

Resilient students are able to translate difficult environments into a source of motivation by maintaining high expectations and aspirations, being goal-oriented, having good problem-solving skills, and being socially competent (Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1994). Resilience can manifest as reaction to a particular event or be a broader response to the high-risk environments individuals

encounter. For many African American students, especially those educated in urban or inner-city schools, academic success is contingent on their ability to demonstrate resilience in the face of racism, poverty, and environments with few resources (Swanson & Spencer, 1991). For example, a group of low-income Black students attending an urban school was found to use their knowledge of the struggle of African Americans and how race and class could limit their opportunities as a motivator that pushed them toward their college goals (O'Connor, 1997). While there has been work that identified the ways students manifest resilience in low-resourced environments, there has been little study of whether and how African American students may demonstrate resilience in high-resourced contexts.

It is important to acknowledge students' agency and resilience in difficult situations, and Winfield (1991) urges researchers and policymakers to take the next step and direct attention to uncovering the environmental factors, experiences, and programs that can reduce risk and increase student resilience. Research in this area has begun to connect the positive impact that schools, peers, families, and communities have on students' resilience (Carter, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; see Wang, Haertel, & Walhberg, 1994 for a review of the literature; Wilson-Sadberry, Winfield, & Royster, 1991). However, there is still much to be learned about environmental characteristics and strategies African American students employ to maintain resilience when faced with difficult or high-risk situations. This study aims to make the connection, addressing not only whether Black high achievers are resilient, but also the environmental factors related to the development and maintenance of resilience across educational contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

Many factors come together to impact the college preparatory experiences of African American high school students. Winfield (1991) asserts that to truly understand Black students' learning and development, one must employ an ecological framework, where the impact of family dynamics, school environment, community, and the students themselves are all assessed. Wang et al. (1995) argue an ecological framework is critical to research on resilience. Its focus on environment allows researchers to go beyond listing characteristics of resilient individuals to exploring and addressing environments and factors that enhance resilience.

Therefore, using an ecological framework, this study compares the experiences of Black high achievers in high- and low-resourced environments. This study addresses three questions: (a) What are Black high achievers' perceptions of school resources and their influence on college preparation?; (b) How do Black high achievers describe their campus racial climate and its influence on college preparation?; and (c) How do high-achieving Black students demonstrate and foster their resilience in their respective environments?

### *Institutional Samples*

This study focuses on Black students attending Twin Oaks and Bennett High Schools (pseudonyms). These schools were selected based on the vast differences between them and the communities where they are located. Table 1 compares the demographics of both schools during the 2001-2002 school year. The detailed narrative describing each school follows.

Twin Oaks is an academically above-average public school located in a diverse California coastal community. The community is largely comprised of white-collar, upper-middle-class, college-educated professionals (United Way of Greater Los Angeles, 2003). During the 2001-2002 academic year, Twin Oaks enrolled 3,387 students, who were 50% White, 32% Latino, 11% Black, and 7% Asian. The families of Twin Oaks' students ranged from affluent to low-income, with White and Asian students reporting average family incomes between \$60,000 and \$74,000, and Blacks and Latinos reporting incomes between \$30,000 and \$49,000. At the time of data collection, 16% of students at Twin Oaks were participating in federal free-reduced lunch program.

Ninety-eight percent of Twin Oaks seniors graduated in 2001, and over half (58%) of the class were UC/CSU eligible. Over 90% of Twin Oaks seniors graduated in 2002 as well, but the



UC/CSU eligibility rate increased to 83%, significantly greater than the state average of 35%. Forty-two percent of Black students at Twin Oaks were UC/CSU eligible, as compared to 25% of African Americans statewide (Education Data Partnership, 2005). In terms of staffing, Twin Oaks had 144 teachers, with a student-teacher ratio of 24 to 1 and where 89% of teachers were fully credentialed. The faculty was predominantly White (68%); 2% of faculty members were Native American, 4% were Asian, 9% were African American, and 16% were Latino (1% did not respond).

**Table 1**

*High School Demographics, 2001-2002*

	<b>Twin Oaks</b>	<b>Bennett</b>
Enrollment	3,387	1,495
Students Receiving Free Lunch	16%	31%
African American	11%	41%
Graduation Rate	98%	90%
UC/CSU Eligibility Rate	83%	8%
Student-Teacher Ratio	24:1	21:1
AP Courses	39	9
Counselors	8	3
College Counselors	2	0

Bennett High, identified by the state as an under-performing public high school, is located in an inner-city, urban community. The surrounding community is largely Black and Latino and according to 2000 Census data, 25% of this community's residents were living in poverty (United Way of Greater Los Angeles, 2003). There was a close relationship between the demographics of the surrounding community and the campus enrollment; 58% of students were Latino and 41% were Black (White and Asian students made up a combined 1% of the Bennett High student population). Bennett students report average annual incomes between \$20,000 and \$40,000.

During 2001-2002, Bennett High School enrolled 1,495 students. Almost 90% of Bennett's 218 seniors graduated in the 2000 academic year, and 23% of graduating seniors were UC/CSU eligible. This percentage had declined by the 2001-2002 academic year to 8% of students being eligible. Specifically, 9% of African Americans at Bennett were UC/CSU eligible upon graduation (Education Data Partnership, 2005). Bennett employed 58 teachers, and 65% of them held full credentials. Twenty-eight percent of teachers had emergency credentials, which qualified individuals, who did not have teaching credentials and were not enrolled in a teaching internship program, to teach. The student-teacher ratio was 21 to 1, and the faculty was predominantly African American (53%). Two percent of Bennett teachers were Asian American, 10% were Latinos, and 33% were White (Education Data Partnership, 2005).

### ***Student Participants***

The researchers employed purposive methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) to identify students appropriate for this study. Students were selected based on race and level of academic

achievement to create a sample which provides best insight into this study's research questions. The researchers identified "high achievers" by students' grade point averages (GPAs, each participant reported a GPA of 3.0 or above) and enrollment in either AP courses or the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program. AVID is a college preparation program for fifth through twelfth graders. The program focuses on improving the college-going rates of low-income and minority students who are performing at the B or C level by challenging them with rigorous coursework, providing them with tutoring, and requiring enrollment in an AVID-elective course that focuses on study skills, organization, and critical thinking (AVID, 2005).

A total of 17 Black juniors and seniors participated in this study. There were a total of 9 female and 8 male respondents: 6 male and 3 female participants were seniors at Twin Oaks High School (9 total); 3 males and 5 females were juniors at Bennett High School (8 total). Students came from fairly similar economic backgrounds, with students from both Twin Oaks and Bennett reporting average incomes between \$30,000 and \$39,000 a year. Most students were not first-generation college students: 89% ( $n = 8$ ) of students at Twin Oaks and 88% ( $n = 7$ ) of students at Bennett reported at least one parent had attended college.

### ***Procedures***

This study is part of a larger research project called the CHOICES Project, which was developed to examine the historically low college-going and graduation rates among ethnic minorities. The researchers engaged in this project have used a multi-method approach to explore the academic experiences, college access, and support networks of Latino and Black high school juniors and seniors in Southern California in an effort to identify key factors related to their educational and career success. High schools were invited to participate in the CHOICES Project based on their higher than average college-going rates for Black and Latino graduates.

Data were collected between September 2001 and June 2002 at ten urban and suburban high schools across the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Student enrollment at sample high schools ranged from approximately 1,300 to over 5,000 students, and the majority of the schools had student populations that were over half Black and Latino. Qualitative and quantitative information was obtained from high school students, teachers, counselors, and parents to construct a more complete perspective of social and institutional challenges facing underrepresented college-bound students. In total, 496 students, 48 teachers, 31 counselors, and 51 parents completed surveys and participated in focus group discussions across all 10 participating high schools.

All junior and senior students at Bennett and Twin Oaks High Schools were invited to participate in this project. Primary research investigators and graduate student researchers conducted twelve student focus groups at Twin Oaks High School and six focus groups at Bennett High School. Focus group participants completed a 20-minute general survey and then engaged in a 60- to 90-minute group interview. Each focus group was audio-taped and transcribed. All focus groups varied by size, race, and gender and took place at the students' high school campus. At Bennett High School, focus groups ranged from seven to eleven participants and two groups were composed of Latino students, one group was of Black students, and three groups contained both Latino and Black students. Focus groups at Twin Oaks High School included six to nine participants. One focus group at Twin Oaks consisted of Latino males, one was Latino and Black males, two groups were Latinas, two groups were White and Asian students, and six focus groups were composed of a mixture of minority students (Asian, Black, and Latino). Only data collected from students who self-identified as African American and fulfilled all "high achiever" criteria were used in this study.

### **MEASURES AND DATA ANALYSES**

The multiple sources of data collected for this study represent a triangulated approach and an effort to assess the personal, structural, social, and institutional factors directly related to student college preparation and achievement. The California Department of Education, school district, and

2000 National Census data from the United Way were used to provide a general statistical portrait, demographic and academic profile of each high school. Survey data provided a reference point for students' qualitative responses and was used to contextualize students' focus group interviews. Surveys assessed students' basic demographic data, GPAs, degree aspirations, family educational and socioeconomic background, and satisfaction with educational experiences and school resources. Data collected from the surveys were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics, specifically independent-sample *t* tests and cross-tabulations. Focus group interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol, employing open-ended questions designed to assess students' perceptions regarding social expectations to attend college, availability of resources, sources of social support, and barriers to higher education. Focus group transcripts were reviewed by program staff for accuracy and to identify recurring themes. These themes served as the basis for coding schemes, which were used to further analyze the data with ATLAS.ti software.

## FINDINGS

While these students had all decided that they wanted to complete high school and attend college, their college preparation processes were influenced by school context. Both schools presented students with environmental challenges; however, the environmental challenges students faced at Twin Oaks differed from those for Bennett high achievers. Black students at Twin Oaks acknowledged the benefits received from attending a highly resourced school, but also recognized how the hostile campus racial climate limited their access to college preparatory resources. Bennett students were exposed to an environment where minorities were in fact the majority, and felt their college aspirations were supported by teachers and counselors. Nonetheless, they suffered from a lack of resources and had diminished access to important college preparatory information. Despite differences in experiences, both groups demonstrated resilient responses to the challenges faced and described how their largely Black, high-achieving peer groups fostered resiliency.

### *Curriculum and Teaching*

**Twin Oaks.** Twin Oaks High School offered multiple curricular resources to prepare its students for the academic rigors of college, including 39 AP and 11 Honors courses. Seven of the nine Twin Oaks respondents (78%) intended to take between 3 and 7 AP courses before graduating. Students rated how well their high school had prepared them academically for college on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "not at all," 2 was "not too well," 3 was "somewhat," 4 was "fairly well," and 5 represented "extremely well." The mean rating was 3.67, with 44% ( $n = 4$ ) of Black high achievers indicating "somewhat" prepared, 44% feeling that they were prepared "fairly well," and one student reporting experiences at Twin Oaks left them "extremely well" prepared for college. Students rated satisfaction with the quality of teaching received at their high school on a three-point Likert scale, where 0 represented "not satisfied," 1 "somewhat satisfied," and 2 "very satisfied." Over three-quarters ( $n = 7$ ) of students were "somewhat satisfied" with the quality of teaching at Twin Oaks, and two students reported being "very satisfied."

In the focus group discussions, Twin Oaks students gave little attention to the quality of teachers or whether the curriculum provided the skills necessary to be successful in college. Students' commentary focused on issues of race and their experiences as African Americans in the advanced track, highlighting what the role of being Black played in their access to and experience in the college preparatory track. According to the students, the experience of being in the AP track was not the same for everyone attending Twin Oaks. One Black male student described being categorized as an athlete rather than a scholar throughout his education, and connected these racially stereotypical beliefs to difficulties that he experienced in gaining access to AP courses:

The focus is on people generalizing or characterizing, stereotyping me based on the color of my skin. And I found out that I had to work a lot harder sometimes. Because in order to get into classes that prepared me for college, I had to work a lot harder. I had to argue a little bit more with teachers.



Respondents also perceived a lack of diversity in their advanced courses, which impacted their classroom experiences. An African American male shared how stereotypes about the academic abilities of African Americans made him more cautious and highly aware of his performance in his AP courses:

I think that it's been kinda hard for me sometimes 'cause like...I don't know...sometimes it's hard when you're in honors or AP classes and there are not very many minorities in it. 'Cause it, psychologically, it's like you can't afford to be wrong. 'Cause then everybody's like, he don't know what he's talking about. He's another, you know.

**Bennett.** In terms of the number of courses offered, the college preparatory curriculum at Bennett High School was less extensive than the curricular options available at Twin Oaks. There were 9 AP classes offered at Bennett, less than a quarter of the number of advanced courses available at Twin Oaks. Despite having fewer offerings, Black high achievers at Bennett anticipated taking just as many AP courses as their counterparts at Twin Oaks; 87% ( $n = 7$ ) of Bennett students planned to take between 3 and 7 AP courses before graduating. Bennett respondents expressed that it was important to take as many AP courses as possible and to maximize the college preparatory resources that Bennett had rather than focus on what they were lacking. According to one female student,

I've been a good student all my life and I come to [this community] and it's supposed to be you know... you [are] going to a bad school, but I kept my grades up regardless if I was going to Bennett or Beverly Hills, and I'm eligible to go to a university and that has nothing to do with the school... We don't have that many AP classes, but we have enough where you can go to school, and if you take advantage of what you have with us instead of complaining about it, then you can do what you have to do.

Fewer AP offerings did not lead Bennett Black high achievers to conclude their high school failed in preparing them for college. Rather, when satisfaction with college preparation was measured on the five-point Likert scale, the average rating was 3.88, which was slightly higher than the mean satisfaction reported by Twin Oaks students (3.67). Thirty-eight percent ( $n = 3$ ) students reported Bennett prepared them for college "somewhat," 38% felt "fairly well" prepared, and 25% ( $n = 2$ ) felt "extremely well" prepared for college by the Bennett curriculum. Similar to Twin Oaks, 63% of students reported being "somewhat satisfied" with teaching at Bennett, while 37 percent ( $n = 3$ ) were "very satisfied."

The Bennett high achievers focus group connected academic preparation for college to the quality of teachers in the AP program. One Black female explained:

We are the cream of the crop and... we get the best that the school has to offer. We get the best teachers, I mean I'm not saying that the teachers that teach the regular students [are not] good, but we get the teachers that are over-qualified for the jobs.

Students expressed that teachers were supportive of their college goals and were especially adept at preparing them for college work. For example, an African American female noted:

It's like some teachers they teach you just for high school. I feel like the teachers we have teach us about college. They teach us the things about what we need to know about college and then they prepare you for life in general. They don't sit there and just cater to you, you know, they tell you that, you know, you need to do this and do this in order to achieve and go to the next level. They're not going to sit there and let you sit in the class and get an A, then when you go to college, you just sitting there like, "I don't know what I'm doing."

One teacher was applauded for creating a comprehensive classroom environment geared toward college preparation:

She's always pushed her kids to go to college. You walk in her room, she has the UC qualifications, all the things on the wall. So it's like to her, you go to college and that's it. Like in our AP class, we don't sit there and do nothing... She gives us a syllabus like a college syllabus and we do the work. She just doesn't check all of our assignments like we're little kids.

Notably, Bennett Black high achievers did not address the role that race played in their ability to enroll or their experiences during AP courses. In fact, Black high achievers saw racial issues as largely outside their high school environment. One female explained she and her peers frequently faced issues of racism and stereotyping in their encounters outside of their largely Black and

Latino high school, but “when you talk about race at this school, it’s not a really big issue.” Her peers agreed, recounting experiences when they were judged as less intelligent by members of external communities, but felt racial issues and stereotypes did not affect their life at Bennett.

### *Counseling and Access to College Information*

**Twin Oaks.** Much like the trends observed at Bennett in the availability of college preparatory coursework, Twin Oaks offered multiple resources to help students prepare for the choice aspect of the college preparation process. Eight counselors (two for each academic year) were available to Twin Oaks’ students. At the time of data collection, five of the counselors at Twin Oaks were White, two were Latino, and one was Black. Students were encouraged to visit Twin Oaks’ College and Career Center, where in addition to meeting with one of the school’s two college counselors, students could access information on admissions tests (i.e., SAT, ACT), scholarships, and specific colleges. Ninth graders were able to gain early exposure to information on the college process through an optional bridge program, in which students learned about graduation and college eligibility requirements during the summer before they started high school. Students from traditionally underserved backgrounds could also participate in Twin Oaks’ AVID program, which addressed both academic preparation and college choice by providing students with tutoring, college counseling, and application support.

Surveys indicated Black high achievers were pleased with the college information available at Twin Oaks; 78% ( $n = 7$ ) were “very satisfied.” In focus groups, some respondents described counselors, especially the college counselors, as embodying Twin Oak’s emphasis on college attendance early in their high school experience. One female student shared:

So, going to this school, I know the first day, freshman year, [you] set up an appointment with your counselor and from then on, I’ve had a plan to go to college. I’ve known classes I need to take. I know what I have to do for my path. And that’s one thing I think about this school is really good.

This attention from counselors appeared to continue throughout all four years of high school for this student. She went on to note there were persistent offers in her senior year for help and information to facilitate her choice process:

It was kinda like . . . they will not leave me alone. The College and Career Center, they’re like, “Oh, you have to do this, you have to do that. Do you have scholarships?” And I think . . . other schools don’t have the chance. So, I think at this school, it’s a great thing.

Continuing on this theme, a Black female participant made a clear distinction between the college preparatory opportunities and encouragement received at Twin Oaks versus what her peers had access to at less affluent schools:

A lot of my . . . friends go to different schools . . . and a lot of them don’t really, [there’s] not really a push to go to college. It’s like, oh, you can go to like a community college and then transfer, which is fine, but they don’t really get the advice [that] you can go to a university. A lot of them think it’s perfectly fine to just go to a community college, even when they have the grades.

Not all counselors at Twin Oaks were described as encouraging Black students’ college preparation and choice processes. Black high achievers in this sample identified general academic counselors as being less than helpful, especially when compared to college counselors. While over three quarters of Twin Oaks sample expressed high satisfaction with their access to college information, only one Black student (11%) was “very satisfied” with academic counseling. One third of students ( $n = 3$ ) were “not satisfied” with Twin Oak’s academic counseling, and over half ( $n = 5$ ) were “somewhat satisfied.” One male student commented:

Counselors, they have not been supportive . . . I expect my counselors to sit down with me every once in awhile to say, “Hello . . . how you doin’?” You know, and actually like say, “Oh, what, what are your career ambitions?” or “Where do you want to go to school?” . . . I couldn’t even say I’ve spoken to [my counselor] more than like three words at a time.

In addition to being perceived as inaccessible, many Twin Oaks Black high achievers thought

their race had a significant impact on interactions with academic counselors. General counselors were described as allowing their low expectations for Black students' abilities and aspirations to shape the advice they gave Black high achievers about college options. For example, a Black male from Twin Oaks commented on the types of institutions and curricula he perceived were emphasized when counselors meet with minority students:

I think they, they encourage minority students to consider ICs [junior colleges] or ROP [Regional Occupational Program] classes . . . They're focusing their life on a job rather than focusing on some education. That's what I think the counselors do. I think in regards to college counselors, I think, I think the two that we have do a great job, but in regards to like overall support of the everyday student, basically they set minority students up to fail.

A Black female described her personal experiences with these types of encounters by sharing that she was encouraged to apply to community colleges and that her counselor expected that she would have to use her racial background to get into college despite her academic abilities and enrollment in a rigorous college preparatory curriculum:

When I go to the regular counselors, they're like, "Oh . . . what, what do you plan to do for college?" And I'm like, "Oh, I plan on going to a four-year university." And they just give me this . . . "Well why don't you just try [a local community college]." Oh great. Really? I take AP classes. I've been taking AP classes since my sophomore year, and it's just like how can I, you know? . . . Or, another way, [they] automatically assume that I'm gonna get into a college because of my race. "Oh, you have a great chance." I said, "No, I don't." I don't see myself as being a race to get into a college. I don't look at my color and go, "Oh, I have a, a greater chance of getting in [than] my White friends," you know. . . I'm competing against [them] with education, not skin color.

**Bennett.** The counseling system and college choice resources offered at Bennett High School were very different from those at Twin Oaks. At the time of data collection, Bennett employed three academic counselors. All three counselors were women, two African American and one White. Each counselor was responsible for all the students in one grade, except for the ninth graders, which the tenth and eleventh grade counselors split equally because they were short-staffed. There was no "college counselor"; college counseling was rotated yearly among the counseling staff and was primarily the responsibility of whoever was the twelfth grade counselor. Like Twin Oaks, Bennett offered access to a college center, which provided information about institutions and financial aid and was intermittently staffed by the twelfth grade/college counselor.

Compared to their counterparts at Twin Oaks, Bennett High School's Black high achievers were less satisfied with the college information received. As mentioned earlier, a majority (78%) of Black high achievers at Twin Oaks indicated they were "very satisfied" with the availability of college information at their high school; 38% ( $n = 3$ ) students at Bennett expressed the same sentiment. This difference in satisfaction could have been partially due to the fact that the college counselor at Bennett was learning on the job and may have been less prepared and informed than her counterparts at Twin Oaks. Commenting on her interactions with the college counselor, one female student noted that

Some of the counselors, they kind of like learn right along with us. And our counselor in particular, she tries really hard to make sure that we have the information that is needed to us, but sometimes, you know, she may not have all the information. And there, there are certain things that we learn from . . . the people that come from UCLA, there are certain things that we learn that when it came time for us to select our classes for next year, but she hadn't quite gotten there yet.

Consistent with optimistic views regarding Bennett's lack of college preparatory courses, students appreciated their college counselor's efforts despite gaps in her knowledge. One student explained "she tries, and that's basically all that we can ask."

Bennett's high achievers were aware that they did not necessarily have access to the same resources or guidance through their college choice process as students at other high schools. However, again, they emphasized the need to take advantage of the resources Bennett did offer. A female Bennett student directly compared the college preparatory resources at her old high school to those at Bennett,

I came from [a different high school]. So I mean, it's a big difference between this school and that school, but I think the teachers and sometimes the counselors, they help you with what you need to do. . . There might [not] be as much

as the more prestigious schools or high schools, but they're here and it's up to us to take advantage of them.

Another female discussed the presence of college representatives and access to college preparatory resources at Bennett, and said that "it may not be all those that other schools have, but they're here."

### ***Fostering Resilience***

**Evidence of resilience.** Despite the barriers Black high achievers encountered at Bennett and Twin Oaks High, they were not dissuaded from their college goals. All students in this sample had firmly established intentions to attend college; since no students indicated they were not planning to apply. Respondents from both Twin Oaks and Bennett High Schools also reported high long-term educational aspirations and widely anticipated being educated beyond a bachelor's degree. Less than a fifth of respondents (18%,  $n = 3$ ) reported that their highest educational goal was to obtain a bachelor's degree, while almost half of these students (48%,  $n = 8$ ) aspired to master's or doctorate degrees, two students wanted a medical doctorate or doctor of dental science degree, three students indicated interest in obtaining a juris doctorate, and one student aspired to a master's in divinity.

Many of the barriers faced by Black high achievers at Twin Oaks stemmed from a hostile campus environment in which they were assumed to be less intelligent and less academically abled because they were African American. Despite being encouraged to apply to community colleges instead of a four-year college or university, students demonstrated resilience and resisted this advice. Regardless of counselors' recommendations, only one Twin Oaks student expressed interest in community colleges, six students were planning to apply to private four-year colleges and five intended to apply to public four-year colleges.

For Bennett students, barriers came in the form of diminished college preparatory resources, specifically, limited access to college-relevant information and courses that facilitated academic preparation. However, Black high achievers at Bennett also demonstrated resilience. While this group of students stated that many, including other students at their high school, saw Bennett as offering an inadequate education and poor preparation for college, these high achievers saw their school differently. According to one Bennett female, her peers at Bennett often "[used] where they're from as an excuse not to do good [sic]," leaving her "irritated" by their constant complaints. Another female student shared,

Most of the people at this school are underachievers. They can achieve but they don't want to and then they complain about what school they go to. They complain about [Bennett] so bad but they are what makes [Bennett] what it is. And so I mean it, it don't, I think it doesn't matter what school you go to it's what you make of that school.

As noted, Bennett high achievers emphasized the importance of taking advantage of the opportunities they were given rather than complaining, both at school and in life more generally. A Black female expanded on this idea, explaining that

You have to meet the school half way, 50-50. You have to help the school help you. You can't just sit around and expect everything to be handed to you especially if you want to succeed in society.

**Peers encouraging resilience.** A consistent theme throughout student focus groups in both high schools emphasized the importance of friends, although not key sources of college information (only one student indicated that friends were a primary resource). Black high achievers attending both high schools relied on their peers for support and encouragement throughout their college preparation processes. An African American male attending Twin Oaks commented on his peer group's collective goals:

In regards to my friends . . . I was blessed. I got a group of friends that like it, it's amazing like how focused we all are in regards to getting something better than what our parents had. 'Cause like every single one of them, all of them are going to college.

For another Black male at Twin Oaks, surrounding himself with friends with college goals reinforced his own aspirations and provided assistance in the college preparation process:



All my friends are going to college. . . We all, we help each other out with, with the college process on those applications and scholarships. We do what we have to do so that all of us will have a better life and future.

In a detailed account of his relationships with his high-achieving Black peers, a student explained the academic and social support his friends were able to give each other as they pursued their college goals:

Our group of friends, we've all been pretty supportive of each other. . . I know that [one of his friends participating in the focus group] is better at math than I am. I know I could ask him or C \_\_\_\_\_, another one of our friends. . . I do well in English and history and they could ask me for stuff. . . And so, I don't know . . . we never really like officially sat down and said, "Listen, this is how we're gonna get to college. We're all gonna help each other." It wasn't like that. It was just like knowing that if we needed each other, [that] we would be there for each other.

Similarly, another student communicated each of his peers played a role in their social group, and he shared how those roles supported their collective college readiness and preparation. Apparently his self-perceived role as the "leader" and his efforts to support his peers often impacted his own motivation and resilience in the face of struggles:

I felt like I was . . . the academic leader in a sense. . . So sometimes I would put more pressure on myself as not to let my friends down . . . I think that like, based on the roles of our friendship, I couldn't let them down.

Bennett's Black high achievers made similar observations about the roles of peers in their resilience and college preparation process. An African American female noted she deliberately chose to spend her time with Black students who shared her goals and aspirations, and how members of the group positively influenced one another:

Everybody that I associate with is goal-oriented. I don't think I could be friends with anybody that's not. Because you know . . . we have to help each other and feed off of each other and I couldn't be around someone that's not trying to accomplish what I am because then they're like holding me back. They're all great influences in my life. And us four [referring to other participants in the focus group], like we really like hang tough a lot . . . we all want to go to the same college—we've made living arrangements and just planned our future.

Additionally, members of high-achieving peer groups were positive role models for one another when encountering difficulties as they pursued their college goals. A Black high achiever attending Bennett noted,

Sometimes . . . you think well, what if I'm not able to do it? And then you look at all your friends that are goal oriented and that just makes you strive even more towards your goal because you're saying if they can do it then so can I.

Connected to this idea, another student explained she was driven to continue achieving at times because she did not want to feel left out of her peer group, adding that "they are your friends...and you always want to stick with that circle."

## DISCUSSION

This qualitative study of seventeen Black high achievers at two high schools adds to the understanding of how environmental factors can both encourage and inhibit the college preparation processes of minority students. This study has the potential to add to the knowledge of teachers, administrators, and policymakers working to facilitate greater levels of academic success for all students, especially African Americans. Rather than contrasting the environments at Twin Oaks or Bennett High School as being more or less problematic versus the other, this study uncovers aspects of each environment that facilitate and inhibit the preparation of Black students who are committed to attend college. In other words, neither high school offered an ideal learning and college preparatory environment for African American students; however, researchers can learn a great deal from the best practices of each high school as they seek to create learning environments that better encourage the success of Black students.

Schools with more resources and greater emphasis on college going positively impact students' aspirations and institutional choices (Boyle, 1966; McClafferty, McDonough, & Nunez, 2002; McDonough, 1998). Black high achievers attending Twin Oaks recognized the college



preparatory resources they had access to and communicated satisfaction with the college information their high school provided. College counselors were especially supportive, providing information on scholarships and schools students were interested in attending. Unfortunately, despite students' access to a rigorous curriculum and school agents who were well informed about college options and opportunities, African American students perceived a hostile campus racial climate where they encountered stereotypes about their intellectual abilities. Participants reported difficulty gaining entrance into advanced courses and said there were few Black students in Advanced Placement classes. Notably, even when these students were able to gain access and succeed in advanced coursework, minority students (and Black students specifically) were encouraged to apply to community colleges, an option that did not match their clearly demonstrated academic abilities and potential. Irrespective of academic preparation, school agents guided students based on stereotypical beliefs about the abilities of African Americans and the types of institutions that were appropriate for them to attend.

These findings are consistent with themes emerging from the existing literature on the experiences of Black students and their access to college preparatory curricula and resources. Attending a high school with a rigorous curriculum and advanced classes does not necessarily mean that all students are encouraged or permitted to take these courses (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Suh, 2003; Gamoran, 1987; Hemmings, 1996; Oakes, 1985; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004). In fact, access to opportunities, resources, and information clearly is shaped by school agents' beliefs about certain racial groups and their abilities. Particularly illustrative of this theme and similar to the findings of this study, Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Suh (2003) reported that Black Gates Millennium Scholarship recipients (arguably the academic pinnacle of all U.S. high school seniors) were also denied access to AP courses and felt that their experiences with their high school teachers and counselors were clouded by stereotypical beliefs about African Americans. These beliefs, experiences, and expectations can be understood as creating hostile campus climates African Americans must endure, requiring them to fight against doubts driven by racist stereotypes for access to college preparatory resources more available to their peers.

While difficult for all African American students, frequent encounters with doubts about their academic abilities have been particularly frustrating and debilitating for high achievers, resulting in diminished academic performance and, in the most extreme cases, attrition and dis-identification with academics (Steele & Aronson, 1998).

Alternatively, Black high achievers attending Bennett High School were aware they had fewer resources than students attending more affluent institutions. They noted they did not have as many AP courses, their counselors were not as informed about college information, and they did not have as many college recruiters as their peers attending more affluent schools. While these deductions were not surprising considering Bennett's resources, these students' responses to their low-resourced environment were somewhat unexpected. Bennett Black high achievers repeatedly expressed frustration not with their high school, but with students who blamed academic under-performance and lack of college opportunities on their school environment. The comments of Black high achievers revealed they felt they could not afford to waste time by complaining; rather, they decided to be optimistic, and take advantage of the opportunities they did have available. Bennett students anticipated taking as many advanced courses as respondents attending Twin Oaks High School, despite the fact that Twin Oaks' AP courses outnumbered Bennett's AP courses 4 to 1. AP teachers were described as being very helpful in these students' college preparation processes by encouraging them to pursue a college education, providing college information, and, overall, creating focused college preparatory environments in their classrooms.

Interestingly, while acknowledging the roles race and stereotypes played in their interactions outside of their high school, Bennett's Black high achievers did not describe their day-to-day experiences as being shaped by racial issues. The racial composition of Bennett High School in fact did determine the opportunities students had access to and, in turn, how well they were likely to fare in both the college admissions process and postsecondary coursework. It is impossible to ignore that Bennett High School lacked key resources and information to assist students in making college choices and ensuring their preparation for college.

Having a high grade point average and feeling well prepared for college prior to entry is not the same as feeling well prepared while actually engaging in a postsecondary environment. High school performance has been found to be positively related to collegiate academic achievement (Astin, 1993; Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; The College Board, 1999; Nettles, Theony, & Gosman, 1986); nevertheless, educators must consider the added impact of curricula rigor and school resources on college achievement. Low-performing high schools are less likely to offer students access to coursework that is as challenging as what is presented at higher-performing suburban schools. Students attending low-performing schools leave without many of the skills they need to succeed in college (Allen, 1988; Gandara & Maxwell-Jolly, 1999). Therefore, while it is critical for students to think positively and take advantage of the opportunities presented to them, this does not negate the responsibility of administrators, government officials, and policymakers to assist underserved, low-performing high schools in developing competitive, college preparatory curricula by providing increased human and monetary resources. The positive attitudes of academic "John Henryism" (James, 1994) alone is not sufficient to overcome real, formidable barriers to academic success.

## CONCLUSION

For many African American students, the environmental obstacles at Twin Oaks and Bennett present insurmountable barriers between them and college. Freeman (1999) acknowledges that attending a four-year college is not often presented as an option to many Black high school students, and both a lack of school resources and encounters in hostile campus racial climates can deter African Americans from continuing (or completing) their education. These experiences certainly contribute to the disparities seen in college attendance between African American students and their White and Asian peers (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Suh, 2003; Chang, 2000; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004). However, the students in this study are distinguished by persistent commitment to college goals despite huge challenges. Students showed evidence of resilience, maintaining goals and aspirations, finding ways to negotiate the obstacles encountered at their respective high schools.

As noted above, it is important to remember that Black high achievers were not born with resilience, which can and must be fostered at critical times in students' lives (Swanson & Spencer, 1991). This study showed how college-oriented peers, especially African Americans, were a significant source of support for students' resiliency and desire to achieve college goals. This is consistent with the literature that highlights the importance of peer support in the lives of Black high achievers. In a study of under- and high-achieving students at an urban high school, student resilience was fostered by positive peer support and friendships with other high achievers (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005). Additionally, a study found one of the key differences between resilient Black males who went to college and those who did not was that college goers were significantly more likely to report having a best friend with a strong academic profile (Wilson-Sadberry, Winfield, & Royster, 1991).

Black students at Bennett and Twin Oaks employed a strategy that used peer groups to create environments where, contrary to stereotypes about African American academic abilities, high achievement and college attendance were social expectations. These environments added to students' resilience since full social acceptance was contingent upon contributing academic support to the group and maintaining one's college goals. This was particularly important for students at Twin Oaks High School, who regularly encountered those who doubted their academic abilities. Similarly, Datnow and Cooper (1998) found African American students at elite independent schools created Black peer groups where it was "cool" to be smart, allowing them to develop ethnic and academic identities in complimentary ways. This study provides additional evidence of this phenomenon, illustrating that these interactions take place at highly resourced and underserved public institutions alike. It also highlights how peer relationships can be a means of resisting societal and school-wide beliefs of what it means to be Black, thus encouraging resilience in the face of stereotypical beliefs and challenges. The critical part that these peer groups play in

fostering the resilience and supporting the college preparation of African American students leads the authors to recommend that teachers and administrators determine ways to encourage, and create support opportunities for students to interact with and draw strength from college oriented peers.

One way of improving the resilience and fostering more positive educational outcomes of African American students is to reduce their exposure to risk (Masten, 1994). Neither high school presented in this study provides an environment, in and of itself, ideal for the development of African American students. In many ways, each school has what the other lacks, and merging the best of both environments is likely to produce the most positive outcomes. Well-funded schools like Twin Oaks can offer resources such as knowledgeable counselors and AP coursework, both which certainly hold high importance in developing the skills and abilities of Black students. However, "more money" alone is not enough. Stereotypes and racism can stand between African American students and these resources at many high schools—the same way they did at Twin Oaks. Students also need supportive and encouraging environments, much like the one offered by Bennett High School, to take full advantage of the benefits that high-resourced high schools can offer. Thus, educators must encourage state legislators and policymakers to better fund under-resourced schools to improve the college preparation processes of African American students. They must also turn attention to high-resourced environments and insist that teachers, counselors, and key administrators receive diversity training to increase their sensitivity to the needs and experiences of their Black students.

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