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THE DISSIPATION OF URBAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' POST-  
SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND CAREER PLANNING  
DURING THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Seton Hall University

2013

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## **ABSTRACT**

Given the gap in the college choice literature about the decision-making process students use when making a decision on whether or not to attend college (McDonough & Calderone, 2010), the purpose of this study was to explore urban high school students' perceptions of the structural factors that may influence their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. By working with students and guidance counselors at Sheridan High School, categorized as an urban high school but located in a rural area in the mid-Atlantic region of the country, the research team was able to gain information about how students navigate the college choice process and decide to enter or not to enter post-secondary education.

Three supplemental theoretical approaches, the college choice model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), multicultural navigator model (Carter, 2005), and cultural capital and habitus theory (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), were utilized in this study to analyze the social and cultural factors that impact urban students' development of paths to post-secondary education. This study explored the challenges urban students face while navigating the college choice process and the strategies they use to surmount obstacles to enter post-secondary education.

Nine students (African American and White) participated in the study over a three-year period at a high school categorized as an urban high school but located in a rural area in the mid-Atlantic region of the country. The students and their families lived either in the city of Sheridan or in three small rural towns within the district. At the start of the study, all of the students stated that their goal after graduating from Sheridan High School was to go to college. The study indicates that White students were significantly

influenced by their parents, who made sure the students were in Sheridan's Honors and International Baccalaureate programs, which were deemed to better prepare students for college by faculty, guidance counselors, and administrators in the school, whereas African American students (eligible for the free- and reduced-lunch program) did not receive significant support or clear information about the college choice process from their parents; and the students did not develop succinct plans for post-secondary educational opportunities.

There is ample research to support that African American students can achieve similar educational outcomes to White students if they are exposed to professionals and professional careers during their formative years (Freeman, 2005; McDonough & Calderone, 2010; Pitre, 2006). School officials should work with local social organizations and community leaders to create and foster programs that engage professionals (mentorship, tutoring, career shadowing, college counseling) to help students develop and shape their post-secondary and career plans.

This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of my grandmother Lillian “RED” Hawkes, my father Irvin “Rocky Baby” Yates, and my uncle Rush Foster. AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST MY MOTHER SARAI YATES WHO PASSED AWAY ON 10/6/13. I miss and love you all!

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The Truman Commission on Higher Education (1947) suggested that education for all was not a democracy's obligation but its central purpose. The basic tenet of the report was that the U.S. educational system needed to remove all barriers in order for its citizens to receive a comprehensive education that would equip them with the necessary skills to enter the workforce and the middle class. The President's Commission on Higher Education (1947) noted that by improving the education received by African Americans and lower income families and increasing opportunities for them to enter into the middle class, the United States would be able to solve some of its social problems, such as poverty, unemployment, underemployment, crime, unstable families, etc. which were prevalent during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nearly 60 years later, the U.S. Department of Education (2006) reported almost the exact sentiment by stating, "The nation must be committed to building and sustaining a higher education system that is accessible to all qualified students in all life stages" (p. 9). African American and lower-income students have continued to encounter challenges in gaining access to and completing college, in spite of decades of educational reforms to address these issues (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

McDonough (1997) argues that social class and high school operations for guiding students during the college choice process can be significant factors in students' college enrollment decisions. Students' decision to attend college is a complex, multifaceted process involving educational aspirations, peer influence, parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and a college or university's admission office. Sirin et al. (2004)

suggest that students model their parents, adults, and family members' educational path while developing their educational aspirations and career plans. Students make decisions on whether or not to attend college and the type of college based on their perceptions about going to college and the information (e.g., open houses, social media, direct mail, etc.) utilized by admission staffs (McDonough, 1997; Pitre, 2006).

In 2012, nearly 68% of high school graduates enrolled in colleges or universities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). McDonough (1997) asserts that the number of high school graduates attending college might seem to be indicative of the impartial "opportunity structure" (p. 1) which is open to all students based on academic merit. Opportunity structures have been used as pathways to achieve the "American Dream," meaning the structural provisions and methods within institutions and the connections to organizations that determine a person's success (McDonough, 1997).

Many researchers have found, however, that the opportunity structure is not equal for all students (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Hill, 2009; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Howard, 2003; Hurtado et al., 1997; Muhammad, 2008; McDonough, 1997, 2004). The aggregated college enrollment percentages disguise the gap in the "access and retention rates between White students and students of color, as well as between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students" (McDonough, 1997, p. 2). Student academic ability, socioeconomic status (SES), and high school's college-going culture can shape the way in which students develop and choose their post-secondary options. McDonough (1997) argues that "no one student perceives the opportunity structure in its entirety, but instead, imagines schools that she deems "right" or "appropriate," or schools where she will feel comfortable" (p. 2).

## **Background**

### **Patterns of Educational Attainment**

Public high schools in urban areas tend to serve students from disadvantaged backgrounds such as low-income students and racial/ethnic minorities (Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996). Urban high schools generally have fewer resources such as economic, educational, and family support than their higher SES counterparts; and the students have a greater risk of dropping out than those in affluent communities (Swanson, 2009). Urban high school students are less likely to have both parents in the home; and when they do, their parents have lower levels of degree attainment than those in suburban neighborhoods (Bloom, 2006; Fin & Owings, 2006; McDonough & Calderone, 2010; Sirin, 2005).

Researchers have found that across all academic ability levels, African American and lower income students are less likely to apply to or enroll in college than their higher SES counterparts (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Freeman, 1997, 2005; McDonough, 1997, 2004; Pitre, 2006). In 2010, only 52% of lower SES students entered post-secondary education (both two-year and four-year institutions) directly out of high school compared with 82% of higher income counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These college participation rates are principally important to urban high school students who are less likely to enroll or graduate from college (Kuh et al., 2011). When urban high school students enter college, they are more likely to attend two-year colleges (44%) compared with 16% of higher income students (U.S Department of Education, 2012).

## **College Choice Literature**

A number of studies on the college choice process have used one of three approaches: economical (econometric), psychological, or sociological. College choice research has been evolving since the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, primarily focusing on “how student and family characteristics, institutional admissions policies and practices, and public policies have influenced the manner and timing of students’ college choice decisions” (Kinzie et al., 2004, p. 1). Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-pronged model (pre-disposition, search, and enrollment) has been overwhelmingly cited as a foundation to discuss college choice literature for over 30 years (Radford, 2009). The predisposition phase is when students develop the aspiration to go to college. The search phase is when students start to research colleges and universities in an evaluative mode to determine the attributes of the institutions which match their interest. The college enrollment phase is when students use a knowledge base they have built about the colleges to narrow down the list and to make a decision about which college to apply to, gain acceptance, and enroll (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

## **Status Attainment**

Social-status attainment theory focuses on identifying and examining the interrelationship of factors that influence college decisions. Bateman and Kennedy (1997) noted that “educational aspirations are of interest to sociologists as they are an integral element in the status-attainment process” (p. 231). Although there have been numerous studies over the past 30 years that focused on the structural factors (e.g., family support, peer influence, teacher and guidance support, and public policy) that can influence an individual’s aspiration to post-secondary education and the decision making process, a



salient question remains unanswered because the convergence of educational aspirations along race, culture, and gender has not equated to similar educational achievement by each group (Carter, 2003; Cooper, 2009; Freeman, 1997, 2004).

McDonough (1997) contends that the sociological status attainment approach analyzes the impact of a student's social status on the development of post-secondary career and educational aspirations. It is a theoretical lens of sociology that is the basis for the examination of the educational aspirations of students during the college choice process (Sewell et al., 1970). Status attainment research examines how individuals develop and use resources to increase their socioeconomic status (Lareau, 2011).

Researchers have found socioeconomic status of family may account for differences in post-secondary enrollment decision among different racial/ethnic groups (Freeman, 1997, 2006; Hearn et al., 1995; Perna, 2006; Pitre, 2006). Espenshade and Radford (2009) assert that urban high school students (with high poverty concentrations) more often choose less-selective post-secondary schools than their higher income peers, in spite of academic ability.

### **School Effects**

The environment within the high school that students attend can play a major role in decisions about attending college (McDonough, 1997). Hill (2008) found, for example, that private and public schools take distinctly different approaches to the college choice process and college going culture within the school. Hill (2008) measured the college-linking strategies "in terms of the cooperative influences of school characteristics that indicate organization level capacity (resources) and commitment (norms) to navigate the college-linking process" (p. 58)

Students enrolled in private schools are more likely to attend four-year institutions than their public school counterparts. Typically, private schools are smaller and have clear and established college going norms that are expected of all of their students. These schools also have a higher percentage of students on a college preparatory (Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, honors, etc.) track. Private schools help develop students' educational aspirations and career plans better than public schools (McDonough, 1997, 2004). Due to the lower student-to-guidance counselor ratio at private schools, counselors can focus on positively encouraging students at each stage of the college choice process. The differences in the organizational structure, process, and resources between private and public schools impact the process of the students' college planning experience (McDonough, 1997). Although a student's academic ability is a primary factor in determining post-secondary decisions, the relationship between a student's socioeconomic background and the high school's college going culture are also vital to his or her decision about attending college (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997, 2005).

In previous research, McDonough (1997) created a model of the decision-making process students go through during the college choice process that has been comprehensively used as a conceptual framework for over 15 years. Her model attempts to better understand how students "make sense of and move through their social and organizational worlds" (p. 155). There are multiple contributions McDonough's research has added to the college choice literature. First, the study was conducted using qualitative methods, which gave a voice to students to describe their experiences and perceptions about the college choice process.

In prior research, quantitative methods were extensively used to understand students' decisions during the college choice process. First, students' perception of cultural capital creates a sense of entitlement; they believe acceptance into a certain type of school is predicated on their family's habitus and SES and conduct their college searches based on a range of colleges that matches their family's status. Then, the type of high school that students attend can shape their interest in certain types of colleges and universities. McDonough (1997) explains "how schools' organizational arrangements and processes and the linkages between high schools and colleges help define and mediate individual's achievement and aspirations" (p. 155). Finally, cognitive constraints (e.g., geographic location, social network, high school culture) and organizational culture are both important to students' ability to actualize their aspirations during the college choice process.

This study attempts to expand the existing literature by providing two additional lenses to view McDonough's (1997) seminal research on the college choice process. The first is a better understanding of how the cultural context of urban high school students' families, communities, and schools can influence the students' decisions during the college choice process. Second, although numerous studies have detailed the struggles and college planning of students attending large urban high schools (Freeman, 1997, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Roderick, Coca & Nagaoka, 2011), little attention has been paid to high school students' college aspirations attending smaller schools in rural settings. In 2011, nearly one-fourth (23%) of students in the United States attended a rural school, and the enrollment growth has outpaced growth in all other school locales in recent years (U. S. Department of Education, 2012). Rural school districts face unique

circumstances; i.e., difficulty attracting highly trained staff, geographic isolation, and young students moving out of the area for employment opportunities, not relevant in the nation's urban centers (Swanson, 2009). Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) assert that "one to four rural students fails to graduate from high school, and the rate is even lower for minority youth. In addition, only 17% of rural adults over the age of 25 and older have college degree- half the percentage of urban adults" (p. 3).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The college choice processes are complex for students and parents and in particular for urban high school students. A student's decision to attend post-secondary education can be influenced by a multitude of structural factors (e.g., family support, peer influence, teacher and guidance support, and public policy), yet the current literature does not give an adequate account as to why urban high school students' post-secondary aspirations and career plans are adversely impacted by these factors (Fin & Owing, 2006; Freeman, 1997, 2005). Earlier studies support that urban high school students begin the college choice process with comparable educational aspirations to higher income students, but the aspiration does not translate to actual college enrollment, leading to lower college participation rates (Freeman, 2005; McDonough & Calderone, 2010; Pitre, 2006). Despite some gains in post-secondary participation and attainment, large gaps still remain by race and ethnicity (Ruppert, 2003). In nearly every measure of post-secondary participation and economic attainment, there are large gaps between African American and Latino students and their White and Asian counterparts (Isaacs, 2007; McDonough, 2004; Orfield, 2004; Pathways to College Network, 2003). Prior research has focused on the researchers' perception of how African American students navigate the college choice

process. There has been little to no research conducted from within the experiences of African American students as they navigate the college choice process. African American students' perceptions about the social and cultural factors that help or hinder their navigation of the college choice process have largely been unexplored. Freeman (2005) argued that "the voices of students are rarely heard in the debates regarding their lives, and the voices of disempowered students are even more silent...to allow a greater voice and thus provide a deeper understanding of their consideration of the value of higher education" (p. 113). To investigate the questions that were raised in this study, it was paramount to understand African American students' perspective on how factors in their home, community, and school shape their decisions during the college choice process.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws upon Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model, Prudence Carter's (2005) multicultural navigator model, and Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital and habitus to examine why some urban high school students do not fulfill their post-secondary career and educational aspirations, even though they express the desire to do so. To increase participation in post-secondary education for urban high school students, additional research is needed to provide a better understanding of the conditions in their lives (home, community, and school) that nurtures the habitus needed for long-term academic achievement (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Muhammad, 2008). This study integrates the three theoretical perspectives on college choice, cultural influences, and cultural capital in a conceptual model to provide a better understanding of the decisions urban students make during the college choice process.

### **College Choice Model**

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model (predisposition, search, and choice) describes the developmental process which students go through regarding their college decisions (Morrice, 2011). Hossler and Gallagher's model has been prominently used in the college choice literature for over 30 years. The model utilizes both sociological and econometric views to explain the college choice process as a singular integrated process (Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989).

In this study, I utilized the search phase of the college choice model to analyze the structural factors/barriers faced by urban high school students that can either advance or obstruct their development of post-secondary opportunities and planning. In addition, a further understanding of how urban high school students develop their career and educational opportunities and how factors such as race, cultural capital, and school resources influence the ways in which the students navigate the college choice process can fill a current gap in the literature.

### **Multicultural Navigator Model**

Carter (2005) introduced the multicultural navigator model to illustrate "several individual differences such as racial and ethnic ideology, cultural styles, access to resources, and treatment within school and family" (p. 12) explain why some African American students do not excel in school. Carter (2005) challenges Ogbu's work, arguing that students understand the value of succeeding in education, but resist abandoning their cultural identities to achieve success in education. Ogbu's argument is focused on involuntary minorities' perception of lack of future opportunities, which is demonstrated through their lack of effort in school (Ogbu, 1979, 1990, 1995a).

The multicultural navigator model offers the different levels of attachment, engagement, and achievement by African American students.

- Cultural Mainstreamers embrace the dominant culture repertoire, or body of cultural know-how; and although they are very aware of their racial identity, they view most cultural behaviors as race neutral.
- Cultural Straddlers deftly abide by the school's cultural rules.
- Noncompliant Believers are the students with the widest gap among their beliefs, school engagement, and their achievement.

### **Cultural Capital and Habitus**

Cultural capital research has been at the forefront of debates for scholars in an attempt to understand how the reproduction of inequality is perpetuated in schools (Brantlinger, 1993; Lareau, 2001; McDonough, 1997), whether cultural capital breeds the social structure that promotes mobility (Kingston, 2000; Kraaykamp & Van Eijck, 2010) or whether parental SES backgrounds and involvement influence a student's school experience (Carter, 2005; Dumais, 2002; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

Bourdieu (1977) argued that habitus establishes a "set of durable, transposable dispositions which...functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (Swartz, 1997, pp. 82-83). Dumais (2002) defines habitus as an individual's outlook or worldview, which guides one's educational pursuits, ambitions, and lives. Habitus is located within a person's position in the social structure and the individual's understanding of the salient prospects for his or her future. Although Bourdieu typically drew attention to class differences among individuals in reference to habitus, there is a

growing group of scholars that argue habitus can change if an individual is exposed to different interactions and experiences with the dominant culture (DiMaggio 1982; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996; King, 2000; Lizardo, 2009). In this study, cultural capital and habitus are conceptualized by analyzing the participants' perceptions about the type of school they will attend based on their SES and the impact of "social class culture on individual behavior through the high school" (McDonough, 1997, p.156).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Given the gap in the college choice literature about the decision-making process students use when making a decision on whether or not to attend college (Schmitt, 2002), the purpose of this study was to explore urban high school students' perceptions of the cultural and structural factors that may influence their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. This study was exploratory in nature, examining why some African American students do not fulfill their post-secondary career and educational aspirations, even though they express the desire to do so. To increase college attendance for racially and economically disadvantaged minority students, more comprehensive research is needed to better understand the conditions in their lives (home, community, and school) that nurture the habitus needed for long-term academic achievement (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Muhammad, 2008).



## **Research Questions**

The overarching questions that guided this study were the following: what factors are important to urban high school students' development of post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans in a rural setting and how do these factors shape the ways in which these students engage in the college choice process?

1. What factors do Sheridan High School students articulate assist or hinder their development of post-secondary aspirations?
2. What is the role of guidance counselors in helping Sheridan High School students navigate the college choice process?
3. How do Sheridan High School students describe the role of peer influence/support during the college choice process?
4. How does a Sheridan High School student's race/ethnicity impact his or her decision to enter post-secondary education during the college choice process?

## **Significance of the Study**

The college participation rates of Black/Latino youth are significantly lower than their White and Asian counterparts (Lynch & Engle, 2012). Within the age group of 18 to 24 years of age, the lowest college participation rates are for Black and Latino students, whereas Whites (44%) and Asians (58%) have some of the highest participation rates (Aud et al., 2010). In 2009, the percentage of African American students enrolled in college (associate's and bachelor's degree programs) was 25%, the percentage of Latino students was 16%, and the percentage of White students was 60% (Aud et al., 2010).

The disparity in the college going rates of Black/Latino and low-income students and those of higher-income students remains as they enter into college. The college going

rates of each group is comparable to their six-year college graduation rates. Fry (2010) explains that a little over half of the students that enter college graduate within a six-year period, but the graduation rates are significantly lower for Black/Latino students.

According to Aud et al. (2010) within the population of 25-29 year olds in the United States, 17% of Blacks, 11% of Latinos, 33% of Whites, and 60% of Asians had bachelor's degrees in 2008. Although the rates of bachelor's degree attainment have increased across all racial/ethnic groups over the past decade, the disparity or gaps have not closed and in many instances they are expanding (Fry, 2010). The rates for all adults with a bachelor's degree increased from 1996 to 2008 (10% Asians, 7% Whites, 6% Blacks, and 4% Latinos), but the lowest gains were made by Black/Latino students (Aud et al., 2010).

The disparity between Black/Latino and White and Asian students is vast when linked to the economic benefits of higher levels of degree attainment. Baum, Ma, and Payea (2010) argue that "the median earnings of bachelor degree recipients working full-time year-round in 2008 was...\$21,900 more than the median earnings of high school graduates" (p. 11). Adults who possess a high school diploma median salary was \$30,000 a year, approximately 2.1 million dollars less in lifetime earnings than adults who possess a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012).

Baum, Ma, and Payea (2010) found that a similar gap existed in 2008 between bachelor's and associate's degree median and lifetime earnings. For adults who possess an associate's degree, the median salary was \$35,000, approximately 1.7 million dollars less in lifetime earnings than adults who possess a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012).

Aud et al. (2010) assert that the median earnings of full-time year-round Black/Latino workers ages 25–34 is lower at every degree level than White and Asian students. For example, White and Asians with advanced degrees earned approximately \$60,000 and \$65,000, respectively, a year, which is approximately 10% more than Blacks/Latinos with comparable degrees (\$55,000 and \$50,000, respectively). Whites and Asians with bachelor's degrees earned approximately \$50,000 and \$55,000, respectively, which is also approximately 10% more than Black/Latino (\$45,000 and \$40,000, respectively).

In fact, during the latest recession over 400,000 public sector jobs (state and local government) have been lost, which further supports the notion that additional education is needed for middle skilled workers to re-enter the job market. Minority groups, particularly African Americans, have traditionally used public sector jobs as a vehicle into the middle class; during 2008-2010, 21.2% of all African American workers were public employees (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). The reduction of manufacturing, service, and public sector opportunities (advances in technology, trade policies, and economic climate) equates to a number of middle-skilled jobs that are no longer available for skilled workers and a possible drop out of the middle class for many Black/Latino families (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2006). The resulting loss of middle-skilled jobs will have a larger impact on Black/Latino unemployment rates because Whites and Asians work in larger numbers within the private sector, which has had 30 consecutive months of job growth since 2009 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

To increase the participation rates in post-secondary education for urban high school students, comprehensive research is needed to further understand the conditions in

their lives (home, community, and school) that nurture the habitus needed for long-term academic achievement (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Muhammad, 2008).

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter II positions the current study within the existing literature on the academic achievement gap, the theoretical explanations for minority students' educational achievement, the three theoretical approaches used to study the college choice process, and Hossler and Gallagher's college choice model and theory of cultural capital and habitus to examine and understand the experiences of college choice among urban high school students. Chapter III details the research design and methodology of this study. The chapter includes an overview of the process of selecting an institution as well as selecting the participants. The chapter ends with a description of the multiple data collection procedures as well as the data analysis process. Chapter IV provides a discussion of the results and findings and provides an analysis of the data collected. Chapter V focuses on the findings and implications of the study for policy and practice, and future research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The college choice process is a complex multifaceted endeavor that involves several groups, including students, family, high schools, and post-secondary institutions. Many factors (e.g., parental involvement, school environment, curriculum, academic preparation, and financial support) have been identified as having influence directly or indirectly on a student's post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. Some scholars have begun to pay attention to exploring the ways in which traditionally underrepresented minority students (i.e., African American students attending urban high schools) experience the process of going to college (Freeman, 1997, 2005; McDonough & Calderone, 2010; Pitre, 2006).

There have been some influential studies about status attainment that found a correlation between educational aspirations and academic results (Campbell, 1983; Jencks et al., 1983; Sirin, 2005). Although there have been numerous studies over the past 30 years that focused on the structural factors (e.g., family support, peer influence, teacher and guidance support, and public policy) that can influence an individual's aspiration to post-secondary education and the decision-making process, a salient question remains unanswered. Why do urban high school students start high school with a comparable educational aspiration to go to college as their higher income peers, yet their college participations are significantly lower than their higher income peers (Carter, 2003; Cooper, 2009; Freeman, 1997, 2005)? Advancing the research about how aspirations are formed and how they can change during the college choice process is

critical to understanding why educational aspirations can produce exceedingly different academic results along racial, cultural, and gender lines (Kao & Tienda, 1998).

With this in mind, this review of literature begins by describing the context of academic achievement gaps through the lens of race and social class. Next, I discuss the theoretical explanations for urban high school students' educational achievement, and review empirical research that addresses how the intersection of culture and SES influences the academic achievement gap in minority students. I then introduce three theoretical approaches that have been used to explain the process of the college decision-making process with a particular focus on Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) search phase of the college choice model. Finally, I present a theoretical framework that utilizes Hossler and Gallagher's college choice model and the theory of cultural capital and habitus to examine the college choice experiences among urban high school students.

### **Academic Achievement Gaps**

In 2011, White and Asian students graduated high school at higher rates in nearly every state in the United States compared to their African American and Latino counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). While there were modest gains in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in 2009 for all students, the overall achievement gap between White and Asian and minority (Black and Latino) students has not narrowed; in fact, it still remains alarmingly wide. According to the latest NAEP report, a 25-point gap exists in Grades 4 and 8 in reading; and an equal gap exists in math among fourth graders (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

A vast range of literature exists that describes the academic achievement gap between White and minority students. In this section, I focus on the work of two scholars

whose underlying theories--oppositional culture, the burden of acting White, and the multicultural navigator model--offer some explanations of the achievement gap, which are vital to making progress to close the gap (Barton & Conley, 2007, 2009; Brantlinger, 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006)

### **Ogbu's Theory**

Ogbu's (1990) oppositional cultural theory "considers the broad societal and school factors as well as the dynamics within the minority communities" (p. 158). The theory has two main points. The first part deals with the unequal treatment minorities face within a particular society. Ogbu argued that minority groups are systematically blocked from educational opportunities equivalent to those received by the dominant group. Ogbu referred to this part as *the system*. Minority groups face obstacles to successfully find adequate employment, higher earnings, housing, etc., because of racial and ethnic discrimination and structural inequalities or what Ogbu referred to as the "job ceiling." Even if a society leaves behind the formal practices responsible for the inequalities within society and education for minority groups, the remnants of past discriminatory policies in employment, housing, and education remain a reality for minorities. The second part is triggered by a disparity in access to opportunities for minority groups by the dominant culture. Ogbu (1979) argued that the incentive for excelling in school results from an understanding that acquiring higher levels of education will translate into better jobs, higher earnings, elevated social status, and increased self-worth. Once minority groups run into barriers within the opportunity structure and see their possibilities for upward mobility diminish, they develop a perception that no matter how hard they work to acquire additional education, the

benefits they will receive from education will be lower than that of the dominant group. This perception is the foundation of individual-level and community forces that are defined as oppositional culture, which includes the resistance to academic achievement in school.

Ogbu and Simons (1998) argued that “understanding how the system affects minority school performance calls for an examination of the overall white treatment of minorities. The latter includes the barriers faced by minorities qua minorities” (p. 158). Ogbu (1979) describes these barriers as instrumental discrimination, relational discrimination, and symbolic discrimination. Ogbu designates the three types of discriminations as the collective problems that are faced by minorities. He asserts that the United States and other countries function as a “caste” society, with minorities positioned at the bottom. The dominant caste (culture) is held by Whites as well as by those with more favored positions in society. Ogbu moved away from using the term “caste” to describe minorities and started using the term “involuntary (non-immigrant) minorities”—people that have been made a part of U.S. society by force, who consider their existence in the United States as mandated by White people (Ogbu, 1995a). Ogbu argues that involuntary minority students are academically prepared in a school system which is based on preconceived notions of that group’s limited future opportunities to move from the lower class into the middle class. Ogbu suggests that non-immigrant minorities’ perceptions of limited returns from education influence the effort they put forth in school.

According to Ogbu, involuntary minorities view education as a strategy that can only be used by Whites to progress out of poverty and into the middle class. Conversely,



immigrant minorities who willingly moved to the United States for better opportunities (school, jobs, housing, political involvement) view education as the ultimate equalizer to move into the middle class. Ogbu argues that immigrant minorities are more likely to imitate behaviors (i.e., high academic achievement) that are associated with Whites, whereas involuntary minorities often take an oppositional stance to these behaviors. Immigrant minorities experience challenges in school, yet they are normally not as discouraged about their future prospects because their point of comparison is often non-existent opportunities in their home country. Immigrant minorities who achieve modest success in the United States typically exceed, by far, what they would have achieved in their home countries (Ogbu & Simon, 1998).

Involuntary minorities historically have faced challenges that prevented them from competing on an equal playing field with Whites. As a member of the involuntary minority group, African Americans have experienced barriers (high unemployment, unfair access to housing and bank loans, etc.) but have not experienced the benefits from acquiring higher levels of education as their White counterparts have. Ogbu (1978) found that African American parents verbalize the desire for a better education for their children and are willing to work to change the education system to better serve their children. Yet African American students do not dedicate the type of effort in their studies needed to actualize their aspiration and career goals (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

There have been scholars that have strongly critiqued Ogbu's theory because it does not offer an explanation for involuntary minorities that excel academically in school (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998, Carter, 2006, Epstein, 2003). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argue that the "burden of acting White" inhibited minorities from succeeding in

school. In Addition, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that students from the same race eschew African American children that earn good grades in school for acting White and acculturating to the dominant culture. It is through this lens that Ogbu's (1979) theory of acting White is applicable to the academic experience of minority students, whereas oppositional cultural theory generally emphasizes African Americans' rejection of academic achievement in school based on an observed /experienced inequality of interacting with the dominant culture. The burden of acting White represents a rejection of academic achievement because of a self-imposed authenticity process by minorities, who negatively view any imitation of the dominant culture (Freeman, 1997).

Ogbu and Simon (1998) aptly state that minorities start to develop "collective solutions to instrumental discrimination, relational discrimination, and symbolic discrimination" (p.190). Minorities create a subculture, where "swagger," meaning an attitude or belief that minorities can have a better life whether by getting a job, going to college, or by resorting to criminal activity, is formed (Shakur, 1996). Minority students' expression of swagger is displayed by their creation of a persona (clothes, slang, jewelry, tattoos, and braided hair) which is purposely aggressive and excessive as a sign or code of resistance to acculturating to the dominant culture or system. Minority students can face intense scrutiny from peers, family members, and their community to "keep it real" or continue to exhibit swagger, no matter how much education or success they acquire in life (Sampson, 2002). Although scholars (Freeman, 1997, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Ogbu & Simon, 1998) have postulated that education is important in the African American community, there are a limited number of studies examining other cultural

values of African Americans that could offer a different lens through which to view Ogbu's oppositional culture.

### **Multicultural Navigators**

Carter (2005) introduced the multicultural navigator model to illustrate how “several individual differences such as racial and ethnic ideology, cultural styles, access to resources, and treatment within school and family” (p. 12) can impact African American students' academic success in school. Carter (2005) challenges Ogbu's work, arguing that students keenly understand the value of succeeding in education, but resist abandoning their cultural identities to achieve success in education. Ogbu's argument is focused on involuntary minorities' perception of lack of future opportunities, which is demonstrated through their lack of effort in school (Ogbu, 1979, 1990, 1995a).

Carter (2005) defined multicultural navigators as individuals who are skilled at empowering groups of students to achieve in environments that are not conducive to providing equal opportunities for all of its students. Multicultural navigators have instant acceptance in the African American communities because they have a personal understanding of the social, cultural, and economic conditions faced by these groups.

Carter (2005) argues that multicultural navigators are “people who possess both dominant and non-dominant cultural capital” (p. 150). Multicultural navigators can be role models for minority students and show them the necessary skills to live a “bicultural existence”: how to develop the aspiration to go to college and stay connected to their cultural codes. Levine and Nidiffer (1996) posit that all of the informants in their study had a similar story of why the informants ended up enrolling into college; there was a person who inspired and challenged them to make a change in their lives. The mentors

varied among the students (teacher, parent, social worker, neighbor), but the common thread was that the person came into their lives in the moment they were ready for it (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996).

African American families use their cultural and racial characteristics to support group commonality and to emphasize their “Blackness” as a sign of self-pride, not as a sign of antipathy toward the dominant culture. Young (2011) argues that once African American students enter school, their emphasis on “Blackness” is met with a distinct message by the gatekeepers (teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators) that those cultural and racial characteristics are not valued or useful within an academic setting. Carter (2005) suggests that once gatekeepers see low academic ability (normally from some type of test assessment) from African American students, many of them automatically perceive “their practices and proclamations...as a rejection of excellence” (vi., 2005). The model offers the different levels of attachment, engagement, and achievement levels by African American students.

- Cultural Mainstreamers embrace the dominant cultural repertoire, or body of cultural know-how; and although they are very aware of their racial identity, they view most cultural behaviors as race neutral.
- Cultural Straddlers deftly abide by the school’s cultural rules.
- Noncompliant Believers are students with the widest gap among their beliefs, school engagement, and achievement.

Continuing the narrative of why African American students’ post-secondary educational aspirations dissipate in high school compared with their White and Asian peers, Carter (2005) found that students in the noncompliant believer’s category were

likely to be disengaged from school, often in trouble with school officials, and in constant conflict with the dominant achievement ideology. In some cases, the student may be serving as the de facto head of household and have the full responsibility of cooking, cleaning the house, and helping younger siblings with homework. However, in school, the student is expected to behave like a typical student with no adult responsibilities at home and focus on insignificant details such as tucking in a shirt or not slouching in a chair. Many African American students value their dissimilarity (dress, speech patterns, musical taste, etc.) to the dominant culture and they purposely search for differences, not oneness, to preserve sociocultural borders (Carter, 2005). What is missing from the current college choice literature is an exploration of why some African American students choose to acculturate to the dominant culture while others do not.

Noncompliant Black students start to internalize the low expectations of their teachers, lower level classes, and the lack of substantive and diverse images of minorities infused in their curriculum (Bloom, 2006; Carter, 2005; Freeman, 1997, 2006; Muhammad, 2008; Pitre, 2006). Consequently, it is understandable for Black students to be loyal to their culture and racial value systems because they feel a sense of “belonging, connection, kinship, and with mechanisms of dealing with experiences in a society where resources and opportunities are not entirely accessible and open” (Carter, 2005, p. vii). Carter (2005) asserts that multicultural navigators can help African American students understand the essential characteristics needed to survive and succeed in the dominant culture while being able to stay connected to the cultural characteristics that are important in their communities. The ability to navigate the dominant culture (maintaining the parlance, style, customs, and practices germane to one’s culture) and effectively imitating

the same traits in the dominant culture (code switching) is critical for students to succeed in school and life (Carter, 2005, Hill, 2009).

### **Theoretical Approaches to College Choices**

There have been three strands of theoretical approaches: (1) Psychological, (2) Economic (econometric), and (3) Social (status attainment) used to study the college choice process (Bergerson, 2010; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; Carter, 2003; Hossler & Palmer, 2008; Pitre, 2006). Each of the theoretical models describes the multiple steps involved in high school students' decision to enroll in a college. In this section, I give a detailed overview of the current scholarship in college choice theory.

#### **Psychological Approach**

College choice models that follow the psychology traditions typically focus on the individual actions of students during the college choice process. Psychological models tend to analyze the influence of “others, campus climate, cost, and academic programs on student choices” (Hossler & Palmer, 2008, p. 45). A vast amount of studies that employ psychological approach are longitudinal, with a focus on the phases students go through during the college choice process. The psychological models provide a lens to examine the timing of the multiple factors involved in students' decision-making processes to enter post-secondary education. Chapman (1981) proposed a model that shows the relationship between students' background characteristics, external influences, and institutional characteristics during the college choice process. Many scholars have put forward a number of multi-stage models in an attempt to articulate a concept of the development of the desire to attend college, information gathering about different colleges, and the enrollment process (Chapman, 1981, Jackson, 1982, Litten, 1982).

## **Econometric Approach**

Econometric models explain the college choice process from a rationale perspective, meaning that a student's final decision to advance toward higher education is predicated on the perceived cost of attendance, financial aid available to deter costs, academic preparedness, and perception of job opportunities available upon obtaining a college degree (Manski, 2000; Perna, 2006). Researchers have found that students make decisions based on a cost/benefit analysis of perceived lifetime rewards and the perceived lifetime costs of attending college (Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989; McClelland, 1990; Perna 2000). Students factor in the immediate rewards: the ability to learn new information, participation in internships, and student government. They also factor into their decisions future rewards, which include more employment opportunities, higher salaries, and healthcare (Barton & Conley, 2008; Roscigno & Ainsworth, 199; Schmidt, 2002; Tarullo, 2011). Perna (2000) asserts that the costs of financing a college education also include the cost of attendance: "the direct costs of attendance (tuition, fees, room, board, books, and supplies) less financial aid" (p. 118), and the costs associated with lost earnings and vacation time. Hossler, Braxton, and Coppersmith (1989) argue that students make their final decisions about enrolling into college based on an analysis of the cost of going to college compared to other options (military, entering the workforce, not going to college) and then choose the option that offers the best benefit.

Espenshade and Radford (2010) contend that it is not cogent to simply view students' decisions to go to college strictly from a cost/benefit basis because even when students have the same ability to pay for college (financial aid, family income), the final

decision to go to college may still be different. Perna (2006) asserts that researchers should take into account the sociological and cultural perspectives within the student's home, community, and school to ascertain why they are averse to acquiring debt as a method of paying for their college education.

### **Sociological Status Attainment Approach**

McDonough (1997) contends that the sociological status attainment approach analyzes the impact of a student's social status on the development of post-secondary career and educational aspirations. It is a theoretical lens of sociology that is the basis for the examination of the educational aspirations of students during the college choice process (Sewell et al., 1970). Status attainment research examines how individuals develop and use resources to increase their socioeconomic status (Lareau, 2011). Consequently, researchers during the 1960s and 1970s concentrated solely on the impact of SES in forecasting a student's educational aspirations and ensuing educational and career outcomes (Perna, 2006). Kao and Tienda (1998) note that social psychological variables (significant others, academic achievement, peers) were important to analyze the development of post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. The model is also based on the presumption that a student's social class and academic ability determine the scope of the positive reinforcement and support he or she will receive from family members, teachers, guidance counselors, etc., which influences the student's post-secondary college aspirations and career plans. Specifically, parental SES and education are paramount to a student's achievement, which supports previous research that a family's willingness to use their tangible resources can be powerful to a student's future academic pursuits (Wang et al, 1999). In addition, guidance counselors and teachers are



likely to come from SES backgrounds similar to the parents of their students and offer encouragement and support from a shared cultural and social capital orientation (Knotterus, 1987).

Status attainment researchers have demonstrated that it is from the positive interaction (encouragement and support) from significant others that students become aware of the value placed on academic success as a conduit toward fulfilling their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans (Pitre, 2006). Institutional characteristics can have an influential impact on students' aspirations as well as SES and individual academic success. Post-secondary institutions have specific social environments which can increase or decrease access for African American and lower-income students. A student's post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans are a function of a student's "background and circumstances, his or her institutional choices, and the socializing influences of institutions" (Carter, 2002, p. 149).

### **College Choice Models**

Going to college is a complex process for students and parents. A student's decision during the process is affected by a myriad of factors (e.g., family support, peer influence, school culture and environment, post-secondary institution, and public policy) (Radford, 2009). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model (predisposition, search, and choice) describes the developmental phases students go through when deciding to attend post-secondary education (Morrice, 2011). Hossler and Gallagher's model has been widely used in the college choice literature for over 30 years. The model utilizes both sociological and econometric views to explain the college choice process as a singular integrated process (Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989).

### **Predisposition Phase**

The predisposition phase encompasses the development of educational aspirations and career plans in conjunction with the development of the goals to enter post-secondary education. During elementary and middle school (by eighth grade), students begin to develop ideas and plans about entering post-secondary education, and by ninth grade students begin to take steps to help to achieve their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans (Akos, 2007). Hossler and Palmer (2008) assert that parental encouragement is one of the strongest predictors of students' early development of post-secondary plans. McDonough and Calderone (2010) argue that parental encouragement includes two approaches: motivational and proactive. The motivational approach is when parents set high expectations for their children that are upheld throughout their school experience. The proactive approach means that parents are involved in all school events (academic, athletic, etc.), converse with their children about the post-secondary plans, and make sure saving plans are in place (Hossler & Palmer, 2008). Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) argue that there is a positive correlation between consistent encouragement by parents and the development and sustainability of post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans.

### **Search Phase**

The search phase is when students start to collect information about colleges and universities. The search phase typically begins in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade when students take the Preliminary SAT (PSAT), which is a trigger for colleges and universities to start sending high school students' information about their institution (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper,

1999). In addition, students and parents visit Open Houses and gather information about colleges and universities (tour of the campus, financial aid workshops, and meeting admission professionals. During the search phase, students start to match their aspirations to institutional characteristics to create a set of educational options (McDonough, 2006). According to Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) parents influence their children during the search phase by being involved in the selection of post-secondary institutions to which their children eventually apply.

Students may form unrealistic goals based on limited or inaccurate information (McDonough & Calderone, 2010). Some students may not be able to accurately evaluate their current academic performance and curriculum track to see if they have or will have the appropriate grades and core courses to gain acceptance into a particular post-secondary institution they desire. The student's final list generally relies on the level of diligence in information gathering and the amount of resources available to the student and parents (Freeman, 2005; McDonough, 1997, 2005). Middle and upper class families are apt to rely on multiple sources of information (i.e., college alumni networks, private counselors, and professional colleagues) to guide the process versus their lower income peers that rely more on guidance counselors to fill this void of information (Bloom, 2006; Pitre, 2006; McDonough, 2006). Although guidance counselors provide effective and meaningful college counseling, the quality and amount of counseling is often impacted by their heavy workload (Bergerson, 2009).

Before students start to apply to post-secondary institutions, they develop preferences, which influence the prioritization of schools on their list. The students become introspective about their academic qualifications, start to think about alternative

ways to pay for post-secondary education, and then submit applications (Finn & Owings, 2008; McDonough & Calderone, 2010). A student's perceptions about the prestige of an institution, campus culture, anticipated major, and their ability to secure the funding to pay for post-secondary education are the salient factors that determines enrollment (Espenshade & Radford, 2009).

Although prior studies have analyzed the multiple factors that influence urban high school students' decisions during the college choice process, much of the research has focused on the predisposition (development of aspiration) and choice (college attendance) phases of the model (Schmit, 1991), with little attention paid to the search stage of student college choice.

The choice phase of the college choice model is when students start to evaluate their lists and eliminate schools. Students then develop a final list of schools and start to apply to colleges and universities. It is during the choice phase that students start to depend less on their parents and move toward information sources (e.g., guidance counselors, administrators, and teachers) to make their final enrollment decisions (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; McDonough & Calderone, 2010).

### **Choice Phase**

The last stage of Hossler and Gallagher's model is the choice phase. During the choice phase, students receive offers of admission from post-secondary institutions and complete the enrollment process (Perna, 2006). Students typically are in the choice phase during their senior of high school. Hill (2008) notes that institutional characteristics, tuition and financial aid policies, parent education level and encouragement, student academic performance, guidance and teacher support are significant to students' final

selection of a post-secondary institution. McDonough (1997, 2004) found that students typically gain acceptance into their first choice, but there are racial differences in the percentages of students that enroll in their first college choice.

During this phase, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identify a myriad of activities that colleges and universities use to influence a student's final decision. The activities include inviting students to overnight programs on campus, scholarship brunches, and offering financial aid awards. However, scholars have found that students typically focus on one or two institutions as a part of their final choice set (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Radford, 2009). The cost of attending an institution and the amount of financial aid received are important in selecting a post-secondary institution (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2006). Espenshade and Radford (2009) found that high school students generally were not concerned about paying for college until senior year.

The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model has been the dominant conceptual framework to model the developmental stages student go through in deciding to enter post-secondary education. Notwithstanding the advancement of research in this area, there are still questions that remain unanswered about the college choice process. In other words, college choice researchers have not developed a model to demonstrate how minority students (Black, Latino, and low-income) navigate the college choice process (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 1997, 2005; McDonough, 1997). In the following section, I discuss research on the college choice process of African American students.

### **College Choice Models and African American Students**

A number of scholars have found that African American students have higher aspirations to go to college than their White peers (Berkner et al., 2007; Freeman, 1999;

Kao & Tienda, 2008; Qian & Blair, 1999) at the beginning of high school, yet their aspirations continually do not translate into post-secondary participation (Nagaoka et al., 2009; Pitre, 2006; Sirin & Roger-Sirin, 2005). What is troubling about the prior college choice literature is that there is evidence that “something” befalls African American students during the college choice process that decreases their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. However, there is not a clear explanation as to why White and Asian students on the same SES level are not similarly impacted. College choice research, to date, is inadequate in explaining the differences in the decision-making process of African American students and other ethnic groups. College choice researchers have articulated structural barriers African American students face during the college choice process but failed to explain how or why these barriers adversely impact them versus other ethnic groups (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). African American students are more likely than White and Asian students to attend less selective colleges and are less likely than White and Asian students to earn a bachelor’s degree when starting their education at a community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; McDonough, 2006; Radford, 2009). Advancing the discussion about African American students during the college choice process may lead to answers about how and why their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans do not translate into outcomes (focused and realistic steps to be taken to achieve educational and career goals) during high school.

Hossler and Gallagher’s model is a valuable framework to view African American students as they progress through the different phases of the college choice process. The model does not focus on all of the issues faced by African American

students, but it is a very useful theoretical framework to discuss their decisions during the college choice process.

McDonough (1997) and Freeman (2005) suggest that during the predisposition phase of the college choice process, individual factors (academic achievement, financial support, motivation), cultural factors (parental education and occupation, gender, single/two parents household), and institutional factors (school environment, peer influence, culture, guidance and teacher support) have a significant impact on low-income and African American students' decisions to enter post-secondary education (Hossler et al., 1999; Freeman, 1997, 2005; Pitre, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Freeman (1997, 2005) argues that the family plays an important role in African American students' development of post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. Pitre (2006) concurs with Freeman's assessment that the emphasis on academic excellence is nurtured in African American students by their siblings (especially those who attended college) and by family members who may or may not have attended college. Researchers have found that African American students' perceptions of economic viability can influence their decisions to attend post-secondary education, if they believe the academic pursuits will yield financial returns and create access to the middle class (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2006; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). African American students' post-secondary plans are also influenced by their high school's racial makeup, type (public, catholic, Independent, etc.), and teachers and guidance counselors (Freeman, 1997; McDonough, 1997, 2004; Radford, 2009, Roderick et al., 2008).

During the search phase of the college choice process, a lack of information about the college application process (timing of application process, financial aid deadlines, and

parental lack of college knowledge) can impede African American students from entering post-secondary education (Bergerson, 2009; Carter, 2003; Freeman, 1997, 2005).

McDonough (2004) posits that African American students depend significantly on guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators for information when making decisions about post-secondary education, whereas higher SES students rely more on private counselors, parents, college representatives, and peers. African American parents' lack of knowledge about the financial aid process can also be detrimental to planning for post-secondary education (Smith & Fleming, 2006).

Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) argued that “college-educated parents are more knowledgeable than low-income parents not only about the different types of financial aid programs available but about qualification criteria as well” (p. 10). College educated parents' knowledge of the financial aid process is primarily informed by their experiences of going through the process as students and the ability to use social networks to connect with parents that either currently or recently went through the financial aid process. Despite the willingness of African American parents to be involved during the college choice process, studies have found that their lack of “college knowledge” often hinders their role (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper 1999; Qian & Blair, 1999; Smith & Fleming, 2006). This finding supports previous findings of Hearn et al. (1995), Hill (2008), Hurtado et al. (1997), and McDonough (1997), which found that African American students enter the search phase later than White and Asian students, submit fewer college applications, and submit them late in the college application cycle. The importance of African American students and parents receiving sufficient knowledge during high school about college and



financing options play a major role in achieving their post-secondary educational aspirations and career goals (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997, 2004; Radford, 2009).

During the choice phase of the college choice process, guidance counselors and teachers play a more prominent role for urban high school students than their parents and peers (McDonough, 1997, 2005). Researchers have found that individual factors (religion and cultural awareness), social and cultural variables (socioeconomic status and particular region of the country), and organizational variables (type of college, cost of attendance, and financial aid award) were factored prominently into African American students' final enrollment decision (Freeman, 1997; Pitre, 2006; McDonough, 1997).

Stern, Dayton, and Raby (2010) argue that African American students are more impacted than middle or upper income students by financial aid award amounts (amount and type of aid received and tuition costs) when making their final decision to apply to and enter post-secondary education. A number of studies have pointed to rising tuition costs as a reason that "has compelled low-income students to restrict their enrollment to less expensive institutions" (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, p. 12). African American students were less willing to accept loans and work-study jobs as an option to pay for college than their higher income peers (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Researchers have found that increases in college tuition can become a major factor in lowering low-income students' aspiration to go to college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; McDonough, 2004; Pitre, 2006). Low-income students have shown a positive reaction to learning about and receiving financial aid (e.g., grants, scholarships, work-study jobs, etc.) as a motivating factor to enter post-secondary education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

## **Cultural Capital Theory**

A number of scholars have used the concept of social reproduction to examine how schools replicate prevailing social inequalities, specifically as espoused in the research of Bourdieu (Dumais, 2002; Lareau, 2001; Wacquant 1992, 1993). Bourdieu's primary assertions on educational inequality is that students with access to more valued cultural capital will have more success during their educational experiences than their counterparts with less access to valued cultural capital (Lareau & Horvat, 2004). Bourdieu (1977) argues that cultural capital encompasses acquaintance with the broad cultural knowledge about the upper-echelon of society and has the capacity to demonstrate the understanding of "linguistic and cultural competence" (Dumais, 2002, p. 44) in different social settings (school, work, social functions). In theory, all races have access to cultural capital, but upper class families share a common cultural connection with gatekeepers (teachers, counselors, school officials), which is reinforced in educational settings and found less frequently amongst the lower class (Brantlinger 1993; Dumais, 2002; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Kingston, 2000).

### **Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital research has been at the forefront of debates for scholars that are trying to understand how the reproduction of inequality is perpetuated in schools (Brantlinger 1993; Lareau, 2001; McDonough, 1997), whether cultural capital breeds the social structure that bolsters mobility (Kingston, 2000; Kraaykamp & Van Eijck, 2010), and whether parental involvement influences a student's school experience (Carter, 2005; Dumais, 2002; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Lareau, 2012).

Bourdieu (1977) argued that the knowledge and experiences of the upper and middle classes can be used and is, therefore, viewed as “capital” in a hierarchical society. Bourdieu argued that “highbrow” interests embedded in upper and middle classes are a vital part of the lifestyle characteristics that shape the dominant class. It is the distinction of being a part of this “highbrow” culture that is the basis of providing advantage and rewards to students once they enter the school system. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977a, 1990) posit that cultural capital is one of multiple categories of capital besides economic and symbolic. Cultural capital functions as a source of power for dominant groups which use it to gain and maintain status (Dumais, 2002). Bourdieu (1977) found that cultural capital originates from the development of a person’s habitus, “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (Swartz, 1997, pp. 82-83).

According to Bourdieu, this socialization begins during the student’s formative years though students may not be aware of the effort that is being expended by their parents to create the cultural capital. The person’s beliefs, knowledge, and predisposition are then translated into actions that are central to the perpetuation of class structure (Dumais, 2002). In addition, one’s social class may play a key role in developing a sense of the possibilities of his/her future prospects in life (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Dumais, 2002). Cultural capital is viewed to be an advantage in the educational setting for numerous reasons: children exposed to cultural capital may be better prepared to engage in higher order thinking (i.e., critical analysis of abstract text, advanced mathematics, etc.) and may be preferred by teachers when compared to students who possess less cultural capital (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). An absence of cultural capital

in students may dampen students' motivation to stay engaged in school, may hinder their academic development, and may cause teachers not to recognize their academic potential (Lareau, 2011). Dumais (2002) argues that symbolic power is necessary for the strategies of upper and middle class students/families to be successful, meaning that gatekeepers have to recognize the display of cultural capital and place a significant value on it.

Dumais (2002) noted that in Bourdieu's context of cultural capital and education, a "student must have the ability to receive and internalize it...although schools require that students have this ability, they do not provide it for them" (pp. 44-45). Kraaykamp and Eijck (2010) argue that any clear advantage gained by cultural capital and a student's academic performance can be linked to the gatekeepers' ease in communicating to students that have been trained in elite social status and cultural norms. According to Lareau (2001), middle-class children are taught skills (greater vocabulary agility, increased vocabulary, comfort with authority, and familiarity with abstract concepts) which can be used later as cultural capital in their adult lives. Middle and upper class children learn cultural and social codes which are "most valued by the school or most strongly associated with achievement" (Lee & Bowen, 2006, p. 198). Low-income children are not consistently taught these cultural and social codes as are their middle and upper-class peers in their homes and communities, which can lessen the chance for them to use their skills in beneficial ways toward fulfilling their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans (Cooper, 2009). Furthermore, as people ascend the SES scale, resources are transferred across generations, creating a better chance for a child to sustain a middle and upper class existence, versus a working-class or poor child reaching the same level (Lareau, 2011).

## **Habitus**

Dumais (2002) defines habitus as an individual's outlook or worldview, which guides their educational pursuits, ambitions, and lives. Habitus is located within a person's position in the social structure and individuals' understanding of the salient prospects for their lives. Gaddis (2012) posited that "although Bourdieu (e.g. 1984) often emphasizes the class basis of habitus and sometimes hints at the rigidity of habitus" (p. 3). Scholars suggest that habitus can change over time with an individual's increased exposure to the dominant culture (DiMaggio 1982; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996; King, 2000; Lizardo, 2009). Gaddis (2012) added that if students can develop a better understanding of the benefits of education, and feel the benefits will help create a better future (than otherwise); education "may be an important mediator between cultural capital and academic outcomes" (p. 3)

There have been a limited amount of studies that focus on Bourdieu's concept of habitus. The scholars usually focus on it as an individual's future aspirations or expectations (Dumais, 2002; Lareau 2001, 2011), or the overall belief about their abilities, and the tangible value placed on educational success in school and life. Dumais (2002) argues that Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and habitus should be examined concomitantly to determine if they play a substantial role in educational outcomes; specifically, to determine if factors (race, gender, SES) "lead to different benefits from cultural capital and habitus in terms of educational outcomes" (p. 45). Consequently, as argued by some scholars, academically gifted students from lower income families may view schooling in an encouraging manner and may start to acquire cultural capital via

schooling as a strategy towards social mobility and to navigate around or through the barriers related to their class position (Bloom, 2006; McDonough, 2006; Pitre, 2006). A student's positive experience in school and increased cultural capital can positively influence their predilection toward school (habitus); hence, their practice and performance (worldview) is expanded.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Despite a wealth of literature on the college choice process, there is a dearth of research about the different experiences students have in high school based on factors (race, SES, parents educational level, college going climate of school) that shape students' post-secondary educational aspirations and career planning. Building on the strengths and weaknesses of prior studies, this research integrates sociological and psychological factors to examine the development of post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans among urban high school students.

This study draws upon Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model, Carter's (2003) multicultural navigator model, and Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) concept of cultural capital and habitus to examine why some urban high school students do not fulfill their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans, even though they express the desire to do so. To increase participation in post-secondary education for urban high school students, additional research is needed to further understand what conditions in their lives (home, community, and school) nurture the habitus needed for long-term academic achievement (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Muhammad, 2008). This study integrates three theoretical perspectives on college choice, cultural influences, and

cultural capital in a conceptual model to provide a better understanding of the decisions urban students make during the college choice process.

### **Summary**

There has been over 50 years of academic research that has demonstratively advanced our understanding of the college choice process; specifically, an abundant number of prevalent studies incorporating social, cultural, and educational factors that impact urban high school students' post-secondary educational aspirations and career planning. However, a limited number of studies have simultaneously studied African American and White students as they are making decisions during the college choice process.

Urban high school students view post-secondary enrollment as a conduit into the middle class, better job opportunities, and increased earnings (Cooper, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Lareau, 2011; Tarullo, 2011). Yet, through a review of the college choice literature, White students that attend urban high schools have better academic achievement in high school and college participation rates (Barton & Conley, 2009; Freeman, 1997, 2004; Hearn et al., 2004; Howard, 2003; Orfield, 2004) than their African American peers on the same level. This study offers the opportunity to examine the challenges that confront African American and White students as they navigate the college choice process and discusses the differences in the students' experiences and perceptions about how the challenges can impact their decision to enroll in post-secondary education. This chapter also offers a conceptual framework based on Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model with concepts of cultural

capital, habitus, and the multicultural navigator model as the theoretical foundation to conceptualize the decisions students make during the college choice process.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore urban high school students' perceptions of the cultural and structural factors that may influence their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. This study was exploratory in nature, examining why some African American students do not fulfill their post-secondary career and educational aspirations, even though they express the desire to do so. To increase college attendance for racially and economically disadvantaged minority students, more comprehensive research is needed to better understand the conditions in their lives (home, community, and school) that nurture the habitus needed for long-term academic achievement (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Muhammad, 2008).

This chapter describes the research design and methods used in this study. To examine urban high school students' experiences during the college choice process, this study used a qualitative case study approach to provide an interpretive analysis of the research problem. Case studies "are used to develop conceptual strategies or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gather" (Merriam, 1998, p. 38). The Sheridan High School research team identified an urban high school on the East Coast as the case study site. A qualitative software program was used to code and aid in the analysis of the data. This chapter includes an explanation of the following sections of the study: research site setting, data collection, participants, and data analysis.

## **Research Questions**

The overarching questions that guided this study were the following: what factors are important to high school students' development of post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans in an urban high school in a rural setting, and how do these factors shape the ways in which these students engage in the college choice process?

1. What factors do Sheridan High School students articulate assist or hinder their development of post-secondary aspirations?
2. What is the role of guidance counselors in helping Sheridan High School students navigate the college choice process?
3. How do Sheridan High School students describe the role of peer influence/support during the college choice process?
4. How does a Sheridan High School student's race/ethnicity impact his or her decisions to enter post-secondary education during the college choice process?

## **Research Design**

As part of a longitudinal qualitative research project, this case study is to examine individual students' college choice process and urban high school students' perceptions of the structural factors that may influence their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans (Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). The research team collected data from June 2009 to June 2011, conducting focus groups and one-on-one interviews to better understand the college-going process and culture at Sheridan High School in New Jersey. By understanding how urban high school students perceive the steps in the college choice process, this study aimed to provide further

insights into the underlying factors impacting the knowledge gained by students during the college choice process and how the factors aid or hinder their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans.

During a three-year period (2009, 2010, and 2011), the research team, which consisted of three faculty members and one graduate assistant, conducted interviews with students. The rationale for conducting multi-year interviews was to obtain a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions about the college choice process and how the students' educational and career aspirations developed and changed over time. As a follow up to the student interviews, I interviewed three guidance counselors at Sheridan High School in the spring of 2013 to ascertain their involvement with students during the college choice process, their expectations for their students to go to college, and to understand what resources are available to students during the college choice process.

### **Research Site**

Sheridan High School is categorized as an urban high school, but it is located in a rural area in the mid-Atlantic region of the country. The district is one of the 30 poorest communities in the state and is comprised of almost 600 community-based schools. Orfield (2004) asserts that the socioeconomic level of a school district matters, meaning poverty rates and high minority populations factor into lower graduation and college participation rates. Orfield (2004) found that 90% of lower socioeconomic school districts have high levels of poverty and that the students face several structural factors (lower quality teachers, fewer college preparatory courses, high levels of student mobility) that are prevalent in the poorer sections of urban cities.

The community in which Sheridan High School is located consists of approximately 38 square miles, with a population of 66,000, and has the lowest population density in the state. Sheridan is considered a small rural city surrounded by vast farmlands. It is quite possible to have students within the same class at Sheridan High School that live and work on a family farm with students that have never visited a farm or seen livestock in person.

A survey conducted by the Guidance Department revealed that approximately 90% of students begin high school with the aspiration of attending college or other post-secondary education, but only 70% of the class of 2007 actually enrolled in post-secondary education. In fact, 26% of African American students and 4% of White students dropped out of high school during 2009-2010, according to the latest available data for the school year.

The school's enrollment is approximately 470 students, although it has been declining over the past few years. Sheridan High School's student population is comprised of predominantly African American students: 70% African American, 25% White, and 5% Latino. According to the school's Guidance Department, nearly 50% of the students are eligible for free and/or reduced lunch. The school enrolls ninth grade students from three predominantly White and one African American middle school within the district. According to the school's staff, newer options for students to attend academies and the establishment of school choice may be playing a role in the decline in student enrollment over the last few years. In 2009, Sheridan High School students scored Partially Proficient (below average) in the following areas: 25% in Language Arts Literacy and 49% in Mathematics on the High School Proficiency Assessment (State

examination). The State’s average Partially Proficient scores were lower: 12 % in Language Arts Literacy and 28% in Mathematics. In 2009, Sheridan High School’s average Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) score of 870 was 300 points lower than the State’s average score of 1170. Post-graduation plans of students in Sheridan High School’s class of 2010 were as follows: 82.5 % going to some type of college, 3.5% military, 28% employment, and 3% undecided.

### **Sampling Selection**

The lead researcher of the research team contacted the guidance counselor to recruit students for interview. The entire student body at Sheridan High School was offered the opportunity to participate in the study. A recruitment letter was sent to all students by the Chair of the Guidance Department in the fall of 2008. A follow-up recruitment letter was sent to students during the spring semester of 2009. Nine students and three guidance counselors participated in the study. The participants’ race varied as follows: Black (n = 4) and White (n = 5) in the ninth through eleventh grades (roughly 14-17 years-old). The participants’ grades and class rank were mixed, including low performing and high achieving, and included the salutatorian of the graduating class. The majority of the students had passed the HSPA (State examination) by their junior year, and only one student had an SAT score below 860 (see Table 2).

Table 1

#### *Sampling Matrix of Student Interview Type*

	<b>Focus group</b>	<b>Individual Interview</b>
2009	Student A, Student C, Student G, Erica, Student D M(1) F(4) W(3) B(2)	
2010	Student B, Student G, Student C, Student D, Student E, Student F, Student A M(2) F(5)	Student J, Student H M(1) F(1) W(1) B(1)

	W(4) B(3)	
2011	Student D, Student H, Student A, Student C, Student B, Student G M(2) F(4) W(3) B(3)	Student J W(1) F(1)

Table 2

*Participant Demographic Data: Including a Breakdown by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Grade Level, SES, and SAT Scores*

First Name	Lunch Status	Ethnicity	Gender	Final GPA	Class Rank	Lunch Status	SAT (Critical Reading)	SAT (MATH)	SAT (WRITING)
Student A	Full	W	F	4.48	2	Full	650	690	670
Student B	Full	AA	F	3.9	10	Full	400	500	450
Student C	Full	W	F	3.7	17	Full	430	430	480
Student D	Full	W	M	3.7	18	Full	500	530	530
Student E	Full	W	F	3.6	20	Full	470	520	470
Student F*	Free	AA	M	N/A	N/A	Free	N/A	N/A	N/A
Student G	Free	AA	F	2.35	60	Free	310	350	370
Student H	No app	AA	M	2.29	63	No app	N/A	N/A	N/A
Student J	Full	W	F	4.48	2	Full	530	500	560

Note (\*): The student is severely disabled and was in the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) -- The DVRS provides assistance and services to enable individuals with disabilities to seek and retain employment.

Three guidance counselors participated in the study as well: a White male in the age range of 30-45 years old who has been a guidance counselor for over 8 years, an African American female in the age range of 45-55 who has been a guidance counselor for over 20 years, and an African American female in the age range of 60-65 who has worked for over 40 years at Sheridan High School.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection for the study. By interviewing the participants, the research team intended to gain insights into

the participants' post-secondary aspirations and career plans, support system in and out of the school, and the barriers the participants face while navigating the college choice process. The interviews and questions were flexible to allow the participants to openly express their experiences in making decisions about going to college (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Maxwell, 2012; Morgan, 1996). Semi-structured interview uses a predetermined list of questions while allowing an interviewer to probe, giving participants freedom to express their perceptions and opinions (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 2011; Maxwell, 2012).

In this study, the research team utilized both individual and focus group interviews to enhance the meaningfulness of the data (Berg, 2004), which is beneficial to researchers as consistent views of a phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The triangulation between individual interviews and focus groups can also insure the trustworthiness of the findings and add to knowledge creation and analysis (Patton, 2002).

The interview data were collected from a three-year period. Semi-structured interviews that ranged from 60 to 90 minutes were conducted one time per year, during the months of May and June, with a cohort of student participants. This dissertation presents results from three years (2009, 2010, and 2011) of data collection to assess the decision-making process and critical factors impacting urban high school students during the search phase of the college choice process, supplemented by the guidance counselor interview data. The semi-structured interviews allowed the research team to gather information directly from students concerning their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. The student interviews were conducted in the library (focus

group) and conference room (individual interviews) during the course of a typical school day. The guidance counselor interviews were conducted privately in each counselor's office.

### **Data Coding and Analysis**

The data for this study were collected through focus groups and individual interviews with students and guidance counselors and were coded using cross-case analysis (Miles & Hubberman, 1994). The student interview audio recordings were transcribed professionally, and I transcribed three guidance counselor interviews in the spring of 2013. The data analysis process began with my thoroughly reading all of the interview transcripts multiple times. Data were categorized in distinct parts on a single sentence or phrase and then carefully analyzed and compared to determine consistencies and dissimilarities (Creswell, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Words or phrases discovered from the interview transcripts were used to accentuate the frankness conveyed by the participants in the study. In addition, several reviews of the interview transcripts during the coding process yielded new information and themes that were initially missed in the analysis process.

The study participants included both African American and White students, which allowed me the opportunity to perform cross-case analysis by race in terms of students' experiences of the college choice process. The data were analyzed thematically, utilizing the HyperResearch software and codes from the extant literature to categorize the data systematically (Miles & Hubberman, 1994).

The first step in the analysis process started with generating codes, using an inductive thematic analysis from the participant descriptions. The interview data were



coded systematically, searching for similarities, patterns, and important words (Creswell, 2006). Miles and Huberman (1994) assert that a start list should be created from the “conceptual framework, list of research questions, hypotheses, problem areas, and/or key variables that the researcher brings to the study” (p. 58). These descriptive codes were reduced or eliminated by organizing similar codes to create coding categories (Berg, 2004). A total of 30 coding categories were used in this study. The coding categories were descriptive concepts, thoughts, or occurrences that were juxtaposed against one another. The major coding categories for this study were the following: students’ perceptions of guidance counselors’ influence on their decisions during the college choice process, parental influence on students’ decisions during the college choice process, contributing factors that impact the students’ decisions during the college choice process, student preparedness for college based on the academic program (College Preparatory, Honors, and IB), race and socioeconomic background influences on students during the college choice process, and strategies used to navigate the college choice process and enroll in post-secondary education.

During the analysis, each participant was treated initially as a case. The purpose of the single case analysis was to summarize individual participant experiences, perceptions, and understandings; this method creates explanatory narratives regarding each participant. Comparing and contrasting data from one interview with another allowed for the development of detailed accounts of the students’ experiences and perceptions of their post-secondary education opportunities (Creswell, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data reduction process began once all the coding categories were developed. In other words, the most important categories/themes were identified: those

categories which had the highest frequency of occurrence. The sub-codes that were identified as theoretically alike were clustered under more prominent categories. A determination was made to merge or exclude other categories based on a lower frequency of occurrence or connections to other categories.

Each counselor had a specific way of counseling students. For this reason, the data were coded to ascertain each counselor's counseling philosophy. These philosophies included perception of students' academic ability, parent involvement, how often counselors met with students, size of caseload, competing responsibilities, and resources available to aid counselors in their duties.

### **Ensuring Quality of Data**

Qualitative research is often criticized as biased, comprised of small samples, subjective, and lacking rigor (Maxwell, 2012). Although the terms *reliability* and *internal and external validity* have traditionally been used to assess the quality of research studies, these terms are primarily used to describe quantitative studies and are unsuitable for this qualitative study (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Conversely, researchers have used the criteria *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *conformability* to assess the quality of qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2012; Maxwell, 2012).

Lincoln and Guba (2011) argue that qualitative researchers expect multiple realities in their studies and attempt to signify these multiple realities sufficiently. Patton (2002) contends that establishing credibility in a study is not contingent on the size of the data sample; rather, it is contingent on the researcher's ability to collect and analyze pertinent data. The credibility of a study can be improved through the triangulation of

data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Patton (2002) identified four types of triangulation strategies: methodological triangulation, data triangulation, peer scrutiny triangulation, and theory triangulation. To ensure that the findings of this study are meaningful and reflect the participants' perceptions, I used two triangulation strategies: data triangulation and peer scrutiny triangulation.

### **Data Triangulation**

Data triangulation encompasses the use of different data sources to establish the trustworthiness of a research study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with students and guidance counselors to gain insight into their perceptions about the students' post-secondary opportunities and college choice process. During the analysis process, the guidance counselors' responses were compared to the students' responses to determine areas of convergence as well as areas of divergence (Lincoln & Guba, 2011).

### **Peer Scrutiny Triangulation**

Patton (2002) asserts that peer scrutiny triangulation encompasses the use of multiple researchers during the analysis process. Generally, the evaluation team contains researchers within the same area of study, where each researcher analyzes the study with the same qualitative methodology; i.e., interview, case study, and focus groups (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, Creswell, 2012). If there is a consensus in the findings from the multiple researchers, then the trustworthiness of the results is improved.

One peer debriefer was chosen for this study: an assistant professor in the School of Education at Seton Hall University with an interest in urban high school students during the college choice process and qualitative research methodology. The professor

gave constant feedback throughout the data collection and analysis process to acknowledge my subjective bias in the preliminary findings. At each stage of the study, the professor offered suggestions to help me build thematic connections within the data.

### **Transferability**

Maxwell (2012) asserts that the degree to which qualitative research findings can be transferred to the wider population has been a major issue in educational research. The absence of transferability attributed to qualitative methodologies is derived from the use of small sample sizes and the inability to control for sample characteristics (Berg, 2004). Researchers can improve transferability by thoroughly describing the research context and vital suppositions significant to that research (Merriam, 2009). It is the responsibility of qualitative researchers to offer adequate descriptions of the specifics of the research carried out so that readers and other researchers can conclude, with analysis of their own research setting, if the cases are near equivalents (Maxwell, 2012). In this study, a thorough effort was made to offer accurate information relating to the decisions urban high school students made during the college choice process and their desire to attend post-secondary education, which was relayed to the researcher. I endeavored to report findings precisely and straightforwardly. Since this study was conducted to complete the requirements of a doctoral program, I had a knowledgeable mentor who is an expert in the methods and subject area data represented in this study.

## **Role of the Researcher**

Lincoln and Guba (2011) assert that the role of a researcher in a qualitative research study is an added instrument to be studied because the researcher creates the theoretical framework for how the data were analyzed. Researchers can have a major impact on the development of mutual trust and respect with participants, which may lead to more depth in responses during the data collection process. Therefore, the role of a researcher is to identify any subjective bias and limit predetermined views of the phenomena (Kim, 2011).

I am an African American male who grew up in a household in a poor urban community. I graduated from high school at 17 years of age, and went directly to a four-year college. Upon graduation, I entered a master's program, opened a formal wear tuxedo shop and started working first as an admissions counselor at a four-year Jesuit college and later at a State University in New Jersey. The students I recruited came from some of the most economically disadvantaged urban areas in the country, which included Compton, California; Jersey City and Newark, New Jersey; Cleveland, Ohio; the Southside of Chicago, Illinois; and Baltimore, Maryland. As an admissions professional, I met students during college fairs who professed a strong interest in going to college. Yet, when I viewed their high school transcripts, they usually lacked the appropriate courses and grades needed to gain acceptance into a four-year college. Because of my race and experience of growing up in a low SES community, I saw myself as an insider during the research process. This gave me a lens to better understand some of the decisions the students made during the college choice process. I have counseled students with backgrounds similar to those at Sheridan High School to earn acceptance into

colleges and universities by exposing them to financial aid options and creating academic programs to strengthen their academic profile through attending community colleges.

### **Limitations**

My study seeks to better understand the decisions urban high school students make which impact their post-secondary educational aspirations and career planning using the search phase of Hossler and Gallagher's college choice model. It is during the search phase that students begin searching for information on colleges and universities to determine which attributes of the institutions match their interests (McDonough, 1997). By understanding how factors influence urban high school students, educators and policy makers can develop salient programs to increase college participation rates.

I employed a qualitative research design, which generally does not aim for or claim generalizability. This study was neither designed for the findings to be generalized to all urban high schools students of similar characteristics and backgrounds as Sheridan High School students nor to other high school students attending a small school in a rural community. This study does not cover all of the factors that may impact high school students' decisions during the college choice process. For logistical reasons, this study did not include the parents' perspectives regarding the students' college planning. The research literature points to the significance of parents' influence on students' planning and decision on college attendance (Ceja, 2006; Freeman, 1997, 2005; Smith & Fleming, 2006). In addition, the sample size of 9 participants does not allow for the opportunity to achieve informational redundancy or theoretical saturation (Maxwell, 2012).

## **Summary**

The goal of this chapter was to offer a summary of the research design as well as the justification for choosing a qualitative research methodology and a description of the data collection and data analysis processes. A discussion about the trustworthiness of the qualitative study and the researcher's role are also pointed out as vital to the research design.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore urban high school students' perceptions of the cultural and structural factors that may influence their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. This study was exploratory in nature, examining why some African American students do not fulfill their post-secondary career and educational aspirations, even though they express the desire to do so. To increase college attendance for racially and economically disadvantaged minority students, more comprehensive research is needed to better understand the conditions in their lives (home, community, and school) that nurture the habitus needed for long-term academic achievement (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Muhammad, 2008).

This chapter provides an analysis of the data collected from various focus groups and individual interviews of students and guidance counselors over a two-year period at Sheridan High School. The first part of the chapter provides demographic information (race, age, years of experience, and student caseload) on the guidance counselors and discusses an understanding of the involvement they have in helping students navigate the college choice process in addition to their other responsibilities. The second part of the chapter offers a comprehensive profile of the student participants and focuses on the factors (parental/family support, peer support, guidance support, and race/ethnicity) that might help or hinder the decision to attend college.



## **Description of Guidance Counselors**

This section presents a brief profile of each guidance counselor followed by a description of the major themes identified in response to the roles of guidance counselors during the college choice process.

Three counselors participated in the Sheridan High School study, including two African American females and one White male. The ages of the counselors ranged from 30 to 65. The average of the counselor's guidance experience was 12.3 years, and their caseload was divided by alphabet (student's last name).

### **Guidance Counselor 1: Tom**

Tom is a White male guidance counselor at Sheridan High School. He has worked in the school for eight years, with five years as a guidance counselor and three years as a school-based counselor (behavior modification counseling). Tom has a caseload of approximately 150 students with the last names ending in F through O. Tom has the following responsibilities in addition to managing his student caseload: International Baccalaureate (IB) counselor, Coordinator of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Clearing House process, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test proctor, and high school football coach. He commutes approximately 30 miles to Sheridan High School every day from out-of-state.

### **Guidance Counselor 2: Hazel**

Hazel is an African American female counselor at Sheridan High School. She has worked in the school for 40 years, with 21 years as a Business teacher and 19 years in the Guidance Department. Hazel's caseload is approximately 100 students with the last

names ending in P through Z. Hazel has the following responsibilities in addition to managing her student caseload: Chair of the Department, Coordinator of the IB program, Coordinator of state testing, and Coordinator of SAT/ACT testing. She lives in a town about five miles away from the city of Sheridan and spends time outside of work in the community of Sheridan attending church events and service projects.

### **Guidance Counselor 3: Paris**

Paris is an African American female counselor at Sheridan High School. She has worked in the school for ten years, with eight as a guidance counselor and two as a School Base counselor. Paris works with approximately 150 students with last names ending in A through E. Paris has the following responsibilities in addition to managing her caseload: Scholarship Coordinator, College Visitation Coordinator, Advanced Placement test proctor, and Back to School Night, College Night, and Financial Aid Night event planner. Paris lives in the city of Sheridan, and her husband and two daughters are graduates of the school.

### **Role of Guidance Counselors in the College Choice Process**

To address the first research question, “What is the role of guidance counselors in helping students navigate the college choice process?” it is important to consider how guidance counselors are involved in helping students navigate the college choice process in addition to their other responsibilities. Five themes were identified in response to the roles of guidance counselors in the college choice search process: (a) counselor’s post-secondary expectations for students, (b) counselor’s workload, (c) college counseling process, (d) counselor perception of race based on the student’s academic ability level, and (e) parents’ post-secondary expectations for students.

### **Counselor's Post-secondary Expectations for Students in Their Caseload**

All three guidance counselors had an expectation that all of their students would go to college. The counselors did care about the type of higher education (certificate programs, two-year colleges, and four year-colleges) but focused on the notion that the students needed post-secondary education after graduating from Sheridan High School, Tom stated:

My expectation is that everyone will be able to go to college...if they want to; with that said, I know kids can have other goals for themselves...trade schools, cosmetology...one kid I met with last week, I gave him information on barbershop (barber certification) where he can get through a Vo-Tech program.

Although the counselors expected the students to apply to college, they were cognizant of the difference in the academic preparation students received in the IB program compared to the College Preparatory (CP) program. For example, in describing IB students in the school, Tom noted:

The other thing is the IB kids get scholarship money, and the program increases a student's chances of gaining acceptance into Ivy League and competitive colleges and universities. From what we were told, there are additional finances available because they are IB students...being in the IB program holds a little weight; you are going to be a better thinker theoretically coming out of high school, so you are more college-ready.

Paris pointed to the importance of academic preparation for college:

We tell folks when we schedule that they must have A's and B's in the eighth grade, and we will look at their test scores. If they don't have A's and B's, then they probably should not be in honors classes because we don't want the classes to be held back. You know...College Preparatory is enough to prepare you for college if you are serious about going to college.

In describing a counseling session with one student in the College Preparatory program, Hazel stated:

With those grades...are you serious about that [going to college] or are you just saying that because it is a nice thing to say to a student with a 'C' average and low SAT scores that wanted to apply to the state's Flagship University?

The counselor explained that some students in the school say "yes" when asked if they plan to go to college, but there are "a lot of kids that went through the entire process or applying to schools...the whole nine yards, and they ended up going nowhere."

Guidance counselors in Sheridan High School work with students in their caseload to determine the best post-secondary options, considering academic performance such as GPA, SAT/ACT test scores, and class rank. The guidance counselors also took into consideration the type of academic program to which the student has been exposed to determine which type of post-secondary institution (certificate program, two-year, or four-year) will provide their student with the best "fit" (opportunity for academic success).

## **Counselor Daily Responsibilities to Manage Student Caseload**

The counselors articulated their daily workload in three broad areas: helping students graduate from high school, college counseling, and other responsibilities. The processes of helping students graduate from high school begin in freshman year, with the guidance counselors completing a credit audit sheet (stored in the student's folder). The credit audit process is ongoing and counselors spend a considerable amount of time changing students' schedules to reflect failed classes, summer school attendance requirement, special review assessment courses (requirement if student failed a section of State examination), course reinstatement, and online courses. Paris described the credit audit process as the most demanding "stressor" out of all of her work responsibilities.

A minimum would be to make sure that all of the credits are in line, and that's all we are asked to do...make sure each student is on track to graduate. Getting the students ready to graduate is the biggest stressor on me; we have a credit sheet inside their folder and you just have to make sure each year their credits are in line and in place, that they are not failing anything. We make sure all of our seniors are in place to graduate; all our freshmen have met the requirements for that year.

All three counselors mentioned that the low performing, or "students that are having trouble," receive more of an emphasis in their daily workload than the middle or high achieving students. The counselors had a sense of frustration with the school leadership's philosophy of allowing students who are dropped off the attendance roll (for excessive absences) to make up missed assignments with teachers. Hazel lamented:

The students get multiple opportunities, as many times as they want to start over and get it done...the teachers, principal, and superintendent will work with them. I have found that we have to exhaust every possibility because if you don't, that one parent will come back and say, 'You didn't do this.' The students are told to 'go around and see your teachers, get your work,' and we will let them try it. Some of the teachers might get mad, but they give them all of the work and the kid might come another two weeks and work for another two weeks. The same pattern happens because they just can't keep it up; the pattern starts over.

The counselors meet with students in their caseload once a month (required by the superintendent) to discuss the student's academic progress and to discuss any academic issues that may put them in jeopardy of failing a course. A follow-up letter is sent home to parents after each semester if students are at risk of failing a course or being dropped from the academic roll because of excessive absences. The letters detail what classes the student will need to take in summer school and, in the case of seniors, what online classes are available to make up the needed credits for the student to be eligible for graduation. Paris stated that "we might have a kid that missed fifty-something days and hasn't been here...and we will send a letter saying we are dropping them from the rolls for attendance. They'll show up the next day."

To summarize, the Sheridan High School guidance counselors have three broad areas: helping students graduate from high school, college counseling, and other responsibilities, which represent their daily workload/ responsibilities. The counselors are required by the superintendent of the district to meet with each student in their caseload

once per quarter to “check-in” with the students. The counselors spend an inordinate amount of their time working on the primary function of helping students complete the course requirements to graduate from high school, which reduces the time for counselors to work with the students on college counseling.

### **College Counseling Process**

The college counseling process starts at the beginning of a student’s freshman year. Students and parents are invited each fall to a Back to School function, which is an introduction to the college-counseling program at the school. Students and parents are given information about the Naviance career and counseling software, scholarship newsletter (details upcoming college counselor visits to the school and financial aid nights), a copy of their academic transcript, and a booklet which plans out year by year the steps students need to take to prepare for college. One counselor explained how freshmen start the college counseling process: “Tom starts to talk to the students about going to college in the ninth grade and introduces them to the Naviance program because we each have a part.” The IB counselor meets with the students four times during their freshman year to start the process of having them input colleges into their Naviance program. Tom described the process of freshmen selecting colleges to input into their Naviance profile:

It can be their favorite football team...I don’t care...the point is, if you pick it, you better be able to tell me something about the school the next time we meet. The profile, meaning I want to know what is the school’s average freshman GPA, the average SAT or ACT scores, the retention rate...how many students stay after their freshman year?

A different counselor works with the students in the Naviance program during their tenth-grade year. The counselor meets with the students four times during the year and focuses on getting the students to write a journal about their future career, fill out job applications, and practice resume building in the Naviance program. In describing the benefits of the college counseling software, Paris stated, “Naviance is a world within itself; there is no reason they should not know anything about going to college...they just have to use it.” During the students’ junior year, counselors start to work with students to narrow down their college lists. Tom stated:

By eleventh grade, the expectation is that you have done all of this research...you need to have ten schools that you have done the research on. They [students] do a power point presentation in careers [class] on at least five of them. The second part to this is...what we try to say to them is, ‘Now you have seen the school’s profile, we have shown you your transcript...do you match?’ It is usually pretty cut and dried...we teach them it is an average...some kids with a 2.8-2.9, with nice SAT scores can still go [to a four- year college]. We show them based on how it lines up, but it is important for them to have some intangibles so they can see it.

During the junior and senior year, the students are alerted to weekly college counselor visits to the school by the morning announcements and scholarship newsletter. The students also are encouraged to attend the local community college’s Financial Aid Made Easy (FAME) nights, where college counselors help parents fill out the Federal Student Aid Form (FAFSA). The Guidance Department also takes groups of students to visit neighboring colleges to help get them excited about the application process.



All three counselors explained that after seniors apply to college and are accepted, many of them have problems securing adequate aid (scholarships or need-based grants) to attend four-year schools and end up attending the local community college. Hazel stated:

I tried to find out why the students last year didn't go to school [four-year college], and the main reason was that the financial aid piece fell through. No matter how much free money the student may receive, they need the parent information. I find that was the attitude...for some reason, the parents thought that even after going through the FAFSA...they did not need to submit their financial information.

Paris stated:

It is a big deal, and you want to make sure the students have...everything they need and as much scholarship money as you can find for them. You have to look every which way for all the money they can get because it is so hard to find money the students can get...they are smart kids, but that's not the key because being smart is not enough anymore. If their parents have any type of money, they can't get money out there either, so you know everything is just hard.

In sum, the Sheridan High School Guidance Department has a college counseling program which consists of an annual Back to School function, student newsletter, quarterly meeting with a counselor, and ongoing interaction with the Naviance college counseling software under the direction of a guidance counselor. The students are exposed to college campuses via trips, military representatives, and admissions professionals visit the school for information sessions.

## **Counselor Perception of Race Based on the Students' Academic Ability Level**

Sheridan High School receives incoming freshmen from four neighboring middle schools within the district. One school is in the city of Sheridan, whereas the other three schools are in small rural towns surrounding Sheridan. The majority of the African American students come directly from Sheridan Middle School, while the majority of the White students come from the three rural towns in the district. The student population at Sheridan High School has consistently dropped over the past few years. School Choice is a program that allows approved districts to enroll students that reside outside of the district at no cost to their parents. The negative reputation of the city of Sheridan became the factor why White parents from the rural sending districts were afraid to send their children to Sheridan High School. The counselors talked candidly about a percentage of White students who are scheduled to attend Sheridan High School, but the parents decide on other school options because of the reputation of the city and the perceived lack of academic quality of the school. Hazel stated:

Well... I believe our Black population is maybe 61%...maybe 65%. When I first started, although Sheridan is a predominantly Black city, our sending districts were predominantly White; so at one time the African American population was the minority here. The changes started with the academies, choice, and all of the other stuff...we call it White flight. It started with folks trying to go to the Vo- Tech School; and as the opportunities opened, they could go to more high schools where the diversity wasn't as great. They would do that.

Paris explained:

There was a gun issue years ago; a student brought a gun in the school...and of course that had made the paper. Since then we have boosted up security; we have a resource officer that is a certified police officer. We also have a retired state trooper as a security officer at our front door now, so there is no reason...we have heard rumors that people think that it is not safe here, and that's not the case.

Sheridan High School's guidance counselors visit the four middle schools in the district near the end of each school year to register students for their ninth-grade classes. These students are either placed in College Preparatory (no GPA or test score requirements) or Honors (the students must have A's and B's in all their classes and score Advanced Proficient on at least one section of the State examination). The students in the Honors cohort are allowed to enter the IB program for their junior and senior year. However, there are a disproportionate number of White students who are placed in the "upper level classes" compared to the African American students in the school, primarily because of the test score requirements and the aggressive tactics used by White parents to get their children into the program. White parents also advocate to have their children in the Honors/IB classes to segregate them from students from the city of Sheridan. Hazel stated, "A lot of times the kids [White] were in the upper level courses because parents felt that there will be less diversity in those classes."

Paris explained that White parents have the perception that students in the College Preparatory classes are less motivated to succeed, so they will advocate to make sure

their children are in the Honors/IB program even if they don't meet the academic criteria for the program:

So their kids [White] would be separated in those classes [Honors] from those kids [African American] that were in general classes, because the kids in general are lower...and not as focused; teachers don't work as hard, and the whole nine yards. So we said, 'If a kid wants to be in Honors, they have to work on that level,' and we have had kids in the middle schools that teachers recommended them for College Preparatory, but the kid wanted honors. We tell them and the parents, 'We will let them take a shot at it...we will put them in even before the test scores come back, but if they find that they cannot hang, we are going to take them out.'

Hazel stated:

We can't tell a student not to take AP or Honors...but if a parent's child didn't make the test cutoff, a parent can say, 'I still want my child to take Honors,' and say, 'The student has all A's and B's and one C.' The parent will argue with principal and say, 'I don't care if my child didn't make the cutoff,' and he will say, 'If you think your child can handle the work,' and he will let them do it because guess what...the bottom line is it is their child. The parents argue that 'Yes, my child had a C,' and I've seen it where he let the parents win.

Parents of the students living in the rural communities in the district are hesitant to send their students to Sheridan High School because of the negative reputation (lack of academic quality of the school and safety concerns in the city). Students are placed into

one of two academic tracks (Honors or College Preparatory) at Sheridan High School based on their GPA and eighth-grade standardized test scores. If a student does not meet the academic criteria for the Honors program, a parent can advocate on his or her behalf to the Guidance Department to gain acceptance into the program.

### **Parents' Role during the College Choice Process**

The guidance counselors described their interaction with parents and how the parents' relationship with the school is often established along racial lines. The guidance counselors pointed out that advocacy is important to parent involvement for their children to succeed academically and navigate the college choice process.

White parents are often seen as aggressive advocates for their children to be in the Honors program, which in turn leads to acceptance into the IB program during the student's junior year. In some cases the White students are not academically qualified to be in the program, but the parents understand that by using social capital (that is, they go to the school and talk to the administration), their child has a better chance of being put into the Honors program, which is similar to the findings of other studies. Tom stated:

To me it's interesting; we have parents that are all the way overbearing, and we have the ones you never meet no matter what. I would say there is a difference... with the non-minority, there is definitely more involvement it seems. I have some parents from the sending districts [White rural areas] that I just see them all the time.

The counselors commented that White students in the school are willing to take harder courses and want to be in the Honors and IB program because their parents work vigorously to make sure the students are in the "upper level" programs. These parents

believe that the College Preparatory program does not adequately prepare students for college-level work: more diversity, a drop-off in the curriculum, and a lower quality of teaching. The parents also understand that the students need to be exposed to the best curriculum the school has to offer to be prepared for college acceptance and academic achievement.

On the other hand, African American parents are not viewed by the Sheridan guidance counselors as aggressive advocates for their children to gain acceptance into the Honors and IB programs. Tom stated, “When we see the minority students’ parents, it is normally because of a problem. Some of the parents of the city kids you just can’t get them to come in here [school]...well, for regular things anyway...just discipline or attendance issues.” Tom continued, “I mean, you call them and they are just not going to call you back [laughs]; they have their own priorities going on. We do a lot...we have senior night, financial aid nights; I mean we give them information galore that we try to get out.” Paris described a different approach to working with African American parents that will not come to the school:

I live in the community so I know some of the families and some I don’t. I try to meet as many of the families as possible and try to get phone numbers. If I see parents at a basketball game or out in the community, I try to introduce myself because...a lot of them don’t come to the school, so if I see them, I try to build a relationship and communicate with the parents. I mention positive news like if their child makes the honor roll.

The Chair of the Department described a sense of antipathy and lack of trust within the African American community in the city of Sheridan for the Guidance

Department and school officials. Hazel stated:

I remember my first counseling...the first time I went out to schedule. The child was scoring in the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile, and I thought she was a great student for College Preparatory [highest level course at the time]. I remember talking to the student, who was African American, and the mother went off on me. She said, 'You are just like those White people... you are trying to set my daughter up'.... I said, 'Because I'm suggesting that she take College Preparatory classes?' The parent said, 'She is not taking that... you are just trying to set her up,' but I'm trying to explain this child scored in the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile and she is smart; but the parent would not relent. The Director of Guidance came over to me and said, 'You can't argue with the parent...if she wants her daughter to be scheduled in general classes...schedule her in general classes.'

The counselors described a process of working in conjunction with the teachers in the school to create an open dialogue with African American parents to make sure their children are being scheduled in the best classes that match the student's ability. The parents are reluctant to have their children take courses that will negatively impact their GPA, although four-year colleges and universities use additional factors (SAT/ACT scores, class rank) to determine acceptances and academic scholarship awards. In describing African American students' desire to go to college, Hazel stated:

I see now that more African American students are taking more challenging courses, but what I do find in Sheridan...our kids aspire to go to school, and

even when failing...when I call them in because they are failing and I ask what do you want to do, they say, 'I want to go to college.'

The Sheridan High School guidance counselors recognized the need for parents to advocate for their children to be placed in the Honors (top academic program) at the start of the freshman year. Interestingly, White parents advocate for their children to enter the Honors program even if they don't meet the academic criteria, whereas some African American parents do not support their children to enter the program even if the student has the academic qualifications.

### **Demographic Characteristics of Students**

Student participants include six females and three males; five were White and four were African American. The students' GPA's ranged from 2.29 to 4.48 on a four-point grading scale. The students' SAT scores ranged from 310-650 (Critical Reading), 350-690 (Math), and 370-560 (Writing). More than half of the participants did not qualify for the free- and reduced-lunch program. The African American students lived primarily in the city of Sheridan, except for one student whose family moved to a rural town when he was in middle school. All White students lived outside of Sheridan in one of four rural towns in the district.



Table 3

*Background Characteristics of Student Participants*

	Ethnicity	Gender	Final GPA	CR	MATH	WRITING	Academic Program
Student A	W	F	4.48	650	690	670	Honors
Student B	AA	F	3.9	400	500	450	Honors
Student C	W	F	3.7	430	430	480	Honors
Student D	W	M	3.7	500	530	530	Honors
Student E	W	F	3.6	470	520	470	Honors
Student F	AA	M					College Prep/DVR
Student G	AA	F	2.35	310	350	370	College Prep
Student H	AA	M	2.29	None			College Prep
Student J	W	F	4.48	530	500	560	Honors

Note (\*): The student is severely disabled and was in the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) -- The DVRS provides assistance and services to enable individual with disabilities to seek and retain employment. W= White and AA= African American.

**Descriptions of Participants**

**Participant 1: Student A**

Student A is a White female student. She describes herself academically as bright, optimistic, and determined to succeed; academic achievement is very important. She entered the school in the Honors program and moved into the International Baccalaureate at the start of her junior year. Student A was ranked second academically in her graduating class with an A average and scored 2010 (out of 2400) on the SAT exam. Student A participated in extracurricular activities during high school, including clubs and sports programs, and she worked at a part-time job. Both of Student A's parents graduated from college. She lives in a small rural town near Sheridan High School and does not qualify for free- or reduced-lunch. After graduating from Sheridan High School, she enrolled in a four-year college out of state.

### **Participant 2: Student B**

Student B is an African American female student. She describes herself academically as determined, hardworking, and curious. She entered the school in the Honors program and moved into the International Baccalaureate at the start of her junior year. Student B was ranked tenth academically in her graduating class with a B+ average and scored 1320 (out of 2400) on the SAT exam. Student B participated in extracurricular activities during high school, including clubs and sports programs, and she has a summer job in the guidance office. Student B's mother graduated from college and is a teacher in the district; her father did not graduate from college and works for the post office. She lives in Sheridan and does not qualify for free- or reduced-lunch. After graduating from Sheridan High School, she enrolled in a four-year college out of state.

### **Participant 3: Student C**

Student C is a White female student. She describes herself academically as smart, lazy, shy, and caring. She entered the school in the Honors program and moved into the International Baccalaureate program at the start of her junior year. Student C was ranked 17<sup>th</sup> academically in her graduating class with a B+ average and scored 1340 (out of 2400) on the SAT. Student C played on the basketball team while attending Sheridan High School and did not work. Her father did not attend college and is a truck driver; her mother passed away when she was in middle school. She lives in a small rural town near Sheridan and does not qualify for free- or reduced-lunch. After graduating from Sheridan High School, she enrolled in a local community college.

#### **Participant 4: Student D**

Student D is a White male student. He describes himself academically as smart, a procrastinator, and a little bit lazy. He entered the school in the Honors program and moved into the International Baccalaureate program at the start of his junior year. Student D was ranked 18<sup>th</sup> in his graduating class with a B- average and scored 1560 (out of 2400) on the on the SAT. He played on the baseball team during high school and did not work. Student D's parents did not attend college; his mother is a secretary at the Board of Education and his father is a truck driver. He lives in a small rural town near Sheridan and does not qualify for free- or reduced-lunch. After graduating from Sheridan High School, he enrolled in a local community college.

#### **Participant 5: Student E**

Student E is a White female student. She describes herself academically as unique, loud, talkative, but a hard worker. She entered the school in the Honors program and moved into the International Baccalaureate program at the start of her junior year. Student E was ranked 20<sup>th</sup> in her graduating class and scored 1460 (out of 2400) on the SAT. She played soccer and softball during high school and did not work. Neither of Student E's parents attended college. She lives in a small rural town near Sheridan and does not qualify for free- or reduced-lunch. After graduating from Sheridan High School, she enrolled in a local community college.

#### **Participant 6: Student F**

Student F is an African America student. He described himself as dedicated to go to college. Student F is a severely disabled student and in the DVR program in the school. The program offers the following services: vocational counseling, placement services, job

seeking skills and skills training, college training, physical restoration, and emotional restoration services. Student F lives with his grandmother and aunt; both of them went to college. He lives in Sheridan and qualifies for the free- and reduced-lunch.

#### **Participant 7: Student G**

Student G is an African American student. She describes herself academically as a hard worker, responsible, and patient. She was in the College Preparation program throughout her academic career in the school. Student G was ranked 60<sup>th</sup> in her graduating class and scored 1030 (out of 2400) on the SAT. She was a member of the Future Business Leaders of America club, a cheerleader, and played on the tennis team at the school. Student G's grandmother attended college and is now retired; her grandfather did not attend college and is a truck driver. She lives in Sheridan and qualifies for the free- or reduced-lunch program. After graduating from Sheridan High School, she enrolled in a local community college.

#### **Participant 8: Student H**

Student H is an African American male student. He describes himself academically as hardworking, smart, and artsy. He was in the College Preparation program throughout his academic career in the school. Student H was ranked 63<sup>rd</sup> in his graduating class and did not take the SAT. He was a member of the marching band for all four years of high school and had a part-time job after school. Student H's mother graduated from college, and she is a teacher in the district; his dad did not attend college and works in construction. Student H was born in Sheridan, and his family moved to a rural town outside of the city when he was in middle school; he does not qualify for the

free- or reduced-lunch program. After graduating from Sheridan High School, Student H enrolled in Trade School.

### **Participant 9: Student J**

Student J is a White female student. She describes herself academically as smart, hardworking, and really into solving interesting problems. She entered the school in the Honors program and moved into the International Baccalaureate program at the start of her junior year. She was ranked second in her graduating class and scored 1590 (out of 2400) on the SAT. She was a member of the Jazz and Concert Band as well as a member of the Field Hockey and Softball teams throughout high school. She also worked as a babysitter over each summer. Student J's mother and father both graduated from college; her mother is a pathologist, and her father is a teacher (Athletic Director) in the district. Student J lives in a rural town outside of Sheridan, and she does not qualify for the free- and reduced-lunch program. After graduating from Sheridan High School, she enrolled in an in-state, four-year private college.

To address the second research question, "What factors do Sheridan High School students articulate assist or hinder their development of post-secondary aspirations?", it is important to consider how students develop the aspirations to enter post-secondary education and how the development process impacts their decisions during the college choice process. Four themes are identified in response to the role of the development of the post-secondary education aspirations in the college choice process: (a) student's academic preparation in middle and success in high school, (b) student academic experience in high school, (c) future plans after high school graduation, and (d) racialized academic experiences.

## **Student's Academic Preparation in Middle School and Success in High School**

All of the students in the study expressed that preparation in middle school (honors/advanced classes, academic enrichment provided by teachers, test preparation, conversations with teachers about their college experience, and information sessions with high school guidance counselors) helped them formulate post-secondary aspirations. In describing the Honors curriculum at Sheridan Middle School, Student B stated that although her friends were in the Honors program in middle school, they did not continue on into the Honors program in high school:

I had all honors classes...they [friends] did; they took advanced classes, yes, but they didn't take it in high school. Maybe they were scared, maybe they thought they were going to be too hard or something like that; but they just didn't take them. Like some did [in high school], like the most I have in a class is--chemistry class--is like maybe 6 out of like 20.

Student A who had attended a rural middle school, remembered the interest students received in middle school from teachers and the extra effort they gave to develop students.

At my old school the teachers always took an interest in their students, which they do here too, but they have a lot more students to worry about; and my teachers [middle school] they would say, 'We are going to put you in this enrichment program.'

Middle school teachers and school counselors encouraged the students to take advanced academic courses if they established benchmark scores based on state examinations. Student J, who attended a rural middle school, also explained how taking

advanced classes in middle school helped position students to take advanced classes as they entered high school:

I doubled up on science, so I took freshman and sophomore science. And my eighth-grade year I took freshman math because, at our school, you are given the option. If you want, you can test on the Algebra 1 [level]; and if you pass this test, you can start your freshman year on geometry, or some kids actually bump up their English. But you just take, say for English, if you're a sophomore, you take 2 and 3; and if you're a junior, you take 3 and 4. And I guess that's what you get if you double up any single year. You take an AP class, and that gives you more ranking.

The Honors/IB curriculum at Sheridan High School is designed for students to take AP courses during their senior year; some of the Honors/IB students use a strategy of doubling up on specific classes to fulfill core requirements in a specific subject (English, math, or science) by junior year. The students are then able to free up more opportunities during their junior year to take AP courses. Student G, who attended Sheridan Middle School, emphasized the importance of a teacher in nurturing her desire to attend college:

I started thinking about this [post-secondary education] when I was about in seventh grade. My science teacher actually thought it would be a good idea for me to start that because I told her about my plan and what I wanted to do, and she said it would be a good idea if I looked into business communications because I am like a really good public speaker. I like

talking in front of people, and she said it would be a good idea if I go into that and I thought about it and I said I would do it.

Student E who attended a rural middle school, concurred on this point about how conversations with middle school teachers helped her start to think about entering post-secondary education:

Student E: It hit me honestly in the end of eighth grade, when I began thinking about it. Because people [teachers] started saying when you go into high school you have to make the decision [to enter post-secondary education].

Interviewer: What people?

Student E: My teachers. They were saying, well, you're going into high school now. Only four years from now you're going to be out of there; you're going into college, and have you been thinking about where you want to go and what you want to be?

Sheridan High School's guidance counselors visit the four middle schools in the district near the end of each school year to register students for their ninth grade classes. These students are either placed in College Preparatory (no GPA or test scores requirements) or Honors (the students must have A's and B's in all their classes and score Advanced Proficient on at least one section of the state examination). Sheridan High School guidance counselors also speak to students about resources offered in the school (dual degree program with Sheridan Community College and the School Base counseling program). Sheridan High School guidance counselors strategized to market the Honors/IB programs to students attending the four rural middle schools outside of



Sheridan High School and the School Base program to students attending Sheridan Middle School. The Honors and IB program's (college-oriented) curriculum is designed to expose students early in high school to advanced classes, trips to college campuses, and professionals in the community. The School Base youth services program (vocational and job-oriented) is a social services program that provides counseling, employment opportunities, recreation, health education, and referral services for teens. Student E, a White student, described her understanding of the School Base program:

I think it's called 'School Base,' and it's kind of like counselors and therapists and stuff. I don't need to go there, so I don't really know. The group therapy and stuff, yeah...I mean I guess that's supposed to help. I mean we haven't had any incidents like since [did not finish thought]...so I guess that's helping.

Participation in the Honors/IB programs and the School Base program in Sheridan High School falls covertly along racial lines. Students are automatically accepted into the Honors/IB programs based on their grades and test scores during middle school. If a student does not meet the academic criteria for the program, the parents must meet with the principal and the head of Guidance to request that their child be put into the program. White students participate in the Honors/IB program at a significantly higher percentage than African American students. Conversely, African American students participate in the School Base program at a significantly higher percentage than their White counterparts.

In summary, all of the students expressed a desire to enter post-secondary education upon high school graduation. The students also expressed that the preparation

received in middle school (e.g., honors/advanced classes, academic enrichment provided by teachers, test preparation, dialogue with teachers about their college experience, and information sessions with high school guidance counselors) helped them formulate post-secondary aspirations. The interaction with Sheridan High School guidance counselors during the students' eighth grade year to choose courses and support services (opt out of classes, Honors and College Preparatory, School Base program) helped the students develop a framework to understand the resources available in the high school that can help them navigate the college choice process.

### **Student Academic Experience in High School**

Students enter Sheridan High School with a fundamental understanding that earning a post-secondary degree is necessary to enter the workforce in a specific career. Student E, a freshman at Sheridan High School, explained her understanding of how colleges accept students, "Colleges don't look at the lowest people, like on the GPA's. They look at the highest; in order to do something, you have to be one of the highest with the GPA." Student A, a freshman at Sheridan High School, spoke of her understanding of the majors and types of degrees needed to enter a specific career.

Of course moving on to college. I want to get a Master [master's degree] in biology or something. I want to go into the medical field, probably as a surgeon or something like that. I also considered veterinary things... basically that and of course either a double major or minor in music or vocal performance.

Another freshman, Student G, commented on the link between her major in college and her goal to open a business:

I plan on going to college; I was looking at Connecticut University and then I was looking at Quinnipiac because I want to get my degree in business communications, and then I want to take an extra two years for a master's [degree] because I want to start my own business.

Some of the students noted that they feel pressured by their parents and family members to succeed academically. Student B expressed that she has always felt pressure to succeed academically because both of her parents graduated from college.

My parents have been putting up pressure on me, but I've kind of been expected to handle a lot because of my parents' education. They're both graduates...both went to F&M, then University of Pennsylvania to get their masters or whatever. So they have always been like straight A's [grades], go to college, whatever. So... I have always had straight A's in my report cards. They always had these expectations in me to do well and go to college like them and make a life for myself.

She added that her mother expects her to succeed academically because of the success of her older sister, who recently graduated from Sheridan High School and now is in college. For example, Student B stated:

Because my mom is like, I feel almost like compared to my sister sometimes. She'd be like, oh well, she got straight A's, so you should be

getting straight [A's], and I'm like, we're not the same people...but, I'm like ok, that's good for me.

Student E described her mother's expectation of grades, "Every grade mom always wanted to see. So anything below, like, actually she'll get mad if I'm putting away a B. She's like, I know you can do better." Student D, explained the expectations from his brother, who was a Sheridan High School graduate:

I would say my brother 'cause he went to the school and graduated from here in 2002. He was very athletic. He maintained a B average here and he pushes me, 'Like come on, you can do better. He wants me to do better than he did in high school so when I come home with a B, he'll be like 'Oh, that's not good enough, you can reach for an A' ... if I come home with a C, he'll be like, 'You can do better than that,' so he pushes me.

Parents are instrumental in advocating for their children to be in the Honors program because this program is perceived to better prepare students academically for post-secondary opportunities than students in the College Preparatory program. These parents work diligently to make sure their children are in "upper level" programs because they believe the College Preparatory program does not adequately prepare students for college level work. Student B pointed out that her mother was going to force her to go into the Honors program whether she wanted to enter the program or not.

Because my mom she was like, 'Oh, you're taking honors classes.' I was going to take them anyway, but she was just like maybe they [friends] don't have somebody to say oh you can take honors classes 'cause you can do the work and have someone to actually push them to actually do it.'

Parents can also impact a student's academic experience in high school by providing academic resources (private college counselor, SAT/ACT preparation materials) outside of the school. Student J recalled how she works with a private counselor:

I have a counselor that my parents, I don't want to say bought, but this college planning group network thing. We check in on each other once in a while, me and her, and she tells me all the stuff [college application process].

She went on to say that Sheridan High School is not providing the type of education that is preparing her for post-secondary education:

I kind of want to like transfer schools because I know that here if I do want to do something medically, I am going to need good math, I am going to need good science, and I am not getting either of this here. I really do want to transfer to Woodstown because I know there they have really good programs in that. But I mean if they don't accept transfer students and I haven't heard many good things about the... either, I don't really have an option to go anywhere else other than me getting shipped off to a private school. So I guess I am basically concerned with the quality of education I am getting here.

Student A described how her parents are paying for a summer program at UPENN, which will help her enter college having already earned credits:

This summer I got accepted to [UPENN] so I'll be going there this summer, and then I'll be going there part-time next year; hmm, and I'll hopefully be

able to enter college as a sophomore. My family is loving that I want to do this; they like ‘Thank God you going somewhere!’ Hmm, yeah, they are paying for me to go to [UPENN], they paying for like everything because they just excited for me to go.

In summary, parents can play a vital role in the student’s academic experience in high school by advocating for them to be in the Honors program and by providing additional academic resources outside of the school. Some of the students felt pressured by parents and family members to succeed academically, and felt that their parents made the final choices---academic program in high school and then post-secondary (type, major, and location). These students understood and supported the active role their parents played in their academic experience and the college choice process.

### **Student Plans after High School Graduation**

All students in the study expressed a desire to enter post-secondary education upon high school graduation. At different intervals during the study, the students’ plans changed slightly in the type of college (two-year, four-year), location of the college, and the possibility of delaying entrance into post-secondary education to work or enter the military. Student C’s desired major (journalism) changed after her freshman year, while gaining exposure to the major in a class during her sophomore year, and type of college also changed (2-year) after she began to contemplate how to pay for post-secondary education. Student C explained some of the factors that led to her change of proposed major in college.

Student C: Well, my counselor gave me classes that I need to like do journalism. But, I'm not sure. I used to want to be a Journalist but those jobs are kind of decreasing, like it's hard to get into, so I'm going for Special Education.

Interviewer: Ok, all right. And have you discussed any other career choices with him [dad]?

Student C: My dad, he supports me, like he thinks it's a good idea to go into that [Special Education] because there are so many job opportunities. Like you always going to need a Special Education teacher. And he supports for me to go to [a local community college] because of like financial situations, and the [local community college] is cheaper than going to college [four-year].

Interviewer: Anything else concern you?

Student C: Definitely the money because my family doesn't really have a lot of money. So I need like a scholarship to be able to like get it. If I can't get a scholarship, then I have to find a way to get the money to go. Hmm, well I'm going to go to [the local community college] for two years.

Student E also recalled how geographical locations of colleges and multiple conversations about different majors with her mother helped her narrow the college search. Student E stated:

Like I wanted to, before going to high school, I wanted to be a chef or a psychologist; and she hasn't kind of turned that down, but she wasn't like,

okay let's go for it. She is more like well, you know its more school and like more time. She wants me to do something that's like towards my interest more than just something that I want to do.

Student D started his freshman year wanting to become a computer technician; the academic major he wished to pursue in college changed to accounting by his junior year. Student D described how taking an accounting class helped facilitate a change in his career choice.

Student D: I've just been on computers my whole life, and I decided I liked them. Because I just like computers, and I get it mostly.

Interviewer: What do your parents think about your career choice?

Student D: My mom thinks I should go in [to be] a computer technician, and I agree with her.

Student D went on to talk about the change in career choice after getting advice from his mother to go to Sheridan Community College:

The accounting teacher helped me figure out that I wanted to be an accountant. But my mom told me that since accounting was what I wanted to do, I wasn't like absolutely positive, so I should just go to the community college for two years and just get the courses that I have to take out of the way and then decide what I want to do and then transfer.

As students advance each year in high school, some of their initial career choices and college major may change. In their junior year, students began to explicitly identify post-secondary options by taking elective classes (Career Exploration, Accounting, Journalism, and Drafting). Students whose parents are involved in the college choice



process typically have more realistic post-secondary goals, compared to students that rely solely on guidance counselors and teachers.

### **Student Academic Experiences Based on Race**

Students at Sheridan High School seem to have different academic experiences based on race. The differences in academic experiences might shape the focus of the student's post-secondary and career plans. Students in the Honors and IB programs have more of a focus on entering directly into four-year "good schools" after high school graduation, whereas students in the College Preparatory program tend to focus on two-year community colleges, job oriented certificate programs, entering the workforce, or the military. Student J, a White student in the Honors program, explained why she wanted to attend a four-year college:

There is like the state PAC program. You can go to like the two years of community college and then go to a college [in-state], but I really don't want to do that, cuz I think that I would get more sufficient or higher education than going to a college that's like prestigious. I know it costs a lot more money, but I think that it will be worth it in the long run. Like when I am applying to jobs and stuff I think like...I think like if you go to Johns Hopkins or go to a community college and then you go both apply for the same job at a hospital, I think that they would definitely consider [the] Johns Hopkins kid way more than a community college kid; and I think that if I get a good job, then it will pay off a lot shorter than it would take if I just, I don't know.

Student H an African American student, offered a contrasting view between White and African Americans students of looking at college options:

Well, when my Dad graduated from high school, he had a number of options on what he could do. He was either the draft, you know, Du Pont, or a factory job. But now he's telling us that those jobs aren't really in demand like they were. Now it's more important for somebody to know exactly what they want to do and get the education for it instead of just doing something where you don't know where you'll be at a couple of years from now.

As noted earlier, in Sheridan High School, White students make up approximately 99% of the Honors and IB programs, whereas African American students represent approximately 99% of the College Preparatory program. It is worth noting that the racial distinctions in the academic programs become salient as students enter (as freshmen) into Sheridan High School. White students enter Sheridan High School with a knowledge base from their middle school that they can opt out of or double up on certain academic courses to prepare to enter the IB program (junior year) and take advanced placement (AP) courses (senior year) to better position themselves for acceptances into four-year colleges. Student J, a White student, explained her plan to take advanced classes in high school.

Student J: I took Algebra I in eighth grade, cuz you had like, if you scored a really high score on the Seventh Grade New Jersey Ask Test, then you get the option to take Algebra I in eighth grade. So I took that.

Interviewer: You are exempted, right?

Student J: Yeah, and I took Biology because I really want to go into the medical field. So I think that if I got all my generalized classes done around my freshmen and sophomore year, then I will be able to take more health-oriented classes my senior or junior year.

African American students who take Honors classes at Sheridan Middle School are not as cognizant of the importance of continuing in the Honors program in high school or taking advantage of curricular options based on their middle school academics and test results as their White rural school counterparts within the district. Student B, an African American, student stated:

I had Honors classes...that is like what split me with like some of the people in the middle school. I would be cool with them [African American friends] and then like once I got into high school, they weren't in my classes anymore because they didn't take Honors and like I would take honors.

Students at Sheridan High School credit the guidance counselors and teachers with helping them learn about different post-secondary options as well as selecting elective courses that give them exposure to future career options. The counselors and teachers often talk with the students about their college experiences and give the students tangible advice about attending post-secondary institutions (selecting majors, financing, and living on campus). Student A pointed out the lasting impact a teacher had on students as they moved on to post-secondary education:

They definitely are. I know that when kids graduate, they usually have a teacher to thank... like after first year college like...I am so happy I had this class. And I know that I am going to remember my English teachers, you

know, you say 'yah' or 'I am doing good,' ding, you hit the buzzer and then he corrects you and 'you're doing well' and 'yes,' but the things he says is going to make an impact on the way you speak and learn and they, teachers like that, introduce to you a new way of thinking at a higher level, being able to comprehend more things and thinking outside the box like, making connections like text to world, text to self, text to text connections and I think that, you know, some kids that don't feel like learning or don't care, they are not going to make those connections.

White students at Sheridan High School typically cite their teachers over their guidance counselors as the source of information about post-secondary education. The students tend to have better relationships and relate more with the teachers in the school. The students articulated that they do not need their guidance counselors for the college choice process and only go to see them during scheduled meetings with the guidance counselors or for class schedule changes. Student J described her interaction with Mrs. Blue, an African American guidance counselor:

Interviewer: Who is your guidance counselor?

Student J: Miss Blue, but I usually just go to Mr. Hammer [White guidance counselor] anyway.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Student J: I don't really like Miss [Blue].

Interviewer: Because?!

Student J: I don't know, I just, our personalities kind of clash.

Interviewer: Okay, so you are not really connecting?

Student J: Yeah, but like I usually don't go to the Guidance office a lot because I don't really need guidance. But I only, I usually only go if they call me down or if I need to schedule classes.

The students mentioned a close friendship with teachers in the school, and often cited feeling comfortable with talking to them about post-secondary and career options.

Student A expressed closeness with teachers in the school:

I'm friends with a lot of the teachers 'still' -- like my [basketball] coach who also teaches Economics, I love him so much. Hmm, I don't know; like I'm friends with a lot of them. They don't really keep up with my work because they know I'll do that myself. Yeah, I think they care...my English 4 teacher is really wonderful, like I love her, she was like 'I know you are going away to college next year,; if you ever need help, any paper for college, you can come see me, after school I'll be here, like I'll read over everything you write, I'll write you a letter of recommendation.' Like she loves me, and the English teacher I had last year, he's like, we still hang; yeah, like I say 'Hi' to him all the time. I like it when teachers take a personal interest and when they kind of expect things of me, because it makes me feel like I am not just another student or they are actually caring about what I am doing in my future.

African American students at Sheridan High School typically cite their guidance counselor over their teachers as the primary source of information about post-secondary education. The students tend to have better relationships and relate more with the guidance counselors in the school. The students articulated that the guidance counselors

often check on their grades, talk about personal issues, and offer advice about college majors and acquiring scholarships. Student B described how counselors in the school periodically check her academic progress in school. She stated that ‘they [guidance counselors] would ask something about it. So I feel good about it because I know somebody is pushing me and encouraging me to get back to reality.’ Student G concurred on this point and added:

Well, my guidance counselor is always on me, he’ll call me down, talk to me about my grades, tell me what I need to take. I need to take my SATs on Saturday, he called me down for that...making sure I have my papers in on time, like my grade is low, he calls me down, he’s like, you should fix this. You could do better at that.

Student H, also commented on the value he gives his guidance counselor’s opinion:

I don’t know. I think...I think like sometimes I value the counselor’s opinion more than the teachers; just because like different things will go on in class and...like you might not like a certain teacher, but your guidance counselor helps you I guess kind of deal with it.

Student B described the lack of a cultural connection with teachers in the school:

Student B: I would say the teachers. Because, the teachers, they influence the students. If, ah, one of the bad influences would be like, ah, sometimes I hear students yelling at the teacher, cussing them out, because of something so small. I understand what they are talking about, coz sometimes, [not clear], put my color down, my race down, but like sometimes African

Americans and like Caucasians, sometimes there is, it's a difference in culture. Some of the things that like Caucasians say to each other, like ah, African Americans don't say to each other.

Interviewer: Does it matter if a teacher is Caucasian or African American?

Student B: Sometimes, it does, yes. It does. Because I haven't had an African American teacher since in the middle school, and in high school, it's like a little different. I feel, sometimes more comfortable [with an African American teacher] because it is somebody that's culturally, it's like connection.

In summary, students at Sheridan High School experience racialized space within the academic tracking. The differences in academic experiences can shape the focus of the student's post-secondary and career plans. White students tend to have a closer relationship and connection with their teachers- which can be attributed to better academic preparation for students in the Honors/IB programs in comparison to their counterparts in the College Preparatory program and the racial background of the teachers (the majority of the teachers in the school are White), whereas African American students tend to establish a closer relationship and build connections with guidance counselors due to the racial background of the teachers and guidance counselors (two out of three guidance counselors are African American). All these things might influence their perceived lack of academic preparation received in the College Preparatory program when making decisions during the college choice process.

To address the third research question, "How do Sheridan High School students describe the role of peer influence/support during the college choice process?", it is

important to consider how peer influence/support could positively or negatively impact students' decisions as they navigate the college choice process. Three themes are identified in response to the role of peer influence in the search process: (a) segregated friendship networks, (b) negative peer influence (peer pressure), and (c) positive peer influence/support.

### **Segregated Friendship Networks**

All of the students in the study described relationships with friends that were developed long before they entered Sheridan High School. The students' friendships are homogenous groupings that are deeply shaped by the community (rural or urban) in which the students live and the middle school they attended before entering Sheridan High School. Student A, a White student who grew up in a rural community outside of Sheridan High School, described her friends in middle school and in the community as a very supportive and a "close knit" family and community structure. Student A stated that "in [Mannington] where I lived, like there were a hundred and sixty (160) kids at my school; it was a really tiny elementary school, and like everyone there knew everyone's mom and everyone knew everyone's family. It was so nice."

In describing her friends, Student A went on to say:

I kind of grew up with them through church. I go over to their house and everything. But they seem so much different than the kids here [Sheridan High School]. They seem to have a much brighter outlook, I guess...they seem to know what they want to do in life; they seem to have higher aspirations and expectations for themselves. They come from better families, like you go to their house and like their parents are together. They



have like this nice house or they are having dinner together as family at the table. Like they seem to have better connections and being able to handle the future. They all kind of expect me to, you know, get a good job, they know I am smart. They know my parents' expectations of me, so they all expect me to make good decisions and go off and be the perfect little American dream I guess. I know they all expect me to do really well, even people I haven't really met in other communities, like in Woodstown, I know some of the families but not all of them and then at church. Like I know of them and even they kind of know me and they are like, 'Oh. Yah, she seems smart.'

Student A's account highlights two perceptions (of rural community members): that the students and families from the rural communities have a stronger family structure and grow up in a close knit community, which impacts the development of higher aspirations and career plans more than students from the city of Sheridan.

Student E, a White student who grew up in a rural community outside of Sheridan High School, concurs with the point that she grew up in a very small community where everyone knows one another and there is strong support for students entering post-secondary education. Student E added:

So basically there is only 300 kids in the school altogether, and everybody knows everybody in our township because it's so small. If somebody's child does really well they get like, I don't want to say rewarded, but like everybody like respects them like, 'Oh, your daughter went away to college and like became something better than herself and got out of this town.'

Because like our town is like very small and it's full of farmers. So like there is not a lot of college, except for like the teachers that work at the school. So if your child does go [to college], you will have something like, I want to say like pride about [it], but you really do get to brag about it because so many people around there didn't go to college.

Although African American students described positive attributes of the urban community of Sheridan such as church participation, parents involved in their academic experience, and honors classes offered at Sheridan Middle School, they also spoke to negative characteristics of the community. They noted low academic expectations of their friends, drugs, teen pregnancy, and lack of family support of children within the community, which significantly differed from students who grew up in the rural communities outside of the city of Sheridan. Student B, and African American Honors student, described a significant difference in support from community members from the city of Sheridan in comparison to students living in the rural communities.

Some of the people like here in Sheridan, like they probably could care less because sometimes people don't really care if you be successful, like my mom says like some people want to see people like being real good to fall. Some do care somewhat, like [they] know that I am going somewhere [post-secondary education]. And some are like 'Oh, who cares, she thinks she is better than everybody else because of who her mom is.' It always go back to the mom.

Student B described some of the experiences of her friends' home life and the significant differences (high volume of single parent homes, exposure to domestic

violence, teen pregnancy) from students who grew up in the rural communities outside of the city of Sheridan.

They [African Americans] aren't like full homes like Student A was saying. She was talking about how the parents were still together, and they had a nice house, and they eat together and have dinner together. While I know these friends where mom and dad are divorced, cheating, having other children by somebody else and, I can say that myself, like, my parents are divorced and it's like, like different. Like sometimes, it's not even divorce, it's sometimes other things too that connect students like, they may have an abusive father, they may have an abusive mother, they may have a mother that's like strung out on drugs and not even barely home.

She went on to explain how the students' experiences at home can impact (lower) their aspirations to succeed academically at school.

Because, like I live in Sheridan... so Sheridan does not have a good rep, and it's just like, teenagers popping babies out like, every time you turn around, seriously, like...the drugs and the way they live [African American kids in the city] and some people don't understand where they come from so all they see is somebody walking around the school cursing down the hall or that teacher slamming doors. All they see is that, but underneath they don't see like where they come from, their mom has left them and their dad is slapping them around the house and things like that. It all comes out in the school sometimes, and that's what may keep them from going forth, is because of their home life and what they can and cannot get. Maybe they

really want to go to college and maybe they really want to be successful. But sometimes they are held back because of what they go through in life.

Student G, an African American student who grew up in the city of Sheridan, described a lack of desire by some of her friends to succeed academically because they were focused on becoming pregnant while still in high school.

When I came into high school, some of my friends were like, ‘Yeah, I want to get pregnant!’ and I’m like, why would you want to do that and get pregnant and waste your high school years ‘cause then you’d be tied down to a baby? I didn’t have much to say to her because if that’s what you want to do, that’s what you want to do.

Student G’s revelation about the normalcy of teen pregnancy by some of her friends was in direct contradictions to some of the White students that lived in the rural communities. Student A described a conversation with her mother about some of the negative influences she was being exposed to at Sheridan High School. Student A stated:

Me and my mom had this talk a while ago because she started getting worried because of the environment [Sheridan High School] that this is so different from what I’m used to. I walk down the hallway and I hear language and you see things that you really shouldn’t...like hearing, like seeing pregnant girls walking down the hallway or hearing stories about people coming to school hung over [and] high.

Student G further pointed out the differences in the academic preparation students received in the rural communities compared with the students that attended Sheridan Middle School:

I'll have to agree with her that academics, the rates at this school [Sheridan High School] is different districts coming to this school and like Lima Aillaud Middle School [rural district] would be on a different level than Sheridan for middle school level. Like we learn different things, like we are on different levels when we come to this school and it's hard to combine all the students in one school, like somebody could be on like eighth grade level and then there is one student could be on tenth grade level and it's hard to combine all these together. I haven't really learned anything because everything I do I learned at sixth grade. I am doing it right now, and I feel like I'm not like learning nothing, like I could go over to my elementary school and do the same thing I'm doing here. It gets boring after a while.

Almost all of White students were in the honors program [academic track leading to entrance into the IB program], whereas the vast majority of African American students were in the College Preparatory [general education] program. African American students and parents are cognizant of the negative stereotypes [African American academic achievement] held by some White people in the surrounding rural areas in the district and within Sheridan High School. One student recalled how her sister's academic achievement--the highest total of scholarships in the graduating class and a full academic scholarship to a university in New Orleans--as validation that academic achievement was not solely for White students and athletics solely for African American students in Sheridan High School. Student B offered:

She [sister] basically said she could do it too...like at graduation she had the most scholarships. She [mother] was like because sometimes Caucasians think like they should have the academics and we supposed to have the sports. Stereotypes and stuff like that like, but my sister, she's really smart. She showed me that it's not you know just a White thing [academic achievement]. It could be a Black thing, it could be anybody that could succeed basically, so. What I'm I saying...she was down in the dumps and she rose up somewhere. She's just a minority, you know, Black or whatever, and she succeeded in scholarships down in New Orleans, so she just succeeded.

Students in this study expressed having minimal interactions with peers that were not from their community or in their academic program. Student J, a White student in the Honors program, described her limited interaction with African American students in the school in the following:

Well, I mean like I'm an all Honors, so I really still don't have exposure [to African American students] other than like lunch and my health class, which doesn't have an Honors cuz they are all really like...there's two kids in Honors--two Black kids--in Honors classes. I say 'Hi' and stuff, but I mean if they [African American] say 'Oh my gosh, let's go hang out this weekend,' 'No,' like if they say 'Hi,' I'll say 'Hi' back. Those are the only two things that I am ever exposed to them other than in the hallways, but I mean a month like after you respect them, they respect you I mean.

Student B noted that her only interaction with White students is in her Honors classes and during lunch, but she prefers to sit in the lunch room (which is self-segregated by race by the students) with her African American friends.

Student B: Well some middle schools are predominantly Black, so it's all like Black Ok. We're in a Black crew. We come up to the high school, it's like they [friends] didn't take Honors classes up in high school...that is like what split me with like some of the people [African American] in the middle school I would be cool with; they weren't in my classes anymore 'cause they didn't take Honors.

Interviewer: Now, you said that you were put in a class with Caucasian people. Now, is there like any type of racial divide in the school? Are you...

Student B: Yeah, especially like lunch, I can give you the lowdown. White people sit in the middle, Black people on the outside. I don't know why, it just happened.

For both White and Black students at Sheridan High School, close and longstanding relationships with friends of the same race were developed in their communities before the students entered Sheridan High School. The students' segregated friendships are deeply shaped by negative perceptions of people outside of their community (rural or urban), which helps form an "us versus them" mindset students bring from the community into Sheridan High School. The students also lament that their friends are primarily in the same academic program in the school and they have limited interaction with the other racial groups in the school except for common classes and possibly during lunch.

## Negative Peer Pressure

Students were aware of how peer pressure might be a negative factor in starting their high school career and lead them on the wrong academic path during their freshman/sophomore years. Student E, a freshman, explained how it was more important during her freshman year to focus on making friends than to focus on succeeding in the classroom.

My freshman year, because like coming into high school, I wanted to make friends before I did anything else. I [was] not concentrating a whole [lot] like my friends in general get in the way, and sometimes I don't do anything [in class], and sometimes I just have to look back and like I have to do it [talk].

Student B described some of the types of peer pressure that can derail her from staying focused in school:

I would say peer-pressure. Like people wanting you to do certain things and you really don't want to do it, but you only do it because you want to be cool, you want to fit in. It's like hard, trying to be who you want to be and maybe get out of Sheridan and not just stay in Sheridan, and just not be that successful.

She went on to explain specific examples of the type of peer pressures students' encounter at social settings outside of the school.

I believe sex and not that much with drugs. [Student A, drinking] [Student B, slapping the desk] I said drugs, drinking, thank you, drinking. Drinking yes, because drinking, I was at one party and they were passing around a



bottle and it was like you drink it. I was like 'No.' That's not me. Like I keep in my head that if I even drink one time or do anything stupid like that one time, that will mess me up for sports and I love sports. So, I just keep that in my head. So I have to think about the consequences before I act and peer pressure is anything like doing drugs or being sexually active and putting my way will definitely not get me to.

Student D, a sophomore, talked about how peer pressure and interacting with friends in class can negatively impact his grades:

Student D: Just getting in trouble because of friends, peer pressure and stuff, and just a few bad grades, but I was able to bring them up again, so...

Interviewer: And were they F's [grades in classes]?

Student D: Well, it was a D [grade in class], I brought it up, so...

Interviewer: Why did you have these negative experiences?

Student D: Just friends, they just, you try to impress them sometimes, you got a hand and they probably motivate my bad grades.

Student H echoed Student D's point that his friends use peer pressure to encourage students to act out and cause distractions in class.

I get distracted in class sometimes...I guess like different conversations I hear or stuff going on in the background, and I will have my opinion on it or I have something to say about it. So I think I get distracted. Yeah, I guess it will be more of those than the other ones--so like, you know like sometimes they [friends] will expect you to do a certain thing that you might not feel comfortable doing but you might do it anyway just because.

Student A talked about the maturity needed to separate herself from friends that may not be on the right track (behavior and academics) and how she cannot let “hanging out with friends” stop her from focusing on succeeding in school.

Well, I would say, just the friends that I hang out with sometimes. Because, I mean it's always good to have those friends who push you to do the right thing. You know, I go to church and everything. I think that's important too. Sometimes, you hang out with these people, stuff happens and like it's fun. But at the same time, you know you shouldn't be there, like in that situation or whatever. It doesn't really affect me but I know that if I hang out with them too much, I could really hurt myself. I am basically just trying to resist all the temptations that you see every day. Because if you give into them, then you would start going down that path, like not caring or not thinking what you are doing.

She went on to explain a salient understanding of how associating with the wrong friends can lead to the development of bad habits and stop students from succeeding academically and in their career aspirations. Student A stated:

They are my friends. [If] I hang out with them all the time, it rubs off on me. I haven't picked up any of those habits and I don't intend to, but the attitude that comes with these habits, the negative things, we are living in the now, we're just like looking for the next party, we're not looking into the future, it kind of brings you down.

The students in this study posit that Sheridan High School's environment is conducive to the development of bad habits and negative peer pressure. Student A, a

White student, explained that the exposure to students with lower academic expectations, teens walking around the school pregnant, and overall bad behavior in the school and inside the classrooms creates an effect of normalizing the behavior for students. Student A stated:

It doesn't bother you anymore and it [peer pressure and bad student behavior] just becomes a part of your normal everyday life and you get here and you are like, you know that this isn't really bad. It's not and it should be, that's wrong, it should be bad. You should see something wrong with that, and it's not, and you just become kind of numb to it and everybody becoming numb to it and saying it's ok like it doesn't really matter anymore.

She went on to explain how friends from her community (who had good grades in middle school) entered Sheridan and started to develop bad habits and succumbed to negative peer pressure. Student A explained:

It's not just acceptable. It's normal and if you don't do it, it's strange. Even friends I never expected to be like that have become like that and it's everywhere. Like, even my closest friends are doing things. Like one of my friends she is like, she has this guy that's not even her boyfriend and she is like 'you know, I don't care what everybody else thinks. It doesn't matter.' And I am like, 'really, please don't do that' [sex] like I mean like ok, if he is your boyfriend, not for that, but if he is your boyfriend, ok. But she is like, you know what, it doesn't matter anymore. It's everywhere and I think it's because the people she has been hanging out with more are kind of like sluts. I feel kind of helpless and it's making me sad that all these people I

knew that were such good students and such good people have been caught up in all of this once they came to the school. And it's really sad.

White students in the study articulate that their friends from the rural communities develop bad habits and succumb to negative peer pressure once they enter high school and are exposed to negative issues brought to school by students from the city of Sheridan. The perception from White students in this study was that all students from Sheridan live in broken homes and dysfunctional families and cannot avoid the negative issues in the community which impact the students' postsecondary and career aspirations. Student A illustrated how she witnessed friends (from the rural communities) start to change once they started high school and picked up bad habits that can be detrimental to their post-secondary and career aspirations:

Student A: Yes. And you know we are best friends, and then like the big drop this year dropped a couple of [friends] because we are sitting at lunch just looking at each other and we've all changed since we came into high school. I still try to do good at school and everything, but they [friends] get this attitude and it comes, not offending anybody, it comes to the students in this school that school doesn't matter anymore.

Interviewer: So your friends are getting that attitude?

Student A: Yeah. It takes a back seat in your life when you come to high school. And they've picked up some of the habits, one of my friends--a couple--smoke now and almost all drink now and...

Interviewer: So how has that gotten in your way?

Student A: Because they are my friends, I hang out with them all the time; it rubs off on me. I haven't picked up any of those habits and I don't intend to, but the attitude that comes with these habits, the negative things, we are living in the now, we're just like looking for the next party, we're not looking into the future, kind of brings you down.

Student E, a White student, stated that students [from the city of Sheridan] stop other students from succeeding in school because some of them bring their rough experiences from home with them into the school.

Some ways I think students [from Sheridan] keep other students from achieving their own goals because some students, like Student B was explaining, and it's like the home life that they have is that they can go through...they go through hell at home and then they come to school and then they have to listen to all this stuff teachers put them through, and sometimes teachers don't even understand that they can offend you or push the wrong button at the wrong time, and then they are just looking at the students like they are crazy, not understanding what they have to go through in their home.

African American students in the study had a more nuanced view of peer pressure and the development of bad habits that can derail a student's post-secondary and career aspirations. African American students agreed with White students that there are negative and dysfunctional issues in some of the homes and community of Sheridan that, if brought to school, can cause disruptions in the classroom and school environment. African American students understand why some of their friends are not focused in

school and that their lower academic performance will limit post-secondary and career opportunities. Although African American students are very sympathetic to some of their friends' toxic home lives, the students are very cautious not to let peer pressure and bad behavior prevent their actualization of post-secondary and career aspirations. Student B, an African American student, recalled how one of her friend's fight with a parent prevented the student from focusing in school the next day; and even if the student had talked to someone at school (school official) about her problems at home, at the end of the school day the student still had to go back to the bad situation at home.

So, it's like, if something bad happened at home, you come to school and you are mad. I have a couple of friends that had a couple of fights with their mom and they were just like all just, you could see that in their face. They were just like just totally messed up in school. So sometimes that may hinder people from learning and they are like, their mind is on something else, and then they had school and then they go back to their home. And it's like, it's not that good of an environment, but nobody can pick the family that they want to be brought up in. It's just who they are. They can't help it. But they can't help their future. That's one thing that holds the students back from like achieving it.

### **Positive Peer Influence/Support**

Students attribute "close" friends to helping (e.g., tutoring, motivation, and pushing each other academically) them excel academically in school. The students made a distinction between different groups of friends (close friends and associates) they associated with in school and back in their communities. Student J described how

academic competition amongst friends in the Honors program motivated her to achieve the best grade in each class:

I think I'm motivated; I mean our class is. We've been with each other for a long time, and like our whole class, we knew each other before we even came to high school, so there's that whole friendship and like friendly competition thing, like 'oh yeah!...we got a higher grade than you, but I'm going to get a higher grade than you in that class.' It's all fun and stuff but we're really learning.

In making a distinction between very close friends and associates, Student G stressed that friends were peers with whom she shared intimate and personal details and associates were peers she would speak to on a superficial level at school.

Interviewer: What's the difference between friends and associates?

Student G: Somebody who you just come to school and you say, 'Hi, how're you doing?' Yeah, you wouldn't tell an associate, oh like. It's the way I see it. You keep one close person by your side and know that he's going to stick with you to the end and then the rest, just talk to them on a daily basis.

'Cause you've got to figure that out through high school. By senior year, you should have everybody figured out.

Student G also described the difference between being a freshman and an upper classman in dealing with friends and associates and negative influences:

Interviewer: Now the associates that you came in with in ninth grade, do you still talk to them now, those people?

Student G: Some of them, some of them I talk to them and others like, no.

Interviewer: You dropped them.

Student G: Yeah.

Interviewer: Why?

Student G: They were kind of bringing me down. Why would you do that? Some of the stuff that people in school are interested in, I'm like no, I don't want to do that, why, why do that?

Increased maturity and prudence helped the participants disassociate with peers who were deemed to be negative influences. For example, Student A described how she has matured and now makes better judgments about friendships:

I think I've matured a lot. I will always talk to people, but I always worry about making other people happy, and now I focus on like myself. I'm still nice to people, but I'm like more tactful about how I handle things now, I handle situations more maturely and I think...like I have better judgment now and I'm less concerned about what people think about me and I'm better off. Like I'm comfortable with myself, like I can handle 'this,' I can take this on myself, and whatever you think you can think. But I'm going to do what I know is right, and, if you need help I'll help you, but if you are going to compromise what I think, then you can leave.

Similarly, Student E concurred with this point, stating that the majority of her friends are academically motivated and well behaved in school, and her strategy to stay focused in school is to not associate with students that do not share her academic and career goals.



I mean, and all my friends are typical students. I don't really like to get involved with people that don't care about what they are doing because I know that will just bring me down and make me do stuff that I shouldn't do.

Another factor that the participants identified as key to their growth and maturity as students is being directly influenced by older friends in their community (college students). The older friends offer pieces of advice on how to deal with peer pressure while in high school and the differences in academic coursework from high school to college. Student E also explained:

My friends outside of school are, I want to say like they just came home from college now, so a lot of them are older and they are done with the drama just like we are done with the drama. They have a different mindset, which I like. I don't know, people are maturing now, so my friends outside of school, I have more friends outside that are older because people in high school are too immature.

Further, she went on to describe the post-secondary and career plans of her friends from the community that are home from college:

Friends that are back from college, I know one is, he is majoring at NYU for Film. My one friend she's at [local community college], she really doesn't know what she wants to do yet, which is kind of okay because her family owns like a bunch of businesses so she could actually just end up taking over for her family business. Her and her brother and her three sisters actually all could take over the different sections of the family business. I mean that's what they want to do. And my other friend, that's what he will

probably end up doing too, is working for his dad and eventually taking over. Let me think, one wants to major in [AEC] Agricultural something, engineer maybe? Hmm, a few that want to work at the nuclear plant because it's so close and like it's a good job and it pays well and the guys are all like 'Yay! It's like nuclear; we get to blow stuff up!' I don't know what they think but that's what they want to do.

Student C also commented on the advice received from her boyfriend that graduated from Sheridan High School and is now in college about the differences in taking high school classes versus college courses.

Student C: My boyfriend goes to college, and like some of his classes like he's talked to me about so I might like take some of his classes of what he is going to do, and the same like for my other friends.

Interviewer: And what does he say that college is like?

Student C: He said it's really different from high school; he said it's better, like it's more focused I guess.

In summary, as students at Sheridan High School start to mature (age and grade level), they start to make better decisions about the type of friends who can help motivate them to succeed academically and start to disassociate themselves from friends that are not focused in school and are participating in behaviors that can derail their post-secondary and career plans. The students' older friends within their communities provided practical advice about how to navigate through high school and college expectations.

To address the fourth question, “Does a Sheridan High School student’s race/ethnicity impact his or her decisions to attend college during the college choice process?”, it is worth noting the perceptions held by community members, parents/family members, and students about two primary factors: location (rural versus urban) and academic program (Honors/IB versus College Preparatory) within Sheridan High School, which contribute to the students’ racialized experiences once they enter Sheridan High School. Four themes are identified in response to the impact race/ethnicity might have on students’ decisions to enter post-secondary education during the college choice process of search: (a) perception of race based on geographic location, (b) perception of race based on the students’ academic program/school environment, (c) White students’ academic experience, and (d) African American students’ academic experience.

### **Perceptions of Race Based on Geographic Location**

Sheridan is an urban city (approximately 5,000 residents) surrounded by four rural towns/communities (with a range of 1,000 to 2,500 residents). The rural and urban community members have racial, cultural, and economic characteristics, as described by students and counselors in the study, that can help explain how Sheridan High School students develop some of the racial/ethnic and cultural perceptions about students outside of their community and race. The culture of rural and urban students which is embraced and taught in their communities shape the students expectations (e.g., interacting with students from a different race/ethnicity in the school, safety concerns, and racial animus) before they actually start their first day in Sheridan High School. Although the forthcoming cultural descriptions are completely derived from the evidence within the

study, they are not presented as an all-encompassing description of every student, family, and community member in each rural or urban community.

The findings of this study reveal that students attending Sheridan High School did not speak in racial terms (i.e., White students live in communities that are safe and drug free or Black students do not care about school or getting good grades) in describing peers who are of a different race or live in a different geographic location (rural or urban). The students articulated any differences by describing the community and academic program of their peers (i.e., Sheridan city neighborhoods are unsafe and drug infested or College Preparatory students do not care about getting good grades). The students developed these perceptions of race and behavior characteristics of people outside of their community from their parents and community members. Negative problems in Sheridan are propagated with such fervor within the rural communities that White students believe that Sheridan is in complete urban blight and a violent crime can happen there at any time.

In some instances the negative perceptions about issues in Sheridan have validity (criminal activity in an area, teen pregnancy rates, and high drop-out rates) but do not completely describe an entire community. Sheridan has a State District Factor Group (approximate measure of a community's relative socioeconomic status) of "A," which is the high level of poverty metrics within the state (U.S Department of Education, 2012). Sheridan is also ranked as one of the top 100 cities (with a minimum population of 5,000 residents) in the United States with 69.8% of single parent homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Students in the rural communities also articulated a perception about the participation of students from the city of Sheridan in illicit activities inside and outside of

Sheridan High School. The following statements by Student C and Student A illustrate this:

Interviewer: So the kids in Sheridan city, the teenagers, they don't, there's nothing to do around here?

Student C: No, not really.

Student A: Drugs, that's about it.

Interviewer: Is that a problem?

Student A: Yeah!

Interviewer: In the school or is it in the town or...?

Student A: All over, really.

Based on the analysis of data collected for this study, White families, who predominantly live in rural communities outside of Sheridan, are more inclined to use coded language to describe racial or cultural differences of African American families who predominantly live in the city of Sheridan. African American families and students typically use very direct racial language to describe racial or cultural differences from White families and students.

Student B, an African American student, offered a very candid description of the issues in Sheridan, which fuel some of the negative perceptions harbored by rural families and community members.

Like sometimes, they aren't like full homes [Sheridan] like Student A was saying. She was talking about how the parents [in rural communities] were still together, and they had a nice house, and they eat together and have dinner together. While I know these friends [from Sheridan] where mom

and dad are divorced. Like sometimes, it's not even divorce, it's sometimes other things like they may have an abusive father, they may have an abusive mother. So that students, they are taking care of the household things and still trying to do their work, and that's what sometimes like pulls them back from trying to do what they need to do. Maybe they really want to go to college, maybe they really want to be successful. But sometimes they are held back because of what they go through in life. It's not always easy. It's not like, here's your college. You have to work for it.

She went on to describe the difficult home life of some of her friends and the challenges they faced growing up in a violent dysfunctional home.

Like, sometimes, across the street, I hear people yelling and screaming and cussing out each other. They are almost ready to fight on the street and I am trying to go to sleep, I am trying to do my work, my windows are down, I still can hear them across the street. It's horrible and I can't imagine what other people go through. Because that's their family members. I have a couple of friends that had a couple of fights with their mom and you could see that in their face. They were just like just totally messed up in school. And it's like, it's not that good of an environment, but nobody can pick the family that they want to be brought up in. It's just who they are. They can't help it. But they can help their future. That's one thing that holds the students back from like achieving it.

There are four rural towns (Queensbridge, Lima Aillaud City, East Flatbush, and Magnolia) that surround the city of Sheridan. Each of the towns have similar

characteristics, such as small, close-knit communities and a high value for education. The majority of families are led by two parents, the primary occupation is small privately owned farms; and professional and college-educated parents use resources to share information about how to create educational opportunities for their children. The rural towns outside Sheridan are very small and the families primarily live in houses on large parcels of farmland. The children within the four rural communities often play on the same sports teams (some of the school's student populations are too small to host extra-curricular activities) and attend the same church functions. Student D, an East Flatbush resident, remembered a church meeting where a family was celebrated and their young child received an award for reading a book above her grade level.

I remember going to a community [church] meeting, and this girl like she was in the third grade and she read a whole book by herself or something and they gave her an award. I think that that's important to encourage the kids when they are young and having things like, even the tutoring I do for the little kids and there is even tutoring at high school for high school kids. I think that's really good, you know, to help the kids, you know, to be encouraged and stuff.

Student A, a Magnolia resident, concurred on this point about community pride and support for young students.

Something that happened the other night. We came back, the whole choir came in singing and this little girl gets up there, it's again like the standard singing and like she is in third grade and she's like [performing on the] fourth grade level and it's like yeah... it's great, they are announcing to the

whole community that that's such an amazing thing and like my sister at home, she's in third grade and she's reading a tenth-grade level book, and I just think there should be another outlet [in Sheridan] for students like that.

Student J described her home in Queensbridge and how farms are predominant in the area. She stated, "We are really rural. I just live in a big farmhouse, I guess. It's just all, all farmhouses; they aren't any apartments anywhere, cows, horses; and houses are pretty far apart from each other." Student A added a similar description of her town, Magnolia, pointing out her mother's active involvement with his schooling.

Well, where I live it's really spread out, mostly rural. So, honestly, there aren't that many things to do there. It's basically focused on the elementary school and I mean everybody there is basically [close]; my mom's president of the school board, so they all know... Student A is going to do great [in school]. They all have high expectations and they know I am going to graduate. If I didn't they would be shocked.

She went on to describe the closeness of families in the community and explained why it was important for her to show the best behavior inside and outside of the community:

Like in [Magnolia] where I live, like there were a hundred and sixty (160) kids at my school, it was a really tiny elementary school, hmm, and like everyone there knew everyone's mom and everyone knew everyone's family, it was so nice, everyone was nice to each other, you don't have to worry about going places - like here [Sheridan High School]. And I just have a lot of friends there. I kind of grew up with them through church. I go



over to their house and everything. But they seem so much different than the kids here [Sheridan High School]. They seem to have a much brighter outlook I guess. And they seem, and that's not for all the kids, because every school has those kids... but they seem to know what they want to do in life; they seem to have higher aspirations and expectations for themselves. I feel like now I have to live up to it, so, I can't mess up in front of them [parents] or in front of some of their kids. Some of their kids if they go back and tell their parents that wouldn't be good. But, you know, I have to basically keep relationships up and keep up appearances with those people [within the community].

The small size of the communities and tight knit within families create a sense of protection for the students from exposure to “negative or bad issues.” During the students' formative years before entering high school, they appear to have limited or no knowledge about negative incidents such as crime, teen pregnancy, or underage drinking; and the students develop a perception that these issues do not happen in their communities. Student E described how she felt protected growing up in her community and her first exposure to negative “issues” at Sheridan High School:

You get exposed to so many more things out there that you know in my little community [where] I grew up, you would never expect us to see. When we were in middle school, the biggest issue people faced was like matching their clothes with their friends, like they weren't any issues. You don't realize how protected you are in that school [middle] until you come here and then like hearing, like seeing pregnant girls walking down the hallway

or hearing stories about people coming to school hung over, like oh, that's cool. Like it doesn't bother you anymore and it just becomes a part of your normal everyday life and so it kind of loses [shock] that we had when we were younger, how like oh, so terrible!

In the rural communities, approximately 90% of the families with children under the age of 18 are in a two-parent household (U.S. Census, 2010). The parents have high expectation for their children's academic success and emphasize the importance of entering higher education regardless of the parents' level of education, socioeconomic status, or occupation. Student E, a Queensbridge resident, described the family structure of students in her community and how they are better prepared for the future than Sheridan students.

They come from better families... like, you go to their house and like their parents are together. They have like this nice house or they are having dinner together as family at the table. Like they seem to have better connections and are better able to handle the future.

Students in the rural communities follow their parents' academic instructions/suggestions about their academic curriculum in high school as well as the type, location, and major in college. The parents use their educational or occupational experiences to help guide their children's post-secondary and career choices. Student A, whose parents both had master's degrees, remembered the pressure she felt about earning good grades because of their high level of educational attainment.

My parents both went to college. Both went to F&M, then University of Pennsylvania to get their master's or whatever. And, my dad is head of this

company or whatever, head financial chief senior personnel, and my mom, she used to be a school social worker and now she stays at home. My parents have been putting pressure on me, but I've kind of been expected to handle a lot because of my parents' education. They're both graduates and so I have always had straight A's since third grade... [because] I need to have an important job.

The importance of education is valued within the rural communities, and lower income parents are able to use social capital and aspirational or professional leaders (church, middle school officials, and business leaders) in the community to fill any gaps or questions about the college choice process. Student C's parents did not attend college, but they were able to learn about post-secondary opportunities for her through social networks and the experiences of other parents in the community whose children recently went through the college choice process.

Student C explained that her parents pushed her to succeed academically and to pursue post-secondary education because they were not able to.

Student C: My dad never went to college, so that's another reason why he wants me to go, because neither of my parents went to college because my mom got pregnant when she was sixteen, so she didn't have the chance. Like she wanted to be a lawyer, but she never got the chance and my dad's now a truck driver.

Interviewer: How have their decisions impacted you?

Student C: It motivated me to go to college so that I can get a better job, get a better education.

Parents in the rural communities shared information on School Choice, the importance of the Honors and IB curriculum for college preparedness, college savings plans, etc., regardless of socioeconomic status and provided opportunities for students to gain career exposure. In addition, when students who graduated from high school come back into the communities from college, they share information about college workloads, living on campus, and choosing a major. Student A's future career plan is to become veterinarian, and she recalled volunteering at a local veterinary's office to gain exposure to the field.

The veterinary influences would be having [access] to the animals and going to the vet's office and actually becoming friends with them. I went to volunteer and work there. But just having these little things in life, like oh, I wish I knew how to do this [become a veterinary], and then I figured if this is really how I want to grow [career choice] I would like to know, if that's wrong I know how to fix it [change careers].

Student J, whose mother is a pathologist at a local hospital, explained how she has shadowed doctors to gain exposure to the medical field.

I know that like my mom, a couple of times like, they have this like the shadowing program at the hospital [where] she works. So like I have gone and shadowed doctors before, just to make sure that's I want to do when I grow up.

The perception of the city of Sheridan by rural parents and community members as a den of iniquity is also implicit to Sheridan High School. The rural parents and community members were concerned with the academic quality and safety of the school;

if parents are not able to use School Choice to send their child to a school out of the district or pay for private school, sending students to Sheridan in many cases is a last resort. Some rural parents and students cited an incident where a student brought a gun to the school, and was quickly apprehended by the school administrators and the city police as an example to prove that Sheridan High School is not immune to the problems of the city of Sheridan. Parents and community members send their children to schools outside of the district; or if the students go to Sheridan High School, they are in the Honors/IB program with a very small number of African American students. Student J, a student ambassador, explained why some rural parents stop sending their children to Sheridan High School:

Student J: I mean like, I'm also an Ambassador so we do like eighth-grade things, and they come and they [families from rural communities] tour, and all these parents ask me like, 'Is this such a bad place to be? Because like everybody thinks that Sheridan is such a bad place to be.' Well, I mean, we just, we're like in a city, and a couple of years ago a student brought a gun to school but didn't, didn't do anything, but I mean that set all the parents off. And that's why we only have 60 kids in our sophomore class. Because they sent all the kids to other schools because they didn't want that to happen.

Interviewer: Oh! So the parents sent their kids...

Student J: They got scared. I mean, and that's the thing: I think the only thing we need to work on is our reputation. I mean we are learning so well here and we're having so much fun here, but people don't realize that

because they are too scared to send their kids here! I think the reputation's been the same for a long, long time. I mean it's definitely the incident added on to the reputation, but I mean...

Student E, a White student, remembered a conversation she had with friends (in middle school) about choosing to attend Sheridan High School:

Like when I was in eighth grade, they were like, 'Where you going to high school?' 'I'm going to Sheridan,' and they [were] like, 'eeuw! Why are you going there? You going to get shot there.' 'I am not going to get shot there!'

She went on to describe some of the perceptions of some rural students, parents, and community members about the city of Sheridan.

And there's like [Washington Heights] and Pensacola and that stuff. But there's fault in every school, and not just, just because I go to Sheridan, it does not mean I'm going to get in a gang; and just because I go to this school, I'm going to be a drug addict and like it's stupid stuff. People like that just, you can't make assumptions without going there.

Student J, a White student, recalled the fear she had before the start of her freshman year, about going to school with African American students.

I was really scared. I mean I didn't want to like...I am not like Oh, my gosh, Black people are gonna kill me, but I mean...I just didn't know what to expect. But then again I really still don't have exposure other than like my health class, which doesn't have an Honors cuz there's two kids in Honors--two Black kids in Honors classes...

Student H, an African American student that attended a rural middle school, explained why some rural parents did not want to send their children to Sheridan High School by recounting a conversation with some of his White friends about attending Sheridan High School.

Yeah, and then like sometimes people drive through Sheridan and see the city as, you know, but Sheridan City isn't necessarily what the school is like. So like they view Sheridan City, and then either the kids or the parents will be like, Oh I don't want my kid to go there, and then like, I don't know, when I was in the eighth grade, I heard some kids say that they were scared to come.

He went on to say:

When I graduated from Queensbridge, we [friends] went through this whole thing where like ok, we are picking classes and you get to decide what school you want to go to---and like a lot of people from Queensbridge were like oh...I am afraid to go to Sheridan School. And I was like, why? And they said 'Because, I guess the people that go there, and I am not sure how I would respond to it.' So I told them that I felt the same way, but once you go to the school and get used to it, you will be surprised that a lot of people that you go to school with will become your friends. So, some of them didn't come, but the ones that did understand and know how fun it is to have more than just one group of friends.

Student C also pointed out that her father did not like Sheridan High School or the teachers because of the environment inside and outside of the school. Her father wanted her to be around students with a similar background and culture.

Student C: My dad, my dad doesn't like this school and most of the teachers he doesn't like either, which is I guess is why I don't like them (kind of influenced). Like he would've, like he wanted me to go to [Pennsville] before and not go to Sheridan but...

Interviewer: Why?

Student C: I guess just because Sheridan is more like culturally different than [Pennsville] is. He thought it would be better to go to [Pensacola] but I decided to go here anyway because it's just easier than having to go to [Pensacola].

### **Perception of Race Based on a Student's Academic Program**

Students attending Sheridan High School seem to have racialized experiences based on their academic program (Honors, IB, and College Preparatory). There were two prevalent sub-codes identified in the study which articulate the racialized experiences: (a) perception of students' desire to succeed academically and attend college based on academic program, and (b) segregated interaction with students based on academic program.

Students enter Sheridan High School with an acute perception (academic ability of students in each program, racial/ethnic background of classmates, and chance of entering post-secondary education) of their high school academic experiences depending on whether they were pre-registered (during the eighth grade) to enter the Honors or



College Preparatory academic programs. White students who are predominantly enrolled in the Honors/IB program and African American students who are predominantly enrolled in the College Preparatory program did not use racial terms to describe the academic ability, disruptive behavior, drop-out rates, and teen pregnancy issues of their peers. The students used the academic programs as a descriptor of behavior characteristics to a direct correlation to the racial group and community to which a student belongs. Student C, a White student in the Honors program made a distinction between Honors and College Preparatory (CP) students' approach to their grades and gaining a quality education. Student J, a White student in the Honors program, described her lack of exposure to African American students in the school and the racial/ethnic make-up of the Honors program.

I really still don't have exposure other than like my health class, which doesn't have an honors...cuz they are all really like [talking softly in a low tone] there's [only] two Black kids in Honors classes.

She also noted that students in the Honors program wanted to learn and would go to college.

Student J: Yeah! I think all the [students] like in my class...I just know [will go to college]...

Interviewer: The Honors class?

Student J: All Honors classes...

Interviewer: Definitely see....

Student J: Definitely see people, only there's a couple that, like the parents made them do Honors and they really don't care, but like I can see every

single kid in my Honors classes is going to college because they want to learn, and that's what I like about being in these classes because we all just want to go to college.

Student E, a White student in the Honors program, added that students in the Honors program are motivated to succeed academically because they already have established friendships (from their communities) and a competitive academic spirit before entering Sheridan High School, which accentuates a comfort level of the homogeneity within the Honors program.

I think I'm motivated and it's also like, uh, I mean our class is, we've been with each other for a long time, and like we, our whole class, we knew each other before we even came to high school, so there's that whole friendship and like friendly competition thing, like 'oh yeah! We got a higher grade than you, but I'm going to get a higher grade than you in that class.' It's all fun and stuff but we are really learning.

Student C concurred on this point about Honors students' desire to succeed academically and offered insight into how CP students approach their academic experience in the school. Student C stated that "the Honors classes like...the students actually, most Honors students, care about their grades and their education so it's more of the [CP] people who don't care if you get kicked out and all that."

Similarly, Student A, a White student in the Honors program, stated that CP students caused disruptions in the school, which led them to spend a large amount of time in in-school suspension.

Interviewer: In terms of students, how often do you see disruptions like in the classrooms?

Student A: Every day.

Interviewer: Do kids get kicked out a lot or...?

Student A: It's more in the younger classes like...more freshmen and [CP]....

Interviewer: Where do they go?

Student A: In-school suspension.

Interviewer: And what do they do? Just sit?!

Student A: Well, you are supposed to write an essay when you go there, and you are supposed to do your work while you are in there...but the kids that are in there are not the kids that do their work. So they just sit there asleep.

Student D, a White student in the Honors program, mentioned that a large segment of this group is from the city of Sheridan.

Student D: There is probably a big majority of the school like who don't care about school and don't try hard enough. So, maybe that makes the teachers like put kids in the groups [academic programs] and maybe they just don't care themselves sometimes, so they don't push the kids.

Interviewer: What do you think the expectations are of the Sheridan City community of the students of Sheridan City High School?

Student D: Like I just said, the vast majority of them just don't want to be here or don't care, so the expectations are not that high.

African American students in Sheridan High School described the disruptive behavior and lack of academic focus of (CP) students similarly to their White peers.

Student G, an African American student in the (CP) program, explained that there is a difference in the academic preparation White students in the rural sending districts get compared with African American students that attend the Sheridan Middle School.

Although Student G lives in the city of Sheridan, she attended middle school at Lima Aillaud City. Student G stated:

I'll have to agree with her that academics, the rates at this school [Sheridan High School] are different than the districts coming to this school and like Lima Aillaud City level would be on a different level than the Sheridan Middle School. Like we learned different things, like we are on different levels when we come to this school; and it's hard to combine all the students in one school [from the sending districts].

She explained how students are academically performing on different grade levels, and teachers in Sheridan High School try to help lower skilled students at the expense of better prepared students in the class.

Like somebody could be on like eighth grade level and then there is one student could be on tenth grade level, and it's hard to combine all these together [in one class]. I don't really think that the school is very [good] academically, see like all the teachers are giving you work, [but] I haven't really learned anything yet this year. I haven't really learned anything because everything I do, I learned in the sixth grade. I am doing it right now, and I feel like I'm not like learning nothing like I could go over to my elementary school and do the same thing I'm doing here. It gets boring after a while.

Student B, an African American in the Honors program, noted that some African American students from Sheridan experience challenging life circumstances and obstacles that prevent them from focusing on school.

I think outside of school [impacts students], what we don't see. Like the drugs and the way they live, and some people don't understand where they come from so all they see is somebody walking around the school cursing down the hall or that teacher slamming doors, all they see is that, but underneath they don't see like where they come from. Their mother has left them and their dad is slapping them around the house and things like that. It all comes out in the school sometimes, and that's what may keep them from going forward, because of their home life and what they can and cannot get. But sometimes they are held back because of what they go through in life. It's not always easy. It's not like, it's not like, um, like oh here's your college. You have to like work for it.

Student E, a White student in the Honors program, concurred on the point that some African American students from Sheridan have troubled home lives, which can impact their academic performance in school and that conflict could be avoided in the classroom if teachers had a better understanding or acknowledged the troubles some of the students are facing outside of the school.

Some ways, I think students keep other students from achieving their own goals because some students, like Student B was explaining, and it's like the home life that they have that they go through...they go through hell at home and then they come to school and then they have to listen to all this stuff

teachers put them through, and sometimes teachers don't even understand that they can offend you or push the wrong button at the wrong time, and then they are just looking at the students like they are crazy, not understanding what they have to go through in their home; and I think that just like coming from both sides, a smart student (unclear) but they don't understand it goes both ways.

In summary, when students enter Sheridan High School, they can have a positive or negative perception of a student's academic ability based on their academic program. Students in the Honors program characterize their peers in the program positively (motivated, hardworking, and definitely going to college), whereas their counterparts in the College Preparatory program are often described negatively (lack of desire, don't care about their grades, and don't want to be in school). The racialized experience students have at Sheridan is also intensified by the homogeneity of the academic programs, with White students primarily in the Honors program and African American students primarily in the College Preparatory program and segregation within the academic tracking. A student's race/ethnicity and parental support (stable home life) play a critical role in influencing the students' academic preparation even before entering Sheridan High School and throughout their high school years.

### **Perception of Race Based on Sheridan High School's Environment**

Sheridan High School's overt segregated school environment entails homogeneous groupings (academic program, friends, and social interactions in the cafeteria during lunch) which can inculcate negative perceptions of race which are promulgated in the students' homes and communities. The students self-select themselves

into some of these groupings and often articulate animosity for the amount of classroom time used by teachers to help lower performing students. Student A, a White student, explained why some students in Sheridan are not motivated like her to strive for academic success and have a low value of education.

When you know that you can do better, you can... like I know if I really want to get into an Ivy League school, I could do it, if I really wanted to. But people I feel in high school don't have the aspiration to try and like achieve that. I feel like in this area of Sheridan county or whatever, they don't feel like it's worth that. They just like to live life today and see what happens tomorrow.

Students in the Honors program articulated that there is an unfair amount of resources and teacher time that is given to lower performing students. Honors students (primarily White) complained that all of the school's financial resources and teachers' academic attention is on helping the general population or College Preparatory students (primarily African-American), causing tension among students, which in turn may lead to a racialized experience academically and in social settings. Student E, a White student, described a lack of being pushed academically and her fear of not being prepared to take Advanced Placement (AP) courses during her senior year.

I think we focus too much on like kids that don't get it, trying to build them up and like teachers are like 'Aw, you are smart, you can handle it. Well, yeah, but I still want to learn. I am not being pushed and I think only offering AP classes to seniors, like I am doubling up one of my classes now to try and get them in junior year, to try and get my AP classes in. I want to

be pushed, I want to learn. I haven't learned anything in math because I am still using what I learned in eighth grade because my teacher is terrible like. I want, I don't want the emphasis to be on like, the general population and what they can handle and oh, let's ease things up for them, you know, they need help.

She resented that Sheridan High School is providing all of its resources needed for lower performing students to succeed and feels the lack of academic success for this group is their own fault.

I think the school is doing all that they can. And I think that they have all these resources to use to get involved and they're [College Preparatory students] the ones that are hindering their success, and it's nobody else's fault but theirs. That's just the way I've always thought of it.

Student J similarly stated that she developed an extraordinary work ethic independently while her teachers spent additional classroom time working with lower-performing students.

I think I have a higher work ethic here [Sheridan High School] than if I went somewhere else because it is an inner-city school. But, I am not saying that as an excuse, but I had to work a lot more by myself because there are like...not a lot of smart people in the school. There are only 72 [students] in the freshman class and there is only one Honors class per subject, so and the Honors classes are very lenient. So there is really not smart people in Honors classes. So they get a lot of the attention from the teacher, but that



also helps me more because I am the kind of person that says stop talking, give me the work, let me do it by myself.

She also explained that teachers in Sheridan have a higher expectation for Honors students versus their College Preparatory peers.

I know. Like if you are not there a day, like I remember a couple of days ago I wasn't there and I went to the teacher and I was like, can you print out the PowerPoint so I can have it? And she goes, no, you are Honors and you need to go and get it from someone else. But for the CP kids [brief pause] they get everything handed to them.

Student B, an African American student, explained that she sometimes does not receive adequate help in certain classes because the teachers are working more to help lower-performing students and because her mother is a former teacher in the middle school. She articulated that the teachers feel she can acquire additional resources (because of her mother's position in the school system) to succeed academically that other students from Sheridan may not be able to.

Like, sometimes they [teachers] treat me different like, um, like say if somebody may need help and I may need help too. Then they were like, Oh, you should be fine because your mom [is a Vice Principal at Sheridan Middle School]. I am like, well ok, I still need help. Just because my mom is an English teacher, I still need help. You need to teach me. Because what about the other students that need help and their moms aren't English teachers to help them.

Student B also added that although some African American students' responses are inappropriate during a conflict with teachers, she understands the students' frustrations from a cultural context. A teacher's tone or the type of language used could be considered to be disrespectful.

I would say the teachers. Because the teachers, they influence the students. If, ah, one of the bad influences would be like, ah, sometimes I hear students yelling at the teacher, cussing them out, because of something so small. I understand what they [African American students] are talking about because sometimes, [not to] put my color down, my race down, but like sometimes African American and like Caucasians, sometimes there is, it's a difference in culture. Some of the things that like Caucasians say to each other, like ah, African Americans don't say to each other.

Student J, a White student, similarly stated that students in Sheridan do not see education as a viable option to help them enter post-secondary education and have a successful future.

I don't understand, like, I don't know, they [students from Sheridan] just get in this mind-set early on that school's stupid, they don't want to learn anything, it's not going to get them anywhere, and once you start thinking that you're going to believe that, and you just...they realize that their grades aren't going to get them anywhere and they are going to be working at McDonald's for the rest of their life.

Students also have a racialized experience in social settings within the school. The students in the study articulated how they self-segregate by race in the cafeteria during

lunch. The students do not describe the literal racial lunch line or the fact that they sit exclusively with students from their own race as being racist or a display of racism, but simply as something that “naturally” happens each day. Student J, a White student, explained the segregated nature of the students during lunch as they like to “hang out” with friends who happen to be the same race and culture, but it is not intentional to exclude African American students.

Student J: I don't think that it's intentional. I mean you know like we have two lines in our cafeteria and people call it the 'White line' and the 'Black line.' I mean Black people go to the White line and White people go in the Black line and it's not like we intentionally do that, but it seems that it's weird, everyone kind of just goes to their side, I mean...

Interviewer: Naturally!

Student J: Yeah! And it's not that we have, that we are not considering everybody else's race, it's just the way it goes. I mean we don't hate each other, I mean, yeah, White people sit with White people and Black people sit with Black people, and it's not that we don't like them, we just aren't friends with them. Not because of their color or race or anything, it's just because we just not friends with them.

She went on to say, if an African American student asked to sit at her table during lunch, she would not say no simply because she was African American.

Interviewer: Has a Black student ever sat at your table during lunch?

Student J: Yeah, there's like one, one African-American kid. Yeah, if someone who is Black came up to me and asked, 'I want to sit at your table?' I'm not going to say 'No! You're Black, you can't sit with us!'

Student J: But I don't think that's necessarily defined as like 'racism' or something, it's just something that we - I guess it's our nature, I mean....

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean because you want to mingle with the people who are like you.

Interviewer: Who see yourself just like you?

Student J: Yeah!

Student A and Student C, both White students, similarly stated that students do not mix during lunch time because they are of different cultures. The students to some extent are friendly during class time, but as soon as they are in a social setting outside of class they only mingle with students from the home districts.

Student C: Like in the lunch room like usually; they have like a million tables, like usually each table has a certain color of students, like usually they don't mix.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Student A: Its culture, because the kids...

Student C: Mainly like the way they were raised...

Student A: So the [sending district] kids all stay together and then the Sheridan city kids all stay together.

Interviewer: And they never like, besides, like you know, come together like...?

Student A: In class they do sometimes.

Student C: In class, in class they're like friendly, but when like they go off on their own they just to go the [inaudible] district and then you get the Sheridan city kids.

In describing the culture of students from Sheridan, Student A and Student C opined that drugs are a major issue with kids from the city of Sheridan and described how a student tried to sell them drugs during lunchtime.

Interviewer: In the school, or is it in the town, or?

Student A: All over, really.

Student C: Both.

Student A: And even at our lunch table, like there's this one kid that he can't move [sell] all this drugs and he keeps asking [us to purchase]. We like 'Dude! We don't do any of this, you need to leave us alone!' Like it's constantly in your face, like I was never faced with this stuff before here [coming to Sheridan High School].

Student B, an African American student, explained that she interacts with White students in all her classes (Honors), but she does not get to know them on a personal or friendly level. So, during lunchtime she feels more comfortable with students that are from her race and culture.

Student B: Like the first day at school, sit in class, like ok, I sit with like two White people and I'm cool, whatever. It don't matter, I can sit, [with] who I sit with... it's just who I feel comfortable around because since I really

don't know the Caucasians it's like if I sit there at lunch, like what are we really going to talk about?

Interviewer: Um-hm...

Student B: Like at lunch, I want to like laugh; it's my free time. I want to sit there laughing. I want to laugh at the same jokes. Like I don't think Caucasians will laugh at [Dave Chappell], so...

In summary, Sheridan High School has an overt segregated racial environment that is described by students in this study (White and African American) as not intentionally racial or racist. The students bring negative perceptions of race, inculcated in their communities, as they enter Sheridan High School as freshmen. The students are segregated once they enter the school by their academic program and homogeneous friendships. The students suggested only having personal interactions with students (pre-established in their home communities), in the classrooms. The limited exposure students have with one another within the classroom setting and segregated lunch experience does not offer much time for the students to be exposed to one another. The lack of exposure to one another's race and culture can perpetuate the negative perceptions of race, create animosity between the students, and an "us against them" mentality in the school environment.

### **White Students' Academic Experience**

This study shows that White students from the four rural sending districts of Sheridan have a *White experience* (WE), which enhances their chances of entering post-secondary education (particularly four-year institutions) at a higher percentage than their African American peers from the city of Sheridan. The WE experience is defined as the

confluence of academic factors (middle school academic preparation, high school Honors and Advanced curriculum) and the use of social capital (family and community support) to help shape White students' college plans and career aspirations as they start their formalized education through high school graduation and enter post-secondary education. African American students can have a similar academic experience and enter post-secondary education as White students do if they have access to all or some of the academic resources and develop relationships with individuals such as teachers, guidance counselors, and coaches, who are skilled at empowering students to achieve in environments that are not conducive to providing equal opportunities for all students. These individuals play a critical role in filling any gaps in the students' educational development at home, community, and school to increase their chances of entering post-secondary education.

### **Family and Community Support**

White students in this study use their parents' educational level (high school diploma to advanced degrees) and careers as motivation to succeed, match, or surpass their parents and to gain exposure to different careers as well as additional information about the viability of a given major to the prospect of finding a job upon post-secondary graduation. Approximately 90% of the homes in the rural communities (with children under the age of 18) in Sheridan's sending districts are led by two parents, which can be a positive indicator of stability in the home, an increased focus on academic success, and a financing strategy for post-secondary education. Student A talked about the educational level of her parents and careers as motivation for her to attend college and acquire a senior leadership position in a company similar to her father's.

My dad, they both, my mom and dad both went to [F&M] and then they both went onto [UPENN]. My dad graduated from [inaudible-57min55sec] after [UPENN]. Hmm, so like he does, like he has like thousands of people working under him, and so it's kind of like you know I need to do something big like that. Like I need to have some sort of important job where I'm making a difference and have some sort of power would be nice.

Student E recalled multiple conversations with her mother about future career choices, and her mother strongly encouraged her to choose a college major that matches her interests:

I wanted to be a chef or a psychologist before going to high school, and she [mother] kind of turned that down. She is kind of, like when I was doing sports in high school, she was like you can be in sports management and still around sports, my main interest. And then she kind of briefly talked about it and sports management just kept coming out of her mouth, so it's kind of like something that's not like pushed, or you kind of had to turn against it or go with it and it's easier to go with it. She wants me to do something that's like towards my interest more than just something that I want to do. Like my interest has started to build up for it.

Some of the students are able to gain early exposure to college campuses by visiting the alma mater of their parents during homecoming, sporting events, college tours, etc. The students are able to gain the campus experience during the visits and develop an understanding of the academic expectations for acceptance into the institutions and the rigor of college classes based on their parents and older sibling's



experiences. The students are also able to build an understanding of the cost of attending a four-year college, and the use of a myriad of financial resources, including loans to pay the cost. Student J talked about the prospect of her parents having multiple children in college and ways to help pay college tuition with the understanding that taking out loans to pay for college would be a viable option.

But I'm not concerned about the money [to pay for college]. I don't want to say I'm not concerned about it. I know it's going to be expensive, and I know that I'm not going to have a lot of money. I'm going to have to pay loans out and stuff like that, but I'm not worried about it, I know I can do it... Yeah, and I will be paying that off till I am like 52. That's another thing I guess that would factor in my opinion would be how much money it would cost to my parents. But they would only pay so much and then I would have to get out loans and stuff.

She also thought that paying for college became more of a concern once her older brother started the college choice process and that her parents have a college saving plan that will help mitigate the challenge of paying for college.

But the financial aspect I think I realized when my brother started looking at colleges, and I hear my mom and dad talking about how much they would have to pay for him to go to college, and I don't know like that's another financial thing cause like my mom and dad have two kids who will be in college at the same time. I think they [parents] will pay a lot of it. We are not poor people, but we are not superbly rich.

Within the four rural communities, parents and community members that have graduated from post-secondary institutions serve as informational resources and share vital information that can help create and sustain academic advantages for students throughout their formalized education and during the college choice process, with lower income parents. The strong social networks are used to fill the financial gaps for lower income families at social functions. Education is very important within the rural communities across socio-economic status, and the small community makes it easier to share information about the academic success of community members.

### **Middle School Academic Preparation**

The four rural middle schools in the sending districts of Sheridan provide a parent-friendly environment where parents are encouraged to be involved in school activities and to volunteer in the school (chaperone field trips, arrange for academic tutors, host career seminars, and help organize school events). Parents are required to sign a parent/school contract when picking up the student handbook, which specifies the parent's responsibility in making sure the student is prepared to succeed academically in the school. The student handbook provides information about school policies (access to student records, attendance, Honor roll eligibility, Gifted and Talented program, and Blackboard), as well as the online website (*Toolkit*), which helps parents navigate their child's academic journey from pre-kindergarten through high school. Students in the schools are encouraged by teachers to opt out of classes (mathematics, English, and science) based on state standardized test scores to take advanced classes; and the students are advised by the Sheridan High School Guidance Department during the eighth grade high school registration date to continue on in Honors class for the upcoming school year.

Parents share information at events like the Family Enrichment Network (free events once a week each month in conjunction with the YMCA, to bring families together for different events such as movie night and bowling) about School Choice options to send their children outside of the district for high school and the importance of making sure students are in the Honors and IB program if they go to Sheridan High School.

### **High School Academic Experience**

White parents from the four rural sending schools in the district advocate to make sure their children going to Sheridan High School are in the Honors/IB program even if they might not be academically qualified for such programs (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013). The parents utilized strategies (meeting with the principal and Guidance Department Chair before the start of the school year to advocate for their child's acceptance into the Honors program/IB). The parents are very involved in the school and consistently contact the Guidance Department to look for additional resources (e.g., dual degree program with a local community college) to prepare their children for post-secondary education. In addition, parents expend financial resources to secure SAT/ACT test preparation and private counselors during the college choice process to help students improve their chances of being accepted into tier-one institutions.

White parents in this study were also knowledgeable about financing options for paying college tuition (college saving plans and loans). White students used the experiences of older siblings such as visiting college campuses, selecting a major, and conversations with their parents about paying for post-secondary education as a guide to navigate the college choice process. Student J remembered accompanying her brother on a college visit to Virginia Tech, a campus she visited multiple times in her youth because

family members are alumni of the school. On the way back from the visit, the family stopped to visit a college on her list, although she was a sophomore in high school.

Interviewer: So did you go to Virginia Tech? Just to see the campus?

Student J: Hmm, well, my hmm, aunt and uncle actually met there and got married there....

Interviewer: Oh! They both went to the Tech?

Student J: Yeah, and so like we've been to Virginia Tech a lot of times before. My mom's friend's daughter goes there for Speech and Language Pathology. And James Madison, I just found out, and hmm--my brother went to visit Virginia Tech and on the way back we went and stopped at James Madison because one of the kids goes to school there, so he like took us on a tour and stuff. Plus it's quite an expensive school too.

In summary, White parents use social capital and community networks to make sure that their children have access to the best high schools and academic curriculum. The parents use School Choice to gain acceptance for their children to schools out of the district and advocate to make sure their children are in the Honors/IB program if they go to Sheridan High School.

### **Entrance into Post-Secondary Education**

White parents played a major role in the selection of post-secondary institution (type, major, location). Although the parents preferred that the students stayed in-state and close to home, they stressed leaving the community to go to college--within geographic restrictions. The students are advised by their parents to look into careers and industries outside of farming because the once vibrant farming communities are quickly

failing and the remaining options are very limited (School system, factory worker, truck driver, and fast-food). Although paying for college is a significant issue for many of the White students in the study, they all expressed a desire to go to college no matter how much loan debt would be accrued. The students also articulated working part-time and attending the local community college as a strategy to lower the cost of attending a four-year college. Student E discussed the need to earn a scholarship to go directly into a four-year college, and the possibility of working to earn money to help pay for going to college.

I see myself in college, especially if I had a scholarship; but if I don't, I probably have to work a little bit and get enough money for it. One thing that really worries me is, when I think about it, if I don't get a scholarship, the thing I think about is how to get into college... [I am] planning to go to a good one. Like speaking honestly because I'm not going to go straight into that [four-year college]. But if I get a scholarship, I'll be going in like straight into college for four years.

White parents are very involved in helping their children select majors in college that will lead to careers that are more stable than the career options available in the rural communities. Although paying for college is a significant issue in the rural communities, White parents educate their children about using loans as a strategy to pay for post-secondary education as well as working part-time and attending the local community college to lower the cost of attending a four-year college.

## **Black Students' Academic Experience**

African American students in this study use their parents' educational level (high school to advanced degrees) and careers (teachers, military, truck drivers, and service industry) as motivation to succeed, match, or surpass their parents and to gain exposure to different careers. African American students also use their parent's educational level as additional information about the viability of a given major to the prospect of finding a job upon post-secondary graduation. Student B, an African American student, described how her mother's position (Vice Principal at Sheridan Middle School), high academic expectations, and her older sister's acceptance into college with a full academic scholarship created a standard that obtaining a post-secondary degree was the key to building a successful life. Student B stated:

Well, my mom, she is always saying education is the key, so without education she says to me like there is really nothing like you can build on because you don't have the degree. So she puts it in me, so that makes me want to go to college and be somebody. So she has expectations on me, which makes other people have expectations for me too. And they expect me to go to a four-year college and then go into a job and be successful. Plus my sister, she is in college in Louisiana and she goes to college and then everybody is picking on me, 'Oh, you got to go too because your sister, she has got a scholarship down there and I am like 'All right, I know I got to go so, and I am just expected to go. It's like no option, I am like I am going.

In the city of Sheridan, approximately 80% of the homes (with children under the age of 18) are led by single parents (U.S. Census, 2010), which can be a negative

indicator of stability in the home, a decreased emphasis on academic success, and lack of financing strategies for post-secondary education (Bloom, 2006; Freeman, 2005; McDonough & Calderone, 2010). The African American students in this study lived with a variety of family members (grandparents, aunts, foster parents, and step parents); only two of the student in the study lived with their biological parents. Attending a local community college, trade school, and joining the military is viewed by African American students as a viable option to “get out” of Sheridan and to help lower the cost of going to college. Student H explained that his parents stressed going to college but left the decisions about the type of college, location, and major solely up to him.

My parents always told me that they couldn't make me do everything, but that college was very important and if I'm going to be successful in something that I want to keep doing...go to college. So I think that even if I couldn't see what they meant in it, they wouldn't lead me in the wrong direction. So college was very important.

He went on to say that his mother wanted him to experience attending a four-year college and living on campus, the way she did while attending Rowan University.

Student H: My mom said that she wants me to get the full college experience. So, she'll give me information on the different schools that I should look at. So she is leaning more towards the [four-year] college...

Interviewer: Than trade school.

Student H: Yes.

Interviewer: What about your dad?

Student H: I think that's where the other side comes because like with him, we work

good with our hands, so like--we build stuff and umm--design--different ideas, so I think I could probably--be--good at either one [college or trade school].

Some of the students are able to gain early exposure to college campuses because of older siblings that have gone through the college choice process. The students did not articulate visiting the college campuses with their siblings during their college application process or once their siblings were attending the post-secondary institutions. The students are also able to build an understanding of the cost of attending a four-year college and the need to obtain a scholarship or need-based aid to pay for college. African American students in the study expressed a hesitancy to accumulate any loan debt as a strategy to pay for college and worried that their major would not transfer directly into the job market upon graduation from college. Student B expressed her concern about how the economy could impact the viability of her gaining employment after graduating from college and the ability to pay back loan debt.

Student B: I think what Student G said, but how the economy's going.

Because, when you come out of college, it's like people are still looking for jobs, like I read in *Time Magazine* that like there was a percentage of graduating students actually going back home to live because they had to pay off their...

Interviewer: Student loans.



Student B: Student loans, or they couldn't find a job right away. I think mine [major] would be good because mine [major] is like I think always in demand. It's like medical, I think that will always be in demand.

Within the city of Sheridan, parents and community members who have graduated from post-secondary institutions do not have an organized social network or use social capital to share vital information with lower income parents that can help create and sustain academic advantages for students throughout their formalized education and during the college choice process. Education is not equally valued in the city of Sheridan across socioeconomic status, and some of the negative issues (crime, violence, and poverty) make it less likely that information (scholarships, financial aid tips, college acceptances) will be shared in social settings by community members.

### **Middle School Academic Preparation**

Sheridan Middle School provides a parent-friendly environment where parents are encouraged to be involved in school activities (chaperone field trips, engage academic tutors, attend career seminars, to help organize school events). Parents are required to attend a yearly Back to School night and sign a parental/school contract (access to student records, attendance, Honor roll eligibility, disciplinary policies, and Blackboard) as well as have access to the online website (Khan Academy), which helps parents navigate their child's academic journey from pre-kindergarten through high school. Students in the schools are encouraged by teachers to opt out of classes (mathematics, English, and science) based on state standardized test scores to take advanced classes, but a only a small portion of the students take the advanced classes or gain acceptance into the middle school's Honors program. Students are advised by the Sheridan High School

Guidance Department during the eighth grade high school registration date about the Honors/IB program as well as the social services offered by the School Base counseling program in the high school. Parents of students in the Honors program at Sheridan Middle School do not strongly direct the students to continue into the Honors/IB program in the high school. Parents are adept at finding information about School Choice options to send their children outside of the district for high school, and the importance of making sure students are in the Honors/IB program if they go to Sheridan High School but there does not seem to be an established social network where the information is shared with families throughout the city.

### **High School Academic Experience**

African American parents from the city of Sheridan do not advocate to make sure their children are going to Sheridan High School in the Honors/IB program even if they might be academically qualified for such programs. The parents do not fully trust that the school officials in the high school have their children's "best interests at heart." Student B, an African American Honors student, explained why she thought her friends at the middle school did not continue in the Honors program once they entered high school.

Student B: They did, they took advanced classes, yes, but they didn't take it in high school; maybe they were scared, maybe they thought they were going to be too hard or something like that, but they just didn't take them. Like some did, like the most I have in a class is chemistry class, is like maybe six out of like 20.

Interviewer: Six African-Americans out of...?

Student B: And I'm the, me and one other girl in my history class are like the only African-Americans and we have about 15 in there [class].

She went on to explain that continuing in the Honors program in high school was mandated by her mother, and maybe some of the other students in the Honors program in the middle school did not have a parent to force them to enter the Honors program whether they wanted to or not.

Student B: Because my mother was like, 'Oh you're taking Honors classes.' I was going to take them anyway, but she was just like maybe they [African American Honors students in the middle school] don't have somebody to say, oh, you can take Honors classes 'cause you can do the work' and have someone to actually push them to actually do it.

Interviewer: At home or at school?

Student B: Home. It all starts at home.

The parents are not involved in the school and typically do not enter the building unless there is a disciplinary issue with the student. The parents do not contact the Guidance Department or teachers to look for additional resources to prepare their children for post-secondary education, but they will use all of the academic resources (credit restoration, online courses, night-classes) and social services (School Base) within the school to make sure their children stay on track to graduate from high school. After high school, the parents' primary focus for their children is to gain employment and then go to the local community college. Tom, a guidance counselor, described the lack of interaction he has with African American parents in the school.

Then the minority students...when we see the minority students' parents, it is normally because of a problem. Now, I have some parents from the sending districts [White rural areas] that I just see them all the time. And then there are some parents of the city kids you just can't get them to come in here...well, for regular things anyway...just disciplinary or attendance issues.

African American parents in this study were knowledgeable about financing options for paying college tuitions (need-based aid, merit scholarships, and loans). In some cases, the parents were hesitant to submit information needed to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which prevented students from completing the financial aid process and obtaining grants and scholarships to pay their college tuition. One guidance counselor, Hazel, recalled an experience with a senior who was accepted into a four-year college, but his mother refused to submit her financial information and the student ended up attending the local community college. Hazel stated:

I can't believe he is going to settle for [the local community college] and he could have gone to a four--year school,' but I told her, 'He needed your financial information...and guess what...he is not going to [the local community college] either if you don't give up your financial information. She looked at me blank- faced like she couldn't...she didn't get it...you [parent] have to do something. I find that was the attitude [with parents from Sheridan]; for some reason, the parent thought that even after going through

the FAFSA and all that stuff, the kid did not need their financial information. Why she didn't want to give up the information [I don't know].

The African American students in the study were very concerned about financing college and did not articulate taking loans as a strategy to pay for college. Student G explained that her parents would not let her attend a college out of state because her brother still owed money on loans he took out to pay for college.

Student G: I am kind of mad because the college that I want to go to is out of state, and they want me to stay in state.

Interviewer: Why?

Student G: Because of my brother.

Interviewer: Ok.

Student G: He is still paying off his loan, his college.

Interviewer: Did he go out of state?

Student G: Yeah, he went to Wagner University.

Interviewer: All right, so it is a little more expensive.

Student G: Yeah.

African American students used the experiences of older siblings as a guide to navigate the college choice process. In some cases, the older siblings' academic prowess while attending Sheridan High School and acceptance into a four-year college created a standard the students could follow toward entering post-secondary education. Student G explained how her brother is a motivating factor in her push to succeed in school.

I would say my brother because he went to the school and graduated from here in 2002. He was very athletic. He maintained a B average here and he

pushes me, like come on, you can do better. He wants me to do better than he did in high school, so when I come home with a B, he'll be like, Oh that's not good enough, you can reach for an A. Come home with a C, he'll be like you can do better than that, so he pushes me. We are always talking about it [going to college] and he is like let's go look at this college and see if we like it.

Student B offered a similar statement, that she was often compared to her sister, who had already graduated from Sheridan High School. Student B stated, "I feel almost compared to my sister. She'd [mother] be like...oh...well, she got straight A's, so you should be getting straight A's, and I'm like, we're not the same people, A's and B's. I'm like ok, that's good for me."

In summary, African American parents do not use social capital and community networks to make sure their children have access to the best high schools and academic curriculum. The parents do not use School Choice to gain acceptance for their children to schools out of the district, and advocate to make sure their children are in the Honors/IB program if they go to Sheridan High School.

### **Entrance into Post-Secondary Education**

African American parents played more of a secondary role in the selection of post-secondary institutions (type, major, location) and left the final decision up to their children. Although the parents preferred that the students stayed in-state and close to home, they were supportive of students going to college out-of-state if they earned a scholarship (merit, need-based, or athletic). Although paying for college is a significant issue for many of the African American students in the study, they all expressed a desire

to go to college. Some of the students articulated joining the military as well as working part-time and attending the local community college as a strategy to lower the cost of attending a four-year college.

African American parents were not involved in helping their children select majors in college that will lead to careers that are more stable than the career options available in the city of Sheridan. Although paying for college is a significant issue for students from the city of Sheridan, some of the parents were not willing to submit their financial information to complete the FAFSA process, which eliminated the opportunity for their children to receive financial aid needed to enter post-secondary education.

In this chapter I discuss the themes that emerged from guidance counselors' accounts of the involvement they have in helping students navigate the college choice process in addition to their other responsibilities. The second part of the chapter offers a comprehensive profile of the student participants and focuses on the factors (parental/family support, peer support, guidance support, and race/ethnicity) that might help or hinder the decision to attend college.

Students in this study had a racialized experience during their time at Sheridan High School. The students were segregated by their academic curriculum, with the majority of White students in the Honors/IB program and African American students in the College Preparatory program, homogeneous friendship groupings formed in their communities before entering Sheridan High School, and social settings within the school (the students self-segregated during lunch).

The students arrive at Sheridan High School with negative racial perceptions, which are propagated within their communities (rural and urban). The negative

perceptions create distrust and fear amongst the students and an “us against them” culture within the school. White students articulate being exposed to issues (drugs, teen pregnancy, and violence) from the city of Sheridan that is brought into the school by the African American students. African American students articulate a lowered academic expectation for them in the school by school officials (the majority of the staff and administrators in the school are White) and a focus more on sports for African American and academic achievement for White students. Chapter V provides a summary of findings and discussions connected to the research questions posed in Chapter 1. The section will end with implications for theory, practice, and policy. It also provides a starting point of dialogue for future research.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This chapter begins with a summary of the study's purpose, theoretical framework, and methodology. Next, the chapter summarizes findings of the study and considers the implications for theory, practice, and policy. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research, followed by concluding Student Ds.

#### **Overview of the Study**

The President's Commission on Higher Education (1947) noted that by improving the education received by African Americans and lower income families and increasing opportunities for them to enter into the middle class, the United States would be able to solve some of the social problems such as poverty, unemployment, underemployment, crime, unstable families, etc., which were prevalent during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nearly 60 years later, African Americans and lower income students have continued to encounter challenges in gaining access to and completing college, in spite of decades of educational reforms to address these issues (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

McDonough (1997) argues that social class and high school operations for guiding students during the college choice process can be significant factors in students' college enrollment decisions. Students' decision to attend college is a complex, multifaceted process involving educational aspirations, peer influence, parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and a college or university's admission office. Sirin et al. (2004) suggest that students model their parents, adults, and family members' educational path

while developing their educational aspirations and career plans. Students make decisions on whether or not to attend as well as the type of college based on their perceptions about going to college and the information (e.g. open houses, social media, direct mail, etc.) utilized by admission staffs (McDonough, 1997; Pitre, 2006).

Many researchers have found, however, that the opportunity structure is not equal for all students (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Hill, 2009; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Howard, 2003; Hurtado et al., 1997; Muhammad, 2008; McDonough, 1997, 2004). The aggregated college enrollment percentages disguise the gap in the “access and retention rates between White students and students of color, as well as between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students” (McDonough, 1997, p. 2). Student academic ability, socioeconomic status (SES), and high school’s college-going culture can shape the way in which students develop and choose their post-secondary options.

In 2012, nearly 68% of high school graduates enrolled in colleges or universities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). McDonough (1997) asserts that the number of high school graduates attending college might seem to be indicative of the impartial “opportunity structure” (p. 1) which is open to all students based on academic merit. In order to better understand the experiences of African American students as they develop and actualize their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans, the theoretical framework for this study pulls from three different but related bodies of literature. The first is the college choice process literature; specifically, Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-stage college choice model (predisposition, search, and choice), which describes the developmental process which students go through regarding their college decisions (Morrice, 2011). Hossler and Gallagher’s model has been widely used

in the college choice literature for over 30 years. The model utilizes both sociological and econometric views to explain the college choice process as a singular integrated process (Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989). The second theoretical underpinning is the multicultural navigator concept, drawing from Carter's (2005) multicultural navigator model, which illustrates "several individual differences such as racial and ethnic ideology, cultural styles, access to resources, and treatment within school and family" (p. 12) to explain why some African American students do not excel in school. Carter (2005) challenges Ogbu's cultural ecological perspective, arguing that students understand the value of succeeding in education but resist abandoning their cultural identities to achieve success in education. Ogbu's cultural perspective is focused on involuntary minorities' perception of lack of future opportunities, which is demonstrated through their lack of effort in school (Ogbu, 1979, 1990, 1995a). The third theoretical perspective, cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977a) have been at the forefront of debates for scholars in an attempt to understand how the reproduction of inequality is perpetuated in schools (Brantlinger 1993; Lareau, 2001; McDonough, 1997), whether cultural capital breeds the social structure that promote mobility (Kingston, 2000; Kraaykamp & Van Eijck, 2010) or whether parental SES backgrounds and involvement influences a student's school experience (Carter, 2005; Dumais, 2002; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Bourdieu (1977) argued that habitus establishes a "set of durable, transposable dispositions which...functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (Swartz, 1997, pp. 82-83). Habitus is located within a person's position in the social structure and the individuals' understanding of the salient prospects for their lives. Although Bourdieu typically paid attention to class

differences among individuals in reference to habitus, many scholars argue that habitus can change if an individual is exposed to different interactions and experiences with the dominant culture (DiMaggio 1982; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996; King, 2000; Lizardo, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to explore urban high school students' perceptions of the cultural and structural factors that may influence their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. This study was exploratory in nature, examining why some African American high school students do not fulfill their post-secondary career and educational aspirations, even though they express the desire to do so. To increase the college attendance for racially and economically disadvantaged students, more comprehensive research is needed to better understand the conditions in their lives (home, community, and school) that nurture the habitus needed for long-term academic achievement (Freeman, 1997, 2006; Muhammad, 2008).

### **Methodology**

To examine urban high school students' experiences during the college choice process, this study used a qualitative case study approach to examine individual students' college choice process and urban high school students' perceptions of the structural factors that may influence their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans (Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). A research team collected data from June 2009 to June 2011, conducting focus groups and one-on-one interviews to better understand the college-going process and culture at Sheridan High School in New Jersey. By understanding how urban high school students perceive the steps in the college choice process, this study aimed to provide further insights into the underlying factors

impacting the knowledge gained by students during the college choice process and how the factors aid or hinder their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans.

The rationale for conducting multi-year interviews was to obtain a deeper understanding of the participants' perception about the college choice process and how the students' educational and career aspiration developed and changed over time. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection for the study. By interviewing the participants, the research team intended to gain insights into the participants' post-secondary aspirations and career plans, support system in and out of the school, and the structural barriers the participants face while navigating the college choice process. As a follow up to the student interviews, I interviewed three guidance counselors at Sheridan High School in the spring of 2013 to ascertain their involvement with students during the college choice process, expectations for their students to go to college, and to understand what resources are available to students during the college choice process.

Sheridan High School is categorized as an urban high school, but it is located in a rural area in the mid-Atlantic region of the country. The district is one of the 30 poorest communities in the state and is comprised of almost 600 community-based schools. A survey conducted by the Guidance Department revealed that approximately 90% of students begin high school with the aspiration of attending college or other post-secondary education, but only 70% of the class of 2007 actually enrolled in post-secondary education. In fact, 26% of Black students and 4% of White students dropped out of high school during the 2009-2010, according to the latest available data for the school year.

Nine students and three guidance counselors participated in the study. The participants' race varied as follows: African American (n = 4) and White (n = 5) in the ninth through eleventh grades (roughly 14-17 years old). The participants' grades and class rank were mixed, including low performing and high achieving, and included the salutatorian of the graduating class. The study participants include both African American and White students, which allowed me the opportunity to perform cross-case analysis by race in terms of the students' experiences of the college choice process.

The data were analyzed thematically, utilizing the HyperResearch software and codes from the extant literature to categorize the data systematically (Miles & Hubberman, 1994). With a continual linkage to the research questions, an inductive data analysis strategy was used (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Maxwell, 2012; Morgan, 1996); data were categorized in distinct parts on a single sentence or phrase and then carefully analyzed and compared to determine consistencies and dissimilarities (Creswell, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Words or phrases discovered from the interview transcripts were used to accentuate the frankness conveyed by the participants in the study.

## **Summary of Findings and Discussions**

### **Role of Guidance Counselors in the College choice Process**

With regard to the research question, "What is the role of guidance counselors in helping students navigate the college choice process?", it is important to consider how guidance counselors were involved in helping students navigate the college search process in addition to their other responsibilities (making sure seniors graduate from high school, IB Coordinator, Scholarship Coordinator).

McDonough (2006) argues that one of the primary functions of guidance counselors is to help students acquire pertinent information about the college choice process in order to make informed decisions about post-secondary and career opportunities. In this study, all of the guidance counselors had the expectation that their students would go to college. The counselors did not focus on the type of college (certificate program, two-year college, four year-college) but focused on the concept that the students needed to further their education to fulfill established post-secondary and career aspirations. The counselors in this study were cognizant of the academic readiness (academic program, GPA, SAT/ACT scores, and class rank) for post-secondary education their students received in the school and suggested different options based on the student's academic readiness to enter post-secondary and career opportunities.

McDonough and Calderone (2010) contend that depending on the type of school (public, private, religious based) a student attends, the guidance counselor's caseload and college-counseling focus can be significantly different. The student-to-counselor national average is 460:1 and in California the ratio can be upwards of 1000:1 (College Board, 2012). In schools with larger caseloads the guidance counselors' primary function is to make sure their students make adequate progress to graduation from high school, and therefore college counseling in many cases is a lower priority. Although the counselors in this study had very low caseloads because of the small size of the school, a considerable amount of their daily workload focused on making sure the students were in place to graduate from high school (Martinez & Klopott, 2005). The process consisted of changing students' schedules to reflect failed classes, summer school

attendance/requirement, special review assessment courses (requirement if student failed a section of the state examination), course reinstatement, and online courses.

Guidance counselors in this study explained that the lower performing, or “students that are having trouble,” receive more of an emphasis in their daily (over 50%) workload than the middle or higher achieving students. The counselors had a sense of frustration with the school leadership’s philosophy of allowing students who are dropped off the attendance roll (for excessive absences) to make up missed assignments with teachers. The counselors articulated that the higher level academic students self-regulated (navigated the college choice process) and “made it through,” and it was the middle range student that received the least academic and college counseling because they were not in jeopardy of failing any classes and on track to graduate.

Depending on the high school type and size, there is commonly a person (Director of Guidance, College Counselor, and Scholarship Coordinator) with the sole responsibility of helping students navigate the college application process (McDonough, 1997). The schools have a counseling process (e.g., annual Back to School function, student newsletter, quarterly meeting with a counselor, and ongoing interaction with the Naviance college counseling software under the direction of a guidance counselor, etc.) that starts during a student’s freshman year through senior year. In this study, the academic program determines the type of interaction students had with post-secondary, career, and military representatives and college visits in their career exploration class (elective class with a focus on helping students develop and refine post-secondary and career aspirations). Students in the Honors/IB program reported only meeting with representatives from four-year colleges in the career exploration class, who gave



presentations about the college application process and how to finance paying for college as well as taking trips to visit local four-year colleges in the area, whereas students in the College Preparatory program reported meeting primarily with two-year college representatives, local entrepreneurs such as the Beauty Salon and Soul Food truck, as well as representatives of different branches of the military.

Loeb and Kalogrides (2013) argue that “sorting of students by prior achievement, race, or socioeconomic status to different classrooms within schools may result from a variety of formal and informal processes” (p. 305). In this study, Sheridan High School guidance counselors during their visits to the four rural middle schools in the sending districts (to register students for high school classes) promoted the benefits of the Honors/IB programs to students and parents. The parents (predominantly White) were very aggressive in making sure their children were placed in the Honors/IB program even if the student did not meet the formal academic criteria set by the school for entrance into the program (Rothstein, 2010).

On the other hand, Sheridan High School guidance counselors primarily promoted the School Base social services to African American parents and students during the high school registration process. One guidance counselor mentioned a reason the counseling services are promoted over the academic programs was because of an antipathy and distrust by Sheridan community members that the high school officials “were setting their children up for failure” by offering to put them in the Honors/IB program. The parents (predominantly African American) used social and counseling services, academic credit adjustment, and career planning, gearing their efforts toward keeping their children on track to graduate from high school and immediately enter employment.

The Guidance staff admitted to spending less time working with the higher-achieving African American students on college counseling than they do with students at the lower end of the academic spectrum, suggesting that counselor perceptions of race at this school appear to be based on large amounts of time spent counseling the most academically underperforming students, those who are predominantly African American and whose parents did not make full use of the resources available to help their children move towards post-secondary education.

### **Student Development of Post-Secondary and Career Aspirations**

In response to the research question regarding factors that assist or hinder the development of post-secondary and career aspirations, it is important to consider how students develop the aspiration to enter post-secondary education and how the development process impacts their decisions during the college choice search process.

The findings of this study support previous literature that nonequivalent educational experiences of students of color compared to their White peers are caused by racial segregation across academic curriculums and within school environments (Loeb & Kalogrides, 2013; Mickelson, 2004; Orfield, 2004). The processes of sorting students across academic curriculums within schools creates a myriad of issues for students of color such as a higher percentage of exposure to novice teachers and placement in classes with the lowest achieving and least advantaged classmates in comparison to their White peers (Loeb & Kalogrides, 2013).

Researchers and policy makers have debated the relationship between prior achievement and student demographic characteristics. For example, tracking tends to contribute to within-school sorting by race and socioeconomic status (Mickelson, 2004;

Oakes, 2002; Rothstein, 2010). In this study, the academic preparation students have in middle school can be a precursor to academic success in high school. The academic experience a student has in high school based on their academic curriculum can also shape the post-secondary and career plans (Tierney & Auerbach, 2004).

All of the students in the study expressed that preparation in middle school (honors/advanced classes, academic enrichment provided by teachers, test preparation, conversations with teachers about their college experience, and information sessions with high school guidance counselors) helped them formulate post-secondary and career aspirations. White students attending the four rural middle schools in the sending district described a similar experience of teachers and the school counselors advising them to opt out of classes (according to state testing results) and to take advanced classes in English, mathematics, and science, which created an opportunity for the students to opt out of classes once they moved on to Sheridan High School. By taking advanced classes in middle school, students were better prepared for the rigor of the Honors/IB program in high school. These students also articulated staying in contact with their middle school teachers as resources for tutoring, college counseling, and career advice even after they began high school.

African American students who attended Sheridan Middle School did not describe receiving advice from teachers or school counselors about opting out of classes as a strategy to start taking advanced classes to prepare for high school. The students were not advised by school officials or their parents to continue in the Honors program once they started high school, and many of the Honors students at Sheridan Middle School did not join the Honors/IB program once they began high school. The students did not express a

continued connection to their middle school teachers and school counselors once they moved on to the high school.

Students enter Sheridan High School with a fundamental understanding that earning a post-secondary degree is necessary to enter the workforce in a specific career. This study indicated that White students entered Sheridan High School with clear post-secondary and career aspirations and plans shaped by their parents' educational and career experiences. The parents were very involved and (in most cases made the final decisions) when deciding the type of post-secondary institution, location, and major. The students agreed with their parents' decisions and simply complied because as one student stated, 'They have my best interests at heart, so I'm ok with it.'

African American students' post-secondary and career plans were less clearly defined than those of their White peers. The students did not use their parents' educational and career experiences to shape their post-secondary and career plans. The parents were not as involved (as their White peers) in the students' post-secondary planning, and functioned in a secondary or more supportive role (McDonough & Calderone, 2010), allowing the student to make the final decisions about school type, location, and major as previously studies suggested (Toldson, Braithwaite, & Rentie, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, parents are instrumental in advocating for their children to gain acceptance into the Honors/IB program because this program is perceived to better prepare students academically for post-secondary opportunities than students in the College Preparatory program. These parents work diligently to make sure their children are in "upper level" programs, because they believe the College Preparatory program

does not adequately prepare students for college level work. In this study, White parents advocated more aggressively for their children to be in the Honors/IB program than African American parents because approximately 99% of White students were in the Honors/IB program and approximately 99% of African American students were in the College Preparatory program. The College Preparatory program at Sheridan High School does not appear (as the name would suggest) to prepare students for college, but tracking within the academic program is disguised as college preparation. Goldrick-Rab (2007) posited that some schools do not support a college-going culture for all of its students, and low-income minority students are often placed in lower level academic tracks versus the upper level academic tracks (Honors/IB, Advanced Placement).

Parents can also impact a student's academic experience in high school by providing academic resources (private college counselor, SAT/ACT preparation materials, etc.) outside of the school. White students in the study expressed that the additional academic resources helped narrow down their post-secondary lists during the college choice process. A student's socioeconomic status factored into the type of academic resources their parents could provide; affluent students used private counselors to help them during the college application process, and lower income students' parents provided SAT/ACT test preparation materials (DVDs and books). African American students (regardless of socioeconomic status) in the study did not indicate that their parents provided any type of academic resources outside of the school to help the students during the college choice process.

In summary, students start to develop their post-secondary and career aspirations during middle school (McDonough & Calderone, 2010; Perna, 2006; Pitre, 2006;

Radford, 2009). In this study, a student's race/ethnicity, location of their middle school, and socioeconomic status, are factors that can impact the academic preparation a student receives in middle school as well as in high school.

### **Role of Peer Pressure in the College Choice Process**

In response to the research question "How do Sheridan High School students describe the role of peer influence/support during the college choice process?", it is important to consider how peer influence/support may positively or negatively impact students' decisions as they navigate the college choice process. Three themes were identified regarding the role of peer influence in the college choice process: (a) positive peer influence/support networks, (b) negative peer influence--peer pressure), and (c) segregated friendship network.

The findings of this study support the previous literature on the impact of peer influence on students' college decisions during the college choice process (Furukawa, 2011; Kuh et al., 2011). Similar to previous research, the present study found that peer influence may play a positive supporting role for academic success in the classroom and serve as a bridge to resources and information about the steps involved in the college application process (Kun et al., 2011; Furukawa, 2011; Paulsen & St. Johns, 2002; Perna, 2006). It is worth noting that students in the study made a distinction between *friends*, with whom they shared intimate and personal details, and *associates*, to whom they would speak on a superficial level at school. The students talked about an increased maturity and prudence in deciding which friends/associates were focused and motivated to actualize their post-secondary and career aspirations and weeding out friends/associates that were not academically focused and prone to getting in trouble in

and out of school (Furukawa, 2011). Another factor identified by the participants as key to developing college-going literacy, is a relationship with older friends in their community (college students). The older friends offer pieces of advice on and insight into how to deal with peer pressure while in high school and the differences in expectations for academic coursework between high school and college. The students in the study were able to use their older friends' experiences during the college choice process in high school and their experiences such as choosing a major, living on campus, and time management as a model to help them navigate the college choice process.

Negative peer pressure is a salient factor that leads students on the wrong academic path and derails their post-secondary and career aspirations (Orfield, 2004). The students spoke about eagerness during their freshman year to make friends and become popular as the way they succumbed to negative peer pressure (acting out in school, cutting class, and poor grades). As the students began the college choice process and started to research post-secondary options, they realized that associating with the wrong friends may lead to the development of bad habits, detrimental to succeeding academically and derailing their career aspirations (Kuh et al., 2011).

Perhaps the most significant finding in this study about peer influence is that students posit that Sheridan High School's environment is conducive to the development of bad habits and negative peer pressure. The students explained that the exposure to lower academic expectations, teens walking around the school pregnant, and bad behaviors inside the classrooms and school became norms among students. That is to say, students posited that being exposed to negative issues within the school impacted their focus on their post-secondary and career plans more than peer pressure from friends.

Interestingly, a shared experience of participants by race, academic program, and segregated friendship network was developed in their communities before attending Sheridan High School (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013). Before White and African American students enter Sheridan High School as freshmen, many of them have had limited exposure with students from another race or community. White students explained that their friends from the rural communities develop bad habits and succumb to negative peer pressure after they enter high school by being exposed to negative issues brought to school by students from the city of Sheridan. African American students agree with their White counterparts that African American students who were raised in dysfunctional family environments may negatively affect the learning environment once they enter high school. Consequently, African American students are aware that peer-pressure and bad behavior might exert a negative influence on their post-secondary and career aspirations.

The segregated nature of the students attending Sheridan High School highlights the important of peer pressure. Despite peer pressure prevalent in friends and community and the need to distance themselves from the bad behavior, both White and African American students did not describe the peer pressure or bad behavior as their pre-established segregated friendship network or community. The students blamed the peer pressure and bad behavior primarily on a normalization process students go through starting in their freshman year at Sheridan High School, meaning that after students entered Sheridan High School, they began to acquiesce to the bad behavior, lower academic expectations, and loss of focus on post-secondary and career plans from other races as normal.



## **Role of Race/Ethnicity in the College Choice Process**

Two primary factors contribute to the students' racialized experience once they enter Sheridan High School: (a) location (rural versus urban), and (b) academic program (Honors/IB versus College Preparatory). Although many studies have focused on the structural factors (family support, peer influence, teacher and guidance support, and public policy) that influence an individual's aspiration to go to college and the college decision making process, a question remains: Why do African American students enter high school with an equal or higher aspiration to go to college than their White and Asian peers but enter college at lower participation rates, unanswered because the convergence of educational aspirations along race, culture, and gender has not accounted for similar educational achievement across SES groups (Carter, 2003; Cooper, 2009; Freeman, 1997, 2004).

Students in this study had a racialized experience during their time at Sheridan High School. The racialized experience resulted from a combination of factors that started in the student's home and community and from their elementary and middle school education (Carter, 2005; Freeman, 2005; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009; William & Sanchez, 2011). White parents used social capital/networks to learn information about strategies to gain acceptance for their children into programs such as Honors and the Gifted and Talented program during elementary and middle school to create an academic advantage (opt out of classes, take advanced classes, test preparation, and exposure to veteran teachers) in order to increase the likelihood of their children to enroll in the Honors/IB program in high school (Muhammad, 2008; Pitre, 2006; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011).

Researchers have found that the family's socioeconomic status may account for differences in post-secondary enrollment decisions among different racial/ethnic groups (Freeman, 1997, 2006; Hearn et al., 1995; Perna, 2006; Pitre, 2006). Espenshade and Radford (2009) assert that urban high school students with high poverty concentrations are more likely to choose less selective post-secondary schools than their higher income peers, after controlling for academic ability. In this study, African Americans place a high value on education, but have a strong distrust for the Sheridan school district. African American parents did not utilize social capital/networks as a strategy to gain an academic advantage for their children, which circuitously creates an educational pipeline in the lowest academic program in Sheridan High School. African American students shared that school officials' lower academic expectation for them (the majority of the staff and administrators in the school are White) and steered them toward sports (Freeman, 2005; Williams & Sanchez, 2011).

Although a student's academic ability is a key determinant in college-going decisions, the relationship between a student's socioeconomic background and the high school's college-going culture was also vital to their decision to attend college (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997, 2005; Radford, 2009). White parents in the rural communities shared information on school choice, importance of Honors and IB curriculum for college preparedness, college savings plans, etc., regardless of socioeconomic status, providing opportunities for their children to gain academic and career exposure. In addition, when students who graduated from high school returned to the communities from college, they shared information about college workloads, living on campus, and choosing a major,

which provided a lens for high school students to better understand how to narrow down their college list and major during the search phase of the college choice process.

In this study, students at Sheridan High School seem to have different academic experiences based on race. The differences in academic experiences might shape the focus of the student's post-secondary and career plans. Students in the Honors and IB programs are more focused on entering directly into four-year "good schools" after high school graduation, whereas students in the College Preparatory program tend to aspire to attend two-year community colleges, choose job-oriented certificate programs, and enter the workforce or the military. Segregation within the academic tracking intensified the racialized experience students have at Sheridan; that is, the homogeneity of the academic programs with White students primarily in the Honors program and African American students primarily in the College Preparatory program.

A student's race/ethnicity and parental support (stable home life) play a critical role in influencing the students' academic preparation even before entering Sheridan High School and throughout their high school years (Lareau, 2011; McDonough & Calderone, 2011).

This study attempts to expand the existing literature by examining the college choice process through two critical theoretical lenses. First, this study intended to deepen an understanding of how the social and cultural context of urban high school students' families, communities, and schools can influence the students' decisions during the college choice process. Second, although numerous studies have detailed the struggles and college planning of students attending large urban high schools (Freeman, 1997, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Roderick, Coca & Nagaoka, 2011), little attention has been

paid to high school students' college aspirations attending smaller schools in rural settings.

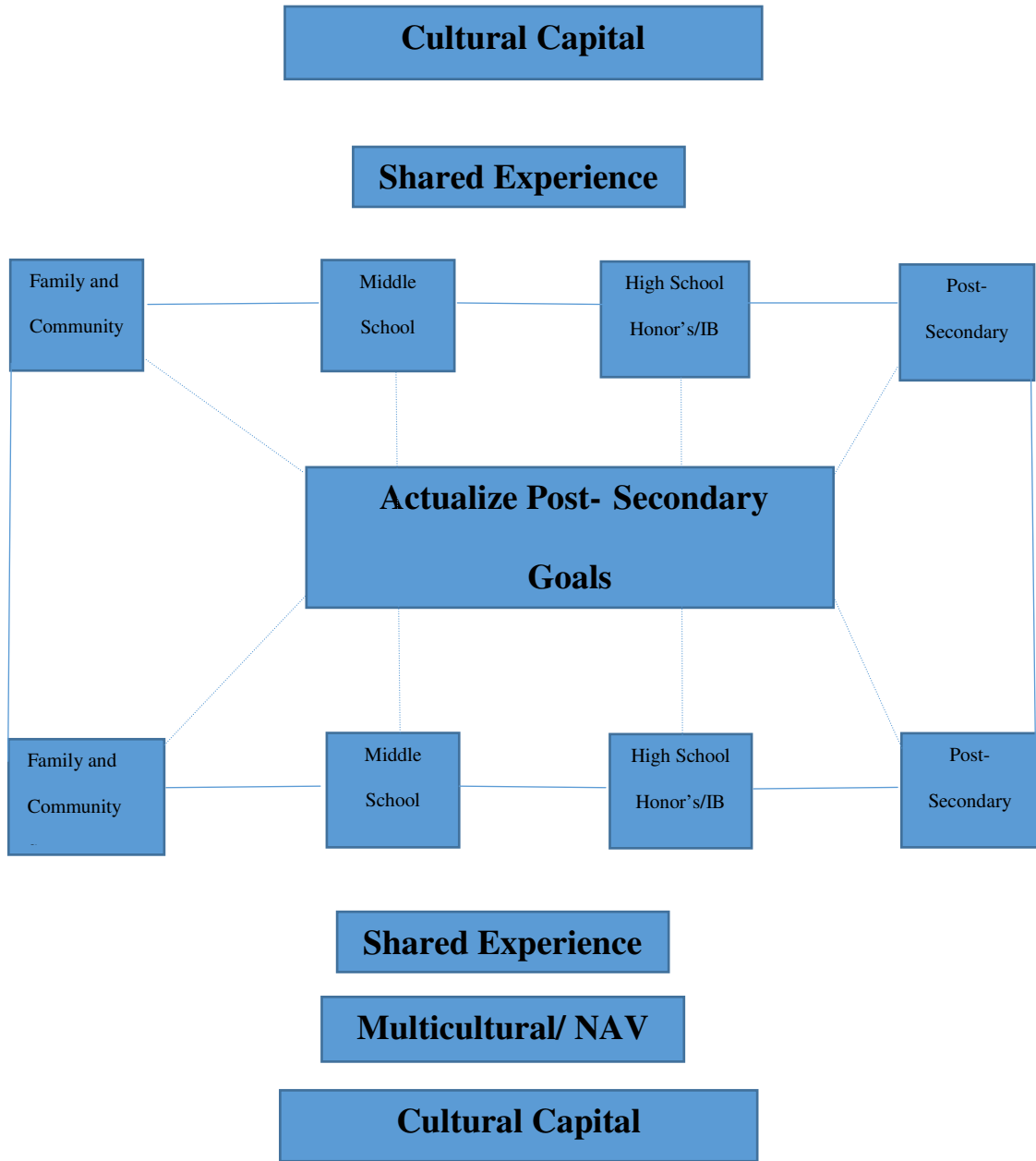
### **Implications for Theory**

In spite of some significant studies that examine a relationship between educational aspirations and enrollment in postsecondary institutions (Campbell, 1983; Jencks et al., 1983; Ganzeboom et al., 1991; Sirin, 2005), a gap still remains in the literature on why African American students start high school with a comparable educational aspiration to go to college as White and Asian American students, yet their college participations are significantly lower than their White and Asian peers (Carter, 2003; Cooper, 2009; Freeman, 1997, 2005; McDonough, 2006). This study is significant as it extends our understanding of how college aspirations are formed, changed, and shaped during the college choice process and why such aspirations can produce markedly different academic outcomes across race, socioeconomic status, culture, and community.

White students from the rural communities have a fundamentally different academic experience attending Sheridan High School than African American students from the city of Sheridan. Despite African American parents' high value of education, a fundamental difference between African American and White parents' worldview in regard to cultural capital and habitus is a lack of trust in the school system (parent, teacher, coach, guidance counselor, etc.) that can help shift the focus of African American parents from an oppositional cultural position to a belief that education is the "equalizer" for minorities to gain access (educational and career opportunities, home ownership, etc.) into the dominant culture (Bucchianeri, 2009; Carter, 2005; McClelland, 1990; Olivarez, & Tierney, 2005; Perna 2000). Figure 1 describes four key factors that

contribute to shaping the academic experience of White and African American students. I will fully discuss the four key factors in the following section.

*White Experience in Salem County*



*African American Experience in Salem County*

*Figure 1*

White and African American Students' Academic Experience

Bourdieu (1977) argued that “highbrow” interests embedded in upper and middle classes are a vital part of the lifestyle characteristics to the dominant class. Being a part of this “highbrow” culture provides students with advantages and rewards when they enter the school system. According to Bourdieu (1977), this socialization starts during the student’s formative schooling years when students may be unaware of the effort that is being expended by their parents to create the cultural capital. Depending on one’s socio-economic status, a person may develop a sense of the possibilities of their future prospects in life. The person’s beliefs are then transformed into actions that are central to the perpetuation of class structure. Cultural capital serves as a means of promoting relative social advantage in educational settings (Lareau, 2011): children who have access to cultural capital may be better prepared to engage in higher order thinking (critical analysis of abstract text, advanced mathematics, etc.) and may be preferred by teachers when compared to students who possess less cultural capital (Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

In the rural towns surrounding the city of Sheridan, the SES level of the families are predominantly lower to middle class. Cultural capital was demonstrated not by a passing down of “highbrow” culture from affluent families to their children but in a shared experience of White families in two prevailing areas: a strong value of education and a belief in what Ogbu called “the system”-- educational opportunities for members of the dominant group not offered to minorities. The prevailing belief in the rural communities was that if students succeed academically and graduate from a four-year college, they would be able to enter the job market and build their life as a part of the “American Dream.” This concept of cultural capital and habitus (shared experience) in

the rural communities is reinforced within the students' homes, by school officials (middle and high school), and by community members.

Bourdieu (1977) postulates that cultural capital originates from the development of a person's habitus, "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (p. 82). Scholars have mainly focused on cultural capital by looking at an individual's future aspirations or expectations (Dumais, 2002; Lareau 2001, 2011), or the overall belief about their abilities, and tangible value placed on educational success in school and life. Consequently, as argued by some scholars, academically-gifted students from lower income families may view schooling in an encouraging manner and may start to acquire cultural capital through schooling as a strategy to increase upward social mobility and overcome the barriers related to their class position (Bloom, 2006; McDonough, 2006; Pitre, 2006). A student's positive experience in school and increased cultural capital can positively influence his or her predisposition toward school (habitus), thereby fostering his or her academic performance and expanding worldviews.

In this study, Bourdieu's' concept of habitus was illuminated in White students' academic preparation in middle school, entrance into the Honors/IB program in high school, and the student's acceptance without question of their parents' plans for their post-secondary and career plans. White parents used social networks to gather information about school choice, test preparation, Gifted and Talented and Honors/IB programs, advanced placement classes, and college savings plans.

In summary, regardless of SES, White parents place a high value on education and place pressure on their children to succeed academically (GPA and state test scores)



and actively advocate for their children to take full advantage of all curricular (Gifted and Talented program in middle school, opt out of classes to take advanced classes, test preparation, etc.) resources provided by the school (McDonough, 1997, 2005, Perna, 2000, 2006; Pitre, 2006). For example, a White student from Queensbridge whose parents did not go to college and work as a truck driver and secretary and a White student from Magnolia whose parents both have master's degrees and work as a pathologist and Vice President of a company expressed similar sentiments about the importance of education in their home and community. These students were in the Honors programs in their respective middle schools and entered Sheridan High School in the Honors/IB program. Both students were at the top (GPA and class rank) of their graduating class and planned to attend a four-year college immediately after graduating from Sheridan High School. The students articulated a closeness in the rural communities where the students spent a considerable amount of time at each other's homes, and their parents shared information about academic programs, School Choice, and college choice) at social gatherings.

African American parents in the city of Sheridan do not share the same worldview of cultural capital as their White rural counterparts. The parents understand the value of education and encourage their children to succeed in school. However, the parents have a strong distrust for the Sheridan school district and believe that the system is set up for their children to fail (Carter, 2005; Freeman, 2005; Ogbu, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 2009). As Kim and Hargrove (2013) point out, African American parents constantly teach their children to take pride in being Black while simultaneously being cognizant of racial marginalization. The parents' understanding of their position in American racial

hierarchy is instilled in their children as explained in Ogbu's (1990) oppositional cultural theory.

Ogbu's (1990) oppositional cultural theory "considers the broad societal and school factors as well as the dynamics within the minority communities" (p. 158). The theory has two main points. The first part deals with the unequal treatment minorities face within a particular society. Ogbu argued that minority groups are systematically blocked from educational opportunities equivalent to those received by the dominant group. The second part is triggered by a disparity in access to opportunities for minority groups by the dominant culture. Ogbu (1979) argued that the incentive for excelling in school results from an understanding that acquiring higher levels of education will translate into better jobs, higher earnings, elevated social status, and increased self-worth. When minority groups face barriers within the opportunity structure and see their possibilities for upward mobility diminish, they develop a perception that no matter how hard they work to acquire additional education, the benefits they will receive from education will not be equal to that of the dominant group. This perception is the foundation of individual-level and community forces defined as oppositional culture, including the resistance to academic achievement in school.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argued that there is a "social-structural and cultural significance of race in education" (p. 48) that has not been rigorously understood in the analysis of educational inequality. They also suggest that psychological factors (parental support, peer influence, SES, and gender) alone do not explicate the significant differences in the educational experience and academic achievement between African American students and their White and Asian peers. Although the psychological factors

often traverse race and are cited in educational literature as reasons for differences in student educational outcomes, these factors fail to fully explain the academic achievement between African American students and their White and Asian peers (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Gates and West (2002) argue that the psychological factors used to explain the educational experience and performance of African American students matter, yet race and culture should be considered in the analysis of the significant differences in academic outcomes and the development of cogent solutions.

Unlike their White peers, African American students do not have a shared experience through cultural capital (strong value of education and a belief in the system). The prevailing belief of African Americans in the city of Sheridan about the prospect of the “American Dream” is not the same as their White peers. The students had access to the same academic resources in Sheridan Middle School as their White peers, but often the students were not encouraged by their parents or teachers to take advanced courses and enter the Honors/IB program in Sheridan High School. African American students were not exposed to a preconceived educational plans (starting in elementary and middle school), and their parents did not play an active role in influencing their children’s high school curriculum and post-secondary and career plans. African American parents do not use social networks to find out or share information (School Choice, test preparation, Gifted and Talented and Honors/IB programs, advanced placement classes, and college savings plans) in the same manner as their White counterparts. African American parents and community members have a strong distrust for the Sheridan school district regardless of the race of the teachers, school officials, etc., and whether they are from the city of

Sheridan or the rural communities (Bucchianeri, 2009; Freeman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Carter's (2005) concept of the multicultural navigator points to "several individual differences such as racial and ethnic ideology, cultural styles, access to resources, and treatment within school and family" (p. 12), explaining why some African American students do not excel in school. Carter (2005) challenges Ogbu's work, arguing that students understand the value of succeeding in education but resist abandoning their cultural identities to achieve success in education. The importance of Carter's multicultural navigator theory to this study is twofold. African American students articulated post-secondary and career plans did not describe the notion of succeeding in school as "acting White." The students were aware of their African American culture and some of them wanted to prove that academic success was not only the purview of White students. When African American students had all of their social and cultural needs met, the students met or exceeded their White peers' educational outcomes.

Carter (2005) argues that multicultural navigators are "people who possess both dominant and non-dominant cultural capital" (p. 150). Multicultural navigators can be role models for minority students, showing them the necessary skills to live a "bicultural existence"; that is, how to develop the aspiration to go to college and stay connected to their cultural codes. Levine and Nidiffer (1996) posit that all of the informants in their study had a similar story of why the informants ended up enrolling in college: there was a person who inspired and challenged them to make a change in their lives. The mentors varied among the students (teacher, parent, social worker, neighbor), but the common

thread was that the person came into their lives in the moment they were ready for it (Bloom, 2006; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Lareau, 2011).

### **College Choice Model**

A number of scholars have found that African American students have higher aspirations to go to college than their White peers (Berkner et al., 2007; Freeman, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 2008; Qian & Blair, 1999) at the beginning of high school, yet their aspirations do not translate into post-secondary participation (Nagaoka et al., 2009; Pitre, 2006; Sirin & Roger-Sirin, 2005). It is clear that “something” befalls African American students during the college choice process that decreases their post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans. However, there are few clear explanations as to why White and Asian students on the same SES level are not similarly impacted. College choice research has not adequately addressed the differences in the decision-making process between African American students and other ethnic groups. Scholars in the field of college choice literature have articulated cultural and structural barriers African American students face during the college choice process but failed to explain how or why these barriers adversely impact them versus other ethnic groups (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model is a useful framework to view African American students as they progress through the different phases of the college choice process. The model does not focus on all of the issues faced by African American students, but it is helpful in discussing their decisions during the college choice process. The previous research using Hossler and Gallagher’s model has primarily focused on the predisposition (beginning) and choice phase (end) of the college choice process, with little attention to the search (middle) phase. There is still a gap in the literature to explain

what happens to African American students once they enter the college choice process, start the search process, and start making decisions that ultimately impact their post-secondary opportunities during the choice phase.

The predisposition phase encompasses the development of educational aspirations and career plans in conjunction with the development of the goals to enter post-secondary education. Students as young as the eighth grade start to develop plans for post-secondary education, and by ninth grade most of them have already developed post-secondary educational aspirations and career plans (Akos, 2007). The current research provides evidence that White students (from the rural communities) were directed by their parents and advised by middle teachers to opt out of classes during their middle school years and to take advanced academic classes. The students were also able to gain exposure to different careers by participating in internships within the community and through dialogue with parents, community members, and teachers about their academic and career choices. The consequence of the exposure (academically and professionally) was that White students entered the predisposition phase of the college choice process with a well-defined understanding of the academic requirements (grades and test scores) needed to gain acceptance into a four-year college and the number of years of post-secondary education and major needed to reach a specific career. On the contrary, African American students were not advised by their parents to opt out of classes and to take advanced classes even if the students were members of the Honors program during middle school. The students also did not have many opportunities to gain exposure to careers by participating in internship programs while in middle school. Conversely, African American students entered the predisposition phase of the college choice process later

and less informed than their White peers about the academic requirements needed to gain acceptance into a four-year college and the number of years of post-secondary education and major needed to reach a specific career. In brief, White students entered Sheridan High School in the Honors/IB program with a focus of gaining acceptance into a four-year college and earning a degree in a major in which they can transition into a specific career. African American students entered Sheridan High School in the College Preparatory (general education) program with a less-defined goal about post-secondary education and more focus on learning skills (drafting, beautician, auto mechanic, computer technician, etc.) that can help them gain immediate employment after high school graduation.

The search phase is when students start to collect information about colleges and universities. The search phase typically begins in the tenth grade when students take the Preliminary SAT (PSAT), which is a trigger for colleges and universities to start sending high school students' information about their institution (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). During the search phase, students start to match their aspirations and institutional characteristics to create a set of educational options (McDonough, 2006). According to Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), parents influence their children during the search phase by being involved in the selection of post-secondary institutions to which their children eventually apply. College-educated parents are better prepared (more knowledgeable) than lower income parents about the different types of financial aid (grants, scholarships, loans, and private loans) available and the requirements to receive the aid (Finn & Owings, 2006). College-educated parents' knowledge of the financial aid process is primarily informed by their experiences of going through the process as

students and the ability to use social networks to connect with parents that either currently or recently went through the financial aid process.

The findings of this study match the college choice literature, that a lack of information about the college (timing of application process, financial aid deadlines, and parental lack of college knowledge) application process can impede African American students from entering post-secondary education (Bergerson, 2009; Carter, 2003; Freeman, 1997, 2005). African American parents' lack of knowledge about the financial aid process can also be detrimental to planning for post-secondary education (Smith & Fleming, 2006). Despite the willingness of African American parents to be involved during the college choice process, studies have found that their lack of "college knowledge" often hinders their role (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper 1999; Qian & Blair, 1999; Smith & Fleming, 2006). This finding supports previous findings of Hearn et al. (1995), Hill,(2008), Hurtado et al., (1997), and McDonough, (1997), which found that African American students enter the search phase later than White and Asian students but also submit fewer college applications and submit them late in the college application cycle.

Students may form unrealistic goals based on limited or inaccurate information (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999) during the college choice process. Some students may not be able to accurately evaluate their current academic performance and curriculum track to see if they have or will have the appropriate grades and core courses to gain acceptance into a particular post-secondary institution they desire. The student's final list generally relies on the level of diligence in information gathering and the amount of resources available to the student and parents (Freeman, 2005; McDonough, 1997, 2005).



During the choice phase of the college choice process, guidance counselors and teachers play a more prominent role for urban high school students than their parents and peers (McDonough, 1997, 2005). Researchers have found that individual factors (religion and cultural awareness), social and cultural variables (socioeconomic status and particular region of the country), and organizational variables (type of college, cost of attendance, and financial aid award) were factored prominently into African American students' final enrollment decision (Freeman, 1997; Pitre, 2006; McDonough, 1997). In this study, African American students entered the choice phase of the college choice process with a narrowed focus on gaining technical skills that can help them gain employment directly after graduating from high school, the possibility of going to a two-year college, or entering the military.

### **Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study offer several suggestions for K-12 and education in general regarding how to improve the number of African American students successfully navigating the college choice process and entering post-secondary education. While previous research highlights the factors that help or hinder African American students during the college choice process (McDonough, 1997, 2005; Freeman, 2005; Pitre, 2006), exposing African American students earlier to different career options will improve their preparation and persistence once they start the college choice process in high school. The study suggests that African American students often enter high school with the aspiration to go to college, but they have not received the adequate academic preparation and guidance in middle school to enter the highest level academic curriculum in high school, which in turn can impact their academic experience in high school and hinder their post-

secondary and career aspirations. Because of the racialized experiences students can have in high school, each high school must understand the differences in student academic experiences based on their academic track (whether covert or overt), and provide resources to help fill the gaps (academic deficiencies, lack of parental support, negative peer influence) students may have during the college choice process (McDonough & Calderone, 2010; Pitre; 2006). Consequently, high schools concerned with helping African American students navigate the college choice process to enter post-secondary education should develop a set of strategies such as afterschool tutoring mentorship programs and career exploration during elementary and middle school to address some of the issues (poverty, crime, teenage pregnancies, etc.) that are germane to their environment (urban or rural, SES, large or small school population).

As McDonough and Calderone (2010) and other researchers (Freeman, 2005; Muhammad, 2008; Ogbu, 1995a; Pitre, 2006) argue, African American parents put a high value on cultural identity, which can lead to the development of oppositional cultural behavior (disregard for the importance of education) in preparing their children for formal schooling. Carter (2005) asserted that multicultural navigators “who understand their own social realities” (Carter, 2005, p. 149) help African American students fill in some of the gaps that persist in their homes, community, and within school. As such, in this study, most of the African American participants with parents and siblings who attended college, had detailed plans (type of college, location, major) to enter post-secondary education similar to those of their White peers.

White students engaged with parents, family members, and school officials very early on during elementary school, with exposure to colleges during parent alumni

functions, internship or shadow days at local hospital or community businesses. The exposure, along with high academic expectations and participation in Honors and Gifted and Talented programs, helped shape the post-secondary and career plans for White students prior to the start of high school. Before and during African American students' formative school years, school personnel should enlist community members (multicultural navigators) to help provide exposure (advanced classes, careers, and tutoring) as they transition from middle school to high school.

The school personnel should develop a formal program in which students as young as kindergarten are partnered with mentors in different professions. Organizations such as Black Fraternities and Sororities, Big Brothers and Sisters, Salvation Army, United Way, and 100 Black Men that partner with schools across the country provide services for students to help them succeed academically and in life. Another strategy to enhance the cultivation of African American students' post-secondary and career plans can be facilitated by the development of an academic elective course, High School Placement (HSP), in the middle school. These courses will focus on the exposure to SAT/ACT test preparation, importance of high academic achievement, steps to opt out of classes based on state test scores, and introduction to high school Honors/IB program. By the end of the HSP courses the students will have a broader understanding (when registering for their high school courses) of earning good grades and entry into the Honors/IB program to achieve their post-secondary and career goals.

In this study, only one African American out of seven was in the Honors program in Sheridan Middle School and then continued on in the program in Sheridan High School. The students in the Honors/IB program had a measurable difference in academic

preparation and laid out more detailed post-secondary and career plans compared with students in the College Preparatory program. The Sheridan High School guidance counselors' normal workload does not provide ample time to work on college planning because more than half of their time is used to make sure the students stay on track to graduate from high school. Thus, a full-time college counselor in the high school with a primary focus on working with students to create individualized college placement plans, financial aid/scholarship, and arranging college visits may be critical in helping African American students navigate the college choice process en route to entering post-secondary education. In the state in which this study was conducted, diminishing aid for public schools has led to the elimination of the Director of Guidance position, which served to provide direct services and support to students for college preparation and application.

School officials in the high school should consider utilizing community members and social organizations to help fill the gap in college counseling, if a school district does not have sufficient funding to hire a full or part-time counselor. The community volunteer(s) can start working with students during their freshman year to build an individualized college plan, which includes mandatory workshops (dual degree course offerings, introduction to Honors and advanced courses, the college application process, financing college, and selecting a career) for parents. The individualized college plan will be developed as a component of a two-year high school elective course (College and Career Exploration); each year of the elective, students will be required to visit one college open house and sit in on an Admissions and Financial aid presentation held at the school.

Finally, findings from this study support previous research that African American students enter high school with less academic preparation than their White peers (McDonough & Calderone, 2011; Perna, 2005; Pitre, 2006). African American parents have a lack of trust in the school district within the city of Sheridan and are reluctant to allow their children to participate in the Honors and Gifted and Talented programs in the middle school. The parents spent a considerable amount of time preparing their children for the prospect of being marginalized during their academic careers while making sure the students had access to the best academic curriculum and utilized all available resources within the school (Freeman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ogbu, 1995a; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2011; Walpole, 2004). Therefore, providing the opportunity for African American students to interact with and establish rapport with multicultural navigators very early on in their academic career is key to forming college aspirations; relationships and trust can be forged between the school district and the African American parents. Therefore, school districts (K-12) should work to build relationships with local social/service organizations to facilitate the college placement process for African American students (McDonough, 2006).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The central focus of this study was on two racial groups of students: African American and White from different community backgrounds (urban and rural) as they navigated the college choice process in high school. My attempt was to provide a lens to uncover the academic experiences and the decisions by students and their parents at each stage of the college choice process among White and African American students and how a confluence of factors helps or hinders their post-secondary and career aspirations. A

number of studies have identified the cultural and social factors (parental support, college- going culture of the school, peer influence) that can cause a drop in African Americans' post-secondary and career aspirations once they enter the college choice process as compared to their White and Asian peers (Freeman, 2005; Muhammad, 2008; McDonough & Calderone, 2010; Tierney & Auerbach, 2004). Yet, there have been a limited number of studies that provided a framework to understand the fundamental social and cultural differences between White and African American students in their home, community, and school experiences, which have a significant impact on the development of tangible and detailed post-secondary and career plans before they start high school. Given the growing issues in urban African American communities (high prison populations, underemployed and unemployed rates, single-parent households, etc.), understanding how to improve their academic experience in kindergarten through middle school can better equip the students to develop the habitus needed to navigate the college choice process in order to achieve college and career aspirations. However, many questions remain yet to be answered. This study suggests additional research is needed to understand the African American academic experience in other settings (rural and suburban) in comparison to their White counterparts. Furthermore, African American students who attend different high schools may possess some characteristics and experiences similar to those of the study participants, but may contrast with others. Additional recommendations for future research are as follows:

1. The present study offers salient descriptions of African American and White students' academic experiences in one high school setting, but is less generalizable in describing their academic experiences in a larger context.

Considering the homogeneity of the urban and rural communities by race, unraveling the social and cultural factors that impact the development of post-secondary and career plans are significant in distinguishing why one racial group's post-secondary outcomes are better than the other's. Future researchers should use a larger data set by race, grade level, and academic program to form a clearer picture of the students' chances of translating college aspirations into actual college attendance across race. The current study is based on the experiences of nine students as they navigate the college choice process during high school. Future studies should attempt to further examine the impact of academic preparation (academic program, grades, test scores) in elementary and middle school on the development of post-secondary and career plans. For example, conducting interviews with students during the spring of their eighth grade school year and viewing their academic records can foster a better understanding of their academic track, whether they are taking advanced classes, and what type of guidance has been received in developing post-secondary and career plans (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

2. In this study, the perspectives of students and guidance counselors were collected and analyzed. As I illustrated throughout the analysis in Chapter IV, parents and family members, teachers, and staff are major influencers to students' post-secondary and career plans during the college choice process. Therefore, it would be beneficial in the future to examine how parents and students use cultural capital and habitus to develop the academic and social cues which are understood and admired by educational gatekeepers (teachers,

staff, and school officials) and used as the foundation to prepare students to navigate the college choice process.

3. In this study, only one African American student whose academic experiences matched White students in the same program was in the Honors/IB program. The student's experience provided insight into a better understanding of the differences in academic preparation between the Honors/IB and the College Preparatory programs. Illustrating the homogeneity by race of the academic programs in the high school, there were no White students in the study in the College Preparatory program. Future research should be conducted to examine if the White students in the College Preparatory program had similar post-secondary outcomes as the White students in the Honors/IB program or whether their academic experiences and post-secondary outcomes matched African American students in the lower level program. Given that almost all White students in this study were in the Honors/IB program whereas the vast majority of African American students were in the College Preparatory program, future research should be undertaken to determine if tracking (covert or overt) is used in different K-12 schools based on race by the name of academic programs (Honors versus College Preparatory) and what impact being in the academic programs has on students' development, academic achievement, and post-secondary planning.
4. Although this study did not focus specifically on how SES, single parent homes, parent educational level, and career occupation can impact students' development of post-secondary or career plans, lower income White students



in this study with parents who did not go to college had a shared experience (academic preparation in middle and high school, unwavering belief in the value of education, and detailed post-secondary and career plans) with their more affluent White peers whose parents had advanced degrees. White parents use social capital/networking to acquire information about resources in the community and school system that can put their children in the best academic environment throughout their school careers. Additional research should be conducted to understand what channels lower income White parents use to gain information (academic programs, School Choice, college application process, college savings plans) to help their children develop the habitus needed to actualize their post-secondary and career plans.

5. In this study, students had a racialized experience during their time at Sheridan High School. The students developed negative perceptions of other races in their communities before attending the school and had limited interaction with other races throughout the school day. Further research should be conducted to determine how attending segregated schools influence the college choice process across different ethnic groups.
6. In this study, African American parents displayed a reluctance to use social networks to acquire information that can help improve their children's educational outcomes. The reluctance comes from a lack of trust that the Sheridan school district has their children's best interests at heart. Further research should be conducted to determine how school administrators can help

build trust with African American parents and within the community of Sheridan.

### **Conclusion**

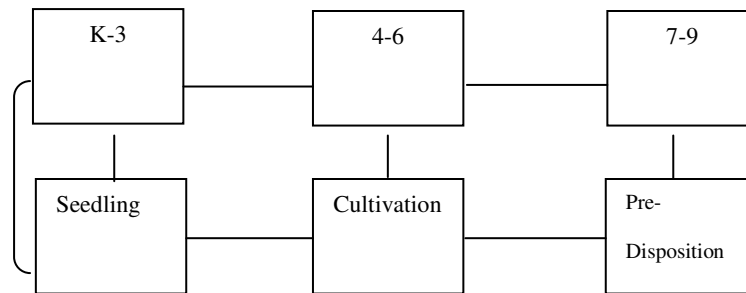
Alexander (2010) posits that public policy enacted over the past thirty years (War on Drugs, minimum sentencing requirements, and Welfare reform) has played a part in devastating communities in ways that are regressing progress made during the civil rights movement. Alexander (2010) argues that more African American men are in prison or under the watch of the criminal justice system than there were enslaved in 1850. What is equally distressing are the incarceration rates for African American youth. According to the NAACP (2013), African-Americans “represent 26% of juvenile arrests, 44% of youth who are detained, 46% of the youth who are judicially waived to criminal court, and 58% of the youth admitted to state prisons” (p. 1).

The U.S. Department of Labor (2012) reported that in 2012 the unemployment rate among African American youth (ages 16-19) was 39.3%, which is almost double the 20.9% unemployment rate for White youth in the same age group. Alexander (2010) poignantly describes a vicious cycle in urban communities across the United States: a parent is out of work for an extended time period, gets into trouble, goes to jail; and the family members left behind are cut off from public assistance and forced to find housing and food. Once the housing support is gone, many of the children are forced to live on the streets, in shelters, or become a part of the foster care system. The dire economic and social ramifications (risk of prolonged unemployment, underemployment, incarceration, etc.) of living in poverty will not change unless students acquire higher levels of post-secondary education (Cancian & Danizer, 2009).

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model (predisposition, search, and choice) utilizes both sociological and econometric views to describe the developmental process which students go through regarding their college decisions (Morrice, 2011). Two prevailing critiques of the model are a lack of focus on minority students and a failure to articulate how factors such as SES, parental and family support, and the college going culture of a school can impact a students' progress through the three stages. In this study, it is clear that by the time African American students enter high school, it is almost too late to significantly impact their educational outcomes, if the student does not already possess the habitus (academic preparation, belief in the value of education) fostered in the home, the community, and the formative years of education (Conley, 2010). What is also evident from this study is the academic experience of African American students that have the habitus before entering high school mirror the academic experiences and educational outcomes of their White peers. African American students need to be exposed to professionals and careers before the eighth grade, when the students start to develop post-secondary and career plans.

Figure 2 adds two phases to Hossler and Gallagher's seminal college choice process (Seedling and Cultivation) and moves up the start of the predisposition phase to the start of a student's seventh grade year. By expanding the college choice process, educators and policy makers will have additional time to expose African American students to careers and professionals as well as develop the habitus the students will need to develop detailed post-secondary and career plans.

Grade level



*Figure 2*

Expansion of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) College Choice Model

My intent in conducting this research was to fill a gap in the college choice literature about the experiences White and African American students have during the college choice process. The prior college choice research focus has been on the factors that impacted lower income African American students' aspirations to enter post-secondary education during the college choice process. During the college choice process African American students from affluent, middle, and lower income backgrounds start the college choice process with a higher or equal aspiration to go to college as their White or Asian peers. But something happens during African American students' high school years which lowers their aspiration to go to college, whereas White students across SES levels appear to have a shared experience and understanding that post-secondary education is connected to obtaining a specified career and the American Dream. What emerges in this study is parents' use of social networks and students' exposure to professionals familiar with the process of entering post-secondary education as vital to

students overcoming barriers and issues in their community which can hinder their future post-secondary and career plans.

The perspective of the African American students in the study provides context to the social and cultural barriers discussed in the literature as impacting African American students' aspirations to enter post-secondary education. The college choice process is complex because of the interplay between the type of academic preparation and guidance a student has received before and during high school and the college-going culture of the school. The fact that African American students are participating in post-education in higher numbers over the past 30 years is a positive trend (Pathways to Education, 2003; NCES, 2012). However, African American students still face negative racial stereotypes and perceptions which marginalize them in school settings, attend failing and underfunded schools, and experience poverty in higher numbers than their White peers. Given that there is very little research from the perspective of African American students' about the challenges they face which can impact their decisions during the college choice process, further research is needed beyond the scope of this study.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE: STUDENT INTERVIEW

**Interviewer Protocol  
Sheridan City High School**

\*Note: The initial student interview protocol was developed by Christopher Tienken.

You are—you're a sophomore? Junior? Sophomore.

Okay. So how has this year been so far?

(Follow up)- My experience is... that you get more friends, there's more activities too, more classes. I mean, sure, I don't like having nine classes, but that's okay.

(Follow up) So do you play/ participate in any other activities?

Any outside hobbies?

Have things been different for you here than they were in like middle school? Has it been a new beginning for you? (why/why not)

(Follow up) When you say [\_\_\_\_\_], you mean .....

What is your best subject?

(Follow up ) So does your interest in \_\_\_\_\_—is that related at all to the teacher or is it separate from—your interest in \_\_\_\_\_ is separate from whether the teacher is a good teacher or not?

(Follow up ) Can you give me an example?

So \_\_\_\_\_ is good. Is there, um, is there—well, I guess you told me your favorite class. Do you have a least favorite class?

What else do you take?

What do you do in those classes?

If you were to describe how your classes here are different from your middle school classes, what would you say? I mean, I think you said a little bit about it, Is there anything else that makes a difference?

What are you focusing on in [FILL IN SUBJECT]

Are there any other kinds of things you're involved in at school aside from your classes?

How do you think your personality changes from home to school? Or does it stay the same? WHY?

Who you are seems to be driven by some sort of attitude. Some sort of decision you made or something? How did that come about?

(Follow up) So it sounds like, in the back of your mind, you're thinking to yourself, "\_\_\_\_\_,", and I feel like there's some other thought there.

[If not already revealed] Do you have any siblings? What are they like?

What kind of paths have your siblings taken?

[If older] Have they all graduated from high school?

(Follow up) Have some of them? All of them? What do your parents think of that decision?

What are your plans after graduation?

(Follow up) How did you come up with it, do you think?

Do you know anyone who's a \_\_\_\_\_?

Do you have a second choice?

What about your friends? Did they have ideas about what they think you should do after high school?

What about your family? What do they think you should do?

(Follow up) How do they encourage you exactly?

What about people at school? Like guidance counselors, teachers. Do you get the sense that they have any specific idea of what you should do after you graduate?

Is there anybody else here at school? One of your teachers maybe. Anybody else who works at school who has some different idea that they have suggested to you?

What's a typical school day like for you and then your friends? Start to finish.

Now do you ever have homework or anything that you're supposed to be doing?

Do you get assigned a lot of homework or just a little bit of homework? Or—

If you were going to describe—if you were going to give me three words that would describe you as a student, what would you say?

(Follow up) How about three phrases then?

If you were to tell me what is the thing you enjoy the most in your life right now, what would you say?

When you think about what you want to do in the future, do you feel like—do you have any concerns about things that might stop you or be barriers to what you want to be.

(Follow up) How do you think you've developed that philosophy?

(Follow up) Do you think there's anybody else that kind of guides you or gives you some inspiration in that way?

What about—what about this high school? Do you think there are things in this high school that will help you achieve your future goals?

Now do you think there's things at this high school that might prevent you from accomplishing everything you want to accomplish?

(Follow up) Would you say you've had a negative/positive experience in high school?

Do you think you could have been doing better this year in high school? Or do you think that you pretty much did what you could do and you pretty much had been doing the best you could be doing?

What is it like at this high school? What are the students like here?

What percentage of ninth graders are kind of not—are cutting classes or not engaged or failing or whatever?

(Follow up) What about—does that percentage increase or decrease when you go up grades?

Do you ever imagine yourself kind of changing your approach to school as you go through high school, or do you think you'll stay pretty focused?

So anyone in particular have their eye on you?

(Follow up) And you think that happens for other students too?

Do you feel like you are a typical student here?

Have you lived here in Sheridan City your whole life?

Do you have any kind of extended family here?

Do you picture yourself staying here for the rest of your life?

Do you know if there are any security or safety issues here at this school?

Do you have any plans for the summer?

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW GUIDE: GUIDANCE COUNSELOR INTERVIEW

#### **SHS Guidance Questions Spring 2013**

\*Note: The initial guidance interview protocol was developed by Rebecca Cox and La Toro Yates.

##### Background

How did you come to work here at SHS as a guidance counselor?

##### Educational/Professional experience

What is the organization of the guidance counselor's office (e.g. how many counselors, head of guidance etc.?)

What does the job consist of exactly?

##### Life of a Sheridan guidance counselor

Different categories of work that you do- typical day/typical week

Rhythm of the school year—month by month; key stuff that you do for 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 11<sup>th</sup> graders, 12<sup>th</sup> graders

- What is your expectation of students graduating from Sheridan and going to college?

##### Scheduling

What is involved with creating students' schedules? How much input do students get/how does that happen? AP/Honors; Electives; SCC courses; failed courses; HSPA/SRA

##### Students

Characterize the students you are responsible for (Caseload)

Minimum that you do for each student/maximum

Most common issues that students come to you for; your response/strategy

Less typical issues? Crises? What kinds of problems do you see that you refer to someone else?

Level of involvement with family members?

Graduation

How much work is involved in making sure your kids graduate?

When/do students get clear on graduation requirements/what it takes to graduate?

- Student focus on credits vs. grades. Is this a problem?

What have been the biggest issues in getting this year's seniors to graduate? (attendance, failed courses, HSPA/SRA)

What % of your seniors will not be graduating?

Post-Graduation Counseling

Current 12<sup>th</sup> graders--% breakdown have confirmed plans for next year (school; work; other)

To what extent/when do you start talking to students about their post-SHS plans?

Are their plans realistic?

Typical timeline of SAT, application process for students who want to go to college? (vs. ideal timeline—reason for the difference between ideal and typical)

Resources available to SHS students who want to go to college? (general college info; college visits, app, financial aid, School based). Do students tend to take advantage of these resources? Or which students do? why/how?

In what ways are parents/family members involved concerning students' postsecondary planning?

SHS as a place to work

Best part about your job/worst part?

- What are some of the variables that impede you from accomplishing your work each day?
- What resources would make it easier for you to do your job?

What keeps you here? What would have to happen for you to consider leaving?