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## Research in Brief - Pushing Education: Parental Engagement, Educational Aspirations and College Access

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# Research in Brief - Pushing Education: Parental Engagement, Educational Aspirations and College Access

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Support for this research comes from Elon University's School of Education.

# Pushing Education:

## Parental Engagement, Educational Aspirations, and College Access



Dr. Darris R. Means is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia. He earned his Ph.D. in Educational Research and Policy Analysis with a concentration in Higher Education from North Carolina State University. His research focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion in K-12 and higher education contexts. Specifically, his scholarship focuses on (a) college access and persistence for students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students and (b) sexual orientation, race, and gender in higher education.



Katherine Wicke LaPlante is the Assistant Director of Counseling and Family Programs for the Elon Academy, a college access and success program housed at Elon University. In this role, she is fortunate to provide counseling support to underrepresented students and their families. She also designs programming for families to educate and empower them throughout their student's journey to college. She graduated from Elon University with a degree in Psychology. She earned a master's degree in Clinical Psychology from Loyola University in Maryland. Additionally, she is a Licensed Psychologist in North Carolina at the Licensed Psychological Associate (LPA) level.



Cherrel Miller Dyce, is an Assistant Professor of Education and Faculty Fellow for The Center for Race, Ethnicity, and Diversity Education (CREDE) at Elon University. A social justice advocate, K-20 pipeline researcher, mentor, and social theorist, Dr. Dyce believes in uplifting marginalized communities through education. She emphasizes cultural competence, diversity, social justice, and critical self-reflection in all research projects. She studies educational inequities, particularly Black males in education, the educational outcomes for students of color, family and community engagement, and preparing preservice and inservice teachers to interact with diverse learners.

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**F**amily<sup>1</sup> engagement research in education has come far from the early days where it was concluded that parents, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or parents of color, who did not participate in traditional activities, such as parent-teacher conferences and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, were not interested in their student or involved with their education. Instead, research highlights the many barriers that groups based on class and/or race/ethnicity may experience when navigating more traditional methods of engagement (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). Family engagement research is beginning to acknowledge that families are not involved in a vacuum; that is, their beliefs regarding education and their efforts at engagement are subject to many factors, including their own educational experiences, their understanding of the school system, and how parents are invited to engage in their schools (Barton, et al., 2004; Hoover-Dempsey

& Sandler, 1997). Additionally, more current research is discovering that families can be engaged in their student's education in ways both academic (asking about homework, volunteering in the classroom) and non-academic (support for their extracurricular and community activities; Auerbach, 2007; Barton et al., 2004; Kiyama, 2010). Acknowledging that engagement can take place outside of the classroom and outside of the ways often prescribed by schools is particularly important for marginalized families who may be presented with barriers to accessing educational information through traditional methods of engagement, and particularly information about the college process.

One way family members can gain information regarding college is through college access and preparation programs.<sup>2</sup> A common understanding of college preparation programs is that they are designed to increase access and information related to college for underserved<sup>3</sup> students; programming that

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<sup>1</sup> The terms family and parent are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript. The researchers are inclusive of parents, guardians, siblings, grandparents, and other family members who have a role in raising children when using both terms.

<sup>2</sup> The terms college access programs and college preparation programs are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript.

<sup>3</sup> The researchers use underserved students to represent students with no family history of college, students from a lower socioeconomic status, and/or students of color.

is designed to complement their public school education (Tierney & Jun, 2001). However, the research shows that without valuing the cultural and personal background of families, efforts at outreach and guidance will be ill-received and likely, ineffective (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Mattingly, Prislun, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). A part of valuing students' culture and background means involving families. Researchers have concluded that family engagement in college preparation programs is critical when trying to help students access postsecondary education (Corwin, Colyar, & Tierney, 2005; Rueda, 2005; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). However, in many college preparation programs interaction with families is minimal, and may include only superficial activities, such as signing paperwork (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Furthermore, there is limited research on the role of families in college preparation programs (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

experiences of parents who have children in a college access program, which are typically designed for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and/or students with limited or no family history of college.

## Theoretical Framework

The ecologies of parental engagement (EPE) framework (Barton et al., 2004) guided this study. Barton and colleagues (2004) presented three assumptions of the EPE framework, which help to frame family or parental engagement as an interactive process:

**“Parental engagement is the mediation between space and capital by parents in relations to others in school settings”** (p. 5): Instead of exploring parental engagement from a stance of involvement (e.g. attendance at school meetings), the EPE framework is based on understanding

parental engagement through exploring the context of space and capital. Parental engagement can be understood as the juxtaposition of parents' actions in school settings in the context of their own capital (human, social, and material) and the values or norms in the space (i.e., school- or home/community-based space). The EPE framework, unlike traditional models of parental involvement, does not seek to understand parental engagement as an outcome. Instead, the EPE framework seeks to understand relationships and actions within the context of a space.

Therefore, Barton and

colleagues argue for the examination of parental engagement as an interactive process between capital and space instead of the static notion of participation in parent-teacher meetings, PTA, and other organized school events and meetings.

**“Engagement as mediation must be understood as both an action and an orientation to action”** (p.5): Barton and colleagues understand action as “acts, processes, or forms of doing something” (p. 8). However, they “also describe how actions exist within and help to shape the relationships and practices of schooling” (p. 8).

The orientation to action refers to the notion that action is always driven by something, such as the drive to make changes within a school setting or the drive to help one's child prepare for college.



The purpose of this qualitative, single case study was to add to the conversation on family engagement in college access programs. The following question guided this research: How do parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and limited or no family history of college engage in their student's education? There were two subquestions: (a) How do parents of from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and limited or no family history of college engage in their student's education in academic and nonacademic settings? (b) How do parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and limited or no family history of college perceive the role of a college access program in engaging in their student's education? Each question is embedded in the context of understanding the

The EPE framework understands parental engagement through two types of action: “how parents activate the resources available to them in a given space in order to author a place of their own in schools and how they use or express that place to position themselves differently so that they can influence life in schools” (p. 8). In addition, the authors challenge the traditional notions of capital (e.g. financial resources) and discuss how individuals may leverage various forms of capital (e.g. resilience) to author spaces and position themselves within those spaces.

**“Differences in parental engagement across different kinds of spaces in urban schools are both a micro- and macro phenomenon”** (pp. 5-6): The authors discussed three types of spaces: school-based settings; school-based, nonacademic settings; and community/home-based settings. These spaces are framed by micro contexts (individual classroom settings) and macro contexts (educational policy, financial resources). The authors discussed how parental engagement was shaped in each setting by micro and macro contexts but also by open communication with parents, perceived capital, and perceived ability to activate their capital.

We used the EPE framework to understand how and why parents became involved in their student’s education. In addition, we explored the activities that the family members chose to engage in by considering the act of engagement as an interactive process, which was framed in the context of space (academic and nonacademic), life history, beliefs, and the capital (Barton et. al, 2004). We focused on a group of parents in one college access program designed for students and families with a financial need and/or no or limited family history of college. We sought to also understand their experiences in the college access program and how they perceived the program in engaging in their student’s education.

## Method

Five family members from the Lakeside Academy, a university-based college access program for academically-promising high school students with a financial need and/or little to no family history of college in one southeastern U.S. county, participated in this study. The five family members were all women and mothers of students in the Lakeside Academy. They all identified having some type of financial need. Approaching their life histories and current experiences of educational engagement, both in academic and non-academic spaces, from a counterstory perspective allowed the researchers to fully evaluate their experiences. Counterstories originated from critical race theory, a theory that examines how racism is embedded in U.S. social institutions and structures (Del-

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gado & Stefancic, 2001; Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002). Counterstories are the stories told by individuals who are marginalized by societal systems and structures; their stories offer a counter voice to the majoritarian voices that often rely on stereotypes to describe the lives of marginalized people (Bell, 2003; Yosso, 2006). Counterstories add a critical layer of information to the public discourse, which allows people to begin to acknowledge the experiences of marginalized groups (Bell, 2003; Carney, 2004; Yosso, 2006).

The five family members participated in two one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with a research team member. The participants had an option to participate in a focus group or complete a third one-on-one, semi-structured interview, and two participants chose to participate in the focus group. The three members of the research team independently read the transcripts and developed a list of emerging codes through an open coding process. The researchers then worked together to develop a codebook and independently applied the codebook to code one transcript. The researchers met together to have a conversation about disparities and refine code definitions before coding all the interview transcripts. The coding process led to categories and then eventually themes for the study. The researchers worked together to challenge any assumptions that arose as they analyzed data to ensure they were staying true to recognizing and acknowledging the voices of the family members in this study.

## Findings

The parents in this study presented counterstories of family engagement for families from a lower socioeconomic status through their critical examination of their own family of origin’s educational beliefs and experiences of engagement, unwavering belief in the importance of education, and the scope of their future goals for their child. The counterstories presented by the families also revealed that the Lakeside Academy

served as a space to engage in their student's education, a space where not only did they feel like they belong, but a space where critical engagement occurred between themselves and their students. There are three overarching themes from the study.

### Counterstories of Engagement

The participants in this study not only verbalized their educational expectations and aspirations, but they were determined to actively engage in their student's education and provide their knowledge and support as their child navigated every stage of their schooling. Their counterstories demonstrated that educational mobility is not fixed by childhood upbringing, and lack of familial educational attainment does not equal lack of educational aspirations for themselves and their own children.

"Because until he gets that four year degree I probably can't let up on it." (Cathy)

### Counterstories of Engagement in Non-Educational Spaces

Families in this study utilized engagement strategies that went beyond the traditional family-school dyad of engagement. Ostensibly, families capitalized on their resources at home, in their neighborhoods, and within community organizations that helped propel their student in the college planning pipeline. Capitalizing on a multisystem approach of engagement, families interviewed for the study viewed engagement in schooling not from an isolative lens but realized that engagement in schooling was representative of the symbiotic transference of knowledge, positioning, self-reflection, and capital from the various networks in which they had membership.

"While I'm fixing supper and [I] ask, 'Did you have homework? What kind of homework did you have for what classes, did you finish it?'" (Angie)

### College Access Program: An Alternative Space for Educational Engagement

The parents in this study saw the Lakeside Academy as a space where the program staff was like an extended family and where there were opportunities for growth for both students and families. The families and students also viewed the program as a place where they could access knowledge and resources not readily available in their own schools, while remaining in a supportive environment. The participants turned to the Academy for academic resources, college planning resources, and resources regarding financial aid. In addition, a few family members went from receivers of information to givers of information. They had taken the information learned in the program and shared it with other family members, friends, and others in the community. They had become not passive receivers of information but individuals who wanted to share their college knowledge with others.

"My role [as a parent] hasn't changed, but [the Lakeside Academy] have made it 20 million times easier and provided so much information." (Joy)

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study adds to the literature on family engagement in several ways. First, this study further challenges the notions that the families from lower socioeconomic classes do not care about the education of their student. The counterstories indicated that family members in this study approached their child's education with passion and concern. Many family members described "pushing" their student to achieve

**Overall, the family members described using the resources available to them through their involvement in Lakeside Academy as their primary method of engaging with their student in college-going discussions, as they reported facing multiple barriers to traditional school engagement, such as lack of access to teachers and school administrators during sanctioned school events.**

their goals, specifically the goal of pursuing a postsecondary education.

Second, although researchers have explored family engagement in nonschool settings, this study expands on the EPE framework by highlighting the various spaces where families are engaged in their student's education. Of particular interest, are the notions of family engagement in the college access program. Several participants in this study discussed how they turned to the college access program as forms of social capital to support their student's education.

Finally, this study adds to the national conversation on the critical topic of access to postsecondary education by exploring the experiences, voices, and stories of families who have a student in a college access program. Overall, the family members described using the resources available to them through their involvement in Lakeside Academy as their primary method of engaging with their student in college-going discussions, as they reported facing multiple barriers to traditional school engagement, such as lack of access to teachers and school administrators during sanctioned school events. Family members described how they felt that college-going information was more readily available in the college access program than in the schools. This study points to the possibility that college access programs can serve as an additional space for family engagement. However, many college access programs continue to only involve family members minimally. Of important consideration is to further explore how families can find and create spaces for educational engagement within "traditional settings," such as schools, and how college access programs can partner with them to mobilize their experiences and knowledge to create this space.

The topic of family engagement is critical for researchers in the field of higher education to understand if we are to truly address concerns of college access, persistence, and retention for underserved students. For college access programs, it is important to move the roles of family members from individuals who sign paperwork to individuals whose roles are essential to the success of the program. Research agrees that family members are an important vehicle to help underserved youth access postsecondary education. However, college access programs, K-12 education, and higher education must be careful when designing programs and services for family members. It is important that these entities do not take a deficit approach to work with families and instead recognize the strengths and talents that families of underserved youth bring to our programs, schools, and institutions.