

PERCEPTIONS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC BLACK  
COLLEGE FRESHMEN CONCERNING ACCESS TO COLLEGE PREPARATION  
RESOURCES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by Aaleeah Bell-McCrary

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2023

APPROVED BY:

Sharon Michael-Chadwell, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Richard Bragg, Ed.D., Committee Member

### **Abstract**

The purpose of the proposed qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perception and lived experience of low-socioeconomic Black college freshmen concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area. The theories used are the control-value theory, sociocultural learning theory, and critical race theory, as it focuses on the impact student's achievement emotions have on their academic performance. The phenomenology research design described how students feel their low-SES status impacts their standardized college readiness scores. A sample pool of an urban first-year college class were used with an average of 120 students, while the sample size for this study was 12 students. The type of sampling used to decrease this sampling pool to 12 participants was the purposive judgment sampling procedure. Urban University (pseudonym) in Atlanta, Georgia, was the setting for this study due to its high number of low-SES students in attendance. In addition, this institution was a public university. It has a president as the institution's leader, deans as the leaders of each college, and professors leading specific subjects in each classroom. For the research data sources, I used document analysis, interviews, and focus groups in this study to collect data from students. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used when completing the data analysis to provide insight into how the participants make sense of the given phenomenon.

*Keywords:* low SES, achievement, college readiness, standardized test scores, academic performance

**Copyright Page**

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**List of Abbreviations**

American College Testing (ACT)

Control Value Theory (CVT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Standardized testing scores are seen as a reliable and objective indicator of academic preparation versus high school course grades because all students are testing the same information in the same manner (Allensworth & Clark, 2020, p. 198). This study explored low-socioeconomic Black first-year college students' perceptions and lived experiences concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area. First, the background focuses on the history of standardized exams and new factors that may label them outdated. Next, the problem and purpose statements are introduced, along with the significance of the study and the research questions used to conduct the interviews. Finally, I define the keywords used in this study and summarize this chapter.

### **Background**

The benefits of gaining a college education are common knowledge of most American students, but the barriers that low-socioeconomic students face during the application process are significant (Leuwerke et al., 2021). The disadvantages found in students who cannot afford college preparatory courses and additional resources not provided by public or private high schools are growing substantially (Knaggs et al., 2015). American high schools and universities have introduced measures to combat these disadvantages, like preparatory courses for students like GEAR-UP, but differences in experiences with low-SES still appear (Sianjina & Phillips, 2014). This section explores the historical, social, and theoretical background behind students' college readiness scores based on socioeconomic status.

### **Historical Context**

In the 21st century, standardized tests constitute an inseparable part of American culture

(Himelfarb, 2019). The Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), introduced in 1926, and American College Testing (ACT), introduced in 1959, are used as a benchmark to select incoming first-year students each year in 45 states. With an influx of students aspiring to gain degrees through higher education, judging students' readiness based primarily on their high school grade point average could have been more effective. These standardized exams, which privately-owned companies created, were developed to assist colleges with these challenges. There was a current trend whereby approximately 88 percent of four-year colleges and universities place moderate or considerable importance on applicants' standardized test scores to determine if students are prepared for higher education (Appelrouth & Zabucky, 2017; NACAC, 2015). These exams boost the institution's perceived selectivity (Baker & Rosinger, 2020) and increase the number of applicants they receive yearly (Appelrouth & Zabucky, 2017; Bastedo et al., 2022).

Bastedo and Jaquette (2011) found that there has been an increasing concentration of wealthy students in specific public and private colleges since 2004. Adversely, poor students have increased in numbers for community college enrollment, and this distinction has caught the attention of policymakers (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). Low-SES students can be connected to the lack of qualified educators (Williams, 2021), library resources (Vernon et al., 2018), and providing learning environments for students at low-SES high schools (Bowers & Schwarz, 2018). Because most American colleges have test focus admittance policies, the lack of resources to prepare for these exams directly impacts their ability to attend selective four-year institutions (Blake & Langenkamp, 2021). Colleges have had implicit and explicit biases against low-SES students since 2009, which has continued into 2019 at institutions like the University of California (Hoover, 2019; Hurst, 2009; Sackett et al., 2012).

## **Social Context**

A growing number of institutions have adopted a test-optional policy to close the gap in the college admittance process (Zwick, 2019). Several studies show the relationship between affluence to test preparation and academic outcome related to students' socioeconomic status (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Appelrouth & Zabrucky, 2017; Soares, 2017; Woods et al., 2018). Hiss and Franks (2014) concluded that students in test-optional colleges who did not submit test scores had similar or better college outcomes than students in the same colleges with similar High School GPAs. The latter did submit scores even though their scores on standardized tests were much lower (Allensworth & Clark, 2020).

A lack of research on the relationship between standardized tests and students' academic performance has prompted research on the validity of standardized testing (Aburas & Nurunnabi, 2019; Nortvedt & Buchholtz, 2018; Wambugu & Emeke, 2013). Developing validity standards in qualitative research can be challenging due to incorporating rigor, subjectivity, and creativity in the research process (Whittemore et al., 2001). The lack of consistency between these measures (SAT scores), and their divergence from other regulatory definitions of college readiness, typifies the challenges of defining college readiness (Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018). Researchers have identified that using standardized testing to measure college readiness was harmful and helpful (Galla et al., 2019; Niessen et al., 2018). However, research on students' thoughts on standardized tests still needs to be completed. The proposed study would focus on students' views of their low-SES status on standardized test scores.

### **Theoretical Context**

Theorists have examined how students and their institutions' socioeconomic status impacts students' standardized test scores to attend college (Leuwerke et al., 2021; Sackett et al., 2012; Zwick, 2019). High schools with a low-socioeconomic status have students with lower

SAT scores than schools with a higher SES (Zwick, 2019). Leuwerke et al. (2021) studied the impact of Iowa's program implementation to fill the college readiness gap between low-SES students and SAT preparation to raise SAT scores. They found that these programs increased standardized test scores for standardized tests test scores these underserved students.

The proposed study focused on how Black low-SES students perceive their financial hardships affected their access to college readiness resources and impacted their standardized test scores. The current research on this topic has identified a negative impact on Black students' low-SES status scores. Still, it has yet to determine if these students agree or disagree with this perspective. Therefore, the findings of the proposed study could extend the body of knowledge on the topic related to Black low-SES students' access to college preparation resources by presenting the perceptions and lived experiences of underserved students rather than focusing primarily on data from assessment scores.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem was that Black students from low-SES families do not have access to college preparation resources due to their financial hardship (Charmatz, 2020; Hoover, 2019; Hurwitz et al., 2017). The U.S. News & World Report 2018 found that admission test scores measure "three times as heavily as high school class rank" (Morse & Brooks, 2018). Family support's limitations provide educators with few options to improve students' socioeconomic status and prepare them for the SAT/ACT exam (Soland, 2018).

A recent study by Galla et al. (2019) found that grades are carefully considered in college admissions based on college completion rates by these students who scored lower on standardized tests. In addition, there are studies of institutions moving towards "test-optional" admittance policies. However, with some institutions still valuing the scores for standardized

testing as an exact measure of college readiness, the discriminatory factors of these exams have yet to be discussed or addressed (Baker & Rosinger, 2020; Zwick, 2019). Therefore, the proposed research study reflects on the understanding of Black students' perceptions and lived experiences of their low-SES status on their college readiness standardized test scores.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of the proposed qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perception and lived experience of low-socioeconomic Black college freshmen concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area. At this stage in the research, Black students feel their low-SES status affects their college readiness standardized test scores as Black students' opinion of low-SES class on SAT/ACT scores.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study was broken into three sections: theoretical, empirical, and practical importance.

#### **Theoretical Significance**

The theoretical significance of this study is to uncover the possible ideological structure that students of all socioeconomic backgrounds have equal access to college preparation resources. The theoretical underpinnings of this problem focus on the requirement of standardized exams as a measurement of college readiness regardless of students' socioeconomic status (Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018; Sackett et al., 2012). If low-SES students cannot access college preparation resources, they are disadvantaged when applying for colleges. The theoretical significance was determined by analyzing Black low-SES students' college preparation experience. This study provided information on students' lived experiences of how their low-SES status has impacted their ability to apply and attend the college/university of their

choice. This choice was based on their proof of college readiness provided by SAT scores, GPA, class rank, course rigor, extracurricular activities, and other measurements. Because students' thoughts on SAT as a college readiness measurement have yet to be analyzed, this study focused on that while providing information that questions this current standard.

### **Empirical Significance**

The empirical significance of this study was to describe how students feel their low-SES status impacts their SAT scores with the hopes of identifying how schools can provide resources to increase student achievement on this exam. The current research literature focuses on SAT scores as a positive predictor of college readiness without accounting for socioeconomic differences in preparation for this private exam (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Appelrouth & Zabucky, 2017; Hiss & Franks, 2014; Niessen et al., 2018). In addition, while income differences in the classroom impacting student achievement have been discussed, solutions to this problem have been minimal for school districts to develop independently (Gaddis, 2015; Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018; Leuwerke et al., 2021; Pickard et al., 2016).

### **Practical Significance**

Racial gaps in college degree completion persist (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010). Being Black was negatively associated with college degree completion (NCES, 2001). Studies employing multiple individual-level and institution-level controls reveal substantial gaps in postsecondary attainment between Blacks and Latinos and their White and Asian American counterparts (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Knowing the dynamic between students' understanding of entrance exams, interpretation of their scores, and decisions about their postsecondary futures was particularly critical to identifying the impact of losing access to college preparation resources on their standardized test scores and college acceptance. The hope was that this

information will motivate colleges and universities to continue implementing test-optional policies and provide additional college preparation resources to level the application field for all students, regardless of their income (Baker & Rosinger, 2020).

### **Research Questions**

The proposed research questions focus on the perceptions and lived experiences of low-socioeconomic Black first-year college students concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area. The following questions elicit rich and descriptive answers from Black students to provide insight into their feelings based on their economic status. In addition, the answers to these questions shed light on their opinions and provide insight for educators, institutions, and SAT exam creators when developing preparation programs and college admission requirements to include higher enrollment for Black low-SES students.

#### **Central Research Question**

What have been low-socioeconomic Black first-year college students' perceptions and lived experiences concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area?

Access to college preparation resources was a challenge that still exists for most high school seniors (Martinez et al., 2019). This was a big issue for Black low-socioeconomic students as they feel less prepared for college than their higher SES peers (Gillen-O'Neel et al., 2021).

Understanding low-socioeconomic Black first-year college students' perceptions and lived experiences concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area provide insight administrations can use to improve all students' collegiate experience. This

study investigated these students' perceptions and lived experiences concerning access to college preparation courses.

### **Sub-Question One**

What factors have hindered Black students from low-SES families from accessing college preparation resources?

#### ***Rationale Statement SQ1***

Factors like lack of additional funding, time, and knowledge due to families' low-SES status impact these students' access to college preparation resources (Tierney, 2002). If parents do not have the additional funding to spend on a college preparation course, their students do not receive them (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017). If parents do not have time to take their students to these private courses to prepare them for standardized exams, they cannot access the resources (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017). Finally, if parents are not knowledgeable about the existence and necessity of college preparation courses, students would not be introduced to them (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017). The factors that hinder Black low-SES students from receiving these resources are essential to understanding how high schools and nonprofits can fill the college preparation resource gap (Jury et al., 2017). Doing so ensures that students are included in the college preparation process and remain competitive with all students applying for higher learning (Jury et al., 2017).

### **Sub Question Two**

How do Black low-SES students' families' economic status determine which colleges they apply to?

#### ***Rationale Statement SQ2***

Students from low socioeconomic status (SES) families are less likely than high-

SES students attend highly selectively due to the cost of attendance (Shamsuddin, 2016). Low-SES families often depend on first-generation college students to maintain the home while working. They may require that students attend a local college to continue their responsibilities to the family. In reverse, low-SES families can also motivate their students to attend a prestigious college using an academic or athletic scholarship in hopes of providing for the family once a job was secured.

### **Sub Question Three**

How have Black students from low-SES families prepared for standardized admission exams?

#### ***Rationale Statement SQ3***

Most colleges or universities require that students take a standardized exam (SAT or ACT) to prove their preparedness for this level of education (Hoover, 2019). However, suppose these students need help to afford traditional college preparation resources like private tutors, online courses, and study materials. Understanding how they prepare for these exams to apply for college was essential (Strayhorn, 2011). In addition, knowing how students rise against their financial adversity provides insight into their lived experiences. Finally, it identifies where high schools, nonprofits, and institutions of higher learning can assist these individuals in their hopes of receiving a college degree (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017).

### **Definitions**

This dissertation used specific terms to understand this research's purpose better. Therefore, words are defined so the reader understands how they should be interpreted based on the use determined by the writer.

1. *College Admission*- A decision of acceptance into a college or university traditionally focused on high school academic performance and standardized test scores (Pretz & Kaufman, 2017).
2. *College Readiness*- The phrase refers to the ability to complete college-level coursework (Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018).
3. *Pekrun's control-value theory*- focuses on how the impact of achievement emotions impacts students' academic performance (Pekrun, 2006)
4. *Critical race theory*- critiques the educational system and outlines how race remains a factor in educational inequality and the role of racism was still present in the classroom (Saar, 2017).
5. *Sociocultural learning theory*- states that learning occurs during the many social interactions individuals have with one another (Vygotsky, 1986).
6. *Socioeconomic status* refers to a student's family social standing based on income. (Hurwitz et al., 2017).
7. *Standardized test*- An exam most higher education institutions in the U.S. use to assess prospective students' performance (Aburas & Nurunnabi, 2019).

### **Summary**

The problem related to the proposed qualitative study was that Black students from low-SES families do not have college preparation resources due to financial hardship (Charmatz, 2020; Hoover, 2019; Hurwitz et al., 2017). The gap between high schools' investment in college readiness in students' standardized test scores (Hoover, 2019) and the students' opinions has yet to be analyzed. Due to their socioeconomic status, not all students can afford to prepare for these exams through books, flashcards, online programs, and one-on-one tutoring due to their

socioeconomic status (Appelrouth & Zabucky, 2017). This proposed qualitative phenomenological study explored the perception and lived experience of low-socioeconomic Black first-year college students concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area. With a high population of low-income students (Welfare Info, 2017), this study provides insight into how students view college-readiness standardized tests and how their low-SES status impacts their scores.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

The purpose of the proposed qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perception and lived experience of low-socioeconomic Black college freshmen concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area. The theoretical framework outlined how the control-value theory, sociocultural theory, and critical race theory are used to understand the topic and its appropriateness for the study. Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory focuses on how the impact of achievement emotions impacts students' academic performance. According to the control-value theory or CVT, achievement emotions are tied to achievement activities or outcomes. Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory of learning (SCLT) states that learning occurs during individuals' many social interactions.

When applying this theory to Black students in low-SES communities, theorists must look at the social interaction students have at home about their education and how specific language can discourage students from participating in the classroom. Critical race theory (CRT) was born from the essential idea introduced by multiple generations of German philosophers and social theorists who belong to the Frankfurt School (Saar, 2017). Theorists Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995) questioned why the importance of gender and class in education had never been expounded to include research on race education.

This literature review aims to identify the current research on students' low-socioeconomic status, the disparities in their college readiness, and how continued research can improve their academic performance. The related literature section was broken into sub-sections and begins with defining socioeconomic status, test anxiety, academic performance, and various measurements of college readiness. The second set of subsections breakdowns the history of

SAT exam inequalities, SAT scores as college readiness measurement, and an analysis of high school and parental involvement in SAT preparation. The final subsections shed light on Black cultural stereotypes in education, possible misdiagnosis of Black student mental health, academic motivation for Black college students, current information provided on students' perception of the SAT as a college readiness measurement, the current testing-optional policies, and the Black student's transition into college.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical frameworks used for this study are Pekrun's control-value theory, sociocultural learning theory, and critical race theory to analyze how students' emotions impact their performance. In addition, these theories are used to identify how socioeconomic differences may define a decline in student performance in college readiness achievement when applying for college.

#### **Pekrun's Control-Value Theory**

Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory focuses on how the impact of achievement emotions impacts students' academic performance. According to the control-value theory or CVT, achievement emotions are defined as emotions tied to achievement activities or achievement outcomes. This theory was founded on the basis that an assessment of values centered on activating achievement emotions, including activity-regulated and outcome emotions, was related to student success and failure. Thus, this theory addresses how achievement emotions impact students' academic engagement and performance.

When researchers apply this theory in their studies, they must assume that the student's learning environment influences the perception of control values (Daniels & Stupnisky, 2012). According to CVT, two appraisal dimensions determine the quality of achievement emotions: (a)

subjective control over achievement in assessed activities and outcomes and (b) the value one attaches to these activities and outcomes. Subjective control refers to “the perceived causal influences on activities and outcomes, such as retrospective attributions and prospective control perceptions” (Ringeisen et al., 2016, p. 1827).

Pekrun (2006) developed this theory when studying how achievement, emotion, motivation, and personality development impact educational assessment. Emotions that have a proven link to learning processes and achievement outcomes are called achievement emotions. Pekrun et al. (2011) explored achievement emotions in the traditional academic context, showing that positive emotions can predict creative thinking and reflection, supporting academic performance. In contrast, negative emotions are more associated with lower levels of performance.

### **Sociocultural Learning Theory**

Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory of learning (SCLT) states that learning occurs during individuals' many social interactions. This theory sprouted from a family of approaches that attend to the functioning of sociocultural contexts, including cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), communities of practice theory (CoP), and actor-network theory (ANT) (Kahlke et al., 2019). Students and teachers form relationships in the classroom through sociocultural theory to assist students' learning process. These social interactions and active participation between the students, their families, and educators help build a positive relationship toward learning. Sardareh and Saad (2012) conducted a study in Malaysia to explore how assessments for learning are viewed from the sociocultural learning perspective. Assessments are integral to teaching, learning, and measuring students' preparedness for the next level of education. The authors found that assessments for learning from the sociocultural

learning perspective emphasize authentic tasks and social interaction to measure how students understood information from their teachers and other learners (Sardareh & Saad, 2012).

When applying this theory to Black students in low-SES communities, theorists must look at the social interaction students have at home about their education and how specific language can discourage students from participating in the classroom. For example, suppose students are raised in a home where higher education was unfavorable or acting White based on the oppositional cultural theory. In that case, students may be less inclined to reach their academic goals due to possible social ridicule (Whaley & Noel, 2010). In addition, if students have fewer educational resources at home due to their low-SES status, this can discourage them from performing positively in the classroom. In comparison, students who have a positive relationship with higher education in their homes and communicate with high-achieving Black students in college perform better in the classroom due to the strong connection in their community (Whaley & Noel, 2010). Thus, identifying how social and cultural norms can impact students' attitudes and performance toward education can improve students' performance on standardized exams regardless of their socioeconomic status.

### **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

Critical race theory (CRT) was born from the essential idea introduced by multiple generations of German philosophers and social theorists who belong to the Frankfurt School (Saar, 2017). Theorists historically used critical theory to uncover possible ideological structures that develop dominant worldviews and challenge the ideologies that condemn or oppress others (Patton, 2016). Theorists Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995) questioned why the importance of gender and class in education had never been expounded to include research on race education. They perceived race in the United States education system

as significant to research. The dynamics and trajectory of colored students were difficult to predict due to limited data (Nam, 2020). These blind spots in educational research are filled with the development of CRT. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) wrote *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education* to critique the educational system and outline how race remains a factor in educational inequality. The role of racism was still present in the classroom.

Ledesma and Calderón (2015) found that in education research on pedagogy, CRT scholars are creating practices that empower students of color but also "dismantle the education and use of colorblindness, meritocracy, deficit thinking" (p. 208). This work aims to challenge educators, students, and their family's thoughts towards students of color by outlining how these students can strive through re-education at the educator level. This study hopes to explore the experiences that Black low-SES students have when preparing for standardized exams. If these students' experiences could have been improved with CRT analysis in their classrooms, their preparedness for higher education would increase. This study used this theory to understand where educators and institutions could have used CRT to improve the standardized testing experiences of Black low-SES students.

### **Related Literature**

The related literature section allows for multiple articles to be compared and analyzed when defining the purpose of this research. The related literature section was broken into subsections and begins with defining socioeconomic status, test anxiety, academic performance, and various measurements of college readiness. The second set of subsections breakdowns the history of SAT exam inequalities, SAT scores as college readiness measurement, and an analysis of high school and parental involvement in SAT preparation. The final subsections shed light on Black cultural stereotypes in education, possible misdiagnosis of Black student mental health,

academic motivation for Black college students, current information provided on students' perception of the SAT as a college readiness measurement, the current testing-optional policies, and the Black student's transition into college. All texts mentioned support why understanding students' low-SES impact on college readiness standardized test scores was essential.

### **Socioeconomic Status (SES)**

The literature on the relationship between socioeconomic status and college readiness and its measurements was evolving gradually. Using the definition that SES reflects existing or potential social resources listed as wealth, power, and prestige identifies the differences in educational resources afforded to high school students to prepare for college readiness assessments (Bradley-Johnson et al., 2004). Impoverished Individuals are more likely to experience psychological distress because of insufficient familial, social, and psychological resources (Wickrama & Vazsonyi, 2011). Cokley et al. (2014) asserted: "Experiences common to low-SES populations include single-parent households, overcrowded homes, multigenerational experiences of financial stress, exposure to neighborhood violence, and substance abuse, all factors that can impact students' academic success" (p. 2). Based on a meta-analysis of over 100,000 students from over 6800 schools, Sirin (2005) reported a medium to a strong association between SES and academic achievement. In 2010, the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, often regarded America's economic issues as closely related to college and career readiness (Duncan, 2010).

Previous research has shown that families from lower socioeconomic levels need more academic support to prepare their students for higher education due to the lack of economic resources (Barbarin & Aikens, 2015; Soharwardi et al., 2020). Beyond issues of school bullying based on socioeconomic inequalities, students now see the impact of their parental economic

status on their college readiness (Soharwardi et al., 2020). So naturally, these low-SES parents would look for high schools to fill the gap of educational resources they cannot provide, but there was a lack of research supporting that primary schools with low-SES composition can effectively serve this gap (Belfi et al., 2016; Guldemon & Bosker, 2009; Vanhoof et al., 2011). Soharwardi et al. (2020) agreed that continued research on the impact of primary schools' socioeconomic composition on low-SES students' achievement was necessary to identify how students' college readiness can be achieved regardless of their economic background.

Despite the concerns about SES impacting students' SAT scores, there has been no change in this college readiness measurement in American postsecondary institutions (Barbarin & Aikens, 2015; Soharwardi et al., 2020). Camara (2013) suggested that test scores provide the most potent evidence of college readiness. Mattern et al. (2018) argued that college readiness should be measured throughout a student's K-12 educational career rather than to pass an exam near the end of high school and named other factors that contribute to college readiness besides academic preparation. The requirement of SAT scores as a measurement for college readiness needs to be updated. Gaertner and McClarty (2015) identify that this limits the interventions that can be made for students if these test scores are the only factors considered.

### **Test Anxiety (T.A.)**

Test anxiety (T.A.) was a combination of physical and emotional symptoms or reactions that interfere with students' academic performance when testing negatively (Putwain et al., 2016). Lotz and Sparfeldt (2017) supported this definition through their empirical study on state test anxiety (STA) as a "set of phenomenological, physiological, and behavioral responses that accompany negative concern" (p. 397) regarding failure on an exam. While most of the research reflects that adverse outcomes are when students show signs of T.A., positive reactions have also

been. Agbaria and Bdier (2020) studied the role self-control, and social support has in reducing test anxiety in Arab teenagers. They found that students with solid self-control skills positively related to test anxiety because they could identify their stressors and "overcome problems such as anxiety and depression" (Agbaria & Bdier, 2020, p. 1029). Developing the ability to perform well under stress prepares students for life outside the classroom. Children from low-SES families tend to enter school behind their peers regarding pre-academic and self-regulatory skills (Noble et al., 2005). If students only react negatively to T.A., their success in life was now extremely limited.

Brady et al. (2018) conducted a study to see if anxiety reappraisal interventions could transform how anxiety was seen in the classroom. Researchers found that the emotions like worry about performance and pressure impair students' performance (Brady et al., 2018). Through their experiment in college classrooms, Brady et al. (2018) found that if instructors (a) change their approach to anxiety in the school, (b) provide emotional aid to students who appear to be suffering from this anxiety, and (c) restructure their communication to students; they can re-shape students' experience and performance in their courses. This possible method to decrease test anxiety has yet to be tested and was essential to discuss.

Fulton (2016) conducted a study to discover the relationship between test anxiety and standardized test scores. "Fear of exams and testing situations was widespread and appears to be becoming more prevalent, possibly due to the increasing frequency of testing and the importance placed on testing" (McDonald, 2001, p. 96). Fulton (2016) focused on 4th graders in New York City but found "a moderate negative relationship between test anxiety and standardized test performance based on the pulse rate data." Torrano et al. (2020) administered a test anxiety questionnaire to "investigate the various the repercussion of sociodemographic and academic

variables on different responses for each component of anxiety on adolescent students" (p.1). These researchers found that adolescents show different emotional responses to test anxiety based on physiological, cognitive, and cultural backgrounds. These differences are also impacted by " gender, age, grade, previous academic performance, and type of exam" (Torrano et al., 2020, p.1). An empirical study on test anxiety in nursing students also found that students emotional responses differed due to cultural differences and overall academic performance (Custer, 2018).

### **Academic Performance**

Academic performance measures student performance in the classroom (Sabbagh, 2021). Muradoglu and Cimpian (2020) defined academic performance as "a function of the amount of effort they (students) put into their performance and the level of skill they possess" (p. 903). In this definition, effort "consists of behaviors such as concentrating and spending time on the task being performed, paying attention, avoiding distractions" (p. 903). The academic performance theory was essential because it defines students' success in and outside the classroom (Muradoglu & Cimpian, 2020). Attaining academic success through high-performance rates means they have gained the education needed to obtain an occupation (Menekse, 2020). Academic achievement was usually measured through grades of assignments and evaluated through the student's GPA (Brugiavini et al., 2020). However, it can also be measured by accomplishing learning objectives at the student's test level, not necessarily the level they should be according to age.

Empirical studies on academic performance state that teachers and education officials measure students' achievement through classroom performance and standardized test results (Anis et al., 2016). Score relevance was based on state regulations, and studies show that some

scores determine the number of resources dedicated to a school in the following academic year (Ryu, 2019). Test anxiety has shown a direct link to impacting students' academic performance positively and negatively (McLeod & Boyes, 2021). Due to the negative ways test anxiety affects academic performance, such as decreased test scores and students' loss of initiative, other initiatives like academic buoyancy have counteracted lower test scores (Martin & Marsh, 2008a). These researchers wanted to see if academic buoyancy could be an adaptive outcome to buffer against the effects of anxiety, particularly worry (Putwain et al., 2016). Anderson et al. (2020) found that higher levels of academic success lowered students' academic pressure, failure avoidance, and lack of control in academic performance when studying possible ways to counteract the effects of test anxiety in students.

### **Measurements for College Readiness**

There are various ways for a student's college readiness to be measured beyond standardized exams. However, college and career readiness are two primary components of most students. Grade Point Average (GPA), course rigor/curriculum, and class rank are the measurements discussed in this literature review.

#### ***Grade Point Average (GPA)***

High school grade point averages (GPAs) are critical academic performance indicators for students, educators, and higher education institutions (Allensworth & Clark, 2020). Students' grades are developed based on the standards of their high school's curriculum and teachers' judgment of their ability to gain academic knowledge, skills, behaviors, and effort toward academic achievement (Bowers & Schwarz, 2018; Brookhart et al., 2016; Kelly, 2008). However, because of the possible freedom, some private and public schools may have given teachers when assigning grades, GPAs have been deemed a biased measurement of college

readiness (Dickinson & Adelson, 2016). In addition, Buckley et al. (2018) stated that GPAs do not neutrally analyze students' performance in secondary schools. Therefore, Allensworth and Clark (2020) conducted a study to find if high school GPAs and ACT scores were predictors of college completion. The findings showed that standardized test scores revealed weak and antagonistic relationships with postsecondary achievement levels.

### ***Course Rigor/Curriculum***

Academic rigor was the level of challenge students have when completed meaningful content or assignments that require them to use multiple skills like active learning, higher-order thinking, and appropriate expectations from their instructors when completing tasks (Draeger et al., 2013). A study by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU, 2006) found that rigorous high school coursework and curriculum increase college enrollment and predict successful completion in first-year college courses and persistence into the second year. While enrolled, institutions seek to promote students' autonomy (Healey, 2005) and critical thinking skills (Stukalenko, 2016) developed in high school.

Levels of academic rigor are developed by classroom instructors, institutional staff, and students (Draeger et al., 2015). Most colleges analyze the amount of rigorous instruction a student has had through the amount of honor, gifted, and advanced placement (A.P.) courses the student has taken and their scores in those classes (Huerta et al., 2013). Huerta et al. (2013) found that the number of rigorous courses the students completed and passed positively assessed their ability to complete courses at the collegiate level.

### ***Class Rank***

A student's rank in their graduating class can be an equivalent predictor of their success on a college campus (Niu & Martha Tienda, 2012). Competitive colleges in the United States list

class rank among the top four determinants of college admission (Hansen et al., 2019). Class rank was usually developed using the student's cumulative grade-point average (GPA), and higher value may be added to more rigorous courses like honor, gifted, or A.P. classes (Morgan et al., 2018). Brookhart et al. (2016) found that ranking helps admission officers at secondary institutions discriminate among applicants to choose the few they will admit efficiently. Like the University of Georgia, selective colleges require information from high schools about class rankings to provide scholarships and other awards, solidifying the importance of students' orders (Brookhart et al., 2016). Hoover (2019) found that 19% of colleges and universities give class rank considerable significance in the application process.

### **History of SAT Inequalities**

In the 1920s and 1930s, intelligence tests were introduced to higher education admissions (Cubberley, 1934; Nettles, 2019). The educational movement that initiated standardized testing for college admission identified students of merit in diverse and opposing social classes and ethnic backgrounds (Koljatic et al., 2021). In 1926, the College Board introduced the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) (Valentine, 1987). Once submitted, the SAT received backlash stating that the exam only yielded positive results to populations who were inferior to others, providing an unfair advantage to low-SES students and foreign nationals (Nettles, 2019). As the SAT exam progressed and more institutions applied it in their admission process, African American students were at a constant disadvantage to their White counterparts (Nettles, 2019). From 1938 to 1950, various cases were brought to the U.S. Supreme Court, and the inequalities of this exam were identified and rectified (*Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada*, 1938; Nettles, 2019). Following these rulings, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Higher Education Act of 1965 which made it illegal for institutions to discriminate based on race, color, or national origin

and increased federal money provided to universities and other financial initiatives to increase student enrollment (Civil Rights Act of 1964, 1964; Higher Education Act of 1965, 1965; Nettles, 2019).

Despite all the improvements introduced to assist students of color in college, there was still a persistent gap in average scores between African American and White students (Toldson, 2018). Camara et al. (2019) identified issues with the SAT from the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the agency responsible for developing the exam. This controversial article prompted the ETS to host an internal investigation to explore differential item functioning in the SAT to address the criticism from Freedle and other researchers (Santelices & Wilson, 2010). Santelices and Wilson's (2010) research confirms that SAT items function differently for the African American and White subgroups in the verbal test and argue that the testing industry must study this phenomenon.

### **SAT Scores as College Readiness Measurement**

The complex dynamics of socioeconomic diversity on higher education campuses have been a problem higher education institutions have seen for years (Westrick et al., 2015). Colleges have relied on standardized test scores to measure college readiness as a catalyst for their issues with merit and diversity (Alon, 2010). The SAT was defensibly an essential exam for American students as it directly impacts college admittance (Mattern et al., 2018) and possible scholarship awards (Montgomery & Lilly., 2012). In addition, using standardized exams such as SAT and ACT allows for an advantage for high-SES students over low-SES students based on access to preparation resources (Niessen et al., 2018).

Preparation for standardized exams, like the SAT, was usually completed during the student's junior year of high school (Appelrouth & Zabrocky, 2017). Students may enroll in

advanced placement (A.P.) or gifted courses in high school to prepare for the rigorous college courses they have and practice completing exams that mimic the SAT exam (Judson, 2017). However, first-year college applicants of lower SES families are less likely to enroll in advanced coursework in high school (Morgan et al., 2018), negatively impacting how students' college readiness is measured (Wearne, 2018). Gaertner and McClarty (2015) suggest implementing the college readiness index for middle school-age students to address these late feedback stages in the college-readiness data.

Grade inflation patterns and rankings prompt colleges to show nepotism towards students from private and suburban high schools because their parents can afford SAT preparation services are some of the high-SES students' advantages (Buchmann et al., 2010). Suppose low-income students need help preparing for college readiness exams properly due to less instruction time and the increasing student-to-college counselor ratio. In that case, using standardized testing to measure college readiness was a disparity that should be discussed. Hannon et al. (2017) asserted that low-SES parents who did not go to college and need help understanding the complexities of the college application process unknowingly place their children at a disadvantage, which makes high school preparation for standardized exams even more essential.

### **High-School Involvement in SAT Preparation**

High school teachers and counselors are essential in preparing students for the SAT (Linnehan et al., 2011). When students decide to gain a postsecondary education, they gain information from several sources, including high school teachers and counselors (Royster, 2003). In addition, high-SES schools host SAT coaching programs led by teachers to help students in the Verbal and Mathematics sections improve their SAT scores (Montgomery & Lilly, 2012). These resources are usually found in high-SES high schools because they theoretically do not

have issues in low-SES schools, like disruptive, unmotivated, and lower-quality educators (Armor et al., 2018). Deil-Amen and Tevis (2010) also found that students in high-poverty schools needed to be more informed about the SAT, even though they held high academic achievements and educational aspirations. With the support of the secondary institution, low-SES students can perform effectively on their SAT to compete with high-SES students and attend 4-year universities (Westrick et al., 2015).

McClaferty et al. (2002) introduced the term college-going culture to "ensure that the schools devote energy, time, and resources toward college preparation, so all students are prepared for their options in postsecondary education upon graduation" (p. 28). College-going culture was most effective for low-SES and first-generation collegegoers because they do not receive this support at home (George Mwangi et al., 2019). High schools practice gatekeeping to restrict information about college preparation techniques based on a student's academic track (Hill Collins, 2009; McDonough & Fann, 2007). Gatekeeping was a form of educational inequality and negatively impacts low-SES students' school culture and academic achievements (Vernon et al., 2018).

The U.S. government has developed programs that provide college preparation resources to underrepresented students (Bowman et al., 2018). Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program, GEAR UP, was one "program designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, para. 1). The federal government has introduced three national educational initiatives called TRIO: Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services (SSS) (Bowman et al., 2018). Upward Bound and Talent Search was developed to increase the number of low-income and minority high school students entering postsecondary

education (Ward et al., 2013). SSS aims to increase first-generation college students' college retention and graduation rates in low-income families (Bowman et al., 2018). The problem with these programs was that they are only open to first-generation students, limiting the number of low-SES students participating. The effectiveness of these programs has also been questioned as evaluation studies have found that they do not affect high school graduation or college enrollment (Bowman et al., 2018).

### **Parental Involvement in SAT Preparation**

While policymakers and elites stand behind the use of standardized exams to determine college readiness (Emerson, 2014), American parents are becoming more vocal about their disagreement with this widely used technique (Wearne, 2018). Social class inequalities are evident when analyzing the costs of various test preparation resources like private tutoring, practice exams, and multiple SAT attempts (Mattern et al., 2018). Families from low-SES groups are less likely to provide exam preparation resources to support their students due to a lack of income academically (Soharwardi et al., 2020). These resources are usually only afforded by high-SES families and introduce the theoretical construct of shadow education – tutoring and extra classes outside the traditional education system (Mattern et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Baker and Rosinger (2020) suggested that shadow education (tutoring and extra classes) can increase the inequalities in the social classes surrounding parents' ability to assist in their children's college readiness. Gaps in social engagement with individuals who went to college lower their students' educational aspirations due to their low SES (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015). As stated previously, if parents did not go to a college or university, they may need help understanding how to prepare students for the SAT. In addition, risks like lack of mobility, family size, composition, and student employment also impact students' ability to

maintain college readiness due to their parents' low-SES status (Hansen & Hoag, 2018). This unpreparedness adds to parental anxiety as the class gap grows and affluent parents can take advantage of shadow education, decreasing low-SES students' college admittance rates (Aburas & Nurunnabi., 2019).

Because the college admissions process has become increasingly competitive, parents from high-SES homes have increased their effort to prepare their students for standardized exams (Appelrouth & Zabucky, 2017; George Mwangi et al., 2019). Academic development and preparation for college are also higher in students whose parents are involved in their school experience (Fan & Williams, 2010). Perna and Titus (2005) found that parents in high-SES homes are likelier to foster relationships with their students' teachers and guidance counselors starting in middle school, increasing their enrollment in postsecondary institutions. Alon (2010) conducted a study to measure the gap between Black, White, and Latino students for SAT preparation. Surprisingly to the author, Black students used more resources for test preparation than White students, given the lower social and financial capital (Alon, 2010). Alon (2010) found that Black students utilized every free or inexpensive resource for test preparation, while White students were likelier to employ private tutoring courses. Most of the race gap in test preparation came from the differences in having affluent parents and, most likely, being college-educated (Alon, 2010).

### **Black Student Cultural Stereotypes in Education**

Stereotypes are beliefs about the behaviors and traits that characterize a group, allowing people to predict and explain another individual's behavior (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). If used positively, this can motivate students to reach their peak performance, and if used

negatively, it can de-motivate students from achieving their academic goals (Daoud et al., 2018; James, 2012). Stereotype threat refers to a phenomenon in which negative stereotypes can trigger students' insecurities about their performance, causing them to exert unnecessary energy and distracting them from academic tasks (Daoud et al., 2018). Daoud et al. (2018) researched whether social identities are a part of the motivation patterns found in Black immigrant and native students. Findings showed that students' racial and ethnic identities were related to their academic motivation rooted in students' resistance against negative stereotypes placed on them (Daoud et al., 2018). Students' ability to overcome internalized racial stereotypes while performing academically was a stressor that can cause mental health issues for Black students outside the classroom (Cokley et al., 2014; Daoud et al., 2018).

James (2012) found that Canadian schools tended to label their Black male students as at-risk due to the stereotypes of African Canadian students being immigrants, fatherless, athletes, troublemakers, and underachievers. Labeling students as "at-risk" was a volatile way to identify students and push the narrative of poor academic performance and low educational outcomes throughout their educational experience (James, 2012). James (2012) examined Canada's "vulnerability index" (used to decipher which students were at risk). He found that students' families' poverty rate contributed to students becoming at risk due to the cultural phenomenon the school "found." In addition, these students have low expectations of classroom participation by administrators, contributing to students being at risk (James, 2012). CRT makes race, and its relationship with gender, class, and other demographic factors, the central focus of any social analysis (James, 2012). If educators fail to interrogate their responses to diverse students critically, they risk criminalizing what are essentially symptoms of psychological distress (Cokley et al., 2014). CRT in this study shows that there was a need to identify students who are

at risk but not use their socioeconomic status as the only defining factor, as that was a type of class discrimination.

The disproportionate discipline Black male students receive also increases their rates of being labeled as at-risk and was a pervasive problem in North American schools (James, 2012; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). A study was conducted to understand further the stereotypes educators place on Black students by randomly assigning teachers to read a vignette about a defiant student (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019) found that teachers who read a vignette about a Black student believed they were more likely to misbehave than White students. The vignette suggests that teachers attribute the misbehavior of Black male students as a character flaw that does not change and alter their behavior towards these students due to this stereotype (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). Cokley et al. (2014) also found evidence that when Black students present the same internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) as White students, they are more extreme. These varying perceptions of White and Black students can lead to racial disparities and exclusionary discipline that increase the academic success gap between students (Cokley et al., 2014).

### **Possible Misdiagnosis of Black Student Mental Health**

The archetype of Black male students labeled as emotionally/behaviorally disturbed because of outward aggression in the classroom was a dangerous label not removed after these students graduate (Cokley et al., 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education, Black children are almost three times more likely than White children to be labeled as having a mental disorder and almost twice as likely to have an emotional/behavioral disorder (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Black low-SES students face challenges with exposure to violence in their neighborhoods, peer pressure related to gang affiliation, along with fundamental changes in adolescents such as

puberty, academic motivation, and identity formation (Cokley et al., 2014). Lewis and Wu's (2021) research with Black youth indicated they might be at risk for "elevated rates of direct and indirect experiences of trauma as a result of community violence and over-policing" (p. 7).

Suppose educators cannot positively identify the mental health issues these students have. In that case, it can easily be defined as a behavioral issue and place these students in remedial classes while their intellectual capacity could be higher (Livingston et al., 2021). Placing students in remedial courses based on behavioral issues and not providing these students with mental health support can cause double discrimination, increasing disparities in mental health service utilization (Livingston et al., 2021).

Applying CRT to the racism and bigotry Black students face adversely affects their mental health by "diminishing their academic self-concept, confidence, and mental efficacy" (McGee & Stovall, 2015, p. 500). Career trajectories for Black college graduates remain racialized, and the intersection with a mental health concern was likely to decrease employment opportunities (Alang, 2019). To improve students' mental health and well-being, interventions should focus on labeling students prematurely and making prejudicial decisions that negatively impact their academic motivations (VanKim & Nelson, 2013).

The mental health needs of college students have become a prominent issue for administrators across the U.S. as the percentage of students with mental health concerns has increased (McClain et al., 2016). Castellanos and Gloria (2007) argued that psych-sociocultural and environmental factors are critical variables that need attention for Black students attending predominately White universities (PWUs). Increasing evidence supports that racial identity matters in Black students' college adjustment, but PWUs have not increased their support to these students (Chavous et al., 2017). McClain et al. (2016) define minority status stress (MSS)

as unique stressors experienced by minority students, including experiences with racism and discrimination, insensitive comments, and questions of belonging on a college campus. The weight of MSS on Black students causes a sense of intellectual fraudulence and contributes to questioning their worthiness, value, and entitlement within the academic environment (McClain et al., 2016).

### **Academic Motivation for Black College Students**

Due to the achievement gap between African American students and White and Asian American students, researchers have attempted to understand better the academic motivation of African American students (Cokley, 2015). Motivation research studies thoughts and beliefs and how they relate to individuals' actions and behaviors (Griffin, 2006). Several researchers found that African Americans have different academic motivations than other students due to cultural differences, decreased economic outcomes projections, and importance levels on obtaining high grades (Freeman et al., 2021; Rasheed et al., 2020). For example, Miller and Wang (2019) conducted a study. They found that culturally relevant pedagogy emphasizes the need for teachers to recognize their own and students' racial and cultural backgrounds to improve their students' academic success. These actions resulted in the school performing above average on standardized testing and proved the importance of shaping positive racial identities of Black students to increase their academic motivation (Cokley, 2015).

A Black student's lack of racial identity and ethnic identity can negatively impact their academic motivation (Chavous et al., 2017). Chavous et al. (2017) conducted a study to examine Black college students' racial identity beliefs over their first year. When students know they are racially stigmatized, it can inhibit their motivation and achievement even if they are academically prepared for college. Griffin (2006) conducted a study to examine the motivation

of nine Black high achievers that attend public universities. The students in this study were of high and low socioeconomic status with various family dynamics and cultural backgrounds within the Black community. The author found that these students were motivated by pride in themselves, their families, and their communities (Griffin, 2006). Findings were also based on the assumption that when parents are involved in their student's education, positive motivation can positively influence their students' academic outcomes.

### **Student Perception of SAT as College Readiness Measurement**

Low-SES and high-SES students have similar academic motivations for postsecondary education, although their families' and high schools' support varies. Students understand the benefits of continuing their education, and their performance on the SAT determines their access to these benefits (Hannon et al., 2017). The idea was that students' SES does not assess their achievement goals for their SAT scores, but the SES of their school does (Poder et al., 2017). Students are interested in completing practice questions and enrolling in tutoring sessions to prepare for the SAT (Lane et al., 2009). With the cost of this private preparation session rising, low-SES students are at a disadvantage when applying to postsecondary schools (Alon, 2010). Furthermore, analysis of students' access to preparation for the SAT should be reviewed when post-colleges or universities develop college readiness measurements (Lane et al., 2009). This focus may allow institutions to consider what matters to students and how their GPA and other characteristics can be used to measure college readiness and provide a fair application process for all students regardless of their SES (Herberger et al., 2020).

Although access to a college education has increased, college completion still varies due to income level (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Under-resourced schools are less likely to provide information for students to succeed in college, which lowers students' attention on preparing

themselves for college readiness exams, like the SAT (Almeida, 2016; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). To counteract this negative influence on students' perception of the SAT, States have dedicated resources to assess college readiness in high school students before graduation (Leuwerke et al., 2021).

California State University (CSU) and the State Board of Education in California developed the Early Assessment Program (EAP), designed to notify students about their college readiness, encouraging them to take action to improve their skills during their senior year (Almeida, 2016). Almeida conducted a study to find if students felt the EAP positively impacted their thoughts and actions regarding college readiness standardized exams. This study found that students felt less prepared for this exam because the EAP was introduced during their junior year when it was too late to make changes to receive college acceptance.

Appelrouth and Zabucky (2017) stated that student test-takers who perceive the SAT as a threat could display academic anxiety and test anxiety degrees. Students are more likely to increase their performance when they understand the value of standardized exams (Hannon et al., 2017). Robeyns (2003) found that when students have the autonomy to make informed choices about their education, their academic performance also increases. Education should take the time to understand how students develop their preferences for types of learning and what they learn to assist with their college readiness (Hannon et al., 2017). This can begin by explaining to students earlier in their academic career the importance of the SAT and the factors this exam has in providing postsecondary institutions about their possible success or failure in continuing their education (Giersch, 2018).

### **Test-Optional Policies**

Due to the growing concerns that minority students are judged due to SAT scores, some institutions eliminate testing requirements in the application process (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005; Nettles et al., 2003). Test-optional policies have expanded diversity by increasing access for high-quality students with poor test scores, who tend to be disproportionate to lower socioeconomic status (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005). Bannister (2021) conducted a study at Vassar College and found that high school GPA was a better indicator of success than SAT and ACT scores. Due to COVID-19, Vassar implemented the test-optional policy for Fall 2020 applicants and found a 25% increase in low-income and first-generation student applicants (Bannister, 2021).

Test-optional college admission policies have risen since the 1990s (Furuta, 2017). Furuta (2017) argued that rationalizing college admission policies after WWII contributed to expanding test-optional admission policies. In addition, the study showed that schools with smaller endowments might be more likely to adopt test-optional admissions policies (Furuta, 2017). Furuta (2017) also found that schools looking to drive more prestige to improve their status motivate institutions to use this policy.

Galla et al. (2019) found that grades should be accorded careful consideration in college admissions based on college completion rates by these students who scored lower on standardized tests. There are studies of institutions moving towards *test-optional* admittance policies. However, with some institutions still valuing the scores for standardized testing as an exact measure of college readiness, the discriminatory factors of these exams have yet to be discussed or addressed (Baker & Rosinger, 2020; Zwick, 2019). Belasco et al. (2014) found that test-optional policies increase the perceived selectivity of these institutions by increasing applications and reported test scores.

## **Black Students Transition into College**

Researchers found that African American students' transition into college can be challenging due to their race. This challenge could be why retention and graduation rates for Black students are lower than others (Wilkins, 2014). Wilkins (2014) examined a group of Black and first-generation White men and conducted interviews to understand their experience transitioning as college students. Identity experiences in high school matter for identity processes in college, as identity expectations change unexpectedly for different groups of people (Wilkins, 2014). In addition, Wilkins found that race and class differences in academic and social integration matter for educational success, social mobility, and personal well-being.

Sewell and Goings (2020) analyzed how Black gifted students transitioned from high school to college and found that Black students face a series of issues that affect their ability to persist and achieve. The study participants were found to have received limited guidance during this transition and had to learn how to succeed in college independently (Sewell & Goings, 2020). Black gifted students are underrepresented due to a lack of teacher referrals into the program, biased testing requirements for expert program admission, and insufficient diversity in the administration to advocate for these students (Sewell & Goings, 2020). Ford (1995) highlighted several school-related factors that sit at the center of the underachievement of gifted Black students: (a) less favorable teacher-student relations, (b) having too little time to understand the material, (c) a less supportive classroom climate, (d) being unmotivated and disinterested in school, and (e) lack of attention to multicultural education. If Black students are not allowed to succeed in the classroom by their instructors, they do not have the confidence to apply and complete college in hopes of obtaining a degree (Sewell & Goings, 2020).

Even if students have similar life experiences, there can be striking differences in the transition process from high school to college for White, Black, and Hispanic students (Robson et al., 2018). Cox (2016) conducted a study that followed 16- low-income Black and Latino students in their high school to college transition. The participants' initial plans to join college after high school differed from delayed college enrollment and two-year college admission due to their socioeconomic status (Cox, 2016). The study found that life circumstances outside the students' control determine how positive the transition into college was.

### **Summary**

Chapter two encompasses the theoretical framework and literature review explaining the importance and relevance of this study. The theoretical framework was based on control-value theory, sociocultural learning theory, and critical race theory. Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory focuses on how the impact of achievement emotions impacts students' academic performance. According to the control-value theory or CVT, achievement emotions are defined as emotions tied to achievement activities or achievement outcomes. This theory was founded on the basis that an assessment of values centered on activating achievement emotions, including activity-regulated and outcome emotions, was related to student success and failure.

Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory of learning (SCLT) states that learning occurs during individuals' many social interactions. When applying this theory to Black students in low-SES communities, theorists must look at the social interaction students have at home about their education and how specific language can discourage students from participating in the classroom. Due to low-SES status, students with fewer educational resources at home cannot perform positively.

Critical race theory (CRT) was born from the critical theory introduced by multiple generations of German philosophers and social theorists who belong to the Frankfurt School (Saar, 2017). Theorists Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995) questioned why the importance of gender and class in education had never been expounded to include research on "raced" education. This study hopes to explore the experiences that Black low-SES students have when preparing for standardized exams. If these students' experiences could have been improved with CRT analysis in their classrooms, their preparedness for higher education would increase.

In this literature review, there was a presentation on the factors that impact college readiness. Most traditional education systems require that students be subjected to a standardized test. This test measures what they have accomplished during their educational career, and their score represents their mastery and readiness for collegiate education. The pressure of this exam can cause educators to negatively pressure students, while outside forces such as lack of test preparation at home, lack of confidence, parental socioeconomic status, and many more also impact students' scores and ability to attend college (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

The literature on the relationship between socioeconomic status and college readiness and its measurements was evolving gradually. Racial identity and mental health misdiagnosis in Black students also discuss why academic success was misrepresented in these communities. Using the definition that SES reflects existing or potential social resources listed as wealth, power, and prestige identifies the differences in educational resources afforded to high school students to prepare for college readiness assessments (Bradley-Johnson et al., 2004).

Test anxiety (T.A.) was defined as a combination of physical and emotional symptoms or reactions that interfere with students' academic performance when testing negatively (Putwain et al., 2016). Test anxiety causes students to have stress, clouded thoughts, and depression. For

most students, the biggest obstacle was getting around the anxiety; their academic performance can be negatively impacted without the tools to do so. Low-SES and high-SES students have similar theoretical motivations for post-secondary education, although their families' and high schools' support varies (Hannon et al., 2017). Students understand the benefits of continuing their education, and their performance on the SAT determines their access to these benefits (Doleck et al., 2019).

Academic performance measures student performance in the classroom (Sabbagh, 2021). The educational performance theory was critical because it defines students' success both in and outside the school (Muradoglu & Cimpian, 2020). Empirical studies on academic performance state that teachers and education officials measure students' achievement through classroom performance and standardized test results (Anis et al., 2016). There are various ways for a student's college readiness to be measured beyond standardized exams. Grade Point Average (GPA), course rigor/curriculum, and class rank are chosen measurements discussed in this literature review. Students' grades are developed based on the standards of their high school's curriculum and teachers' judgment of students' ability to retain academic knowledge, skills, behaviors, and effort toward their academic achievement (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey et al., 2020; Kelly, 2008).

Once introduced, the SAT received backlash stating that the exam only yielded positive results to populations who were inferior to others, providing an unfair advantage to low-SES students and foreign nationals (Nettles, 2019). As the SAT exam progressed and more institutions applied it in their admission process, African American students were at a constant disadvantage to their White counterparts (Nettles, 2019). Colleges have relied on standardized test scores to measure college readiness as a catalyst for their issues with merit and diversity

(Alon, 2010). The SAT was defensibly the essential exam for American students as it directly impacts college admittance (Mattern et al., 2018) and possible scholarship awards (Montgomery & Lilly, 2012). However, with all the improvements introduced to assist students of color in college, there was still a persistent gap in average scores between African American and White students (Blake & Langenkamp, 2021).

High school teachers and counselors are essential in preparing students for the SAT (Linnehan et al., 2011). With the support of the secondary institution, low-SES students can perform effectively on their SAT to compete with high-SES students and attend 4-year universities (Westrick et al., 2015). While policymakers and elites stand behind the use of standardized exams to determine college readiness (Emerson, 2014), American parents are becoming more vocal about their disagreement with this widely used technique (Wearne, 2018). In addition, gaps in social engagement with individuals who went to college lower the educational aspirations of their students due to their low-SES (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015).

Stereotypes are beliefs about the behaviors and traits that characterize a group, allowing people to predict and explain another individual's behavior (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). If used positively, this can motivate students to reach their peak performance, and if used negatively, it can de-motivate students from achieving their academic goals (Daoud et al., 2018; James, 2012). The archetype of Black male students labeled as emotionally/behaviorally disturbed because of outward aggression in the classroom was a dangerous label removed after these students graduate (Cokley et al., 2014). Utilizing stereotypes against Black children was dangerous and can negatively impact students' academic trajectory if not addressed. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Black low-SES children are almost three times more likely

than White children to be labeled as having a mental disorder and almost twice as likely to have an emotional/behavioral disorder (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Low-SES and high-SES students have similar academic motivations for post-secondary education, although their families' and high schools' support varies. Motivation research studies thoughts and beliefs and how they relate to individuals' actions and behaviors (Griffin, 2006). Students understand the benefits of continuing their education, and their performance on the SAT determines their access to these benefits (Hannon et al., 2017). Several researchers found that African Americans have different academic motivations than other students due to cultural differences, decreased economic outcomes projections, and importance levels on obtaining high grades (Cokley et al., 2014; Van Laar, 2000). Students are more likely to increase their performance when they understand the value of standardized exams (Hannon et al., 2017).

Low-SES students are disadvantaged compared to high-SES students due to a lack of knowledge of the application process and access to preparation services (Armor et al., 2018). Since the SAT was a private exam, institutions should find a different measurement of college readiness whose results are not dependent upon the students' SES. Due to the growing concerns of minority students being biasedly judged due to SAT scores, some institutions are moving towards eliminating testing requirements in the application process (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005; Nettles et al., 2003). Test-optional policies have been found to expand diversity by increasing access for students of high quality with poor test scores, who tend to be disproportionate to lower socioeconomic status (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005). Roksa and Whitley (2017) found that African American students' transition into college can be challenging due to their race. This challenge could be why “retention and graduation rates” for Black students are lower than others (Roksa & Whitley, 2017). Wilkins (2014) found that race and class differences

in academic and social integration matter for educational success, social mobility, and personal well-being.

The lack of information on students' perception of SAT as a measurement of college readiness should also be further explored. A growing number of students are deciding that community colleges and 4-year institutions are no longer an option due to monetary restraints from the disparities in this application requirement (Gittell & Hitchcock, 2019). Because students are paying for this higher education, these disparities should be considered by colleges or universities when developing their application requirements as well. Urban University has maintained its price for tuition since the start of the pandemic in 2019. Still, students worry that tuition will increase as Covid-19 restrictions decrease (Aristovnik et al., 2020), increasing the gap in access to higher education.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

The purpose of the proposed qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perception and lived experience of low-socioeconomic Black college freshmen concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area. At this stage in the research, the impact students feel their low-SES status has on their college readiness standardized test scores were generally defined as students' opinion of low-SES status on their access to testing preparation resources. A Southwest Georgia University (pseudonym) in Atlanta, Georgia, was the setting for this study. The sampling pool came from first-year college students, with 100-150 students projected sample size. The type of sampling used to decrease this sampling pool to 12 participants was the purposive judgment sampling procedure. The extent of poverty in the participants' local neighborhoods were obtained by matching their geocoded addresses to information from the American Community Survey (Bee, 2020; Yelin et al., 2019).

The qualitative study uses focus group discussions, questionnaires, and data collected through one-on-one interviews. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability was maintained throughout the study. A questionnaire, One-on-One interviews, and focus groups were used in this study to collect data from students. Two questionnaire instruments used to choose participants were: (a) individual participants' socioeconomic status and (b) the student's SAT/ACT exam characteristics. For this study, theory triangulation, which encourages several theoretical schemes to enable the interpretation of a phenomenon, were used (Denzin, 1970). An audit trail was used to prove dependability and thick descriptions for defining transferability are provided. This chapter also discusses how ethical considerations, and examples of how anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent were maintained.

## Research Design

The quantitative research method supports the collection of data used to measure variables in a structured approach (Haas & Hadjar, 2019). On the other hand, the qualitative research method collects non-numerical data to answer questions through opinions and first-hand observations such as interviews and focus groups (Cooper & White, 2009). The framework of this research method was to 'seek realities not to pursue truth' in the form of manifestation of phenomena as it was in the form of a living world made of interconnected lived experiences subjectively (Qutoshi, 2018).

This study aims to explain the phenomena in students' understanding of their low-SES status on their standardized college readiness scores. The qualitative research method requires researchers to set aside their preconceived ideas--epoch--to describe the phenomena with a natural and clear image (Moustakas, 1994). The technique was most effective because I plan to use the information from interviews and focus groups to gain data on my participants' experiences.

There are five qualitative research designs: phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, historical, and case study. Phenomenology studies examine lived experiences through descriptions provided by the participants in the study to describe the meaning these experiences hold for each participant (Qutoshi, 2018). Grounded theory studies collect and analyze data and develop a theory grounded in the data collected (Field & Morse, 1985). Ethnographic studies contain and analyze data about cultural groups to understand and describe the patterns of the people in their specific cultural environment (Leininger, 1985). Historical studies collect data to identify, locate, evaluate, and synthesize data from the past and relate it to present events (Leininger, 1985). Finally, case studies examine the in-depth experiences of

individuals or groups of people (Younger, 1985). Phenomenology represents a “detailed and systematic attempt to understand the structures of first-person lived experience” (Tassone, 2017). Because this study examines how Black students lived experiences with college preparation tools, the phenomenology study would be the best design.

The roots of phenomenology are in Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle (Fochtman, 2008) as a philosophy of human beings (Qutoshi, 2018). Phenomenology was an approach of study by German philosopher Edmond Husserl (Qutoshi, 2018). This design allows me to examine the uniqueness of each Black student’s lived experience with college preparation resources and describe their feelings through their point of view. There are two types of phenomenological designs: hermeneutics and transcendental. Hermeneutics phenomenology focuses on understanding and interpreting the human experience based on the participant's experience and the researcher's opinion (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

Hans-Georg Gadamer developed a modern version that views hermeneutics to illustrate how understanding, perception, experience, and knowing occur (Gadamer, 1976). Transcendental phenomenology focuses on obtaining an unbiased description of raw data from a person's lived experiences. Primarily developed by Edmund Husserl, transcendental phenomenology was grounded in setting aside all preconceived ideas (epoche) to see phenomena through an unbiased view, allowing the true meaning of phenomena to emerge (Moustakas, 1994).

Because interviews are my primary data source, the selected research design allowed me understand the participant's lived experiences and describe how the phenomena occurred and impacted them without bias. I used the qualitative phenomenology approach focusing on transcendental philosophy when assessing my data for this study. I separated my experience with

the college application process and thoughts about the socioeconomic impacts of SAT/ACT preparation. Hence, the genuine phenomena, as the participants see it, can emerge without my interference with their lived experience. Some limitations while using this design are maintaining no researcher-induced bias, sample size, and potentially poor questions from researchers. I have detailed the plan to mitigate these limitations in the trustworthiness section of this study. The research questions used in this study focused on the student's experiences with standardized testing and how their low-SES status impacts their access to college preparation resources.

### **Research Questions**

The proposed research questions focus on the different perceptions and lived experiences of low-socioeconomic Black first-year college students concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area. The following questions elicit rich and descriptive answers from Black students to provide insight into their feelings based on their economic status. In addition, the answers to these questions may shed light on their opinions and provide insight for educators, institutions, and SAT exam creators when developing preparation programs and college admission requirements to include higher enrollment for Black low-SES students.

#### **Central Research Question**

What have been low-socioeconomic Black first-year college students' perceptions and lived experiences concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area?

#### **Sub-Question One**

What factors have hindered Black students from low-SES families from accessing college preparation resources?

### **Sub Question Two**

How does Black low-SES students' families' economic status determine which colleges these students apply to?

### **Sub Question Three**

How have Black students from low-SES families prepared for standardized admission exams?

## **Setting and Participants**

A Southwest Georgia University (pseudonym) was the setting for this study. The current first-year students who participated in this study as they have completed the SAT exam. Their experience with the exam allowed them to share their perception and lived experience of low-socioeconomic Black first-year college students concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area.

### **Site (or Setting)**

Southwest Georgia University (pseudonym) in Atlanta, Georgia, was the setting for this study. Due to the number of low-SES students in attendance, Southwest Georgia University was the best setting for the study. This institution was a public university, and its population of students' socioeconomic status varied. Southwest Georgia University was close to Atlanta's homeless and impoverished communities, making it a good setting for this study. Southwest Georgia University was in Georgia's capital, with a population of low-SES students in 2019 reported as 20.8% (United States Census Bureau, 2019), 3.9% higher than the state's average of 16.9% (Welfare Info, 2017). These rates mean that there may be a larger pool of low-SES

students to choose from to conduct interviews for this study.

Universities in the state of Georgia currently have an acceptance rate of 76.1% as of 2020, and with students having an average SAT score between 1060-1250 or an average ACT score of 20-26 (Niche, 2020), in-state applicants that fall in the poverty line may need additional resources to compete with other applicants. Therefore, first-year students currently enrolled at Southwest Georgia University are the requested participants for this study. This participant ground was used because the students would have completed their SAT/ACT exams, sent their college applications, and have been accepted to their respective colleges. These students have the necessary experience to answer the interview questions in this study to describe their low-SES status's impact on their access to preparation resources.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study are first-year college students who have completed and received scores from their SAT exams. First-year college students in this study are students who graduated from high school the previous school year. These students are also graduates from Georgia public and private high schools. Female and male first-year students are invited to participate in this study. There was an even 50/50 split between male and female participants. Ethnicity was a deciding factor in choosing participants, as this study focuses on the lived experiences of Black low-SES students. In addition, participants' parents must have a low-SES status while the student was in the 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade to show the impact their status had on their SAT preparation resource access.

Pseudonyms maintain the confidentiality of each participant; therefore, pseudonyms were developed in the following format: First letter of first and last name, letter “s” for student, and number in order of interview date; ex. Daniel Lee’s pseudonym would be DLS1. Some

limitations with participants were the amount of students who identify as having a low-socioeconomic status versus those who do not. To combat this, I can open the participant pool up to multiple classes or specific groups at the Urban University that may provide a larger sample size of Black low-socioeconomic students for this study.

Twelve participants, who identify as having a low-socioeconomic status in high school, were used for this study. Some limitations to sample size are that 12 participants may provide too much data to be synthesized, lived experiences may vary, and a phenomenon may need to be identified. On the contrary, having 12 participants could also limit the amount of data that can be synthesized about their lived experiences. While an adequate sample size was desirable, conducting trial interviews with larger groups of 15-30 was acceptable to determine the final sample size. In fact, “sample size deals more with the precision of the estimation of effect and not necessarily with the study's validity” (Koes, 2004). Conducting a trial interview to determine the most effective sample size may also assist in eliminating bias and avoiding misinterpretation of interview questions when collecting data.

### **Researcher Positionality**

The interpretive framework and philosophical assumptions identified in this study are consistent with my outlook on the work. The interpretive framework used to conduct this study was social constructivism, allowing the insights from participants to shape this study. The philosophical assumptions in this study are around the information provided in the interviews conducted with the participants.

### **Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive framework that I was used to conduct this study was social constructivism. Social constructivism was a learning theory based on the ideas of Vygotsky

(1978) that human development was socially situated and knowledge was constructed through interaction with others. Creswell (2009) states that social constructivism was a sound theoretical framework, allowing qualitative analysis to disclose insights into how people interact with the world. The social constructivist theory asserts that people's ideas coincide with their experiences and that writers build on their socio-cultural awareness, a critical point in identity construction (McKinley, 2015). The goal of this research was to rely on the information given by the participants based on their experiences to share how their low-SES status impacts their SAT scores.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

The philosophical assumptions of this study are explicit and multidimensional, depending on the knowledge gained from the interviews through students' experiences. For example, the ontological assumption can be revealed through multiple realities. Furthermore, the epistemological assumption was constructed by the researcher's and the individuals' researched experiences. Finally, the axiological assumption was from my experiences as a low-SES student.

#### ***Ontological Assumption***

The ontological assumption was the inquiry into the nature of being (Wegerif, 2008). Based on this study, multiple realities are constructed through interviews with students. For example, some students may feel that their SAT scores were higher or lower due to low-SES status. Depending on their personal history, the realities of these students could mirror one another or be different. However, the consistent truth between these students was that they all have a low-SES status due to their parent's income.

#### ***Epistemological Assumption***

The epistemological assumption uses “subjective evidence obtained from participants”

(Creswell & Poth, 2018), which parallels the interviews, surveys, and observations I conducted when completing my research. The reality of the theory was constructed through information provided in the discussions by the participants. Their shared experiences define their truth and express their low-SES status's apparent impact on their SAT scores.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

Axiological assumption questions the role of values in the study context (Gericke, 2012). As a rising senior in high school, my SAT scores were negatively impacted due to my low-SES status. My parents could not afford to purchase SAT preparation sessions with private tutors or additional resources to ensure my test scores met the acceptance rate for my chosen colleges. Although I had a high GPA (3.7/4.0) upon graduation, my SAT scores were below the minimum for the colleges I wished to attend, making the application process difficult. My high school did not provide SAT/ACT preparation courses or study materials to fill the gap I had due to my parent's financial constraints. If high schools offered additional resources for students from families with low-SES status, these students' scores would be higher. More students would attend four-year institutions if these programs were implemented (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Researcher's Role**

I did not graduate or maintain employment from this university nor have connections to the university. I have no ties to the participants, their professors, or any support program at the university in which the participants may be involved. I do not bring a biased opinion to the research. I hope to explore the perception and lived experience of low-socioeconomic Black first-year college students concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area. I do not have any assumptions about the participants' demographics or the data provided through this study. As the researcher, I created a space where participants feel

comfortable sharing their experiences with standardized testing regarding college acceptance due to their socioeconomic status. My role as the researcher did not impact the data collection or analysis process as I am a removed party with no prior connection to the participants.

The role of the researcher in qualitative research was essential in this study of social phenomena. As an interviewer, rapport and friendship was established with my participants to make them comfortable to continue participating in the study (Raheim et al., 2016). My role as the human instrument was to elicit detailed narratives from my participants. Effective interview techniques like asking probing questions, listening to the response, developing follow-up questions, then asking those questions to continue a deeper conversation about their experience was applied (Levitan et al., 2018).

As an encoder, all interviews were recorded, translated into standard English, and organized chronologically (Henriques, 2014). As the analyst, analysis methods and procedures were utilized for this transcendental qualitative research (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). To limit any bias while conducting interviews, I did not interpret the questions asked to the subjects to answer as objectively as possible. Instead, read the research questions precisely as they are written so participants can respond constructively. In turn, answers were not be modified to mirror how I feel about the topic to ensure no bias was used when analyzing their lived experiences.

### **Procedures**

This section explain how I followed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, soliciting participants, the data collection and analysis plans by data source, and an explanation of how the study achieves triangulation.

### **Permissions**

I submitted documentation of institutional permission from each research site to the IRB

before receiving IRB approval (see Appendix A). Although my study procedures involve universities, IRB approval from these institutions must be obtained as directed by the specific institution's IRB. Permission from the research site were sought before submitting the LU IRB application, but I did not begin recruiting participants until after receiving full IRB approval. Students are recruited from the current first-year students from Southwest Georgia University, and responses to these questionnaires determined their eligibility for inclusion in this study. The researcher recruited students via institution-based email.

### **Recruitment Plan**

All eligible participants received a study information sheet before signing an informed consent form. A copy of the information sheet was posted under Appendix B. A sample pool of first-year college students was an average of 120 students, while the sample size for this study was 12 students. The type of sampling used to decrease this sampling pool to 12 participants was the purposive judgment sampling procedure. Purposive sampling was a non-probability sampling method in which the researcher relies on personal judgment when sampling from the population (White et al., 2018). The decision to sample primary studies for inclusion in the qualitative evidence synthesis allowed me to achieve a sufficiently wide geographic spread of preliminary studies while limiting the number of studies included (Ames et al., 2019). Because this study was based on qualitative research, I used purposive sampling to gain additional knowledge about the socioeconomic phenomenon rather than making a statistical inference (Rivera, 2019).

Once informed consent forms (see Appendix C) are received from at least 12 students, interviews were scheduled via Zoom or in-person based on the participant's eligibility and comfortability and did not interrupt their studies. Focus groups were also held to learn how students feel about standardized testing and college readiness assessments by their perspective

universities. All COVID-19 precautions the CDC gave were followed throughout this study's interview and focus group sessions. I was active and present for all discussions and focus group sessions.

The extent of poverty in the participants' local neighborhoods was obtained by matching their geocoded addresses to information from the American Community Survey (Bee, 2020; Yelin et al., 2019). A poverty baseline questionnaire supported the examination of the student's responses about (a) their parents' economic resources (working fulltime-part time), (b) financial support from the state government (food, bill assistance, housing assistance, etc.), (c) educational assistance (such as free tutoring, SAT/ACT waivers), and (d) neighborhood exposure (neighborhood poverty rate at country baseline and how long the parent lived in this neighborhood) (Owens & Clampet-Lundquist, 2017).

An assessment by the study interviewers to determine which respondents to this poverty analysis questionnaire would likely be informative (Palinkas et al., 2015; Yelin et al., 2019). A pilot study was completed in the classroom of first-year students at Southwest Georgia University and compared to the information from the American Community Survey to determine if students from poverty households can be identified. The pilot study was not recorded, but notes were taken to guide developing wording and critically interrogate how researchers can most effectively research a "collaborative self-study approach" (Malmqvist et al., 2019).

### **Data Collection Plan**

Document analysis, interviews, and focus groups were used in this study to collect data from students. Document analysis of instructed journal entries of how students describe how their SES status has impacted their college application process was used to explore students' thoughts on the college readiness requirements of their chosen college. Prompts that mirror the

interview questions were provided in the journals to assist the participants in providing information from their lived experiences. Individual interviews were conducted with students to explore their thoughts on their low-SES status and SAT scores. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Finally, focus groups with participants allowed students to share their thoughts on SES's impact on test scores. These focus groups may identify differences in how the effect was perceived positively and negatively. See Appendix D for all instrumentation protocols.

There are limitations when collecting data for this study as some were collected in several ways: online, in person, and through written journal entries. The limitations and difficulties in online data collection can be due to technical issues. External technical problems can arise from a lack of consistent computer/Internet access, the Internet service provided, or the “respondents may lack the willingness to participate in online computer surveys” (Lefever et al., 2007). On-site data collection with paper and pencil also has limitations. It was limited to time and location, and “although the number of participants can be controlled, for example, in a classroom-administered questionnaire, there was no guarantee that the respondents are truly willing to participate” (Lefever et al., 2007). Collecting research data through traditional paper-and-pencil methods can be costly and time-consuming due to visiting the participants face-to-face at their universities.

### **Individual Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted to retrieve data on students who described their low-SES status on their SAT scores. Sawaki and Koizumi (2017) defined personal interviews as a structured way to understand students' comments on how test scores are used and how college readiness measurement can be improved. Individual interviews are a data collection tool to gather participants' thoughts from their specific experiences with a particular topic. Conducting

interviews in this study was appropriate because it allows for data on the participant's demographics, experiences/views regarding the socioeconomic impact on standardized test scores, resources to prepare for standardized testing, and recommendations for replacement college readiness measurement tools. I conducted interviews through Zoom after classroom hours to not interrupt instruction time. Participants were either at their homes or in a private area that was sound controlled to protect the privacy of their words and the interview.

Participants' parents are welcome to be present but cannot interrupt the interview with their questions. Participants are given a copy of interview questions to confirm the students' comfort before the initial consultations. I was in my home or reserved secluded office space to maintain the privacy of the participant's answers to interview questions. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, allocating pseudonyms to sustain students' privacy and anonymity. Through these interviews, research questions about how students describe their college application experience and feelings about standardized testing as a measurement of college readiness were answered.

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

1. Please tell me your age, major, and current year at State University. CRQ
2. Describe what was required for you to submit to universities for your college applications. CRQ
3. What did you know about the SAT before taking it? CRQ
4. What resources did your high school provide to prepare you for the SAT/ACT exam? SQ1
5. How did you prepare for the SAT exam? SQ3
6. How did you afford to take the SAT exam? SQ3

7. Describe your feelings about the SAT exam. SQ3
8. How did your parents' economic status affect your readiness for college? SQ2
9. Imagine that your parents were upper-middle-class; how would that have impacted your SAT/ACT scores? SQ3
10. Describe your feelings about using standardized exams like the SAT as college readiness measures. SQ1
11. How would you define how your SES status impacted your SAT scores? SQ2
12. How has your SES status influenced what colleges you chose to apply to? SQ3
13. Because standardized test scores have been removed from some colleges' admittance process due to COVID, how do you feel about being compared or even denied admittance to colleges due to your score? SQ1
14. What other ways can a student's college readiness be measured? CRQ
15. If you were a recruiter, how would you change the college admittance process at your chosen university? CRQ

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan***

Phenomenology studies do not use the term data analysis but rather an explication. Explication was an investigation of a phenomenon's constituents while keeping the whole context clear (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Groenewald, 2004). The data from the individual interviews was analyzed using the inductive approach. The inductive approach allows researchers' findings to emerge from significant themes in raw data without sanctioning structured methodologies (Thomas, 2006).

In this qualitative evaluation of students describing their SAT scores' impact based on their low-SES status, I collected their experiences using face-to-face interviews. This evaluation

allows me to transform the data through interpretation (Groenewald, 2004). This study used the simplified version of Hycner's (1999) explication process, which was broken into five phases: Bracketing and phenomenological reduction, delineating units of meaning, clustering of units of meaning to form themes, summarizing each interview, validating it, and where necessary modifying it, extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews, and making a composite summary (Groenewald, 2004).

**Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.** During this phase, I removed any preconceived feelings about the socioeconomic impact on standardized test scores and open my mind to only listening to the responses given by my participants. I repeatedly listened to recordings of interviews and focus groups, as recommended by Holloway (1997) and Hycner (1999), to become familiar with my participant's words. Doing so allowed me to understand how the students felt and how their socioeconomic status impacted them without bias (Groenewald, 2004). The experiences of each participant are recorded through electronic notes to provide the existence of the phenomena, contributing to this first phase of explication.

**Delineating units of meaning.** Any statements made by participants that illuminated the research phenomenon were extracted (Creswell, 1998; Groenewald, 2004; Holloway, 1997; Hycner, 1999). This allows the phenomena to be identified without presuppositions (Groenewald, 2004) bias from me. In addition, I compared electronic notes of the illuminated statements to eliminate unnecessary comments based on the number of times a topic was mentioned and how the participant's tone follows each statement (Groenewald, 2004).

**Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.** Continuing to maintain an unbiased opinion regarding the phenomenon, I examined the non-redundant list of statements and elicit the real essence of each word in a holistic sense (Groenewald, 2004). Common themes are identified

by grouping meanings and comments that define important topics (Creswell, 1998; King, 1994; Moustakas, 1994; Sadala & de Adorno, 2001). I also re-reviewed the recorded interviews and focus group sessions to confirm that clusters are separated by appropriate meanings (Groenewald, 2004). Clusters may overlap due to students having similar experiences with socioeconomic impact on SAT scores in the college application process.

**Summarizing each interview, validating it, and, where necessary modifying it.**

Groenewald (2004) explains that a validity check was required during this phase of explication. I contacted the participants individually and assess if the finding, clusters, and themes I have identified are accurate to their feelings. If they are inaccurate, I recorded the conversation and re-cluster based on the new data provided.

**Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.** In this final phase, I looked for common themes found through the interviews (Hycner, 1999) while ensuring significant differences do not exist (Groenewald, 2004). Finally, I wrote a summary as Hycner (1999) and Moustakas (1994) suggested to reflect on the context of the previously identified themes.

**Document Analysis**

This study analyzed journal entries, providing information on student's thoughts on their college application process impacted by their low-SES status. Reflection by solo researchers was often done in written forms such as journals (or diaries) and case records (Boutilier & Robin, 2012). Participants are asked to write about their experience in preparing for the exam, taking it, and re-taking it if applicable. Entries should be made on different days and provide as much detail as possible. Instructions on completing journal entries are provided to the students as a guide. Annink (2017) found that journals improve the transparency and quality of cross-cultural

interview studies in qualitative research. Journal entries can assist researchers in acknowledging any emotions the participants may have had during their testing process but could not clearly describe in their interview process.

### ***Document Analysis Data Analysis Plan***

I read all the journal entries that the participants submitted. Key were identified and organized from each journal entry, and notes were developed, which were managed into sub-categories by grouping notes with similar likeness. Prompts that mirror the interview questions were provided in the journals to assist the participants in providing information from their lived experiences. The finalized themes were emailed to the participants, asking for feedback on the categories if the themes read as incorrect based on the information they gave in their journal writing. The finalized themes must represent the participants' information to understand their experiences clearly. Finally, I re-read the data from each participant's report and populate a chart with text representative of their experiences and the agreed-upon theme identifying the information found.

### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups are a form of group interview that uses group interaction as a part of the method; instead of asking each person to respond to a question, people are encouraged to talk to one another (Ricci et al., 2019). I hosted the focus groups to ensure all participants' responses are raw and truthful, with an unbiased opinion. For example, this focus group answered research questions about how students' low-SES status impacts their SAT scores and thoughts on college readiness measurements. Respondent validation tests if responses from the individual interviews are still valid during the focus group sessions (Bloor, 1978). Respondent validation tests measure research participants' responses to initial data (Aranza et al., 2021). For example, transcripts of

interviews can go through respondent validation testing checking for accuracy, or to first drafts of interpretive reports to respond, again, to their accuracy, but also the interpretive claims” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### ***Focus Group Questions***

Five questions were asked in this section:

1. Did your parents prepare you for the SAT exam? SQ3
2. Why did you choose to take the SAT exam versus other pre-college exams? CRQ
3. What three factors impacted your choice in selecting this university for your post-secondary education and why? CRQ
4. What was the one thing you would recommend changing about the college application process and why? CRQ
5. Do you feel the SAT exam prepared you for college? Why? SQ3

Questions one and two invite participants to explore their imagination and design an application process that best suits low-income students. Institutional inequities impact low-income and minority students (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018) compared to their counterparts (Bettencourt, 2020; Davis, 2010). This question aims to allow low-income students to use that disadvantage and develop a policy that would ethically level the competition.

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan***

The focus group data analysis plan followed the five phases used in the individual interviews, which are:

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.
2. Delineating units of meaning.
3. Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.

4. Summarizing each interview, validating it, and, where necessary modifying it.
5. Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary (Groenewald, 2004).

### **Data Synthesis**

I used a meta-analysis to synthesize the data collected for this study. Meta-analysis refers to integrating the results of many studies to arrive at evidence synthesis (Normand, 1999). Meta-analysis has the potential to inform and explain. Still, it also can mislead if, for example, the individual studies are not similar, are biased, or publication or reporting biases are significant (Normand, 1999). Therefore, I used the meta-analysis to organize these ideas and SPSS Statistic systems to arrange the information by collective theme titles. These theme titles became headers when analyzing the data found from the interviews.

I used integrative reviews to continue analyzing the information from the interviews. This process was explained by Broome (1993) as a method that summarizes past empirical or theoretical literature to provide a clear understanding of a particular phenomenon. Data was extracted from primary sources and used as a reference to integrate findings from the conducted interviews that outline the phenomenon. Categories and related terms are identified to facilitate information integration based on similar definitions and processes, showing the relationship between the empirical text and the described phenomenon. Coded data was reported by category and theme and compared repetitively as each primary source was reviewed to verify harmony between the integration with the phenomenon in question.

### **Trustworthiness**

As defined by Polit and Beck (2014), trustworthiness was the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study. The protocols for

establishing this study's trustworthiness are explained through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness relates to the appropriateness of any research value, tools and techniques, and processes, including data collection and validation (Mohamad, 2015). Trustworthiness also establishes the soundness of the methodology, sampling process, data analysis process, and the study's conclusion (Golafshani, 2003).

### **Credibility**

Credibility entails an accurate description of the phenomenon of interest and the generation of believable research claims and can be promoted by using a systematic process throughout all stages of research (Liao & Hitchcock, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Accuracy standards are intended for judging and increasing the accuracy of findings and conclusions. Accountability standards require adequate documentation and reflection on the evaluation process and products found when outlining credibility (Liao & Hitchcock, 2018). Triangulation was a method used to increase the trustworthiness of research findings (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). For this study, theory triangulation, which encourages several theoretical schemes to enable the interpretation of a phenomenon, were used (Denzin, 1970). I focused on viewing the data through an academic lens and contradictory theories (Fusch et al., 2018).

### **Transferability**

The degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents was how transferability was defined (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through thick descriptions about describing behavior and experiences and their context that may be meaningful to outsiders (readers) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). I used thick descriptions in this study to explain how participants felt regarding their experiences with

socioeconomic impact on SAT scores. As the researcher, I can only create the conditions but cannot assure transferability.

### **Dependability**

Dependability involves participants' evaluation of the findings, interpretation, and recommendations of the study such that all are supported by the data received from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability was concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination but derived from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, I used audit trails and transparently describe the research steps from the beginning and end of the research project (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In this study, I kept an audit trail of all the data records throughout the study.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability was concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination but derived from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, I used audit trails and transparently describe the research steps from the beginning and end of the research project (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In addition, in this study, I kept an audit trail of all the data records throughout the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Data storage for this study was saved in two ways: online and password protected in a Google Drive folder and password protected on a portable hard drive. I preserved this password, which was be written down or shared with anyone. Information that was optional for this study was not be requested. Pseudonyms for the site are used, and participants' names and other personal information were not e shared. Students were well-informed about all the different aspects of the study and their data. Students were informed of how data was stored, and practical

guidelines and protocols were detailed and shared. The data was stored for two calendar years, destroyed through a complete wipe, and overwritten any data found after the wipe.

### **Summary**

This chapter discusses the qualitative phenomenology approach of this study, focusing on transcendental philosophy when assessing my data for this study. The history behind phenomenology studies was examined along with the site for the analysis, Southwest Georgia University, and its reasoning. The purposive judgment sampling procedure was outlined as the sampling tool used in this study. The types of data collection techniques (interviews, focus groups, and document analysis) are also outlined. For this study, theory triangulation, which encourages several theoretical schemes to enable the interpretation of a phenomenon, were be used (Denzin, 1970). There was also an audit trail to prove dependability, confirmability, and thick descriptions for defining transferability. This chapter also discusses ethical considerations, and examples of how anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent was maintained was provided.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to share the perceived lived experiences of Black low-socioeconomic college freshmen with access to college preparation resources. The focus of Chapter Four was to present the findings of the data collection through participant descriptions in the form of tables and narrative themes. Twelve Participants were interviewed about their experiences with access to college preparation resources while in high school. Narrative themes express the lived experiences with college preparation resources found through journal entries, interviews, and focus groups used in this study. Tables display the responses in a collective format based on data collection methods.

### Participants

Participants used in this study met the following requirements: African American descent, 18 years old, current college freshman, and were considered low SES while attending a Southwest Georgia high school. Thirty students expressed interest in participating in the study and completed the required survey in Appendix E to determine if their demographics fit the study requirements. After reviewing the surveys received, 18 participants were found to meet the demographic requirements for the study. Of the 18 students' invited to participate in the study, 12 accepted and engaged in the journal entries, interviews, and focus groups for this study. Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of all 12 students who participated in this study.

**Table 1**

*Student Participants*

Student Participant	College Year	Degree Choice	Age	SES Status
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SSS8	Freshman	Computer Science	18	LOW
ALS2	Freshman	Health and Human Performance	18	LOW
KMS7	Freshman	Biology	18	LOW
ABS5	Freshman	Health Science	18	LOW
CWS1	Freshman	Biology	18	LOW
CES3	Freshman	Mass Media	18	LOW
SBS4	Freshman	Food Science	18	LOW
NHS9	Freshman	Software Engineer	18	LOW
Amber	Freshman	Psychology	18	LOW
JHS10	Freshman	Criminal Justice	18	LOW
QBS12	Freshman	Animal Science	18	LOW
AGS6	Freshman	Undecided	18	LOW

Table 1 shows the demographics of the student participants used in this study.

## Results

### Interviews Results

Twelve participants were interviewed to gain knowledge about their lived experiences with access to college preparation resources. Participants were informed that the interviews would be used to learn from their experiences. Participants were also told that interviews would be recorded, how information would be stored, and the data destruction process once the study was completed. Table 2 shows the results from these interviews providing data on the emerging themes and outliers found based on literature regarding Black low-SES students' access to college preparation resources. The coding of data points can be found in Appendix J.

**Table 2***Interview Results*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Emerging Theme</b>	<b>Emerging Theme 2</b>	<b>Emerging Theme 3</b>	<b>Outlier Based on Literature</b>	<b>Predominate Theme</b>
Describe what was required for you to submit to universities for your college applications.	Test scores, application, essay, references (11)	High school GPA, application (1)		None	Test scores, application, essay, references (11)
What did you know about the SAT before taking it?	Had in-depth knowledge about the amount about the exam (2)	Had a basic understanding about the exam (9)	Had a minimal understanding about the exam (1)	None	Students had a basic understanding about the exam (9)
What resources did your high school provide to prepare you for the SAT/ACT exam?	College prep books (12)	PSAT (12)		None	College prep books and PSAT (12)
How did you prepare for the SAT exam?	School provided SAT preparation materials (12)	Parents provided SAT preparation materials (4)		None	School provided preparation materials (12)
How did you afford to take the SAT exam?	School provided SAT waivers (10)	Parents paid for the exam (2)	Did not take the exam (1)	None	School provided SAT waivers (10)
Describe your feelings about the SAT exam?	Good feelings about the SAT exam (3)	Bad feelings about the SAT exam (6)	No feelings about the SAT exam (3)	No feelings about the SAT exam (3)	Bad feelings about the SAT exam (6)
How did your parents' economic status affect your readiness for college?	Negative impact (7)	No Impact (5)		No Impact	Negative Impact (7)
Imagine that your parents were upper-middle-class; how would that have impacted your SAT/ACT scores?	Would have done better on the SAT exam (6)	Would have done the same on the SAT exam (3)	Would not have impacted score (3)	Would not have impacted score (3)	Would have done better on the SAT exam (6)
Describe your feelings behind using	SAT scores should be	SAT scores should not be	Indifferent (1)	None	SAT scores should not be

standardized exams like the SAT as college readiness measures.	used to measure college readiness (3)	used to measure college readiness (8)			used to measure college readiness (8)
How would you define how your SES status impacted your SAT scores	SES had no impact on SAT score (4)	SES had an impact on SAT score (8)		SES had no impact on SAT score (4)	SES had an impact on SAT score (8)
How has your SES status influenced what colleges you chose to apply to?	SES has no influence on SAT score (9)	SES had influence on SAT score (3)		None	SES has no influence on SAT score (9)
Because standardized test scores have been removed from some colleges' admittance process due to COVID, how do you feel about being compared or even denied admittance to colleges due to your score?	Do not agree that students should be denied admittance based on test scores (5)	Agree that students should be denied admittance based on test score (3)	Indifferent (1)	None	Do not agree that students should be denied admittance based on test scores (5)
What other ways can a student's college readiness be measured?	Essays, high school GPA (6)	High School GPA, community service, references (5)	Test scores, essay, high school GPA (1)	None	Essays, high school GPA (6)
If you were a recruiter, how would you change the college admittance process at your chosen university?	Remove essays, remove test scores, focus on high school achievements (9)	Leave the admission process as it was (2)	Indifferent to change to the college admittance process (1)	None	Remove essays, remove test scores, focus on high school achievements (9)

Several sub-themes were identified in the data collection process when interviews were conducted with all 12 participants. Five predominant themes and one outlier were identified from the 15 questions asked to each participant. Data analysis of the themes and outliers identified are expounded upon in this section.

### **Predominate Themes**

The five themes found through interviews were that students had a basic knowledge of the SAT exam, high schools provided SAT preparation resources, students had negative feelings toward the SAT exam, SES negatively impacted SAT scores, and students' encouragement to changes regarding college admittance policies. These themes are discussed in detail, including excerpts from interviews to support theme identifiers.

### ***Students Basic Knowledge of SAT Exam***

Students agreed they understood the logistics of the SAT but did not have insight into the exam academically. Nine or 75 % of participants had prior education about SAT exam before taking the SAT exam. CWS1 shared that he “did not know much about the SAT exam at all.” ABS5 shared, “My parents did not go to college, so they didn't know how to prepare me for the exam. My school provided SAT prep classes and fee waivers for the exam, but I only had a basic understanding of the exam and knew it would be long.” When asked, KMS7 shared, “Before taking the exam, I knew it was bad but that it was hard, but I didn't know what type of questions would be asked. I guess I wasn't that prepared for the SAT before taking it, making it tough”.

### ***Schools Provide SAT Preparation Resources***

Twelve or 100% of the participants received free SAT prep courses/resources from their high school due to their SES and enrolled in them before taking the SAT exam. CES2 shared, “The SAT exam was provided for free by my high school.” JHS10 stated, “The SAT exam was free. My high school provided the test and gave us a day to take it in school (on campus)”. Eight or 67% of students could only afford to take the SAT exam due to the fee waivers provided by their respective high schools.

### ***Students' Negative feelings about SAT Exam***

Students shared negative feelings about the SAT exam regarding the access to preparation resources, lack of prior knowledge of the exam, scores used as a college readiness measurement, and the weighted factor of students' denial of admittance. SBS4 shared that they found the exam "Challenging," adding, "I feel our grades should determine college readiness because I'm not a great test taker." CES3, when asked about their feelings, shared that "The SAT was all about how you take it, and if you don't know how to take it, then you may become frustrated and possibly fail. Not knowing how to take the test and not having resources to learn how to take the test was very frustrating." "I was a bit confused with the content of the exam when I took it," states CWS1, adding that "I used the study materials my school gave me, but I did not feel prepared once I started taking the exam, and that worried me as I wish I had more opportunities to prepare." ALS2 added, "I did not like taking the (SAT) exam. I did not do well on the exam, and sitting for hours was nerve-wracking."

### ***SES Negatively Impacts Student SAT Score***

Eight or 67% of students agreed that their family's socioeconomic status impacted their SAT scores negatively. SBS4 hypothesized that if her parents were upper-middle class, "it would have assisted me with more resources and allowed me to take the test several times." When asked how their parent's economic status affected their readiness for college, ALS2 replied, "Negatively, I could not afford additional tutoring resources that would ensure I do well on the exam." JHS10 adds, "I prepared for the SAT by studying old information from my freshman year and used the practice book from my school to prepare. If my parent had more money, I could've studied more up-to-date information and taken practice quizzes like some of my friends".

### ***Students Encourage Change College Admittance Policy***

The SAT exam has been a unit of measurement of students' acceptance into colleges and universities across the United States since 1959. Most students believe it was an outdated measurement of college readiness. Nine or 75% of students agreed that college admittance policies should be changed to focus on the applicant's grade point average rather than SAT score. When discussing their feelings about SAT scores used as a college readiness measurement, KMS7 stated, "I feel our grades should determine college readiness." ABS5 felt that college readiness can be measured by students' "habits in high school," and CES3 shared, "A specific exam based on degree choice should be developed by the school of choice." JHS10 stated, "Essays nor SAT exams should be required for admittance; grades should matter more." ABS5 said, "I would not change anything other than not requiring SAT or ACT scores," KMS7 agreed, stating they would change admittance requirements by "Removing essay and SAT score requirements."

### **Focus Group Results**

All twelve participants were invited to participate in the focus group for this study, so additional data would be collected about their lived experiences in an intimate group setting. Six participants accepted the invitation and participated in the focus groups. Participants were informed that the focus groups would be used to learn from their lived experiences. Participants were also informed that the focus groups would be recorded, how information would be stored, and the data destruction process once the study was completed. Table 3 provides the results from these focus groups providing data on the emerging themes and outliers found based on the literature on Black low-SES students' access to college preparation resources. The coding of data points can be found in Appendix J.

### **Table 3**

*Focus Group Results*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Emerging Theme</b>	<b>Emerging Theme 2</b>	<b>Emerging Theme 3</b>	<b>Outlier Based on Literature</b>	<b>Predominate Theme</b>
Did your parents prepare you for the SAT exam?	Yes (2)	No (2)	Other family members (2)	None	No (2)
Why did you choose to take the SAT exam versus other pre-college exams?	Free with student voucher (4)	Easier exam based on research (2)		None	Free with student voucher (4)
What three factors impacted your choice in selecting this university for your post-secondary education and why?	Student life, location, price (3)	Student life, career placement, scholarships (1)	Heritage, student life, graduation rates (1)	None	Student life, location, price (3)
What was the one thing about the college application process you would recommend changing and why?	Remove Essay (4)	Remove SAT score requirement (5)	No changes (1)	No changes (1)	Remove SAT score requirement (5)
Do you feel the SAT exam prepared you for college? Why?	Yes (2)	No (4)			No (4)

Several predominant themes were identified in the data collection process when focus groups were conducted with all 6 participants. Three dominant themes and one outlier were identified from the five questions asked to the group. Data analysis of the themes and outliers identified are discussed in this section.

## **Predominate Themes**

The three themes found through the focus group interviews were that students chose the SAT exam due to testing vouchers, choices for attending enrolled university, and removing SAT scores as a college acceptance requirement. These themes are discussed in detail, including excerpts from the focus group to support theme identifiers.

### ***Chose SAT Exam due to Testing Voucher***

SBS4 shared, "I didn't feel limited when picking a college because there are so many to choose from. Deciding where to apply because of limited places to send my scores was difficult." Students shared that their testing vouchers limited the number of schools scores could be sent to for free to five schools. All the participants shared their disdain for this process because their parents "limited additional income" meant students could only apply to the five schools where their scores would be received. NHS9 added that "If I could have sent my scores to three more schools, I may not have attended [school name redacted] (this institution).

### ***Choices for Attending Enrolled University***

All participants shared their reasons for choosing their school, and the predominant themes were student life, location, and price. Student life was a universal theme for all participants, as all students shared that they wanted to attend a school that was fun but would also help them start their careers upon graduation. Some students like NH69 shared that location was necessary because "I needed to be close to help out [financially] at home so my parents are not so stressed out." AGS6 shared that "I knew my parents couldn't pay for my college expenses, and I did not want them to, so the price of the school determined where I applied."

### ***Remove SAT Score as College Acceptance Requirement***

Among the students, 11 out of 12, or 91%, shared that using SAT exams to measure a student’s readiness for college-level workload was not definitive. SSS8 asserted, “I don’t think it can accurately measure someone’s intelligence.” “I did not enjoy taking it [SAT] and only had two chances to take the exam due to a test voucher. I think it should be removed because students who take it more than twice have an advantage over those who do not,” responded AGS6 when asked about changing the college application process.

### Document Analysis Results

Twelve participants were instructed to complete journal entries before conducting their interviews for this study. Participants were informed that the journal entries would be used to learn from their experiences. Participants were also informed how journal entries data would be stored and the data destruction process once the study was completed. Table 4 provides the results from these journal entries providing data on the emerging themes and outliers found based on the literature on Black low-SES students' access to college preparation resources. The coding of data points can be found in Appendix J.

**Table 4**

#### *Document Analysis Results*

Question	Emerging Theme	Emerging Theme 2	Emerging Theme 3	Outlier Based on Literature	Predominate Theme
What did you know about college preparation resources when you were in the 9 <sup>th</sup> to 11 <sup>th</sup> grade?	Need to research colleges and prep resources (4)	No Knowledge about College Preparation (3)	Take Standardized Test and maintain GPA (3)	None	Need to research colleges and prep resources (4)
What would you have done differently to prepare for college since you have started your freshman year?	Take GPA more seriously and take more AP classes (5)	Prepare for college earlier in high school than 11 <sup>th</sup> grade (2)	Apply for more scholarships (2)	None	Take GPA more seriously and take more AP classes (5)

### ***Predominate Dominant Themes***

Several themes were identified in the data collection process when document analysis was conducted through assigned journal entries with all 12 participants. Two predominant themes were identified from the two questions asked of each participant. Data analysis of the themes was explained in this section.

The two themes found through journal entries were: students need to research colleges and preparation resources, and they should have taken high school more seriously regarding their test scores, community involvement, and GPA. These themes are discussed in detail, including excerpts from the focus group to support theme identifiers.

### ***Research Colleges and Preparation Resources***

Students were asked what they knew about college preparation resources before the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. QBS11 wrote, "I knew that I had to do my research about the colleges. I also looked at the cost of each school before applying so I knew how many scholarships, grants, and loans I might need". All participants understood that it takes some preparation before attending a 4-year institution. Entries focused on students' prior knowledge of "research colleges, SAT scores they accept, and how their students rank amongst others" regarding college graduation rates, career placement, and the rigor of the curriculum at each institution.

### ***Take High School More Seriously***

Students understood that SAT scores would measure college readiness to attend a four-year university in the United States. When asking students what they would do differently to prepare for the exam after taking it, KMS7 wrote that they would've "studied more." NHS9 wrote, "I should have taken school more seriously and not hang out with the wrong crowd, so I could've gotten into any school I wanted." QBS11 added in her entry, "I would have applied to

scholarships sooner and focused on getting higher grades, so I could've had more options of colleges [to attend].”

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

Two outliers were found in this study. The first outlier was found through interviews were that some students felt SES had no impact on SAT scores. The second outlier was found through the focus group were that some students felt no changes should be made to the college application process. These outliers were based on the differences to the literature and are discussed in detail including excerpts from the interviews conducted to support identification. Outliers impact to future research on the topic is also discussed.

#### ***SES has no impact on SAT Scores***

From the interviews, the outlier was that *SES did not affect SAT Scores*. JHS10 shared, "My SES status didn't impact my SAT scores because my parents didn't have to pay for me to take the exam." JHS10 explained, "Since the school provided the voucher, I felt I had a chance to get into college because I was able to take the test." The limited access to college preparation resources shared during this study should push this topic forward by educating college admission teams about the possible financial inequality in students' pass-to-test taking. When asked how many vouchers participants received, all 12 students stated they were given two SAT vouchers and one ACT voucher. If these students' parents could not afford for their children to take the exam more than once, as recommended by most 4-year colleges and universities (Bloem et al., 2021), then their ability to attend these colleges could be negatively impacted due to their low-SES even if the student does not realize it.

#### ***No Changes to College Application Process***

Students understand the benefits of continuing their education, and their performance on the SAT determines their access to these benefits (Hannon et al., 2017). When asked, SSS8 said, “I would not change the college admittance policy because I got into the school I wanted.” NHS9 agreed by stating, “No changes need to be made to the admittance process; students need to change their perspective on the exam and find better free ways to prepare.” Based on students’ responses, they had to adapt to the college application process. This can further research how students observe trends and procedures set by our academic culture and how it may limit students' view of justice in the education system. This outlier can support further research by expounding how students' and parents’ lack of requests for additional resources determines the amount of preparation resources the government provides to public high schools.

### **Research Question Responses**

The following responses to the research questions involve the triangulation of themes from the three data sources. Those sources were: interviews, focus group responses, and information analyzed using participants' documents.

#### **Central Research Question**

What have been low-socioeconomic Black first-year college students' perceptions and lived experiences concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area?

The participants’ perspective was that their socioeconomic status impacted their access to college preparation resources. ABS5 said, “My mom doesn’t have much money for college, so I thought I wouldn’t be able to go.” Cokley et al. (2014) asserted: "Experiences common to low-SES populations include single-parent households, overcrowded homes, multigenerational experiences of financial stress, exposure to neighborhood violence, and substance abuse, all

factors that can impact students' academic success” (p. 2). JHS10 lived experience paralleled: "My parent's economic status affected me, but I used the application fee waivers to apply to my colleges.” This was also found in a study by Wickrama and Vazsonyi (2011), where impoverished individuals were more likely to experience psychological distress because of insufficient familial, social, and psychological resources.

During the focus group, students shared that their low SES gave them opportunities to receive testing vouchers to take the SAT exam for free, college prep books, and the ability to take the PSAT, all offered by their high school. Students relied heavily on the resources provided by their high schools to prepare and attend college upon graduation. ABS5 stated, "If I wasn't given SAT prep classes and the test fee waivers from my high school, I probably wouldn't be in college now, to be honest.” Journal entries from participants also echoed that their high schools provided resources that their parents could not due to their low SES. KMS7 wrote, "My parents didn't know much about the SAT exam, so I am glad my school provided us with resources to prepare.”

### **Sub-Question One**

What factors have hindered Black students from low-SES families from accessing college preparation resources?

Studies have found that students who have a positive relationship with higher education and classroom leaders like educators in their homes perform better in the classroom due to the strong connection in their community (Whaley & Noel, 2010). Participants' perspectives found that their SES hindered access to additional college preparation resources outside of what was provided by their high schools. AGS6 said they prepared for the SAT through “SAT prep classes and books provided by my high school.” Focus group responses found that the price of the

institution students attended directly influenced what schools they ultimately applied to. Since most students were limited to the number of applications, they submitted based on test vouchers, an increased number of students also wanted the SAT requirement removed from the college admittance policies.

ABS5 added that if their parents were upper-middle, “It would have made a difference in my SAT score because I could have taken tutoring classes.” Through journal entries, CWS1 wrote, “My parents did not have extra funds for a tutor, workbook, or classes.” Despite the concerns about SES impacting students' SAT scores, there has been no change in this college readiness measurement in American postsecondary institutions (Barbarin & Aikens, 2015; Soharwardi et al., 2020).

### **Sub-Question Two**

How do Black low-SES students' families' economic status determine which colleges they apply to?

Competitive colleges in the United States list class rank among the top four determinants of college admission (Hansen et al., 2019). Class rank was usually developed using the student's cumulative grade-point average (GPA), and higher value may be added to more rigorous courses like honor, gifted, or A.P. classes (Morgan et al., 2018). Through interviews, participants' perspectives were that their socioeconomic status did not determine which colleges they applied to. When asked, NHS9 shared, “My parent's SES status did not influence which colleges I applied for. My parents told me to apply where I wanted to go and not to limit my options.” SSS8 agreed, stating that their SES “Did not impact my college choices at all.”

Conversely, the focus group discovered that students' SES did determine the schools they chose when comparing scholarship and grant possibilities vs. loan options to pay for their tuition.

During focus groups, AGS6 shared that “I knew my parents couldn’t pay for my college expenses, and I didn’t want them to, so the price of the school determined where I applied.” SBS4 shared in their journal entry that “I wish my parents could have afforded to take me on more college tours, so I had a better idea of where I wanted to go for school.” Not being able to choose your institution based on a lack of financial resources was an opportunity for continued research on this subject and how it impacts students' access to success after high school graduation.

### **Sub-Question Three**

How have Black students from low-SES families prepared for standardized admission exams?

Participants perceived that their parents did not prepare them for the SAT but that their high school provided resources for them. Alon (2010) conducted a study to measure the gap between Black, White, and Latino students for SAT preparation. Surprisingly to the author, Black students used more resources for test preparation than White students, given the lower social and financial capital (Alon, 2010). Alon (2010) found that Black students utilized every free or inexpensive resource for test preparation, while White students were likelier to employ private tutoring courses. CES2 writes that “If my parents were upper-middle class, I could have prepared more. My high school provided free SAT prep courses in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade that prepared me for the exam.” When asked about students' college preparation techniques, CWS1 stated, “I didn’t know anything about college prep.” SBS4 shared, “I knew I needed to take a standardized exam and maintain a certain GPA throughout high school. Family support's limitations provide educators with few options to improve students' socioeconomic status and prepare them for the SAT/ACT exam (Soland, 2018). Through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, it

was found that students' families leaned on their high schools to provide the college preparation resources that parents could not provide.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four reviewed the findings of this study through data collection methods from participants' lived experiences. Journal entries, interviews, and focus groups of Black low-SES first-year college students identified that SAT preparation, SES impact, and how college readiness was measured impacted their access to college preparation resources. Students shared that their parents' income level left the burden of additional college preparation resources for college hopefuls for the school to provide. Data collection methods identified predominate themes such as SES negatively impacted students' SAT scores, lack of community involvement in college preparation, and removing SAT scores as a college acceptance requirement. These themes were discussed in comparison to the current research on the topic and how further research can answer questions this study may have posed and continue further education on students' access to resources.

Participants like ALS2 shared that "I would have been able to afford more tutoring sessions for the SAT if they (parents) made more (income). Thankfully my high school provided free vouchers to take the PSAT and SAT twice." Students like CWS1 stated that "I had SAT prep classes provided at my high school for free that assisted me." Through this study, their lived experiences and others are studied and shared. The phenomenon explored in this study was that low-SES impacts students' access to college preparation resources. Their feelings about this access and how it impacts their SAT score was a byproduct of their low SES, as shared by the participant in this study.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

This study aimed to explore the phenomenon of Black low-SES students' lived experience in accessing college preparation resources. The information provided in this study should be used to further education on this topic and challenge the reader's perception of college preparation access for various demographics. Chapter Five. Hosts information concluding the data collection methods analyzed in Chapter Four. Chapter Five was comprised of five discussion subsections: (a) interpretation of findings, (b) implications for policy and practice, (c) theoretical and methodological implications, (d) limitations and delimitations, and (e) recommendations for future research.

### Discussion

This section discusses the findings in light of the developed themes mentioned in Chapter 4. These findings are then further explained through the subsections below.

#### **Interpretation of Findings**

This study used journal entries, interviews, and focus groups to retrieve data on Black low-SES students' lived experiences with access to college preparation resources. This section shares the thematic findings summary and breaks each with literary references. The conclusions of this study show that Black low-SES students have a shared lived experience with access to college preparation resources.

#### ***Summary of Thematic Findings***

Through interviews and focus groups, there were several phenomena discovered. Thematic findings such as students lacking knowledge about the SAT, limited SAT prep and

feelings about their low-SES negatively impacted Black low-SES students' access to college preparation resources. These phenomena were shared in the interpretations listed in this section.

**Students Had SAT Prior Knowledge.** The first phenomenon identified was that 9 or 75 % of participants had prior knowledge about the SAT exam before taking the SAT. Interview Question 3 asked the participants – What did you know about the SAT before taking it (CRQ) – 75% of participants shared that they were introduced to the SAT by their high school. Their parents introduced 25%. Mbekeani (2023) found a disparity “in parental investments that may be associated with widening gaps in educational attainment.” Coincidentally, nine or 75% of participants also shared that their parents did not attend a 4-year college and university and had no prior experience with the exam. 3 of the 12 participants stated that their parents had experience with the SAT exam and parents had friends who had taken it and passed along information about the SAT exam to the students.

**Students SES Impact SAT Scores.** The second theme found through this study was that students perceived that if their parents had a high income, their SAT scores would have been better. This phenomenon was also found in a 2023 study where SAT score improvement was studied between low and high SES students from 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade (Dahlke et al., 2023). Dahlke et al. (2023) found that “lower-SES students achieved lower-than-predicted (SAT) test scores at a higher rate than higher-SES Students. When participants were asked how their parents' SES affected their SAT scores and overall readiness for college, 100% or 12 out of 12 participants stated that their SES impacted their SAT score negatively, and 8 or 66% of students shared that having a higher income would have positively impacted their SAT scores.

### **Students' Emotional Response to SAT as College Readiness Measurement**

The final theme in this study was that 8 out of 12, or 66.7% of participants, shared negative feelings about SAT scores being used as a college admittance requirement. Theorists have studied test option policies for the past ten years to analyze if there are different ways to measure college readiness (Belasco et al., 2014). The results from these studies were that keeping or replacing SAT score requirements for college acceptance has both pros and cons for college administrators and their prospective students.

A recent study in 2022 by Christina Pellegrino on the test-optional policy and its impact on college admittance policies found that “test-optional institutions place greater emphasis on academic accomplishments.” (Pellegrino, 2022). The findings from this study, when students were asked if college readiness can be measured outside of SAT scores, showed that 100% of the participants feel this was a possibility. Based on the findings from this study and others regarding SES's impact on SAT scores and test option policies, the implication for the SAT college admittance requirement may require further research before a definitive decision can be made.

### **Implications for Policy**

This research shows that high school students' SES may negatively impact their access to college readiness resources to prepare for the SAT, a college admittance requirement for many 4-year colleges/ or universities. With the SAT cataloged as one of two standardized tests used to measure students' readiness and acceptance into four-year colleges and universities (Bastedo et al., 2022), a possible negative impact may influence the colleges/and or universities students attend (Davis, 2021). Previous study's findings showed support that low SES students might have an unfair disadvantage in accessing college preparation resources due to their income (Witherspoon et al., 2022), intergenerational disparities in education (Tompsett & Knoester, 2023), and residential segregation (Muniz, 2021). The policy of requiring SAT scores for college

admittance may indirectly discriminate against low SES students (Kosunen et al., 2021), limiting the number of 4-year colleges/universities that students can apply to that meet other requirements for admittance, such as GPA, community service/involvement, and assigned essays (Michaels & Barone, 2020).

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

The purpose of this section was to address the theoretical and empirical implications found in this study. This section was broken into two parts, contributions through the theoretical framework and relationship with current research, to express these theoretical and empirical implications. The theoretical framework for this study was described, and details are provided on how it focused on the purpose of this study; the connections to current research are also offered based on the information found in the data collection process.

#### ***Contribution through Theoretical Framework***

The theoretical framework in this study was based on three theories: Pekrun's (2006) Control-Value Theory, Vygotsky's (1986) Sociocultural Theory of Learning (SCLT), and the Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Saar, 2017). The theoretical underpinnings of this problem focus on the requirement of standardized exams as a measurement of college readiness regardless of students' socioeconomic status (Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018; Sackett et al., 2012). The empirical significance of this study was to describe how students feel their low-SES status impacts their SAT scores with the hopes of identifying how schools can provide resources to increase student achievement on this exam. These theories and significances were used to develop interview questions so students could share their lived experiences with college preparation resources.

Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory focuses on how the impact of achievement emotions impacts students' academic performance. Results indicate that 75% of students felt

negative about the SAT exam, and 66.7% felt their SAT scores would have been higher if their parents had increased income. Pekrun (2006) found that emotions have a proven link to achievement outcomes, as shown through participants' accounts in this study. This study highlights Black low-SES students' feelings about using the SAT to measure college readiness and the impact the SES has on their scores due to limited access to resources.

Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory of learning (SCLT) states that learning occurs during individuals' many social interactions. During focus groups, participants discussed a phenomenon in their lack of access to college preparation resources outside of the classroom and how it negatively impacted their test scores. Students also shared that their parent's knowledge of the SAT and how to prepare restricted their access. This reduced students' social interactions with SAT education when preparing for college to the resources their high school had to offer. With 100% of students utilizing only school-produced SAT resources, their chances to prepare for the exam are decreased compared to high-SES students (Bastedo et al., 2022; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011; Zwick, 2004). This study extends the knowledge on how the minimal social interaction impact on low-SES students can decrease their ability to attend a 4-year college and university.

Critical race theory challenges students, parents, and educators' ideals toward students of color and their success through re-teaching at the educator level (Saar, 2017). The results of this study show that students felt their SAT scores would have improved if they had been introduced to the exam before 11<sup>th</sup> grade by their high school and their parents. This theory did not extend knowledge on this topic but instead confirmed that both parents and educators are limited in the number of resources they can provide to students based on the SES of the parent and the public school's annual budget (Davis & Welcher, 2013).

### ***Relationship with Current Research***

This study focused on how Black low-SES students perceive their financial hardships affected their access to college readiness resources and their standardized test scores. This study shared that Black low-SES students felt that their financial hardships negatively impacted their access to college readiness resources. Table 3 shows that 100% or 12 out of 12 participants received and used SAT resources from their high school to prepare for the SAT exam. When asked if their economic status affected their access to readiness resources for college, students shared that not having income for tutors or additional knowledge about the exam impacted them negatively. As shown in Table 4, 66.7% of candidates could only afford to take the SAT due to test waivers provided by the high school, which only included one attempt. A study in 2021 found that the college admission process, like at the University of Georgia, encourages students to take the SAT more than once (Bloem et al., 2021), and students' inability to do so can be due to low SES decrease their enrollment chances (Goodman et al., 2020).

Students also shared that their parent's lack of prior knowledge about the SAT impacted their access to college preparation resources, as 75% of participants were only informed about the exam from their high school. A study in 2022 found that low-SES students whose parents had less than a bachelor's degree graduation rates were at 65%, while high-SES students were at 95% (Bastedo et al., 2022). Intergenerational mobility was controlled by the person's access to resources. It does not apply equally to low SES students that attend public high schools (Davis & Welcher, 2013) or Black students' immediate family members with minimal higher education (D.A. Long et al., 2012). Previous studies have discovered that having college graduate friends, parents, and a higher SES are crucial factors that increase the likelihood that a child would advance to a 4-year college and university (Blake & Langenkamp, 2021).

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

During this study, several limitations and delimitations were identified. Limitations in this study are defined as the weaknesses identified while conducting this research and completing data analysis to develop the study (Kohler et al., 2022). Delimitations are the boundaries of the research study as defined by what should be included and excluded to reach the goals of this study (Taherdoost, 2022).

### **Limitations**

The limitations identified in this qualitative phenomenological study are as follows:

1. Twelve Black-low SES first-year college students were chosen for this study.
2. The timeline for conducting research was within a 1-month period.
3. No state college identifiers were included in this study.

### ***Methodology and Research Design***

Utilizing the qualitative method for this study limited the objectivity of verifiable results, the interviewer's skill requirements, the time the interview/focus groups consume, and the category-intensive process (Choy, 2014). Because this study cannot be replicated precisely, objectivity through verifiable results was limited (Choy, 2014). The skill requirement for the interviewer was limited as the interviewer was also the data analyst and author of the study with a limited amount of experience as an interviewer for an academic study. Due to the research for this study being conducted during participants' finals season, the time to schedule and conduct interviews was also limited. Focus groups limited the amount of nuanced data than using a survey since the required social capital was relational and could have been impacted by individuals who responded first, second, third, etc. (Choy, 2014).

The qualitative method also limits the researchers' interpretations (Choy, 2014) as the student's lived experiences are being analyzed, and the researchers' opinions must not be biased or measured during this study at any time. The interviewer's control over the data provided was also limited (Choy, 2014) as the participants lived experiences and knowledge influence the data collected through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis.

### ***Sample and Sampling Strategy***

Identifying participants from college campuses was challenging when recruiting initially started that met the study requirements. The survey was developed to request students' demographics to determine whether they would fit. It limited the number of truthful answers received as responses were based on participants' responses (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The location of the study was the Southwest area of Atlanta, Georgia, where most of the urban state colleges are located, making it a central location to identify possible participants (Dache, 2022).

Due to the Urban University's diversity, this area should be considered for future studies focused on assorted student demographics. Flyers were posted and emailed to several groups and departments on several Urban University campuses and received limited responses. The flyer was posted at the end of the semester, limiting the number of students who would see the flyers due to final exams and students leaving campus for the summer break (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). When Liberty Universities IRB initially approved flyers, an incentive was not listed, and no responses were received to the flyers requesting participants. After adding an incentive and finding students who meet the study requirements, the next issue was finding students who would provide complete sentence answers to interview questions and would participate in the focus group.

### ***Data Collection***

Data saturation was not achieved because this study was qualitative (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Students initially answered interview questions with one-word or one-sentence responses, so additional explanation was given about the purpose of the study, and students were encouraged to expound on their lived experiences when answering interview questions. Students were encouraged to join the focus group and advised that it would not take too much time of their day. Ultimately, 6 participants agreed to participate in the focus group, and when asked, those students shared that they enjoyed learning from other experiences. This data collection method was impactful in identifying the phenomenon students had in their lived experiences (Ahmad et al., 2022). Data collection was also limited by participants' responses, which cannot be objectively verified (Choy, 2014) since it was based on their lived experiences.

### ***Data Analysis***

Like most qualitative studies, this study cannot be replicated precisely and was limited in its ability to be verified entirely since the data was based on the participants' lived experiences (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Analysis of lived experiences was also limited due to labor-intensive hours used to analyze data from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis (Choy, 2014). Data analysis was limited in numerical representativity (Queiros et al., 2017) as this study was focused on participants' lived experiences. Research was limited in quantifying information as some aspects of reality cannot be qualified (Queiros et al., 2017). Analysis of focus groups was limited as the information source was a group, and the difficulty to manage the group and gain clarity on participants' responses was minimal (Queiros et al., 2017). This study was also limited in identifying possible relationships between participants' lived experiences and analyzing that data while maintaining an unbiased opinion (Queiros et al., 2017).

## **Delimitations**

This study shared the lived experiences of Black low-SES students accessing college preparation resources. This study was limited to a phenomenological study as the other methodologies did not focus on students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences with access to college preparation resources examined—this perspective added to current research by studying students' perceptions from their point of view. A qualitative design was chosen over quantitative so data could be analyzed unbiasedly and students' lived experiences remained the focus of synthesized points. After talking to several friends and my mentor, a \$10 Chick-Fil-A gift card to all participants was added to the flyer, and immediate responses were received from possible participants. With the added incentive came lots of interested students who did not meet the age or school year requirements for the study.

This study was limited to participants 18 years or older to mitigate consent forms to parents, increase interested participants, and shorten the time to retrieve consent forms from participants. Data collection methods were limited to journal entries, focus groups, and interviews (Baker & Chenery-Morris, 2020). This study was limited to Black low-SES students to control the focus on their specific lived experiences based on previous research, as one of the goals of this study was to expand the knowledge on this topic. This study does not use statistics from other minorities as a base measure of data analysis, as Black low-SES participants were chosen as the focal point (Price, 2021).

This study was limited to first-year college students as participants because they recently took the SAT exam, so their experience with access to college preparation resources would hopefully be fresh on their minds. This study was limited to questions that provided responses from students' lived experiences to mitigate bias during the data collection (Roos, 2022). The

study does not cover parents' or teachers' feelings toward students' access to college preparation resources. This information would be outside the scope of the research this study aimed to contribute to continued education.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study can be interpreted as introductory insight into Black low-SES students' perceptions of access to college preparation resources. This study focused on how their SES impacted them and students' preparedness for the SAT. The results of this study should be expounded on in the future by focusing on other demographics to compare students' lived experiences. Researchers should investigate other minority groups such as Asian, Alaska Native, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indians, first-generation Americans, and students who are the first in their families to attend college whose SES was also low. Studying these students' access to college preparation resources can continue our education into the impact this has on college admission rates and the success of the next generation as it pertains to college admission and continued learning.

Further research should utilize grounded theory for additional phenomenological studies on this topic. The grounded theory was a qualitative method used to provide an explanation or theory behind events (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This theory allows researchers to further their reach into students' lived experiences on this topic through expedited data collection on a grounded ideal. Grounded theory may increase education on this topic through in-depth interviews and a focused content analysis of students' lived experiences. Grounded theory can also provide accurate data informing experts about the differences between low and high-SES students regarding college preparation and admittance.

The limited access to college preparation resources shared during this study should push this topic forward by educating college admission teams about the possible financial inequality in students' access to test taking. Collegiate administrators such as Admission Officers, SAT Administrators, and public high school Superintendents would benefit from reading this manuscript. College Admission Officers would help as these results shed light on students' lived experiences with their admission policies, and officers can use this information to modify their process. SAT Administrators would benefit as these findings share how preparation for their exam can be limited and negatively impact their success. This information could increase the number of preparation resources SAT Administrators develop and possibly increase the access to these resources for all SES levels. Public high school Superintendents can benefit from this manuscript as it may increase SAT and ACT preparation resources for students who classify as low-SES.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to share Black low-SES students' perceptions of access to college preparation resources. The disadvantages found in students who cannot afford college preparatory courses and additional resources not provided by public or private high schools are growing substantially (Knaggs et al., 2015). Standardized testing scores are seen as a reliable and objective indicator of academic preparation versus high school course grades because all students are testing the same information in the same manner (Allensworth & Clark, 2020, p. 198). A lack of research on the relationship between standardized tests and students' academic performance has prompted research on the validity of standardized testing (Aburas & Nurunnabi, 2019; Nortvedt & Buchholtz, 2018; Wambugu & Emeke, 2013). This study utilized interviews, focus

groups, and journal entries as data collection methods to discover Black low-SES students' perceptions.

The research questions focused on several objectives. They lived the experiences of low-socioeconomic Black, low-SES first-year college students concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southwest Georgia area. Data collection using these techniques displayed several phenomena in Black low-SES students' access to college preparation resources for the SAT exam, all surrounding their parents' income's negative impact on their access. These findings add to the current research on this topic and continue our understanding of how a student's SES impacts their ability to attend a 4-year college and university. The limited access to college preparation resources shared during this study should push this topic forward by educating college admission teams about the possible financial discrimination students shared they feel upon applying.

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**APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER**

March 31, 2023

Aaleeah Bell-Mccrary  
Rick Bragg, Sharon Michael-Chadwell

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY22-23-911 PERCEPTIONS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF  
LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC BLACK COLLEGE FRESHMEN CONCERNING ACCESS TO  
COLLEGE PREPARATION RESOURCES

Dear Aaleeah Bell-Mccrary, Rick Bragg, Sharon Michael-Chadwell,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval was extended to you for one year from the following date: March 31, 2023. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which was applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP  
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research  
Research Ethics Office

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPANTS

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Low-Socioeconomic Black College Freshmen Concerning Access to College Preparation Resources

**Principal Investigator:** Aaleeah Bell-McCrary, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years old or older, a high school graduate of a Georgia public and/or private high school, identify as an African American, and have had an annual household income of \$0-\$50,000.00 while in high school. Taking part in this research project was voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What was the study about and why was it being done?

The purpose of the study was to explore the perception and lived experience of low-socioeconomic Black college freshmen concerning their access to college preparation resources in the Southeast Georgia area.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in writing 3 journal entries with guided questions which should take 1 hour. The journals will need to be emailed to the researcher once complete.
2. Participate in a one-on-one, in-person or online interview that will take no longer than 30 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded.
3. Participants will be randomly selected to participate in a focus group with 4 other participants in a closed, in-person or online setting, that will take no longer than 2 hours. This focus group will be audio-recorded.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include insight into Black low-socioeconomic status (SES) students' perceptions of their college preparation resources and how this access impacts their SAT scores, sharing how students feel their low-SES impacted their access to college preparation resources, and identify racial and socioeconomic gaps in college degree completion.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. The risks involved in this study include the possibility of psychological stress from being asked to recall and discuss prior trauma. To reduce

risk, I will monitor participants' physical, emotional, and verbal responses and discontinue the interview if needed, and provide referral information for counseling services.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data (physical and electronic) will be stored on a password-locked hard drive and locked in an office filing cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked hard drive and locked in an office filing cabinet for three years and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

#### **Was study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study was voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study was Aaleeah Bell-McCrary. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [abellmccrary@liberty.edu](mailto:abellmccrary@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Sharon Michael-Chadwell, at [smichaelchadwell@liberty.edu](mailto:smichaelchadwell@liberty.edu).

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address was

Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number was 434-592-5530, and our email address was [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) was tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

### **Your Consent**

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study was about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

---

Printed Subject Name

---

Signature & Date

**APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT: PERMISSION TO CONTACT****ORGANIZATION'S MEMBERSHIP AND/OR USE OF FACILITIES**

To: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

From: Aaleeah Bell-McCrary  
Doctoral Candidate- Liberty University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Re: IRB Approval Inquiry-Bell-McCrary- State University (pseudonym)

Good Morning,

My name was Aaleeah Bell-McCrary, and I am currently pursuing my Ph.D. in Higher Education Leadership from Liberty University. I have completed my proposal defense and wanted to gain more information on the proper steps to receive IRB approval from State University to start my research using students from State University as my participants. My hope was to provide electronic surveys to students meeting my participant criteria and schedule follow-up focus groups through Microsoft Teams to gain data on their lived experiences for my study.

I can provide proposal specific items that are required but wanted to start here to gain a full scope of what will be required of me for this effort.

Thank you for reading this message and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Regards,

Aaleeah Bell-McCrary, MBA

**APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT: PERMISSION GRANTED TO CONTACT ORGANIZATION'S MEMBERSHIP AND/OR USE OF FACILITIES**

To: Aaleeah Bell-McCrary  
 Doctoral Candidate- Liberty University

From: \_\_\_\_\_ (Date)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (Title)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (State Universities name)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Ms. Bell-McCrary,

The State University (pseudonym) Institutional Review Board (IRB) has administratively examined your study materials for the proposed research entitled "IRB-FY22-23-911 PERCEPTIONS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LOW- SOCIOECONOMIC BLACK COLLEGE FRESHMEN CONCERNING ACCESS TO COLLEGE PREPARATION RESOURCES" that were reviewed and approved by the Liberty University IRB. You are granted permission to recruit participants for this research project on the State University (pseudonym) campus.

Although the IRB allows for the recruitment of participants for your study, the board cannot provide access to faculty, staff, or student email addresses as this information was not included as part of State Universities (pseudonym) public directory and was protected under FERPA regulations. You are free to contact State University (pseudonym) faculty/staff members, Office of Student Affairs, or LISTSERV administrators known to you, asking that these individuals provide prospective participants with information regarding your research with the understanding that participation in the research project was voluntary and not a requirement.

Please note that permission to recruit was not an IRB review, and applying to recruit does not serve as or replace review by an IRB. The Liberty University IRB retains responsibility for conducting all required continuing reviews of the study, and all unanticipated problems or adverse events related to the study must be reported to the home IRB.

Should you have questions, please contact the board by email at \_\_\_\_\_ or by telephone at \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,  
 NAME

TITLE  
DEPARTMENT

APPENDIX E: SURVEY

## Survey Questions

1. Are you 18 years or older?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
2. Do you identify as an African American?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
3. Do you identify as a male, female, or nonbinary?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Nonbinary
  
4. Did you graduate from a public and/or private high school in the state of Georgia?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
5. What was your immediate family's annual household income while you were in high school?
  - a. \$0-19,999
  - b. \$20,000 to \$39,999
  - c. \$40,000 to \$59,999
  - d. \$60,000 to \$79,999
  - e. \$80,000 to \$99,999
  - f. \$100,000 and above
  
6. Would you complete three journal entries about your experience about college readiness before conducting an interview?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
7. Will you answer one-on-one interview questions for this study in person or online?
  - a. In Person
  - b. Online
  
8. Focus groups will be created and participants from this study will be chosen randomly. Are you comfortable participating in a focus group after the interview?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Indifferent

#### **APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Please tell me your age, major, and current year at State University. CRQ
2. Describe what was required for you to submit to universities for your college applications. CRQ
3. What did you know about the SAT before taking it? CRQ
4. What resources did your high school provide to prepare you for the SAT/ACT exam? SQ1
5. How did you prepare for the SAT exam? SQ3
6. How did you afford to take the SAT exam? SQ3
7. Describe your feelings about the SAT exam? SQ3
8. How did your parents' economic status affect your readiness for college? SQ2
9. Imagine that your parents were upper-middle-class; how would that have impacted your SAT/ACT scores? SQ3
10. Describe your feelings behind using standardized exams like the SAT as college readiness measures. SQ1
11. How would you define how your SES status impacted your SAT scores? SQ2
12. How has your SES status influenced what colleges you chose to apply to? SQ3
13. Because standardized test scores have been removed from some colleges' admittance process due to COVID, how do you feel about being compared or even denied admittance to colleges due to your score? SQ1
14. What other ways can a student's college readiness be measured? CRQ

15. If you were a recruiter, how would you change the college admittance process at your chosen university? CRQ

## **APPENDIX G: TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW**

Transcription: Respondent ALS2

Researcher: Please tell me your age, major, and current year at State University (pseudonym).

ALS2: 18, Health and Human Performance, Freshman

Researcher: Describe what was required for you to submit to universities for your college applications.

ALS2: I knew I needed to complete the FASFA, college application, and planned degree field had to be decided.

Researcher: What did you know about the SAT before taking it?

ALS2: Yes, I knew about it, and I took it in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

Researcher: What resources did your high school provide to prepare you for the SAT/ACT exam?

ALS2: We took the PSAT in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade and I took the ACT for free in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Researcher: How did you prepare for the SAT exam?

ALS2: PSAT was provided from the school for free and tutoring sessions once a week for 2 months paid by my parents.

Researcher: How did you afford to take the SAT exam?

ALS2: Parents and school offered free ACT.

Researcher: Describe your feelings about the SAT exam.

ALS2: Did not like it, did not do wek, long hours and sitting to take the test.

Researcher: How did your parents' economic status affect your readiness for college?

ALS2: Negatively, could not afford additional tutoring resources that would ensure that I do well on the exam. But conversely, made me grind harder to find ways to study and pass the exam.

Researcher: Imagine that your parents were upper-middle class; how would that have impacted your SAT/ACT scores?

ALS2: I would have been able to afford more tutoring sessions if they made more.

Researcher: Describe your feelings behind using standardized exams like the SAT as college readiness measures.

ALS2: Do not think that it determines if a student would do well, some people don't take tests well but can do well in the classroom.

Researcher: How has your SES status influenced what colleges you chose to apply to?

ALS2: Not being prepared for the exam meant my scores weren't the best and even though I had a 3.6 GPA, I did not have the test scores to apply to other institutions.

Researcher: Because standardized test scores have been removed from some colleges' admittance process due to COVID, how do you feel about being compared or even denied admittance to colleges due to your score?

ALS2: Unfair because they should have been left removed if they were removed for any reason.

Researcher: What other ways can a student's college readiness be measured?

ALS2: Social skills because college was not just based on how you do on a test but how your environment impacts how well you will do.

Researcher: If you were a recruiter, how would you change the college admittance process at your chosen university?

ALS2: I don't know, I applied, and they didn't require test scores and I was accepted based on my GPA.

#### Transcript: Respondent AGS6

Researcher: Please tell me your age, major, and current year at State University (pseudonym).

AGS6: 18, Psychology, Freshman

Researcher: Describe what was required for you to submit to universities for your college applications.

AGS6: My transcript, recommendations, and essays

Researcher: What did you know about the SAT before taking it?

AGS6: SATs help you to receive scholarships.

Researcher: What resources did your high school provide to prepare you for the SAT/ACT exam?

AGS6: SAT prep class and books that my high school gave me.

Researcher: How did you prepare for the SAT exam?

AGS6: I did mock exams on my own and studied answers I got wrong.

Researcher: How did you afford to take the SAT exam?

AGS6: My mom paid for it.

Researcher: Describe your feelings about the SAT exam.

AGS6: I did not enjoy taking it, but I felt confident in my scores.

Researcher: How did your parents' economic status affect your readiness for college?

AGS6: I knew my parents couldn't pay for all of my college expenses but I didn't want them to, but it did worry me when preparing for college.

Researcher: Imagine that your parents were upper-middle class; how would that have impacted your SAT/ACT scores?

AGS6: I would have received more prep classes.

Researcher: Describe your feelings behind using standardized exams like the SAT as college readiness measures.

AGS6: I don't think it can accurately measure someone's intelligence.

Researcher: How would you define how your SES status impacted your SAT scores?

AGS6: If my parents had more money, I would have taken more prep classes and had a better score.

Researcher: How has your SES status influenced what colleges you chose to apply to?

AGS6: It hasn't.

Researcher: Because standardized test scores have been removed from some colleges' admittance process due to COVID, how do you feel about being compares or even denied admittance to colleges due to your score?

AGS6: I believe that scores help more with scholarships rather than acceptance.

Researcher: What other ways can a student's college readiness can be measured?

AGS6: It can be based on community involvement.

Researcher: If you were a recruiter, how would you change the college admittance process at your chosen university?

AGS6: I would not change anything.

#### Transcript: Respondent JHS10

Researcher: Please tell me your age, major, and current year at State University (pseudonym).

JHS10: 18, Criminal Justice, Freshman

Researcher: Describe what was required for you to submit to universities for your college applications.

JHS10: The application process wasn't hard at all. What's required was your SAT/ACT test scores, transcript, and sometimes an essay.

Researcher: What did you know about the SAT before taking it?

JHS10: I knew that it was a required exam. I also knew that once you study and prepare yourself for it the test will be a lot easier.

Researcher: What resources did your high school provide to prepare you for the SAT/ACT exam?

JHS10: My high school provided an SAT class. They also provided us with a practice book to help you understand.

Researcher: How did you prepare for the SAT exam?

JHS10: I prepared for the SAT by studying old information from my freshman year. I also used the practice book to help be prepare.

Researcher: How did you afford to take the SAT exam?

JHS10: The SAT exam was free. My high school provided the test and gave us a day to take it in school.

Researcher: Describe your feelings about the SAT exam.

JHS10: The SAT exam was very nerve wrecking. It'll make you very anxious because it was a score that will be sent to your colleges.

Researcher: How did your parents' economic status affect your readiness for college?

JHS10: My parents economic status affected me because I had to use application fee waivers to apply.

Researcher: Imagine that your parents were upper-middle class; how would that have impact impacted your SAT/ACT scores?

JHS10: I feel it would have made a difference in my score.

Researcher: Describe your feelings behind using standardized exams like the SAT as college readiness measures.

JHS10: My feelings toward them are neutral because it gives colleges a better sense of where you stand academically.

Researcher: How would you define how your SES status impacted your SAT score.

JHS10: My SES status did impact my SAT scores because my parent couldn't pay for me to take the exam, so I used waivers from my school.

Researcher: How has your SES status influenced what colleges you chose to apply to?

JHS10: It did not.

Researcher: Because standardized test scores have been removed from some colleges' admittance process due to COVID, how do you feel about being compares or even denied admittance to colleges due to your score?

JHS10: Testing did not have to come back but it was normal to me because I was prepping in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Researcher: What other ways can a student's college readiness can be measured?

JHS10: Community service, references transcripts, and extracurricular activities.

Researcher: If you were a recruiter, how would you change the college admittance process at your chosen university?

JHS10: Essays can be taken away and SAT scores should not be required, grades should matter more.

## **APPENDIX H: THEORETICAL MEMOS**

The notion that accesses to college preparation resources was “limited” for low-SES students and therefore makes it challenging to attend four-year colleges and/or universities was often stated throughout interviews. Participants tended to feel strongly that the use of GPA as a college readiness measurement—in contrast to SAT scores—provided them benefits that they could not have obtained due to low-SES. This idea was expressed in various styles from all participants, but the theme remained the same.

The drawbacks of their low-SES, besides the limited access to SAT prep resources, included the fact that students’ parents’ education on the exam was limited so it was difficult to gain support when preparing for college applications. Participants noted that their high schools provided resources that made taking the exams available as “fee waivers, college prep booklets, and PSATs were provided”.

Those who utilized these free school resources were commonly grateful that they were offered by their high schools. Many of the participants mentioned that without these resources their scores would have been negatively impacted. Additionally, the students felt that their scores could have been higher if they were in a higher income bracket.

## APPENDIX I: TABLES

**Table 1***Student Participants*

Student Participant	College Year	Degree Choice	Age	SES Status
SSS8	Freshman	Computer Science	18	LOW
ALS2	Freshman	Health and Human Performance	18	LOW
KMS7	Freshman	Biology	18	LOW
ABS5	Freshman	Health Science	18	LOW
CWS1	Freshman	Biology	18	LOW
CES3	Freshman	Mass Media	18	LOW
SBS4	Freshman	Food Science	18	LOW
NHS9	Freshman	Software Engineer	18	LOW
Amber	Freshman	Psychology	18	LOW
JHS10	Freshman	Criminal Justice	18	LOW
QBS12	Freshman	Animal Science	18	LOW
AGS6	Freshman	Undecided	18	LOW

**Table 2***Interview Results*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Emerging Theme</b>	<b>Emerging Theme 2</b>	<b>Emerging Theme 3</b>	<b>Outlier Based on Literature</b>	<b>Predominate Theme</b>
Describe what was required for you to submit to universities for your college applications.	Test scores, application, essay , references (11)	High school GPA, application (1)		High school GPA, application (1)	Test scores, application, essay, references
What did you know about the SAT before taking it?	Had in-depth knowledge about the amount about the exam (3)	Had a basic understanding about the exam (8)	Had a minimal understanding about the exam (1)	None	Students had a basic understanding about the exam
What resources did your high school provide to prepare you for the SAT/ACT exam?	College prep books (12)	PSAT (12)		None	College prep books and PSAT
How did you prepare for the SAT exam?	School provided SAT preparation materials (12)	Parents provided SAT preparation materials (4)		None	School provided preparation materials
How did you afford to take the SAT exam?	School provided SAT waivers (10)	Parents paid for the exam (2)	Did not take the exam (1)	Did not take the exam (1)	School provided SAT waivers

Describe your feelings about the SAT exam?	Good feelings about the SAT exam (3)	Bad feelings about the SAT exam (6)	No feelings about the SAT exam (3)	No feelings about the SAT exam (3)	Bad feelings about the SAT exam (6)
How did your parents' economic status affect your readiness for college?	Negative impact (7)	No Impact (5)		No Impact	Negative Impact
Imagine that your parents were upper-middle-class; how would that have impacted your SAT/ACT scores?	Would have done better on the SAT exam (6)	Would have done the same on the SAT exam (3)	Would not have impacted score (3)	Would not have impacted score (3)	Would have done better on the SAT exam (6)
Describe your feelings behind using standardized exams like the SAT as college readiness measures.	SAT scores should be used to measure college readiness (3)	SAT scores should not be used to measure college readiness (8)	Indifferent (1)	Indifferent (1)	SAT scores should not be used to measure college readiness (8)
How would you define how your SES status impacted your SAT scores	SES had no impact on SAT score (5)	SES had an impact on SAT score (7)		SES had no impact on SAT score (5)	SES had an impact on SAT score (7)
How has your SES status influenced what colleges you chose to apply to?	SES has no influence on SAT score (9)	SES had influence on SAT score (3)		None	SES has no influence on SAT score (9)
Because standardized test scores have been removed from some colleges' admittance process due to COVID, how do you feel about being compared or even denied admittance to colleges due to your score?	Do not agree that students should be denied admittance based on test scores (5)	Agree that students should be denied admittance based on test score (3)	Indifferent (1)	Indifferent (1)	Do not agree that students should be denied admittance based on test scores (5)

What other ways can a student's college readiness be measured?	Essays, high school GPA (6)	High School GPA, community service, references (5)	Test scores, essay, high school GPA (1)	None	Essays, high school GPA (6)
If you were a recruiter, how would you change the college admittance process at your chosen university?	Remove essays, remove test scores, focus on high school achievements (9)	Leave the admission process as it was (2)	Indifferent to change to the college admittance process (1)	Leave the admission process as it was (2)	Remove essays, remove test scores, focus on high school achievements (9)

**Table 3***Focus Group Results*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Emerging Theme</b>	<b>Emerging Theme 2</b>	<b>Emerging Theme 3</b>	<b>Outlier Based on Literature</b>	<b>Predominate Theme</b>
Did your parents prepare you for the SAT exam?	Yes (2)	No (2)	Other family members (2)	None	No (2)
Why did you choose to take the SAT exam versus other pre-college exams?	Free with student voucher (4)	Easier exam based on research (2)		None	Free with student voucher (4)
What three factors impacted your choice in selecting this university for your post-secondary education and why?	Student life, location, price (3)	Student life, career placement, scholarships (1)	Heritage, student life, graduation rates (1)	None	Student life, location, price (3)
What was the one thing about the college application process you would recommend changing and why?	Remove Essay (4)	Remove SAT score requirement (5)	No changes (1)	No changes (1)	Remove SAT score requirement (5)
Do you feel the SAT exam prepared you for college? Why?	Yes (2)	No (4)			No (4)

**Table 4***Document Analysis Results*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Emerging Theme</b>	<b>Emerging Theme 2</b>	<b>Emerging Theme 3</b>	<b>Outlier Based on Literature</b>	<b>Predominate Theme</b>
What did you know about college preparation resources when you were in the 9 <sup>th</sup> to 11 <sup>th</sup> grade?	Need to research colleges and prep resources (4)	No Knowledge about College Preparation (3)	Take Standardized Test and maintain GPA (3)	None	Need to research colleges and prep resources (4)
What would you have done differently to prepare for college since you have started your freshman year?	Take GPA more seriously and take more AP classes (5)	Prepare for college earlier in high school than 11 <sup>th</sup> grade (2)	Apply for more scholarships (2)	None	Take GPA more seriously and take more AP classes (5)

**APPENDIX J: DATA ANALYSIS CODING****Interview Response Coding Sample:**

Q6 – How did you afford to take the SAT exam?

- 1- School Paid
- 2- Parents Paid

Q7 – Describe your feelings about the SAT exam.

- 1- Positive
- 2- Negative
- 3- Indifferent

Q14 – What other ways can a student’s college readiness be measured?

- 1- Different ways than SAT exam
- 2- Same way as the current standard

**Focus Group Coding Sample:**

FG2 – Why did you choose to take the SAT exam versus other pre-college exams?

- 1- Free w/ voucher
- 2- Easier exam
- 3- Prior knowledge
- 4- Parents/School encouragement

FG4 – What was one thing about the college process you would recommend changing and why?

- 1- SAT score requirement
- 2- Nothing
- 3- Essay Requirement
- 4- References Requirement

5- Application Fee

**Document Analysis Coding Sample:**

JE1 – What did you know about college preparation resources when you were in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade?

- 1- Take Standardized test and GPA
- 2- Small Knowledge about Scholarships
- 3- No knowledge about College Prep
- 4- Researched Colleges and Prep
- 5- Knew Application Process

JE2- What would you have started preparing earlier like applying to schools and scholarships?

- 1- More College Visits
- 2- Document Volunteer Hours
- 3- Take GPA more seriously, Take more AP classes
- 4- Nothing, family motivation
- 5- Prepare Earlier
- 6- Applied for more Scholarships.