

# AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS IN THE SEARCH STAGE OF COLLEGE CHOICE

## Unintentional Contributions to the Female to Male College Enrollment Gap

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*A serious imbalance exists in today's African American undergraduate student population in which the number of women far outnumber the number of men. Although at the macro level, political, sociological, and economic forces frame this gender enrollment gap, scant research has explored microlevel influences such as parents and parenting. This study uses a qualitative methodology and Hossler's model of college choice to examine African American parent involvement during the search stage. The study finds that the parents, who are mostly female and have higher aspirations for daughters, encourage daughters to consider 4-year colleges more often but show equal levels of tangible support for sons. The authors suggest that the boundaries of Hossler's model necessarily shift when considering urban African American parents and that practitioners must have equally high academic aspirations for both African American male and female students.*

**Keywords:** college choice; African American; parents; single parents

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**By strolling down** the major thoroughfare of an American college or university on any given morning, a person should develop an idea of an institution's personality. However, while observing student spaces, she or he would soon note that the clear majority of African American<sup>1</sup> students are female. Indeed, a recent study by

King (2000) indicates that an undergraduate enrollment gender gap that places females at an advantage is characteristic for all racial groups but is most extreme for African Americans (63% female to 37% male). With the exception of three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs or HBCs)—Morehouse College in Atlanta (100% male), Livingstone College in North Carolina (52% male), and Lane College in Tennessee (51% male)—the trend continues into the new millennium (Holmes, 2004). In 2001, there were 179,000 Black male first-time college students compared to 265,000 Black female college students (Bureau of the Census, 2003). Black women earn 58% of all professional degrees, 66% of all doctoral degrees, 67% of all bachelor's degrees, and 69% of all master's degrees awarded to African Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). What are the reasons for this imbalance, when did it begin, and what are the consequences of this trend for both higher education and at-large society?

The academy has presented several theories to explain this phenomenon. Sociologists posit that society does not adequately reward Black men for academic achievement, whereas economists explain that Black men exhibit typically pragmatic, male tendencies by conducting cost-benefit analyses that result in post-high school choices other than 4-year college enrollment (Kane, 1994; Ogbu, 1987, 1991, 1994). For example, some people believe that lower income men of all races are more likely to pursue high-paying blue-collar careers (such as becoming aircraft mechanics or telephone and power line service and repair men) than enroll in college (Fonda, 2000). Socioeconomic explanations assert that the lack of economic opportunities combine with the effects of persistent racism to force young Black<sup>2</sup> men out of the mainstream economy and into the underground economy and then into the criminal justice system (Watson & Smitherman, 1996; West, 1993; Wilson, 1978, 1987). In fact, the Justice Policy Institute (2002) noted that in 2000, there were 791,600 African American men under the jurisdiction of state and federal prison systems and local jails, whereas 603,032 were enrolled in college. To be sure, macro level racial and socio-political dynamics shape the climate in which having more Black men in jail than in college becomes status quo. Empirical research has little to say about how Black families might unintention-

ally contribute to the phenomenon of African American male-to-female college enrollment disparity at the micro level. This study explores how urban African American parents influence the decision of their sons and daughters to consider post-high school options.

This topic is timely. Today, the numbers of non-student athlete African American male undergraduate students in Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) is dwindling. Still, there are several positive effects of this trend, such as the dramatically increased representation of Black women among the cumulative number of future leaders in American business, law, science, education, and the professions. Add to this the fact that 55% of undergraduate women earning degrees come from the neediest economic backgrounds (Sanchez, 1997). However, the most obvious negative is the absence of Black males as leaders in American business, law, science, education, and the professions. Additionally, there are countless quality of life issues caused by this imbalance, such as the so-called marriage dilemma of the college-educated Black Woman and Black male and female dating tensions in PWIs (Fletcher, 2002; Gose, 1996; Sistahspace.com, 2003). We will not address these issues here, but it is important to note that these issues will continue to confound the African American community if the trend is not soon abated. More important to this study, however, is the issue of equity and access for African American males as a unique group of American males and as a separate PWI subpopulation. Their comparatively small presence begs the question, "What does the gender imbalance do to the quality of undergraduate experiences for African American men and women in PWIs?"

**BLACKS IN COLLEGE: LIMITED ACCESS, MASS ACCESS,  
AND THE GROWING ENROLLMENT DISPARITIES  
BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN**

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, formal higher education was denied to African Americans. Nearly 200 years of slavery followed by 100 years of Jim Crow combined to discourage and exclude Blacks from the American higher education landscape. Yet

even with these barriers and seemingly insurmountable obstacles, from 1760 to 1860, African Americans successfully gained access to college and completed their studies.

History tells us that the first African Americans to attend college did so during the 19th century in institutions such as Middlebury College, Dartmouth, Amherst, Bowdoin, and Oberlin (Cowan & Maguire, 1994; Higginbotham, Litwack, & Hine, 2001). Beginning with Cheyney University, the first colleges specifically for African Americans opened in the early 19th century. Funded by the federal government and White philanthropic groups that supported abolitionist sentiments, the schools were used as a tool to teach reading and writing to former slaves (Bennett, 2001; Lucas, 1994; Williams, 1993). As the colonial colleges groomed privileged, young (in this era usually preteenaged) White males to become preachers and teachers in colonial communities, HBCUs trained Blacks to become preachers and teachers in segregated churches and schools (Cohen, 1998; Lucas, 1994). By 1900, there were more than 20,000 Blacks in college and more than 2,000 Black college graduates, most of whom attended HBCUs (Cowan & Maguire, 1994).

In fact, prior to 1945, almost all African Americans in college attended HBCUs, but 5 years later, the tide of social justice and the adjoining federal legislation swept Blacks into PWIs in heretofore unheard of numbers (Willie, Garibaldi, & Reed, 1991). After World War II, the number of African Americans in college skyrocketed along with the overall number of Americans in college as a consequence of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1945 or the G. I. Bill. One of the many by products of the G. I. Bill was the 100-fold increase of Blacks in college in 1950 compared to 1900; there were now more than 200,000 Blacks in college. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and its legislative products (the antisegregation and Jim Crow legislation of the mid-1960s) further increased the number of Blacks in college. By 1970, there were well above 500,000 African Americans in college, and for the first time, their enrollment numbers in PWIs approached and surpassed numbers in HBCUs. Even with the beginning of America's massive swing from the liberal late 1960s and 1970s to the neoconservative 1980s, the number of Blacks in college still

reached a million (Bureau of the Census, 2000; Snyder & Hoffman, 2001). By 1990, nearly 1.3 million African Americans were enrolled in college, and by the turn of the century, 1.7 million.

The year 1970 was noteworthy for an altogether different reason: the trend of Black female enrollment surpassing that of Black males. Black women represented 45% of all Black college students, but by 1969, there were slightly more Black women in college than men. However, in 1970, women represented 54% of all Black college students; in 1980, they represented 58%; and in 1990, they represented 61%. By the year 2000, they constituted 63% of the total Black college student population (Snyder & Hoffman, 2001). The most recent National Center for Education Statistics data show that Black women represent nearly 65% of more than 1.6 million African Americans currently enrolled in college (The Education Resource Institute, 1995; Fossey & Bateman, 1998; The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1988; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

What are the possible causes for this disparity? Some studies have found that Black men and women are both more likely to have experienced poverty and poor precollege schooling than Whites and Asians had. Add to this the fact that African American men generally have fewer identifiable examples of higher education success. Additionally, studies have concluded that Black men experience more aggressive discrimination and stereotyping in education, resulting in truancy, underachievement, and confinement to the non-college-track K-12 curriculum (Green, 1991; Majors & Billson, 1992). Moreover, Hacker (1992) and Green (1991) write that only 1 out of every 5 African American males of college age is enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year college, whereas 1 out of every 3 Black men has been arrested or incarcerated. Additionally, Black men face financial barriers that discourage college attendance. Kane (1994) writes that rising college costs, lower emphasis on college (by Black men), and lower achievement contribute to lower college enrollment by Black men.

It appears that although higher education is legally available to all African Americans, there may be something qualitatively different about the perceived or real opportunity structure for African American men. Not only do African American men lag far behind

African American women, but they also trail men and women of most other ethnic and racial backgrounds. It is therefore not surprising that Slater (1994) found that African American men are less likely to perceive success (career attainment) coming from or through higher education. It follows that researchers, educators, or other practitioners interested in African American college aspirations and participation should pursue inquiry that addresses the perceptions Black men hold about college choice. Concomitantly, it is important to acknowledge the critical role parenting plays in helping Black male children construct ideas and outlooks about college. Finally, it makes sense to find out how these ideas and outlooks result in different college choice processes for Black women and men.

#### COLLEGE CHOICE LITERATURE REVIEW

The term *college choice* represents a process that captures the academic, social, economic, and familial influences that shape a child's journey from kindergarten to post-high school. Scholars have used sociological, economic, and psychological frameworks to describe and characterize college choice mostly from the perspectives of the high school student (Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Holland, 1958; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Jackson, 1982; Kerr, 1962; Litten, 1982; Maguire & Lay, 1981; McDonough, 1994, 1997; Richards & Holland, 1965; Stordahl, 1970). Most of these college choice frameworks are built from the experiences and perspectives of White students. Those that consider parent perspectives (again, usually White) tend to examine the impact of socioeconomic status and social class and how they affect values and behaviors associated with conditioning their children to appreciate and aspire to college (McDonough 1994, 1997; McDonough, Ventresca, & Outcault, 2000). The most complete of these models disaggregate college choice into a step process or a stage process.

Jackson (1982) used a multistage model to suggest that both sociological and econometric perspectives could be used to describe col-

lege choice as a singular, integrated process. Litten (1982) used a similar approach to further distinguish how race, gender, academic ability level, parental education level, and geographic location added layers of complexity to each stage. Following the work of Jackson (1982), Litten (1982) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a stage model that has become the starting point for research or discussion about college choice. Hossler's college choice model consisted of three time periods: predisposition, search, and choice. Predisposition (K through Grade 8) represents the time that parents help children develop a taste for college education. Search (Grades 9 to 10) is when students (and parents) take an inventory of their needs, values, wants, and limitations and then attempt to match them to a large number of desirable institutions, thereby creating choice sets. During the final stage, choice (Grades 11 to 12), students withdraw somewhat from their parents and rely on peer groups, teachers, counselors, and other sources to arrive at a final college attendance decision. These models were devised with the student in mind; models for parent involvement have not been developed.

There is much we do not know about parental involvement in college choice. We do know that a student's decisions are shaped by parent involvement and the kind of post-high school trajectory parents establish for their children. We know that degree aspirations are correlated to parents' education and income levels (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Dixon & Martin, 1991; Flint, 1992). We also know that, contrary to the dominance of father's aspirations on White children, most Black and Latino children are guided by their mothers (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Flint, 1992; Freeman, 1999; Hearn, 1991; Hossler et al., 1989; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969). Finally, we know the impact of parents in college choice corresponds to their level of involvement.

Still, there are no models that accurately chart parent involvement in college choice. Fortunately, Hossler's findings from empirical research on student college choice have produced several descriptors and characteristics of parental involvement in college choice (Hossler et al., 1989). This study draws its inspiration from these findings.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HOSSLER'S SEARCH STAGE**

Although scholars have devoted little time to how this support and encouragement is manifested in Black families, we can be certain that their role in establishing college aspirations is significant. This article will explore how involvement of African American parents during the search stage of college choice contributes to differences in post-high school aspirations between sons and daughters. Therefore, this study of urban African American parents paid close attention to any college choice practice that could be categorized as being part of Hossler's search stage. In doing so, we assert that the search may occur for a longer period of time than outlined by Hossler's original college choice model. According to his model, the search occurs from 10th grade through 11th grade and essentially involves students (with parental input) searching through a myriad of postsecondary options to prepare for the choice stage that takes place in the 12th grade. It is our position that, for many students, the actual search process continues throughout the 12th-grade year.

Hossler et al. (1999) theorized that parent involvement includes three broadly defined activities: setting aspirations, providing encouragement, and active support. These three activities represent the analytical categories used during this study to understand parental college choice behavior. Before continuing, we will explain each of the three components of this theoretical base.

The first, aspiration setting, involves five signals that place children on a college choice trajectory. The first signal is predisposition, which represents a set of values, attitudes, and tastes transferred to children, related to educational goals and, for the purposes of this study, college choice. During predisposition, college enrollment and completion becomes a matter-of-fact accepted norm. With predisposition, parents with higher levels of postsecondary education are more likely to send stronger college-going signals. The second signal, direction setting, represents how students are guided toward college before high school begins. The most visible direction-setting practice is when parents make sure that their children are placed into a college-going trajectory by enrolling them in college preparatory classes. The third signal, price, explains the

tone and timbre of conversations between the parent(s) and the child about college costs. Stronger college-going signals are sent by parents who construct cost as a necessary part of college attendance and a nonrestrictive factor in college choice. The fourth signal, proximity, involves conversations about the appropriate distance away from home and the relative value of attending in-state or out-of-state colleges. This conversation is closely tied to the final signal, quality, or how parents value the prestige and reputation of colleges and then communicate these values to their children. Whether direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal, these five signals form an intricately layered web of influence that deeply shape a child's ideas, motivation, and expectations about college enrollment and completion.

The second activity, encouragement, falls into three categories: attitude, consistency, and congruence. Attitude is the parents' willingness to do whatever makes the students happy. Consistency relates to the dependability and frequency of any parent's positive verbal encouragement about college attendance. Congruence measures the similarity of parental and student plans. It is important that parent and student plans be calibrated or at the very least be similar. Incongruent expectations for college are doomed to create and then escalate conflict. Where influence can be indirect or direct, encouragement is almost always direct; it is a much more aggressive way of programming a child for or against college attendance.

The third and final activity, parental support, is defined as any tangible, action-oriented activity parents engage in to support their child's college aspirations. These represent any tangible financial activities, such as establishing savings accounts or trust funds; allocating the budget, such as paying for children to participate in college preparation activities such as college visits and summer camps; or time commitments, such as help filling out applications or financial aid forms. Parental support may also include extensive travel commitments. For example, parents may elect to take children on college visits or use their social capital (friends or family) to facilitate job shadowing and/or fact finding about colleges in the child's choice set. Finally, there are substantial home counseling time commitments. For example, parents may review relevant col-

lege admission information in casual or formal one-on-one conversations with their children. Our study sought to explore how urban African American parental involvement in college choice was consistent with Hossler's three activities and in what ways it differed for sons versus daughters. Specifically, are there differences in aspiration setting, encouragement, and support?

### RESEARCH QUESTION

Our guiding question asks whether parenting practices of African American families help set women toward and men away from 4-year college trajectories. Second, it explores whether the African American college gender gap can be attributed in any way to the different ways in which sons and daughters are raised and prepared for life beyond high school. Additionally, it asks how differences or similarities play out in the aspirations parents hold for their children, how encouragement is delivered, and how action-oriented activities are pursued. Finally, it explores whether parental college choice involvement is more fluid than theorized by Hossler, and if it is possible that parents maintained high levels of involvement throughout the search stage and into the choice stage.

### SAMPLE AND METHOD

Our study of 39 African American parents is derived from a larger study<sup>3</sup> of attitudes about college choice after the passing of California's Proposition 209 that made affirmative action in admission illegal for public colleges and universities. Of the 39 Black parents, most had students enrolled in high schools located in South Central Los Angeles (L.A.), Lynwood, or Watts-Willowbrook. This study contains the responses of 11 of the original 39 parents (9 mothers, 1 grandmother, 1 father) who combined have 6 daughters and 6 sons enrolled in the lowest socioeconomic schools from the original group of 39 parents (see Table 1). We chose the lowest socioeconomic schools because, in an earlier analysis of the data, the most poignant, heart-wrenching, and revealing responses that

**TABLE 1**  
**Parents, Children, Grade, and High School**

| <i>Parent</i>        | <i>Sex of Child</i> |             | <i>Grade</i> |                | <i>High School</i> |
|----------------------|---------------------|-------------|--------------|----------------|--------------------|
|                      | <i>Female</i>       | <i>Male</i> | <i>11</i>    | <i>12</i>      |                    |
| Angelica             |                     | X           | X            |                | Magnet             |
| Clarissa             | X                   |             |              | X              | Magnet             |
| Delia                |                     | X           |              | X              | Magnet             |
| James                | X                   |             | X            |                | Parochial          |
| Kerry                |                     | X           | X            |                | Magnet             |
| Latrisha             | X                   |             |              | X              | Magnet             |
| Lavella              | X                   | X           |              | X <sup>a</sup> | Magnet             |
| Makeba               | X                   |             | X            |                | Magnet             |
| Millie               | X                   |             | X            |                | Magnet             |
| Nellie (grandmother) |                     | X           |              | X              | Magnet             |
| Susan                | X                   |             | X            |                | Magnet             |
| Total for 11 parents | 7                   | 5           | 6            | 6              |                    |

a. Both children in 12th grade.

indicated the absolute highest level of difficulty with college choice came from the parents of children in these schools. For us, it made sense to use these schools to help focus our analysis of family influence on the male to female gender gap phenomenon.

The children were enrolled in the most competitive schools in their communities. All the 12 teenagers were enrolled in public, inner-city magnet, or parochial college preparatory high schools. Because the original study was designed to monitor perceptions about college choice in underrepresented populations, schools were chosen and separated by their percentage of Latino and Black students as well as the success of students in completing required courses for eligibility to the University of California. Parents and high schools are described in greater detail below.

Data for this study were collected from focus groups, interviews, and field notes. Each focus group or interview took between 60 to 90 min, with a few lasting close to 120 min. Individual interviews and focus groups took place at the school site in classrooms, counseling offices, courtyards, outdoor and indoor lunch benches, and sometimes hallways. The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and open ended so that there would be plenty of room to

probe for facts, opinions, insights, and expanded answers (Yin, 1989). The questions were separated into four broad areas: college application and admission, beliefs about campus climate, perceptions about college cost, and information sources. For each area, the questions were crafted to allow parents to speak about their knowledge, confidence, and ability to advise about college.

Because our goal is to develop new theory with respect to African American parents and their activity in college choice, the parents' responses were analyzed using grounded theory. Scholars suggest that grounded theory is the most appropriate form of qualitative data analysis when the goal of a study is to generate theory that explains process or captures nuances of interactions among groups of people (Creswell, 2002). For this study, the above-mentioned individuals are African American parents. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze what parents said. The constant comparative method is a system of qualitative data analysis that gives the researcher an opportunity to analyze data while coding.

### **HIGH SCHOOLS AND PARENTS**

Ten of the 11 parents of this study were female, and one was male. The 10 female parents (all mothers and one grandmother) had children who attended five L.A. metropolitan area high schools that enroll mostly inner-city populations (mostly Black and Chicano-Latino students). James, the sole father in this study, had an 11th-grade daughter enrolled in a suburban parochial school that enrolled mostly Anglo Americans. Of the parents whose children attended L.A. metro high schools, Kerry (11th-grade son), Makeba (11th-grade daughter), Latrisha (12th-grade daughter), and Angelica (11th-grade son) were all enrolled in the same inner-city medical magnet high school. Lavella had a 12th-grade daughter (Gizelle) enrolled in this same magnet school but had a son (Gary) enrolled in an inner-city oceanography magnet school located within a larger school. The remaining five L.A. parents had children enrolled in similar "school within a school" magnet programs: Delia (12th-grade son), Susan (11th-grade daughter), Clarissa

(12th-grade daughter), Nellie (12th-grade grandson), and Millie (11th-grade daughter).

**FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY ASPIRATIONS:  
DAUGHTERS MUST, WHEREAS SONS MIGHT**

Through an analysis of what parents said, it appears that college attendance expectations for African American sons and daughters are different. For 11th- and 12th-grade daughters, 4-year college is framed as the very best option for success, fulfillment, and self-sufficiency; the only logical next step for someone of their intelligence level. For 11th- and 12th-grade sons, 4-year college was certainly an option, but only one of many acceptable post-high school choices. For example, community college enrollment or other ways of “making it in America” were acceptable paths for sons to take. Much of what was acceptable for sons seemed mitigated by parental fears that their sons would become involved in illicit activity while teenagers. This fear is reasonable because their sons attend high school in unstable low-socioeconomic areas; parents were horrified with the possibility that their sons could easily be lost to the American criminal justice system. Indeed, through the primary author’s own 10-year experience living in southwest L.A. as an African American male, he learned that he was never too far from the possibility of negative and sometimes fatal encounters with the L.A. Police Department. It is with the knowledge that comes from this lived experience that the parents’ fear is not considered exaggerated and is fully understood.

**YOUNG, BLACK, MALE, AND UNFORGIVEN**

Most of the parents in this study believed that America can be an unforgiving and callous society for a Black man without a high school degree or in trouble with the law. Kerry felt that the dangers facing the young African American males of inner city L.A. demanded extraordinarily high levels of parental supervision and intrusion. Kerry said that she told her 11th-grade, college-bound son, “It’s tough out there for a Black man; you know, I don’t want

you to become a statistic.” Kerry transformed the fear that her son would become a statistic into vigilance and parenting strategies that allowed her to closely monitor her son’s activities.

Single mothers of sons like Angelica expressed feelings of being overwhelmed with the responsibilities of raising Black males without the help of a father. She spoke poignantly about how pressures of this responsibility can give way to hopelessness, saying, “I’m frightened for him, and like I said, I’m barely surviving, I am barely surviving. If he becomes an adult and cannot hold his own, I don’t know what’s out there for him.” She continued, “He needs to take care of his business [because] I feel there’s no one out there for him, he’s gonna have to do it for himself.”

Angelica believes that ordinary schoolyard fights serve as gateways to a life of incarceration, especially for young Black men. She says that one day, her son “was talking about the situation [of] getting into a fight. And I’ll tell him all the time like, ‘that’s what they [the system or those in power] want you to do, they just want the Blacks, to fight one another, kill off one another, you know get into trouble, become incarcerated.’”

#### **MAKEBA’S THEORY**

Makeba was the most educated of the parents in this study. She submitted the proposition that in California, penitentiary growth was tied to the privatization of prisons. She also suggested that privatization of the prison system was connected to the trend of higher education becoming less accessible to traditionally under-represented students. She felt that many people stood to profit from the mostly Black, Brown, male, and ever-increasing prison population. In the same focus group, Makeba later commented that more minority men in jail meant more majority men employed as policemen, criminal lawyers, and prison guards and administrators. The three other mothers responded in typical African American call and response fashion indicating a high level of agreement with Makeba’s theory.

**FEAR OF DEPENDENCE (GIRLS) VERSUS FEAR FOR SURVIVAL (BOYS)**

Whether conspiracies of the implied kind exist would necessitate an entirely separate debate that will not be engaged in this article. However, what is critical to acknowledge is the fact that these perceptions are real and held by parents of children in what are considered the “better” public magnet programs and schools of L.A. From all we gathered through analysis, it was not hard for us to believe that how parents guide their sons through the search stage of college choice might be shaped by their belief that the “system” is intent on destroying their young men. Because of this belief, parents use stories of the tragic outcomes that will come from bowing to temptation and peer pressure to become involved in criminal activities. In short, parents send their sons on trajectories that help them survive the streets and avoid confrontations with law enforcement and criminal elements.

On the other hand, daughters are seemingly thrust into a college preparatory trajectory with less focus on the negatives of street entanglements and their attendant tragic outcomes. The mothers of this study used stories of negative outcomes to motivate their daughters; but these stories were associated with the evils of dependency. From their comments, it seemed that they raised their daughters to become academic achievers to gain personal and financial independence. Essentially, the method of motivation is the same, but there are little differences in the stories that are told to daughters compared to sons. In a world where little things matter the most, our data suggest that the small differences in stories and motivational practices for parents of young men versus those of young women during the search stage of college choice result in vastly different college choice pathways.

These little differences are manifested in what appeared to be different guiding assumptions about the tendencies of sons and daughters. The assumptions are that sons will get into trouble and daughters will get into situations that will make them dependent. These assumptions changed how parents talked about the educational aspirations they held for their daughters compared to their

sons. It seemed that they believed the best way to counter the temptation of inner-city criminal activity was to set up reasonable and flexible post-high school goals for their sons. These goals were ostensibly low-stress, low-pressure goals compared to the high-stress peer pressure to become involved in criminal activity. Millie, another single parent, let us know that she thought her 11th-grade son should cast a wide net with respect to career choices:

I wanted to find out whether he's interested in going to college because I also understand that a formal education is not the only way to achieve success in America; while I think it's important, if my son doesn't think so, then it's not probably going to do him very much good.

Of interest here is Millie's willingness to allow her son to determine if college is important. She seems to make the assumption that her 11th-grade son knows what is best and has the maturity and foresight to determine if college is a reasonable option. This lenient approach was not observed with the parents of 11th-grade daughters. For daughters, it appeared that parents strongly pushed college education as the way to achieve independence, to become self-sufficient, and to develop strategies to conquer adversity. Susan talked about how her daughters had no option other than to become college students. She let them know that they were duty bound to continue their family tradition of strong and determined African American female students who did not let their low-income status deter them from college.

The ambition I had meant that as a single mother raising three kids nobody was gonna stop me. I mean, I look back at my own parents, especially my mother. Back then, they didn't graduate from high school or anything like that, but my mother went back, and my sister as well. You are low income? So what!

It was clear that Susan would accept no excuses because all the women of her family had triumphed over difficult life challenges to become college students or graduates. Her exhortations were typical of how daughters were programmed toward 4-year college attendance with little exception.

Mothers from this study seemed to be more involved in their daughter's academic lives and more willing to nurture their intellectual selves. Clarissa told us that she admired her daughter's academic ability and assertiveness. She said, "I tell my daughter that you are as intelligent as the next person. And how the next person gets it is because they study." She constantly builds up her daughter's intellectual ego. She told us, "I tell her, 'you're so intelligent and that I am so proud to have you as my daughter.'" About her daughter, she also said, "she knows what she wants and she's going to get it. She's determined that she's going to be a lawyer." She strongly encouraged her daughter to read, and if her daughter seemed tired of reading, Clarissa would remind her, "When you were little, I used to take you to the library; I used to give you books, and you loved your books." Clarissa sent strong 4-year college aspiration signals and provided frequent, consistent encouragement toward this goal. Other mothers were equally sure of their daughter's academic futures.

Makeba also sent her daughter extraordinarily strong 4-year college aspiration signals. She told us that her "daughter is going to be graduating she'll just turn 16 [sic]. She's looking about doing her undergraduate work perhaps at Berkeley. And then doing her graduate work at Howard. I am trying to encourage her to do everything including leaving California, but she doesn't want to leave California." Because of her encouragement, the daughter's college plans were solidified and clearly defined early in her academic career. Makeba said, "When she was 8 years old, she knew she was going to be an OB-GYN doctor and that she was going to Howard University Medical School. We've known about going to college for a long time." Key to Makeba's statement was the idea that college had been a goal for "a long time." This represents intense direction setting, a solid 4-year-college-going predisposition, and a proximal framework not limited to California.

From this data, it appears daughters are programmed early and often for academic success and that these young women benefit from their parents' involvement in their academic lives. Furthermore, parents encourage their daughters to freely take advantage of all college has to offer. Latrisha told us, "I think ideally I would like for her to go away because there's a certain independence that she

would learn. It's important for young women to meet, to be independent." Lavella wanted her daughter to take advantage of all college opportunities explaining that "I would like for her to live on campus or close to campus and get the total experience of being on her own even though she's not totally on her own."

#### **PROGRAMMED TO FLY AT DIFFERENT ALTITUDES**

What the parents told me about their involvement with their daughters indicated that they wanted them to "fly" as high and far as their dreams could take them, knowing that the result would bring them employment, self-sufficiency, and fulfillment. Likewise, they encouraged their sons to fly, but on a route noticeably lower in altitude and closer in proximity to home than their African American sisters. Perhaps this more modest flight pattern was their way of holding on and protecting them just a little while longer so that they could become young men under their careful watch. They seemed determined to fight the ever-present temptation of the pervasive, nihilistic "thug life" popularized by their son's "hard core, gangsta rap" heroes. Involvement with sons was so dominated by the desire to keep them out of harm's way that the cumulative stress of this vigilant fight took a toll on their ability to enthusiastically embrace their boy's academic potential. The data revealed much less glowing reports of their son's schoolwork and scholastic potential than for their daughters. In any case, sons were programmed in different ways than daughters, and attitudes toward their schooling and performance varied greatly from their African American sisters.

#### **FOUR-YEAR FOR DAUGHTERS; TWO-YEAR FOR SONS**

Parents seemed to push daughters toward 4-year colleges, whereas community colleges came up often as the college of choice for sons (with the exception of those being recruited by NCAA athletic teams). Hossler says that setting such limits amounts to a college aspiration signal tied to low proximity and low cost. Angelica told us, "I would think that for a person in my situation, I'm a single mother, I wouldn't frown upon it, if my son went to a JC [junior col-

lege] first. I could save some money.” Some parents believed that community colleges offered a more direct path toward prestigious universities. Nellie, a grandmother who had custody of her grandson shared her plans and his thinking about college explaining, “My son, my grandson, we suggest 2-year for him and then go on to the other.” Whereas 2-year transfer options are generally an excellent way for students to gain admission into tier-one research institutions they might not be eligible to attend following their senior year, it is significant that they become the default institution for sons. Conversely, for daughters, community colleges were mentioned only as backup institutions. Lavella and her two 12th graders gave us the most concrete examples of differing parental college expectations for daughters versus sons.

Both of Lavella’s children were seniors (a son and a daughter). There were great differences in college expectations held for each; with respect to college choice, her connection to Gizelle (her daughter) was much stronger than the one to Gary (her son). It was quite clear that Gizelle had been directed toward college and was given 4-year college encouragement sustained during a long period of time. She worked hard to help Gizelle choose appropriate college preparatory courses in anticipation for her eventual application to 4-year schools. When asked about the achievement tests her daughter would be taking, Lavella replied, “she’s taking the AP calculus and the AP English, the AP history, art history and the AP physics; she has four different AP classes.”

Beyond course selection, Lavella gave her daughter strong direction-setting signals that indicated she expected her to go to college. As per Hossler’s description, she gave Gizelle a great deal of parental support through tangible actions. She told our interviewer that she if her daughter were to enroll in a college outside of the L.A. Basin area she would find a way to visit her:

If she wants to apply out of state and if that’s what she really wants to do, I’m not gonna discourage her from going. Even, you know, how that just means I’m gonna have to put some money aside also.

Lavella did not have the expertise to help direct choice, saying that “she’s been doing a lot of footwork herself, contacting cam-

pus, having them send her applications, getting to know about the requirements." But she stayed involved by encouraging her to not miss deadlines or miss important college preparation and application steps; she and Gizelle seemed to develop college choice sets together. The story is quite different for her 12th-grade son.

She mentioned, "My son was interested in oceanography, so I told him he could go to the Oceanography Magnet." Although he was enrolled in a magnet program, he was not necessarily college bound, and Lavella gave no indication that she was as involved in her son's course selection and academic program. She also seemed content with her son's goal of enrolling in community college even though he was a student in an academically enriched public high school magnet program. She said, "For a lot of the students like Gary, (4-year) college is a foreign concept. He wants to go to a junior college first, but Gizelle wants to go directly into a 4-year." It is important to note that Lavella said that college was a foreign concept for her son, whereas most of her comments about college preparation focused on her daughter. It is interesting that she was in constant communication about her daughter's plans but out of the loop with respect to her son's program. Could her behavior contribute to her son's lowered college aspirations, or was her involvement a function of each child's independently produced college aspiration? Perhaps, but then again, it is possible that the difference in college choice aspirations between son and daughter, in this scenario, are the result of factors outside Lavella's expectations.

#### **INDEPENDENCE VERSUS SURVIVAL (REVISITED)**

It is possible that the sociological forces and overlapping, competing societal pressures that surround these two siblings may have reinforced their noticeably different aspirations. By sociological forces, we are referring here to societal expectations concerning the status quo intellectual and academic activities of Black women versus Black men. Perhaps they have both been encouraged and reinforced by these social forces to pursue community college (son) and 4-year college (daughter). Alternately, within the family, the son may have been conditioned to shoot for high academic goals compared to boys in his neighborhood, yet not as high as his sister.

And still another possibility might be that in the context of their community and the typically high attrition of young Black men to the streets, for the son to pursue community college represents an equivalent goal to his sister's 4-year college plans. In fact, it would not be much of a stretch to think that this confluence of conditions, forces, and possibilities play out for all the sons mentioned in this article.

It is important to understand that the parents of this study are only actors within a larger context framed by inner-city realities faced all throughout the United States. This reality is typified by overcrowded and underfunded minority schools, overworked teachers and counselors, homelessness, chemical dependencies, lack of health care, regional gang conflict, and neighborhood racial conflict as well as overall economic underdevelopment and strife. It is a wonder that their daughters are so successful and that their sons, although not stellar students, were academically productive and out of trouble. Is what we see here truly a case of teaching young women to be independent and teaching young men how to survive? Whatever the answer, it is clear that the modal college aspirations and expectation held by the parents of this study target more prestigious institutions for daughters compared to sons. On the outside, it would appear that they insist on their daughters going to 4-year colleges while nudging their sons toward enrolling in local 2-year colleges. However, we must emphatically state that there was nothing malignant at work here with respect to their sons; instead, analysis revealed a reasonable reaction by parents to outside forces that presented different realities and land mines for their boys compared to their girls. Indeed, the involvement of these parents bordered on heroic, given their job stress, financial responsibilities, personal issues, and health setbacks.

#### **DIFFERENT ASPIRATIONS AND ENCOURAGEMENT; SIMILAR ACTIVITIES**

To review, our study used Hossler's search stage of college choice to understand how Black parents send their sons and daughters on different college choice trajectories. According to him,

parental involvement in college choice involves five college aspiration signals (predisposition, direction setting, price, proximity, quality), three kinds of encouragement (attitude, consistency, congruence), and any form of support or action-oriented activity (savings, college visits) that would signal college attendance to their children. In this study, we found different aspirations and encouragement for sons and daughters; aspiration varied by the quality and intensity of expectations and encouragement. All the while, tangible, action-oriented activities seemed linked to the child's goals and represented an area where sons and daughters were treated equally.

#### ASPIRATIONS

The college aspirations parents held for their daughters seemed different than those held for their sons. Daughters seemed to be on a trajectory toward 4-year college, whereas sons seemed bound for community college. In fact, the expectation that daughters go straight to a 4-year college was embedded early in their lives, as many of the parents had conversations with their girls about their expectations long before high school. Hossler et al. (1999) might argue that daughters were more favorably predisposed to 4-year college enrollment and benefited from their parent(s) creating a predisposition toward 4-year college while engaging in direction setting as well as sending consistently positive signals about proximity and price. Sons were encouraged to attend college also but were more strongly encouraged to choose local colleges and to stay out of trouble. Parents accepted a wider range of post-high school choices for their sons, whereas daughters had a much narrower set of choices. Many of the parents assumed that daughters would not only go to college but would also persist in higher education through the professional school level. For example, Makeba assumed that her daughter would not only attend University of California, Berkeley, for her bachelor's degree but would also become a very specific kind of physician (an OB-GYN). Similarly, Clarissa knew that her daughter would become a lawyer.

On the other hand, sons were described as athletic team leaders, charismatic charmers, and hard workers. They were not described

as scholars or highly intelligent young people capable of high academic achievement in undergraduate and graduate education. Parents did not speak of possible majors, careers, or special areas of academic interest when it came to their boys; in fact, the most passionate words about their sons dealt with overcoming the influence of the streets. It might be argued that, given the inner-city context, this concern and effort to keep young men out of harm's way qualifies as pro-college direction, setting behavior. Indeed, Black sons were the focus of parental worries and concern, as they were considered vulnerable and perpetually at great risk in America. The levels of educational aspiration parents held for this group of urban African American teenage boys were modest compared to their teenage girls. For sons, any choices from a wide variety of acceptable and productive post-high school careers or vocational choices were acceptable. Just as parental aspirations for sons and daughters differed, so too did their encouragement.

#### ENCOURAGEMENT

Much was made of the daughter's academic focus, tenacity, and intellect. They knew what they wanted to study and had good ideas about where they would enroll. Parents nurtured their daughters' intellect and self-esteem by constantly reminding them how intelligent they were along with voicing their confidence in their academic ability. Hossler et al. (1999) would argue that encouragement for daughters was frequent and consistent. Additionally, college plans were congruent between daughter and parent(s) as they were quite often co-constructed. We were able to see much evidence of parents being quite involved in planning their daughters' high school curriculum as well as discussing college options. They were also given the freedom to live on campus, once enrolled, so that they could grow independent and experience what college life had to offer.

For sons, much was made of how treacherous life would be if they were to get mixed up in the wrong crowd, hang out, or otherwise get in trouble. The young men were encouraged to participate in social events as close to home as possible with as much supervision as possible. With so much supervision at home, it is hard to

imagine this group of sons having the same *carte blanche* to fully experience college if they were to attend. What we noticed was that the young men were consistently encouraged to not get into trouble, finish high school, and make pragmatic, local postsecondary education choices. These pragmatic goals seemed mutually constructed and indicated a high level of congruence between parent and son. The difference for sons was that these goals were much more modest and far less ambitious than those for daughters.

#### SUPPORT

Support is shown through action-oriented, tangible activities that involve sacrifices of time and money in support of a child's college aspiration. Once committed to a specific goal or direction, parents showed equal support for daughters and sons. Parents seemed to take time to have meaningful conversation with their children regardless of their level of postsecondary aspiration. Parents and children worked together to consider all possible angles and situations attached to attending college.

For example, even though her son was heavily recruited to play football at a NCAA Division I institution, Delia was just as concerned about her son's academic life as she was about his athletic life. She told us about taking her son to an SAT preparation program every Saturday during his 10th-grade year.

I would take Norton to a program at the local public university that taught them a lot about the SAT and a little bit on scholarships. I would take him on Saturdays for a couple of semesters.

Angelica's actions validated the words she expressed about wanting her son to avoid the streets and become a college-educated Black man. She was willing to do whatever it might take and was further willing to spend whatever money was within her means to help her son improve his SAT scores.

I know that the SAT is very important to admittance to college, so I purchased two different programs for the computer, but our computer broke down and so, that's not going well.

Although they experienced technological difficulties, this is an example of an admirable financial sacrifice, as she noted several times how overwhelmed she felt as a working, poor, single mother. Her message seemed to convincingly state, "If you put forth the effort, I will do whatever I can to help you."

Although this study contrasted several differences in how parents were involved with their daughter's and son's college choice search stage, they were treated similarly in the area of support once a specific goal became the family's agreed on, specific focus. These sacrifices are valid examples of support and were valid even if their children failed to follow through. Our data showed that parents in this study repeatedly showed support through action-oriented, tangible activities that involved substantial sacrifices of time and money.

In summary, the differences between daughters and sons were most visible in aspirations and encouragement. Significant differences could be seen in the intensity and aggressiveness of 4-year college direction setting, and the consistency, intensity, and frequency of verbal encouragement. The result is that daughters seemed to travel along a much clearer road to 4-year college, which was paved at an earlier age than that for sons. Also, there seemed to be a much stronger, more conscious effort to boost the intellectual self-esteem of the daughters while concomitantly encouraging their independence.

### **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Our study found that the boundaries that define Hossler's search stage of college choice have to be softened when applied to diverse populations. Hossler and others have theorized that beyond predisposition, parents usually become secondary influences to peer groups, teachers, counselors, college recruiters, and other outside influences. He also posits that students begin to take more ownership of the process, somewhat diminishing the role that parents play. However, we found that of the 11 parents included in this

study, most were heavily involved in college choice beyond the predisposition and search stages. In addition, there were differences for involvement by gender.

Therefore, beyond broadening the boundaries of Hossler to include more flexible boundaries for diverse parents, this study suggests that activities during search are different for parents of daughters versus sons. An argument could be made for what many in the admission profession acknowledge as the tendency for young men to not take college choice seriously until their senior year. However, in this case, college aspiration signals and encouragement were very different for young women compared to for young men, even though there was evidence of high levels of involvement with single mothers of sons. What differs is the level of expectations for daughters compared to those for sons.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The strongest suggestion for practitioners in college counseling, admission, and outreach is to be cognizant of college and achievement expectations held for African American students. There are consequences for expecting too little of both female and male students, and lowered expectations often result in lower aspirations. Strategies have to be developed to nurture the academic lives of African American young men and to engage them in 4-year college direction setting from an early age. We suggest that these strategies can begin as early as the fourth grade—a grade in which Kinjufu (1984) suggests that much damage is done to the academic self-esteem of Black boys.

Such strategies do not have to come at the expense of African American women; in fact, aggressively cultivating the academic self-esteem in Black males will have a spillover effect on Black women. It is highly likely that efforts such as these will result in a rewards system that will make academic excellence more important to young African Americans. Ogbu (1983) states that motivation toward academic excellence is problematic for nonimmigrant African Americans because of problems with the American folk theory for education. He characterizes this theory as one that posi-

tions education at the entry point of a free and fair process to attain desirable social and economic goals. It can be argued that African American men have not completely bought into this folk theory because of examples they see that invalidate college education, things they have witnessed that serve as academic disincentives. There simply are not enough voices in the academic cheering section for young African American men. In essence, practitioners need to become this cheering section and embrace the task of pushing Black men and encouraging them to more fully consider the long-term benefits of a long-term investment of time in education.

### NOTES

1. *African American* and *Black* will be used interchangeably to identify people of African descent who live in America.
2. *Black* and *White* are capitalized as they are words descriptive of the descendants of Africans and Europeans in America and not words to indicate skin color.
3. The above-mentioned "larger study" was developed by chief investigator Dr. Patricia McDonough of the University of California, Los Angeles, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

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