Standing, being and positioning: A qualitative study of the academic, social and cultural experiences of graduates of a college preparation program during their first year of college

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BOSTON COLLEGE
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STANDING, BEING AND POSITIONING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY
OF THE ACADEMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF
GRADUATES OF A COLLEGE PREPARATION PROGRAM DURING
THEIR FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

Dissertation
by
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ABSTRACT

STANDING, BEING AND POSITIONING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE ACADEMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATES OF A COLLEGE PREPARATION PROGRAM DURING THEIR FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

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Evidence suggests that college preparation programs successfully support students through college preparation and application process. However, most research into college preparation programs does not attend to students’ collegiate experiences once they leave college preparation programs. This dissertation explored the long-term influence of Small College’s College Preparation Program (CPP) on students’ collegiate academic, cultural, and social experiences, following college preparation program graduation.

This research is a multiple-case study that used phenomenologically oriented interviews. The source of participants was students who completed CPP in 2006 and 2007 and who were enrolled in a university. Using purposeful sampling to achieve maximum variation among CPP graduates, I conducted three tape-recorded interviews of seven participants. Interactive interviews followed Seidman’s (1998) recommendations for interview content. Positioning theory was used, in conjunction with social and cultural capital, to analyze data throughout data collection.

Positioning theory served as a useful lens for examining the first year college experiences of CPP graduates because it allowed the researcher to explore participant experiences with their agency in mind. Much of the literature on university outreach
college preparation programs places students at the center of the research. Often, though, within the research, students are positioned as passive recipients of college preparation services. Viewing the college admissions process as a discourse, participants reflexively self-positioned, but they were also engaged in interactive positioning. In either role, participants assumed an active role, rather than the passive role that most research positions assigns to students.

This dissertation finds that participants actively self-positioned as they applied both dominant and non-dominant social and cultural capital during their college preparation and after matriculation. The ability to navigate complex and exclusionary contexts speaks to participants’ strengths, perseverance, and motivation. Supportive relationships mitigated the impact of stereotype threat, interpersonal and institutional microaggressions. Moreover, participants self-positioned in ways that built on participants’ wealth of insights, experiences, relationships, and capital, leading to academic success.
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CHAPTER ONE: COLLEGE PREPARATION PROGRAMS AND POSITIONING

In May of 2006, three female graduates of Small College’s College Prep Program (CPP) received admission into Small College, a private university in the Northeast with a distinguished reputation, for the following fall\(^1\). Once matriculated in Small College, two of the girls, Chasneika and LaToya (pseudonyms) joined College Prep, a university outreach college preparation program, as undergraduate mentors, thereby continuing their involvement in College Prep. Late that fall semester I spoke with Chasneika and LaToya as they prepared for their final exams. Both girls revealed that they experienced higher stress levels and more demanding coursework than they expected. LaToya shared that she dropped the lecture component of a core course, although she needed to remain in that class to progress through her degree requirements. Despite needing this class as a prerequisite for her next semester class, the professor allowed LaToya to receive credit for her lab work and to re-enroll in the next course. In the spring semester, LaToya enrolled in the lecture part of the dropped class as well as all of her other courses to remain on-track towards graduation.

Early in the spring semester of 2007, the College Prep undergraduate mentors met with mentees to discuss their college expectations and experiences. One of the former College Prep students, LaToya, told her mentees that during lectures she took notes on the professors’ presentations and on her classmates’ responses. She explained that she often did not understand classmates’ references or what their answers meant. For

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\(^1\) In order to protect participants’ confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used to describe place and program. When participants requested, pseudonyms are used. Most participants requested their real names be used.
instance, in her literature courses, LaToya’s classmates referenced novels she had neither heard of nor read. Following classes, she returned to her dorm room to look up the definitions of words and other aspects of her classmates’ answers, so that she could understand what had occurred in class that day.

Both stories exhibit a dissonance among what students expected, what the college preparation program experience prepared them for, and their lived first-year college experience. In the existing research on college preparation programs, few qualitative investigations address the college experiences of students who completed college preparation programs. The research that does exist primarily focuses on quantitative data, which do not access students’ lived experiences (Balz & Esten, 1998; Gándara & Bial, 2001; Horn & Chen, 1998; Ishitani & Snider, 2004; Myers, Olsen, Seftor, Young & Tuttle, 2004). Furthermore, few researchers have explored how students’ understandings of their academic, social, and cultural experiences change over time in light of their college preparation. Moreover, the research that has explored freshman year experiences or the long-term effects of college preparation programs has not considered the positioning students undertake during the process of matriculation. Students’ first-year college experiences as graduates of college preparation programs remain a relatively unexplored avenue of research.

Unequal College Preparation, Admission and Graduation

Students, like LaToya and Chasneika, of low socioeconomic status (SES), who primarily represent racial and ethnic minorities, struggle to surmount obstacles that
preclude attaining a higher education. Researchers have identified barriers that challenge America’s disadvantaged populations as they seek to graduate high school and continue to college (McPherson & Schapiro, 1999; Sanoff & Powell, 2003). Some of these obstacles include: access to information on college admission requirements and collegiate academic expectations; the inadequate academic preparation provided by schools primarily serving students from low SES backgrounds; the impact of SES on the college decisions students make; and the dissonance between students’ cultural and social backgrounds and college culture.

A student’s SES heavily influences college aspirations, opportunities, and persistence in a number of complex ways (Gladieux, 1996; Marklein, 2004; McPherson & Schapiro, 1999). Students from low SES homes are less likely to receive information about college admissions requirements (Goodwin, 2000), be academically prepared to enroll in a four-year institution (Marklien, 2004), or graduate with a bachelor’s degree (Sanoff & Powell, 2003). Throughout the college-going process, which includes completing admissions applications, writing essays, financial aid application, and matriculation, students from low SES homes and schools must work to overcome barriers that impede their higher education plans. Many of the barriers pertain directly to accessing logistical information on the college-going process.

Information about college academic, cultural, and social practices as well as the college application process is vitally important to a student’s successful pursuit of higher education. Such information often proves elusive to students from low SES high schools.
for a variety of reasons that may include a lack of available information from their parents, despite support and encouragement from home. Often, potential first-generation college students must turn to their school guidance counselors for assistance. Students whose guidance counselors recommended college preparation courses of study and pursuit of higher education, planned to enroll in four-year universities (King, 1996). Unfortunately, not every student receives such guidance. Often students aspire to matriculate, but they do not enroll in college preparatory coursework while still in high school (Goodwin, 2000; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003). Given that high school counselors in low SES schools are often responsible for higher case loads, students who graduate from poorly-resourced schools rarely receive individual attention or timely guidance, which is essential to successful college matriculation. Without appropriate guidance, students enroll in fewer college prep courses and, therefore, receive high school educations that inadequately prepare them for college-level coursework.

Regardless of low SES backgrounds or being first-generation college attendee, rigorous high school coursework predicts college persistence (Horn & Kojaku, 2001). Such coursework includes Advanced Placement classes, dual enrollment opportunities within local colleges, and four years of math, science, history, English, and a foreign language (Venezia et al. 2003). Unfortunately, few under resourced schools offer such courses for all students (Tab, Waits, Setzer, & Lewis, 2005). Moreover, courses listed as

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2 Dual enrollment occurs when students are concurrently enrolled in both high school and college courses. Typically, a student attends high school and also enrolls in a college class. Often, high schools allow students to leave their high schools during the school day to attend a college course.
college prep are not always sufficiently rigorous or truly represent Advanced Placement (AP) courses. “For example, evidence suggests that some schools label a course AP when, in fact, the course does not use college-level textbooks or does not follow the recommended AP Course Description. In some cases, a school may even call a course AP when, in actuality, no such AP course exists” (Ewing, 2006, p.4). Students, like the participants of this research, may believe that their high school classes prepare them to be successful in college, only to experience feelings of frustration once enrolled in college.

Although higher education preparation programs often focus on improving academic preparation and seeking to mitigate the effects of SES, students’ social and cultural experiences also impact their first-year college experiences (Alford, 2000; Anglin & Wade, 2007; Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999). In fact, research indicates that, for African American students, social experiences play a vital role in college persistence (Schwitzer et al. 1999). Despite the centrality of sociocultural identities, college preparation programs often ignore students’ cultures (Tierney, 1999), even though recognition and support of students’ cultures informs successful college preparation programs (Gándara & Bial, 2001). Without acknowledgement or support, students experience dissonance between their own cultural experiences and the culture of college (González, 2000-2001). Unfortunately, failure to achieve a bachelor’s degree is often viewed as the student’s failing, rather than a failure of institutions to meet the needs of their students (Tierney, 1999).
College Preparation Programs

Most outreach college preparation programs address a variety of similar factors to assist students who graduated from under-resourced high schools, to enter and succeed in college. For instance, Advancement Via Individual Determination’s (AVID) curriculum focuses on students’ study skills, time management, and goal setting. TRIO\(^3\) programs offer supplementary writing, reading, math, and science classes. Outreach college preparation programs also seek to provide rigorous academic training for students in order to supplement and enrich their public high school educations. Furthermore, many outreach college preparation programs assist students in preparing for entrance exams (like the SAT and ACT, which are often required components of college applications), applying for financial aid, completing college applications, and writing college entrance essays. Seniors in Small College’s College Prep program engage in some discussions of social and emotional issues surrounding the first year of college. Few programs, though, directly address issues of race and culture. Finally, some programs, such as Outward Bound and Summer Search, involve students in cultural experiences that enhance prior knowledge of situations comparable to experiences that students from middle and high socioeconomic status may bring with them upon entering college. Such experiences may include visiting art museums, attending the symphony, viewing a play, enrolling in a summer college experience, or completing a ropes course.

\(^3\) TRIO, a descriptive phrase, refers to the three original programs that offered support to students from low SES homes as they progressed through middle school to higher education. Today, TRIO programs, which receive money from Title IV, include six programs to support students with financial needs in their pursuit of education - Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, Educational Opportunity Centers, and the McNair Post-Baccalaureate Program.
Researchers have evaluated outreach college preparation programs (Callahan & Wolk, 1999; Fenske, Geranios, Keller, & Moore, 1997; Gladieux, 1996; Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002; Hubbard, 1999; Kenny, Gallagher, Alvarez-Salvat & Silsby, 2002), addressing questions such as: What role do these programs play in increasing the enrollment of under-represented minorities in higher education? And what can college preparation programs do to improve? Researchers have found that students who were involved in college preparation programs were more likely to succeed in college (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001; Fenske et al., 1997; Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002; Horn & Chen, 1998; Hubbard, 1999; King, 1996). Student enrollment in college preparation programs resulted in higher matriculation in higher education (Horn & Chen, 1998). Indeed, a high frequency of college prep activities predicted increased higher education enrollment (Horn & Chen, 1998). College prep activities improved students’ standardized exam preparation and assisted students in completing college applications (Horn & Chen, 1998). Finally, while the college prep programs predicted enrollment at four-year universities, student involvement in college prep programs did not predict enrollment at any other type of college, such as two-year programs, vocational training programs, or community colleges (Horn & Chen, 1998).

Students who enrolled in a high school and college collaboration program on Saturday mornings reported higher levels of self-confidence in attaining higher education and career goals (Kenny et al., 2002). They also described themselves as participating in their classrooms at school, being involved in school activities, and practicing their
leadership skills (Kenny et al., 2002). Students were encouraged and supported in college prep programs, resulting in increased self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002). Of students enrolled in a college prep program, only nine-percent were not enrolled in some form of higher education (Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002). Conversely, of the students who did not take part in a college prep program, twenty-four percent were not enrolled in higher education after high school.

In short, much evidence suggests that students who engage in college preparation programs are better prepared for college, which, in turn, may result in higher college graduation rates. These programs play a vital role in supplementing students’ educations as they prepare for matriculation. Unfortunately, many students from low resourced schools cannot participate in college preparation programs. Budgetary constraints often limit enrollment in preparation programs. Budgets affect the number of advanced courses offered, the ratio of college guidance counselors to students, and the spaces available in university outreach college preparation programs. Moreover, students who do not demonstrate college potential can be excluded. Institutional assumptions of students’ potential may, in fact, exclude students whose cultural and educational backgrounds do not mirror the cultures of school and college (Loza, 2003). Given the evidence of the positive impact of college preparation programs, programs that attend to cultural diversity and identities may better serve students and offer services to a greater number of children.
School-University Initiatives

A range of early intervention programs exists, including privately-funded programs, school to college interventions, federal and state collaborations, and academic outreach programs (Fenske et al., 1997). School-college collaborations take many forms, such as those that focus on students’ transitions from high school to college, allowing students to follow a K-16 trajectory. Other initiatives are more short-term and focus on improving high school completion rates as a method for increasing college enrollment. These initiatives may include AP courses or dual enrollment programs. Given the various forms of school-college collaborations, school-university collaborations present promising initiatives as they may allow for multiple stakeholders to collaborate on contextually-specific initiatives (Fenske et al., 1997). School-university partnerships may help bridge the gap between high school and college academic expectations (Boston Higher Education Partnership, 2007). Partnerships between high schools and colleges can open communication on collegiate academic, social, and cultural expectations and experiences. Universities and schools can jointly examine academic expectations in order to better prepare students for collegiate coursework (Venezia et al., 2003). School-university collaborations also create opportunities for higher education institutions to evaluate their best practices for retaining a diverse student population. Such preparation, on both sides, may increase the graduation rates of students from low SES schools and families. Moreover, context-specific collaborations may be able to offer college preparation for students who are not traditionally identified as college bound.
Collaboration between schools and universities, then, may be able to offer services to more students. For instance, CPP’s entrance criteria included high incoming GPAs. Through discussions with participating school headmasters, CPP learned that a population of students were receiving no services because they did not have high or low GPAs; their academic potential was overlooked. Therefore, CPP revised its entrance criteria and worked more closely with schools to support this new population of students.

**Long-term Effects of College Preparation Programs**

Much evidence suggests that college preparation programs have been successful at getting students into college. What remains, however, is the gap between the students who graduate with four-year degrees and those who do not. “Though access to higher education for low-income students has increased and gaps in access between high and low-income students decreased, the gap between well-to-do and poor students in four-year degree completion remains. Indeed it appears to have increased somewhat over time (NCES, 2005, Table 5-B, p. 24, found in Tinto, 2007).

While research questions that address the impact of college preparation on high school students (Callahan & Wolk, 1999; Fenske et al., 1997; Gladieux, 1996; Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002; Hubbard, 1999; Kenny et al., 2002) offer important insight into what raises college admissions rates of low SES students, most research into college preparation programs does not attend to students’ college experiences or their persistence and graduation rates once they leave college preparation programs. There are notable exceptions, however. In 1970, the Office of Education began regular evaluations of the
Upward Bound program. Thirty-years later, Myers et al. (2004) also investigated the impact of Upward Bound on students’ college retention rates. Overall, the researchers found that Upward Bound had no statistically significant effect on students’ college enrollment or college credits earned. Moreover, the overall impact of Upward Bound on students’ college engagement also proved statistically insignificant. However, like the report issued in 1974, Myers et al. (2004), relied only on quantitative data to explore the impact of Upward Bound on students’ college engagement, enrollment, and persistence, and did not explore possible explanations for these findings through qualitative research methods. While the research may have found no statistically significant findings, there were many students who reported that Upward Bound did positively impact their college experiences. Unfortunately, use of quantitative methods in this research did not allow for exploration of these experiences.

Although many college preparation programs complete self-evaluations that report college attendance rates of their students, the long-term influence of college preparation programs on students’ college graduation rates often remains unexamined. Gándara and Bial (2001) investigated pre-collegiate programs aimed at increasing the number of minority students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who attend college. The programs evaluated for this report included private nonprofit programs, university-based, government sponsored (including federal, state, and community), and K-12 programs. Despite the number of college preparation programs evaluated, the authors found that very few programs gathered data or followed their
students past the college admission phase (Gándara & Bial, 2001). Moreover, “the literature on the transition to college, and college preparation programs, in particular, is void of student voices” (Tierney, 2004, p. 952). Finally, most programs remain unaware of their students’ collegiate academic, cultural, and social experiences, following college preparation program graduation. Historically, this was also true of CPP. Over the years, acceptance rates and financial aid package information was collected and reported. However, as revealed by the participants in this research study, little outreach to CPP graduates has happened, despite their reported eagerness to share and give back.

Given the absence of research on the long-term impact of college preparation programs and the information that students’ experiences reveal, I ask:

- What are the academic, social, and cultural experiences of graduates from a university outreach college preparation program during their first year of college?
- How do students explain their academic, social, and cultural experiences as college students in light of their college preparation? In addition, how do these experiences and understandings change over time?

University Outreach College Preparation Programs

College preparation programs assume many forms, depending on the sponsoring agencies’ resources, goals, and philosophies. For instance, a college preparation program may be conducted during the school day, like Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). A community organization may offer services on weekends or after-school hours, like Bottom Line, or a university may operate a
federally funded program, like Upward Bound, and partner with several high schools. Additionally, a university outreach program, such as College Prep, may collaborate with only one or two public high schools; this latter incarnation of a university outreach program will be the focus of this dissertation.

The curriculum and practices of a university outreach college preparation program are informed by the culture, context, and discourse of college. Loza (2003) defines university outreach college preparation programs as those that

… identify a cohort of students from underrepresented groups based on set criteria and utilize a host of strategies and interventions to get them ready for college. The strategies generally include individual academic tutoring, college visitations, college counseling, and some type of parent component (Fashola & Slavin, 2001; Jun & Colyar, 2002). The gist of a student-centered outreach program is to close any perceived academic gaps in the individual student (p.44). Therefore, a university outreach program aims to improve students’ academic college readiness. However, academic preparation is not the only factor that impacts college success; the influence of race, SES, gender, social and emotional support, and other factors contribute to college retention and graduation (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; White, 2005). University outreach college preparation programs that build relationships with one or two high schools may offer individualized academic plans and greater social and cultural support because of the deeper knowledge of students’ academic and financial needs. Such programs may also
provide better access to the social and cultural capital associated with success in college. University outreach programs may also maintain more regular contact with students and their schools throughout the program and after high school graduation because of the emphasis on research at many universities. Small programs, like CPP, may also be able to maintain more consistent connections to their graduates, as the numbers of students completing such small programs are fewer.

**At-risk Environments**

As evidenced by matriculation, retention, and graduation rates, students of low SES and of African American, Native American, Latino and other ethnic minority descent contend with multi-layered barriers to college. These students grapple with racism, inadequate educational preparation, and lack of opportunities (Kozol, 2005). Further, many under-represented students are the first generation to attend college or graduate from high school; thus, their families may not possess the cultural and social capital to assist their children as they explore and attempt to navigate higher education opportunities (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Loza, 2003; Tierney, 1999).

However, college preparation programs, schools, and universities may not consider students’ cultural wealth. Cultural wealth may “… encompass, along with students’ unique cultural capital, other accumulated assets and resources such as students’ navigational capital, social capital, economic capital, experiential capital, and aspirational capital” (Solórzano et al., 2005, p. 18). When viewed through a lens that does not account for students’ cultural wealth, institutions may define students as at-risk. From this
viewpoint, at-risk is a fixed characteristic of the student, rather than of the environment in which the student is educated. By not affirming students’ cultural identities and cultural wealth, institutions, such as college preparation programs, schools and universities, create at-risk environments. Students are seen as coming to educational experiences with deficits rather than with assets. Therefore, throughout this dissertation, “at-risk” will refer to the context and environments in which students are educated, rather than in reference to students’ characteristics.

**Framework**

**Social and Cultural Capital**

Social capital, as a framework from which to analyze students’ experiences has increased in usage over the last 30 years. Dika and Singh (2002) synthesized educational research on social capital and educational outcomes in an effort to find “… theoretical and empirical support for generalized claims that social capital is positively linked to (a) educational achievement (grades, test scores), (b) educational attainment (graduation, college enrollment), and (c) psychosocial factors that affect educational development (engagement, motivation, self-concept)” (p.36). Of particular relevance to this research, the synthesis revealed that “… social capital is positively associated with high school graduation and college enrollment - (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Yan, 1999)” (Dika & Singh 2002, p.41).

Like Portes (1998), Dika and Singh (2002) explore the often overlapping and confusing definitions and usage of *social capital*. Two scholars, Bourdieu and Coleman,
explored social capital in their theoretical and conceptual writings. Bourdieu’s (1986) work is often associated with theories of social reproduction and power (Dika & Singh, 2002), whereas Coleman’s work explored social capital as both a mechanism for attaining social capital as well as the benefits of social capital (Portes, 1998).

In this dissertation, *social capital* will be defined as the relationship paths and the networks that build towards cultural capital. *Social capital* leads to resources, benefits, and rewards – like relationships with admission people, or connections with professors. “To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage” (Portes, 1998, p.7). Through social capital participants may gain *cultural capital*. Of particular interest to the findings of this research, I will explore *embodied cultural capital* (e.g. professors, admissions personnel, financial aid advisors, and instructors) as well as *institutionalized cultural capital*, like schools, college preparation programs, and universities (Portes, 1998, p. 3-4). By possessing *social capital*, participants reap benefits through membership and the acquisition of *embodied and institutional cultural capital*.

However, in order to access *social capital*, actors must devote a variety of resources, including economic and cultural. This is true on either side of the exchange of social capital. “For example, transactions involving social capital tend to be characterized by unspecified obligations, uncertain time horizons, and the possible violation of reciprocity expectations. (Bourdieu 1979, 1980)” (Portes, 1998, p. 3-4). For instance, a college preparation program, like CPP, that shares social and cultural capital ultimately
benefits, and so is paid back, when its students graduate from high school, matriculate, graduate from college, and enter the workforce. Portes (1998) refers to this pay back as “social chits.” CPP belongs to a community in which it gains approval for providing access to social and cultural capital. Its original investment of money, time, and resources is paid back through students’ success.

**Positioning Theory**

Much of the literature on university outreach college preparation programs places students at the center of the research. Often, though, within the research, students are positioned as passive recipients of college preparation services. Universities collaborate with schools. Programs recruit students. Students receive information and preparation. Colleges admit students. This assumes that students possess no agency; thus, passivity may imply powerlessness on the students’ parts. In my work as a college preparation program coordinator, students revealed that they seek out college preparation programs affiliated with particular universities. For instance, some students joined College Prep partially because of its association with Small College. Research participants also expressed awareness that their high school classes were not preparing them for success in college. Students may independently seek out such programs, and, often, parents, teachers, and counselors also encourage students to participate. In the end, students belong to College Prep for three years, which requires commitment, determination, and perseverance. In this way students position themselves as active participants in their college preparation.
Positioning theory posits that people engage in conversations, or discourses, and accept or reject subject positions. Subject positions may be “reflexive,” when a person places him/herself, or “interactive,” when the person is positioned by another (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001, p.743). In the social interaction of discourse or conversation, subject positions assume varying roles of power and powerlessness. For instance, a teacher may position herself as powerful when giving students instruction, and students may be positioned as powerless when the teacher ignores students’ experiences. On the other hand, a student may position herself as powerful when she resists instruction, thereby placing the teacher as powerless.

Generally, theorists have applied positioning theory to relationships between researchers and researched (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001) and writing personal narratives and autobiographies (Morgan, 2002). However, “[t]he connection between subject positioning and social power relations enables a notion of ‘positioning’ to work not only at the level of interpersonal conversation, but also in relation to the socio-political level …” (Morgan, 2002, p.472). College admission, matriculation, and graduation all operate within a socio-political context. To earn admission to college requires certain political acts and results in political, social, and cultural repercussions. To matriculate and graduate from higher education is a social interaction with political consequences and influences.

If the college admissions process is viewed as a larger conversation, or a discourse, students can position themselves and be positioned. By engaging in a college
preparation program, a student reflexively self-positions, but she is also engaged in interactive positioning. In either role, a student assumes an active participant role, rather than the passive recipient role that most research positions assigns to students. Therefore, positioning theory serves as a useful lens for examining the first year college experiences of students who graduated from a university outreach college preparation program.

Positioning theory offers a compelling framework from which to operate because students, although constrained by contextual factors, are powerful. The levels of commitment and determination CPP students exhibit must be acknowledged and given due credit. The goal in utilizing positioning theory is to avoid placing students in passive roles in the research and to explore their experiences with their agency in mind. However, a delicate balance must be achieved. The risk in using a positioning framework is that the onus of success or failure is placed on the students with contextual factors remaining unexamined. With this in mind, this dissertation will examine larger contextual factors while taking into account students’ agency.

**Scope of Study**

The source of participants is the 2006 and 2007 graduating classes of Small College’s College Prep Program. I invited 9 students who graduated from the Small College College Prep Program in 2006 and 2007 to be participants in interviews for this dissertation. In the dissertation proposal, three students from each cohort were to be asked to participate. However, I was unable to recruit any members of the graduating class of 2005. Therefore, the final research participants are from the 2006 and 2007
graduating classes of CPP. Four students represented the 2006 class and 3 students represented the 2007 class. The experiences of these seven students create the inductive case studies presented here. These students have completed their first year of college, and have transitioned from high school to college. Given the lapse of time since matriculation, at the time of data collection, participants were finishing their sophomore and junior years of college. The sample was characterized by considerable racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. All interviewed students were at least 18 years old. All of the participants were graduates of College Prep who began the program in 10th grade and continued until they graduated from high school.

I focused on first-year college experiences for a variety of reasons. First, these two cohorts completed the College Prep program. They have the benefit of reflecting on their College Prep experiences and academic achievements and may also identify the benefits they received as members of College Prep. They will also have an opportunity to reflect on their current goals as well as the goals they held upon entering College Prep. Second, in order to evaluate students’ collegiate experiences through the perspective of a college prep graduate, the first year of college is the closest to their high school experiences, yet still part of their college experience. In other words, the connections students may draw between the college preparation program and their collegiate social, cultural, and academic experiences may be most discernable during the first year of college. As students progress through their college educations, their understanding of the college preparation process and their first-year experiences may change over time.
However, reflection on these experiences will be done by a more mature student who has a deeper understanding of the contexts and circumstances than a student beginning a college education. Furthermore, the participants of this research have had more time to reflect on the longer-term impacts of CPP on their college experiences. It is with a more mature view that they approached their participation as well as how they viewed their lived experiences.

The small number of participants and the focus on one university outreach college preparation program limit the generalizability of this research. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), however, information from case studies can be used as analogy to connect knowledge across case studies, populations, or circumstances. Each of my participants offers both unique insights into their relative experiences and the experiences of students participating in college preparatory programs in general. Stake (2005) suggests that qualitative researchers who use case studies “draw a purposive sample, building in variety and acknowledging opportunities for intensive study” (p. 451). According to Stake (2005), a purposively drawn sample can lead to opportunities to learn, an important feature of case studies. A varied and balanced participant population will reveal more diverse experiences, leading to a greater understanding of the phenomenon. I recruited former College Prep students who enrolled in a variety of colleges. Some students, for example, attend small, private universities with a Jesuit mission, while others matriculated at private universities with a business orientation. Still other students chose larger colleges or public institutions. The majority of participants were English Language
Learners (ELLs) and immigrants to the United States from a variety of countries. All participants self-identified on CPP applications as living in low socioeconomic circumstances and all were graduates of Boston Public Schools. By purposively sampling former College Prep students from diverse settings and cultures, I was able to investigate the unique perspectives and experiences of each participant.

A phenomenological orientation also provides a perspective to access individuals’ experiences. Although people share similar circumstances, each of us experiences situations in unique, individualistic ways. However, in phenomenology, “[p]eople are considered tied to their worlds – embodied – and are understandable only in their contexts” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p.45). In other words, a phenomenologically-oriented framework allows the researcher to attend to the individual experience while also considering that individual’s context. For my dissertation, asking a phenomenologically oriented question allows me to access College Prep graduates’ academic, social and cultural experiences as first year college students. The research question also examines students’ contexts. Moreover, the context of the college preparation program, high school, and college are examined. Given the importance of considering students’ agency within institutions, phenomenology will serve as an apt framework for this research.

**Significance of Study**

Recording and reporting the students’ lived experiences, while not representative of all students who graduate from college preparation programs, offers deeper
comprehension of the unique experiences of each student. I believe that each of my participants offers unique insights into their relative experiences and the general experiences of students participating in college preparatory programs. A detailed exploration of the participants’ narratives yielded thick and rich descriptions, which allows readers to comprehend the researched phenomenon and participants’ experiences when also examining context (Munhall, 2001). Such recognition of students’ lived experiences may inform college preparation program construction, freshman year experience seminars, and aid universities and high schools as they work to ease their students’ transitions from high school to post-secondary educations.

In my former work with the Boston Public Schools through the Office of College and Career Connections, I met regularly with Vice Provosts of universities, Deans of Student Affairs, headmasters of high schools, and project directors of independent education firms to create and coordinate plans to expand Boston high school students’ access to college admission. Regardless of their professional titles, these people reiterated again and again that college admission is just one step in the college-going process. University faculty and admissions officers seek ways to enrich under-represented students’ college experiences, so that low SES and minority students remain in college and earn baccalaureates. Given that many universities offer outreach college preparation programs, coordinators and directors of such programs were also working with the Office of College and Career Connections to create more effective college preparation programs that offer positive long-term effects. Unfortunately, this work ended with the transition to
a new Superintendent and the attending institutional changes. The work that started has now moved into a university controlled program that recruits Boston Public School graduates.

As evidenced by the literature, most outreach programs do not collect data on students’ first-year college experiences. It appears that most university outreach college preparation programs have yet to address the gap between college graduates and non-college graduates despite increased matriculation rates. Moreover, students’ voices have not been accessed as a way to learn what happens to students once they graduate from a college preparation program. The findings of this dissertation, therefore, may inform university outreach college preparation programs as they seek to increase their positive impact on students’ college experiences.

**Focus of Dissertation: Roadmap**

In Chapter 1, I argue that many efforts to alleviate unequal college access have been undertaken at a variety of levels. However, the focus of college access has remained solely on getting students into college. Once students enter college, university outreach college preparation programs no longer monitor, or support, their graduates’ experiences. Therefore, how these experiences and students’ understandings change over time also remain unknown. Furthermore, existing research primarily focuses on quantitative data, which does not allow for deep understanding of students’ lived experiences during their first year of college following graduation from a college preparation program. Chapter 2 expands on these ideas in a literature review that evaluates the research on college
preparation programs, and situates my research within a national and local context. I also
attend to my role as researcher in this chapter. Chapter 3 delves into the theoretical
framework from which I analyzed the data. Chapter 4 explores the methodology I utilized
for this dissertation and will explicate reasons for selected methods of data collection and
analysis. Chapter 5 describes the College Prep Program (CPP) and the participants of this
research. Chapter 6 reports research results focused on participants’ experiences with
CPP, their academic experiences during the first year of college, and the connections
participants perceived between CPP and the academic demands of college. Chapter 7
presents the social and cultural experiences of participants during their first year of
college, and Chapter 8 offers analyses, discussion and recommendations for practice.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Students of low socioeconomic status (SES), who primarily represent ethnic minorities, struggle to surmount obstacles that often preclude higher education. Researchers have identified barriers that challenge America’s disadvantaged populations as they seek to graduate high school and continue to college (McPherson & Schapiro, 1999; Sanoff & Powell, 2003). Some of these obstacles include: access to information on college admission requirements and collegiate academic expectations; the inadequate academic preparation provided by schools primarily serving students from low (SES) backgrounds; the impact of SES on the college decisions students make; and the dissonance between students’ cultural and social backgrounds and college culture. Given these barriers, college preparation programs have worked, and been successful, at helping increase the college admission rates of high risk students. However, high risk students do not remain enrolled in college, often dropping out as early as the first semester of matriculation. This results in a growing divide between students from low socioeconomic status (SES) and those from high SES backgrounds. Unfortunately, most college preparation programs do not track their graduates’ college experiences or their persistence and college graduation rates. While many college preparation programs self-report matriculation rates of their students, the long-term impact of college preparation programs on students’ college graduation rates often remains unexamined (Gándara & Bial, 2001). Moreover, “the literature on the transition to college, and college preparation programs, in particular, is void of student voices” (Tierney, 2004, p. 952). In other words,
few studies have explored students’ lived experiences during the first year of college following graduation from a college preparation program.

In this chapter, I review the literature of three related areas: 1) successful college preparation programs, 2) the long-term impact of college preparation programs, and 3) research into first year college experiences of high risk students. These areas of research share common points of contact with students, such as matriculation, academic preparation, and social interactions. However, little research has looked into students’ first-year college experiences within the context of college preparation program completion. Further, research into college preparation programs often places students as passive recipients of services, rather than as active participants. Positionality will serve as the framework for exploring students’ experiences, and communities of practice, as a theory, will help contextualize those experiences. Moreover, phenomenologically-oriented research methods will also provide a lens through which students’ lived experiences may be examined.

In the existing research on college preparation programs, few qualitative investigations address the college experiences of students who completed college preparation programs. Existing research focuses primarily on quantitative data, which do not access students’ lived experiences (Balz & Esten, 1998; Gándara & Bial, 2001; Horn & Chen, 1998; Ishitani & Snider, 2004; Myers et al., 2004). Furthermore, few researchers have explored the long-term impact of university outreach college preparation programs on students’ collegiate academic, social, and cultural experiences. Therefore, students’
first-year college experiences as graduates of college preparation programs remain a relatively unexplored avenue of research.

**Scope and Genre**

Using ERIC and PsycINFO, I entered the following search terms: higher education, college bound, college preparation programs, evaluation of college preparation programs, TRIO, AVID, Upward Bound, college bound high school students, low socioeconomic status, first year college, college freshmen, student retention and phenomenology. This produced literature reviews, program evaluations, conceptual work, empirical research, qualitative research, and mixed methods research. These works take several forms: journal articles, reports, papers, and books.

To access the most current research, I limited my search to works completed from 1995 to 2010. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research were incorporated into my synthesis if a study specifically addressed college preparation programs and/or first year college experiences. Qualitative studies which focused on students from high-risk circumstances were also integrated into my review for a more complete and descriptive understanding of student needs. In particular, I sought phenomenological research that investigated the lived experiences of students in college preparation programs or during their first year of college.

I eliminated program descriptions from this literature review. However, I did include program evaluations that either evaluated multiple college preparation programs and/or were performed by outside researchers. These offered a more objective description
of current intervention/prevention efforts being made to improve student success as well as critiques and suggestions for improvement of current programs. Further, evaluations which looked at multiple programs also gave an inventory of models in use. The conceptual pieces used for the synthesis also provided suggestions for improvement in college preparation programs and ways to increase college retention rates of high risk students. Finally, empirical research offered statistical information on students’ demographics and a quantitative view of the long-term impact of college preparation programs. Empirical research also recommended new directions for educational research based on statistical analyses of data.

**Definition of Terms**

**At-risk Environments**

As evidenced by matriculation, retention, and graduation rates, students of low SES and of African American, Native American, Latino and other ethnic minority descent contend with multi-layered barriers in these college experiences. These students grapple with racism, inadequate educational preparation, and lack of opportunities (Kozol, 2005). Further, many under-represented students are the first generation to attend college or graduate from high school; thus, their families may not possess the cultural and social capital to assist their children as they explore higher education opportunities (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Loza, 2003; Tierney, 1999).

Oftentimes students who fit this description are termed *at-risk* students. However, Pizzolato (2004) makes a powerful argument for using *high-risk* to describe college
students with “academic backgrounds, prior performances, or personal characteristics” (p. 425) that place them at high risk for failing or dropping out of college. Pizzolato (2004) uses high-risk “…because it suggests [that] risk for withdrawal or failure is a gradient scale, rather than a binding quality a student unequivocally has or does not have” (p. 425). A gradient scale allows for students to “adapt and achieve” rather than remain unchanged and unable to achieve in college.

However, college preparation programs, schools, and universities may not consider students’ cultural wealth. Cultural wealth may “…encompass, along with students’ unique cultural capital, other accumulated assets and resources such as students’ navigational capital, social capital, economic capital, experiential capital, and aspirational capital” (Solórzano et al., 2005, p. 18). When viewed through a lens that does not account for students’ cultural wealth, institutions may define students as at-risk. From this viewpoint, at-risk is a fixed characteristic of the student, rather than of the environment in which the student is educated. By not affirming students’ cultural identities and cultural wealth, institutions, such as college preparation programs, schools and universities, create at-risk environments. Students are seen as coming to educational experiences with deficits rather than with assets. Therefore, throughout this dissertation, “at-risk” will refer to the context and environments in which students are educated, rather than in reference to students’ characteristics.
University Outreach College Preparation Programs

College preparation programs assume many forms, depending on the sponsoring institutions’ resources, goals, and philosophies. For instance, a college preparation program may be conducted during the school day, like Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). A community organization may offer services on weekends or after-school hours, like Bottom Line, or a university may operate a federally funded program, like Upward Bound, that offers services to several high schools. Additionally, a university outreach program, such as College Prep4, may collaborate with only one or two public high schools; this latter incarnation of a university outreach program will be the focus of this dissertation.

The curriculum and practices of a university outreach college preparation program are informed by the culture, context, and discourse of college. Loza (2003) defines university outreach college preparation programs as those that

“… identify a cohort of students from underrepresented groups based on set criteria and utilize a host of strategies and interventions to get them ready for college. The strategies generally include individual academic tutoring, college visitations, college counseling, and some type of parent component (Fashola & Slavin, 2001; Jun & Colyar, 2002). The gist of a

4 College Prep will be used as a pseudonym for a college preparation program that is sponsored by a small, Jesuit university in the Northeast. The use of a pseudonym will serve to protect the identities of research participants.
student-centered outreach program is to close any perceived academic
gaps in the individual student” (p.44).

Therefore, a university outreach program aims to improve students’ academic
college readiness. However, academic preparation is not the only factor that impacts
college success; the influence of race, SES, gender, social and emotional support, and
other factors contribute to college retention and graduation (Goldrick-Rab, 2006;
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programs that build relationships with one or two high schools may offer individualized
academic plans and greater social and cultural support because of the deeper knowledge
of students’ needs and access to the culture of college. University outreach programs may
also maintain more regular contact with students and their schools throughout the
program and after high school graduation because of the emphasis on research at many
universities. Finally, some university outreach programs offer free college tuition for
those who complete a program and earn admission to the sponsoring university.

**Social and Cultural Capital**

Social capital, as a framework from which to analyze students’ experiences has
increased in usage over the last 30 years. Dika and Singh (2002) synthesized educational
research on social capital and educational outcomes in an effort to find “… theoretical
and empirical support for generalized claims that social capital is positively linked to (a)
educational achievement (grades, test scores), (b) educational attainment (graduation,
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(engagement, motivation, self-concept)” (p.36). Of particular relevance to this research, the synthesis revealed that “… social capital is positively associated with high school graduation and college enrollment - (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Yan, 1999)” (Dika & Singh 2002, p.41). However, like Portes (1998), Dika and Singh (2002) explore the often overlapping and confusing definitions and usage of social capital. Two scholars, Bourdieu and Coleman, explored social capital in their theoretical and conceptual writings. Bourdieu’s (1986) work is most often associated with theories of social reproduction and power (Dika & Singh, 2002), whereas Coleman’s work explored social capital as both a mechanism for attaining social capital as well as the benefits of social capital (Portes, 1998).

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However, in order to access social capital, actors must devote a variety of resources, including economic and cultural. This is true on either side of the exchange of social capital. “For example, transactions involving social capital tend to be characterized by unspecified obligations, uncertain time horizons, and the possible violation of reciprocity expectations. (Bourdieu 1979, 1980)” (Portes, 1998, p. 3-4). For instance, a college preparation program, like CPP, that shares social and cultural capital ultimately benefits, and so is paid back, when its graduates graduate from high school, matriculate, graduate from college, and enter the workforce. Portes (1998) refers to this pay back as “social chits.” CPP belongs to a community in which it gains approval for providing access to social and cultural capital. Its original investment of money, time, and resources is paid back through students’ success.

**Access to Higher Education**

In this section, I provide an overview of the literature on barriers that prevent or impede students’ access to higher education. Researchers have explored the influence of socioeconomic status (SES) on students’ educational attainments. However, the definition of low SES/high poverty depends upon researchers’ scales. Scholars have also investigated what higher education institutions students choose when they live in and are educated in low SES circumstances (Hamrick & Stage, 1995; Hamrick & Stage, 2000; King, 1996; McPherson & Schapiro, 1999; Sanoff & Powell, 2003). Low-resourced schools can negatively impact students’ access to post-secondary education due to a lack of information and inadequate academic preparation. The research into the barriers
students face places the need for college preparation programs in context. College preparation programs seek to ameliorate the barriers to matriculation and graduation. However, educational barriers that affect students while in high school continue to affect them while they are in college. Therefore, research into students’ lived experiences as first-year college students following graduation from a college preparation program is vitally important.

**Socioeconomic Status**

Federal guidelines, determined in 1969 by the Social Security Administration, determine poverty levels by stipulating how much a family can earn while accounting for food expenditures. This definition, although still used today, fails to account for factors that may determine and influence children’s standards of living. Greenbaum (1991) questioned whether the federal formula should be used in a modern economy as other possible indices of poverty may include: health related expenses like medical care and insurance, stable employment, modern facilities in the home like electricity and plumbing. Greenbaum (1991) also incorporated ethnicity, highest level of education attained, gender, occupation, and native country as possible determinants of SES.

Horn and Chen (1998) also include parents’ education in determining families’ socioeconomic status (SES). Horn and Chen (1998) identified students whose families lived on incomes which place them in the lowest income percentile as high risk. While the U.S. Census Bureau does not include parent’s education in determining family SES, SES plays an important role in students’ academic resiliency, or persistence attributes.
that assist students as they navigate educational barriers to graduate from high school. For resilient, or academically successful, students, Finn and Rock (1997) found that the mean family income for low SES, resilient students was $17,500 while the mean family income for high school dropouts was $10,000 a year. Both income levels place families as living well below the poverty line, but deeper and more pernicious poverty may increase students’ risk of dropping out. Catterall (1998) found that SES was an influencing factor on academic resilience, but not for African-American or Latino students, which contradicts González and Padilla’s work (1997) with Mexican-American students. In her ethnographic study of two students, Brantlinger (2003) found that one school’s lower-SES students were placed in lower level classes more often. She also found that “35% [of the lower SES students were] identified as learning disabled, emotionally handicapped, or mildly retarded and were receiving special education services” (2003, p. 114). Hamrick and Stage (1995) determined that disaggregated models revealed more detailed information of the role SES played in students’ resiliency.

Low SES schools and home environments compound educational barriers for students. The U.S. Census Bureau (2000) reported that twenty-five percent of people living below the poverty level were African-American, twenty-three percent were Latino, and thirteen percent were Asian, compared to the relatively low nine percent of White Americans (www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-19.pdf). As shown in the 2000 U.S. Census report, high percentages of ethnic minorities live in low economic statuses. Unfortunately, poverty influences children’s learning resources (Eamon, 2002).
learning resources available to children of low socioeconomic schools do not compare favorably to more highly funded schools. In his book, *Ordinary Resurrections*, Kozol (2000) compared the funding spent per pupil across New York State. In the 1997-98 school year, New York City spent around $8200 per child compared to the $20,000 spent in Manhasset and the $5200 spent in the South Bronx (Kozol, 2000). Unfortunately, Kozol’s (2000) findings from ten years ago remain relatively unchanged, and the negative effects of budget differentials between high and low funded schools continue to impact students’ educational achievements and opportunities (Biddle & Berliner, 2002).

For instance, Sanoff and Powell (2003) reported that in 2000 fifty-four percent of lower SES students matriculated in higher education as compared to the eighty-two percent of students from the highest income brackets who enrolled. Researchers identified the rise of tuition costs as one of the reasons for this ever-widening gap. According to McPherson and Schapiro, a drop of 1.6% in low-income students’ enrollment occurs for every $150 raise in tuition costs (1998). Further, the median family income increased by only five percent from 1980 – 1995 while the tuition at four-year public institutions of higher education increased by a staggering ninety-eight percent (Gladieux, 1996).

Moreover, the federal government increased subsidized loan programs, but the Pell Grant program, a federal program for low SES students to receive free money to attend college, has not kept up with rising tuition. “…[G]rowth in guaranteed and direct loans has been enormous (a real increase of 114% between 1990-91 and 1997-98), but expenditures on the Pell program have risen by only 5% in real dollars” (McPherson &
Schapiro, 1999). Echoing McPherson and Schapiro’s findings, Marklein (2006) stated, “Thirty years ago, the maximum Pell Grant covered 84% of the cost of a four-year public institution; today, at $4,050 a year, it covers 40%” (2006, p. 3). In real terms, a Massachusetts family living in the lowest SES quartile would need to spend 64% of the family’s annual income to pay for one year at a two-year public education. The same family would need to spend 225% of their income to finance one year at a private four-year university (New England Board of Higher Education, 2007). Combine the factors of rising tuition with fewer Pell Grant benefits, and fewer low-income students attend college.

**College Knowledge**

Information about college academic, cultural, and social practices as well as the college application process is vitally important to a student’s successful pursuit of higher education. King’s (1996) research discussed the importance of high school college counselors for students from low SES circumstances. “Almost 90 percent of low-income SAT takers whose counselors recommended they attend a four-year college or university reported plans to do just that” (King, 1996). Further, counselors involved in students’ college aspirations also advised students to take college preparation classes in high school. King’s (1996) study points out the role of high school college counselors as an important factor in the success of many students. For students whose parents did not attend college, college counselors may be a vital, and often singular, resource in providing accurate college information. Unfortunately, few students receive the proper
guidance and information as they plan their high school schedule of courses. Goodwin’s (2000) research revealed that “…55 percent of Hispanic students reported they planned to go to college, but only 23 percent planned to enroll in college-preparatory courses. Similarly, 64 percent of African-American students said they planned to get college degrees, but only 25 percent planned to take college-bound courses” (Goodwin, 2000, p.7). What may be implied by Goodwin’s (2000) research is that, regardless of dire predictions, students continue to consider a college education a viable option, even when they do receive timely and necessary information that would prepare them for college entrance and graduation. In accordance with the findings of Goodwin (2000), many of the participants of this research reported a lack of timely college preparation guidance at their schools and that logistical information as well as social capital was gained through CPP participation. Therefore, the importance of college preparation programs increases (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004).

The responsibility to convey college access information, however, does not lay only with public high schools and college preparation programs. Universities also have a duty to communicate academic requirements and social expectations to students as they seek to enter, and graduate from, higher education. The Boston Higher Education Partnership (BHEP, 2007) investigated what happens to Boston high school graduates once they enter college, and found that one-third of Boston Public School high school graduates enrolled in community colleges were placed into remedial or developmental English classes and half enrolled in remedial math courses. Moreover, to explain the
disconnect between their expectations of college and their experiences, students described a “…shortage of information available from colleges regarding the knowledge, skills, and competencies that high school students need to acquire for postsecondary success” (p. 9). This is particularly important given that Venezia et al. (2003) reported student misconceptions about preparing for and attending college. In their research, Venezia et al. (2003) found that students believed that graduating from high school adequately prepares them for college. However, “adequate preparation for college usually requires a more demanding curriculum than is reflected in minimum requirements for high school graduation, sometimes even if that curriculum is termed ‘college-prep’” (Venezia et al., 2003, p. 31). These findings reveal that the lack of communication between high schools and colleges and universities negatively impacts high risk students’ college aspirations and their college-going opportunities.

**Academic Preparation**

Horn and Kojaku (2001) investigated the influence of high school academic curriculum on college persistence. Their report indicates that when all sources of influences were “[t]aken together, the results suggest that completing a rigorous academic curriculum in high school may help students overcome socioeconomic disadvantages such as low family income and parents with no college experience …” (Horn & Kojaku, 2001, p. 72). In other words, students from low SES schools are more likely to succeed in college when they enroll in academically rigorous high school courses. However, many students are unable to access academically challenging high school coursework, resulting
in few students of low SES who receive adequate academic preparation for college. Many Title I schools cannot provide Advanced Placement courses for all interested and capable students. The National Center for Education Statistics found that “[s]chools with the highest minority enrollment were the most likely to indicate that they did not offer any dual credit or exam-based courses” (Tab, Waits, Setzer, & Lewis, 2005, p.5).

Furthermore, Burton, Whitman, Yepes-Baraya, Cline, and Kim (2002) report that “There are only about one-third as many African American and Hispanic students in the AP Program as one would expect based on their frequency in the population ages 15 to 19 (each group is approximately 15 percent of the age cohort but only 5 percent of AP takers)” (p.9). In 2005, one of the comprehensive partner high schools of CPP split into four small schools through Gates funding. Given the lower number of students and fewer teachers, Advanced Placement (AP) courses became obsolete. Students who were enrolled in CPP could no longer enroll in AP courses during their 12th grade.

Due to the lack of access to rigorous academic curriculum within students’ high schools, many university outreach college preparation programs offer enrichment academic courses. For instance, federally funded Upward Bound programs must offer core classes in “…math, laboratory science, composition, literature, and foreign language” (www.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound). Such enrichment work aims to equalize the pre-collegiate skills and experiences of students from low SES schools with those experiences of students from high SES schools and families. The absence of rigorous academic curriculum and opportunities places students from low SES schools at a
disadvantage during the college admissions process because of the increased competition for college admissions and importance of a college education. Moreover, high risk students also face increased difficulties as they seek to graduate college if they are not given proper academic backgrounds that can support their college academics.

Institutions Students from Low-Income Circumstances Choose

For the students from low-income circumstances who do enroll in college, their institutional choices are also impacted by financial considerations, lack of information, and inadequate academic preparation. For instance, in an analysis by McPherson and Schapiro (1999), 46.7% of students from the lowest SES quartile attended two-year public colleges and only 15.2% enrolled at private or public four-year institutions. Marklein (2006) reported that, “[a]t the nation’s 146 most selective colleges, only 3% come from the lowest socioeconomic quarter…74% come from the top quarter” (p. 1). Community colleges, or two-year colleges, provide access to higher education for many students who cannot afford a four year college. However, few students who choose a community college as a stepping stone to a bachelor’s degree actually earn a four-year degree. Indeed, Sanoff and Powell (2003) found that eight percent of the students who enrolled in a community college graduated with a baccalaureate by 1994. Unfortunately, over a decade later, statistics do not demonstrate an improvement in the retention and graduation rates of students from low SES schools. For example, Boston Public School graduates who enroll in community colleges and four-year universities continue to drop out at stunning rates (BHEP, 2007).
College Preparation Programs

Given the low enrollment and high college attrition for high-risk students, numerous private organizations, universities, and government agencies have created college preparation programs. These programs aim to increase college enrollment and graduation rates of minority and other underrepresented students. Most outreach college preparation programs report an increase in college attendance rates for their participating students. However, many programs do not gather or report data on students’ academic, social, and cultural experiences during their first year of college. This leaves one area of presumed impact unexplored in research on college preparation programs. Without knowledge of the longer-term impact of outreach college preparation programs, we cannot definitively say whether our efforts prove effective at increasing college retention and graduation rates of minority and low SES students.

Many researchers found that students who were involved in college preparation programs were more likely to succeed in high school (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001; Fenske et al., 1997; Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002; Horn & Chen, 1998; Hubbard, 1999; Kenny et al., 2002; King, 1996). Student enrollment in college preparation programs also results in more matriculation in higher education. Horn and Chen (1998) found that a high frequency of college prep activities predicted higher education enrollment. They also found that college prep activities increased students’ financial aid awareness and their standardized exam preparation (Horn & Chen, 1998). The programs also assisted students complete college applications (Horn & Chen, 1998).
Students who were enrolled in a school and college collaboration on Saturday mornings reported higher levels of self-confidence in attaining higher education and career goals (Kenny et al., 2002). They also described themselves as participating in their classrooms at school, being involved in school activities, and practicing their leadership skills (Kenny et al., 2002). After examining three college preparation programs, Hagedorn and Fogel (2002) concluded that students are encouraged and supported in college prep programs. Further, students may experience increased levels of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002). Hagedorn and Fogel (2002) also found that of the students who were enrolled in a college prep program, only nine percent were not enrolled in some form of higher education. Conversely, of the students who did not take part in a college prep program, twenty-four percent were not enrolled in higher education after high school. Finally, more students in the college prep group enrolled in four-year institutions, while students who did not participate in college prep opted for community college more often (Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002).

Gladieux (1996) evaluated federally funded college preparation programs called TRIO, which receive money from Title IV. TRIO programs include: Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, Educational Opportunity Centers, and the McNair Post-Baccalaureate Program (Gladieux, 1996). Funding goes to 700,000 people from the ages of 11 to 27 years old as well as over 1,200 universities, colleges and agencies (Gladieux, 1996). According to Gladieux (1996), efforts to equalize higher
education opportunities have failed; there are still large gaps between who benefits from post-secondary education and who does not.

Fenske et al. (1997) examined the range of early intervention programs. Unlike Gladieux (1996), their work included privately funded programs, school to college interventions, federal and state collaborations, and academic outreach programs (Fenske et al., 1997). Fenske et al.’s (1997) work concluded that the most effective programs were the school to college initiatives. Callahan and Wolk (1999) conceptualized college and community partnerships. They asserted that an impoverished community involved with a college would yield more students enrolled in college. Callahan and Wolk (1999) held that community-college relationships prove more effective than relying on the schools to carry the full burden of relationships and policy changes.

**The Social and Cultural Expectations of College**

Gándara and Bial (2001) found that recognition and support of students’ cultural backgrounds comprised one common component of successful college preparation programs. Tierney (1999) argues that most college preparation programs are constructed under similar assumptions. First, Tierney (1999) asserts that college preparation programs operate under the assumption that students need to learn how to negotiate, and secure, financial aid. A second assumption is that college preparation programs should focus on the individual, and finally, students need academic skills that conform to dominant cultural expectations. However, Tierney (1999) contends that this model neglects the importance of students’ cultures. “In other words, not only are students’ cultural
backgrounds irrelevant to their successful collegiate experiences, if students are to succeed in college, those backgrounds must be discarded in favor of the dominant cultures of their institutions. Moreover, if an initiate/student fails, the blame falls on the individual, not the institution” (Tierney, 1999, p. 82).

By synthesizing the literature on college preparation programs, it becomes clear that while the current programs may not meet all students’ needs, they may provide one important key towards success. As noted earlier, resilient students possess higher self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. Furthermore, the research showed that college prep programs helped increase these feelings in students. As Winfield (1994) suggested, schools and college prep programs may foster resiliency by offering more access and opportunities for college.

In the following section, I explore the research on nationally recognized college preparation programs. These programs, due to their longevity, offer the most data regarding academic experiences, sample populations, and consistency across programs. While this dissertation focuses on a university-high school collaboration, there are few investigations into their effectiveness or the long-term impact of such programs (Gándara & Bial, 2001).

**TRIO and Upward Bound**

Of the TRIO college preparation programs, Upward Bound (UB) receives the most attention in scholarly work. Briefly, Upward Bound (http://www.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound) serves students from low SES homes and
students who will be first-generation to attend college. The U.S. Department of Education stipulates that Upward Bound programs must include coursework in literacy, lab sciences, mathematics, and foreign language. As most Upward Bound programs are housed on college campuses students may also have the opportunity to attend a 6-week summer program on a college campus.

Balz and Esten (1998) analyzed TRIO graduates’ success following high school graduation. According to their findings, “… Hispanic first-generation students [who participated in TRIO] were the most likely to still be enrolled in or have completed their post-secondary programs five years after entering college…” (Balz & Esten, 1998, p.339). Further, “With regards to the highest levels of educational attainment achieved 10 years later, the TRIO participants included in the HS&B Study reported greater academic success than did their non-TRIO counterparts. Nearly 11% of TRIO participants reported having some graduate school experience compared to only 5% of the non-TRIO group. Over 30% of TRIO participants had attained their bachelor’s degrees within the 10-year timeframe compared to 12.9% of the non-TRIO population” (Balz & Esten, 1998, p.341).

Fashola and Slavin (1997) found that “[t]he impact of UB was greater on Latino students who had entered the program with low expectations than for any other student participants. Latino UB students increased their academic coursework by 2 credits each year; African American and White students increased their academic loads by less than .5 credits” (Fashola & Slavin, 1997, p.19). These findings are difficult to interpret because
Fashola and Slavin do not define “low expectations.” Do they mean that teachers and school administrators held low expectations for the students? Or do they mean that students held low expectations for what Upward Bound could help them accomplish? Finally, the researchers also found that once students entered college, there were low rates of retention at the collegiate level (Fashola & Slavin, 1997), resulting in questionable long-term results.

Cabrera and Padilla (2004) also examined Upward Bound through a qualitative study with two bilingual Hispanic participants, one male and one female. Both graduated from Stanford University and they offered a retrospective view of their educational preparation. Erandi, the young woman involved in the research, participated in both AVID and Upward Bound. Due to her mother’s inability to assist her in pursuing a higher education, Erandi sought out mentors in Upward Bound and AVID. Therefore, Erandi attributes her intellectual development primarily to the assistance she received from her AVID and Upward Bound instructors. “Erandi’s mother still supported her academic pursuits, but she was unable to guide her with information about precollege courses, SAT exams, or the college application process” (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004, p. 162). Hence, Upward Bound assisted Erandi in accessing the “culture of college” (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004).

Myers et al. (2004), researchers for Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., completed the third review of Upward Bound, and they specifically targeted the long-term effects of UB. With over 2,800 students, Myers et al. (2004) randomly assigned
students to treatment and control groups in order to ascertain, “What effect does UB have on students’ post-secondary experiences? Who benefits most from UB? What is the association between staying in UB and students outcomes?” (p. xv). Myers et al. (2004) did not find statistically significant effects on students’ matriculation at any higher education institution. Further, the findings neither clearly indicated an increase in enrollment at four-year universities nor did UB have statistically significant effects on the number of course credits earned over one year. However, for students with low academic expectations, those who did not expect to earn a bachelor’s degree, UB positively impacted both four-year enrollment and persistence. Additionally, when the data were disaggregated into race, UB most significantly impacted Latinos. Interestingly, UB did not demonstrate the same impact on African American or White students. Finally, the longer students remained in UB, the more positively UB impacted post-secondary persistence and outcomes.

**Project Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID)**

Touted as both cost-beneficial and an “un-tracking” program, AVID began in San Diego schools in 1980. AVID aims to recruit at-risk students whose academic performance does not match their potential. These students may be: “Low-income and linguistic minority students who have average- to high-achievement test scores and C-level grades, students who would be the first in their family to attend college, and students who have special circumstances that could impede their progress to college, are eligible for AVID” (http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ToolsforSchools/avid.html). Students begin
the program as seventh graders and continue until graduation. AVID occurs in schools where students take an extra academic preparation course during the school day. Students also receive tutoring from college students (http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ToolsforSchools/avid.html). Fashola and Slavin (1997) characterize the program as a dropout prevention program as well as a college preparation program. Their review of research on AVID also mentions that the program has done relatively well with both Latinos and non-Latinos.

The young men and women in Hubbard’s investigation (1999) who were chosen for the AVID program fit three criteria: students who were in non-college bound classes (general academic classes or vocational courses); students who showed potential for improvement or success; and students who were recommended by their teachers or counselors. The young men and women in the AVID program aimed to attend college despite past “tracking” placement in non-college prep courses. The young women viewed college as a way to better their futures, to plan a career in a profession (i.e. law, medicine, psychology), and a means towards independence and financial security. College offered security for their futures and AVID offered a way to attain higher education (Hubbard, 1999).

The young men in Hubbard’s work (1999), however, were less specific about how college could help them. Some boys expressed hopes of owning their businesses, but most saw college as a way to play professional sports. While the young men were less specific about college, some of their vagueness may be attributed to past experiences.
Many of the young men reported that they experienced discrimination from counselors. The young men conveyed stories of college counselors who discouraged them from academic classes or refused to give information about four-year colleges (Hubbard, 1999).

Lockwood and Secada (1999) investigated the effects of Project AVID on Latinos by looking at two high schools in California that adopted the AVID curriculum. Teachers reported that AVID helped them monitor students’ academic progress, to identify areas for improvement, and to address social issues (Lockwood & Secada, 1999). AVID coordinators also described working collaboratively with teachers. Given this increased coordination and monitoring of students’ achievements, at one high school, nine of ten students enrolled in post-secondary education.

Watt, Powell, Mendiola, and Cossi (2006) used 1998 and 2002 Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) reports to gather evidence of high school course enrollment, high school graduation rates, and post-high school graduation plans. The researchers looked at ten high schools in Texas that participated in AVID and compared them to non-AVID schools. AVID high schools tended to have higher minority populations and more low SES students. Interestingly, Watt et al. (2006) found that advanced course enrollment increased at AVID schools and decreased in non-AVID schools over the four year period. Likewise, students with advanced graduation plans, those who intended to matriculate, increased from 7.1% to 51.7% in AVID schools (Watt et al., 2006).
School – University Initiatives

Laguardia (1998) identified school-university partnerships that had been in operation for more than 5 years and targeted improving the rates of college-going for minority and disadvantaged students with two goals in mind. Laguardia (1998) collected data on 1) measures that partnerships, which focus on the academic success of minority students, use to determine success, and 2) to evaluate how well their goals are met. Laguardia (1998) found that programs used programmatic features which were informed by academic literature. Laguardia (1998) also discovered that college preparation programs in his study are somewhat successful at increasing college-going rates. However, the participating programs are neither fully informed regarding college retention and graduation of their students, nor are they fully informed on financial resources available to their students. Finally, the programs “appear only marginally committed to creating institutional change” (p.167). Only 46.8% of study participants reported that the programs collected data on college graduation rates. “…[T]his research raises concerns regarding the paucity of interest in institutional reform, the low levels of reported college retention, insufficient data collected to verify success in postsecondary institutions, and the lack of attention to financial support for partnership students” (Laguardia, 1998, p.179). Laguardia (1998) hypothesizes that one explanation for a lack of data collection may be explained by the difficulty in tracking students once they enter college “due to confidentiality restrictions” (p. 179).
This study looked only at partnerships that involved three levels of education – a school district(s), a community college and a four-year university or college. Laguardia (1998) argues that partnerships involving only two educational levels result in a “more limited cooperative arrangement” (p.171). However, Laguardia (1998) does not explain the reasoning behind this choice. It is unclear as to what forms the bases for this opinion and research choice. Further, Laguardia (2003) surveyed three people involved in each partnership – the coordinator/director of partnership, a representative from higher education, and a representative of the K-12 schools. Laguardia (1998) does not attend to who comprises the final sample. How many respondents were from the community college versus the four-year universities and colleges? What role did the K-12 representative play in the partnership? Do all respondents have access to these measures of success? Moreover, only 40 surveys were returned and included in the study. Finally, the author does not indicate in what states he focused his efforts.

**Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP).** Like many other college preparatory programs, the University of California’s Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) begins services for students in middle school and continues services until graduation from high school. Opportunities offered to students include: concurrent enrollment in community college courses while attending high school; participation in an Advanced Placement Boot Camps; attendance at Algebra Academies; contributing to Student Research Institutes; as well as involvement in Saturday College, and Summer Residential Academies (http://www.eaop.org). The typical student participating in EAOP
is “…Hispanic and not White, Asian, or Filipino; ha[s] high grade point averages in ninth grade, as well as in grades 10-12; … ha[s] non-limited English proficiency; and [is] not participating in the free/reduced lunch program” (Quigley, 2002, p.15). Quigley’s (2002) analysis of the effects of the EAOP on students’ achievements reported that one of the program components, achievement services, is aimed at students who do not require remediation in math or literacy. While Quigley found that EAOP is highly successful with the students it serves, it appears that students with limited English proficiency are excluded from the programmatic benefits and access to college. Moreover, students who meet the EAOP admission requirements may not need extra assistance to enter college, because they are better prepared than high risk students.

**Neighborhood Academic Initiative Scholars Program (NAI).** The Neighborhood Academic Initiative Scholars Program (NAI) is another university-based program that recruits middle school students with a C grade point average, or better, to participate in college preparation on the University of Southern California’s campus. Following a rigorous admissions process, students sign agreements that they will attend school 90% of the time and hand in their school assignments. As an incentive for remaining with NAI from seventh through twelfth grades, the University of Southern California (USC) provides free tuition for students who apply and gain admission to USC. One of the NAI goals is to improve students’ self-perceptions by naming them scholars. This deliberate name choice aims to help students see themselves as future
college students. This is particularly important given that the program aims to recruit “average” students.

Tierney and Jun (2001) completed an evaluation of several college preparation programs and chose NAI program as an exemplar. On average, 90% of NAI graduates enrolled in post-secondary education and 60% of those enrolled in four-year research institutions (Tierney & Jun, 2001). The researchers attribute the success of the program to its operational framework of cultural integrity. For instance, NAI emphasizes student success within the context of their neighborhood, rather than emphasizing the negative effects of students’ living conditions. Students’ cultures are considered a “critical ingredient for acquiring cultural capital and achieving success” (Tierney & Jun, 2001, p. 211). Further, Tierney and Jun (2001) emphasize the relationships between NAI and students’ parents and the supports that these relationships provide. Despite the successes, Gándara and Bial (2001) critique Tierney and Jun’s (2001) research because they failed to report on students’ achievements in college. Moreover, Gándara and Bial (2001) argue that given its rigorous expectations – extra classes every day and Saturday attendance requirements – that “the persistence demonstrated in staying in such a program may be the most critical factor in student success” (p. 41). In other words, NAI students may be more resilient than their classmates.

Using autophotography to gauge the effects of NAI on high risk students’ self-concepts, Jones (2004) asked 91 middle school students to, of whom half were NAI participants, to take 24 pictures that represented who they are and are not. The researcher
then asked students to explain their choices and to take a Rosenberg Self-Esteem Measurement. Jones (2004) analyzed the findings using ANOVA and found that NAI participants more often identified themselves in the following categories: scholarship, chores, and general. Given these findings, Jones (2004) concluded that NAI successfully assists students self-identify as scholars. Further, Jones (2004) interpreted the findings to mean that NAI students were also more likely to engage in “responsible behaviors” (p. 197) and were, therefore, more disciplined. However, Jones (2004) also found that African American girls’ self-esteem was negatively correlated with scholarship.

**Long-term Effects of College Preparation Programs**

Martinez (2003) looked at the influence of TRIO’s Student Support Services (SSS), which helps students stay in college by offering tutoring, counseling, and academic enrichment, on Latino students. Martinez (2003) found that her participants received limited support in their attempts to attain and remain in college. For instance, study participants did not receive support from high school teachers or guidance counselors. In fact, many were discouraged from applying to college or for scholarships. However, even when parents were uneducated regarding the college application process, parents encouraged higher education as a means for improving one’s life. Participants described one teacher or mentor who encouraged them, but this was a rare occurrence. Therefore, Martinez (2003) argues that students must reconstruct their “academic self-

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5 Federal guidelines determine students’ eligibility to enroll in a Student Support Services program at their university. To be eligible, students must meet the same low SES and first-generation status as all TRIO programs.
confidence” in order to remain and succeed in college. Martinez (2003) states that “Their perceptions regarding the opportunities denied them and the obstacles they confronted before attending college revealed the extent of reconstruction of academic self-confidence needed to help them navigate the higher education setting” (p.15).

Martinez’s (2003) research attempts to fill a hole on the study of Latinos in college. Moreover, Martinez (2003) calls for institutions to build in support services for Latino students and to present them in “ways that students feel comfortable accessing them” (Martinez, 2003, p. 20). The recommendation to make support services more accessible would undoubtedly benefit all high risk students.

While Martinez’s (2003) work asks important questions, several limitations plague her research. For instance, this article uses quotes from only four students, which brings into question the reliability and validity of her findings. Furthermore, Martinez (2003) relies on relatively weak arguments. While the article’s purpose and goal is important, the execution is weak. For instance, only in the description of the study does Martinez (2003) refer to “reconstruction” of students’ hopes. Moreover, Martinez (2003) does not offer examples of quotes from participants that refer to “rebuilding of self-confidence” (p.15). Finally, Martinez (2003) describes participants as former participants in TRIO programs, but does not say what their current status is. Are students still in college? Why are they no longer participating in TRIO SSS? How much time had passed since their participation? Where do they live? How old are they? These unanswered questions address participant characteristics and the academic context in which the study
was conducted. By leaving these unanswered, Martinez (2003) does not offer a clear picture as to her participants’ collegiate experiences.

Ishitani and Snider (2004) investigated how college preparation programs affected college retention. The researchers report that “…[S]tudents who took ACT/SAT preparation courses in high school were 33% less likely to drop out than those who did not” (Ishitani & Snider, 2004, p.8). However, “Receiving help with financial aid in high school increased the attrition rate of students by 89% for the second year [of college]” (Ishitani & Snider, 2004, p.10). Ishitani and Snider (2004) later explain that these negative effects exist only during students’ second year of college. The researchers explain the negative effects of receiving financial aid assistance by suggesting that “students needed assistance in financial aid application because of indecisiveness in their college decisions or their poor college planning” (p.12). This hypothesis completely negates the experiences and frustrations of first-generation college attendees and implies that those with less cultural and social capital are being lazy or unmotivated.

Gándara and Bial’s (2001) report sought to 1) show the range of programs and the variety of features; 2) “to identify programs with evaluation data that would allow as assessment of the effectiveness of particular models and features, and 3) “to assess the extent to which existing programs address needs and problems identified in the literature” (p.11). Only 13 college preparation programs engaged in evaluation to measure programmatic impact. Of the 13 programs, only 2 are K-16 partnerships, NAI and Minnesota PEOP. The authors describe six common features across successful programs.
– a meaningful relationship between an adult and a student; access to high quality instruction and improved curriculum; the programs viewed their investments in these students as long-term; recognition and support of students’ cultural backgrounds; the creation of supportive peer groups; and scholarship assistance. The authors delineate impediments to programmatic success. These include: program attrition; no real, or measured, impact on individual students’ GPA’s or test scores; programs focus their efforts on individual students rather than affecting positive change in students’ academic environments; a cessation of involvement once students enter college, leaving question as to what happens to students upon entry into college. Gándara and Bial (2001) report on the rarity of programs evaluating success in terms other than college-going rates. Most programs did not report students’ college GPA’s, graduation rates, or first-year persistence rates. Gándara and Bial (2001) argue that one method for answering questions regarding students’ college experiences would be to “give attention to measuring the outcomes that the program purports to be affecting” (p. 65).

Minnesota’s PEOP allows high school students, who are in the upper one-third of their class, to enroll in college credit courses at state universities. Students who are in the top 50% of their class may enroll in community college courses. In either instance, students are not expected to pay tuition. According to a 1996 evaluation, PEOP “substantially decreased the cost of education for the participating families, who were disproportionately in upper income brackets, but had little effect on the cost of higher education for the poorest families since they were much less likely to participate”
Moreover, Minnesota did not encourage low-income families to participate. “Little is known about long-term outcomes for students. Most programs do not have data that show if they increase the rates at which participants obtain college degrees when compared to students who have not participated in the program” (Gándara & Bial, 2001). “While many programs include descriptive ‘evaluation’ material citing numbers of students served, numbers going on to college, and the like, or formative studies that attempt to provide feedback to program implementers about how the program works, very few actually conduct rigorous outcome evaluations with comparable comparison or control samples” (Gándara & Bial, 2001, p.13).

**Criticisms of Traditional College Preparation Programs**

Viewed as a whole, the research on college preparation programs and their influence on college retention of high risk students reveals many holes. Some researchers believe that neither the methods of recruiting students nor the conceptualization of the programs will allow for that goal to be met. For instance, Tierney (1999) criticizes traditional beliefs guiding college preparation programs, such as the guiding principle that merely providing financial aid will rectify inequitable access. Tierney (1999) points out that policy-makers have honed in on financial aid as the remedy for the gap between minority students in college and White students in college. For example, Graduation Really Achieves Dreams (GRAD), which exists only at one high school in Houston, TX, promises $1000 scholarship/year of college. However, GRAD yields disappointing graduation and college retention results (Fashola & Slavin, 1997).
Loza (2003) argues that college preparation programs’ recruitment criteria may exclude Latino students who have the most need for college preparation and academic programs. Loza (2003) examined the eligibility requirements of EAOP, Upward Bound, and AVID. Of particular concern to him is that students must demonstrate their potential for college admission. Each program requires students to exhibit their potential through high test scores, high GPAs and grades, as well as demonstrating motivation (Loza, 2003). “...[A] comparison of eligibility requirements for participation in these programs and the numbers and academic standing of Latino students served demonstrates that many underachieving/at-risk Latino students in middle and high schools are not being served” (Loza, 2003, p.50). Others argue that these college preparation program admission requirements allow programs to choose only the best students in a school. Critics of such practices, including the headmasters with whom I worked, argue that traditional admission requirements use only traditional measures of success that often serve to exclude students who may benefit from the increased academic expectations and experiences that college preparation programs offer.

Both Tierney (1997) and Loza (2003) use Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital framework to further examine traditional college preparation programs. Cultural capital refers to the linguistics, values, mores, social practices, and competencies that people learn and/or inherit from their culture. Further, the dominant group uses their cultural capital to determine the rules by which all other groups must live (Nieto, 2005). Tierney and Jun (1999) argue that “...college preparation programs connect students to social
networks and try to develop the cultural capital that it takes to survive in what many working-class youths perceive as an alien environment - college campuses - or it might focus on psychological and emotional support structures for adolescents who do not have an adult in their lives who has gone to college or who understands how to go about getting into college” (p.210). In order to learn cultural competencies for the college environment, students must enroll in AVID or other such programs where they learn the “culture of college” (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004). However, Tierney (1999) argues that “…not only are students’ cultural backgrounds irrelevant to their collegiate experience, if students are to succeed in college, those backgrounds must be discarded in favor of the dominant cultures of their institutions” (p.82).

**Research into First Year College Experiences**

In light of these criticisms, González’s (2000-2001) research examined how the assumptions of college success impacted Latino college students. González (2000-2001) found that, in order to remain in college, the Latino student participants became cultural workers; students worked to transform their environment to reflect their cultural experiences and to minimize the contradictions between the culture of college and the Latino culture from which they came. González (2000-2001) completed a qualitative study using interviews, observations, and documents; the research attempts to answer 2 questions: “1) How do Chicano students experience their university environment? In particular, what meanings do they construct of their university experience during the first two years? 2) How do Chicano students negotiate their university experience as they
persist towards graduation?” (González, 2000 – 2001, p. 71). González, (2000 – 2001) found that participants felt marginalized and alienated. González uses Sleeter and McLaren’s (1995) definition of marginalization; marginalization occurs when a participant “experience[s] repression or stigmatization or [is] placed in a position of marginal importance, influence, or power” (p. 75). González (2000–2001) also used Walsh’s (1994) definition of alienation – “experiencing estrangement in a particular environment or situation” (p.75). Moreover, participants experienced a variety of contradictions in their social world, physical world, and epistemological world. However, the two young men were able to actively resist marginalization and acted to transform each of these worlds.

One shortcoming of González’s (2000-2001) research is the low number of participants; he interviewed only two male, Chicano, first-generation college students. These young men also knew each other before college and lived as college roommates. Although González (2000-2001) grounds his participant choices in research, these factors undoubtedly influenced their experiences and González (2000-2001) does not attend to them.

Schwitzer et al. (1999) assert that “adjusting to the social environment seems to be central to the success of many African American students in mostly White settings” (p. 190). For instance, Schwitzer et al. (1999) found that the African American students in their study, who attended a predominantly White college campus, experienced difficulty in approaching White faculty members. The culture of college lays the
responsibility of seeking out assistance from college professor and teaching assistants on students. Such social and cultural expectations have a direct effect on students’ first-year college experiences (Alford, 2000; Anglin & Wade, 2007; Schwitzer et al., 1999; Watson & Kuh, 1996). However, college preparation programs constructed under the assumptions Tierney (1999) outlines do not address how students can negotiate new social interactions on the college campus. Participants in this research repeatedly referred to the interactions they had with professors during the first year of college. Participants connected these interactions with the how CPP prepared them to seek out professors’ attention. This information, how to access social and cultural capital, allowed students to position themselves in beneficial ways. These findings are discussed further in Chapter 7.

**Conclusion**

As evidenced by the research on the success of college preparation programs, their long-term impact, and the first-year college experiences of high risk students, it becomes evident that this dissertation may fill a hole in the current research. Little is known about students’ lived experiences during the first year of college following a college preparation program. Given this lack of information, the proposed dissertation will seek to answer several questions that have gone unexamined in the literature.

- What are the academic, social, and psychological experiences of graduates from a university outreach college preparation program during their first year of college?
How do students explain their academic, social, and cultural experiences as college students in light of their college preparation? In addition, how do these experiences and understandings change over time?

To investigate these research questions from the framework of positionality, I expect that students’ agency in their experiences will become evident. The positioning theory perspective is one that has not been used in research on university outreach college preparation programs. In fact, positioning theory has most often been used to examine teacher relationships and the relationships between researcher and the researched. This framework will undoubtedly provide a fresh perspective on university outreach college preparation programs. Moreover, university outreach college preparation programs are another area of research that is often only explored internally. The Small College university outreach college preparation programs may benefit from an external perspective. Working from outside the program may remove the pressures of proving success, which may, in turn, offer new insight into students’ lived experiences during the first year of college following completion of a university outreach college preparation program. Finally, it is vitally important to the retention and graduation rates of low SES and minority students that these questions are investigated. Such answers or theories that are found may offer insight into ways that university outreach college preparation programs may improve their long-term impact and make a qualitative difference in young people’s lives.
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social and Cultural Capital

Social capital, as a framework from which to analyze students’ experiences has increased in usage over the last 30 years. Social capital, using Bourdieu’s (1986) definition, consists of two components - relationships that lead to benefits and resources and the quantity and value of those resources (found in Portes, 1998, p. 3-4). Resources may include economic capital, embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital. These will be addressed later in this chapter. However, depending upon the social setting in which these forms of capital are applied, the capital’s value varies (Dika & Singh, 2002).

Like Portes (1998), Dika and Singh (2002) explore the often overlapping and confusing definitions and usage of social capital. Dika and Singh (2002) argue that Bourdieu’s (1985) work is often associated with theories of social reproduction and power (Dika & Singh, 2002), whereas Coleman’s work explored social capital as both a mechanism for attaining social capital as well as the benefits of social capital (Portes, 1998). In this research study, social capital will be defined as the relationship paths and the networks that build towards cultural capital. Using Portes’s (1998) recommendations, I will attempt to clearly define those who seek social capital, those who hold social capital, and the actual resources (p.6). Social capital may lead to resources, benefits, and rewards – such as relationships with admission people, or connections with professors, which may benefit students through academic achievement. In their synthesis of
educational research on the impact of social capital, Dika & Singh (2002) found that “…social capital is positively associated with high school graduation and college enrollment - (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Yan, 1999)” (Dika & Singh 2002, p.41).

This research study uses social capital as a framework from which to analyze those programmatic elements that have positively, or negatively, influenced College Preparation Program graduates’ first-year college experiences. CPP is a form of social capital because it consisted of a network of relationships that extended beyond students’ home and school lives – relationships which had the potential to increase embodied and institutionalized capital. Moreover, as other research has demonstrated, these relationships can be instrumental to students’ academic success (Auerbach, 2004; Gándara & Bial, 2001; Hamrick & Stage, 1995; Sanchez, Reyes & Singh, 2006).

This is of particular importance to this study because one of the goals of College Preparation Program (CPP) was to ensure that graduates of the program matriculated. However, in order to access social capital, actors, or CPP students, must devote a variety of resources, including economic and cultural. This is true on either side of the exchange of social capital; “…transactions involving social capital tend to be characterized by unspecified obligations, uncertain time horizons, and the possible violation of reciprocity expectations. (Bourdieu 1979, 1980)” (Portes, 1998, p. 3-4). For instance, a college preparation program, such as CPP, that shares social and cultural capital ultimately benefits, and therefore, CPP is paid back when its students graduate from high school, matriculate, graduate from college, and enter the workforce. Portes (1998) refers to this
pay back as “social chits.” CPP belongs to a community in which it gains approval for providing access to social and cultural capital. Its original investment of money, time, and resources is paid back through students’ success.

**Cultural Capital**

Through social capital participants may gain *cultural capital*. Definitions of *cultural capital* also abound. Again, seminal scholars, Bourdieu (1985) and Coleman (1988) offer two definitions that have been taken up and expounded upon by others scholars. Bourdieu’s conception of cultural capital, and Coleman’s subsequent expansion (1988), consist of three aspects: “… embodied (dispositions of mind and body), objectified (cultural goods), and institutionalized (educational qualifications)” (Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 33). Of particular interest to the findings of this research, I will explore *embodied cultural capital* as well as *institutionalized cultural capital* (Portes, 1998, p. 3-4). Lareau and Weininger state (2003) “…[I]n our view the critical aspect of cultural capital is that it allows culture to be used as a resource that provides access to scarce rewards, is subject to monopolization, and, under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next. Moreover, it is critical to stress the socially determined character of cultural capital” (p. 587). CPP transmits embodied and institutionalized cultural capital through its programmatic features, such as advisory classes that guide students as they attain college knowledge. College knowledge may be monopolized because it is information that is housed within institutions and may also be transmitted from one generation to the next, particularly in economically privileged and dominant
cultural families. Accessing college knowledge and its associated social and cultural capital also offers a pathway to scarce rewards like matriculation and college graduation. Finally, through participation in CPP, students attain social and cultural capital in a socially-defined context. By possessing social capital, participants reap benefits through membership and the acquisition of embodied and institutional cultural capital.

Embodied cultural capital can also consist of attitudes and beliefs, social norms, values and mores. Portes (1998) extends the definition of embodied cultural capital to include influential people. In this research, embodied cultural capital will include CPP instructors, CPP mentors, professors, and some aspects of college knowledge. The primary emphasis is that this capital cannot be exchanged, like money or a diploma. Instead, it is learned and adopted or adapted (Hong & Youngs, 2008). Like other forms of capital, the capital possessed by students from low-SES schools and backgrounds is not equally valued. Hence, programs like CPP serve as social capital and offer students assistance with accessing embodied cultural capital from the dominant cultural norms. Hong and Youngs (2008) argue that, “… unless low socio-economic status (SES) and minority students have opportunities to internalize dominant cultural norms, they may be disadvantaged by their schools with regard to school engagement and performance, college attendance, and employment opportunity” (p.3). Again, a goal of CPP was to enhance students’ preparation in order to attain academic achievement and matriculation. For these reasons, embodied cultural capital is one lens through which data was analyzed.
The third form of cultural capital is institutionalized cultural capital. This form “… develops as a result of one's having embodied cultural capital and successfully converting it via the educational system” (Dumais, 2005, p.421). Moreover, institutionalized cultural capital is a form of capital that can be exchanged because, as Bourdieu implies, it signifies “cultural competence” (Pazzaglia & Margolis, 2008, p.185). Graduation from a college preparation program carries value within the academic spheres. Through participation in CPP, students possess institutionalized cultural capital that was utilized during the college application and preparation processes. The data concerning the college application process and first year experiences will be analyzed through the framework of institutionalized cultural capital.

**Positioning Theory and Communities of Practice**

Much of the literature on university outreach college preparation programs places students at the center of the research. However, within the research, students are often positioned as passive recipients of college preparation services. Universities collaborate with schools. Programs recruit students. Students receive information and preparation. Colleges admit students. Removing students’ voices from the college preparation process and associated research implies that students possess no agency; thus, passivity may imply powerlessness on the students’ parts. I argue, however, that conducting research into first-year college experiences following a college preparation program is one method for sharing students’ voices and revealing their agency. In my work as a college preparation program coordinator, students revealed to me that they sought college
preparation programs affiliated with particular universities and participated in extracurricular activities that supplemented their academic preparation and college applications. For instance, some students joined College Prep partially because of its association with Small College. Many of this research study’s participants viewed CPP as an opportunity to improve their academic preparation and chose to participate because of the expected benefits of that participation. Some of the students may have independently sought prep programs, and their parents, teachers, peers, and counselors encourage students to participate. In the end, students attended CPP for three years, and this required commitment, determination, and perseverance. In this way, students positioned themselves as active participants in their college preparation.

Positioning theory posits that people engage in conversations, or discourses, and accept or reject subject positions. Subject positions may be “reflexive,” when a person places him/herself, or “interactive,” when the person is positioned by another (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001, p.743). In the social interaction of discourse or conversation, subject positions assume varying roles of power and powerlessness. Generally, theorists have applied positioning theory to relationships between researchers and researched (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001), writing personal narratives and autobiographies (Morgan, 2002), and teacher-student relationships (Murrell, 2007). For example, Ritchie and Rigano’s (2001) research sought “…to demonstrate how the application of positioning theory can be helpful in understanding conversations between researchers and their research participants, particularly in interviews” (p.742). When a student participant was with her
classmates, she positioned herself as “too-cool-to-try-hard,” but when she was with only
the researcher, she positioned herself as a good science student (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001).
The teacher participant positioned himself as a teacher with something to offer once the
researchers purposely worked to position him in such a way (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001).
“…[W]e disrupted the binary of powerful-powerless by arguing that the participants, at
times, could be both powerful and powerless” (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001, p. 749). For
instance, a teacher may simultaneously position herself as powerful when giving students
instruction, and students may be positioned as powerless when the teacher ignores
students’ experiences. At the same time, a student may reposition herself as powerful
when she resists instruction, thereby placing the teacher as powerless.

Morgan (2002) argues that positioning theory may transcend application from
one-to-one conversations to use in examining power relations on a larger scale because
both applications of the theory consider socio-political aspects of dialogue. College
admission, matriculation, and graduation all operate within a socio-political context. To
earn admission to college requires certain political acts and results in political, social, and
cultural repercussions. To matriculate and graduate from higher education is a social
interaction with political consequences and influences. Additionally, Davies and Harré,
(1990) argue that discourses, the use of language and other forms of communication, are
institutionalized. “Institutionalisation can occur at the disciplinary, the political, the
cultural, and the small group level” (Davies & Harré , 1990, p.45). In other words, the
discourse that students and universities engage in is also institutionalized, meaning that
there are predictable and acceptable ways to communicate. These discourses occur within recognized social structures with attendant roles. Moreover, college preparation programs engage students in communities of practice by creating communities based on shared knowledge and goals. Wenger (2000) conceptualizes communities of practice as relationships within which members share knowledge and engage in social interactions. If the college admissions process is viewed as a larger conversation, or a discourse, students can position themselves and be positioned within a community of practice. By engaging in a college preparation program, a student reflexively and deliberately positions herself, but she is also engaged in interactive positioning. In either role, a student assumes an active participant role, rather than the passive recipient role that most research, and college preparation programs, positions students within.

Harré and van Langenhove (1999) discuss forced positioning with regards to institutions’ power to judge people inside and outside of the institution. In forced positioning, an institution demands an accounting of behavior (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p.26). In doing so, the institution forces the person being judged to “…position themselves as an agent” (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p.26). For example, university admission offices act, ultimately, in judgment of students’ academic preparation, actions, decisions, and qualifications for matriculation. As such, college applicants must describe their preparation, qualifications, and decisions in such a way that they are expressing their agency. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) describe the context of selection practices as a type of forced positioning because universities make descriptions available
to college applicants, which “…prescribe what is to be done but also involve tacit and sometimes explicit acts of forced positioning” (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p.27). By requiring applications for matriculation, posting requirements for admission, and then accepting or rejecting applicants, a university asks the college applicant to position herself. As such, the college application process is a discursive process – the college applicant is force positioned by the university and the applicant can reposition herself. Moreover, the applicant can express her agency in order to gain admission by being perceived as an ideal candidate through deliberate self-repositioning.

Furthermore, students who participate in CPP self-position and engage in communities of practice. In their seminal work, Lave and Wenger (1991) examined how learners engage in communities of practitioners. While their work focused primarily on professional communities of practice, subsequent educational research has found the concept useful for explaining participation, competencies, values and identity within learning communities. For example, CPP represents a community of practice because students enter the program with limited college knowledge. Through participation in CPP, students and CPP instructors create a community in which they exchange knowledge, share values and goals, and develop identities. Linehan and McCarthy (2000) argue, though, that neither positioning theory nor communities of practice can be used to adequately theorize on how people learn and interact within a given situation. Therefore, they conceptualize learning and interactions as a combination of both theories. That is, communities of practice can be used to understand how people interact with each other
within social expectations and constraints. Positioning theory elucidates the interactions between people and the level of agency each possesses within those interactions. Using this argument, Linehan and McCarthy (2000) juxtapose communities of practice and positioning theory in a way that allows for agency within socially constructed arenas of interaction. They argue that, in order to understand individual’s interactions within social situations, there must be “… a dialogue between individual selves and communities of practice as [a] starting point, in recognition of the unity and polyphony of interaction” (Linehan & McCarthy, 2000, p. 439). In other words, CPP students exercise agency and are able to position themselves within a community of practice because there was an ongoing dialogue concerning students’ cultural capital and how those strengths, identities and values interacted with the capital presented by CPP.

There are moments, though, when agency may not be fully exercised in communities of practice. Eraut (2002) warns that “… when relevant communities of practice are dysfunctional, the role of individual agency will be ignored” (p. 4). Given that college preparation, application, and matriculation are all larger discourses, so too can it be argued that each of these is a dysfunctional community of practice. Evidence to support this contention comes from limited access to college preparation and unequal college admission and graduation rates of students from low SES and minority backgrounds. Therefore, it may be argued that in such a context, students cannot exercise agency. “However this is not to say that the self which is enacted in particular circumstances is in any sense determined by the practices of a community. A
participant’s understanding of a community’s practices can provide a sense of ‘oughtness’ about what they should do but it does not determine the course of interaction. In dynamic interactions there are very often many, even contradictory, options created by and available to participants” (Linehan & McCarthy, 2000, p.442). In the case of CPP, students were, or became, aware of inequalities within higher education and learned how to self-position within the discourse by applying learned social and cultural capital.

In other words, a student who engages in a college preparation program enters into a community of practice, but this does not necessarily mean that she is fully constrained by the community. Ritchie and Rigano (2001) explain the work of Davies and Harré (1999) and how positioning occurs in this way: “…[O]ur acquisition or development of our own sense of how the world is to be interpreted from the perspectives of who we take ourselves to be involves learning the categories, participating in discursive practices, positioning of oneself in terms of these categories and storylines, and recognition of oneself as having the characteristics of a category member” (p.746). A student in CPP exercises her agency through her self-positioning and how she is positioned within the larger discourse.

Given the complex interaction between individuals and the college preparation and graduation processes, positioning theory and communities of practice will serve as useful frameworks for examining college preparation program graduates’ lived experiences during their first year of college. CPP graduates entered the discourse of individual and university upon entry into a preparation program. Positioning theory
allows the researcher to view students’ individual experiences within a larger context with its attendant agreed upon roles, rights and responsibilities. Moreover, positioning theory can consider various forms of cultural capital and social capital.

**How does Social and Cultural Capital Intersect with Positioning Theory?**

Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart and Sabat (2009) argue that by looking at contexts, researchers can examine both “normative constraints and opportunities for action” (p.6). In doing so, “it becomes clear that access to and availability of certain practices, both conversational and practical, are determined not by individual levels of competence alone, but by having rights and duties in relation to items in the *local* corpus of sayings and doings” (Harré et al., 2009, p.6). Using Bourdieu’s (1986) social and cultural capital construction, college preparation programs may be viewed as engaging in social reproduction that further marginalizes students from low SES backgrounds. It is also possible to conceive of college preparation programs as offering a means for students from diverse backgrounds to acquire the social and cultural capital of dominant social groups in order to attain academic success in college settings. College preparation programs can serve as a site for practicing application of social and cultural capital in a setting with rights and responsibilities.

In order to position herself as competent within the discourse of academia, a student enrolls in CPP to attain the status necessary for matriculation. In doing so, she has positioned herself within an agreed upon set of competencies, roles, and values. These competencies, roles, and values are often derived from those that are important to the
dominant groups – i.e. public schools, universities, and college preparation programs. While a college preparation program may position a high school student as powerless by focusing on academic, social and cultural capital deficiencies, it also engages in an interactive positioning cycle – meaning that a high school student can reflexively and deliberately reposition herself within the discourse. To illustrate, CPP recruits students based on GPA, attendance, and recommendations of teachers and guidance counselors. Recruitment criteria that value traditional standards of academic success, such as GPA, test scores and evidence of motivation, position the student. The students are “‘invited' to conform, indeed are required to conform if they are to continue to converse with the first speaker in such a way as to contribute to that person's story line” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 40). In other words, in order to benefit from the preparation program, the high school student must enter the conversation with the understanding that such markers of achievement are valued and rewarded.

Moreover, CPP offers access to social and cultural capital. The student, once given access, may exercise her agency by repositioning herself. For instance, she may understand that to create connections with professors, she must engage in certain types of behavior, such as sitting at the front of class and visiting during office hours. This is capital acquired during her college preparation program, but it is the application of that capital that the student actualizes the knowledge and expresses her own power. The student’s application of cultural capital, to the college setting, determines her positionality. Murrell (2007) describes this as impression management (p.91). The
student’s positionality adjusts to the setting, practices, and people in context. Being adept at negotiating various discourses may lead to greater academic achievement because students are better able to “read themselves into a social setting” (Murrell, 2007, p.99). Before becoming adept, however, students must have the opportunity to learn about the capital that is valued in academic discourses and the how to apply their knowledge. Thus, a college preparation program may afford the “freedom to achieve” (Sen, 1992 as found in Anderson & Larson, 2009). Freedom to achieve focuses on “the real opportunity an individual has to accomplish what he or she wants to do” (Anderson & Larson, 2009, p.75). In the case of CPP graduates, they wanted to matriculate and graduate from college.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the research on the success of college preparation programs, their long-term impact, and the difficult, or often challenging, first-year college experiences of students from at-risk environments, it becomes evident that this dissertation addresses a hole in the current research because there is a scarcity of research about students’ lived experiences during the first year of college following a college preparation program. Given the paucity of research in this area, the proposed dissertation will seek to answer several questions that have gone unexamined in the literature.

• What are the academic, social, and psychological experiences of graduates from a university outreach college preparation program during their first year of college?
How do students explain their academic, social, and cultural experiences as college students in light of their college preparation? In addition, how do these experiences and understandings change over time?

To investigate these research questions from the framework of positionality, I expected that students’ agency in their experiences will become evident. The positioning theory perspective is one that has not been used in research on university outreach college preparation programs. This framework offered a fresh perspective on university outreach college preparation programs. Moreover, university outreach college preparation programs are another area of research that is often only explored internally. The Small College university outreach college preparation programs may benefit from an external perspective. Working from outside the program may remove the pressures of proving success, which may, in turn, offer new insight into students’ lived experiences during the first year of college following completion of a university outreach college preparation program. Finally, it is vitally important to the retention and graduation rates of low SES and minority students that these questions are investigated. The results of this research may offer insight into ways that university outreach college preparation programs may improve their long-term impact and make a qualitative difference in young people’s lives.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This dissertation study focused on the academic, cultural, and social experiences of college students during their first year of college after graduating from the College Prep Program (CPP) during their first year of college. I examined students’ academic, cultural, and social experiences within the context of their current collegiate placements and with the shared history of College Preparation Program (CPP) participation. The two cohorts of participants completed a three-year university outreach college preparation program in May 2006 and 2007. CPP classifies itself as an intervention program that assists students in gaining admittance into, succeeding in, and graduating from post-secondary institutions. As with many college preparation programs, CPP does not consistently collect data on students once they matriculate. This study’s research questions ask:

- What are the academic, social, and cultural experiences of graduates from a university outreach college preparation program during their first year of college?
- How do students explain their academic, social, and cultural experiences as college students in light of their college preparation? In addition, how do these experiences and understandings change over time?

Gándara and Bial (2001) evaluated a number of college preparation programs and found that very few programs gathered data or followed their students past the college admission phase. Moreover, “the literature on the transition to college, and college preparation programs, in particular, is void of student voices” (Tierney, 2004, p. 952). Finally, most programs remain unaware of their students’ collegiate academic, social and
cultural experiences, post-college preparation program graduation. Using phenomenologically-oriented interviews and archival evidence, the goal of the research is to investigate the academic, cultural, and social experiences of graduates of a university outreach college preparation program during their first year of college.

**My Positionality**

As a doctoral candidate, I have spent ten years of my life enrolled in college. During the four years between my bachelor’s and, at the time of contact, Master’s degrees, I taught English in urban middle and high schools. As a White, middle-class woman from Iowa with extensive education, I am well-versed in school, the rules of school, and the process of attaining higher education, but this was not always my experience.

As a high school student, college seemed like an unattainable dream, an ideal I could see but could not reach. Like my participants, my parents graduated high school but did not attend college. Some of my extended, uninvolved family members had, but they were not resources I could access. As such, I was the first in my family to matriculate, making me a first-generation college attendee. Although I was an academically prepared, goal-oriented female from the dominant culture, I did not possess the social or cultural capital to begin the “college-going” process. Moreover, I did not know how to position myself to build capital or to find a stance that engaged my agency. The high school I attended, like many public schools, had too few guidance counselors and too many students. Without deliberate positioning and without social and cultural capital, I was
unable to access guidance through my school. Like many first generation students, I also feared debt, so college loans seemed ill-advised. And although I imagined myself beyond high school, I did not know how to attain my goal of higher education without having a bank account rich enough to finance a college education. While I possessed social and cultural capital within my own spheres, I was unable to access these relationships in ways that would build on my strengths.

Feeling overwhelmed, under-prepared, and ignorant of college knowledge as a high school student, I did not apply to the state university I would eventually attend. That spring of my senior year, I did not apply for financial aid nor did I apply for scholarships. A month before classes began, I enrolled in a community college in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Following the procedures of enrolling eventually led me to apply for financial aid, which resulted in Pell Grants, but I was too late to apply for any scholarships. To avoid loans, I worked full-time as a cashier in a health food store for minimum wage. As the community college did not offer on-campus housing, I lived off-campus in my own apartment. In many ways, I was a traditional college student with respect to age and academic preparation. However, my first-year college experiences were like those of a non-traditional college student with respect to college choice, living arrangements, and financial needs.

My experiences as a first year college student took place in a very different context from those of my participants. My participants attend four-year colleges in the Northeast. While I understand the phenomenon of being a freshman, I cannot assume that
similarities exist between my lived experience and that of my participants. In order to
dispel my assumptions of what it means to be a freshman in college, I examined the
differences between my experience and that of my participants. Furthermore, I looked to
my own beliefs about what college means in society and how I have understood that
meaning.

At the time, and still, college offered a path to a better life. To my thinking,
education offered financial stability, steady employment, and perhaps fewer instances of
discrimination based on my gender. College provided a pathway towards a career. It
meant I could support my future children and never have to worry about paying bills or
losing my home. In many ways, my early understandings have remained unchanged. I
still believe that education can build pathways to all of the assurances I sought. I know
now that there are no guarantees based on a degree. However, my beliefs and hopes
informed my work as an English teacher and as the CPP coordinator. Only later in my
own graduate education did I reflect on the personal joy and satisfaction I received
through learning. As an undergraduate, such lofty thoughts of how education benefitted
me beyond employment were rare.

As I reflected on my own experiences and beliefs, I also looked to the
experiences of my research participants. To begin with, my spatial experience, or how I
experienced place and space, presents a very different experience than that of a New
England college student. Moreover, time influences our experiences, and our temporal
experiences, or how we experience lived time, are affected. I first attended college in
1993, whereas many of my participants began college in 2007. Within those fourteen years, many changes have occurred in college student populations. For instance, now more young women attend college than young men, and although the proportions are still not equitable, there are more students of color who matriculate than when I entered college.

Finally, my corporeal experience, that of my lived body, as a White, female college student is very different from that of my participants, most of whom immigrated to the United States from developing countries. As a white woman, I am part of the dominant culture. I saw images of young women like me in movies about college, in brochures advertising higher education, and during walks around campus. I could imagine myself in college, blend in with the student population, and unless I shared my own story, allow others to assume that I was economically privileged. This differs from the experiences of the stories my former students shared with me. As I describe later, unlike many of my participants, I never felt that I had to act as the representative of my culture or ethnicity in a college classroom discussion.

After two years at a junior college and endless visits to my advisor, I transferred to the University of Iowa to study education. After my own academic struggles toward matriculation, I felt a responsibility to support young people through education. I believed that I had something to share and this goal motivated me to pursue my bachelor’s degree in English and secondary education. My university was over 100 miles away from my mother’s home and I was one student of more than 30,000, which meant
that if I needed it, I had to seek support from the university. In fact, I chose to disappear and rarely sought connections with professors; I graduated from the University of Iowa without one academic connection. As an undergraduate, I believed that should I need attention, I would be a bother to professors, an intrusion on their work, and that in asking for attention, I was asking too much of their time. Unfortunately, this is a truth that I continue to struggle with even as a Ph.D. candidate. To give myself time to adjust to my new environment, I chose to live in the dorms with my cousin. I felt simultaneously safer and more connected to both home and the culture of college within this new arrangement.

Following my undergraduate education, I taught in an urban high school in Texas. Although I earned a bachelor’s degree in education and focused primarily on underserved populations, my first year as a teacher revealed a wide chasm between my experience and that of my students. My ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade classrooms were comprised of students from diverse ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. My placement at this high school revealed many of the difficulties children from low income households experience in public schools. I quickly recognized that students from diverse ethnic, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds face academic challenges that can dissuade many of them from considering college a possibility. Many of my former students did not receive individual guidance as how best to overcome the barriers to higher education. These barriers included living in low socioeconomic circumstances, being teen parents, learning English, and inadequate educational preparation. While I could offer my own college admissions and matriculation experience as an example to
my students, my example was neither well-informed on the college admissions process nor was it closely related to my students’ experiences.

When I left teaching to pursue my master’s degree, I still intended to work with students from low socioeconomic environments. As a Donovan Scholar at Boston College, I continued my training as a teacher, but in the context of the Boston Public Schools (BPS). BPS was very different from the school districts in which I worked in Texas, and again the experiences changed my worldview. Whereas I attended good, neighborhood public schools as a child and lived in an area where very few chose to attend private high schools, my students attended high schools that were far from their neighborhoods and those who could, generally White children, opted for private education. Some of the participants in my research travelled for over an hour on public transportation to attend high school. In some schools, if students arrived late, the doors were locked and students could not enter the school with a parent, creating even more educational barriers.

Finally, as a doctoral student, my assistantship was to serve as the CPP coordinator for one year. I chose, however, to remain with CPP for three years, from 2004-2007. During this time, I continued my work with BPS students and interacted regularly with school administration. I am no longer affiliated with CPP. However, through my work as the former coordinator, I maintained on-going relationships with the graduates of CPP as they pursued their college degrees. CPP recruited students from three high schools identified as Title I schools. Students attended the College Prep program
two Saturday sessions a month in order to receive academic enrichment courses, information about attending college, and the experience of classes on a university campus.

As the coordinator, it was my responsibility to recruit 10th grade students from high schools to participate in the College Prep Program. College Prep worked with three Title I high schools in Boston; two new small schools formed from a comprehensive high school under Gates funding, and the other high school maintained its comprehensive status, but educated students through Small Learning Communities (SLCs). In the fall of 2006, three high school liaisons - a guidance counselor and two teachers - gathered a small group of students, recommended by their teachers, at the beginning of the school year to attend my College Prep recruitment presentations. This served as my initial contact with students. During the presentation students asked questions and received application materials.

Once students were accepted into College Prep, contact continued in a variety of ways. I monitored students’ grades and attendance at school and at College Prep. Furthermore, I held regular conferences with liaisons, College Prep advisors, and instructors about students’ progress. I also continued regular consultation with the high school administrations. When students exhibited, or expressed, difficulty with academics or personal issues, I met one-on-one with them. The meetings were intended to discern the best supports, so that students could remain involved with College Prep and maintain
their academic standing. Often these support systems resulted in collaborated efforts with school personnel.

I also greeted students every College Prep morning and chatted with them while they signed in and ate breakfast. I visited their College Prep classes as an observer, and I ensured that every student got on their buses in the afternoons. Finally, I regularly visited their high schools to meet with the CPP liaisons and their headmasters. When students saw me in the school halls, they greeted me with smiles and hugs, often quite surprised to see CPP intersecting with their school lives.

These interactions allowed me to build relationships with students. Students also sought out my guidance when they struggled with academics and familial issues and to share good news, such as college acceptances, academic awards, and travels abroad. I believe that these interactions formed the foundation of trusting relationships that allowed me to ask for their participation in my research.

Due to my presence in their lives over three years, I am a participant, or an insider, in this research. I helped create students’ academic experiences at College Prep by designing curriculum and by organizing field trips and college visits. I also responded to students’ requests for science and art classes by altering the program to include elective courses that were previously unavailable at CPP. I interacted with students socially and culturally at celebrations, mealtimes, and casual conversations. Through our interactions, I collaborated with students to create their College Prep experiences.
As an interviewer in this research study, my role was to listen. I intended to create space for students to share stories about their College Prep and to reflect on their college experiences. Therefore, collaboration continued through the research process; I am now present in students’ college experiences, thereby impacting it. Consequently, I am both a participant and a researcher. My role as a researcher affords me insider status because I am involved in the creation of knowledge with the participants in this research study. A goal of phenomenology is to understand the lived experiences of an individual and the meaning the participant attaches to that experience; this research study aimed to understand the lived experience of a CPP graduate during the first-year of college and how those experiences and meanings may have changed over time. To explore this phenomenon, interviews allowed participants and me to engage in “…reflection on the experience under study, [thereby] creating the circumstances for the researcher’s inclusion in the study” (Boyd, 2001, p.105).

**Ethics**

Given my former role as the College Prep coordinator and my interconnected roles of researcher and participant, I maintained awareness of power disparities between my former students and myself and my impact on the research conducted (Cohen, Kahn & Steeves, 2000; Ritchie & Rigano, 2001). Although I am no longer affiliated with CPP or in any way connected to CPP graduates’ education, I worked to remain aware of my former role and the influence that may have had on the research participants and the research process. The ethic of care stance “…addresses the effect any action is likely to
have on human relationships in the specific context of a given dilemma” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.72). During this research study, I operated under the ethic of care stance. To do so, I engaged in bracketing. Bracketing is a “… way of examining personal commitments and prejudices prior to beginning data collection. Bracketing helps ensure that researchers’ biases are reduced in both data collection and analysis” (Cohen, Kahn & Steeves, 2000, p. 38). Bracketing is an on-going process in phenomenological research (Cohen, Kahn & Steeves, 2000). To engage in bracketing, I kept a journal in which I examined my relationships to the data and the participants. These relationships, when unexamined, can impede the research. To illustrate, College Prep graduates may view me, an older woman, as trustworthy and supportive and feel comfortable in disclosing their impressions of the College Prep program and its connection to their first-year college experiences. However, as I am the participants’ former College Prep program coordinator, participants may view me as an authority figure and not reveal their true experiences to me for fear that I would be disappointed or uncomfortable. Examining my relationships with participants during data collection and analysis through writing increased the rigor of my inquiry and increased my awareness of the influence and impact I had on the interview process.

**Overall Approach and Rationale**

This research study achieved methodological congruence through the fit between the problem and the questions, the question and the methods, the methods and the data, and the analysis and presentation of data (Morse & Richards, 2002). The research
problem addressed by this dissertation is that there is little known about the first-year academic, cultural, and social experiences of CPP graduates. Therefore, the primary research question specifically addressed this problem. The research question is phenomenologically-oriented, and, according to Mariano (2001), “[r]esearch questions best answered by case studies are what, how and why questions” (p. 366). Multiple-case study methodology was employed in order to best answer the question as it focused on a number of participants who experienced similar college preparation. Multiple-case data consist of interview transcriptions, field notes, memos, and archival documents. A phenomenologically-oriented framework was used, in conjunction with positioning theory and social and cultural capital, to analyze data throughout data collection, as this adheres to case study design. Analytical strategies, such as dividing data into categories, then domains, and finally into themes, are also congruent with the research question, methodology and data collection. The final data presentations are written case studies.

The study addressed the problem that few college preparation programs follow their students once they have matriculated. Matriculated students may receive student support at their universities, but many students, particularly students of color or students from low socioeconomic schools and homes, do not graduate from college. Given the apparent lack of continuity in support of students as they transition from high school to college, researchers and college preparation program coordinators do not know what students experience once they leave the college preparation program. This research study aimed to address this area of research. The primary research question asks: What are the
academic, social, and cultural experiences of graduates from a university outreach college
preparation program during their first year of college? How do students explain their
academic, social, and cultural experiences as college students in light of their college
preparation? In addition, how do these experiences and understandings change over time?

This research is a multiple-case study within a phenomenologically-oriented
framework. Using purposeful sampling to achieve maximum variation among CPP
graduates, I conducted three tape-recorded interviews of participants. Interactive
interviews followed Seidman’s (1998) recommendations for interview content that draws
on phenomenology. The first interview attended to participants’ life histories, with a
focus on the past experiences in CPP and high school. The second interview asked
participants to describe their first year of college after having graduated from CPP. The
final interview asked participants to reflect on the meaning they attach to their CPP
experiences and that of their first year in college. Seidman (2006) encourages researchers
to conduct all three interviews within 3 to 5 days of each other. Conducting successive
interviews ensures that participants’ words and memories remain salient from one
interview to the next. It also allows for better connections to be made by the participants
in the third interview (Seidman, 2006). Moreover, Seidman (2006) recommends that
researchers do not conduct in-depth analysis between interviews in order to reduce the
likelihood that the researcher guides the participants’ responses. In this way participants’
experiences and words guide the research. Below is the time frame of recruitment, data
collection, and data analysis.
Table 4.1

Overview of Research Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of research</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Time frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>To orient researcher to phenomenon</td>
<td>Reading scholarly articles</td>
<td></td>
<td>On-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering archival data</td>
<td>To orient researcher to context; to inform contextual understanding</td>
<td>Review old surveys; participants’ application essay to CPP; high school GPAs, attendance records, &amp; college admittance</td>
<td>Surveys; website information; demographic information;</td>
<td>Summer 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bracketing</td>
<td>To reduce researcher’s bias and preconceptions</td>
<td>Memo writing; journaling of researcher</td>
<td>Memos; journals</td>
<td>on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>To purposively sample graduates of a college preparation program</td>
<td>e-mail possible participants; follow up phone calls</td>
<td>e-mails; phone calls</td>
<td>Summer 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed consent</td>
<td>To ensure participants’ confidentiality &amp; understanding of rights</td>
<td>Informed consent procedure; letter; on-going process</td>
<td>letters</td>
<td>Summer 2009; on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>To gather participants’ life histories; focus on college preparation</td>
<td>Audio recorded conversations; memos; field notes</td>
<td>Audio tapes; transcriptions; memos; notes</td>
<td>Summer – Winter 2009 (depending on research participant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>To gather information on participants’ experiences during first year of college following CPP graduation</td>
<td>Audio recorded conversations; memos; field notes</td>
<td>Audio tapes; transcriptions; memos; notes</td>
<td>Summer – Winter 2009 (depending on research participant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 3</td>
<td>To ask participant to reflect on meaning of phenomenon</td>
<td>Audio recorded conversations; memos; field notes</td>
<td>Audio tapes; transcriptions; memos; notes</td>
<td>Summer – Winter 2009 (depending on research participant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>To finalize themes, categories, &amp; codes</td>
<td>Use HyperRESEARCH; use of Colaizzi’s</td>
<td>themes &amp; categories</td>
<td>Winter 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member checking</td>
<td>To ensure accuracy of themes</td>
<td>Sharing write-ups with participants</td>
<td>Participants’ responses</td>
<td>on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
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<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>To finalize themes, categories, &amp; codes</td>
<td>Use HyperRESEARCH; use of Colaizzi’s methods</td>
<td>themes &amp; categories</td>
<td>Fall 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings presentation</td>
<td>To write research’s findings and interpretations</td>
<td>Use case study format</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fall 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Recruitment of Participants

#### Participants

The source of participants was students who completed Small College’s College Prep Program and who are currently enrolled in a higher education institution. The study was open to all races, ethnicities, and genders. No groups were excluded. All interviewed students were at least 18 years old. The sources of participants are the 2006 and 2007 graduating classes from the college preparation program who are enrolled in a post-secondary educational institution. To be included as a participant, the participant must have completed at least two of three possible years of the college preparation program. To be excluded, the participant did not enroll in a higher education institution for one year or joined CPP for only one year. I contacted the two cohorts of former CPP students who are matriculated; I recruited seven participants, four from 2006’s class and three from 2007.

I used purposeful sampling to select participants who met my criteria of inclusion (Morse & Richards, 2002). These participants have the requisite CPP experience and are currently enrolled in a variety of colleges. Around twenty students fit these criteria. Some
students, for example, attend small, private universities with a Jesuit mission, while others matriculated at private universities with a business orientation. Still other students chose larger colleges or public institutions. By purposively sampling former College Prep students from diverse settings, I was able to investigate the unique perspectives and experiences of each participant and was able to build greater understanding of the first-year college experience of university outreach college preparation program graduates. Recruitment letters informed College Prep graduates of the research questions, research design, and their rights as participants.

Recruitment

Given the time passed since I last spoke with many of the participants, I struggled with how to find students who graduated from the 2006 and 2007 classes of CPP. Over the years, I maintained consistent contact with two participants: Eleni and Chasneika. We used e-mail to communicate and to arrange meetings. In order to reach other CPP graduates, I decided to use Facebook. It is a form of social networking that many college students use on a daily basis. I created a profile on Facebook that was used only for communicating with my former students. Beginning with Chasneika and Eleni, I “friended” these two participants. “Friending” means that I requested that they allow me to access their Facebook pages and that they could access mine. This allowed for quick and easy communication. It also allowed me to recruit other participants, because many participants maintained contact with each other and use Facebook. Using Facebook, communication can occur in two ways: through private e-mail messages and through...
postings on a friend’s “wall” (a public forum). Therefore, students had the option of contacting me in ways that were confidential and private to arrange for interviews.

Using one of the Facebook features, I posted a “note” on my profile to recruit students interested in participating in this research. The note was the same e-mail I sent to them privately, which asked potential participants to respond to the e-mail, or “note,” if they were interested in participating in the research. These e-mails informed College Prep graduates of the research questions and design. The e-mail asked potential participants to respond to the e-mail if they were interested in participating in the research. Participants were given $20 gift cards to Best Buy or Target for each interview. If participants decided to complete only one interview, they still would have received the gift card. A gift card was given following each interview. Once participants returned the e-mail, I made contact through private e-mail messages or phone to arrange the first interviews and to complete the informed consent process.

Informed Consent

As the primary researcher, I performed initial and on-going informed consent procedures. I completed the IRB training and completed two qualitative research courses at the doctoral level. I completed a small study with IRB approval during one of these courses.

Participants were informed that they could end the interviews at any time and that they did not have to answer all of the questions. There were no negative consequences if participants declined to participate in the research. Should a participant have withdrawn
from the research prior to the first interview, he/she received a $10 gift card. In the data, I looked for general trends in their responses rather than unique responses that may identify an individual.

Throughout the process, I shared my interview write-ups and theories with my participants as part of member-checking. I also shared my write-ups of interviews with individual students and no other participants, so that other participants cannot be identified. Students shared their reactions to the information I shared with them.

“Unlike the one-shot method of obtaining consent from research participants prior to their participation in a traditional research program, postmodern researchers should engage in ongoing dialogue and plan for periodic reaffirmations of consent with their participants” (Howe & Moses, 1999, as found in Ritchie & Rigano, 2001, p. 754). Reaffirmation helped the collaborative process of this research study as it alleviated power issues while building trusting relationships between participants and me. Sharing themes and interpretations and reviewing transcribed interview data ensured continued understanding of the process and final product. I also shared the final draft with the participants. Students offered their opinions and suggestions before the final edition.

Confidentiality

Hard copy data are stored in a locked storage area. Electronic data are stored on my personal computer and is password protected. Only I have access to interview data. Data regarding college preparation program attendance may be accessed by the college preparation program’s instructors and administrators as this is standard practice.
Pseudonyms and the list of names as well as audio recordings are kept in separate, locked files. No one else has access to this information. I will not dispose of media. No one other than the primary investigator will have access to the recordings. In the event of publication resulting from this study and in all written documentation, participants will not be identified by name and will be provided a pseudonym. Identifiers are kept separate from the data. Code names are kept in one area. Data are kept in another. Identifiers will be destroyed in five years post-publication, if an article based on this research is published.

**Data Gathering Procedures**

I conducted a phenomenologically-oriented multiple-case study with graduates of a university outreach college preparation program who are enrolled in a post-secondary educational institution. Tape-recorded interviews took place at the participants’ convenience, in a space chosen by the participants that ensured confidentiality. Interviews lasted from sixty to ninety minutes, dependent upon participants’ answers. I interviewed each participant three times. Participants’ answers informed follow-up interview questions. Interactive interviews, however, followed Seidman’s (1998) recommendations for interview content. The first interview was a focused life history that related to the research question. The second interview asked the participant details of his/her experience during the first year of college after graduating from a college preparation program. The final interview asked the participant to reflect on the meaning she/he attributes to the phenomenon.
Table 4.2

Overview of Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Length of time</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 – focused life history</td>
<td>60 – 90 minutes</td>
<td>1 per participant; total = 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 – lived experiences during 1st year of college</td>
<td>60 – 90 minutes</td>
<td>1 per participant; total = 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 – meaning &amp; reflection</td>
<td>60 – 90 minutes</td>
<td>1 per participant; total = 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I gathered archival data from files kept in the college preparation program’s office that contain information about students’ demographics, high school GPAs, high school and college preparation program attendance, the colleges to which students applied, and all acceptances they received. During the three years that I served as the program coordinator, I surveyed students on their CPP experiences, satisfaction, and academic needs. These surveys and others conducted by past researchers were included in archival data. Information on the college preparation program was collected from websites which were created by the two high schools that collaborate with the college preparation program and by the college sponsoring the college preparation program. I also gathered information on the program through reviewing grant proposals, past yearbooks, and newsletter publications.

Data Analysis Procedures

Each source of data was entered into HyperRESEARCH for data analysis. Data were analyzed using van Kaam’s (1959) and Colaizzi’s (1978, as found in Rossman &
Rallis, 2003) methods which begin with a reading of data and coding for categories, then
domains, and finally themes. Throughout data analysis, I utilized member-checking,
which asks participants to verify the veracity of the themes and interpretations of the
researcher (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). To further enhance the credibility of this research
study, I triangulated data by conducting multiple interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

The findings of the study are presented as a multiple case study. According to
Mariano (2001), a strength of using case studies is that the research is “…grounded,
thereby providing a perspective that evolves directly from experience instead of from a
priori hypotheses, assumptions, or instruments” (p. 378). To illustrate, in the case of my
dissertation, I may assume that I understand what participants experienced in College
Prep and its connections to their educational experiences in college. Using a case study
design, however, makes it more difficult to impose these assumptions on the data because
data emerged from the participants’ experiences rather than my preconceptions.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology provides a theoretical orientation to access someone’s individual
experience. Although people share similar circumstances, each of us experiences
situations in unique, individualistic ways. Phenomenology aims to reveal the lived
experience of an individual and the meaning she makes of those experiences.

“Experience is considered to be an individual’s perceptions of his or her own presence in
the world at the moment when things, truths, or values are constituted” (Morse &
Richards, 2002, p.44). To explicate, each of us constructs individualistic knowledge and
categories for that knowledge, but these categories are also influenced by society (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005). For instance, the meaning a CPP graduate makes of her first year of college encompasses her knowledge of dorm roommates, interactions with professors, and ways of being a student. These are categories of knowledge that Schutz (1962, 1964, 1967, 1970) argue are “social in origin” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 485). Therefore, we regard knowledge of the first year of college as familiar, and we may assume we share the same perspective. However, each individual student constructs her own subjective reality and perspective. When researcher and participants interact, each brings her subjective reality to the conversation. If the goal of phenomenologically-oriented research is to understand an individual’s lived experience, the researcher must be aware of her own perceptions.

**Bracketing**

A phenomenological researcher must engage in *bracketing*. Bracketing refers to the following process:

“…[T]he analyst temporarily sets aside belief in reality in order to bring its apprehension into focus. This makes it possible to view the constitutive processes – the *hows* – by which a separate and distinct empirical world becomes an objective reality for its members. Ontological judgments about the nature and essence of things and events are suspended temporarily so that the observer can focus on the ways that members of the life world subjectively constitute the
objects and events they take to be real, that is, to exist independently of the
attention to, and presence in, the world” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p.485).
Bracketing allows the researcher to put aside her perceptions and to hear and understand
that of the participants. Once the researcher acknowledges the participant’s perspective
and begins the interview process, she learns about another’s perspective.

Data Presentation

Case Studies

Through these research methods (i.e., conducting individual interviews and
describes two methods for presenting phenomenologically-oriented research. The first
presentation is the “category or theme and quote method” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 96),
which is used to present the findings of this research study. This presentation begins by
briefly describing the themes and categories revealed in data analysis. Using the themes
as headings, I inserted quotes and anecdotes that support the formation of the category;
quotes represent the participants.

Table 4.3

Overview of Data Analysis for Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Participant 1</th>
<th>Participant 2</th>
<th>Participant 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Mariano (2001), a strength of the case study is that it is “…grounded, thereby providing a perspective that evolves directly from experience instead of from a priori hypotheses, assumptions, or instruments” (p. 378). To illustrate, in the case of my dissertation, I may assume that I understand what participants experienced in College Prep and its connections to their educational experiences in college. However, grounding themes in students’ experiences through quotes, use of in vivo codes, and engaging in member checking ensured that I did not impose my assumptions on the data because data emerged from the participants’ experiences rather than my preconceptions.

Moreover, case studies are contextually bound (Mariano, 2001). Bromley (1986, found in Mariano, 2001) argues that a case should be seen within its “‘ecological context’ (Bromley, 1986), that is, in its physical, social, cultural, and symbolic environment” (Mariano, 2001, p.361). Given the emphasis on context, case study methodology allowed for focus on the individual experience, the micro, while simultaneously examining the macro forces that influence and impact individuals’ experiences. Therefore, multiple-case study methodology fits well with the research questions as well as within positioning theory and a phenomenological orientation because the method and theoretical frameworks operate on the assumption that there are multiple realities and each experience is embedded within context.

The multiple-case study is also a compelling methodology because the researcher is “interested in exploring the same phenomenon in a diversity of situations or with a
number of individuals” (Mariano, 2001, p.368). Stake (2005) also calls this a collective case study. In collective case study “…it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (Stake, 2005, p.446). Given that there is little research on the academic, cultural, and social experiences of CPP graduates, the multiple-case study may inform better policy and programmatic decisions with regards to students’ needs.

The multiple-case study design is also structured to ensure “trustworthiness” (Guba, 1981). Trustworthiness is used to evaluate case studies in place of validity and reliability (Guba, 1981). In achieving trustworthiness, the researcher attends to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Yin, 1994). Credibility refers to the plausibility of the findings, or how accurate and likely the findings are (Zach, 2006). Transferability contends with how comparable the findings are to similar situations, contexts, and experiences (Zach, 2006). Dependability is often achieved through audit trails in order to “ensure the stability of the findings” (Zach, 2006, p.7). Finally, confirmability is accomplished through researcher reflexivity, data collected through multiple sources, and member-checking. Attending to these four components ensures rigor and reliability in case study research.

Using multiple-case study design, I was able to explore the diverse academic, social, and cultural experiences of students who live and learn in a variety of college contexts and who share the similar phenomenon of completing CPP. Given the match
between my research goals, data collection methods, and sampling decisions, the multiple-case study offered a relevant avenue for data presentation.

Conclusion

I conducted a phenomenologically-oriented multiple-case study with graduates of a university outreach college preparation program who enrolled in post-secondary educational institutions. Interviews took place at the participants’ convenience in spaces that ensured confidentiality. Interviews lasted from sixty to ninety minutes, dependent upon participants’ answers. I interviewed each participant three times. Follow-up interview questions were informed by participants’ answers. However, the interview format and progression followed phenomenological interviewing structure as detailed by Rossman and Rallis (2003). The first interview was a focused life history that related to the research question. The second interview asked the participant details of his/her experience during the first year of college after graduating from a college preparation program. The final interview asked the participant to reflect on the meaning she/he attributed to the phenomenon.

To analyze the data, I entered archival data, transcriptions, and memos into HyperRESEARCH. From there I utilized van Kaam’s (1959) and Colaizzi’s (1978) methods for data analysis as outlined by Boyd (2001). This involved reading through the data searching for phrases that describe the phenomenon of the first year in college following graduation from a college preparation program. To ensure accuracy, I engaged
In member checking. Finally, the research is presented through case studies that explore themes and experiences.

In the next chapter, I provide a CPP description. Using programmatic elements as an organizational structure, I present themes revealed through participants’ responses. As described in Chapter 6, students’ experiences of CPP revealed a variety of areas that were impactful, but CPP graduates also reflected on areas that were less important in the meaning they attributed to their experiences, offering areas for further development and research.
CHAPTER FIVE: CPP PROGRAMMATIC DESCRIPTION AND PARTICIPANTS

In this chapter I first describe College Preparation Program (CPP) programmatic elements and then the research study’s seven participants. CPP aimed to create communities of practice within urban schools, to provide access and opportunity to college preparation, and access and opportunity for matriculation.

**College Preparation Program Description**

In 1987, a professor at Small College (SC) started College Preparation Program in an effort to better connect Boston Public School (BPS) students with higher education. The Small College program worked directly with two BPS high schools with the goal of providing academic enrichment and early college preparation. The founder remained Director of the CPP program until 2003, when another professor assumed leadership. In fall of 2004, I began my internship with College Preparation Program as its Coordinator, which lasted for 3 years. The programmatic description that is still posted on SCs website refers to the program as it was during those years. While the program continues its partnership with students from the West Side High School (WSHS) and Midtown High School (MHS), the high school’s structure changed. Moreover, the CPP programming, curriculum, schedule, and opportunities have changed. My research participants were all graduates from the CPP program prior to the changes to CPP. Therefore, programmatic descriptions will refer only to that which the study participants experienced.
Program Goals and Objectives

The overarching goal of College Preparation Program was to support students and their families as they prepared for, applied to, entered and achieved in college. These goals were addressed through a varied program format, with an emphasis on academic supplementation of high school coursework, standardized test preparation, and guidance through the college application process. In a 2005 – 2006 report the following objectives of College Preparation Program were: Programmatic objectives included – “1) to provide rich, content-oriented coursework in Language Arts, mathematics, science and the Arts; 2) to enhance the development of study skills and test-taking skills; 3) to provide individual and group guidance for students that supports their academic and socio-emotional development; 4) to promote the development of a social support network for students (and their families) that affirms each student’s cultural identity and encourages achievement in high school and college years” (http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cbound/index.html). Moreover, staff and faculty held the belief that students impact their schools and communities. Through participation in College Preparation Program, students would not only positively impact their own lives, but they would also serve as agents of change.

College Preparation Program Participants

In 2004, when I began as coordinator of the program, program-eligible students were required to earn a 3.0 GPA or better, attend school at least 90% of the time. They were expected to engage in all CPP activities and pursue volunteer activities outside of
school and CPP. Beginning in 2005, CPP altered its recruitment criteria in order to meet the needs of the partner high schools. Headmasters requested CPP to take on students who were not necessarily at the top of their class, but those students who demonstrated the potential to improve their academic standing and attend college. However, the participants of this research were recruited using earlier criteria. This is evidenced by their GPAs and class standings.

Table 5.1

Overview of Participants in CPP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2005 - 2006</th>
<th>Number of CPP juniors &amp; seniors (n=35)</th>
<th>Percentage of CPP students</th>
<th>2009 - 2010 Percentage of MHS population (n=1208)</th>
<th>2009 – 2010 Percentage of Small HS 1 (n = 342)</th>
<th>2009 – 2010 Percentage of Small HS 2 (n = 353)</th>
<th>2009 – 2010 Percentage of Small HS 3 (n = 320)</th>
<th>2009 – 2010 Percentage of Small HS 4 (n = 313)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African descent (7 females, 3 males)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian (1 male)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>.9%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina/os (9 females, 4 males)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>52.7%</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (9 females, 2 males)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total females</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total males</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the fall of 2003, 10 sophomores from MHS and 10 sophomores from WSHS began their three-year participation in CPP. The following fall, another cohort of sophomores from partnership schools was recruited. Over the course of three years, College Preparation Program retained the majority of its participating students. In 2005 – 2006, 53 students participated in College Preparation Program: 18 sophomores, 17 juniors, and 18 seniors; 35 females and 18 males. Students’ self-identified ethnicities included 2 Asian-Americans, 26 Africa-descent, 15 Latinos, and 10 White students.

Upward Bound (UB), the largest college preparation program in the United States, reports similar participant statistics (Cahalan & Curtin, 2004). In 2001, 64% of UB participants were female. “The largest percentage (45 percent) of Upward Bound participants in 2000–01 were black or African American followed by white (25 percent), Hispanic or Latino (19 percent), Asian (5 percent), American Indian or Alaska Native (4 percent), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (2 percent), and those of more than one race (1 percent)” (Cahalan & Curtin, 2004, p. xvi). The figures are not reassuring, given that young men, regardless of the program size, do not receive services to prepare them for college in equitable numbers. However, as a trend, such figures do provide a direction for future services that target specific populations.

**Recruitment Process**

College Preparation Program admitted 20 incoming sophomores each year. When the program began, 10 attended Midtown High School and 10 attended West Side High School. In 2005, when the Gates Foundation small schools initiative disbanded WSHS as
a comprehensive school, CPP continued its relationship with the 4 small schools that now comprise West Side Complex. After the two cohorts who remained from WSHS, College Preparation Program maintained a partnership with only two of the small schools.

School liaisons were hired to recruit students and to maintain a relationship between the school sites and the College Preparation Program. Liaisons were most often school guidance counselors, because they were able to access students’ grades and schedules, and received students’ standardized test reports. When needed, liaisons contacted students to remind them of upcoming CPP events and to gather paperwork, such as permission slips for outings and medical release forms.

Liaisons invited sophomores to an auditorium or small conference room to hear a presentation on College Preparation Program. Invited students were usually on honor roll, had high attendance rates, and received favorable reports from their homeroom teachers. Much like Loza’s (2003) criticism of such recruitment practices and the headmasters’ later requests, these recruitment practices and eligibility requirements served only the highest achieving students in the partner schools.

As the coordinator, it was my responsibility to present the program to potential participants. I informed students of the eligibility requirements, how often the program met, its Saturday schedule, transportation and lunch provisions, and the potential benefits of joining. I invited current CPPers to join me in the presentation, so that they could share their own experiences with potential incoming sophomores. I allowed time for students to ask questions, but usually students were too shy to ask any questions in front of the
group. Most often, students approached me individually for more information, or they asked their friends after the presentation ended.

Following the presentation, application materials were left with the school liaison to be returned by a set deadline. As part of the application process, students wrote a one-page essay addressing their goals and how those goals would be met by joining College Preparation Program. Students often joined with friends; they attended the same high school classes and added College Preparation Program to the list of activities that they participated in as a group. There were times, though, when a liaison specifically targeted a shy student, in hopes that he would interact with his classmates in a different environment and benefit from the socializing aspects of CPP. Often, this strategy met with success and new groups of friends were formed through CPP participation. As discussed in a later chapter, these groups ultimately created CPP identities and built peer support: an essential factor found in many research reports (Roderick et al., 2008; Kenny et al., 2002; Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Horn & Chen, 1998).

**Program Duration and Setting**

Students began the CPP program in the fall of their sophomore year in high school and continued through graduation. Over the three years that students remained involved in CPP, the curriculum built upon prior knowledge, with the goal that when students applied to college, they entered the college-going process fully informed. Classes took place during the school year on Small College’s campus. Most classes were located in the School of Education building, but many classes were located in science
labs, art studio spaces, computer labs, and in large lecture halls. Students ate lunch with their mentors in the college dining facilities every Saturday that CPP met.

**Program Structure**

From 2004 – 2007, when I was Coordinator, CPP classes met at Small College on two Saturdays per month during the school year. Students followed differentiated curriculum, depending on their grade level. Below is a typical schedule from fall 2006.

Table 5.2

**CPP Saturday Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>SOPHOMORES</th>
<th>JUNIORS</th>
<th>SENIORS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:00</td>
<td>Check in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Help yourself to juice &amp; breakfast bars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 – 10:10</td>
<td>Class: Math</td>
<td>Class: Writing</td>
<td>Class: Advisory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15 – 11:25</td>
<td>Class: Writing</td>
<td>Class: Math</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30 – 12:20</td>
<td>Lunch with Mentors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30 – 1:30</td>
<td>Class: Advisory</td>
<td>Class: Advisory</td>
<td>Class: Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30 – 2:30</td>
<td>Class: Science</td>
<td>Class: SAT prep</td>
<td>Class: Art</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students in one of several graduate programs taught academically focused classes to CPP students. Some instructors pursued a M.Ed. through an Urban Scholars Program, which aimed to prepare teachers for teaching in urban contexts. Math and writing instructors were enrolled in the Curriculum & Instruction Ph.D. program. Participants identified the collegial relationships with their instructors as increasing their enjoyment of CPP, influencing their collegiate decisions, and providing a source of information. Although instructors only saw College Preparation Program students twice a month, they
maintained contact via e-mail and phone calls. Many of the research participants described how available, open, and helpful their CPP instructors were. In fact, some CPP graduates maintained relationships with their instructors beyond graduation. These findings are discussed in Chapter 6.

Math and writing curriculum aligned with Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, but instructors determined class work based on assessments of students’ strengths and areas for improvement. The math instructor focused on problem-solving skills and critical thinking. He regularly employed technology as a way to better prepare students for college-level math. MCAS preparation was integrated during sophomore year, as was SAT preparation during junior year. Writing classes also focused on critical thinking and academic language usage. Every summer, students read one assigned book for which they wrote an essay and submitted to their instructor in the fall. Writing for summer reading focused on building connections between students’ lives and the text. For instance, as sophomores, the class of 2007 read *When I was Puerto Rican*. As juniors, the class of 2006 read *A Passage to India*. The goal was to offer reading that students would not have an opportunity to read through their high school curriculum, but also to extend students’ prior knowledge as they pursued matriculation.

Beginning in the spring of their sophomore years, students began writing college application essays. Students explored college application essay topics throughout the spring term of sophomore year, but the essay became the primary focus of writing classes during the spring of junior year and continued into the fall of senior year. Writing
instructors used a workshop model. Students regularly engaged in peer review and received instructor feedback on writing. Explored further in the next chapter, this research study’s participants referenced that this early start gave them a sense of security as they engaged in the college application process. Moreover, each referenced how confident they felt about their essays when submitting college applications. Finally, many participants of this research wrote their college application essays about their participation in College Preparation Program as an indicator of the readiness for college, ability to commit to an educational path, and willingness to go above and beyond requirements in order to attain their goals.

In order to support students’ goals, M.Ed. and Ph.D. students in Counseling and Educational Psychology programs led advisory classes. The curriculum used by advisors focused on developmental needs as students prepared for college. For instance, as sophomores, students completed goals and developed plans for how to attain those goals. As juniors, students continued work on goals and plans. They also explored possible careers by visiting the university’s career center and interviewing people in their interest areas. Juniors also researched universities with majors associated with their interests. Students’ research expanded to include university admissions requirements, student populations, tuition rates, and various educational opportunities. As seniors, the advisory focus shifted to the social and emotional well-being of students once they entered college. For example, CPP seniors met with a panel of college students to discuss residential life, dating, peer pressure, balancing school work with life, as well choosing majors and
seeking supports. The CPP administrators also provided seniors with a book, *Navigating Your Freshman Year: How to Make the Leap to College Life-and Land on Your Feet* (Lombardo & Jackson [Eds.], 2005), which addressed similar questions as those posed to the panel.

**Mentors**

SC undergraduates volunteered to serve as mentors to CPP students. As a student run organization, the CPP Mentor Council accepted applications, interviewed potential mentors, and invited those who met the criteria established by the Mentor Council to join the program. Potential mentors also completed a questionnaire that asked: 1) why do you want to become a mentor? 2) Have you had mentoring experience before? 3) What would you contribute to the program/share with your mentor? During interviews, the Mentor Council President, Schuanne Cappel shared that she “looked for people who would be available, seemed diligent and committed to things they sign up for and sensitive to/aware of various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Beyond that, [Schuanne] wanted mentors who were enthusiastic and genuinely interested in the program (i.e., not just another extracurricular--like a filler of sorts)” (personal communication, February 28, 2011). Mentors agreed to attend every College Preparation Program Saturday. Many remained as mentors over the 3 years that the College Preparation Program student participated. When a mentor graduated, a replacement was assigned. Often, CPP mentors attended the community meetings to further their presence and engagement with the program. Every College Preparation Program Saturday, mentors and mentees formed
teams, so that students could benefit from knowing more than one Small College student. In their teams, they ate lunch and engaged in afternoon activities, which included attending sporting events, movies, performances, and art fairs and playing games in the recreation complex. Some mentors and mentees met outside of College Preparation Program and continued their relationships beyond the program or graduations. Mentors helped students become familiar with the social aspects of college, acted as role models, and served as resources for how to make decisions, how to manage time and how to negotiate potential roommate situations. As discussed in the next chapter, participants sought out their mentors to ask questions that they were too shy to ask their CPP instructors or high school teachers. The invaluableness of these relationships is also reflected in the return of CPP graduates once they matriculated into Small College.

Specific Instructional Components of CPP

College Knowledge

College knowledge or logistical knowledge was a primary component of CPP. Information, such as protocols and processes of college or the “how to’s” and “what’s” has been found to be critical in students’ success in matriculating and graduating from college (Stoutland & Coles, 2009). College knowledge consists of “…an understanding of the following processes: college admissions including curricular, testing, and application requirements; college options and choices, including the tiered nature of post-secondary education; tuition costs and the financial aid system; placement requirements, testing, and standards; the culture of college; and the challenge level of college courses,
including increasing expectations of higher education” (Conley, 2007, p. 14).

Furthermore, some higher education institutions have application requirements that are not included in the common application or require financial aid application requirements that are not addressed in the FAFSA (Conley, 2007, p. 14). Such information was conveyed to students both formally, through curriculum, and informally, through relationships with CPP mentors and instructors. CPP advisory classes specifically addressed college knowledge as CPP instructors guided students in researching college majors, application requirements, institutions’ selectivity, student populations, tuition, and financial aid. Advisory classes also guided students as they researched career interests, interviewed professionals in those careers, and crafted plans for attaining their goals. During senior year, students met with college students in a seminar dedicated to questions about college culture, roommates, and first-year expectations. To reinforce this knowledge, CPP also provided a book: *Navigating Your Freshman Year: How to Make the Leap to College Life and Land on Your Feet* (Lombardo & Jackson [Eds.], 2005). The book allowed students to refer back to important concepts discussed during CPP, after entering college.

In writing classes, students completed college applications and composed scholarship essays. Juniors in CPP also attended SAT preparation classes, for which the program provided The Official SAT Study Guide, for independent practice in test taking and building vocabulary. Informally, students acquired college knowledge during lunches with mentors and other activities, specifically designed to allow CPP participants time to
meet socially with a college student who often became a friend as well as an advisor.

CPP instructors were also college students; though graduate students, so they, too, offered their own experiences to students.

**Financial Aid, Loans, and Scholarships**

Financial aid was also a critical component of CPP discussion from the beginning of each student’s participation in the program. Students expressed anxiety regarding college tuition, and CPP recognized this as a legitimate and real concern for students and their families. During the fall of CPP students’ senior year, CPP provided a financial aid advisor from Small College to meet individually with students and their families. Students brought the necessary paperwork. (A list was provided to students prior to the meeting, allowing time to gather the documents.) Parents were invited but in most cases were unable to attend. Given these constraints, the financial aid advisor provided contact information, and many students followed up with him at a later date when they had questions.

During advisory, CPP instructors answered questions about loans and financial aid packages that universities offered. Instructors also guided students’ searches for scholarships, often leading them towards scholarships with significant awards. In particular, Mr. G, who worked with students from the beginning of CPP participation, knew students’ academic and cultural backgrounds: two key elements when they sought scholarships. As shared later, Mr. G was a particularly important person in students’ acquisition of college knowledge.
**College Visits**

CPP arranged and provided transportation for visits to colleges in the region, so that students could be exposed to other campuses and opportunities. Generally, sophomores visited one campus a year, juniors two to three, and seniors one other campus in the fall, with primary emphasis on junior year because it allowed ample time for students to explore options. Moreover, when contacted, many local institutions of higher education did not want to host sophomores. While not stated directly, it could be related to liability issues as well as financial constraints. When juniors visited two small, private colleges, the universities provided lunch and gifts, like pens and mugs. Because of the hospitality with which they were received, students often reported feeling welcomed at these colleges and the majority of CPP students later applied to these schools.

**Guest Speakers**

College Preparation Program provided students with role models through a variety of sources, including guest speakers. Speakers shared personal stories of going to college and selecting college courses. They offered advice prioritizing time during college in order to earn higher GPAs. Guest speakers also helped students understand what was expected of them on their application essays. For instance, one gentleman from Small College admissions came to speak to seniors every fall. He described timelines and the process of reviewing applications. This information helped students understand the other side of the process.
College Preparation Program Research Participants

Table 5.3

College Preparation Program Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>1st generation college attendee</th>
<th>HS graduation year</th>
<th>Number of college applications &amp; results</th>
<th>College attended &amp; graduation year</th>
<th>Other college preparations programs prior to college</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Midtown HS; 2007</td>
<td>6 applications: 3 acceptances 3 rejections</td>
<td>UMass Amherst; 2011</td>
<td>Briefly enrolled in Asian Student Center &amp; Russian School of Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akorfa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Ghanaian</td>
<td>No, but parents college educated in native country</td>
<td>Midtown HS; 2007</td>
<td>12 applications: 4 acceptances 4 rejections 4 unreported</td>
<td>UMass Amherst; 2011</td>
<td>None reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noman</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Midtown HS; 2007</td>
<td>4 applications: 2 acceptances 2 rejections</td>
<td>Boston University; 2011</td>
<td>Upward Bound @ BU; Gear Up; Homework Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chasneika</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>West Side HS; 2006</td>
<td>8 applications: 1 acceptance 7 unreported</td>
<td>Small College; 2010</td>
<td>Access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raimar</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>No – mother college educated in native country &amp; in US</td>
<td>West Side HS; 2006</td>
<td>11 applications: 2 acceptances 1 rejection 8 unreported</td>
<td>Emmanuel; 2011</td>
<td>Bottom Line; Summer Experience at SC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loris</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Albanian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>West Side HS; 2006</td>
<td>10 applications: 3 acceptances 2 rejections 5 unreported</td>
<td>Bentley; 2011</td>
<td>Bottom Line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleni</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>West Side HS; 2006</td>
<td>9 applications: 1 acceptance 1 rejection 7 unreported</td>
<td>Lesley University; 2010</td>
<td>Bottom Line</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chasneika

Chasneika is a tall, exuberant Dominican-American girl. Born in Boston, she grew up in Jamaica Plain with two older sisters. At home with her parents, Chasneika speaks Spanish, but she did not attend ESL classes while in public school. Her parents, not familiar with the college-going process encouraged her to pursue college preparation programs to attain matriculation and then graduation. Chasneika is especially close with one sister, who attended West Side High School (WSHS). Her sister’s attendance, in addition to that of her friends, led Chasneika to choose WSHS. One of Chasneika’s sisters successfully completed college, and this is the sister to whom Chasneika turned when she needed guidance from home. The other sister did not pursue college. The summer prior to college, Chasneika participated in her university’s summer preparation program – Summer College Start (SCS). She earned college credits, learned some study skills, and became comfortable with her cohort. I’ve known Chasneika since she was in 10th grade at WSHS. Although I was not her student teacher, Chasneika’s friends included many of my former students. I believe that my relationship with Chasneika truly developed once she was in college. When she entered Small College (SC), her roommate was one of my former 10th grade students. Early in their freshman year in college, Chasneika’s roommate contacted me to meet the two girls for coffee. After the first meeting, we continued contact and went out to dinner on several occasions. It was through these meetings and dinners that we talked about life at SC, what was different
from their expectations of college life, and what caused stress in their lives such as boyfriends, friends, other roommates, work, and school. Chasneika’s easy smile and laugh belie how hard she worked as a college student. During the first two years of college, she maintained several part-time jobs in an effort to meet her financial responsibilities, which included tuition, books, and living expenses. Chasneika also attempted to engage in other university activities, but often found it difficult to balance her responsibilities of school, work, and extra-curricular activities. For a time, Chasneika also continued her involvement with CPP, serving as a mentor. However, as CPP changed and Chasneika’s responsibilities increased, she discontinued her involvement with CPP. In May 2010, Chasneika graduated with a Bachelor’s Degree in Communications.

**Eleni**

Eleni is a Greek-American young woman whom I have known since her 10th grade year at WSHS when I was her English student teacher. Although Eleni was born in the US, English is not her first language; she attended The Greek Bilingual Program offered through Boston Public Schools and primarily spoke Greek at home. In particular, Eleni is very close to her grandparents. Eleni shared that, in many ways, her grandparents raised her. Eleni talks about her grandparents as the family members who most supported her as she pursued matriculation and college graduation. In fact, her college application essay referenced the garden she worked with her grandmother and how that cultivation was like her own cultivation of education. Eleni was a very involved high school student.
She was in the National Honor Society, president of her class, captain of the volleyball team, engaged in the Mayor’s Youth Council, Boston Student Advisory Council, volunteered, worked in the summer at academic enrichment camps for middle school students, tutored English Language Learners at WSHS, and played volleyball. This level of involvement continued while she attended college. She served as a Senator for Lesley University’s Student Government Association, and worked in a restaurant on weekends. As a college graduate in May 2010, Eleni earned her degree in English and minored in secondary education and Spanish.

Loris

I met Loris, an Albanian-American student, when he was in the 10th grade English class where I student taught for my M.Ed. Although I have known Loris for a long time, I did not have regular contact with him. I do not believe that I really knew Loris until he shared his history and experiences during our interviews. He, too, immigrated to the US when he was a child, and like many of my other participants, English is not his first language. As a non-native English speaker, Loris reported to me that he did not do well on the entrance exams for the exam high schools and, therefore, chose to attend WSHS. During the summer between his 11th and 12th grades, Loris was one of two CPP students who attended the SC Summer Experience and lived on a college campus for six weeks. The Summer Experience enrolls students from across the United States in three courses; students earn college credits that may be transferred to other universities. Loris shared that this was one of the most important components of his college preparation – he lived
on campus and engaged in college-level work prior to matriculation. As a CPP student, his friends also included the other students who came to SC on Saturdays for three years. While involved in CPP, Loris also worked for his father on weekends, was elected president of the National Honor Society during his senior year at WSHS, and earned valedictorian of his senior class. As a college student, Loris lived at home while he pursued international business at Bentley. He studied abroad in several countries, including Ghana, Belgium, and a two week visit to Eastern Europe. Loris graduated with his bachelor’s degree in International Business and a pre-law minor fall 2010.

**Raimar**

Raimar is a Puerto Rican-American young man who attends Emmanuel. I have also known Raimar since he was in 10th grade as a student in the ELA classroom where I student taught. Raimar grew up with his mother, older brother, and younger brother in Boston while his father remained in Puerto Rico. During summers, Raimar returned to visit his father and family, staying for months at a time. The September following his high school graduation, Raimar stayed in Puerto Rico – despite his acceptance to UMass Amherst. Prior to his application and acceptance to UMass Dartmouth, he never visited the campus. The university is located over 2 hours away from his Boston home, and he felt that he needed to stay much closer. Raimar describes his relationship with his mother as very close, and this relationship was an important factor that affected his college-going decisions. Rather than attend college the year following high school, Raimar worked in retail and later decided to apply to universities closer to home. Upon acceptance to
Emmanuel, Raimar moved on to campus, which is located within five miles of home, and participated in his university’s summer experience, Road to Intellectual Success at Emmanuel (RISE). During the summer experience, Raimar earned college credits and learned study skills through the RISE program. He continues his involvement with RISE as a mentor. He also took a Semester at Sea, where he traveled to many countries while continuing his coursework. Raimar plans to graduate from Emmanuel with a bachelor’s degree in Global Studies in 2011 – also within 4 years of matriculation.

Class of 2007

Henry

Henry is a college senior at UMass Amherst. A quiet, Chinese-American boy, he shared that he prefers numbers over literature. On CPP Saturday mornings, Henry was often the first to arrive. Unlike other CPP students, Henry walked from his home in Midtown. Other CPP participants rode the CPP busses, but Henry lived in the neighborhood where he went to school, which is unusual for Boston Public School students. During high school, Henry lived at home with his parents, two brothers, his cousin and his grandmother. He described it as a small space with many people and little room. Henry shared that his mother was determined that he would do well in school and go to college. She paid for classes at a private college preparation program, but when his family learned about the CPP program, without any fees attached, she enrolled Henry’s older brother and Henry, when he was eligible. After CPP classes and activities, Henry walked across campus to return home. He is one of the few students who spent such free,
unstructured time on SC’s campus because of this walk. Henry matriculated into UMass Amherst – a flagship university 2 hours from Boston. After changing his major three times, Henry now intends to graduate with a major in statistics in 2011.

**Noman**

Noman is a Pakistani-American student. Raised in Pakistan until he was 9, Noman, his mother, brothers and sister moved to the US to be with their father. Noman started school in ESL classes and quickly progressed into honors and Advanced Placement classes as his English skills progressed. He attended Midtown High School (MHS) where he joined CPP as a sophomore. CPP is how I came to know Noman. Even as a sophomore in high school, Noman held himself with confidence and dignity. He was easy to talk with and would shake hands to greet people. His older brothers also pursued college through a variety of programs. Like Noman, they also participated in Upward Bound, CPP, and they majored in business. Noman shared with me that his brothers are his mentors and his sources of support. Noman also shared his goals to be a good man, to be an upright citizen, to work hard and when things are not going as he hopes - he works harder. His stories revealed that he looks to himself and his actions when he is not satisfied with his grades or results. However, he also knows that people are resources. His brothers have helped instill this in him and this is a lesson he seems to have learned well. As an Upward Bound student at BU, Noman continues to connect with the program directors and coordinators. He continues to give back to Upward Bound and he shared with me that he viewed his participation in this research study as a way of giving back to
me as well as to CPP. As a business major, Noman will graduate from BU with a Bachelor’s degree in Finance and Accounting May 2011.

Akorfa

Akorfa is a Ghanaian-American girl attending UMass Amherst. A graduate of MHS, she entered the BPS system as a native English speaker, but because she immigrated to the United States at fourteen, she was placed into ESL classes – out of which she quickly transferred into higher levels of English classes. Akorfa is a soft-spoken, but passionate young woman who loves to write. I came to know Akorfa during CPP Saturdays. As a quiet, reserved student, she did not seek me out and I only came to know about her accomplishments from the school liaison at MHS. For example, Akorfa wrote for school newspapers focused on the environment, participated in the National Honors Society, and was a member of two youth political groups. She is quick to explore new areas of interest; her curiosity and confidence have been a blessing and a source of frustration as she engages in college courses. Akorfa is an only child, and she and her parents still struggle with citizenship. However, as Akorfa described, her parents refuse to “go into the shadows.” They continue to follow the necessary paperwork trail to attain citizenship despite the years of frustration. Because of her status as a non-citizen, Akorfa has not been eligible for financial aid. Her parents, instead, have taken out loans from banks to support her and to pay her tuition. Akorfa is pursuing a B.A. in political science, a minor in women, gender and sexuality studies and a certificate in international relations at UMass Amherst and will graduate in May 2011.
Conclusion

Using a variety of research-based programmatic elements, CPP aimed to create communities of practice within urban schools, to provide access and opportunity to college preparation, application, and matriculation. Programmatic elements were selected to provide a supportive environment that enhanced interpersonal relationships and offered academic enrichment and social experiences that benefited CPP students. Further, research findings of best practices for building a college preparation program informed programmatic decision-making. For instance, logistical, or college, knowledge has been well documented as critical to students’ success with college preparation and matriculation (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001; Fenske et al., 1997; Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002; Horn & Chen, 1998; Hubbard, 1999; Kenny et al., 2002; King, 1996). Mentors and supportive relationships with knowledgeable adults have also been found to benefit first-generation college students (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Gándara & Bial, 2001; Tierney & Jun, 2001). For the three years this research study’s participants were enrolled in CPP, these key elements were applied.

In the next chapter, I share CPP graduates’ descriptions and experiences during the college preparation, their academic experiences during their first year of college, and their perceptions of the impact of CPP on college academics. In later chapters, I will report on the social and cultural experiences of CPP graduates and the impact of CPP on such experiences. The final chapter will address areas of success and areas for more research into college preparation programs.
CHAPTER SIX: CPP EXPERIENCES AND FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE ACADEMICS

This chapter focuses on the theme of academics to highlight the connections between a college preparation program and the ensuing academic challenges and successes that participants experienced during their first year of college. Participants reflected on the perceived impact of their involvement in College Preparation Program as they engaged in the academic discourse of higher education. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section addresses participants’ experiences in College Preparation Program and the meaning they created of these experiences. The second section attends to participants’ academic experiences during their first year of college.

Prevalent Themes in Participants’ Experiences with College Preparation Program

While the research participants described various and unique experiences, many of the descriptions revealed prevalent themes that occurred across cases. A major theme that arose during analysis is the specific roles that participants played in their college preparation. Aspects of this theme include a) the positioning that participants assumed in the discourse within higher education; b) the interactions between place and participants; c) the importance of relationships between peers in a community of practice; and d) the supportive role of CPP instructors. Another theme that revealed itself during analysis was the role of knowledge in a college preparation program. Dimensions of this theme include a) the lack of academic rigor in CPP’s curriculum; and b) the importance of logistical knowledge in getting to college. Finally, participants shared that the synergy of logistical
knowledge, the power of place, and the support of CPP instructors allowed them to assume social and cultural capital, which led them to believe that “anything is possible.”

**The Role of Positioning in College Preparation**

**Expectations, opportunity and positionality: “I took everything they offered”**

A common term, with many definitions, used to describe students who attain matriculation is “resilient.” Some researchers define resiliency by focusing on personal characteristics and the actions resilient students take to achieve academic success. By one definition, a resilient student plays an active role in his/her life (Hebert, 1996; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). Accordingly, the student possesses high academic and career goals and remains focused on her plans for the future (Kenny et al., 2002; Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1993). The student also exhibits flexibility and adaptability when faced with changes or stressors (Hebert 1996; Wang et al., 1993; Winfield, 1994). The resilient student also possesses positive self-esteem and an internal locus of control (Wang et al., 1993; Hebert, 1996; Kenny et al., 2002). While some researchers concentrate on actions, personal characteristics, and protective factors, others direct their attention to academic achievements and failures to define resiliency. González and Padilla (1997) identify resilient students as those who are academically successful students despite high risk environments and circumstances. In other words, they display “social competence, good problem solving skills, independence, and a clear sense of purpose” (Wang et al., 1993).

In many ways, this research study’s participants fit the multitude of definitions of academically resilient students. However, most research that focuses on academic
resilience does not explore how students position themselves in relation to opportunities. In this research study, participants’ responses revealed that they purposely pursued college preparation opportunities in order to attain goals of matriculation. Positioning theory posits that people engage in conversations or discourses, and accept or reject subject positions. Subject positions may be “reflexive,” when a person places him/herself within the structure of the discourse, or “interactive,” when another positions the person (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001, p.743). In the social interaction of discourse or conversation, subject positions assume varying roles of power and powerlessness. In this section, I will present how this research study’s participants positioned themselves within a socio-political conversation: admission to college.

Participants related many stories regarding their deliberate self-positioning as demonstrated by their decisions to join a college preparation program. For instance, Akorfa shared that she accessed College Preparation Program (CPP) through her relationship with her guidance counselor. As a sophomore, she made her intentions to matriculate known. When the guidance counselor, Mrs. G presented the opportunity to enroll in CPP, Akorfa applied. Akorfa said, “At that point, I was like really interested in … getting through college, so Mrs. G would help me with getting [to] college. I was willing to do it.” By engaging her guidance counselor in the expectation she held for herself, college enrollment and graduation, Akorfa deliberately self-positioned herself as a powerful actor, as a person with agency, in the conversation. She accessed resources, such as people and programs, in order to meet her own expectations.
Similarly, Noman shared matriculation as a personal goal and expected that he would attain that goal. Noman described deliberately self-positioning himself within the conversation between college and himself.

[CPP] was another preparation program that was offered to me, because I was just thinking about the college and I was making sure that I got to college either way I can. And one of the colleges that I wanted to go to was [Small College], so again this was a great way for me to kind of get my foot in the door, concerning [Small College]…

Noman’s description reveals that he deliberately self-positioned himself in order to attain matriculation. Moreover, he focused on a particular college, Small College, with intention of familiarizing himself with the discourse practiced within that college. It could be argued that Small College, or any college, forced Noman to position himself in such a way, so that he followed the college’s rules of discourse. However, I assert that Noman, like Akorfa, exercised agency. Agency, as defined by Murrell (2007), is the “critical conscious understanding of both one’s situation and positionality in any given setting or context” (p. 29). Both participants understood that to receive admission to college, their situations required them to deliberately self-position in a way that accessed resources that would enable realization of admission, such as a college preparation program.

Likewise, Eleni discussed her understanding of her situation with regards to college preparation and the resources available to her at her high school. As discussed in
Chapter 2, guidance counselors play critical roles in students’ college preparation. King’s (1996) study acknowledges the role of high school college counselors as an important factor in the success of many students. For students whose parents did not attend college, college counselors may be a vital, and often singular, resource in providing accurate college information. Unfortunately, few students receive the proper guidance and information as they plan their high school schedule of courses. While Eleni, like other students in this research study, accessed their guidance counselor as often as possible, the demands placed on an individual counselor and school resources, like college preparation courses, did not meet the needs of these CPP participants. Accordingly, CPP students sought other resources and deliberately self-positioned to engage in the discourse with college admissions. Eleni shared:

I feel that us who wanted to do it did it because we were - for lack of a better word - hungry for that help because in high school ... [West Side] was a big high school, right? And our guidance counselor did as much as she can. I give her props because she helped me. … The [CPP] students [were] always going to her because we needed her signature, her guidance … but she had other responsibilities. (interview)

Eleni remarks that CPP students were “hungry” for help, and she perceived CPP as a source for college guidance that was unavailable through her school and guidance counselor. Once the resources became available through school, CPP students “were already acquainted with they [they] had to do” (Eleni). In this way, Eleni, like other CPP
participants, recognized a need for further supports and self-positioned in such a way that prepared her for entering the discourse associated with higher education.

Loris reiterated Eleni’s description of becoming involved in CPP. He shared that involvement with CPP offered insight into college expectations, familiarity with being on a campus, and information for attaining matriculation. In his words:

It was a unique type of thing you do to help high school students. Especially for us who came from public schools and didn't have that much of opportunities so it's kind of like - it really worked for us. … I didn't know at the time how it would benefit, but like I said, it was sort of … information in a sense so any information could have done.... No I don't think we knew at the time, especially sophomore year, it was sort of … like we went in cold, sort of like go forward because we knew we had to do it. It was sort of - yeah [SC]! We get to go to college… a real college and maybe see how a classroom, how it runs… all those sorts of those things. We came from public schools. At the time you didn't have that opportunity like what [Small] College offered us… [A]ll of us became grateful.

As shared by Loris, and other participants in this research study, involvement in CPP was both an opportunity as well as a necessity. Participants perceived that the resources directly available to them at school and at home would not offer enough academic, cultural, and social capital essential to realize college matriculation. They viewed college admission and graduation as critical personal goals. They held high expectations for themselves, and when given an opportunity to access resources, social
and cultural capital, they positioned themselves in such a way that benefited their entry into the college admission and matriculation discourse.

**Power of Place: “That’s going to be me”**

CPP was held on a small, private college campus. In order to remove transportation barriers to involvement with the program, CPP hired public school bus drivers to pick up students from their neighborhoods, deliver them to the university, and to return them home. The ease of transportation, while mentioned by several participants, was not as significant as the impact of being physically present on a college campus. Every student discussed their experiences of being a high school student on a college campus and the impact that place had on their visions of their futures. Therefore, a major finding from this research study is the power of place. “Power of place” is associated with the impact of space on human experiences, ecological education, and place-based education that emphasizes a sense of place within student learning (Gruenewald, 2003).

In higher education, Broussard (2009) argues for administrators to encourage connections between students and campuses by developing sacred spaces that create meaningful connections between students and their alma maters. As Broussard (2009) asserts, “a true learning environment provides for both formal instruction and learning that takes place without instruction” (p. 12). Using these understandings of the impact of place on learning, this research study’s participants directly addressed how attending classes on a university campus positively influenced their college preparation.
Chasneika shared that being in college classrooms benefited her because she became familiar with a campus. Chasneika observed:

First, there was the classroom setting because they actually had class; you had the classroom, you know, with the welcome in the morning … in [an] auditorium where a class would be held. For example, we actually get to see that. I actually got to see like college classroom; how it would actually be if you were to be in college. So, I think that was really beneficial.

Another participant shared that he believed that being a high school student on campus was an important aspect of the program. Henry said: “The main thing actually was going to a college when you're a high school student experiencing how everyone learns, taking some of the classes that they're offering.”

Familiarity with a college campus, its size, and how buildings are arranged and used became a recurrent trend in our conversations. Akorfa, for example, stated: “… being on the college campus helped me because I actually knew what to expect - like I knew that it would be big. I knew that it would be huge and people would be different.” The opportunity to see a campus and interact with college students helped create expectations of college life.

Experiencing “place” also assuaged some students’ fears about the size of a college campus. Raimar shared: “Being on the college was great. It was awesome. It was like - I remember the first day I got to [Small College] for the first time, I just said, ‘Wow, this is so big!’ And just, I guess, walking around and I remember the cafeteria and
how everyone interacted in the cafeteria. And, everyone’s just talking to each other.” The opportunity to see that college students made friends, despite the size of the campus, made Raimar feel more comfortable within the setting.

Although CPP began early in the morning when few college students were awake and walking around campus, this did not negatively impact students’ experiences. Henry shared that his “…favorite part was just being there, just being a high school student in a college campus, seeing how students who are pursuing an higher education works, even though you barely see them.” Later in the day, CPP students ate lunch with their mentors, who were college students, which allowed CPP participants to engage in more informal conversations about college life.

Some of the benefits included being able to envision life as a college student. Loris shared that being on campus “…kind of gave me a glimpse. A glimpse how college life is rather hearing people say this and this, this or that. You got to actually see it, yes, and live it, basically.” Raimar further asserted that seeing students engage in extra-curricular activities on campus allowed him to imagine himself in the role of a college student. “And I don't know - just seeing everyone on the quads playing - when it was summertime, people playing, or going to the gym, and playing basketball once in a while. It was a good experience. And it was just – ‘Wow. I can totally see myself doing this.’” Raimar’s statements indicate that the ability to imagine taking on the role of a college student, who engages in activities like playing basketball and making friends, made the
idea of transitioning into a different context less intimidating because he was familiar with these activities and the spaces in which they happen.

While students attended CPP classes on campus, they were afforded more freedom than what they experienced in high school. CPP participants took classes in several buildings and often had to walk across campus to attend those classes. CPP instructors did not escort students to buildings, so there were some unstructured and unchaperoned times that also allowed students the opportunity to experience campus life. Akorfa shared a story of accidentally walking into a classroom full of students taking a test. “It really dawned on me that I’m really going to be in college. One day when we walked into a class taking examinations and the way they all looked sitting in those chairs I was like, ‘Wow, that’s going to be me like in a couple of years.’” Seeing college students engaging in college academics offered her, too, a glimpse of what her future held.

In many ways, the location or “place” of CPP was a vital component of the program because this research study’s participants were able to engage in a lived experience that reflected their personal goals. The impact of spending time on a college campus, or the power of place, made the possibility of assuming the role of college students tangible and attainable. Participants could envision themselves sitting in a college classroom, because they attended CPP classes at Small College. They could imagine eating lunch in a college cafeteria because they regularly met with the CPP mentors. Practicing these roles by engaging in activities associated with being a college
student on a college campus familiarized CPP participants with ways of being and what to expect when they attended college.

**CPP Identity and a Community of Practice: “A step ahead”**

Participants’ experiences with CPP built a community of practice and a CPP identity that resulted in students feeling “a step ahead” of their high school peers. One of the goals of CPP was to foster a community of practice. Research-based curricular and programmatic decisions were made in order to foster a community of practice and to instill a CPP identity (Tierney & Jun, 1999). CPP participants began their involvement of the program as a cohort in 10th grade and continued their participation with the same classmates for three years. As a program, CPP utilized formal methods for building a community of practice, such as recreationally-oriented events and classes that focused on peer review. When students began the program, CPP students completed a ropes course with their cohort. The intention was to build trust within the cohort of students, because they attended different high schools. Other initiatives were undertaken such as winter celebrations when students received CPP t-shirts. CPP also hosted a graduation celebration for seniors as they completed CPP and graduated from high school. At each event, students’ families were invited and each cohort performed an original skit, song or poem related to academic achievement and student successes. CPP students also received yearbooks with photos of their classmates, mentors, instructors, and program administrators. In their classes, CPP instructors engaged students in peer review of writing and team-focused math classes. CPP students also elected class representatives...
who were responsible for communicating information to their classmates as well as sharing concerns and ideas to CPP administration. Each of these programmatic elements was designed to encourage a connection to the program and among participants.

While CPP intended to foster these relationships, the program did not intentionally seek to recruit groups of friends nor did the program specifically target family members of former CPP graduates. However, from the beginning of their participation, most CPP students from West Side High School joined the program with their friends or family. Raimar and his cousin signed up for CPP together. Raimar shared the conversation he and Luis had about joining CPP. “… I remember my cousin … said, ‘If you do the program, I would do the program.’ So we said ‘Let's do it,’ and we stuck through it.” Chasneika also reflected on her decision to join CPP being influenced by her friends. “… I think it did have some influence in it because, you know it was every other Saturday, so it was like ‘oh, I have to get up early again on a Saturday and, you know, take this bus to [Small] College’ to do this, but then again, when you're not doing it alone; it also helps. So, yeah, I knew a few people who did it, so it was actually… I was looking forward to it rather than forcing myself to go. …But, it was like the sort of thing, either, we all went through it [or] none of us were going to do it. That's how it felt because, you know, in high school you get influenced a lot by your friends and you don't really take your own initiative, but yeah, like we all said ‘oh, are we all going to do it? Yes, okay,’ so we went and did it.” These participants’ experiences indicate the importance of positive peer relationships that nurture high aspirations, which is a finding
in accordance with research on the impact of peer relationships on academic achievement and aspirations. If peers are supportive of their friends’ involvement in college prep programs, this may facilitate high achievement (Kenny et al., 2002). González and Padilla (1997) found that the most significant predictor of student grades was a sense of belonging at school; they also found that high levels of peer support were more prevalent among resilient students. Horn and Chen (1998) also found that students with peers who planned on college, or those who were involved in school, also enrolled in college more frequently. Horn and Chen (1998) found that if all or most of a student’s friends planned for college, that student was six times more likely to enroll in higher education.

Participants from Midtown High School, however, reflected that their reasons for joining were less influenced by friends than the participants from West Side High School. Henry reported that “…because [CPP] opened up for me, then that means … I could learn there. I’d have time with some friends I know there from high school. I got to meet more people.” Meeting more people offered Henry an opportunity to form new friendships. Henry, though, was also influenced by his brother’s successful completion of CPP; “he finished [CPP], so I figured why not give it a shot” (Henry). Likewise, Noman’s brothers advised him to participate in CPP because it would allow him to demonstrate his commitment to multiple preparation programs.

Similar to Henry, Akorfa also reflected that she did not join CPP to be with her friends, but that by joining CPP, she was also able to meet new people. “Like we knew each other in school, but we hanged out with like different groups of people but then
when we got to [CPP] since were the only ones from [Midtown High], we hanged out together and then we became friends.” Noman, on the other hand, joined CPP only to find out that some of his other friends were also participating. “I was surprised there was … three people from my high school were in [CPP] my year, meaning that they were sophomores with me. Two of them I was really good friends while one of them I wasn't you, but I would have classes with her, but they were two of them always really good friends with one name was J.” In his experience, like other CPP participants, Noman’s newly formed friendships continued beyond CPP’s walls into his high school relationships.

While the intention was to build a community of practice that transcended high schools, participants shared that their inter-high school relationships did not continue outside of CPP classrooms. At CPP “[West Side], stuck to [West Side] and [Midtown] stuck to [Midtown]” (Chasneika). CPP students did not interact with students who attended different high schools, although they “were nice to each other but [they] didn’t really have conversations” (Akorfa). During less structured groupings, “like during lunch time, all the [Midtown] kids will be at one table and the [West Side] kids would be on another table” (Akorfa).

However, those communities of practice that did form within the high school and CPP were strong. In fact, CPP students “all had the same classes because [they] had that little beginning, like a little lift [at CPP]. So [they] had the same schedule throughout junior and senior year” (Eleni). This community of practice emphasized academic
achievement and college admission, in part, because, “… after [CPP], [they] got acquainted with wanting to be in honors classes, wanted to achieve more, challenge [their] academic needs. … [A]fter [CPP], [they] felt more confident in our academic success … and [their] progress excelled” (Eleni).

One theme that emerged from data analysis was being “a step ahead.” Being a step ahead meant that the college knowledge they acquired led them to feeling more confident and better prepared for the college application process, “because [they] had the same … academic mindset to achieve greatness, excel and graduate together, knowing [they] are going to go to school wherever” (Eleni). Participants gauged their preparation in comparison to high school classmates, which led them to feel more prepared, “And not only because of the college prep journey to get to where [they] were, [they] were on time with what [they] had to do to feel more confident because if [they] didn’t have that kind of prior knowledge of how to do college searches that [CPP] acquainted us [with]” (Eleni). CPP graduates discussed their experiences that led to feeling confident that they were receiving guidance, reassurance, good information, and valuable resources. They were already “ahead of the game” (Eleni). CPP guided students “as early as end of sophomore year and beginning of junior year, which was great, because if [they] didn't have [CPP], …[they] weren’t even probably guided maybe till the end of junior year by [their high school] teachers” (Eleni). Being given timely information, particularly when compared to non-CPP classmates, allowed CPPers to receive additional help “[b]ecause [they] were focused on doing a college essay [at CPP] and then in class at [West Side
they] were focusing on doing the college over here. It was sort of like [CPPer]s were a step ahead of the other students” (Loris).

Eleni reiterated Loris’s sentiments when she described feeling that she received timely information, particularly when she compared her experiences to those of her high school classmates who were not participating in CPP. This realization left her feeling confident that she was taking the necessary steps to attain college acceptance. Moreover, they “already had two essays [done] by the time [they] finished junior year of [CPP].”

**Support of CPP Instructors: “More like tutoring” but “building trust”**

As described in Chapter 5, one of the goals of CPP was to provide academic enrichment through academically rigorous courses. During interviews, participants reflected on their experiences with and expectations of CPP instructors. Overall, participants viewed that instructor support was more like tutoring. Noman observed that, “the program needs [to] challenge the students more” (Noman). Given greater challenge, but with “enough resources to overcome that, to meet those challenges, to meet those expectations” (Noman), CPPers “will succeed. … They will meet the expectations” (Noman). This indicates that some students required more challenge in addition to explicit instruction. As Noman advised, “Students don’t mind that they are in the dark, but there has to be a way out of it.” Explicit instruction offers the way out of the dark, while curriculum and expectations could challenge students.

As the program was structured, the expectations and challenges resulted in CPP homework that “wasn't going to be great work” (Loris). In part, this may be explained
because “it didn't affect [CPP students] academically, in [their] high school, so if [they did] it, it may not be 100% effective” (Loris). This group of students began their high school educations with the start of No Child Left Behind legislation, which emphasizes high-stakes education. Earning a high school diploma in this context may have trained students into believing that their work at CPP did not carry as much weight when there were no consequences directly tied to academic performance. Moreover, CPP instructors were perceived as “pretty lenient” when students did not complete assignments. For instance, if “somebody missed an essay, they would be like - okay just bring it back next time” (Loris). When students needed additional assistance with SAT problems, “they would just go over it if you didn’t get the right answers; they [would] make sure we did” (Loris). In other words, academic work with fewer immediate academic stakes was not experienced as high pressure, which resulted in more time spent on student understanding and multiple opportunities to submit completed work. Unfortunately, a combination of low-stakes homework and lenient instructors created the perception for some that the College Preparation Program did not offer enough supports.

Although the majority of participants did not feel challenged by CPP academics, they reported feelings of trust, support and guidance from their instructors, such as “if [students] have any problems, [they] could e-mail [the instructors] with anything” (Loris). This continued contact, outside of CPP hours, did benefit CPP students as they prepared for college. Many of the students maintained relationships with their CPP instructors that continued outside of the CPP classroom. This may be in large part due to
the interactions and availability that instructors demonstrated. Despite the overwhelming sense that academics did not prepare students for college, the instructors played important roles in serving as guides throughout the participants’ college-going process; roles that “built upon trust so it was the common goal that [they] were working on” (Loris). Instructors “made sure [students] were taught and [made] sure [they did everything right. [They] had the right information” (Loris). The right information included “briefly just talking about what Small College has to offer, what UMass has to offer or [another university]. She was giving us all these options, all these levels of universities whether it was public, private or community college” (Eleni). By discussing multiple options, instructors were “just reassuring us that it could be done - like you are here because you showed with your grades, obviously that you are college bound hence the fact that you are here. And we are here to help you…” (Eleni). By engaging in these conversations, instructors worked to build CPP students’ dominant cultural capital while simultaneously reassuring students that they were intelligent and possessed strengths that would help them attain their dreams. Moreover, instructors reasserted their expectations in students by working to guide students on the path towards matriculation. This is evidenced by the multiple points of contact and continued relationships beyond CPP Saturdays.

Often CPP students maintained relationships with their instructors beyond the time they spent in the program. My relationships with CPP graduates, for example, continued beyond their high school graduations and through their college years. In much the same way that I connected with CPP graduates, celebrating successes and maintaining
connections, other instructors also continued their involvement with CPP graduates. One of the most striking examples of these relationships is between Raimar and his advisor, Sarah. While Raimar struggled with his decision not to attend college the year after high school, Sarah continued to contact him on a regular basis – asking about his application process, offering continued guidance and support by calling to ask “Raimar, what are you doing? What are your plans? What is this? What are you doing now?” (Raimar). Sarah also “helped [him] along with the applications and the whole process” (Raimar). Her persistence and guidance supported Raimar as he continued to pursue his goals, and as he shared, “I think that if it wasn't for her, I probably would've never gone to school.” As discussed in Cabrera and Padilla’s (2004) work, positive relationships with supportive adults, can help students access information in the college-going process. Cabrera and Padilla’s (2004) qualitative study with two bilingual Hispanic participants offered a retrospective view of their educational preparation. Erandi, the young woman involved in the research, participated in both AVID and Upward Bound. Due to her mother’s unfamiliarity with college knowledge, and her inability to assist her daughter in pursuing higher education, Erandi sought out mentors in Upward Bound and AVID. Similar to Raimar’s relationship with Sarah, Erandi attributed her intellectual development primarily to the assistance she received from her AVID and Upward Bound instructors. “Erandi’s mother still supported her academic pursuits, but she was unable to guide her with information about precollege courses, SAT exams, or the college application process” (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004, p. 162). Hence, Upward Bound assisted Erandi in
accessing the “culture of college” (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004) much like Sarah assisted Raimar in his continued education once he was no longer eligible to access CPP supports.

Despite examples of continued support, one of the difficulties students faced was consistency. Every year, the majority of instructors left the program. As M.Ed. and Ph.D. students graduated from Small College, new instructors joined the program. While some students felt that these changes reflected the cycles of school, something to be expected, other students felt that “you lose the environment ... You lose the vibe that you have people from last year, so like everything feels different because, you know, all the teachers do everything different” (Chasneika). Changes, like that of instructors who built supportive and trusting relationships, impacted some students’ experiences, leaving them feeling “frustrated” and observing that the program lacked “consistency.”

Moreover, Noman felt that CPP did not meet often enough for trusting relationships to develop with his mentors.

The same thing with the programs that I took - it has to be consistency, if it's not there then I feel frustrated, and it leads to a lack of trust. As a high school student, the only thing that I have is to rely on, the only thing I want to do is - I want to build a relationship and their relationship has to be built on trust. Every relationship that you have, either it's personal or academic or anything, is based on trust. So if that trust is missing because of frustration or whatnot, or there isn’t enough time for the trust to develop, then you don't gain anything from it.
Noman often compared his experiences in CPP with those in Upward Bound – a program he was involved with that offered more hours of contact and summer experiences. Due to his continual contact with Upward Bound, he expected that CPP should maintain and offer similar levels of support and academic challenge. As the Program Coordinator, I experienced many of Noman’s frustrations. I, too, advocated for more contact, more rigorous academics, and more summer opportunities. However, given its funding sources, CPP was not able to provide the same level of support as a program like Upward Bound. Moreover, CPP’s schedule often changed to adjust for college exams, a lack of available classrooms, and football games on campus.

Regardless of the irregular schedules and the summer breaks, CPP instructors were able to create lasting relationships and many of this research study’s participants reported feeling supported; they received proper and useful guidance through the college application process. In particular, students described feeling most supported through the college knowledge curricula.

**Role of Knowledge**

**College Knowledge and Its Role in CPP Experiences**

This research study’s participants repeatedly referred to one of the components of CPP: college knowledge. College knowledge includes several areas of information that explore the information necessary to successfully attain matriculation. Programmatically, CPP addressed college knowledge in formal ways—through advisory classes—and informally—through conversations with academic instructors and mentors. Consistent
with the findings in this study, research acknowledges the importance of college knowledge on first-generation college students’ decisions, including how students choose universities (McPherson & Schapiro, 1999; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008).

On a regular basis during the three years of College Preparation Program, advisors guided students as they researched colleges that would be a good “fit.” A good fit was a school that met students’ expectations in regards to demographics, degrees offered, size of student population, co-curricular activities, and study-abroad opportunities. Students would “look at different schools, look at the statistics of the schools, what you are looking for, what kind of high schools they're at or looking to recruit [from] and all of that. And we also [looked at the] recruiting process, so interviewing” (Loris). A good fit also included admission requirements, acceptance rates, and scholarship and financial aid availability. In reviewing universities, students explored a number of higher education options in case a student was accepted, but not offered enough financial aid. “[CPP] told me I have to because - just in case [Small College] doesn’t work because, not for acceptance, maybe they are not going to give me enough aid because I told them that I don’t want to take too much loans out but just enough so I can be okay” (Eleni). As discussed later, financial considerations weighed heavily during the admissions process. Through awareness, CPP students chose a range of schools that varied in tuition, demographics, and admission criteria.

CPP also encouraged students to apply to multiple colleges, so that students had a backup plan. Part of the decision process of where to apply involved expanding
participants’ applications to include universities that offered a range of admission
requirements and acceptance rates. “[CPP] taught us … you make the harder schools by
looking at their acceptance - what they needed like SAT scores, essays,
recommendations, all that. And then like the medium sized schools and then the
community college maybe public schools or something like that. So you have to have the
mixture” (Loris). A mixture of schools ensured that every CPP graduate would attend
college following high school graduation.

Although these additional schools were not participants’ top-choice universities,
they offered a backup plan, should students not be accepted by first-choice schools, and
“It was like you are applying only at the top schools and then being rejected by them and
then not going to college” (Loris). However, students struggled to consider options
beyond their top-choice schools. In particular, many CPP participants wanted to attend
Small College because “I knew [Small College]. I know how to go to the library still”
(Eleni). Visiting Small College for three years made the university less daunting and
more accessible because the students became familiar with classrooms, the campus
facilities, and the admissions process. “The Admissions Office … used to come a lot of
times talking about how the process works” (Loris). This suggests that increasing
familiarity with a college campus may increase students’ confidence while perhaps also
limiting their ability to envision having a similar experience on other campuses. Harré
and van Langenhove (1999) explicate how institutions force self-positioning “…when an
institution wants to classify persons who are expected to function within that institution,
performing a certain range or tasks in coordination with the task load of others. A typical example of this can be found in selection practices and … the course of which applicants and appointees are acquainted with job descriptions and rosters of duties” (p. 27). By inviting the Admissions Office representative and hosting a college preparation program on the university campus, Small College helped participants become acquainted with the responsibilities and experiences of a college student. CPP further offered access to dominant social and cultural capital by locating the program within a university setting. Through observation and acknowledgement of place, participants self-positioned to enact their agency, or the “sense of responsibility for one’s life course, the belief that one is in control of one’s decisions and is responsible for their outcomes, and the confidence that one will be able to overcome obstacles that impede one’s progress along one’s chosen life course” (Schwartz, Côte & Arnett, 2005, p. 207). In this way, the power of place offers another dimension of positionality in the admissions process.

As a college preparation program, CPP created an environment in which students felt comfortable, but the program may not have advocated enough for students to become as familiar with other campuses. As a program, CPP could better encourage students to “have a close love” (Eleni) for other schools as a way to encourage students to explore multiple options beyond their top-choice universities and to reduce the negative effects of possible university rejections.

Despite not pushing for increased familiarity at other campuses, “[CPP] …motivated [students] to explore other options” (Eleni). Eleni did not receive admission
to Small College, which greatly disappointed her. Through CPP’s guidance, though, Eleni explored other universities during her application stage. Moreover, she did matriculate and graduate from another private university with a similar student population that was located close to home. In this way, having a backup plan benefited her by offering another university to attend the fall after her high school graduation. CPP’s guidance to apply to a range of schools also benefited Akorfa when she encountered financial aid difficulties. As Akorfa recounted, “… I had … at least four solid colleges that I got in and then two other backups, one that I wasn’t really interested in going to, so I had four good colleges that I have gotten into.” Although Akorfa received admission to a number of schools, due to her citizenship status, she was unable to attend the schools she ranked as most desirable. Nevertheless, through CPP guidance to explore options, Akorfa also applied to state universities whose tuition her parents could afford; this allowed her to progress towards college graduation despite significant citizenship and financial barriers. In this way, the programmatic emphasis to research universities that met students’ criteria supported students as they sought matriculation.

The practice of applying to a range of schools ensured that CPP participants would attend college the fall after their high school graduation and not take a year, or more, off from school. Researchers have found that time away from an academic environment reduces rates of degree attainment (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). Unfortunately, not every student was able to access the information provided by CPP in the same way. One student struggled with college knowledge and took a year away from
school before going to college. Raimar described his choices as more random than his peers’ choices. Raimar only focused on what college majors universities offered, rather than considering a variety of factors, such as school demographics, size, and location. Raimar revealed his application decisions during the second interview and shared his confusion as he applied: “I don't know how I chose them. ... I remember I was at this school - there's a school behind [West Side High School] ... they have sports management and I'm like ‘Oh, I can go for sports management. So let me apply here.’ And then UMass Amherst - I don't know what it was about UMass Amherst but I was probably like ‘Oh, this sounds interesting. Let me go there.’ So I guess I was just really confused in high school, and even today, about what I wanted to do. I was like, ‘Oh, hotel management sounds fun,’ or ‘sports management sounds fun,’ or, I mean, ‘Writing sounds fun.’ So, it was more like ... confusion...” As discussed later in this chapter, Raimar’s confusion partially stemmed from not knowing what major he wanted to pursue once he entered college. Being unaware of when and how a college student determines a major, significantly and negatively impacted Raimar’s decision-making. This indicates that college knowledge, as a programmatic feature, should attend to issues beyond acceptance and into areas of college course planning.

**College Knowledge - Preparing and Positioning: “What schools look for”**

When CPP students began their involvement with the program, they received the message from school guidance counselors, high school teachers, and CPP instructors that “this is something that looks good on your [college] application” (Noman) such as
involvement in a college preparation program, outside of school hours, “because lot of
colleges saw it as a positive thing” (Loris). CPP students were “preparing themselves
really well for college and they were pretty college bound” (Loris).

Multiple participants reflected on the college application essays and the support
they received through CPP. “A lot of students wrote their essays about dedicating their
Saturdays to [CPP]” (Loris). CPPers felt as though they “overcame something good. So,
it was like all the hard work that you did throughout the program actually worked out and
actually was for something good” (Chasneika). The attention CPP students paid to their
essays, and in particular the attention focused on CPP in their essays, reflects the sense of
accomplishment CPPers associated with participating in a three-year program. Moreover,
CPPers believed that the extended time dedicated to crafting a college application essay
contributed to the college acceptances, because “if you're a … great student on paper and
then you write them this crappy letter, it's not going to be [accepted]” (Chasneika).
Students placed utmost value on the essay, believing that it reflected their
accomplishments as well as their determination to matriculate.

CPP students appreciated the support during the drafting stages of writing.
Students felt they were given an “ample amount of time,” leaving CPPers feeling
“reassured [that they] were getting the grammatical help or the structure - like the intro,
thesis, some details and then a nice conclusion” (Eleni).Taken together, additional time,
guidance through the writing process, and an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of
their CPP participation, indicates that students benefited from a protracted drafting period that included varying methods of feedback.

Beyond the essay, participants in this research study reflected on other characteristics they believed that schools look for when accepting students. These included, “extracurricular activities” that reflected being “involved a lot” (Chasneika), including serving as the “class president,” “captain of volleyball” (Eleni), or taking on “community service” (Loris). Participants also focused on attaining a high school GPA that as “off the roof” (Chasneika) and taking challenging “classes [that] reflected [their] academics and they were shown in [their] grades” (Noman). Participants also recognized the impact of “SAT scores, essays, recommendations” (Loris). Furthermore, students believed that schools looked at students’ ability to face “adversity [because it] is going to come no matter what you do” (Noman). With the understanding of “what the school requires,” participants assumed the mindset that “This is what I need to do, sort of change I need to do, [to] prepare myself for it” (Loris). By becoming savvy consumers of “what schools look for,” CPP participants engaged in deliberate self-positioning to become the “ideal student” (Noman). They acquired social and cultural capital in order to enter the discourse of higher education and used that information to engage in the conversation with the admissions process.

**College Knowledge: “You didn’t have to be rich to go to college”**

Financial concerns often inhibit high school students’ college decisions, particularly if students come from low-resourced school, homes, and circumstances or are
first-generation college attendees. First-generation college attendees may be unfamiliar with financial aid requirements, availability or methods to meet tuition demands. Often students and their families struggle with how to meet tuition costs, “and a lot of kids, when they go to think about college, they think about money like – ‘This costs $50,000 a year – I don’t think I have that money’” (Loris). However, involvement in CPP allayed fears because it allowed students to “reflect more that you didn’t have to be rich to go to college” (Eleni). Without this understanding and without financial aid availability, some students may forego college altogether or become an attrition statistic (Dynarski, 2003; Roderick et al., 2008).

By alleviating fears about the affordability of college, students aimed for acceptance to more prestigious universities, because they “never thought about [money]. So we went to schools like [Small College]” (Loris). Removing the barrier of tuition by offering resources allowed students to set higher expectations for themselves, reinforcing their agency and positionality within the college matriculation discourse. Beyond guiding students through the financial aid application phase, CPP also provided direct instruction in “scholarship searches with Mr. G” (Eleni). Over three years, regular scholarship searches encouraged students to institutions. Furthermore, it allowed students to see “where the money lay, sort of how to approach any grants or scholarships, for example, what prep work needed to be done for those – maybe write an essay, maybe it’s an interview for those. So it prepared us” (Loris). In the end, the majority of CPP students attended university with “92% funding” (Eleni) or full scholarships.
Unfortunately, citizenship status was an area where CPP was unable to fully assist students in accessing financial aid. Whereas cost “never crossed my mind,” because “the most I need is $10,000; so what? Financial aid would pay for most of it, so I have to come up with the rest” (Noman), Akorfa’s citizenship status prevented her from attending the prestigious, and more expensive, schools to which she was accepted. As a result, she felt “really angry because I actually got into a lot of good colleges and it was bad.” In working with students whose families immigrate to the United States, CPP, as with all college preparation programs, is limited in its capabilities to influence and support the process towards permanent resident status. However, Akorfa’s experience points to the need for greater support through a variety of measures, including more attention to state university systems that offer both lower tuition and academic opportunities as well as connecting families to non-profit agencies that may guide families through the naturalization process.

Furthermore, creating an environment in which students feel comfortable revealing their concerns surrounding citizenship, and therefore their need for different guidance and support systems, becomes critical. As Akorfa shared, “My parents are very private people so they don’t like to tell people about our problems so they’re always going to work it out for themselves. Yeah, so they wouldn’t let me contact anybody else to help us because that’s how they were brought up to like to do stuff for themselves.” Such independence and determination is admirable, but presenting resources to students,
without asking students to reveal their status, may help circumnavigate both privacy
issues as well as a need for support.

Social and Cultural CPP Capital: “Anything is possible”

In many ways, CPP serves as a source of institutionalized social capital because it
leads to resources, benefits, and rewards such as relationships with admission people or
connections with professors. It is through social capital that participants may gain
dominant cultural capital and adjust their positionality as they engage in discourse with
universities. Upon examination of what universities require for admission, students
learned that they needed to engage in “building the resume, making sure that you are well
rounded, you have to show them that you are serious about academics” (Noman).
Universities also ask students to “show them that you want to experience and you can
show them why you are taking different programs that tests your different character and
kind of force you to do like think different and do different things” (Noman). In sum,
universities ask college applicants to demonstrate flexibility, intelligence, perseverance,
and commitment. However, without access to the dominant cultural capital to deconstruct
these expectations, first-generation college attendees may not be able to deftly frame their
strengths in a manner that universities recognize, which may prohibit participation in the
discourse. In order to become familiar with university discourse, with university “culture,
what is it that they like, what they don't like” (Noman), college application processes and
admission, CPPers learned that “It’s just a matter of thinking about it and matter of
approach” (Loris). Once participants in this research study became familiar with how
they should be “thinking about it,” they felt more confident and comfortable going through the college application and admissions process.

**Academic Knowledge and Dimensions of College**

In this section, I present participants’ first year college academic experiences in light of their participation in College Preparation Program (CPP). While research participants described various and unique experiences, many experiences overlapped to create a shared understanding of the college preparation program and its impact on college going.

**Prevalent Themes in Participants’ Experiences**

Three critical themes related to academic knowledge and dimensions emerged during data analysis: a) academic dimensions of college; b) time management; and c) importance of study skills. The first prominent theme, academic dimensions of college include a) the relationship between prior academic knowledge and course expectations; b) the immense workload; c) the importance of writing in all college subjects; d) the impact of grades; and e) efforts to seek out resources to improve academic performance. A second theme reflected the importance and interaction of time management with course schedules, work demands, and overall expectations. A common theme among participants’ experiences noted that study skills were acquired over time through trial and error. Finally participants shared how college knowledge supported success and influenced struggles.
The Academic Dimensions of College Matriculation

Lack of Rigor and Explicit Connections: “I wasn’t really prepared”

A consistent theme found during data analysis is the lack of academic rigor that students experienced as they prepared for college. While participants were highly successful during their high school years, as evidenced by their participation in National Honor Societies, service as senior class presidents, and scholarships awarded toward university attendance, they consistently reported that they did not possess the prior knowledge necessary for achieving their own academic expectations. “As far as material wise, academic wise, everything I learned in college was completely new and I just couldn’t relate it back to high school” (Noman). Chasneika also revealed, “Yeah, it was a huge surprise only because like in high school, you're so successful and then CPP, you know, it helps you out; it makes things seem much easier. But then, you come to college and it's like ‘whoa!’ It feels like if you learned absolutely nothing.” This indicates that students either did not receive academic preparation necessary for college or explicit connections between high school and college academics were not made clear to students.

Several participants believed that the CPP academics were beneficial, particularly with writing and reading. Although some participants shared that CPP did offer enrichment that filled in academic gaps, other participants disclosed conflicting experiences regarding CPP curriculum. While some viewed CPP as benefiting their academics, they also shared that the rigor was not enough to fully prepare them for what they later experienced in college. In particular, CPP math classes, while “like a general
course” (Henry), taught CPPers “techniques” and they “learned shortcuts” (Henry), which helped “a lot during college years” (Henry).

More frequently cited in interviews, CPP English classes offered supplemental reading over the summers because partner high schools “didn’t have reading lists like other schools did. … No reading list whatsoever” (Eleni). The additional summer reading “required [students] to write a small little essay in the end to be prepared to bring it when College Preparation Program started in the fall, which was great” (Eleni) because “College Preparation Program just did that extra boost” (Eleni). CPP instructors “went out of the way to help [students] more with writing structure” (Eleni) by “tell[ing] how to set up a paper; how to brainstorm before [students] actually start typing/writing” (Chasneika). This indicates that explicit instruction in writing strategies became tools on which students later relied. As an English and education major, Eleni’s experience with CPP curriculum was directly related to her college major. This is also true of Henry’s academic preparation for his college major in statistics and Chasneika’s major in Communications. In these cases, the participants reflected that the CPP curriculum were beneficial and useful later in their college careers.

Overall, most participants reported not having access to an academic environment that would have made the transition to college easier. For instance, Raimar remembered that in high school, “in English I seldom remember having to write a paper. Or even if I did have to write a paper, I don't know if … I don’t know how … it will be graded.” Similarly, Eleni believed that her writing “… was great because people used to come to
me for help … So I thought I was a strong writer. And in my high school all the teachers
are like – ‘wow, you have some talent, how about if you help your peers?’” In both cases,
Raimar and Eleni did not receive feedback that allowed them to improve their writing
skills. An academic environment that develops students’ strengths while simultaneously
challenging students would have better prepared students for college academic demands.
These college experiences echo Noman’s sentiments in regards to lack of academic rigor
in CPP and his wish for CPP to “challenge students more.” Consistent with these
findings, scholars have addressed the relationship between academic preparation in high
school and academic achievements in college (Horn & Kojaku, 2001; Perna, 2005;
Advisory Committee, 2010).

College-level courses consistently build on prior knowledge. As Loris shared, “It
was in my freshman year - economics classes - they were really challenging because I
never had taken economics before in high school,” nor did Loris learn the math concepts
that are integral to understanding economics. Noman also found that, without prior
knowledge, his accounting courses presented daunting learning curves. “I had no
background in any sort of business… I never had that background that I needed. So I
guess part of my failure was because of that, because I didn’t have the background
because I wasn’t … as well rounded.” Unfortunately, Noman blamed himself for
struggling – believing that he wasn’t well-rounded enough to enter into this introductory
course – rather than the high school curriculum with which he was educated.
As discussed earlier, students often compared their own preparation to that of their peers. Once participants moved into the college classroom, the yardstick by which they measured themselves changed. Graduates of CPP noticed a difference in their preparation and that of their suburban peers. “…[O]ther students who come from high schools in the suburbs, they're okay, they know everything. They're like, ‘Okay. I can do this.’ They know how to manage everything. They know how to write the perfect paper. They know how to write this, and that. And we graduate and I came in, I'm like: ‘What the – what is this?’” (Raimar). Likewise, Loris noted that that “a lot of suburban students have taken some sort of economics or Math with economics” - an area of study that Loris did not encounter until he entered his university and, therefore, found difficult.

In a critical inquiry class devoted to philosophy, Raimar shared that his classmates were able to engage in class discussions because “Karl Marx said this, and Aristotle…‘Oh, well, he said this and he said that and this guy said this.’ And there was a lot of participating in class too.” Classroom discussions that centered on areas with which Raimar was unfamiliar left him struggling to participate because he “didn't want people to be like, ‘Oh, this kid doesn't know what we're talking about.’” Chasneika also shared that her classmates who had attended “private school already knew what he [the professor] was talking about and me and Toya would be completely lost. … Because like everybody knew everything, what they had to know” while she and LaToya were “just lost like ‘What's going on?’”
Overall, participants shared two areas in which they felt that they were academically prepared. At his high school, Henry read *Invisible Man* and noted that “we read this book called *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. Yeah, we read that book and we had to read it in college as well. So, it actually helped.” Eleni shared that, due to the summer reading requirements for CPP, she did not enter college “not knowing who Jane Austen was or not knowing - thank God, Shakespeare… [CPP instructors] really helped me discover classics whether it was just simple books about Abraham Lincoln’s address.” Participants experienced academic success when their prior knowledge coincided with course content. For example, when Raimar’s class read *I, Rigoberto Manchu*, he felt “a lot more confident - like I could do this…since I came from Puerto Rico, I came from Latin America, I knew I could relate to it.” Moreover, he did not fear giving a wrong answer, partially because he felt “more connection with the professor and more, I can say this and I know that she will understand.” Raimar anticipated that his professor would be more apt to respond, "Yeah, yes." Eleni, Henry, and Raimar’s experiences speak to the importance of building prior knowledge as well as recognizing the cultural capital students bring to the college classroom.

Overwhelmingly, though, these shared experiences point to students who, during the first year of college, felt lost, who struggled with material, who were hesitant to participate, and who placed significant pressure on themselves for not being adequately prepared for college academics. For the most part, students did not blame their high schools or preparation programs that did not offer academic preparation that allowed
them to enter college fully confident. This points to the interactions of resiliency and agency. As discussed earlier, scholars identify academically resilient students as those who possess positive self-esteem and an internal locus of control (Wang et al., 1993; Hebert, 1996; Kenny et al., 2002) and those who meet with academic success despite high-risk environments (González & Padilla, 1997). For students who struggle with meeting the academic expectations of college, a university may be characterized as high-risk, because it does not acknowledge the social and cultural capital nor the prior knowledge of students from minority backgrounds. When academically resilient students with high agency, like the participants of this research study, encounter academic challenges in a new context, they assume the responsibility for their academic performance without consideration of how their universities are not meeting their needs. Given the success with which participants’ previous efforts met, one can understand how participants assumed the blame for their academic struggles. While this also may indicate assumption of a deficit paradigm, it also indicates that participants’ drive to succeed motivated their redoubled efforts. Moreover, as Murrell (2007) explains, a student with agency “… is able to determine his or her own positionality and resist the repositioning attempts of others” (p. 101) and she can exercise choice. While participants recognized their struggles, they reflexively repositioned themselves as capable and, therefore, able to overcome barriers.

Few students, though, were prepared for the amount of work they would encounter, because of their academic preparations. However, Raimar shared that the
Director of his university’s summer start program spoke directly to students about the academic environment that he was about to enter.

Roystone told us that most of the students are coming here, are going to know what's going on, they're going to know what they're talking about. “They're going to do things, use words that you've never heard before, the professors are going to talk about things that you've never heard before” and he [would] always tell you, “You're going to have to double your work. You’re going to have to research what the students are talking about and then you have to do all of these things.”

Following the Director’s advice, Raimar “went back and researched most of the things we talked about in class and to get a sense of what it was. So then maybe next time when we talked about the same thing, I at least understood what was going on and was able to participate.” Noman devoted his time to “read[ing] more. Visit[ing] professors more. Mak[ing] sure I was on top of whatever I was doing.” Hearing a similar story from Chasneika and LaToya prompted this research study’s questions because the students who participated in CPP are intelligent and motivated students who work relentlessly to achieve their goals. Each student exhibited perseverance, determination, and hope; traits that are simultaneously inspirational and heartbreaking. Heartbreaking because they initially accepted a deficit paradigm that places undue pressure for students from urban and low resourced schools to look to themselves for answers and not to question systems that did not academically prepare them or build upon the strengths that they carry. Their
strengths are what drive them to create prior knowledge, to experience fear in class
discussions by asserting their views, to inquire into learning strategies, to build
relationships with professors, and to carry on despite repeated challenges and difficulties
in the college classroom.

**Writing Is Critical**

Writing revealed itself as one of the most critical skills to academic success in
college. “[T]he professor expects that you know how to write a paper, you know how to
write a thesis, you know how to support everything” (Raimar). Students met college
expectations with a mix of frustration and determination. Participants felt frustration
because their high school preparation did not address writing structure and other
benchmarks of college-level writing. While participants were introduced to basic writing
skills, these skills were not developed enough to ensure early success with college writing
demands. Therefore, participants’ determination to succeed led them to writing support
centers. Writing centers provided tutors who “looked over your essays besides the
teachers; they will give you different kinds of feedback, and also a lot of research”
(Loris).

Eleni, who experienced success in high school English classes, encountered a
setback once she entered the college classroom. After experiencing embarrassment
because she would “would have the most marks on [her] paper,” Eleni realized “I can’t
be doing this, I need legit help.” Like her CPP classmates, Eleni became “annoyed at
[herself] because [she] wasn’t doing what [she] thought [she] would. [She] was just like
[her] brother … where they feel like they can do it but they just have to push themselves more.” Eleni felt that “[she was] not sufficient enough to be a college student” because “one professor who was really discouraging … she said that maybe [Eleni] should reconsider [her] English major and just have secondary ed. with another specialization whether it’s math, science, something [Eleni] didn’t really have to use … English speaking or writing skills.” As a result, Eleni briefly changed her major from secondary English education to secondary science education. Her dream, though, to “to get back to the community [she] came from - struggling readers and writers,” fueled her determination and she sought help from the writing center at her university.

Struggling with similar writing difficulties, Raimar received feedback from his professors that “‘You just – you jump in, from the past to the present, from the past to the present,’ and ‘You need help with that.’” He, too, received the advice from his professor that “There's an academic resource center here on campus, and any time you need any help for any class, you just go to them and they help you out. So if you need help in writing, you can go get help for writing.” Raimar, however, received explicit instruction from his college professor, a former Boston Public School teacher, who instructed him to “‘Just watch these, look at how you wrote this paragraph as opposed to how you wrote the next paragraph,’ or he'll point out stuff like that, so he helped out.” Taking the advice of his professor, Raimar realized that “that's what I had to do” in order to be successful in his English classes, and “after a while you kind of get the hang of things.” Through
continued effort, Raimar felt that he achieved an understanding of how to structure his papers.

Writing centers, though, did not always offer the support that students felt they needed. Noman visited the writing center at his university during the first year of college, but “to my understanding the tutors didn’t help me out at all. Because my essay would not be that improved.” While Noman felt confident that “the professors … weren’t worried about my ideas because the ideas I had were great and everything I was going to talk about were great, too,” his primary concerns revolved around “the structure; does it make sense?” Feeling frustrated, Noman decided not to return to the writing centers because “they didn’t help me out with and that would just hurt my grade and I was like, what’s the point in going there like an hour you telling me something I already know?” Noman recognized the areas with which he struggled, but was unable to access explicit instruction for methods to correct his mistakes. When he did not earn higher grades, despite seeking help, Noman opted not to return to a sanctioned resource, believing his time was better spent struggling independently to improve his writing.

While participants demonstrate tremendous drive and possess multiple strengths, they grappled with college academic expectations. However, the academic abilities of students are not risk factors that explain students’ challenges. Rather, schools and universities are ill-equipped to teach students, such as this group of participants, from diverse backgrounds. Unfortunately, their educational experience throughout high school often resulted in learning basic skills rather than critical thinking. In many ways, these
academic experiences can be tied to the testing demands of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and associated standardized assessments. “Washback”—the influence of testing on classroom instruction—has been defined as “The extent to which the test influences language teachers and learners to do things that they would not necessarily otherwise do” (Messick, 1996, p.243) or as “The influence of testing on teaching and learning” (Bailey, 1996, p.259). Spratt (2005) reviewed the various points of impact of assessment practices studied by literacy researchers, areas that include curriculum, pedagogy, learning, attitudes, and feelings. Evidence suggests a narrowing of the curriculum when schools face pressure to improve test scores (Au, 2001). Unfortunately, however, such narrowing of the curriculum often results in students learning more basic skills and fewer critical thinking skills (Spillane, 2002). As discussed in Pedulla, Abrams, Madaus, Russell, Ramos and Miao (2003), the higher the stakes that accompany a standardized test, the greater the impact on curriculum and pedagogy. Proponents of impromptu writing assessments, like the essay component of the SAT and MCAS writing responses, argue that increasing assessments of writing will result in “washback,” that serves to improve students’ exposure to writing by positively impacting curriculum and pedagogy, thereby closing achievement gaps between students of color and white students (Spencer, 2006). However, Ball, Christensen, Fleischer, Haswell, Ketter, Yagelski, and Yancey (2005) state “Research suggests that writing focused on following patterns, writing one draft, and adhering to specific criteria for the test—just the kind of instruction likely to be used to prepare students for the new SAT [and MCAS]—prepares students poorly for college-
level writing tasks and for workplace writing tasks” (p. 6). Curriculum reflects testing demands and students who experience fewer writing opportunities, like CPP participants who graduated from low resourced schools, and more formulaic instruction will not receive adequate writing preparation for college academic success. Generally, these students are from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, are English Language Learners (ELLs), and are students of color.

Other factors contribute to students’ under-developed writing. Students are products of public high schools with curricula, which do not correspond with the expectations of most universities, colleges or community colleges. Venezia et al. (2003) investigated the gaps between high school and university academic expectations. According to their findings, the curricular demands of most high schools do not match those of the average university. Venezia et al.’s (2003) research found that universities required more credits in core subject areas; feeder high schools in Venezia et al.’s study required three years of science and social studies whereas the universities recommended four. The same held true for math and English requirements. Further, only 1.5% of low SES college-bound students met five criteria for admission to highly selective colleges (NCES, 1995). Unfortunately, as Perna (2005) stated: “[T]he groups of students who continue to be underrepresented in higher education are also the groups least likely to be academically prepared” (p. 114).

Given high stakes testing, fewer diversified writing opportunities, a narrowed high school curriculum, and emphasis on basic skills, participants in this research study
faced significant academic challenges in writing. In response to most of the challenges participants faced, they sought resources, such as writing centers and feedback from professors, consulted with classmates, and continued to re-position as they participated in the discourse with higher education.

**Grades: “If I’m a good student, it should show in my GPA”**

CPP participants apply pressure to themselves through their high expectations. Based on their success in high school, including being class valedictorians, participating in National Honor Society, and earning academic scholarships to their universities, participants expected to do well academically. When they earned lower grades than they anticipated, they asked, “Why was high school so easy, and now this is like – bam - so hard?” Students reflected that “high school was so easy” (Chasneika), but as freshmen, students “get overwhelmed. There is lot of expectations that you think you have to do” (Loris). Of these expectations, students held high goals for their GPAs during their initial forays into college academics. Many students entered college with the understanding of the importance of “academics, freshman year, because they are the base of the rest of your college career” (Loris). Moreover, students judged their performance and “success in college on [their] GPA” (Noman). While Noman recognized that this definition of academic success is “very simple and it’s just very narrow-minded,” he also believed that “if I am a good student, it should show in my GPA.” Participants learned to equate grades and GPAs with understanding and academic achievement.
Another aspect of students’ past academic experiences that informed this perspective was some level of false confidence instilled in them through their completion of college preparation programs. Not earning the grades he expected, Noman found his GPA “alarming.” This was particularly so in light of “the fact is that [he] took so many programs, [CPP], Upward Bound, Gear Up.” Given his success and preparation via a variety of college preparation programs, Noman assumed that “because [he] took those different main programs that [he] would be a better student.” Other participants carried similar assumptions about what they could expect of their academic achievements.

Following completion of a college-based summer preparation program, Chasneika believed that “first semester, I thought I was going to be perfectly fine because I automatically assumed that it was going to be smooth because I did [Small College’s preparation] and I had nothing to worry about.” Her success in the summer program led her to expect similar academic course structures, assessments, and studying environments. Unfortunately, “That was wrong; I should have never done that.” Similarly, in his summer college program, Raimar earned “for Math class, an A–. For both Political Science and English, it was a B+. So my GPA when I entered here was a 3.3 or 3.4.” Meeting with such academic success led him to believe that “college is easy.”

Interestingly, the participants who completed programs on their college campuses the summer before beginning university study struggled the most with not meeting their academic expectations. This may indicate a lack of academic rigor in summer programs that are designed to better prepare urban, first-generation college attendees, and students
whose first language is not English. Other students did not enter college believing that they would be able to earn grades and GPAs at similar levels as they achieved in high school. Although in high school, participants earned A’s, many entered college “with the mentality that Bs are really good in college so [they] strive to [get] that” (Loris). Other students heard the message that CPP conveyed, which was that “the first year is the most struggle” (Henry) and that college was “really hard” (Akorfa). However, even though students believed that they were “warned” and “informed” that college was “going to be difficult” (Eleni), the reality of not performing at the level they expected of themselves led to feelings of embarrassment, shame, and frustration.

Earning low grades was a unique and unpleasant experience for participants in this research study; their reports cards were “never Ds, never Fs” (Raimar). So when students earned lower grades, they began to ask “oh my God, is this really for me? … Am I supposed to be here? … Am I going to be able to do this all along?” (Chasneika). Not knowing if their grades were “just a rough start” (Chasneika), participants began to consider explanations: “I am not as smart as either I thought I was or I am not as prepared as I thought I was” (Noman); and to rationalize that this response was “because I’m a perfectionist” (Akorfa). Again, students turned to their own role in their academic struggles, believing that “they just have to push themselves more” (Eleni). They asked: “What am I not doing? Am I not doing enough? What do I have to do?” (Raimar). They sought out professors after class to ask, “[W]hat did I do wrong? Am I reading the test wrong?” (Chasneika). Lower grades left some students feeling “annoyed” (Eleni),
“horrible” (Chasneika), and “bad” (Akorfa), because they weren’t “doing what [they] thought [they] would” (Eleni). Often these academic struggles led some participants to feeling isolated. Although grades were not published, upon receiving a low grade on a test, Akorfa explained that,

I didn’t do good and whenever I’d get a bad grade - I always felt as if … [the professor] was saying, ‘Oh, she got a bad grade.’ I felt like everybody was like, “Why did you get a bad grade?” Like everybody was like focusing on me and just there’s a feeling when you…maybe it just me because I like to get good grades every time. When I don’t get good grades, I just feel as if I’m letting somebody down, the teacher down or something.

As discussed in the section on classroom participation, many participants in this research felt they were “standing up” to stereotypes because “a lot of white students already feel that minority students are there just because we need diversity on campus and [minority students are] not smart or anything like that” (Raimar). This increased pressure to serve as a model minority left some students feeling that they were “singled out” (Chasneika) to serve as representatives of their high schools, their cultures, and their races. In the next chapter, I will discuss the social and emotional experiences students described, but this pressure to defeat stereotypes profoundly impacted participants’ academic experiences. One of the characteristics that stands out among CPP students is that they believe they can adapt and position themselves in such a way to modify, change or transform personal outcomes. They take responsibility for their work,
their paths, their grades, and their obligations through adaptive strength comprised of
determination, motivation, and willpower. However, it has drawbacks “[w]henever [they]
do something that [they] felt is below what [they] can do, [they] tear [themselves] up over
it … [they] beat [themselves] up” (Akorfa). While some may recognize this as “really
bad to be doing that” (Akorfa), they continually return to their own roles in their
academic achievements, reflecting “Maybe if I did this, I would have done that, if I did
that…” (Akorfa), “I should have done better. I could have done better” (Loris).

**Course Planning and Withdrawing: I “winged it” and “I didn’t want a W”**

One response to difficult coursework that advisors and college preparation
programs may suggest is that students to choose first semester courses during that
simultaneously challenge students intellectually and meet general education requirements
without overwhelming them. Planning programs of study strategically can help students
acquire prior knowledge that they will need as they progress through their college years.
Often this role is assigned to a university office devoted to advising, and some
universities later transfer the role on to faculty members who teach in a student’s college
or major, someone who is “in the school of your degree” (Chasneika). In one student’s
experience, she registered for courses during orientation with the help of “orientation
leaders” who “do your registration” (Chasneika). While this initial assistance can help
students, Chasneika found herself “so completely lost” because “it wasn't even a schedule
that I had set up in my head.” Exactly who is supposed to advise students as they enroll in
courses, though, is not always clear. When asked who served as his advisor, Noman replied, “I don’t think I have one.” Henry shared “I didn't have an advisor.”

As Noman chose classes, he followed the advice he was given by one of the college preparation programs he attended—“try to get rid of your requirements as fast as you can.” Noman, like other participants in this research study, focused on meeting CORE requirements. Henry’s university also required “general educational courses,” which he had “to take to graduate.” Other students “picked out … courses based around” (Raimar) their majors, so they would have “an idea of what [they’d] be doing” (Akorfa). Without guidance, though, some participants decided to “just pick random courses” (Henry) or they “just winged it” (Akorfa).

While programs of study offer some guidance as course selection, students rely on a variety of strategies to choose their courses. For instance, students also evaluate professors, both formally and informally. Word of mouth can help students decide worthwhile courses to satisfy electives or course requirements. Noman sought guidance from his former college preparation program where he “can go talk to them and be like – ‘I want to do this, I want to do that,’ and they can help you out and be like – ‘hey maybe you should take this class, maybe you should take that.’” Chasneika’s university used a professor evaluation system that allowed students to post feedback about professors and classes, so that all students can access the information. For instance, students may post information “if that class is a lot of reading or this class has a lot of homework.” Unfortunately, Chasneika did not “know about that in [her] freshman year.” Upon
reflection, she realized that she would have made other choices if she had access to the information offered by the evaluation system. Likewise, Henry also shared that he “kind of regret[s]” choosing his classes in the manner he did, because as he progressed through his coursework, his general education classes, which “are supposed to be easy classes … would [have] balance[d] out” his more difficult coursework.

Perhaps part of what becomes overwhelming about college is the immense number of choices—college majors, courses, and professors--especially when compared to choices students faced in high school. College classes sound interesting, offer new knowledge but may also derail students if they do not choose courses successfully or choose classes that do not meet requirements. And what happens when students face academic challenges that they are not ready to tackle? Participants revealed that many of them were unaware of how to withdraw from a course or what the consequences of withdrawing were. In the experiences of many of the participants, universities “don't make it clear like how withdrawals work” (Chasneika). Although universities posted “instructions on the website” and “the syllabus even told” (Raimar) students how to withdraw, participants were “afraid of even dropping like any of [their] classes” (Chasneika). Some students were aware that they would “get a W on [their] transcript” (Raimar) and others “didn't know what would happen” (Chasneika). Most, however, concluded “that [it] doesn't look good” (Raimar). As a result, students “didn’t want a W so [they] don’t withdraw” (Akorfa). Therefore, they “would just stick it through and … see what happens” (Raimar). What happened, in most cases, was that students struggled
with the classes, earned lower grades than they expected of themselves, and did not know how to rectify the situation. There is a sense of fear of failure or how others would perceive their actions if they did withdraw from a class, as evidenced from their statements regarding not knowing the outcomes of withdrawing. Again, participants relied on their own determination to overcome challenges. They utilized resources - classmates, academic centers, and professors - but did not know how or what the consequences would be if they withdrew from a class, which, when looking back, leads them, to the conclusion that they “should've just withdrawn and then taken it over again; that's what [they] should've done” (Chasneika). Knowing information like the timing of when to withdraw to avoid a W on their transcripts and the consequences of withdrawing, students could make more informed decisions, not “beat [themselves] up” (Akorfa), or feel “horrible” (Chasneika) because they struggled with earning higher GPAs.

Managing Time: Course Demands, Work Schedules, and General Expectations

Course syllabi: “What is this?”

While logistical information, or college knowledge, was a primary component of the College Preparation Program, participants reported feeling overwhelmed and under-prepared for the academic demands of the college classroom with respect to the interaction of time management and course demands, work schedules, and overall expectations. Participants learned, through trial and error, to navigate academic
challenges from being unfamiliar with a course syllabus, managing the workload of a full-time college student, and being unsure how to best study for exams.

Prior to entering his first college course, and despite completing university summer preparation program, Raimar described his first college class as overwhelming. “The teacher is just going over the syllabus and for this class; he's going over the syllabus. So he did what to expect blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. ‘Okay, you can go home.’ But – I mean, I didn't even know what the syllabus was. It was like - I never got that in high school.” While the professor shared his expectations of the course and students’ work, the professor presumed that students were familiar with how to interact with and utilize a syllabus. Professors create syllabi, because students are “supposed to know [what is expected]; [they] are responsible for checking that syllabus every day to see what due for the next class” (Chasneika). The responsibility of managing time, learning content, preparing assignments, and prepping for assessments is placed on the college student – responsibilities with which some students may not be familiar. Over time, the participants in this study learned how to read and utilize the information held in course syllabi that allows students to “know what to expect … and [they] actually see what it's all about from beginning to end” (Chasneika). However, CPP could improve initial responses to syllabi by offering examples, discussions on the format and expectations of syllabi, and use of syllabi in the CPP courses. This would make students familiar with the role of a syllabus in a class as well as ensure that CPP participants were not overwhelmed by the information provided. Assumptions and expectations of prior
knowledge, much like the presumption of how to utilize a syllabus, continued beyond the first meeting of a college course and impacted the academic experiences of this research study’s participants.

Time Management and Work: “I had to”

Upon being introduced to a syllabus for the first time, participants shared that they were initially overwhelmed by the “… workload put on your shoulders” (Chasneika). Until college, many participants in this research study either “[did not] study for those [advanced] courses” (Henry) in high school or “used to do [their] homework in less than an hour” (Chasneika). In comparison, college coursework required students to “study a lot, a lot, a lot for hours and hours” (Raimar), sometimes “up to two to three hours to finish” (Chasneika) for one class. With the increased time demands on students’ homework efforts, and knowing that college coursework “was going to be academically hard and trying” (Akorfa), students concluded that there was more of a demand on “knowing about time management” (Noman) and “know[ing] how to plan out stuff” (Akorfa). Knowing about time management meant that “a big chunk of [time management is] how to study, how to prepare … studying the whole week for one course” (Chasneika), “being more organized” (Noman), and “lots of research, stay[ing] on top of your work, stay[ing] on top of your readings” (Raimar). Participants found “how easy it is to get sidetracked, do other things rather being focused on school work or other things. When you live on campus you have more time on your hands, you don’t have time for family, you’re just on your own” (Loris). As this research study’s
participants struggled to meet college academic demands, they learned that being a college student involved more than academics – it meant that they must be “able to expand your horizons” (Chasneika) and that they needed to “make the big circle … go outside that and look at the sort of what the school offers” (Loris).

**Working to Make Time and Money**

Unfortunately, economic demands required some students to work, which was additional pressure as they balanced increased workloads with attempts to expand their horizons. While CPP encouraged students to find work study positions, because these positions are often more accommodating to the academic demands on students, requiring fewer than 20 hours/week, the majority of the participants “had to work” (Chasneika) and feared taking on too much debt during their years as students. Those who worked felt “overwhelmed” (Eleni) by the pressure to balance work and school. Participants also found that their “homework would be like half bad” because “most of the time [they] wouldn't do the reading and things like that” (Chasneika). This “makes it difficult for the student to maintain good academic standing” (Eleni). While students “wish[ed they] didn’t have to work,” knowing that working too many hours was “defeating the purpose of attending university” (Eleni), they were also very aware that their “parents don't even make that much money” (Chasneika), “mak[ing] enough to live” (Eleni), and students did not “want to ask them for anything” (Chasneika). Participants found, though, that work study positions that revolved around “office work … A.K.A. homework” (Eleni) allowed them to complete homework for their classes, and these positions also offered “the most
rewarding experience” (Raimar) when they found connections between their own educational experiences and work.

Participants shared experiences that reflect findings in other research studies, which point to the importance of working fewer than 20 hours per week, the more positive effects of work-study employment which “increase[s] integration to campus life … while a job other than work-study (which is most likely off campus) can have the opposite effect (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; O’Brien & Shedd, 2001, p. 8). Such findings are consistent with the results of this research study, which concludes that there is a critical need to increase work-study opportunities for students who meet the socioeconomic requirements. Unfortunately, current budgetary plans propose to reduce spending on Pell Grants (Superville, 2011). Educational grants have been found to increase student retention (Pell, 2004) as they decrease the amount of unmet college tuition, thereby reducing the number of hours students must work. As Chasneika, Raimar, and Eleni suggest, work-study programs not only provide students, extra financial support but also positively impact students’ engagement with coursework and academic achievement.

**Study Skills**

“Write everything down”

Reducing time demands can reduce some of the pressure students experience during their first college classes. Study participants found that “college … was just [a] completely different animal” because the “classes were little bit harder” (Noman). The
new content that students learned challenged them as did acquiring note taking skills and how to engage in classes. Participants reflected that “this is something that nobody prepares you for” (Chasneika). While participants believed that CPP advised students to “find out what works for you… what kind of study habits are your habits. What is the best way to study for you,” they understood this guidance to be “just advice they were giving out” rather than “necessarily skills that [they were] learning” (Noman) or being “really specific on like what you're supposed to be doing” (Chasneika) in order to study or manage time. The lack of explicit instruction on study skills and note taking strategies resulted in students returning to methods they used in high school or from “watch[ing] movies” to determine “what happens” in the college classroom (Akorfa).

In an effort to engage in the classes and learn new content, students followed CPP guidance. They “read and [took] down notes” to prepare for the classes and regularly “[went] to lectures and stuff like that” (Noman). In order to engage with the lecture format of most college courses, students “sat in the front desk”; tried to volunteer answers; and “listen[ed] to professor, writing down whatever is told, and writing down notes” (Loris). Participants learned a variety of cues that indicated when they should take notes in classes. For instance, “anything that went onto the blackboard, you would write it down. And it is important if the professor says it twice you think that is important so you write it down” (Loris). However, in order to determine importance, students “have to know the material to know what's important and what … is not important” (Chasneika).
Conversely, when professors “never wrote down anything,” students’ grades were “really bad in that class [during] freshman year” (Chasneika). Further, some participants found that at “[f]irst, my notes were sloppy” (Chasneika) because “in class you're scribbling and you may not know what you were writing” (Loris). As Akorfa described, there were times when she would “write everything down” and “sometimes I would be focused on writing so much that I don’t actually hear what she’s saying.” The amount of note taking, without guidance in developing a system or how to determine importance of content, created situations in which participants were scrambling to record lecture material while also attempting to learn new content. While they “tried to understand [the classes], [they] just couldn’t” (Noman). Students believed they could “just go on, just paying attention to lectures” (Noman) or “sit[ting] in the third row because [they] have to pay attention; [they] have to write, write, write” (Chasneika). Students’ reflections reveal an immense amount of work and frustration as they struggled with how to engage in their college courses and how to enter the academic discourse of a college classroom.

“Learn[ing] it the hard way.” Over time, participants “learned it the hard way” (Chasneika) and began to change their methods for recording lecture material. Akorfa “learned to focus on what the teacher is saying, what they say is what you write down, not necessarily everything they write on the board.” Loris found that “Any PowerPoint - they show examples. Examples you write that down so stuff like that. Sometimes the professor says, ‘Oh you don't need to take notes.’ They have the PowerPoint slides and you just listen in some of those classes.” Noman “talked to some people” in his classes in
order to understand lecture material more effectively. After class, Raimar “researched most of the things we talked about in class” in order to “get a sense of what it was” that was discussed in class. Participants found truth in what the Program Director at Raimar’s university warned “In order for you, as a minority to succeed in school, you're going to have to double or sometimes triple the work that other students are putting in.” These initial experiences with college-level academics indicate that these participants were resourceful in their approach to learning new skills, even as they faced the realities of their academic preparation in a new, and often harsh, academic environment.

**College Exams: “What didn’t work”**

This new context assessed students’ knowledge with final exams, and until college courses, students “didn’t really have tests that evaluated us at the end of classes” (Eleni). As discussed earlier, until college, this study’s participants shared that they did not “study at all in high school, at all, never” (Raimar). Oftentimes, their high school assessments were more explicitly connected with homework. When they “did [their] homework” they found that “what showed up on your homework showed up on the test or things like that” (Raimar). However, in college, participants discovered that they “weren’t acquainted” with this form of assessment, leaving them feeling “vague” as to how to approach studying (Eleni). Not until college did some participants learn “that's why you have to go to lectures I guess, some stuff they tell you … only during lecture … they'll explain certain materials” (Henry). Beyond new ways of learning content, different testing formats and the volume of content challenged students and sometimes resulted in
test-taking strategies that were unsuccessful. In Loris’s economics course, “the test was … multiple choice, which I really didn’t like.” The challenge of a new testing format and new ways of retaining information resulted in Loris not “do[ing] well in the class” further reinforcing that participants had to determine what professors considered important information and what to include in their notes.

As they prepared for exams, participants “tried to figure out the best way to study” (Noman) by experimenting with various strategies. Eleni “was introduced to flash cards and how they can help because [she] had never used that method.” While this new knowledge was “exciting,” she also “found out that [she is] not a flash card person.” Such metacognitive knowledge and exposure to various studying strategies would have benefited her before she entered college classes and encountered the extreme pressure of college exams. Without this insight, Eleni “stressed a lot” and “just tried to study.” Other participants reported that they “didn’t know the basics of studying” (Henry), and although “some things that [they] did in high school helped” (Chasneika), most of what they knew did not benefit them academically. In comparing himself to his college classmates, Noman reflected “most people can read a chapter in an hour and they would know everything about it.” However, Noman found that he was “spending two hours reading the chapter and understanding nothing, getting nothing out of it,” which left him believing that there “has to be something wrong with [his study skills].” Raimar reflected that “as far as the note taking - I'd just read something and if it interests me, I'd underline it. So that's pretty much what I do for note taking.” Similarly, Chasneika believes that
preparation programs need to offer better guidance in “how to study for tests, how to read, and understand it. You know, they taught us like read with a pen, but that's it.” While this is one way to read and study, having only one method for note taking or studying for tests was not sufficient for the academic achievement participants expected in their college experiences.

So how did participants learn to study? They learned by struggling, seeking out resources to supplement their learning, and adapting their strategies accordingly. Eleni’s roommates helped her learn new strategies for studying throughout the term; she observed their preparations for “small quizzes [they] had throughout the semester before finals.” Eleni watched how “one would have this method; one would have this method” and then “tried both.” As a result of her roommates modeling study strategies and then engaging in practice, Eleni found that when she would “write it out and then read it to [her]self. Cover and try to reiterate what [she] know[s]” that her assessment results improved. Improving study skills also meant devoting more time to learning material and preparing for tests. While participants initially believed that studying for exams “one or two days is going to be good enough” (Chasneika), their early experiences with college assessments left them believing they needed “to change everything about me or how I used to do things” (Noman). As with many of their early college academic experiences, participants had to adapt methods of studying and adjust the amount of time they spent on coursework. Participants reflected on “what didn't work … from the first semester” (Chasneika) and tried “to replicate [what worked]” (Noman). They began to study “at
least two weeks in advance” (Chasneika), “go over [their] notes … keep looking at the information” (Akorfa), “re-write … notes always” (Loris), engage in “a lot of memorization” (Chasneika), and go “to the library where [they’d] find a quiet space” (Raimar). Each participant “found out what mistakes” (Henry) they’d made, but they also applied immense pressure to themselves as they engaged in the process of learning what worked for them. All too often, participants took the blame for their struggles and tried to determine what was missing from themselves rather than looking at the systems that could have supported them more effectively. All too often, participants internalized their struggles, identifying themselves as “lazy” (Henry) and believing that they “should do more” (Loris). For the most part, students engaged in help-seeking and problem-solving behavior. However, even these strategies did not always yield the results they expected.

Other students struggled with the amount of material they need to recall for their final exams. For a communications course focused on theory, Raimar said that the final exam was “really hard” because he had to memorize “20 plus theories” and “all of them made their way into that exam in one way or another.” When prepping for the SAT or MCAS, participants were advised to take their time and check their work before handing in their exams. However, given the high content volume and high stakes of a college final exam, some students faltered in their confidence. In particular, Henry discovered that “[A]t the end when I'm done with everything… I think this is the answer and I think it's wrong and I switch it and I should've saved my first guess.” While he followed the advice of CPP instructors and high school teachers by checking his work, Henry’s efforts were
not always successful. Given that participants were simultaneously learning new information, new ways to retain content, note-taking strategies, study skills, time management, and ways to perform well on final exams, it is no wonder that Henry second-guessed his answers or that Raimar shared “I really don't know how I did it.”

**Classroom Discussion: “Do I even want to participate?”**

Such efforts extended to participation requirements for university courses. Raimar’s research into lecture topics was fueled by the hope that “maybe next time when we talked about the same thing, you at least understood what was going on and you'll be able to participate.” In a class with students of varying classes, Loris encountered professors who “picked on you … they call on you, they call your name. They will ask you what you think about this and … without you volunteering.” Other participants also chose to “never speak” during their freshman year because they were “intimidated like if I said something that was wrong” for fear that the professors “would grill me” (Chasneika). Other participants felt intimidated “being in a classroom where everyone is raising their hands and participating” (Raimar). Peers were meeting professors’ expectations that all students should participate, but these participants found that this was just one more area college discourse in which were not prepared.

Beyond speaking up in class, participants believed that their classroom contributions would not be viewed as valid as the statements of their more affluent peers. As Raimar visually demonstrated the bar by which his participation was measured, he shared that “that because of the things [his classmates were] saying and the words they're
using that … their answer is up here and [his] is down here.” Likewise, Chasneika feared being questioned by professors because she shared “what [she] was thinking or something like that.” Such fears led students to question “do I even want to participate?” (Raimar) Knowing, though, that participation impacted their grades, students developed strategies to work around their intimidation or fears. Some students chose to “go first and then let everyone go after me” (Raimar). This way, they were able to participate, but did not feel that they were being judged as harshly by classmates or professors, if their contributions occurred at the start of class. Other students worked around participation in class by “reading more” (Noman), asking questions in an effort to “help the teacher notice that you're interested; that you are actually there” (Chasneika) and to demonstrate their willingness to engage in discussions. Students feared that professors and classmates would only view them as “quiet in class” (Chasneika) or that their academic achievements would end up “feeding into the stereotype of a black kid who wasn’t that smart” (Akorfa). Speaking in class meant facing the fear that others may think “‘this kid doesn't know what we're talking about’” (Raimar).

Such fears are very real and the determination to face stereotypes, to negotiate ways to meet expectations while facing social, emotional, and academic obstacles is a testament to these participants’ strength and perseverance. While participants believe that “it gets better, better, and better” (Raimar), the effort expended to find a voice in the college classroom may be too daunting for students with fewer internal resources. These students found a way to “participate in class without having to worry” (Raimar) because
“it's my opinion” (Chasneika). Having found that much of what participation entails, a reliance on personal experience and connections made beyond texts and lectures, they no longer “care what anybody thinks” (Chasneika) and feel freer to participate in class discussions.

**College professors: “One of a kind”**

While participation in class discussions was required for some courses, the opportunity to ask questions for clarification may not arise in a “three-hundred student class … packed to the max” (Chasneika). Given large class sizes and that “sometimes [professors] have so much [in their lectures]” students found “that if you don't understand, you're going to be lost then. They're not going to stop for you” (Henry).

Some participants in this research study also “noticed that a lot of professors don't really pay attention” (Chasneika), meaning that the freshmen year professors seemed to approach teaching as though there were going to be many mistakes made by freshmen, so they appeared to be less invested in checking to be sure all students were engaged or learning. In particular, when Chasneika reflected on her first classes, she believed that “nothing sparked” – meaning that the professors didn’t seem to care whether or not their material was interesting or engaging. For some classes “the professor just goes there to teach and then he walks out” (Henry), giving the impression that he was unavailable for clarifying students’ understanding or responding to their questions. This was further emphasized in that the professor “doesn't answer questions. When people raise their hands, he just ignores them” (Henry). In other courses, professors “come in, they just
lecture, they don’t care who is there, who is taking notes; they don’t require participation or attendance” (Loris). In these classes, participants perceived that the professors are “not that interested” (Noman) in students. While these interactions were not the norm and professors who displayed this lack of interest were “one of a kind” (Henry), intentional or not, demeanors that relay the message that they do not care were surprising and disappointing. This may be particularly disheartening for students who graduated from CPP and from urban high schools with teachers who were clearly invested in their academic success. Participants in this research felt that they attended “high school[s where] everybody was willing to help you … you could go up to anybody for help and you knew the help was there” (Chasneika). In comparison, participants in this research study “haven’t seen that intensity and that [level of] care” (Noman) from their university professors. Such interactions further enforce participants’ perceptions that it is their “lack of effort and [their] lack of enthusiasm” (Noman) that causes them to falter.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored the themes connected to academics in order to explicate the connections between a college preparation program and the ensuing academic challenges and successes that participants experienced during their first year of college. Divided into two sections, Chapter 6 examined the role of participant positioning in college preparation, the role of college knowledge, academic dimensions of college matriculation, time management demands, and study skills.
Positionality emerged as a prominent theme in college preparation. As discussed in the first section, participants actively sought out CPP to acquire dominant social and cultural capital that would facilitate meeting their goals of matriculation. By enacting their agency, participants deliberately self-positioned within the socio-political conversation of matriculation. Once participants enrolled in CPP, they recognized that they gained knowledge, which eased their anxieties surrounding the college preparation and application processes. Through acquisition of dominant cultural capital, participants gained awareness of college admission requirements and applied that knowledge to prepare for college. College knowledge, a key component of CPP, included admission requirements, how to access financial aid to finance tuition, and how to navigate the admissions process. “In terms of cultural capital, college preparation programs connect students to social networks and try to develop the cultural capital that it takes to survive in what many working-class youths perceive as an alien environment-college campuses - or it might focus on psychological and emotional support structures for adolescents who do not have an adult in their lives who has gone to college or who understands how to go about getting into college” (Tierney & Jun, 2001, p. 210). Participants also strengthened their learner identities by engaging in a community of learners that centered on academic achievement. Moreover, CPP instructors built trusting relationships that fostered the development of the community of learners and encouraged participants to persevere as they prepared for matriculation. Through CPP enrollment, participants experienced the power of place by visiting Small College’s campus for three years. The power of place
was critical in helping students envision their goals to matriculate. Spending time on a college campus, or the power of place, made the possibility of assuming the role of college students tangible and attainable.

Once matriculated, however, participants experienced academic struggles. Collegiate academics demanded participants possess prior knowledge in order to meet their own academic expectations. College knowledge that was not addressed in CPP, like planning programs of study, navigating universities’ course withdrawal procedures, using a syllabus, and time management skills, were areas that participants reflected would have been beneficial in their college preparation. Furthermore, academic demands, such as how to participate in college course discussions note taking and study strategies, presented struggles that participants had previously not encountered. As participants grappled with deficit paradigms, they assumed blame for their struggles and attempted to self-position again in order to academically achieve.

In Chapter 7, I attend to the social and cultural experiences that affected participants’ first year in college. Although many of the cultural and social experiences occurred in the college classroom, participants’ reflections reveal the pressure of being a minority student in predominantly White universities and how the unfamiliar contexts demanded that participants self-position in ways that strengthened their voices and confidence. Finally, Chapter 7 will focus on people as resources and how participants relied on, and built new, relationships for support. Chapter 8 will offer a summary of
findings as well as address areas of success and areas for more research into college preparation programs.
CHAPTER SEVEN: FIRST-YEAR SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

During their first year of college, participants in this research study grappled with new social and cultural experiences, ones in which they were one of few students of color or one of few students from a low socioeconomic status. These new experiences ranged from standing up to stereotypes, being the only minority in social and academic situations, and struggling to apply acquired social and cultural capital to new situations. As a result, participants relied on familiar sources of academic and emotional support, such as family and friends. Students also sought out new sources of support, like members of their college preparation cohorts and extra-curricular groups. As participants reflected on their first year’s social and cultural experiences, they discussed ways that CPP did, or did not, prepare them and what a college preparation program can institute to better prepare students for the sorts of social and cultural interactions they encountered as college students. Moreover, CPP graduates shared the positioning and deliberate decisions they made in order to empower themselves and find voice on their college campuses.

Standing, Being, and Struggling

Being a minority: “Standing up” and “blending in”

Participants in this research study attended public high schools where their races, ethnicities, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses (SES) constituted the demographic majorities. Their high schools were comprised of “Spanish, Black, White just like a melting pot of people” (Henry). Despite being a “melting pot,” however, Latinos “stuck
with the Spanish kids and the African-Americans stuck with themselves, and the White student, the very few White students at [West Side High School], were with themselves” (Raimar). Furthermore, almost 80% of West Side and Midtown High Schools students are considered low income (http://profiles.doe.mass.edu). As has so often been discussed in research, low socioeconomic status (SES) and concomitant struggles are “the never ending financial problem in inner city. Even if you are considered White … it doesn’t matter. You don’t have to be Hispanic or Latino, African-American. You can be any race and endure this” (Eleni).

Prior to college, participants recollected very few instances at West Side High School or Midtown High School when they operated within social situations as a minority race, culture or members of a SES group. Participants’ neighborhoods also reflected the demographics of their schools. As this group of CPP graduates prepared for college, few discussions focused on what they might expect as they became minorities on their college campuses. As a result, students “never really thought about race and how that would play into college” (Akorfa). Having never considered the impact of race or SES, and without explicit conversations focused on issues of becoming a racial, cultural or economic minority, participants in this research study felt unprepared for the social and cultural interactions that occur on a predominantly White college campus. Research that addresses transitions to college concludes that while all students struggle to transition, students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds contend with adjustments to campus climates that are often experienced as culturally hostile and
damaging to students’ academic identities (Carter, 2003; Fischer, 2007; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja and Solorzano, 2009).

Participants became very aware of their minority status once on their college campuses. As Noman shared, “[my college] is the Whitest school I've ever seen in my life. I was like - I feel different.” In their classes, Chasneika saw that “everybody looked alike” (Chasneika), which meant that students of color “don’t have that option of blending in … You can just know” (Akofa), or as Raimar described the visual recognition of race and skin color, when walking into the cafeteria “you can pretty much count the dots.” As students entered their first classes, there were often only “10 Black kids in the whole 300 people [class]” (Akofa); in smaller classes, “there were three of us who were not White out of at least 25” (Raimar). The immediate recognition of difference may have compounded some participants’ beliefs that they received admission because the college “looked at … my race” (Chasneika), or because, as believed by “a lot of White students… we need diversity on campus” (Raimar), and not because students of color are “smart or anything like that” (Raimar).

Although most participants did not share how they came to hold these initial beliefs, Chasneika reflected on how her participation in the university’s summer preparation program influenced her feelings. “It's just a feeling for some reason … also because of [the university’s summer preparation program]. If you look at it; they're all minorities in that program.” Interacting with only minority students during the summer programs may have simultaneously allowed students to find peers with similar
backgrounds, which proved beneficial and a source of peer support, but it may also have influenced students’ perceptions of their academic abilities. While Chasneika views herself as “a really smart person” consideration of race as a factor for admission, as seemingly evidenced by placement in a summer program with a minority student population, “feels horrible.”

As they engaged in college courses, participants in this research study asked “where do I fit in?” (Akorfa). During classes that required group work, “it would be awkward because I’ve had to either find people who are not White, as in either Asian or Arabic, because the White kid didn’t necessarily gravitate towards me” (Akorfa). Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg and Klukken’s (2004) participants reported similar feelings of isolation originating from segregated seating choices and separation during group work. In addition to feeling separated from classmates during group work, class discussions that focused on race, culture or socioeconomics often resulted in further separation, sometimes because professors would “number us out” (Chasneika) for discussion. Moreover, “when the subject about race came up, all the students will kind of pose and look around – look around the room like, ‘Oh, I see a couple of – so I don't know if should say this’” (Raimar). In other words, both White students and participants in this research study were very aware of race. Given the focus on students of color during discussions focused on race, culture and socioeconomics, students of color in this research study felt as though they had to “to speak out for everybody else that wasn’t in the class just because” (Akorfa), alluding to the pressure of performing as a model.
minority student. Davis et al. (2004) describe this phenomena as representing or hypervisibility; hypervisibility refers to being noticed “wholly as a result of being Black” (p. 435). Participants in this research, Black and Latino, felt hypervisible when professors singled them out to speak for their cultures or race. For example, in Chasneika’s adolescent psychology course, there were “two Latinas; it was like me and another girl that was Hispanic. No guys were Hispanic. The rest were like White and then, there was a couple of Black girls and that's it.” When the class discussion turned to the impact of socioeconomic status, Chasneika “really felt like as if ‘oh, it's hard to translate because she has that [Latina and low SES] perspective… she'll know what it was like.’ And then, also because I went to a Boston public school, so that also singled me out as well.” While professors may have wanted to encourage participants to share their experiences, given their minority status in the classroom, participants believed they were expected to “speak out for everybody” and to “actually prove yourself” worthy of being in the college classroom (Akorfa).

When asked if professors noticed her isolation, Akorfa responded, “I don’t know if they did but…I don’t think it would be their job in the college to make sure that the black kids won’t get…yeah…” In other words, Akorfa did not believe that it was her professors’ responsibility to create an inclusive learning environment that welcomed difference. Nor did Akorfa seem to believe that her professors should take an active stance in promoting equity. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC & U, 2007) issued a position statement for “inclusive excellence,” which
addressed “Equity-mindedness: A demonstrated awareness of and willingness to address equity issues among institutional leaders and staff” (http://www.aacu.org/compass/inclusive_excellence.cfm). Akorfa, Chasneika, and Raimar’s experiences of isolation in the college classroom and their belief that professors are not responsible for creating a learning environment in which participants feel connected or fully engaged in learning, indicates that AAC & U’s (2007) initiative has yet to be realized. College and university educators must also attend to issues of race and culture in classroom discussions in order to create inclusive and welcoming learning environments. Researchers have found that interactions with faculty and perceptions of prejudice partially inform campus racial climates (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella & Hagedorn, 1999; Fischer, 2007; Smith, 2005). Perceptions of prejudice, with regard to university faculty, include equitable grading policies, faculty academic expectations of students of color, and availability to meet outside of class (Davis et al., 2004). Cabrera et al. (1999) found that perceptions of prejudice and a negative campus climate affected both Black students and White students. However, Black students’ commitment to an institution was more affected by perceptions of prejudice than that of the White participants (Cabrera et al., 1999). Fischer (2007) found that “each one-point increase in the campus racial climate scale for Blacks resulted in a 10% increase in the odds of leaving college” (p. 148). Positive relationships, though, between faculty and students whose backgrounds are different from the majority student population increased their satisfaction with college, and hence, their likelihood of retention (Fischer, 2007). While
all participants in this research reported satisfaction with their college experiences, one must ask how much more connected participants might have felt had their professors actively created inclusive groups for discussion without singling out the students of color to represent their races and cultures. In efforts to rectify the isolation Akorfa experienced, she self-positioned to create connections to her classmates by approaching them rather than waiting to be approached. Talking to others became one measure Akorfa, a soft-spoken young woman, undertook to counteract stereotypes. Because she was the “only one” Black person in many of her classes and in her dorm, she feared that if “[she’s] quiet, then people are gonna say, ‘Oh well, she’s Black. She doesn’t talk and therefore other Black people don’t talk.’” Understanding the ways that students experience isolation from their peers and their professors, as well as the efforts they expend to counteract isolation and stereotypes, may lead to better academic integration and more positive perceptions of college classroom experiences. When there is an increase in diverse populations on predominantly White college campuses and an absence of active engagement within a racialized discourse, professors and universities operate under the “naive notion that interaction among ethnic groups would evolve naturally” (Cabrera et al., 1999, p. 154). By choosing to not actively engage all students in the learning environment without the additional pressures of hypervisibility, professors exacerbate the social and academic isolation of students of color.

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6 “[A]cademic integration relates to academic performance, involvement with the curriculum, and contact with faculty and staff” (Smith & Wolf-Wendel, 2005, p. 26)
Being “singled out” is one aspect of intergroup relations within positioning theory. Intergroup positioning occurs when an individual is positioned, or positions herself, based on membership in a group, such as race or culture (Tan & Moghaddam, 2003). Within intergroup positioning, individuals may find that they are a group representative, like the participants in this research study as they engaged in academic discourse within a setting where they were the minority. “Group representatives are persons whose group memberships are made more explicit by the speaker’s claim…, by the acknowledgement of others …, or by the situation or context (e.g., finding oneself to be the only minority in the room as the topic of racial discrimination emerges in a discussion). In such instances, a person is exercising the claimed and/or socially ascribed right and duty to ‘speak on behalf of’ [a racial, cultural or ethnic group]. In such instances, and particularly when one’s status as having the ‘right to speak on behalf of’ is formally recognized, a person’s utterances are likely to be taken as a group commitment rather than as an individual undertaking” (Tan & Moghaddam, 2003, p.185). Given the immediate recognition that participants were the minority in the college classroom, through phenotype, discourses, and reactions, they were both ascribed and claimed the right to speak on behalf of their races, cultures, and socioeconomic groups. Hence, this increased pressures on participants in this research study to participate in ways that did not reinforce stereotypes. While participants quickly became aware that they served as group representatives, CPP “never did [prepare students for these situations]. They only told us to be open minded because you going to see people from different backgrounds -
people that you have never met before” (Noman). However, culture and socioeconomic status would have been a “good thing to talk about so [participants] had an idea of what to expect when [they] go to college” (Akorfa). In addition to preparing students for the impact of social, cultural, and SES factors on their college experiences, CPP could have engaged students in explicit conversations regarding professors’ lack of cultural competence, feeling isolated in classrooms, and where participants may find sources of support as they encounter a campus climate that was not fully welcoming or inclusive.

When White participants in this research study encountered classmates from different socioeconomic statuses, they also felt “alienated from this population” (Eleni). At most of the universities where participants in this research study matriculated, “Everybody had a similar life. Everybody had a yacht you know, everybody lived in this huge house. You know everybody had their parents to give them a nice car and all this money. That's like everybody basically; everybody I've met in classes is like that” (Chasneika). In college courses with classmates from high socioeconomic backgrounds, students from low socioeconomic homes found that they, too, needed to stand up against stereotypes. Eleni shared her experience in sociology course.

I was feeling like a minority because although I was White, considered a White Caucasian, they thought I was just middle class. All these girls went to boarding school; they already lived this life … In that sociology class especially, and then other discussions we had in the education classroom … We were discussing how they would think White students in their classrooms would be academically up
there, but since they’re in the city they are still not urban student level. I’m like -
twitching. Everyone assumes the academic levels on SATs or MCAS or the
Connecticut version of MCAS - all the White kids are better when it comes to
testing, academics - no? I’m part of that mediocre level of testing or writing or
math. You can’t assume unless you have evidence … Even though I’m White it
doesn’t mean I have all the luxuries a White middle class girl you assume I am to
be to have. (Eleni interview).

Among those luxuries that Eleni indicated was academic preparation. Participants
were keenly aware of the differences between their academic preparation and that of their
more affluent peers. “…[Y]ou got to think ‘Okay these are students that are really
prepared, they’re pretty much set forward; they got their parents that are backing them
up’” (Loris). Having parents with economic stability and resources, to the participants in
this research study, meant that “These students in my class had the best private schooling,
tutors to enrich their writing skills, strengthen their algebraic expressions when I was
struggling” (Eleni). Given the intersections of race, culture, and socioeconomic status
with the dominant cultural and social capital, participants often disengaged from
classroom participation because they “didn't want people to be like, ‘Oh, this kid doesn't
know what we're talking about.’ … [They] didn't want to … feel like [they were]
stereotyping that” (Raimar), or “feeding into the stereotype of a Black kid who wasn’t
that smart” (Akorfa).
Researchers have shown that the pressure to not reinforce stereotypes can impact students’ academic performance, as in the reluctance of participants in this research study to participate in class discussions (Harrison, Stevens, Monty & Coakley, 2006; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat theory posits that students may not hold negative views of their own academic capabilities, but the awareness that others hold negative stereotypes results in “anxiety erupt[ing] in situations in which the individual’s performance may be perceived as indicative of his or her social group, regardless of the individual’s beliefs about his or her abilities” (Harrison et al., 2006, p. 342). Harrison et al. (2006) found that when students from low SES were exposed to stereotype threat, they performed worse on exams due to increased test anxiety. However, Harrison et al. (2006) found that students from low SES backgrounds neither reduced their efforts nor assumed a negative view of their academic capabilities, indicating that testing anxiety, due to stereotypic threats, negatively impacted performance. In the present research study, findings indicate that participants were aware of stereotypes, which negatively impacted their performance in participation, despite their beliefs that they were academically capable and their efforts to prepare for class discussions. Researchers also found that when students of color with strong racial identity, which generally serves as a protective factor because students are less likely to have negative views of their own race or culture, encounter high rates of stereotypic threats, academic performance is still negatively impacted (Davis III, Aronson & Salinas, 2006). Davis et al. (2006) hypothesize that positive attitudes about one’s own capabilities are reduced when faced with situations
with high stereotypic threats. Davis et al.’s (2006) findings also coincide with the findings of this research. Despite positive views of their academic capabilities, when participants encountered high stakes situations, like class discussions where students were a minority, they initially performed less effectively and less often.

As in most of the experiences in which participants confronted barriers, such as undue pressure to act as the representative of their culture or socioeconomic status, students in this research study positioned themselves in roles that allowed them to flourish. “Important to the concept of positioning is the idea that positions are actively negotiated and achieved, rather than ascribed and passively received” (Tan & Moghaddam, 2003, p.187). Although participants may have initially avoided participation in class, they found that it “gets better, better, and better” (Raimar). In part, because students found that “it's my opinion; I don't care what anybody thinks. … I'm going to speak up about it” (Chasneika). Initially, participants withdrew from participating in the academic discourse, which may indicate that others positioned them as powerless or passive. However, as Chasneika’s response shows, “[i]nitial positioning can be challenged” (van Langenhove & Harre, 1999, p. 18). Furthermore, “speaking up” aligns with positioning theory’s concept of the right to speak with the right’s corresponding responsibilities and obligations (Tan & Moghaddam, 2003). Rather than eschewing the duties and obligations to speak up or stand up, participants in this research actively positioned themselves in such ways that they embraced their identities and took power from their perspectives. While “it is difficult [to act as a group representative in
college classes], right now, I don't mind it anymore. Yeah, I'm proud of being a Latina, you know and I'm proud of people knowing it, so it's like I don't put mind to it” (Chasneika). Other students, though, adopted the belief that “I'm here to do my work, to do me and not worry about what anybody else says or does” (Raimar) and many students reflected that they “speak out more often” (Henry). Further, “Even if it was the wrong answer I would still raise my hand and share my opinion” (Loris). Adopting these positions allowed participants to become more confident in their participation and in their experiences as college students. Moreover, participants recognized the value of the social and cultural capital that they possessed as students of color.

**Positioning and Professors: “Making yourself visible”**

In a move to re-position into active participants in the academic discourse, participants “would go to the teachers after class ... and that's how they would know [students]” (Chasneika). The decision to visit during professors’ office hours was partially informed by messages from multiple sources “It was something that I was told by brother. It was something I was told by [Upward bound], [CPP] classes … So they were like - go see your professors, go see your professors. So a bunch of different things, ten people telling me - hey go you see your professor if you are struggling and I did. And it worked out with some” (Noman). Participants visited professors during office hours, so that “they will know you're there” (Chasneika). CPP graduates viewed this as particularly important when they enrolled in “a big class,” because “the teacher notices that you are there and that you're participating with her” (Chasneika). Beyond visiting professors,
participants decided to “[sit] right in front” in an effort to demonstrate that they are “not afraid” and that they were purposefully “making [themselves] visible” (Loris). Although Akorfa shared a similar philosophy regarding immigration processes, of not “just giv[ing] up and drop[ping] out, go[ing] into the shadows … we have to keep fighting,” Loris’s reference to making himself visible is connected, in that, participants were not paralyzed by fear and did not avoid attention once they understood the context and discourse.

Students acted in ways that were expected in order to attain academic success within a dominant cultural context. Moreover, they took a stand that they deserve to be in the college classroom. Returning to positioning theory, those with the right to speak have either “claim[ed] the right and/or are socially ascribed the right to speak and be heard. A person who has the ‘right to speak on such an occasion’ has already been positioned in a particular way” (Tan & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 184). In deciding not to “go into the shadows,” participants in this research claimed their right and positioned themselves as group representatives even while being assigned the role. However, when viewed as claiming the right, participants’ actions may be perceived as strengths and reflexive in their negotiation with discourse.

As a result of this position in the academic discourse, participants actively sought interactions with professors. For example, Noman “learned from [his professor] but it wasn’t through books, it was just me talking to him… separately. [Noman] would go sometimes to his office hours; [Noman] would just talk about different stuff. Go read some articles and then talk to him about it.” Coming to this position, though, was not
without fear. Raimar shared that he was “very self conscious and – [worried that if he asked] this question, what are people going to think? … [W]hat is she going to think or what are they going to think?” Chasneika, though, advised “don't be afraid to look for help because … I was; sometimes I was afraid to ask. ‘Would I be a bother?’ Or like what would they say.” Loris also addressed the role that fear can play in classroom discussions: “You always think okay they could be smart but you could be just smart as them. I always go with the mentality of - don’t have fear, or ruin your potential - that sort of thing.” In other words, participants were aware that the interaction between social forces, like biases against students of color and students from low-resourced schools and discourse, but they worked to self-position in ways that enacted their agency.

One way that participants self-positioned was to enroll in courses that focused on their cultures as well as courses that addressed political and social issues. Raimar shared that he felt more comfortable “in that class where I have a Spanish professor. I guess I could connect more with her too. So I think it was a lot easier than being in a class with a White professor.” Similarly, Akorfa enrolled in a course taught by a “professor for African film [who] was actually Ghanaian.” In reflecting on her experience, Akorfa shared that the course “just felt like home,” which led her to “always talking in [her] class and that helped her [talk]” more often in other courses. In both examples, Raimar and Akorfa shared that they did not fear participating in class discussions, because they knew that the professors, a Puerto Rican woman and a Ghanaian man, would understand their perspectives. They believed that they could say more. Neither Raimar nor Akorfa were
afraid that they would be perceived in a negative light because their experiences and their cultures coincided with the professors’ and the curriculum. In reaching out to professors whom they trusted, participants felt comfortable going to “just ask questions, just sort of like what they taught us at [CPP]” (Loris); participants asked professors “‘Where can I go to do this?’ or like this and that and [professors] helped” (Chasneika). In these rare instances of comfort and welcome, participants achieved academic integration, as marked by their “academic performance, involvement with the curriculum, and contact with faculty and staff” (Smith & Wolf-Wendel, 2005, p. 26). Through their academic integration, participants accessed resources, learned new material, and reaffirmed their academic identities. However, participants were able to fully achieve academic integration when they enrolled in courses taught by and about People of Color. This response to institutional microaggressions corresponds to the findings of Yosso et al. (2009). Much like the participants in Yosso et al.’s (2009) research, by enrolling in courses taught by faculty of similar cultural backgrounds, these participants were able to “…engage in the rigors of the university curriculum from a ‘safe,’ supportive environment where they position [People of Color] histories and experiences as valid and important knowledge” (p. 677). Thus participants self-positioned in ways that fostered academic and cultural identities. Given the overarching benefits of a diversified faculty, it is critical that universities hire faculty of color (Smith & Wolf-Wendel, 2005).

In these ways, participants reflexively positioned and began to blend the benefits from the learned dominant social and cultural capital they attained and the non-dominant
social and cultural capital they possessed when they entered college. As discussed in Harré et al. (2009), “access to and availability of certain practices, both conversational and practical, are determined not by individual levels of competence alone, but by having rights and duties in relation to items in the local corpus of sayings and doings” (p.6). A student may understand that to create connections with professors, she must engage in certain types of behavior, like sitting at the front of class and visiting during office hours. This is potential capital acquired during her college preparation program, but it is through the application of that capital that the student actualizes this knowledge and expresses her own power. The student’s application of dominant cultural capital to the college setting, determines her positionality. Moreover, “[c]ertain forms of cultural capital are valued more than others, and each person brings a different set of dispositions (habitus) to the field of interaction. Social space is a field of forces and struggles between agents with different means and ends (Bourdieu, 1998). The field is characterized by the ‘rules of the game,’ which are neither explicit nor codified” (Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 33). As participants became more familiar with the discourse of academia, and the “rules of the game,” they applied acquired dominant social and cultural capital in ways that impacted their positionality. Furthermore, as asserted by Carter (2003), dominant and non-dominant cultural capital can coexist. In fact, like Carter’s (2003) participants, the participants in this study “reveal their agency in either context, whether they choose to adhere to [their own] cultural capital or dominant cultural capital, or both” (p.151). In
later sections of this chapter, I will address how participants relied upon non-dominant cultural capital to find positive and supportive relationships.

**Families: They “always try to support each other”**

A possible contribution towards adopting new positions within the college context may be ascribed to participants relying on familiar sources of support during difficult times. Sources of support included family members and friends. Most participants in this research study were first-generation college attendees, which research suggests limits their access to dominant group social capital in attaining matriculation. “…[S]ociological research suggests that differences in access to social capital play an important role in why low-income and first-generation college students have difficulty translating aspirations into enrollment” (Roderick et al., 2008, p. 16). While students in this research may not have had access through their families to dominant social capital that might have eased the transition from high school to college, participants did have families who “gave [them] support” by “letting [students] know that [CPP] was important” (Chasneika). In efforts to support their children’s academic aspirations, and prior to enrolling in CPP, participants’ parents “signed [their children] up for weekend classes at a different place which you have to pay for” (Henry), seeking out “something that’s maybe affordable whether it was 50 bucks” (Eleni). When given the option to join CPP, parents and students considered CPP “wonderful,” in part “because it was free” (Eleni). Older brothers also encouraged CPP students to join the college preparation program because they “knew that this was a good program, this was something that you need, and it was
Parents were involved in their children’s CPP participation by “getting [them] up every morning” (Chasneika); if needed, parents offered to “to drop [students] off and pick [them] up every Saturday” (Raimar). Mothers insisted that CPP participants “won't … stay at home to sleep in and watch Saturday morning cartoons” (Henry); “they used to ask [CPP students] for the dates [of CPP], so they could make sure that [they were] there,” and “any excuse … they didn't let it fly” (Chasneika). When CPP participants worried about their academic futures, grandmothers “encouraged [students] that everything is going to okay, that [they] have all these great people helping [CPP participants] whether it was in school or mostly in [CPP]” (Eleni). Recognizing CPP participants’ strengths and successes was another way that families supported CPP participants’ involvement in the college preparation program. CPP sought to connect with parents of participants, but the outreach was generally limited to orientations and celebrations. However, CPP participants’ families were “always there the first days of [CPP] when [students] actually get to bring [their] parents” (Chasneika) and at the end of year celebrations.

As evidenced by the college preparation experiences of this research study’s participants, their parents played a critical role in enrolling, encouraging, and supporting their children’s aspirations of matriculation. As discussed in Ceja’s (2004) research into
the role of parents in Chicana students’ college aspirations, the deficit paradigm views espouse the “belief that low-income parents of color typically do not value the importance of an education, fail to inculcate such a value in their children, and seldom participate in the education of their children” (p. 340). However, as in the case with these participants, other scholars have found that parents, even those who did not attend college, encourage their children in a multitude of ways. These include: providing sources of support, financial and emotional (Kenny et al., 2002); functioning as a source of knowledge (King, 1996); acting as role models (Hubbard, 1999); and offering examples of overcoming adversity (Hubbard, 1999; O'Connor, 1997). Parents also motivate their children. As Loris reflected, his mother “really pushed us, thinking about college and stuff. She never stopped -like, live the American dream. That’s why everybody comes here but you couldn’t do any more. We have to work, work, work. We have to do the extra effort to get yourself educated.”

Many studies explore the importance of parental expectations. When parents expected their children to attend college, they were more likely to want to aspire towards college and succeed academically in high school (Catterall, 1998; Finn & Rock, 1997; Hamrick & Stage, 1995; Herbert, 1996; Wang et al., 1993). Participants shared that their parents “really pushed us to have a good life and thinking about the sort of things we needed to do” (Loris) and that their mothers “just want [them] to be successful” (Akofa). In Finn and Rock’s study (1997), seventy-two percent of resilient students said that their parents expected them to go on to higher education as compared to fifty percent of non-
resilient completers and thirty-six percent of dropouts. Similarly, Henry’s parents “expected [him] to finish [college] and then ... what they expect the least would be me getting my Master’s.” Hubbard (1999) found this is true of young African-American males and females as did researchers who examined the role of parental support of education on resilient Latino youth (Catterall, 1998; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997). Like the findings in other research, parents of participants expected their children to attain matriculation and to succeed academically.

Parents held high expectations for their children, like Akorfa’s “parents [who] thought [she] was going to be a doctor. Just a doctor, they don’t care as long as [Akorfa] can say, ‘Hey, I’m a doctor.’” Although Akorfa does not intend to become a doctor, the expectation that she will succeed academically helped motivate her when she struggled with the new social and cultural demands of the college context because it was how “[Akorfa] was raised and what [her] parents expect of [her] because … [she has] a lot of dreams riding on [her] to be successful and be the poster child.” Participants’ parents believed in their children, as exemplified by this quote from Chasneika: “My parents know I’ve always had a strong character and they’ve always known that I've always been to myself and I've always been independent.” Although parents were often “not a person that [participants] ask for academic help or preparation help or any of that” (Raimar), their beliefs that their children would attain academic success provided a foundation for students that served as sources of emotional support. For example, when Chasneika earned lower than expected grades her first semester at college, her parents supported her
by saying: “You cannot judge; it's your first semester, you know; you're going to have a rough time; there's ups and downs all the time. You know what you did wrong, so you know how to correct it in the future, so like just words of wisdom made me go through it; live through it.” Similarly, when Raimar doubted his decision to attend Emmanuel, his mother supported him by reminding him: “Here’s what you have to do, you have to go to school; you have to study.” Participants’ parents, in a multitude of ways, conveyed that “they want me to have an education as opposed to, like, just serving everyone else” (Henry). Not every participant, though, had parents to whom they turned during difficult times. While Eleni has “a very good relationship with [her] grandfather,” her father is “just not supportive.” At those times, Eleni turned to her grandmother who “would always be there to reassure [her]. ‘Don’t worry; I am here to help you.’ And she did help [Eleni], started off my college career whether it was helping buy [her] laptop or my grandfather graciously giving some money to help just getting [Eleni’s] fridge for [her] dorm.”

Family expectations and reassurance helped participants navigate the difficult social and cultural terrain of college. Given the important role that parents played in CPP participants’ preparation for college, it is no wonder that parents were also influential when students applied to college. While most participants viewed their decisions as “an individual choice,” they also viewed their choices as “a family decision as well” (Loris). Part of that decision process was consideration of the distance from home to college. When choosing a university to attend, participants questioned, “Do I want to go away
from home? Do I want to go away from home?” (Raimar). Loris revealed that “[he] knew [he] was going to apply to schools in the Boston area so [he] was pretty much set on that - like being near [his] family and stuff.” Likewise, Raimar shared “There was no chance I would be able to live away from home.” For students who did live on campus, being close to home allowed them to spend significant time with their families, particularly during the first year, when “there’s maybe two weekends [they] didn’t go home” (Eleni); others “went home sometimes once a month” (Henry) or “every other weekend” (Noman).

There were times, though, when familial demands “probably drifted away some of my schoolwork” (Loris). For instance, participants “had to go to stores, buy this, do this” (Loris) or as in Henry’s experience, he shared that he regularly engaged in language brokering.7 “[E]ven now, a lot of times, when my mom wants to speak to my little brother, she don't know how to put in words that he can understand. So I have to be there.” After he moved away to college, Henry continued to act as his parents’ language broker, both in the home and in their business dealings. Weisskirch’s (2006) participants felt confident and proud when they acted as language brokers for their parents; associated positive feelings were correlated to positive family relationships. Sy (2006) also found that when Mexican American college students spent time at home, they experienced lower stress with their transition to college. However, increased language brokering led to

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7 Language brokering refers to informal translation processes, which include “translat[ion] or Interpre[ation], face-to-face interactions, transactions, documents, forms, letters, contracts or even directions to a piece of equipment” (Weisskirch, 2006, p. 332).
increased stress (Sy, 2006). In other ways, parents asked participants to act as their representatives and links to the world that their children were entering. Chasneika’s parents “don't even know how to use a computer … They're so not like into this world. Yeah, they don't care about it. They don't care about it; they don't want to anything about it; it's whatever to them.” This left Chasneika, “really frustrated too because my father would be like you know ‘teach me how to do this’ and I'm like ‘I don't have time.’” As students struggled to balance the demands of work and study, parents unwittingly added to their children’s pressure to manage time. While some researchers point to the pressures families place on students to “remain as involved in family issues and problems as they had been when they were living at home … at the price of not being able to fully ‘live’ at college, and to engage with people, issues, and work at the institution” (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004, p. 112), some participants in this research study did not associate additional pressure from their connections to home. Rather, some participants shared that they “miss [their] family” (Eleni), they “really just love going and spending time with [their] family” (Raimar) and that they wanted to “go home whenever there's cousins' birthday parties and stuff” and “tried to attend those as often as [they] can” (Henry). Participants reflected that their families “always try to support each other” (Noman), which, as students engaged in cultural and social experiences that were stressful, became more and more important sources of strength and motivation.

Like many first generation college attendees, most participants’ parents “graduated
from high school but didn’t go to college” (Raimar). Most participants also immigrated to the United States and “one of the reasons [families] came here was because of education, [to] have that opportunity [they] wouldn't have elsewhere” (Loris). Education meant that participants would not have to “clean bathrooms” (Eleni), “[serve] everyone else” (Henry), or “have to travel back and forth from [Puerto Rico] for jobs” (Raimar). Because their families “made a big sacrifice by coming to this country and working hard” (Loris), participants believed that they “have a lot of dreams riding on [them] to be successful” (Akorfa). Further informing their motivation to succeed in college was the understanding that “that sacrifice that they made for me, they took the hardship, they took the bullets to make sure that I didn't have to feel anything” (Noman). Even when there were times when participants “it felt like it was just me by myself with all this stuff to do” (Raimar), they also felt that their families were “really focused on making sure that [they] don’t worry about anything else except [their] studies” (Akorfa). Given the motivation that participants received from their families, they felt “supported … the whole way” (Raimar).

These findings echo those of other scholars who found that when parents expected their children to attend college, they were more likely to want to aspire towards college and succeed academically in high school (Catterall, 1998; Finn & Rock, 1997; Hamrick & Stage, 1995; Herbert, 1996; Wang et al., 1993). Furthermore, parents supported participants’ aspirations in multiple ways, much like the findings of Ceja’s (2004) research with Chicana/o students. And much like Ceballo’s (2004) findings of parenting
strategies that Latino parents use to encourage higher education completion, the parents of these participants were unable to offer academic support, like helping with homework or hiring tutors, nor were participants’ parents able to guide students through the matriculation process. However, parents provided emotional support and motivation when participants struggled with the challenges of college.

**Microaggressions: “I just wasn’t comfortable with them”**

College experiences, though, encompass more than academic settings and interactions with professors. “[T]here are two different sides of college, it’s the academics and then there’s the social life. So you need to experience both because they’re very intertwined, they affect each other. College life is not just school work, it’s other stuff as well” (Loris). Participants in this research study lived on college campuses in dorm rooms with roommates from different racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds than those with whom they had previously interacted. In many ways, participants were even less prepared for social interactions with their White, and often more affluent, peers, than they were for meeting college academic demands. In particular, participants were unprepared for the **racial microaggressions** that they confronted in college. **Racial microaggressions** “are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin, 2007, p. 271). As expanded by Yosso et al. (2009), racial microaggressions also include interpersonal microaggressions, racial jokes, and
institutional microaggressions. Of particular relevance to this research study, participants experienced interpersonal microaggressions, “verbal and nonverbal racial affronts” (Yosso et al., 2007). In this section, I share participants’ experiences regarding the intersections of race, culture, and SES and the separation they experienced from their classmates and dorm mates.

Dorms were often sites of social and cultural interactions that are new for all college students, but adjusting to dorm life may be particularly trying for students who have not interacted with people from backgrounds that are different from their own. Raimar’s description of his initial surprise to living in the dorms that first autumn - “[T]o walk into a floor and see all White students, it was kind of like, ‘Oh, wow, what did I do?’” Raimar’s reaction indicates that students felt discomfort even in areas outside of the classroom. Noman shared that “[his] roommates, people on [his] floor, were cool to each other but [Noman] just wasn’t comfortable with them.” Whereas Noman’s friends prior to college came from “similar backgrounds … where [their] family wasn’t in the best situation but it was a situation where [they] will make the most of it and [they] appreciated every little thing that [they] had.” Noman believed that he “just can't be friends with [the people in his dorm].” In part, Noman’s response to the students living in his dorm was influenced by a difference in socioeconomic status, because “in college, it’s a little bit different because you have guys coming from rich, rich parents driving Beamers and to them it's like a $1000 is nothing” (Noman). Similarly, Eleni’s roommate “asked [her] why [she] worked so much. [Eleni’s roommate] never worked.” Again, the
socioeconomic differences impact how students understood each other and resulting friendships reflected shared backgrounds. “[S]ocial class has a lot to do with making friends” (Eleni). Furthermore, the lack of understanding regarding financial constraints point to an SES-based microaggression. Dismissing the economic concerns of students who come from low SES homes can be another way to communicate disdain, intentionally or not.

Shared understandings include how space is appropriated. For example, Henry “never had [his] own room either. [He] always shared it with [his] older brother and [his] younger brother. So it was always three [people] in the room.” Familiarity with having more than one person in a room allowed students to better adjust to the distractions of rooming with another person. In Eleni’s dorm room, her roommate’s and her “desks were side by side and our elbows can touch almost, and [Eleni’s roommate] hated that.” Eleni’s roommate shared a photo of her room at home, and Eleni saw that it was a “bit bigger than our double.” Eleni, used to sharing a home with multiple generations of family, was unaware of the discomfort of her roommate “until the end of the first semester when [Eleni’s] boyfriend came and reorganized [their] room so [they] could have better space.” While the close quarters “didn’t really bother” Eleni, the closeness of the space led to tension between roommates.

Shared living areas presented other uncomfortable social situations in which participants experienced interpersonal microaggressions. For example, Raimar and his friends, primarily students of color, chose to visit “the little lounge area… We would
hang out there, and most of the time, a group of five or six of us would go just to do work or whatever.” Although Raimar didn’t “want to say that [White students] would get up and leave because [Raimar and his friends] walked in,” Raimar observed that other students who lived on his dorm floor

… would just get up and leave. And, it was a different experience. But... you just say whatever. You live with it. If they want to get up and leave because they think we're going to do anything to them, or because they can't stand being around us, then bye. Go leave. You had to get up. You were the one that left. We're not going to get up and leave if you come back in. I don't care. (interview)

By walking away, Raimar’s classmates conveyed the message that they did not want to interact with him or his friends. Given that “[m]ost of [his] friends were from the RISE Program,” and so were also students of color, Raimar was left to conclude that the White students in his dorm thought “‘Oh, they're Spanish, or they're Black, so let's not go talk to them.’” Similarly, Akorfa recounted how her dorm mates would “over-explain things as if I couldn’t possibly understand it and it made me feel as if they felt I was less smarter than them.” Akorfa shared,

I can’t really remember what it was we were talking about but we were in my room and we were talking about…I think it was the book Awesome Thing and then one of the guys, Kyle, turned to me. He was like, ‘Well, you know Akorfa…’ I’m like, ‘Actually I study this stuff, so I know what you’re talking about. Don’t over-explain things to me…’ I was always reminding them of ‘hey guys, I got
here. I’m smart. I’m even maybe smarter than you so don’t talk down to me when it comes to stuff like that.’ (interview)

The bathroom was another area of shared living space where Raimar and his friends observed cultural differences.

We used to go into the bathroom, and there will be towels thrown all over the place, and napkins thrown all over the place. And there's some students who will be like, "Oh, you don't have to clean that because the cleaning people would do it." But because we know, because, they’re minority, they're probably immigrants too. So because we know that, I don't know, because we grew up around that and because probably our parents or family members had to go through that, we clean up after ourselves. I'm not going to throw my napkin in the middle of the bathroom and say, "Oh, she will clean it." I'm not going to do that. So I think, we make sure, the minority, we make sure we were clean and we were doing everything. So when we got into the first, that bathroom experience, just seeing everything thrown around, and toilets unflushed, and everything, it was just like, "Wow." … Yeah, I think that was probably the biggest [surprise] (interview)

To Raimar, the refusal of White students to consider the feelings or the work of minority service people created a hostile climate. In response, Raimar shared that “in your room, you could just lock your door. Isolate yourself.” He could avoid interacting with classmates who confronted him through microaggressions. He also modeled behavior to express his empathy. For example, “even after we eat [in the cafeteria] – we'll get up, we
throw every – we throw everything away, we grab our plates … and we clean, we dust.”

As discussed earlier, Akorfa engaged in talking to others to counteract possible stereotypes. In other efforts to counteract stereotypes, Akorfa deliberately set out to educate her classmates on what it felt like to be a minority on a college campus.

Well in Central when you go to the cafeteria, it’s mostly all White people. And then when you go to… the Northeast, its mostly Indian and Asian people, but whenever you go to the Southwest, where my friends would feel awkward and out of place because it was mostly Black people, I would feel comfortable in the Southwest more than I did in Central. So like going back and forth between all the different dining rooms, actually taught my group of friends about fitting in.

(interview)

Fitting in, though, was difficult for participants in this research study. As shared in another section, the inability of participants to “blend in” made the separation from classmates and peers even more apparent. While the participants in this research study had “other friends [who] are Hispanic, Asian, White” (Akorfa), or they “made friends with like different minority races” (Henry), and they were “willing to sit with girls” (Eleni) from all cultures, participants observed that, “in college settings … Latinos would join their own groups. There are always groups of students hanging out with each other in a library or studying. Even at cafeteria you’d see that sort of thing, like athletes with athletes” (Loris), “all the jocks, all the African-American, Hispanic students. We were never mixed” (Eleni). Participants believed that their high school friendships better
transcended racial and cultural differences, because the students were “naturally mixed” (Eleni) and when they confronted the separation along differences, “it bothered [them]” (Eleni). Locks et al. (2008) found that “Having a greater precollege predisposition to engage in diversity activities is associated with greater perceived racial tension” (p. 274). Moreover, Locks et al.’s (2008) findings were particularly marked for “White students, indicating that students may be more critical of the racial climate” (p. 274). For the White participants in this research study, having attended k – 12 schools with minority classmates may have predisposed them to be more aware than White students from predominantly White high schools of the separation between students along cultural and racial lines, which would explain their discomfort with the campus climate of separation. Loris thought that it may have been easier for him to transition to his university: “So probably be[ing] in minority and then going to majority, maybe it felt more comfortable on my side. A Latino going to a White school it would probably feel more difficult from them.” Reflective of Loris’s thoughts, Raimar also shared his hypothesis as to how groups of students operate within public and social settings. “I think a lot of the students [of color], what they do as well is they don't try to talk to the White students. I think they sit there, and are just like, ‘Let's see who's going to come up to us, and start a conversation with us because we know these people are serious.’ And we know those people are not like, ‘Oh, they're Spanish, or they're Black, so let's not go talk to them.’ I think that's what a lot of them do. And I think that's how they end up making friends with other students.” In other words, the White students who traversed the public spaces to
interact with students of color were considered “serious” and potential friends. Although Raimar shared that he wanted White students to approach him and his friends, he also shared that to prepare for college students should “get to know everybody because when you come to school and you feel under-prepared in a way.” By not “get[ting] to know other people, get[ting] to know their background, where they come from… the first year, it was - the transition was really hard.” Raimar’s experience is supported by Locks, Hurtado, Bowman and Oseguera (2008) who argue that “Interactions across racial and ethnic boundaries can facilitate mutual liking and respect if such interactions are deliberate and structured to be more than superficial encounters” (p. 261). In Raimar’s experience, having not interacted with students from other cultures, particularly White students, negatively impacted his preparation for college. Furthermore, White participants no longer connected as easily with students of color because they were no longer the minority in their schools. Yosso et al. (2009) argue that universities want students of color on campuses because it benefits White students by “liven[ing] up class dialogue through more diverse points of view, and prepares White students to gain employment in a multicultural, global economy” (p. 664). However, universities do not facilitate the relations between students of all cultures nor do institutions create climates in which students of color feel welcomed and valued. Given the experiences of participants in this research study, the findings support Yosso et al.’s (2009) contentions.

Within Raimar’s circle of friends, the onus was placed on the White students whereas Akorfa assumed the responsibility of educating her classmates about how it feels
to be a minority. There are two distinct differences in these participants’ experiences. 
First, Akorfa attended a large university and Raimar attended a small university. 
Secondly, Raimar completed a college-based summer program with other students of 
color. He belonged to a cohort that met regularly and supported each other through 
difficult academic, social and cultural situations. Akorfa, on the other hand, lived in a 
small dorm with other students who were mostly White. She did not have a cohort on 
whom she could rely as she confronted stereotypes. While there are some indications 
from this research that the cohort model separates students of color from their White 
classmates, as evidenced by Chasneika’s perceptions of her college admission and 
enrollment in the university’s summer preparation program, the support Raimar received 
encouraged him to take the stance “I'm going to sit here, I'm going to make myself 
known, and that's it.” 

In another example of protective action, Chasneika shared that, in seeking out 
friendships with White students or trying to change classmates’ stereotypes, “[she 
doesn’t] even bother. It's like whatever; I don't bother to … even make the effort. You 
know, I've met a lot of the people through the programs through some classes that we 
have to do like group activities and stuff. But then, if it wasn't for that, I wouldn't even 
care; I wouldn't even mind.” (Chasneika). When participants encountered dismissive 
classmates who left rooms or spoke down to them, they experienced racial 
microaggressions as defined by Yosso et al. (2009). While the participants in the present 
research study worked to explain and recover from affronts, the implications are clear.
Participants worked to counteract the racism they encountered, either through defensive talk, like Akorfa trying to explain that she understands the discussion topic, or defensive rejection, like Raimar’s decision to ignore the actions of his classmates and Chasneika’s choice not to pursue friendships with White or more affluent peers. Regardless of their ways of coping, participants experienced race-related stress.

**Peers: “You have to find the right group”**

As high school students, participants “never used to think about [networking]” (Chasneika). However, involvement in CPP helped build communities of support to which participants returned as college students. As she struggled to transition to college, Eleni reached out to another CPP graduate; they “used to go out just to eat and just talk about our experiences.” Eleni felt that their conversations “also helped” and eventually her transition to living at school “got better.” During the first year of college, participants perceived that their struggles were not similar to the classmates, like Noman who shared that, “not a lot of students were struggling because they came from other countries and they went to the top private schools there. Because they are so rich. So - not a lot of people were struggling. They were struggling because they were getting Bs rather than As and I was trying to get Bs but I was getting Cs.” Participants’ perceived that their struggles, therefore, were not normal or were too embarrassing to share with their classmates. In an effort to regain confidence, participants reached out to familiar sources of support, like their friends from high school and CPP. For example, when Chasneika
struggled academically during her freshman year, she reached out to her CPP cohort and high school friends. Chasneika reflected:

   I would always call, you know, Annie and Fanelly; we're still really close to this day and I would always call them like telling them ‘I can't take it; oh my God, I'm going to go crazy,’ whatever and … it would help too because they would be on the same page. Like ‘don't worry; you're not the only one, you know, we'll get through it; it's hard; call me if you need anything,’ so it would be good.

   (interview)

   Recognizing that her friends experienced the same struggle reassured Chasneika; her anxieties were not out of the ordinary. Other participants maintained contact with friends from high school and CPP for social support. A month after his college courses began, Henry didn’t “feel safe sleeping in the same room” with his roommate, so he moved in with his former Midtown High School and CPP classmates. “I stayed [with them] after [one] month, I stayed with Vinh. So, Vinh was roommates with … Francis. He also went to [Midtown] High; them two were roommates. So but Francis had a girlfriend. So, I, technically, I kicked Francis out of his room. I took his room and made him go with his girlfriend's room. So everything worked out.” In this example, Henry’s former classmates were resources he could turn to, rather than waiting for the university system to rectify his dorm situation.

   High school friendships also offered academic support. Loris took several college courses with a high school classmate and they regularly “stud[ied] together and all that.”
When participants did not have former classmates to whom they could turn, they sought friendships with college classmates who also graduated from Boston high schools. These friendships also comforted students because “[they] knew that [they] were all experiencing the same things... the same hard work or whatever it is” (Raimar). Raimar and his friends would “would push each other” and “help each other out if anything comes up.” Henry’s friends from high school also helped him navigate the social and academic contexts of college. He “met a bunch of his [high school classmate’s] friends” who, as sophomores, “have done everything and they could just tell me what to do, what not to do.”

Friendships like those Chasneika, Henry and Raimar describe, counterbalanced the social interactions they had with their classmates who “are different” (Henry). Even if some of them are “nice guys” (Noman), participants did not “want to go hang out with this person. There was no feeling like that” because they “have nothing in common with some of them” (Noman). Given that “in college, [participants] have more control over who [they’re] going to be friends with and who [they’re] not going to be friends with” (Chasneika), participants learned that they “just have to find the right group” (Henry). Moreover, they discovered that they had to “actually put mind into it like who should be [a]friend and who shouldn't” (Chasneika). Akorfa advised future college students to “find a place in the college where she fits in so to make sure how she’s going in, she’s going to a community of people who are like-minded … [I]f you go into college and you find a community where people are like you and they like to do things that you like to do, it’s
easier to make friends than if ... you just go and then they place you in a random hall and there's nobody.” Whether academic or social, supportive peers who are the “same type of people” (Akorfa) helped students “find [their] way through” (Chasneika) college.

As discussed earlier, Akorfa attended a large university and she did not complete a university-based summer preparation program, unlike Raimar, Chasneika or Noman. Loris and Henry did not attend a summer preparation program at their universities, so they also did not belong to a cohort that offered social and cultural support. In their experiences, involvement in “extracurricular activities are important” (Loris), because they offer an avenue for “finding the right group.” For example, Henry “made a lot of friends joining club sports, because [he] did intramurals.” Loris advised that “these are the sort of things that [students have] to be involved with to see from a different view - to see other students’ view on the college life.” Likewise, Akorfa shared that she tried to “just [put] [her]self out there.” While “most of the African kids that [Akorfa] knows in college the only club they’re involved in is the African Students Union,” Akorfa believed that limiting her involvement to only African clubs was “not really broadening [her] horizons.” She joined “different cultural clubs and stuff ... because that’s how you actually meet people.” In Akorfa’s experience, “you can’t actually meet people [through classes] that well unless you go to their clubs with them. So doing that has like allowed me to get to know different people that I wouldn’t actually ever know.” Akorfa actively sought groups in order to offset the rejection she experienced in her classes. Despite the microaggressions of her peers in class, Akorfa tried to give her classmates the benefit of
the doubt, sharing that “it got better but it’ll pop up. I don’t think people mean to do it. It’s just something they would do without thinking.” By looking beyond intention, Akorfa tried to carve out friendships that would allow her to reaffirm her academic and cultural identity. As Murrell (2007) posits, “The dynamics of racialized discourse, culture, and ethnicity come into play as individuals attempt to restore self-integrity in settings that threaten that integrity” (p. 48). In an attempt to restore her self-integrity, Akorfa reached out to classmates in new contexts that offered fewer threats to her academic identity.

While some participants responded to the different social and cultural interactions, like Akorfa, as “not very comfortable with but you got to go along with it or live with it” (Noman), other participants shared that they needed to know that they “had the support of [college] friends, who understood where [participants] came from and acknowledged that, and they had some similarities” (Eleni). Likewise, Raimar shared that “most of [his] friends were from the RISE Program. Most of the friends, [they] came in, [they] knew each other, [they] stuck together.” Sticking together helped counteract that “every day [participants] have things thrown at [them] that shake [them] to the core and question who [they] are and what [they] think. It might be confusing if [they’re] insecure, if [they] don’t have a strong sense of identity, [they] might get lost and get confused easily” (Akorfa). Enrollment in the university-based summer preparation programs helped participants know “like a hundred kids that were minorities” by the start of freshman year, which “actually helped [participants] like spread out and get to know
[even more of] the minorities” (Chasneika). Even though participants retrospectively believed that they “knew what [they were] getting into when [they were] accepted” (Chasneika) into a predominantly White university, the university summer preparation programs created supportive peer cohorts. Participants who developed relationships with classmates of similar backgrounds felt that they “needed to stick together in order to be seen, in order to be heard, in order to be felt around campus” (Raimar). This feeling may indicate that participants experienced institutional microaggressions, which are “those racially marginalizing actions and inertia of the university evidenced in structures, practices, and discourses that endorse a campus racial climate hostile to People of Color” (Yosso et al., 2007, p. 63). Participants in the present research study responded to institutional microaggressions in one of two ways. They either sought friends from the dominant cultural groups on campus, or they engaged in community building and activism with and for students of color.

Through his involvement with the RISE program and other students of color, Raimar actively sought to self-position in a way that enacted his agency as evidenced by his efforts to be visible on campus. As a group, Raimar and his friends enter this “massive white cafeteria and [they] try to sit in the middle… And we sit there because … you have to walk in, and you're going to see us” (interview). While White students may perceive this as separation, as shared by Eleni and Loris, Raimar deliberately chose to sit in the middle of the cafeteria as a way to be known. In some ways, it is a test, to see if White classmates are “serious” (Raimar) and willing to be friends, but it is also a strong
statement against institutional and interpersonal microaggressions. By positioning himself in this way, Raimar is reaffirming his identity as well as his rights to speak and be heard. Given the ascribed and assumed position as a group representative and activist to resist institutional and interpersonal microaggressions, Raimar shared that he believes “Every minority student has that role.”

During her sophomore year, Akorfa also assumed the role of activist, when she joined “a troupe of performers who perform skits that portray racism, sexism, classism, all the isms … in freshman dorms… every Tuesday night.” Through her involvement, Akorfa found that she is “less shy in front of people” and after joining, she was “just hooked.” By performing for others on issues surrounding discrimination, Akorfa realized that she “was always meant to be that kind of person; that was just the person I needed [to be]… I knew that my life, I was always going to be that kind of person. So that was just like the push I needed.” While Akorfa’s involvement in groups that supported her identity development took longer than Raimar’s, both participants positioned themselves in ways that enacted their agency.

Conclusion

Given I am a White woman, the openness with which my participants shared their stories surrounding cultural and social struggles honors me because it demonstrates their trust and the strength of our relationships. As a researcher, I must examine my own positionality. While I understand not fitting into the dominant group, because of my own socioeconomic upbringing, my experiences with more affluent peers were not as frequent
as those experienced by the students of color in this research study. Moreover, as a White person, I could “blend in.” Only when I chose to “stand up” in my own college courses for people with fewer SES resources did I revealed my outsider status. Although I try to share my experiences with all of my former students, it could be that my participants see me only as I am now – a well-educated, middle class, White woman. Several times participants revealed their hesitancy to discuss race and culture. Participants apologized, “if it’s personal, I don’t mean to offend you” (Akorfa) and said that they didn’t “want to make this a race thing” (Raimar). However, when I reassured them that I was trying to understand and that I was “not going to take offense,” they were more willing to share their stories. I have no doubt that students experienced more interpersonal and institutional microaggressions than what they shared in their interviews. I admire my participants’ sensitivity, but wonder how much more they would have shared if I were a person of color.

What participants did share, though, indicates that they actively self-positioned as they applied both dominant and non-dominant social and cultural capital. The ability to navigate complex and often exclusionary contexts speaks to participants’ strengths, perseverance, and motivation. As argued by Aronson and Steele (1995) stereotype threat can significantly impact students’ academic achievements, particularly when they act as group representatives and are aware that their actions speak for their cultures. Supportive family and peer relationships helped mitigate the impact of stereotype threat,
interpersonal and institutional microaggressions, allowing participants to self-position in ways that built on their wealth of insights, experiences, relationships, and capital.

In the final chapter, I address what was effective about CPP preparation of students for college in academic, social, and cultural contexts and what CPP, and other programs, can expand upon to help ease the transition to college for students of color and students from low-resourced schools.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The impetus for this research began with a story two CPP graduates told me during their first year of college. As they struggled in courses to understand new material, build prior knowledge, balance the time demands of work and school, and regain their identities as smart, capable students, Chasneika and LaToya sought out people as resources and used a variety of strategies in order to succeed academically. With their story as inspiration, I sought out other CPP graduates to answer the following phenomenologically-oriented research questions:

- What are the academic, social, and cultural experiences of graduates from a university outreach college preparation program during their first year of college?
- How do students explain their academic, social, and cultural experiences as college students in light of their college preparation? In addition, how do these experiences and understandings change over time?

Social and Cultural Capital

This research study used social and cultural capital as a framework from which to analyze those programmatic elements that positively or negatively influenced College Preparation Program graduates’ first-year college experiences. CPP is a form of social capital because it consisted of a network of relationships that extended beyond students’ home and school lives – relationships which had the potential to increase embodied and institutionalized capital. Moreover, as other research has demonstrated, these
relationships can be instrumental to students’ academic success (Auerbach, 2004; Gándara, 2001; Hamrick & Stage, 1995; Sanchez, Reyes & Singh, 2006).

Like other forms of capital, the capital possessed by students from low-SES schools and backgrounds is not equally valued. Hence, programs like CPP serve as social capital and offer students assistance with accessing embodied cultural capital from the dominant cultural norms. Hong and Youngs (2008) argue that, “… unless low socio-economic status (SES) and minority students have opportunities to internalize dominant cultural norms, they may be disadvantaged by their schools with regard to school engagement and performance, college attendance, and employment opportunity” (p.3). Again, a goal of CPP was to enhance students’ preparation in order to attain academic achievement and matriculation. For these reasons, embodied cultural capital is one lens through which data were analyzed.

**Positioning Theory**

Positioning theory posits that people engage in conversations, or discourses, and accept or reject *subject positions*. *Subject positions* may be “reflexive,” when a person places him/herself within that discourse or “interactive” when the person is positioned by another into that discourse (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001, p.743). In the social interaction of discourse or conversation, *subject positions* assume varying roles of power and powerlessness. Much of the literature on university outreach college preparation programs places students at the center of the research. However, within the research, students are often positioned as passive recipients of college preparation services.
Universities collaborate with schools. Programs recruit students. Students receive information and preparation. Colleges admit students. Removing students’ voices from the college preparation process and associated research implies, however, that students possess no agency; thus, passivity may imply powerlessness on students’ parts. In this research I argued, however, that conducting research into first-year college experiences following a college preparation program is one method for sharing students’ voices and revealing their agency.

As revealed through reflections, participants actively self-positioned within academic discourse by enrolling in CPP as high school students. Moreover, through acts of self-positioning, participants enacted their agency, demonstrating their “critical conscious understanding of both [their] situation and positionality in any given setting or context” (Murrell, 2007, p. 29). Enrollment in CPP depended on the opportunity provided by Small College and students’ recognition of the role that participation in a college preparation program would have on their educational paths. Participants simultaneously understood that their schools were unable to provide the necessary academic preparation, social or cultural capital to attain matriculation. This was evidenced by participants’ reflections that they “came from public schools and didn't have that much of opportunities” (Loris). Moreover, CPP aligned with participants’ goals of “making sure that [they] got to college either way [they] can” (Noman). When given an opportunity to access resources, social and cultural capital, participants positioned themselves in such a way that benefited their entry into the college admission and matriculation discourse.
Prior to the present research study, positioning theory has not been utilized to analyze how participants use college preparation programs to access academic, social, and cultural capital as they seek matriculation and graduate college. Although cultural status positioning was applied to examine how students simultaneously employed dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital, (Carter, 2003) the analyses did not employ positioning theory as defined by Harré and van Langenhove (1999). Davies and Harré (1990) state that, “a discourse is to be understood as an institutionalised use of language and language-like sign systems. Institutionalisation can occur at the disciplinary, the political, the cultural, and the small group level” (p. 45). Moreover, “discourse is a multi-faceted public process through which meanings are progressively and dynamically achieved” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46). Because participants engaged in a discourse with higher education and constructed meaning over time, positioning theory was a relevant framework for understanding how students accessed academic, social, and cultural capital through a college preparation program. Furthermore, positioning theory posits that identities, roles, and power constructions are not static; an individual is “constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46). As evidenced by reflections, participants adjusted their positions during college preparation as they acquired new knowledge and a greater understanding of the discourse with higher education. Rather than passively receive information, participants actively pursued opportunities, applied knowledge, and continually self-positioned as they did so.
Positioning theory could be applied in such a way as to reinforce a deficit paradigm, by placing primary responsibility for success and struggle on CPP participants. However, positioning theory attends to the complex and dynamic nature of relationships between individuals and between individuals and institutions. Given the dynamic nature of discourse, positioning theory offers a framework for understanding how participants enacted agency as they participated in the college preparation process. Rather than placing responsibility only on participants, this view can inform how college preparation programs interact with students. It may encourage preparation programs to address the complex ways that students acquire and apply college knowledge as well as social and cultural capital more explicitly.

Findings

Using positioning theory and social and cultural capital as the theoretical framework, I analyzed the data from three interviews with seven former CPP graduates. The themes that emerged include a) the self-positioning of participants within the discourse of academia; b) the power of place on college preparation; c) the relationships between peers in a community of practice; d) the important role of supportive instructors. The role of knowledge also emerged as an important theme during college preparation. Dimensions of this theme include a) the lack of academic rigor in a college preparation program; and b) the importance of college knowledge during the preparation process. Participants reflected on the interactions of the power of place, college knowledge, and supportive instructors, which enabled them to acquire dominant social and cultural
capital. During their first year of college, participants’ responses revealed three themes: the academic dimensions of college coursework, the critical nature of time management, and the importance of study skills. The academic dimensions of college include a) the connections between prior knowledge and college course expectations; b) the work associated with carrying a full course load; c) the importance of writing across content areas; d) the impact of grades on participants’ identities as learners; e) the efforts participants expended in seeking out academic resources to improve their academic achievement. Further, the data revealed a second theme regarding the interaction of time management, work demands, and overall expectations. Participants also shared that they acquired study skills over time through trial and error and how college knowledge supported success and impacted struggles.

Although CPP offers institutional social capital and access to dominant cultural capital, it did not do enough to prepare CPP participants for the social and cultural experiences of college life. Participants were unprepared for the often, hostile campus racial climates which they entered upon matriculation. Participants encountered microaggressions that included interpersonal and institutional forms. As they struggled to confront these new contexts and discourses, participants described “standing up,” “blending in” (or not), and alternately making themselves visible and resisting hypervisibility. In efforts to navigate campus climates that were often unwelcoming, participants relied upon familiar sources of support, like family and former CPP and high
school classmates. Participants also created new communities, which supported their efforts to counteract stereotypes, hypervisibility, and isolation.

CPP and University Connections

Power of Place

Instrumental to students’ college preparation, the location of CPP on a college campus offered direct access to college climate, university expectations, and a learning environment that encompassed more than formal instruction. Proponents of place-based education argue that environment supports students’ acquisition of knowledge and meaning making (Gruenewald, 2003). Moreover, Holland, Gordan and Lahelma (2007) argue that “space is not merely a backdrop to activities that take place, it also shapes processes and activities” (p. 221). However, as discussed in the next section of this chapter, taking classes with their high school peers, who were also students of color, while on a predominantly White campus did not prepare participants for unwelcoming campus climates. In accordance with these understandings of space and place, participants revealed the impact that being high school students on a college campus had on their preparation. Taking part in preparation classes in college classrooms familiarized students with the arrangement of college classrooms, which influenced their understanding of how they could participate in class discussions and become visible to future professors. CPP emphasized that students should sit close to the front of the room in large auditoriums, but emphasizing a point and exposing students to actual auditoriums where college course are held offer two very different understandings. As discussed in
Chapter 6, CPP participants regularly chose seats in the first three rows of large college classes. However, it can be argued that having prepared for college in settings that mirrored students’ college experiences allowed participants to understand how seating choices can impact participation. Furthermore, it seems that direct application of acquired dominant cultural capital eases the transition from high school to college, as evidenced by participants’ stories that they “sat in the front desk” (Loris) or that they chose to “sit in the third row because [they] have to pay attention or [they] have to write, write, write” (Chasneika).

Furthermore, multiple participants reflected that when they first arrived to Small College, they reacted to the size of the campus as “this is so big!” (Raimar). As students prepared for college, they came to “[know] that [their college] would be huge,” but they learned ways to navigate the space and form relationships despite the initially overwhelming space and number of students. Through observation, students gained “a glimpse how college life is” (Loris). That glimpse would not have been obtained had CPP held classes at the high schools or in community centers. While many high schools proclaim partnerships with institutions of higher education, few participants visited universities through their schools. Without exposure to a college campus, participants would have entered their freshman year unfamiliar with the ways that place impact learning. Moreover, by observing college students on campus and interacting with “place,” participants more easily envisioned themselves as college students. They came to realize, “That’s going to be me like in a couple of years” (Akorfa).
Unfortunately, at the time I served as Program Coordinator, CPP struggled to hold all Saturday meetings on campus. Due to classrooms reserved for testing and other programs and home football games that prevented school busses from picking up and dropping off students, CPP relocated some meetings to students’ high schools. At times, CPP canceled its meetings when alternative arrangements could not be confirmed. Given the impact that place had on participants’ preparation, it becomes imperative that Small College give precedence to CPP’s schedules and room requirements.

A Community of Practice

Participants’ experiences with CPP built a community of practice and a CPP identity that resulted in students’ feeling “a step ahead” of their high school peers. One of the goals of CPP was to foster a community of practice. Research-based curricular and programmatic decisions were made in order to foster a community of practice and to instill a CPP identity (Tierney & Jun, 1999). CPP participants began their involvement in the program as a cohort in 10th grade and continued their participation with the same classmates for three years. As a program, CPP utilized formal methods for building a community of practice, such as recreationally-oriented events and classes that focused on peer review. CPP represents a community of practice because students enter the program with limited college knowledge. Through participation in CPP, students and CPP instructors created a community in which they exchanged knowledge, shared values and goals, and developed academic identities.
If peers are supportive of their friends’ involvement in college prep programs, this may facilitate high achievement (Kenny et al., 2002). Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) found that the most significant predictor of student grades was a sense of belonging at school; they also found that high levels of peer support were more prevalent among resilient students. Horn and Chen (1998) also found that students with peers who planned on college, or those who were involved in school, also enrolled in college more frequently. Horn and Chen (1998) found that if all or most of a student’s friends planned for college, that student was six times more likely to enroll in higher education.

In accordance with the findings of other researchers, most participants from West Side High School (WSHS) joined CPP with friends or family members, deciding that they “all went through it [or] none of [them] were going to do it” (Chasneika). Participants from Midtown High School, though, tended to join as individuals, and upon enrollment, they “got to meet more people” (Henry). Regardless of joining as individuals or with groups of friends, all participants discussed how belonging to CPP and having a community of practice that shared an “academic mindset to achieve greatness, excel and graduate together” (Eleni) built confidence and motivation.

As college students, participants maintained contact with their CPP classmates, thereby continuing participation in the communities of practice established at their high schools and through CPP. When students faced difficult living arrangements, like Henry, they reached out to friends who also graduated from their high schools and CPP. Henry’s friends also offered advice regarding what courses to take, prerequisites for college
majors, and how often to visit college professors. Chasneika lived with LaToya, a CPP and West Side High School graduate, though not a research participant. When Chasneika struggled with academics, Chasneika went to LaToya because she “knew a lot of resources too because she works for the office [devoted to first year students].” For example, LaToya guided Chasneika on how to withdraw from a course, a process with ramifications that were not clearly outlined to Chasneika. Similarly, Loris enrolled in courses and met to “study and all that” with his friend who graduated from the same high school, completed CPP, and attended the same university.

Sanchez, Reyes, and Singh (2005) found similar results in their qualitative study on supportive relationships in the lives of Mexican American college students. Much like the findings of the present study, Sanchez et al. (2005) found that participants reached out to friends for emotional and school support. As discussed by Tierney, Corwin and Colyar (2005), “much of the research on peer groups and college preparation programs is so sketchy that one can conclude little about their influence” (p. 67). However, the value that participants in the present research study placed on their communities of practice and the continued contact between cohort members once in college indicate that college preparation programs should foster these positive peer relationships, as they often transcend college preparation program participation. Moreover, college preparation programs should continue contact with cohorts, through reunions and invitations to speak about their experiences, as a way to strengthen these communities of practice and to benefit high school students who are working towards matriculation.
Supportive Instructors

CPP hired some instructors who pursued a M.Ed. through an Urban Scholars Program, which aimed to prepare teachers for teaching in urban contexts. Math and writing instructors were enrolled in the Curriculum & Instruction Ph.D. program. In order to support students’ goals, M.Ed. and Ph.D. students in Counseling and Educational Psychology programs led advisory classes. Participants identified the collegial relationships with their instructors as increasing their enjoyment of CPP, influencing their collegiate decisions, and providing a source of information. Although instructors only saw College Preparation Program students twice a month, they maintained contact via e-mail and phone calls. Many of the research participants described how available, open, and helpful their CPP instructors were.

Instructors clearly communicated a “level of care” (Noman), that they were “here to help you” (Eleni), and a “common goal that [all] were working on” (Loris). By communicating with students, instructors built trusting relationships, despite a lack of academic rigor in the CPP courses. CPP participants reflected that when CPP participants experienced doubt or anxiety, instructors also engaged in “just reassuring [CPP students] that [getting to college] could be done” (Eleni). Some CPP graduates maintained relationships with their instructors beyond graduation. For example, Raimar attributed his matriculation after taking a year away from school to his relationship with Sarah. Other students expressed gratitude for Mr. G’s guided scholarship searches, because they found “scholarship[s] [they] didn’t know about” (Eleni). Chasneika shared that, during her first
year of college, she maintained contact with Mr. G who “would actually ask [Chasneika and LaToya] like ‘how are you guys doing?’ or like ‘do you need help with anything?’ ‘Do you need advice?’ so that was good to know. It was good to know that he was there for us.” Regarding my own relationships with students, I have maintained contact with participants even after some graduated from college. As the Program Coordinator, I did not teach academic or advisory CPP courses. However, the stability of my role allowed me to build trusted relationships with students. As they transition out of college, many have now asked me to advise them on graduate programs, to assist as they build curriculum for programs they coordinate, and to serve as job references.

As evidenced by the relationships with instructors that transcended their time with CPP, “consistency leads to trust” (Noman). Participants most often referenced instructors who continued teaching for CPP for more than one school year. This indicates that the more contact participants have with adults in a role that depends on trust, the greater the impact of the relationship may be on participants’ preparation and feelings of continued support. As discussed in Cabrera and Padilla’s (2004) work, positive relationships with supportive adults, can help students access information in the college-going process. Further, Gándara (2001), in one of the few comprehensive reviews of college preparation programs, asserts that programs should “[provide] a key person who monitors and guides the student[s] over a long period of time – a ‘mentor,’ program director, faculty member, or guidance counselor” (p. viii). Gándara’s (2001) findings indicate that the longevity of a relationship with a supportive adult, who is familiar with a student’s aspirations and
strengths, more positively impacts students’ academic achievements, matriculation
decisions and rates. Given the literature concerning the support that social networks offer
to students as they attain matriculation and college graduation and the lack of research on
the specific impact of college preparation instructors, a closer look at how college
preparation instructors can develop trusting relationships over time and the benefits of
such is well deserved. Moreover, by looking more closely at the role of relationships
between participants and instructors of college preparation programs, CPP could better
inform practices. Finally, as participants transition to college, formalized relationships
with CPP instructors may offer support as participants contend with hostile, or
unwelcoming, campuses.

**College Knowledge**

College knowledge or logistical knowledge was a primary component of CPP.
Information, such as protocols and processes of college or the “how to’s” and “what’s”
has been found to be critical in students’ success in matriculating and graduating from
college (Stoutland & Coles, 2009). College knowledge consists of “…an understanding
of the following processes: college admissions including curricular, testing, and
application requirements; college options and choices, including the tiered nature of post-
secondary education; tuition costs and the financial aid system; placement requirements,
testing, and standards; the culture of college; and the challenge level of college courses,
including increasing expectations of higher education” (Conley, 2007, p. 14).
Participants felt well-prepared for the application process. “[CPP] helped [participants] with [their] college applications a lot and the essays a lot and [CPP] actually showed us how to get the applications; the common app and a lot of stuff so, it was really helpful that way” (Chasneika). Having this knowledge of the logistics for applying to college helped students feel that they had a “leg up” (Eleni) when compared to their high school classmates. Furthermore, participants reflected that CPP offered timely assistance as they wrote their applications essays, and “[a] lot of students wrote their essays about dedicating their Saturdays to [CPP]” (Loris), indicating that participants felt pride in their successful completion of a three year program. CPP also guided students through their decisions as they chose which colleges to send their applications, so that all participants could attend college the fall after graduating high school. Finally, CPP guided students in financial aid applications and scholarship searches in an effort to remove the barriers presented by tuition and housing. Participants came to the realization that “you didn’t have to be rich to go to college” (Eleni). With the removal of financial barriers and an understanding of the processes involved in matriculation, “any student can go … anywhere they want” (Loris).

The importance of each of these logistical elements has been well documented by other scholars (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Goodwin, 2000; Venezia et al., 2003; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Perna, 2000; Tierney, 1997). As a program informed by research, CPP effectively transmitted college knowledge to students as they prepared for the application process. In participants’ estimations, CPP “prepared
[participants] for was making sure [they] went into college. … [CPP] reached their objective; their objective was to get [participants] into college - they did that” (Noman). Moreover, “a college preparation program can only do so much because they can tell you this is what you should, do this, what you can do, this is what blah, blah, blah” (Raimar).

As discussed later in this chapter, though, college knowledge should transcend application processes and address issues associated with transitions into college.

**CPP and University Missed Connections?: Implications for Practice**

Analyses revealed several areas that did not meet participants’ needs as they prepared for college. In particular, analysis of responses indicated that participants did not feel adequately prepared for the workload and time management demands of college courses. Moreover, participants’ reflections identify that the lack of academic rigor in CPP failed to adequately prepare them for the demands of college coursework. Finally, the lack of explicit conversations regarding being a minority on a predominantly White college campus did not prepare students to transition into new social and cultural contexts.

**College Knowledge and Transitions**

As discussed in Chapter 6, participants felt unprepared for many aspects of college, including note taking skills, study skills, and time management. While participants believed that CPP advised students to “find out what works for you… what kind of study habits are your habits. What is the best way to study for you,” they understood this guidance to be “just advice they were giving out” rather than “necessarily
skills that [they were] learning” (Noman) or being “really specific on like what you're supposed to be doing” (Chasneika) in order to study or manage time. Oftentimes, teachers and instructors operate under the assumption that students acquire note taking and study skills as they progress through their elementary, middle, and high school educations. However, without explicit instruction in strategies, how are students expected to acquire these skills and strategies?

Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson and Le (2006) found that study skills were directly related to retention outcomes. In Robbins et al.’s (2006) research, study skills referred to students’ beliefs that they understood how to complete homework and tests. While CPP referred to AVID’s (2008) curriculum for study skills, the explicitness with which AVID addresses study skills was not incorporated fully into CPP advisory courses. In part, this was the result of instructors who were not trained in various strategies. Further, instructors focused more on goal setting, making educational plans, and researching colleges and careers in advisory classes. Like Tierney and Jun (2001) argue, focusing only on basic study skills is not sufficient for college preparation. Although these are important aspects of preparing for college, participants’ responses indicate that more explicit instruction in note taking and study skills would have better transferred to their college academic experiences. Moreover, these participants were academically successful in their high schools and participated in a college preparation program. If participants like these are not receiving guidance in study skills, how are students who are not as academically successful acquiring these skills? And how do those students fare
in college courses? While participants acquired note taking and study skills through trial and error, direct instruction may have mitigated the frustration participants experienced as they transitioned to college. Rather than trying to learn study skills as they conquered new content, participants could have directed their efforts to learning and understanding new material.

Time management also emerged as an area in which participants struggled. “[T]he skills that [participants] had acquired - it was just basically that - it wasn’t the skill to how to be better at time management; it was just [them] knowing about time management” (Noman). Clearly, CPP addressed time management, but failed to offer explicit strategies and failed to be “really specific like this is what you should do at a certain situation” (Chasneika). Chasneika advised that “[CPP] should also like integrate something like a time management class; something like that because, you know, just to let them get like a little taste of what it's going to be like.” Kuh et al. (2006) contend that first generation college students do not possess time management skills to the same degree as students who are not the first generation to attend college. As high school students, participants regularly juggled extracurricular activities with work and family obligations. While participants entered college believing they were skilled at time management, upon matriculation, the academic demands demanded more time than anticipated. Moreover, as many first-generation college students also work as they matriculate, Kuh et al.’s (2006) findings may indicate that due to increased time demands, they possess less developed time management skills, in comparison to more
affluent peers. In Stoutland and Coles’s (2009) report on the college persistence of Boston Public Schools’ graduates, they found that the family and work responsibilities compounded students’ struggle to manage time. Likewise, participants in this research shared that many of them worked off-campus jobs. Given the CPP population’s need to work as they attended college, guidance on how to balance coursework and employment would have greatly benefited CPP graduates as they transitioned to college.

**Lack of Rigor**

Overwhelmingly, research that addresses matriculation and college persistence points to the importance of rigorous academic preparation. Regardless of coming from low SES backgrounds or being a first-generation college attendee, rigorous high school coursework predicts college persistence (Horn & Kojaku, 2001). Such coursework includes Advanced Placement classes, dual enrollment opportunities within local colleges, and four years of math, science, history, English, and a foreign language (Venezia et al. 2003). Unfortunately, few under resourced schools offer such courses for all students (Tab, Waits, Setzer, & Lewis, 2005). Outreach college preparation programs, like CPP, seek to provide rigorous academic training for students in order to supplement and enrich their public high school educations.

However, participants reflected that the academic areas of concentration in CPP were limited; “[CPP]only focus[ed] on the subjects like math, English … But, that's not the only thing that they offer in college” (Chasneika). Moreover, some participants possessed a false sense of confidence in their abilities because “in [their] high school all
the teachers are like – ‘wow, you have some talent, how about if you help your peers?’” (Eleni). While participants excelled in their schools, CPP could have offered a more rigorous curriculum that “challenge[d] students more … Those challenges – [participants] will overcome those. Those obstacles - they will overcome those. And they will meet those challenges and those expectations” (Noman). Howards’ (2003) study found that high school students believed that their teachers’ expectations were not as high as their parents’ expectations. This impacted students’ academic identities because of the incongruence between the messages they received. Furthermore, positive relationships in which teachers communicated high expectations of their students positively impacts academic achievement (Wimberly, 2002). One way to communicate high expectations is to challenge students and provide appropriate scaffolding. However, as participants indicated, CPP did not offer a quality of academic rigor that adequately supplemented participants’ preparation. While CPP provided summer reading lists, SAT prep, math courses, and writing instruction, participants reflected that “As far as material wise, academic wise, everything I learned in college was completely new and I just couldn’t relate it back to high school” (Noman). This further indicates that connections between skills and content must be explicit, so that CPP participants recognize prior knowledge they acquire as they prepare for college and relate it to college study. Furthermore, “[CPP] didn't really talk about like that workload you're going to have…, so it was like a struggle” (Chasneika). Participants would have felt better prepared for the college academic demands they encountered during their first year of high school, if academic
rigor and workload had been increased. The findings of this study are supported by other research that focused on college students in New England (O’Brien & Shedd, 2001); O’Brien and Shedd (2001) found that New England college students from low SES and minority backgrounds most often cited inadequate academic preparation and difficulty of workload as the reason for feeling unprepared for college.

Increasing academic rigor and workload in a college preparation program, though, requires a delicate balance. As high school students, CPP participants reported involvement in multiple extracurricular activities as well as part-time jobs. In attempting to respect the time demands CPP students balanced as high school students, CPP resisted adding more writing and reading assignments. Further, as revealed in interviews, participants understood that CPP homework “didn't affect [participants] academically, in [their] high school, so if [they did] it, it may not be 100% effective” (Loris). Would increasing workloads and academic rigor have resulted in participants increasing efforts and attention paid to CPP work? Watt, Johnston, Huerta, Mendiola and Alkan (2008) found that students enrolled in AVID, a college preparation program, most often left AVID because of workloads. Students were unable to commit to the work required and left the program. Given that CPP also lost students when time demands became too difficult to balance, one must wonder how increased academic rigor and workload would have impacted CPP retention rates. One possible solution to increasing academic rigor and workload would be to better connect the work students completed at their high schools. For example, CPP students could have brought their writing and math
assignments to CPP Saturdays for feedback and assistance. Doing so would also prepare the CPP instructors, many of whom were M.Ed. students, for their future classrooms. For the instructors in Small college’s Ph.D. programs, this may also have informed their research and teacher education courses.

Although CPP encouraged students to enroll in the highest level of courses available at their schools, not all participants were able to access Advanced Placement courses. For example, upon receipt of Gates Foundation money for small schools, West Side High School transitioned from one comprehensive high school to four small schools during participants’ senior year. As a result, Advanced Placement courses were no longer available. Through this transition, CPP became especially critical for WSHS students, as they did not know how the transition would affect their college applications or chances to matriculate. However, CPP did not offer academically focused courses to seniors, which would have continued to bolster academic preparation through the schools’ transitions.

Outreach to Boston Public Schools is particularly critical at this point in time. Currently the school district faces a $63 million budget deficit and many schools are closing or are being recombined with other schools (http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/budget). With this restructuring parents and teachers fear that students will not have access to resources, like small classes and guidance counselors. Given the push to restructure traditional high schools into charter schools, students may not even have access to the schools they wish to attend. Research confirms these very real concerns; not every student has access to human and material
resources such as advanced coursework or guidance professionals. Often students aspire to matriculate, but they do not enroll in college preparatory coursework while still in high school (Goodwin, 2000; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003). Participants revealed that they relied upon CPP to provide access to college knowledge and to guide them in the preparation process. Unfortunately, not every student is aware or able to access college preparation programs (O’Brien & Shedd, 2001). To better support partner schools and to offer more equitable access, college preparation programs could share resources and materials with guidance counselors and teachers. Moreover, current CPP students could serve as school outreach representatives. Roles like these would offer students more opportunities to enact their agency and simultaneously enhance the ripple effect of college preparation programs. Among their recommendations Engle and Tinto (2008) advise that, “The key … is for principals, teachers, counselors, and directors of college access programs alike to work together to purposefully create a college-going culture in the school’s overall environment” (p. 28). Engle and Tinto (2008) point to the importance of connecting college preparation programs with high schools in order to achieve academic preparation. In other words, it is a concerted effort on the part of all stakeholders.

**Incorporation of Non-dominant Forms of Social and Cultural Capital**

CPP served as a form of institutional capital, in that the program transmitted embodied and institutionalized cultural capital through its programmatic features, such as advisory classes that guide students as they acquire college knowledge. College
knowledge may be monopolized because it is information that is housed within institutions and may also be transmitted from one generation to the next, particularly in economically privileged and families from the dominant culture. Accessing college knowledge and its associated social and cultural capital also offers a pathway to scarce rewards like matriculation and college graduation. Finally, through participation in CPP, students acquired access to dominant social and cultural capital in a socially defined context. By possessing dominant social capital, participants reap benefits through membership and the acquisition of embodied and institutional cultural capital.

Explicit instruction on discourse within higher education would offer participants opportunities to examine ways of being. Furthermore, familiarity with dominant discourse would allow students to gain entry to different opportunities. To do so, though, students “must learn to ‘decode the system’ that has been established by the dominant group and establish relationships with key institutional agents” (Perna, 2005, p. 132). Participants in this research study revealed that they applied cultural capital they acquired in CPP when, as college students, they would “go up to the teacher; introduce yourself and be like - let me know your office hours or … just ask some questions and [professors] will know you're there” (Chasneika). This indicates that participants understood how to approach professors, how to interact with them, and how to engage in discourse. In accessing opportunities, participants also wrote letters to Alumni requesting sponsorship to study abroad, also indicating engagement within academic discourse and enacting cultural capital towards new opportunities.
Conversations about students’ own familial and cultural discourses would also support their academic identities as students of color within predominantly White institutions. As Wildhagen (2010) argues, “… mere access to valued [or dominant] culture is not enough to ensure that individuals use that culture to their advantage. Individuals must know how to mobilize culture to serve their interests, which is dictated by habitus” (p. 522). Inculcating participants with dominant cultural capital without acknowledging and valuing students’ own capital could lead, as Tierney (1999) warns, to their “cultural suicide” (p. 89). A more culturally responsive curriculum in CPP would build on participants’ cultural wealth. When viewed through a lens that does not account for students’ cultural wealth, institutions and college preparation programs may define students as at-risk. From this viewpoint, at-risk is a fixed characteristic of the student, rather than of the environment in which the student is educated. Students are seen as coming to educational experiences with deficits rather than with assets. By avoiding direct conversations regarding ways to reject a deficit paradigm, CPP did not support students as they transitioned to college and became group representatives of their cultures and neighborhoods. Participants recounted numerous stories of self-doubt as they tried to counteract stereotypes and interpersonal microaggressions. Better incorporation of participants’ non-dominant social and cultural capital in CPP academic courses and advisory courses may better prepare students for the microaggressions and campus racial climate that they encountered as freshmen. Through academic courses that build on students’ cultural identities and cultural wealth, institutions, such as college preparation
programs, schools and universities, could support students’ academic identities even when they struggled with inhospitable campus climates.

Among the aspects of social and cultural capital, which CPP failed to integrate are the roles that parents play, in participants’ college preparation. As indicated by participants’ reflections, CPP parents were actively engaged in participants’ preparation. Parents encouraged participants’ enrollment in CPP, drove participants to Small College’s campus, and monitored CPP meeting dates and times. CPP parents held high expectations of their children and motivated participants when they struggled. Participants knew that their families supported them as they applied to college and matriculated. However, CPP rarely engaged parents in the processes of preparing students for college. CPP invited parents to events, like orientation and end of year celebrations, and sent home newsletters. However, CPP missed an opportunity to create a more unified support base for CPP participants. Moreover, by not engaging parents more effectively, CPP’s understanding of participants’ cultures, values, and strengths was limited. Thus, the ability to incorporate more culturally relevant curriculum that built upon students’ cultural wealth was limited. Although CPP recognized the important role that parents play as CPP participants prepared for matriculation the ways in which CPP sought to engage parents was ineffective. Many parents worked on Saturdays, and so could not attend regular meetings. A more welcoming stance would have been to hold open house meetings at times that were more convenient for families. Moreover, most participants were first-generation college students. While parents supported their children
as they aspired for college, parents did not have the college knowledge that CPP offered. By sharing the information with parents, CPP could have helped participants prepare their families for college expectations. For example, during advisory meetings, CPP could invite parents to listen to college students of color to discuss their experiences. In this way, both participants and parents would hear first-hand accounts of what the college context and discourse entail. Moreover, opportunities to ask questions and engage in discussion are more collaborative than hierarchical. Parents could share their concerns and questions and CPP instructors, graduates, and participants could offer their perspectives. By engaging parents in more collaborative forms, CPP could engage with families to provide more holistic bases of support as participants transitioned to college. Finally, working with families could serve to reaffirm students’ cultural and academic identities because there would be shared goals of matriculation with clearly communicated high expectations that do not negate students’ cultural wealth.

**Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability**

Credibility refers to the plausibility of the findings, or how accurate and likely the findings are (Zach, 2006). Transferability contends with how comparable the findings are to similar situations, contexts, and experiences (Zach, 2006). Dependability is often achieved through audit trails in order to “ensure the stability of the findings” (Zach, 2006, p.7). Finally, confirmability is accomplished through researcher reflexivity, data collected through multiple sources, and member-checking. Attending to these four components ensures rigor and reliability in case study research.
As with any qualitative case study with a small sample, this research is contextually bound. Research questions focused on participants’ experiences as they occurred in one college preparation program. Given the emphasis on context, case study methodology allowed for focus on the individual experience, the micro, while simultaneously examining the macro forces that influence and impact individuals’ experiences. Therefore, multiple-case study methodology fit well with the research questions as well as within positioning theory and a phenomenological orientation because the method and theoretical frameworks operate on the assumption that there are multiple realities and each experience is embedded within context. Using multiple-case study design, I explored the diverse academic, social, and cultural experiences of students who live and learn in a variety of college contexts and who share the similar phenomenon of completing CPP.

The range of universities that participants attended, though, may have complicated the understanding of a college preparation graduates’ college experience and decreased the transferability of the findings. Each university offered different support mechanisms and campus climates. Moreover, each participant accessed resources and sources of support in different ways. However, after engaging in member checking throughout the process, participants confirmed that the findings spoke to their college transitional experiences. This confirmation, in conjunction with the support found in other research studies, indicate that this study offered some unique and original findings.
to the body of research. Moreover, positioning theory offered a new framework for viewing the role participants played in their own matriculation.

Areas for Further Research

Giving Back and the Ripple Effect: Students as Change Agents

Many of my participants viewed being part of this dissertation as a way of giving back to me and to CPP. I was amazed and honored. This makes me very emotional to think that I, perhaps, played a small part in their educational paths. As a teacher, I want to make a positive impact on students, but teachers rarely get to know if they made an impact or not. Perhaps through exposure to CPP mentors and instructors, CPP graduates developed a sense of responsibility outside of their own success. My participants, though, also see giving back as more than giving back to the CPP program or to me. It is part of their identities, views of the world, and their sense of rightness. Many of them have served, officially and unofficially, as mentors and volunteers in community service projects or community centers. They see it as beneficial for society to be a part of the giving cycle.

As an area for future research, giving back as part of the ripple effect of college preparation programs may reveal ways to further engage students in acting for social justice and connecting dominant and non-dominant forms of capital. While many college preparation programs, including CPP, ask students to serve as “change agents” (http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cbound/index.html), there are few research studies that attend to the formal ways that college preparation programs can promote these roles.
Conclusion

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not offer final words to my participants. After all, they are my inspiration and my motivation for completing the research. Through the process of interviewing my participants and analyzing their responses, I repeatedly returned to a state of awe. I was awed by their perseverance, determination, motivation, and kindness. In closing, here are their words on what it means to be a college student.

Akorfa

That I have access to information so I'm not going to just blindly believe everything that I'm told; that if I meet somebody from a different part of the world, I can argue with them and not feel as if I’m just saying stuff just to say stuff but actually know what I’m talking about. (interview)

Chasneika

It means you're going to be stressed out. It means you're going to be going crazy and you know you're going to be up late. You're going to be looking for resources all of the time. So, it's like - everything is true what they say about a college student that you're going to go through; it's like going through stages I think. That's how I see it. So, it's like you know at first year like a newborn; you don't know anything and then, it's like, you skip the crawling; that doesn't count. You just walk and like while you're walking, you grow up and you see things in a different way then you used
to see them. So, it's like you're learning every day that you wake up basically. (interview)

Eleni

[T]hroughout I shared the struggles but in the end I learned. I’m going to carry these good things that I learned because and it made me be more aware. (interview)

Henry

Those are called the passage of life or something. It's how you are when you grow up. You make your own choices. I mean, sometimes you choose the right ones. Sometimes you choose the wrong choices. It's how you are as a person, I guess. … [W]hen I started college, I know I should either - if I start the semester of college, I know I have to finish it. If not, I'm already paying for it and it's not cheap. So I don't want to waste everything that I paid for. It's not refundable as well as I don't want like a bad reputation for myself and for my family, too. It's not really just a bad reputation for my family. It's more about I don't want to see how everyone else become more successful and then I drop. Yeah, I don't want like stuff like that to happen. (interview)

Loris

Graduating means you become successful, you are educated, you did the right things in life, and you also have a career ahead of which could lead
to positive things. Like I said, education is a big thing in our family.

…Just the feeling of beating college, finally having the feeling like you made it sort of thing, and sort of like you have the potential to finish, finish in a great institution and become a success that type of thing. I don’t know, you work so hard until high school and you finally realize that you made, you know? It’s that type of thing. (interview)

Noman

Right now what it means college student is a lot of sleepless nights, a lot of work, but maturing and learning every single day. It meant a lot. If I didn’t go to college it would be embarrassing to me; it would be embarrassing to my family. Because I would be the only person in my family not to go to college, out of my whole siblings and even our cousins back at home - they all stressed education … it is just natural for us that when we have more opportunities here that we take advantage of them. So if I didn’t, it will be embarrassing for me, my family and everybody else. (interview)

Raimar

To tell you the truth, I don't know. I felt like…you hear different stories about it. You hear, “Oh, college is easy. It's like high school but more reading.” Or you hear, “Oh, college - is so hard and you have to always be meeting someone and you're working and you're doing class work and it's
so hard.” To me, a college student was just that. Someone who didn't have time at the end of the day because they were always meeting and they were always doing work or if they had a job, they had to go to work. So to me that was a college student. Then I came here and I guess it was completely true. You work, you go to class, you have to study, you have all these meetings with faculty and stuff all over the place, but at the end of the day, you always have time to do what you got to do. I don't know.

(interview)

As evidenced by the meaning CPP graduates constructed from the complex and difficult process of attaining matriculation, research and college preparation programs would do well to learn from their students. Insights learned through these interviews reveal that students from under-served schools possess an awareness of their agency. However, many students do not know how to access the resources necessary for reaching their goals. Moreover, not every student may prove as tenacious as those in this research as they encounter the varied, and often harsh, obstacles of the first year of college. Lessons gleaned from their reflections can improve practice by informing curriculum, and pedagogy of college preparation programs and higher education institutions. Furthermore, the CPP graduates wanted to give back – they recognize the value of their social and cultural capital. Opportunities to share their knowledge and experiences with current high school students, college preparation programs, and
universities, can create shared understandings. Through shared understandings, college preparation programs and universities can better meet the needs of students from all backgrounds. Finally, only in recognition of the strengths that students possess, will we as teachers, of all levels, become change agents through education.
References


APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT E-MAIL

Dear College Prep Graduate,

I am conducting dissertation research that asks: “What are the academic, psychological, and social experiences of graduates of a college preparation program during the first year of college?” As a result of this study, I hope to learn about students’ experiences as first-year college students who graduated from a college preparation program. This includes learning what is most beneficial and what is least useful to students in the College Bound program. I also hope to find out how your experiences and your understanding of them have changed over time.

I am recruiting college prep graduates who are at least 18 years old. I will interview and audio tape those participants 3 times. I also will conduct a focus group at which I will offer dinner. Participants will receive a $20 gift card to either Best Buy or Target following the completion of each interview as compensation for your participation in this research study. Your participation is completely voluntary. Should you decide to withdraw from the research prior to the first interview, you will receive a $10 gift card to Best Buy or Target. Your decision whether or not to participate will have no effect on your grades, academic standing, college prep program records, or your college education. You can stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer questions. Please ask questions if you there is anything that you do not understand or of something concerns you. If you are interested or if you have questions you’d like to ask me, please e-mail me at younglu@bc.edu or call me at ....
APPENDIX B: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Introduction:

You are invited to take part in a research study about a university outreach college preparation program. This research is called “What are the academic, psychological, and social experiences of graduates of a college preparation program during the first year of college?” You are being invited because you graduated from a college preparation program, you are at least 18, and you have completed at least one year in college. If you decide that you want to be part of this study, you will be one a small group chosen to participate.

Your participation is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will have no effect on your grades, academic standing, college prep program transcripts, or your college education. Please ask questions if you there is anything that you do not understand or of something concerns you.

I, Lydia Young, a doctoral candidate in curriculum and instruction at Boston College am being guided in this research by Professor Audrey Friedman in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. No funding has been received for this study, and neither Ms. Young nor Professor Friedman expects to receive any extra money from companies, schools, or other organizations because of the results of this study.

Purpose:

By doing this study, we hope to learn what students experience during their first year of college after they graduate from a college preparation program. This includes
learning what is most beneficial and what is least useful to students’ college preparation programs.

**Procedures:**

The research will be done in a setting of your choice. You will be interviewed and audio recorded by Ms. Young three times. Each interview will require no more than 60 to 90 minutes per interview.

In the interviews, you will be asked about your educational background, family history, your opinion of the college preparation program. You will also be asked to describe your experiences in the program and your experiences in your first year of college. You are also asked to relate your college preparation experiences to your experiences during your first year of college.

Ms. Young also will conduct one interpretive focus group. The focus group will occur in the evening at which time dinner will be provided. During the focus group discussion, the researcher will audiotape the conversation and take field notes. From the themes which arise, she will check for interpretive consistency and validity.

You are not eligible to participate in this research study if you are under 18 years old or if you did not participate in a college preparation program for at least two years.

**Risks:**

To the best of our knowledge, your participation in this study will incur no harm or risk to you more than what you experience in your daily life. the things you will be doing for this study have no more risk of harm to you than what you would experience in
everyday life. However, in discussing your experiences, we may raise sensitive issues. If this does happen, you can end the interview at any moment or decline to answer any questions. I assure you, however, that the questions will focus on your college preparation and your college experiences.

Benefits:

Ms. Young will provide a $20 gift card to Best Buy or Target following the completion of each interview. You may benefit from this study by reflecting on your own experiences. You will also help us better prepare future students for college by improving college preparation programs.

Costs:

You do not have to pay to participate in this research study, nor will you have to pay for transportation.

Compensation:

Upon completion of each interview and the focus group, you will receive a $20 gift card to Best Buy or Target. Should you decide to withdraw from the research prior to the first interview, you will receive a $10 gift card to Best Buy or Target.

Confidentiality:

Your name will not be recorded on the audio tape of the interview nor on the transcriptions of the interview; your participation will remain confidential. This means that no one will know that the answers you gave came from you. This informed consent document, with your name on it, will be stored in a locked cabinet in Ms. Young’s office,
and no one but she will have access to the cabinet. The informed consent documents, the confidential audio interviews and the transcriptions of the interviews will be kept for use in future research and might be shared with other researchers.

The interview you give will be transcribed and analyzed for recurrent themes. In this process, your information will be combined with information from other participants. When I write up the study to share it with other researchers, at meetings or in journals, I will write about you using a pseudonym. You will not be identified in these written materials.

Although it happens very rarely, we may have to show information that identifies you, like this informed consent document, to people who need to be sure we conducted the research properly. These would be people from a group such as the Boston College Institutional Review Board that oversees research involving human participants.

Questions:

You are encouraged to ask questions now and at any time during the study. You can reach me, Lydia Young at … or Professor Friedman at …. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in a research study, please call the office for Human Research Participant Protection at (617) 552-4778.
**Certification:**

I have read and I believe I understand this Informed Consent document. I believe I understand the purpose of this research project and what I will be asked to do. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and they have been answered satisfactorily.

I understand that I may stop my participation in this research study at any time and that I can refuse to answer any question.

I understand that my name will not appear on the transcribed interview and that I will not be identified in reports on this research nor will I be identified on audio tapes.

I have received a signed copy of this Informed Consent document for my personal reference.

I hereby give my informed and free consent to be a participant in this study. I consent to be audio taped for this study.

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APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview 1

This interview will focus on school, student identity, and life history before matriculation.

1. Describe a typical day in your life during your sophomore year in high school. Share examples that relate to school, academics, social life, family, and personal life.

2. How did you come to be involved in the college preparation program? What led you to make the decision to become involved?

3. Describe a typical day in the college preparation program.

4. What were some of the personal, social, and academic experiences that you feel were significant or that stand out during the college preparation program experience?

5. Tell me a story about one critical event (It can be positive or negative.) in the college preparation program that influenced your overall experience in the college preparation program?

6. Who are the people that influenced you positively or negatively in deciding to go to college and to get accepted into college? Please share at least three examples of these relationships.

Possible follow up questions:

- What was the experience like for you?
• What were your perceptions & feelings about the experience?
• Share an example or an anecdote that best represents this experience or perception.
Interview 2

This interview focuses on the “… concrete details of the participants’ present lived experience… We ask them to reconstruct these details” (Seidman, 2006, p.18).

1. What was it like to be a college student during that first year?

2. Describe a typical day in college during your first year at college.
   
   a. Please share some examples/anecdotes that relate to personal, social & academic experiences.

3. What were some of the personal, social & academic experiences that you feel were significant, or stand out, during your first year of college?

4. Now focus a bit more, tell me about a critical event during your first year of college that influenced your overall experience in college that first year.

5. Who were the people (positive/negative) who impacted your decision to remain in college?
   
   a. Please share at least 3 examples of these relationships.

Possible follow up questions:

- If I were your younger sibling, what would you say to me about that first year in college?

- What was that experience like for you?

- What were your perceptions & feelings?

- Ask for examples and anecdotes.
Interview 3

The final interview is when participants can reflect on the meaning of their experiences. “… [I]t addresses the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life. … Making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation” (Seidman, 2006, p.18).

1. When you reflect on your first year in college, what connections do you see between your relationships with critical people in high school and those you met during your first year at college?
   a. Who has continued to impact you?
   b. How did his/her influence shape your first year in college?

2. Regarding your academic experiences as a first year college student, what connections do you see to your college preparation?
   a. Please share 3 anecdotes/examples.

3. What personal, academic, and social experiences surprised you during that first year of college?
   a. How do these connect to your college preparation?

4. When you began college, what did it mean to be a college student?
   a. How/did that change after your first year?

5. How did your relationships with significant people change after your first year of college?
a. How do you explain this?

6. What, if any, of your critical experiences in the College Preparation Program prepared you to be successful personally, academically & socially?

7. What were your challenges or successes during your first year of college?

8. What personal & social experiences impacted your first year in college that may not relate to the College Preparation Program?

9. Can you describe any experiences in the College Preparation Program that may have helped you negotiate your first year college dilemmas?

Possible follow up questions:

- What was that like for you?
- What were your perceptions & feelings?
- Ask for examples and anecdotes