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"You can go to college": Employing a Developmental Perspective to Examine How Young Men of Color Construct a College-Going Identity

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Abstract
This article examines college-going identity construction for Black, Latino, and Asian American and Pacific Islander high school students. The authors use Marcia's (J Personal Soc Psychol 3(5):551–558, 1966; in: Delson (ed) Handbook of adolescent research, Wiley, New York, 1980) ego identity statuses perspective to examine how students develop their college-going identities to consider their post-high school pathways. We draw on focus groups interviews with 153 Black, Latino, and Asian American Pacific Islanders students enrolled in 10 urban and suburban high schools in California. The findings show the importance of being somebody, not quitting before establishing a career or graduating from college, joining the military as a pathway to finance postsecondary education, and the internal pressure to pay for higher education. The significance of this paper challenges the dominant narrative of young men of color not invested or interested in higher education, but highlight how the young men of color negotiate their agency in constructing their ideas and making decisions based on how various tensions and aspirations shape their goals after high school.

Keywords Asian American Pacific Islander males · Black males · College access · Latino males · Identity development · Boys of color

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"You can go to college": Young men of color and college identity construction through a developmental perspective

> I feel like a pioneer…not a lot of men of color go into college and seeing as I am about to go to college…I feel like I'm kind of representing my culture and race - Latino male high school student

The quote above highlights how one Latino male sees himself as an example, as many other young males of color do not pursue higher education (Harper 2015; Saenz and Ponjuan 2009). This student's quote mirrors the national concern about how Black, Latino, Native American, and Asian American and Pacific Islanders' educational success rates are disproportionate compared to their female counterparts (Buchmann et al. 2008; Saenz and Ponjuan 2009). Instead boys of color in the U.S. are tracked into the school-to-prison-pipeline (Giraldo et al. 2017; Huerta 2015a; Rios 2011, 2017; Vigil 1999), a system that criminalizing young men of color and prepares them for future incarceration, or into non-college-going tracks in middle and high schools (Lopez-Aguado 2016; Noguera 2003; Rios 2017; Vigil 1999). Thus the need to create purposeful interventions to promote high school completion and college enrollment is pressing (Martinez and Castellanos 2018; Sanchez et al. 2012), however there is currently a level of uncertainty as the Trump administration is proposing detrimental cuts to college outreach and retention programs for underserved communities (Ujifusa 2018). For many young men of color in the U.S., some schools do not provide the necessary resources for academic enrichment, but instead contribute to their early departure and feelings of isolation and alienation (Clark et al. 2013; Fergus et al. 2014).

The purpose of this paper is to share the qualitative experiences of Black, Latino, and Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI) high school males who are on their pathway to higher education. This paper is unique as it includes the voices of AAPI male youth as previous literature on young men of color often omit their voice (Anderson and Larson 2009; Harper 2015; Harper and Associates 2014; Howard et al., in press; Torres 2015; Watson et al. 2016). The dichotomy of success and failure often does not recognize the disproportionate social and educational challenges AAPI groups experience, and often focus on Black and Latino males. However, virtually no studies have collectively examined all three racial and ethnic male groups to better understand how they form their college-going identities in high school. By focusing on the three largest racial and ethnic groups in this paper, it allows the opportunity to document the convergence of experiences and challenges of students who share similar concerns and decisions about how to access information about higher education. Also, this paper highlights the tensions that emerge as these groups plan for their futures after high school.

Nationally, the high school graduation rates for Black and Latino males is estimated to be between 48 to 51%, and the actual numbers may be lower depending on the measures used by local school districts to calculate completion rates (Schott Foundation for Public Education 2015). For Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodians, Laotians and Pacific Islanders, the high school completion rate is near

or below 50% (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE] 2011; Teranishi 2010; Teranishi et al. 2004). These unsettling high school graduation numbers contribute to the heightened sense of urgency for educators, policymakers, and philanthropies to continue to form strategic collaborations to examine the tensions and factors that contribute to individual student successes that can impact young men of color to transition from high school to college. Perez Huber et al. (2015) report that only 1 of 11 Latino males, 17 of 100 African American males, and 52 of 100 AAPI males will earn Bachelor's degrees, respectively (pg. 3). Perez Huber and others shared that AAPI males hold a larger share of those earning a Bachelor's degree, this number is deceiving because of the low academic achievement of some ethnic sub-groups. For instance, Hmong, Laotians, Cambodians, Pacific Islanders, and others Southeast Asian male students in high school are less likely to enroll into higher education (CARE 2011; Teranishi 2010).

Given these unsettling high school graduation and college enrollment numbers, often times what is missing from this complicated story are the voices of young men of color to discuss their trajectories and hopes for their future. Their relationships with family, school agents, and peers play a vital role in shaping their expectations (Flores-Gonzales 2005; Lopez 2003). In this study, we focus on 153 young men of color that are enrolled in 10 suburban and urban high schools who are on their pathway to enroll into higher education. This paper is timely to counter the national narrative of boys of color as thugs and apathetic about their futures and value of education (Harper 2015). We use a human developmental lens to understand the students' construction of a college-going identity through Marcia's (1966, 1980) identity statuses. We draw from Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012) definition of college-going identity, which is an individual's, "state of mind in which youth believe that college is right for them and aspire to obtain a college degree" (p. 64). This study seeks to answer the following research question: In what ways, if any, do young men of color discuss the sources of motivation or interference that contribute to their development of a college-going identity?

The paper is organized to provide an overview of the literature on educational systems and college access for traditionally underrepresented groups in K-12 education. As there is lack of literature on AAPI males and college access, but a growing body of research on Black and Latino males related to college readiness that we use to help inform our study that will help distinguish the similarities/differences in their experiences, tensions, and aspirations. We then present the application of Marcia's adolescent identity development for this study, followed by the methodology of the study design, and then presentation of the findings, and finally discussion.

Review of Literature

Over the past decade researchers have focused on the structural and institutional challenges young men of color face in high school completion, college enrollment, and the absence of meaningful relationships with teachers, counselors, and other adult educators. Each element of a students' life influences how they navigate

the educational pipeline (McDonough 1997). For example, school districts allocate specific financial resources dedicated to high school college counselors (Hill 2008, 2012), if and how parents feel welcomed or perceived as a burden to teachers and counselors when asking for help with higher education planning (Mullen 2010; Perna and Titus 2005). In particular, low-income and students of color see and understand the importance of higher education as a tool for social mobility (Haveman and Smeeding 2006), but unfortunately, young men of color distrust their teachers and counselors as the persistent racism, sexism, and classism shapes how expectations are set in classrooms and schools (Howard 2014; Noguera et al. 2011; Rios 2017). As a result, lack of trust and relationship with adult educators directly impacts young men of color and their ability to persist to higher education. Although, Valenzuela (1999) focused on Mexican and Mexican–American male and female teenagers, she captured how teachers, counselors, and school leaders' negative attitudes and lack of *cariño* (care) towards Latino youth negatively shaped students' outcomes. The sentiments of the lack of *cariño* are not only isolated to Mexican-Americans, but experienced by African American males as well. Howard (2014) stresses Black boys internalize the victimization they experience as they are perceived as "problems" in their schools and communities. Where social problems and poverty are solely attributed to African American communities without recognition of larger social context that contributes to social phenomenon. These feelings are often unshakable and reinforced by racism and constant poor treatment that students encounter in schools and communities (Huerta and Rios-Aguilar, in press; Rios 2017; Saenz and Ponjuan 2009).

High School Counseling

Moore et al. (2008) report that Black male high school students have little faith in their school counselors. The students in the study believed their counselors provided insufficient or very minimal support in guiding students towards college readiness. The low levels of distrust may be influenced by the sad reality that counselors are unable to spend more than 10–15 min per student as their caseloads. In California during the 2014–2015 academic year, the student to counselor ratio was 760 students to 1 counselor (American School Counselor Association 2016). Similarly, Latina/o high school students do not believe counselors provide accurate financial aid information to help prepare them for higher education (Huerta and Fishman 2014; Huerta 2015a). Black and Latino male youth are not the only targets of racial and ethnic mistreatment in schools, but also expands to AAPIs. The level of support provided to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders is also truncated by the widely accepted "model minority" myth, a stereotype that is largely detrimental to low-income and first-generation AAPI college aspirants, who lack sufficient peer and in-home educational support (CARE 2008). Counselors may believe AAPI students do not require individual support and attention to prepare for college due to the damaging misperception that they are all familiar on how to navigate the college readiness process (Teranishi 2010; Teranishi and Nguyen 2011).

Although, families play a significant role in shaping their sons' college aspirations and expectation for their futures (Huerta 2015a; Huerta and Fishman 2014), most low-income families do not have the necessary connections or information to adequately prepare their children for higher education (Kiyama 2010), and must depend on schools to fill the information gaps, which infrequently occurs (Hill 2008, 2012). Although, AAPI families possess a larger proportion of advanced degree holders, often the students' parents are immigrants to the U.S and may not be familiar with the local educational system or the college admission process, which may pose challenges to their children about how to plan and prepare for higher education.

In fact, majority of low-income families do not understand how to navigate the postsecondary education planning that may impact academic course preparation and participation in extracurricular activities in high school (Ross et al. 2012). Therefore, the role of school counselors is pivotal as they are in a position to provide the necessary opportunities and transmit knowledge to students and their families to build valued forms of social and cultural capital about higher education (Holland 2015; Huerta 2015b; McDonough 1997; Perna and Titus 2005; Stanton-Salazar 2001, 2011). Within this exchange of information, some parents trust that the school systems and school counselors, and believe in counselors abilities to best position and meet the needs of their sons (Holland 2015; Moore et al. 2008), but unfortunately given the large counselor-student ratio not all students are equally supported (Hill 2012). Specifically, for young men of color, who may have to depend on the social support from their school counselors to develop the confidence and collect information about higher education. However, often times these aspirations of pursuing higher education for young men of color may be derailed, given the attitudes and perceptions of educators and teachers of what is possible for them may not equate to postsecondary education (Noguera et al. 2011). For instance, when young men of color are deemed as "troublemakers," counselors and teachers may limit opportunities that will increase their profile for college, such as, involvement in valued school activities, sports, honors and advanced courses that all contribute to the academic and social development of youth (Huerta 2016; McNutly and Roseboro 2009).

Although this behavior may be unintentional, school counselors often try to invest their energy into students who are on the path to college or demonstrate the most promise. Schools focus on traditional forms of "high-achieving," which often negatively impacts students of color because of the intersection of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. School counselors cannot overlook "non-college material students" as they hold aspirations to attend college (Huerta 2016), but may not fit into the traditional models held by schools. Unfortunately, that means additional barriers are created for "non-college" material students, which may directly impact fostering and growing a college-going identity. For example, McDonough and Calderone (2006) documented how high school counselors often act upon their personal middle-class cost–benefit assessments when determining *how* and *who* to advise and which types of colleges, community college versus 4-year colleges, public versus private, should low-income students of color consider for their future. Typically, the counselors' actions result in low-income students of color being guided away from 4-year colleges with more resources and instead advised into local community colleges (Holland 2015). When low-income Latino male students do not trust their high

school college counselors, they will seek college information from others including military recruiters (Huerta 2015a). Huerta (2015a) found military recruiters are better equipped to share college information with low-income Latino male students as they can guarantee specific financial benefits available through the military whereas college counselors are only able to provide estimates of state or federal financial aid. However, Latino male students felt the military recruiters only targeted Chicano and Latino male students for the military and often ignored other racial and ethnic groups (Martinez and Huerta, in press).

School Culture and Expectations

The micro-level experiences in schools are a constant pain for young men of color, and these sentiments are quickly followed by system-level-behaviors that contribute to the derailment of a college-going pathway for students. The role of school culture is important to discuss, as boys and young men of color are often caught in the web of school discipline, tracking, and mistreatment, which often derails opportunities to forge a strong college-going identity (Huerta 2016; Rios 2017; Vigil 1999). High schools create cultures that either promote or hinder opportunities for college-going (Huerta 2015b; Klugman 2012; McDonough 1997). More recently, the influence of school culture on young men of color depicts a grim reality for this group of students (Rios 2011, 2017), where punishment and the criminalization of students in urban schools is more common (Hirschfield 2008). For example, low-income males of color are improperly labeled as special education, emotionally or learning disabled (Connell 1996; Laura 2014; Moore et al. 2008). Once students are categorized as academic deficient—it is often impossible for low-income families of color to dispute schools to remove the label (Ferguson 2000)—the labeling dictates and tracks students into academic curriculum which provide little academic rigor for students, and the unintended outcomes include technical and vocational education in high school (Huerta 2016; Kim 2011; Kim and Taylor 2008; Oakes 2005). When students are in remedial, technical, or vocation-based courses, the level of academic rigor is exceptionally minimal in math and science classes (Kim, 2011; Kim and Taylor 2008), which are powerful predictors of postsecondary enrollment (Adelman 2006; Perna 2000a, b). Schools track young men of color into these lower-level courses as a method to "manage" students who may have become challenges because individual students are constantly insubordinate or have outbursts in classrooms (Flores-Gonzales 2005; Noguera 2003, 2008). When schools limit opportunities for young men of color, through tracking, suspending, or social alienation, it creates additional hurdles to building the valued forms of social and cultural capital that is primarily shared through relationships with college counselors and college outreach professionals (Strayhorn 2010).

Students' Need College Knowledge

Low-income and first-generation high school students need specific forms of college information to understand *how to* prepare for the different types of higher education

institutions; an ability to complete and comprehend financial aid policies and available resources, various admissions criteria, and test requirements (Holland 2015; Tierney 2009). Huerta and Rios-Aguilar (in press) found that often schools ignore or dismiss the types of funds of knowledge Latino male students' possess that do not fit into the social and cultural norms of schools. McDonough (1997) argues similar that schools expect students to possess valued forms of cultural capital, but do not easily share it with all students. Hill (2008, 2012) documented how schools are restricted in their ability to share college information with students because of various institutional limitations that prevent individual student attention. While, low-income parents expect schools to provide valuable forms of college knowledge to their children (Auerbach 2004), unfortunately, only small groups of selected students receive the information. Schools as organizations are aware that students and their families need support to learn valued "college knowledge," but are structured to limit how and who receives the nuanced information (McDonough 1998). These structural limitations then cause disruptions in the information channels for families to learn about the college-going process. The parents' expect their children to be prepared for college admission is well documented (Kiyama 2010), but somehow the college information is not being equally transmitted to the students who need the most support (Holland 2015; McDonough 1997; Perna and Titus 2005).

In some schools, college knowledge can and is seen as a prized commodity that not all students will receive (McDonough 1997), and this sentiment is echoed by Stanton-Salazar (2011) who sees this favoritism and selectivity of supporting students as an additional method to promote social stratification. For young men of color, they have the motivation and ambition to want to pursue higher education (Howard et al., in press), but need the support and institutional scaffolding to adequately prepare for college (Huerta 2015a). When some counselors decide to only provide information to so-called "promising students" who are in the college or honors tracks, leaving non-high achieving students to navigate the college-going process by themselves (Kimura-Walsh et al. 2009).

Theorercal Framework

Marcia's Identity Statuses

This study relies on Marcia's (1980) ego identity statuses to investigate the college-going identity development process for young men of color. Marcia (1966, 1980) based his ego identity statuses from the psychological work of Erik Erickson but made adaptations to focus on adolescent males and female students. Initially, Marcia (1966, 1980) discovered adolescents would experience the following statuses and identity conflicts based on the influence of different cognitive, physical, and social expectations to shape an individuals' identity. He shared the following four concepts an individual will explore and either experience a sense of crisis or commitment: (1) foreclosure, (2) identity achievement, (3) identity diffusion, and (4) moratorium. Marcia's initial work is an ideal application for young men of color in high school as they are always negotiating their identity vocation, career, and educational

opportunities for their futures. Previous studies on adolescent high school students considering postsecondary education have relied on Marcia's theory to understand what tensions and efforts are needed to move towards college (Nakkula and Toshalis 2006; Savitz-Romer and Bouffard 2012). Crisis can be classified as a period of exploration of options. Whereas, the commitment status is the outcome of the crisis period for young adults in their development. As the student develop their post-high school goals, an individual will debate and negotiate which pathway is the most appropriate for them such as seeking employment, developing vocational skills, or postsecondary opportunities (Marcia 1966, 1980). Although, we present a relatively "clean" perspective about ego identity statuses, the process for an individual is messy, non-linear and sometimes circular, revolving between stages and experiences. The importance of creating a well-developed identity provides a foundation to know one's strengths and weaknesses and be comfortable interacting with various individuals. When an individual has a fractured sense of identity, they may struggle to articulate a clear sense of self or direction. The four statuses represent the exploration of identity for adolescents as they consider their context and perceived opportunities to progress in their lives. Each teenager may engage in one, two, or more of the statuses only to return to encounter their starting point of identity development, which is a common experience for youth (Marcia 1980).

Foreclosure

Adolescents in the foreclosed status have made commitments to an identity or future occupational, but have not experienced an identity crisis such as exploring other opportunities not part of the foreclosure status. In this stage, adolescents conform to parents, trusted family members, or other expectations of how young men *should* be based on their context or environment. For example, Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012) suggest adolescents in this status, "[have] ruled out going to college without seeking or receiving appropriate information" (pg. 70). Some male of color may foreclose the college option instead to focus on vocational training or other career choices that do not require postsecondary credentials. Males of color, may not have considered alterative identities such as going to college and may be focused on a narrow reality of starting a business or joining the military because of the messaging they received from peers, family networks, and/or educators. Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) state adolescents may be foreclosed to new ideas and options because of a "lack of trusting" individuals outside their friend and family groups (pg. 30).

Diffusion

Adolescents in the diffusion stage have not made a commitment to any identity or opportunity. Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) assert adolescents are "easily influenced" by their peers and live "moment to moment" to fit into the situations in their lives (pg. 32). Due to the fluidity and reluctance to commit to an identity, college counselors may believe students are not fully "invested" in pursuing and completing postsecondary education. Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012) suggest

students may possess little awareness of higher education opportunities and feel overwhelmed by the amount of information and responsibilities therein related to college costs, major, institutional costs, and other areas that require attention. Simply, Marcia would say that adolescents do not have a clear sense of themselves and their identity, but male students may find it too difficult and aimless to plan for their future by considering postsecondary education because planning may seem extraordinarily foreign to them especially if they are first in their family to pursue higher education.

Moratorium

During high school, adolescents actively explore alternative identity commitments, but have not yet planned a particular pathway after high school (Nakkula and Toshalis 2006). For some students, the decision on whether to enroll in college, join the military, or enter the workforce are equally probable options for them based on their socioeconomic status (Reed 2011). Thus, experimenting with various roles, beliefs, behaviors, and relationships contribute to adolescents experiencing identity crisis, and the underlying tension to avoid a decision and commitment to any one identity. Adolescents in moratorium are in the process of developing the authentic "me" (Nakkula and Toshalis 2006). As youth search for their authentic self, they may use individuals within their family or friend social circles as role models to have a clearer vision of what is possible. So for low-income young men of color, their educational or career opportunities may be shaped by their social networks on what is realistic. When thinking about college, Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012) position adolescents in moratorium as "trying on" the possibility of going to college by conducting personal research to further their knowledge to make an informed decision, and this exploration may be more challenging with limited familial expertise and advice.

Achieved

The achieved status is when an adolescent has explored and commits to building an identity after negotiating the various statuses and crises. For example, when a Latino male decides to enroll in a community college full-time after exploring various options and consideration including college costs, familiar support, and labor market conditions. The result leads towards less anxiety about reaching their authentic sense of self and feeling confident and comfortable with their decision. For some young men of color, they may experience criticism from their friends and family to make the decision to enroll in higher education, and may have developed an increased tolerance from external disapproval. Each male of color, their family, and peer network have different perceptions and values towards higher education, when considering the creation of a college-going identity. As Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012) assert that adolescents have reaffirmed

their sense of achievement by locating and processing information from family, educators, and peers.

Methodology

This qualitative study examined how low-income young men of color develop their college-going identity in 10 high schools in Southern California. The data is based on focus group interviews 496 total students with 153 youth: Black (62), Latino (67), and AAPI (24) male students enrolled in 10 suburban and urban high schools.[1] The purpose of the focus groups was to gain insight into the students' relationships and experiences with various individuals such as friends, teachers, counselors, and parents, who influence their educational processes and pursuit of postsecondary education.

The high schools were selected based on aggregated data of high school completion and college enrollment by the California Department of Education (CDE) of students of color. High school selection criteria included the racial and ethnic composition of each school as well as patterns of academic success within the schools. The academic success measures included the high school's ability to graduate students of color and the rate at which graduates enroll in some form of postsecondary education, such as the community college, California State University, or University of California systems. In total, 10 schools located in four urban and suburban school districts found in and around Southern California participated in this study. Each school site varied in terms of racial and ethnic student populations, the counselor to student ratio, academic curriculum offerings, teacher qualifications, student transition to colleges and universities, and other characteristics.

Data Collection

Focus group interviews focused on college readiness, social expectations to attend college, availability of college-preparatory resources, social and educational support, and perceived barriers to higher education. Students were recruited through snowball sampling and recommendations from teachers and counselors. Focus group interviews ranged from 60 to 90 min on each of the high school campuses for a total of 68 focus groups. A semi-structured interview protocol with open ended questions designed to identify key individuals in the students' lives, their educational goals, information sources, and experiences in the high school to better understand how these areas influenced the students' college preparation and choice processes (Creswell 1998). Each focus group varied in size (5–8 students), race, ethnicity, and gender (Creswell 1998). The student participants were provided movie-tickets as an incentive at the completion of the interviews. Transcription was completed by a

[1] Data for this study is adapted from a larger comprehensive mixed-methods study of 496 racial and ethnic minority students, parents, and counselors at 10 high schools in Southern California and their perceptions of college opportunities.

third-party vendor, and each transcript was then verified for accuracy by a member of the research team.

Participants

Our purpose in insolating the voices of 153 male study participants are to understand how they perceived educational opportunities, barriers, and concerns focused on postsecondary education. The various racial and ethnic groups is based on the students' self-reported identities, some students may have been mixed-race, but on surveys that identified one group. The students' ages ranged from 13 to 18 years old. At the time of data collection, the students were ninth to twelfth graders. Students' aggregated grade point average was 3.0, and highest level of educational aspirations was to earn at least a master's degree. The average household income range for our sample was $30,000–$39,000 and slightly over half (52%) of students reported their parents had attended a postsecondary institution, but did not obtain a college degree. Most students who were part of this study intended to apply public 4-year university, followed by private colleges and universities, and community colleges. Most the Black and Latino students were strongly considering beginning their postsecondary education at community colleges due to postsecondary finances as primary concern.

Coding and Data Analysis

Each transcription was hand coded and read closely to understand the "meaning" of the data related to college access and choice, college-going identity construction, and social and academic experiences in high school (Bazeley 2013). For the first wave of coding, we used a combination of InVivo and descriptive coding strategies to allow us to build ideas into data categories (Bazeley 2013; Saldaña 2013), ensuring participants voices and language was both authentic and honored (Saldaña 2013). InVivo coding allows the researchers to understand meaning and clarity of the words shared by the study participants, whereas descriptive coding is needed to create inventories and categorize the emerging data themes in a manageable fashion (Saldaña 2013; Ryan and Bernard 2003). For the second coding cycle, axial coding was used to organize and focus on the major categories and themes that emerged (Saldaña 2013). Saldaña (2013) states axial coding permits us to focus on the conditions and the context of a given analytical category as we focused on college-going identity construction. These analytical strategies also provided clues as to what was significant to the participants as indicated through their word choices (Miles et al. 2014; Saldaña 2013).

Given the complex nature of multiple internal and external influences that shape identity construction, we used an inductive and deductive analysis to build a picture using a college-going identity lens for analysis (Bazeley 2013; Bogdan and Biklen 2007). We developed our initial list of codes to reflect our theoretical framework and understanding of the college-going literature: Foreclosure, diffusion, moratorium, achieved, and key actors who facilitate the college-going

process, such as parents, peers, counselors, and teachers. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the study, the research team would debrief after each cycle of analysis to increase consistency of the emerging findings. We did not share the preliminary findings with students, as they have since graduated from high school and we are unable to locate any participants.

Findings

Achieving Social Status

As students shared the messages they have internalized from family members and other trusted individuals is the importance of thinking critically and challenge the narrative of how to avoid negative behaviors, be mindful about how educators may attempt to reinforce the notions that young men of color have "failed" by either becoming teenage-parents, are involved in gangs, or dropped out of high school to seek employment. These salient messages have resonated and guided some of the males on how they should achieve a certain status which is achieved by committing to an identity or future occupation, and are not actively considering alternate opportunities. The students' external pressure to do well in school or conform to parents or other caring adults' beliefs aligns with the achieving social status. In this way, the student is considering the college-track, interested in vocational education, or seeking the military as a career option. The importance and sentiment of "being" somebody and not wasting their lives, was shared by 42 of the young men in this study. Whether this belief of "being" someone is an internal or external message about how men should assume a dominant position in society may be important for how young men explore this status. However, the students repeated the pressure to "be someone" in society and related this earned status through their professional or vocation decisions. A Black male student shares the pressure he faces from his father to do as well academically compared to his older sister.

> Yeah. And the same with my dad, you know. I think the only reason why [my dad] compares me [to my sister] is so that I can do better, so I can try, at least try to match up to her. Because if [my dad] didn't [compare me], you know, it wouldn't help me [work towards going to college]. It wouldn't inspire me as much – to do better. Whenever he says that, it just makes me want to just go out and just, I don't know, study more or study harder, every time he says that. It's like I can, I can match up to her one day. But I think that's the reason why he says that.

The statement above highlights an example of a Black father pushing his son academically to achieve like his older sibling. The constant prodding is helping the Black male teenager see the importance and the relationships between academics and college preparation. Another Latino male student shares the pressures of being a strong student and serving as a representative for his family. Conforming

to external expectations can be overwhelming for high school students as they negotiate their sense of self and trying to understand how to interact in different contexts with peers and loved ones. He shares,

> And yes, since I'm the only boy in the family, so they expect me to do the best, since I'm the one that's keeping the name, going on. So, they have high expectations. They want me to be somebody. Not end up doing nothing with my life. So, it's kind of hard, because that's a lot of pressure. That's the type of pressure I don't really need right now.

For this young Latino man, he is expected to perform well academically to preserve his families last name and legacy. He admits "That's the type of pressure I don't really need right now" there is a level of difficult and pressure that is overwhelming for him. And again, the narrative of having "to be somebody" is echoed by Latino families who expect and want their sons to achieve a certain professional reputation. Parents and older relatives share with students the need to become someone. Another Latino male student shared,

> Well, [I was] encouraged basically…[by] older relatives. They tell me that to be a successful Latino, instead of, falling under the characteristics of the other people say…that we usually end up messing up, going on the street selling oranges and flowers, which is not true.

This student's family used a racial stereotype of Latinos selling produce as a method to encourage their young male family member to not waste their life and focus on using education to move forward. The Latino male recognizes the stereotype of recent Latino immigrants having to sell produce and flowers for economic survival, and that does not resonant with his context. Another Black male student shares, "Well, I really want to go to the [Marines] 'cause I want to be somebody [..] Like…That's what I want…really go to the Marines." This student later shares that his older brother was a teenage father and his sister completed college and is financially independent. For this student, his older siblings had different pathways which were echoed by his family. The role and value of mentors and role models are essential for young men of color. Huerta and Fishman (2014) report that Latino male college students feel the need to be role models to their younger siblings to not only understand "how" to navigate the educational pipeline but the "right" mentality about life. This student believes the military will provide him the tools and skills to go the "right way" and not face similar struggles as his older brother.

Multiple Options and Pathways to Achieve

Adolescents in high school are exploring multiple options and unable to make a commitment to a pathway as they are living moment to moment, and gaining new information daily from peers and other adults. For example, 14 students mentioned the military as a last resort among both low and high achieving students. The rationale for strongly considering the military was influenced by various trusted individuals in their life including counselors, teachers, sometimes parents, and the aggressive

presence of military recruiters in schools. The options and pathways create another level of stress for adolescents as they are easily influenced into a specific career or vocation. Military recruiters have a strong presence in minority urban and suburban high schools (Ayers 2006; McDonough and Calderone 2006), and sometimes military recruiters serve as quasi-college counselors. Military recruiters can forge strong and trusting relationships with high school students and provide detailed and guaranteed military benefits with a focus on money and career-readiness, whereas counselors cannot make similar promises (Huerta 2015a). The military presence in schools is an added complexity in how young men of color construct their college-going identity because military recruiters want youth to delay college for technical and vocation training during military service (Huerta 2015a). Often young men of color are aware of the targeted efforts by military recruiters in under-resourced and racially segregated high schools (Huerta 2015a). We found similar experiences within our data, when students were asked about their perceptions about college being an option, one Latino male shared:

> I felt out of my league. I could not really go to college [right now]. Until… I kind of got pressured towards the military. But then, the [counselor] tells you about [college], like towards your junior or senior year. So, it's like, that's not out of the question. You can go to college if you wanted to.

For this Latino male, he does not feel prepared for college and a military recruiter is pressuring him to strongly consider the military. And at the end of the quote, he still believes college is an option for him and his peers. The pressure may be coming from military recruiters as they are able to promote delaying college enrollment to instead use the G.I. Bill benefits to finance their college education (Huerta 2015a). Although this student did not rule out college completely, the academic preparation is a vital area for students to develop their confidence for higher education (Perna 2000a, b). The student stated, "I felt out of my league. I could not really go to college," this sentiment may be related to academics or college finances. Developmentally, individuals who are searching for and uncommitted to a pathway to achieve will struggle to try to find the "right" path. The students in high school have not committed to a specific career or education options, and are receiving information from various trust sources. Considering the level of respect and influence from the study participants' peers, the type of advice and messages they receive about different pathways could heavily influence their post high school trajectories.

Military or Higher Education

The appeal of the military for young men of color cannot be understated. Twenty-eight of the male students in this study are aware of the various positive benefits of military service, but did not identify the military as a next step in their individual lives. However, high school students are constantly negotiating their identities and options because of their age, family context, economic status, school experiences, and the natural cognitive development of young men. High school is a maze

of opportunities for identity construction and trying to determine the next and best steps for their future. The students transition and explore various identities to understand and discover their authentic sense of self of either a future college student or enlisted member of the military. One AAPI student commented:

> [I] always expected to go to college and so [my dad] kind of went along with it and kind of reinforced it a little bit. And there are like a lot of struggles within family and neighborhood and the community, so I will go to college if I'm financially stable and if not, then I will use the Army or Air Force as a last resort.

The AAPI student shared his father supports his goal to attend college. But the student wavers in his decision as financial costs and the opportunity to pursue the military are able viable options for him at this moment. A Black male student states, "I always felt that I should go to college because I live in the 'hood' and it's either go to college or sell drugs so, I don't want to sell drugs, so I will be in the Army, and then going to college." Here, the Black male students understand there are various negative options in his community, it is important to note that some communities where young men of color are riddled with gang violence (Estrada et al. 2018; Vigil 1999, 2003), but he is trying to focus on enlisting in the military and then pursuing college through G.I. Bill benefits. For 25 participants, they believe being self-reliant means being responsible for financing their postsecondary education (Schwartz et al. 2009). A Latino male student shares, "I'm thinking about going to community college, but at the same time I want to join the Marines. So, I really don't know … yet." This final example highlights the tensions and uncertainty about whether to pursue higher education or other vocational training through the military (Huerta 2015a). For low-income students of color, community college serve as a primary gateway to postsecondary education (Dougherty and Kienzl 2006), so students must again struggle with the high cost of college or entering the military and use the G.I. Benefits.

Getting Serious About School

As students moved through high school, they began to slowly understand their achievement is tied to their investment and effort in school. Whether the student decided to identify with a college-going, the military track, or vocational goal is influenced by the internal and external influences in their social circles. A Black male senior shared how he needed to change his attitude and prepare for a college pathway:

> Freshman year, I'd say was probably my best year. But I started to realize that my sophomore year, I sort of had to buckle down. [I] decide what I'm gonna do, and created that [college] path for my future. So, I started realizing I needed to go to college and prepare for that in my sophomore year.

This Black male student above discusses the progression from being undecided about higher education to committing to the college-going pathway. He acknowledged his

past attitude and behaviors, and had to “buckle down” to prepare for his future. The students demonstrate the shift in behaviors that align with the achievement status. Sixty-three participants in this study were cognizant of the financial and cultural value of postsecondary credentials, but expressed concerns about the various institutional and personal barriers they faced in pursuing a higher education. As discussed, a students’ ability to pay for college is a major concern for first-generation and low-income students who are unaware of the different types of federal, private, or state aid (Tierney and Venegas 2009). For example, one male AAPI student shared the following, “My parents will pay for [college], but then again, I want to take my own responsibility, so I would like to pay for it. Will try at least.” This student is assuming ownership of financing his higher education demonstrating an achieved level of college-going identity. The financial pressure may play an influence in how and when students are able to reach the achievement status. Twenty-six students openly shared their concern about *how* to pay for their postsecondary education. Although, they were aware of scholarships and financial aid, they were unaware of how expensive their costs would be to pay for college.

As previously noted, the young men of color received college information from military recruiters, and the students are considering using the military as a step to finance their postsecondary education through the G.I. Bill. An AAPI male student mentioned his intent in joining the military after participating in Junior Reserve Officers Training Corp (JROTC), he shared:

> The reason I decided to go to the Army and college, well, college is always my number one goal and after being in ROTC, I found out that I really like the Army, the life style, so I figured I could get the best of both worlds. That’s it.

He later stated, “Money was a real big problem for me but after I took my [military entrance exam] for the Army I qualified and I secured my job with military intelligence so now college is free.” The study respondent’s participation in the programs fostered the opportunity to build an authentic self and reach achievement status identity, and without the exposure to the college information provided through the JROTC program, the students may not have believed college attendance was possible because of the large costs. The students’ commitment to attending college after their enlistment in the military is the occupation and educational trajectory they have selected and are less concerned about their college costs.

Discussion

The construction of a college-going identity is a complicated process, and various external factors influence how and when young men in this study reach different statuses. It is expected that the young men of color will cycle through the different statuses of identity construction and constantly negotiate an authentic sense of self-related to career or military, college enrollment, or vocational training. As we have presented in this paper, planning and executing reachable college goals is an arduous process for first-generation and low-income students as their peers, family, and others will influence how and when a college-going identity is reached (Anderson and

Larson 2009). Although Marcia highlights the many tensions and supports an adolescent may encounter from their family members, overall the young men of color in this paper received encouragement and support.

As the young men of color in this study consider the different factors to foster their college-going identity, the stark reality of the potential challenges related to college costs is a serious issue for them to consider (Anderson and Larson 2009). As the role of college costs influenced some of the young men's decisions to consider strongly consider the military as a possible option, but it requires trying to understand their own identities at times, in uncertain environments because of the potentially mixed messages about which life and career path is best suited for the individual students. Our findings align with what Anderson and Larson (2009) discusses is the need for young men of color to understand that preparing for higher education requires a real commitment from educators and schools to become successful. However, the students may or may not have the necessary support systems in school to become "serious" or accountable to increasing their academic profiles to prepare for 4-year colleges, but may mean they begin their higher education in 2-year colleges (Huerta and Fishman 2014; Sanchez et al. 2012).

When students trust peers and college counselors in school, the students will be more open to increased academic demands and perceptions of feeling valued (Anderson and Larson 2009; Watson et al. 2016). Ferguson's (2000) work on Black boys in elementary school is an indicator young men of color are in a precarious position, and teachers, counselors, and school leaders often have unhealthy relationships with students which could benefit from the use of culturally relevant pedagogy (Howard 2014; Howard et al., in press; Watson et al. 2016). Education scholars have not fully explored how young men of color engage in these identities struggles to move forward and persist to reach higher education. Noguera (2003) shared school administrators, and teachers are eager to dismiss troubled young men of color from their schools, which means educational expectations are often very low for this group of students. Most educators would assume an increased school failure rate, but we show that the young men in these ten urban and suburban schools are aware of their possibilities based on their school resources and the presence of the military on school grounds. When presenting information about a college or vocational options to remember, these are young adults, who may not be cognitively capable of making adult decisions or understand the implications of poor school behavior or missing important deadlines for college entrance examines, and may be easily influenced by military recruiters who are able to promise multiple benefits through enlistment. This example of cycling through possible career trajectories is a typical experience for young adults as they are trying to make sense of their world and are influenced by various peers, family members, college counselors, and military personnel. Although, Anderson and Larson (2009) highlights the importance of a federal college access program, Upward Bound, the expectations on the students to prepare, make commitments to higher education, and overcome poverty through education is critical to understand the value and potential within young men of color to overcome various barriers to higher education.

Recommendations

What we suggest is for high schools to remember that the young men of color are still in the process of constructing an understanding of their world, opportunities, and local environment, and reliable college information is necessary for each year of high school that can be achieved through mutual trust (Watson et al. 2016). Our suggestion to education scholars and practitioners is to continue to push the intersection of research and practice forward to understand better how to support young men of color as they construct their college-going identity. A common goal is to facilitate the development of a college-going identity. However, this requires a concerted effort from schools, community outreach programs, and local colleges or universities, and understand that young men of color may not be fully aware or committed to embracing a college-going identity means early in high school. These are moments of progress, and it is an iterative process for young men of color to reach a place of identity authenticity by reaching the achievement status.

Counselors should consider creating small learning groups for ninth and tenth grade young men of color to be mentored by upperclassmen in their school or local male college students. These learning communities are important for young men to see and learn from older and more seasoned students, who can share their struggles, achievements, and advice on how to navigate their high school and the local community. The role and influence of older male role models may help younger students understand and slowly begin to integrate a college-going identity at earlier points in their educational experiences. These learning groups should be assigned during summer orientation and then followed up throughout the academic year to help students help more connected to the school. As Watson et al. (2016) shared mutual respect and reciprocity will develop over time to foster a sense of community within male students. As the academic year progresses, counselors should work to invite college recruiters and other outside college access groups to present programs and services available in their neighboring postsecondary institutions to serve as resources for students who matriculate into local colleges. Continuously involving college access programs and recruiters are important for students to know and understand help and support are available, and that college success is not an individual's sole responsibility to learn to navigate and locate resources.

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