African-American and Latino Conceptualizations of the Role and Value of Community Colleges: Results from a Study of High School Students and Counselors

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Abstract
Using qualitative analysis and a Bourdieusian framework, authors investigated perceptions held by southern California African American and Latino high school students and their counselors regarding community colleges. Community colleges were found to be ambiguous assets, used by some students to enhance academic qualifications, but viewed by others as institutions of last resort.

Introduction
Both national political contexts and more localized patterns of educational access make studying the role of community colleges in the educational pathways of California's African American and Latino communities vital for those interested in equity within higher education. Community colleges play a disproportionately large role in the educational pathways of Latino and African American students. Nationally, students under-represented in higher education in general are over-represented in community colleges. Although community colleges enroll only 39% of all students in higher education, they enroll nearly half of all minority students. However, compared to their White counterparts, disproportionately fewer African American and Latino students use the community colleges to transfer to four-year institutions (Cohen and Brawer, 1996). At the same time, recent changes in admissions policies that restrict access to four-year institutions for minority students, especially in California, Florida, Washington State, and those areas affected by the Hopwood decision, further raise the importance of community colleges as potential bridges to the baccalaureate for members of under-represented communities.

National enrollment patterns hold true within California, where both African Americans and Latinos constitute a significantly higher proportion of community college enrollments than their presence in the general population would suggest. Orfield's 1988 study of college access on the part of under-represented students in the Los Angeles basin remains a highly informative examination of the college-going experience of African American and Latinos in southern California (Orfield, 1988). Orfield found significant differences in the college-going patterns of Los Angeles area students. While 70% of African Americans and 73% of Latinos attended community colleges, only 63% of Whites and 54% of Asian Americans did so. Success rates (as measured by the obtaining of the Associates degree and transfer to four-year institutions) differed markedly as well, with precipitous drops in the number of Latino and African American students completing community college, as measured by the above indicators, between 1976 and 1985. Transfer figures reveal a similar story: in 1984, 3.3% of community college transfers to the University of California system were African American, and 9.6% were Latino (Orfield, 1988). Clearly, community colleges play a vital yet uncertain role in the educational careers of African Americans and Latinos both nationally and in the Los Angeles area.

For some educational theorists and researchers, community colleges are an essential bridge between high school and the rewards of post-secondary education, especially for students often under-represented in four-year colleges and universities (Cohen and Brawer, 1996). For others, community colleges serve as a gateway to the baccalaureate for members of under-represented communities. The role of community colleges in the educational careers of African American and Latino students must be examined with regard to both the debate on the utility of community colleges and the current study, by offering a critical perspective to the role of community colleges in higher education system and their role in the part of African American and Latino conceptualizations of higher education.

Theoretical Framework
Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, social capital, and cultural capital illuminate the role of community colleges in higher education. Each of these concepts, as applied to the case of community colleges, is discussed and analyzed in Dr. Charles Outcalt's work. Bourdieu's work is based on the concept of habitus, a disposition, which depends on social, cultural, and economic capital—economic, symbolic, or cultural. Bourdieu's work adds to the debate on the utility of community colleges in higher education system and the part of African American and Latino conceptualizations of community colleges.

Capital can be an objective value of physical, financial, or cultural goods, services, or esteem. It can be accumulated, transferred, or invested, and it has a social dimension, creating distinctions between 'the haves' and 'have-nots' (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu defines cultural capital as distinctions of merit transforming social distinctions, used by those who believe it offers a voice in the general population and its social structures. Bourdieu's work is based on the concept of habitus, which depends on social, cultural, and economic capital—economic, symbolic, or cultural. Bourdieu's work adds to the debate on the utility of community colleges in higher education system and the part of African American and Latino conceptualizations of community colleges.

Cultural capital is a symbolic form of capital that is accumulated and invested in the educational system and the educational experiences of one generation to the next. Cultural capital, which is invested in the educational system, which then is converted into cultural positions, which then is converted into cultural outcomes. Cultural capital is also transferred from one generation to the next (Durkheim, 1964), and cultural exclusion (Bourdieu, 1986) has been split between those who benefit from it and those who are economically disempowered, while others view them as forms of cultural capital. Our first research was informed by the debate on the utility of community colleges in general and community college access for minority students and their counselors, particularly African American and Latino students and their counselors.

The Role of Habitus
Habitus is the use of cultural capital to play a role in the educational careers of African Americans and Latinos. Community colleges are often viewed as institutions of last resort, and for some African American and Latino students, they serve as a bridge to higher education. However, the role of community colleges in the educational careers of African Americans and Latinos must be examined with regard to both the debate on the utility of community colleges and the current study, by offering a critical perspective to the role of community colleges in higher education system and their role in the part of African American and Latino conceptualizations of community colleges.
community colleges serve as a detour at best and as a dead end at worst for the educational plans of under-represented groups (Clark 1960, Brint and Karabel, 1989). The current study, which examines the perceptions of community colleges held by a selected group of Los Angeles area African American and Latino high school students and their counselors, attempts to contextualize the debate on the utility of community colleges for minority students. It is our hope that the current study, by offering an in-depth examination of the attitudes of stakeholders in California's higher education system, will yield new insights on the complicated process of college-going on the part of African American and Latino students.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

Pierre Bourdieu's theories offer an integrated framework for understanding how rational, thinking, and goal-directed individuals pursue their interests yet manage to create and recreate social structures. Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and field analysis can be used to illuminate the role of community colleges for under-represented students in their social mobility. Each of these concepts can separately increase our understanding of student perception and action, while taken together, these constructs offer powerful mechanisms for interpreting not only recent research but also the complex relationship between higher education segments in California and under-represented students' educational plans and pathways.

Bourdieu's work is based on an economics of exchange in which people struggle constantly for position, which depends on accumulating, monopolizing, and converting the many forms of capital-economic, symbolic, cultural, and social. He focuses heavily on the stratifications of the system of higher education because schools reproduce and legitimate the class structure by transforming social distinctions into educational distinctions, which are then socially constructed as distinctions of merit (Bourdieu, 1977).

Cultural Capital and Community Colleges

Capital can be an object or an attribute, possession, or quality of a person, which is exchanged for goods, services, or esteem. Cultural capital transforms aspirations into more valued educational credentials which then supplement or substitute for the transmission of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Individuals' cultural capital leads them to have clear investment strategies of how much and what kind of schooling they or their children should have, although individuals' differing social locations lead them to differing investment strategies. Parents with high cultural capital attempt to secure for their children as prestigious a college education as possible because they believe it will pay off in future job success and social status. Parents with low cultural capital often play out their hopes and dreams for their child's future against compelling realities of financial need, job alternatives, and/or less expensive or more expedient educational credentials with tighter vocational linkages.

Cultural capital is a symbolic good which is of no intrinsic value other than using, manipulating, and investing it for socially valued and difficult to secure purposes and resources. For Bourdieu, the educational system is a complex means of ensuring the transmission of economic capital from one generation to the next. Members of dominant classes convert their economic capital into cultural capital, which can, in turn, be converted into educational credentials in a merit-based system, which then is converted back into economic capital for the use of the next generation.

Cultural capital is also the widely shared attitudes, preferences, and credentials used for social and cultural exclusion (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). The research on community colleges often has been split between those who view them as enhancing an individual's upward economic mobility, while others view them as blunting aspirations by substituting the illusion of progress for its reality. Our first research questions derive from the literature on the role of educational systems in general and community colleges in particular in transmitting cultural capital: Do high school students and their counselors have college knowledge cultural capital? How do high school students and their counselors understand the value of attending community colleges?

The Role of Habitus in Students' Perceptions and Use of Community Colleges

Habitus is the use of cultural capital within specific social contexts. It is a social-class-based durable and transposable set of subjective perceptions, thoughts, appreciations, and actions that...
individuals acquire from their immediate environment that 1) are time and context specific; 2) are shared by members of the same social class or group; 3) frame individual aspirations, predispositions, and actions; and 4) generate strategies that make possible the achievement of diversified tasks (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus is behavior constrained by practical and strategic considerations as well as by the demands of the moment. The central role of habitus is in defining and limiting what an actor sees and how it is interpreted. "Habitus tends to shape individual action so that existing opportunity structures are perpetuated" (Swartz, 1997).

Bourdieu believes that educational institutions limit actors' choice of goals by shaping the way they view their social world, yet he also shows that the social world is transformed constantly by agents who are adapting to historically developing conditions. Bourdieu's individuals do not question the rules; they seek primarily to exploit them for their own advancement.

Stanton-Salazar (1997) uses a Bourdieuan framework to assert that it is crucial to examine the social networks in which students are enmeshed as they progress (or fail to progress) through the educational system. Of particular importance, according to Stanton-Salazar, are those networks that provide the means to understand and act on situation-specific cultural knowledge for one's own advantage. Stanton-Salazar contends that racial minority students have comparatively few predispositions, and actions; and 4) generate strategies that make possible the achievement of diversified tasks (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus is behavior constrained by practical and strategic considerations as well as by the demands of the moment. The central role of habitus is in defining and limiting what an actor sees and how it is interpreted. "Habitus tends to shape individual action so that existing opportunity structures are perpetuated" (Swartz, 1997).

Thus, our second research question is: What are the strategies used by high school students and their counselors when choosing community colleges? To be more specific, do high school students and their counselors use school, familial, non-familial networks, or all of these networks in choosing community colleges?

Using Field Analysis to Understand Community Colleges in Context

For Bourdieu, field analysis permits a broader understanding of a complex set of social processes, particularly those involving struggles for power and advantage, than that possible using more narrowly-focused units of analysis. Some higher education researchers, including McDonough, Ventresca and Outcalt (2000) and, mostly notably for this research, Brint and Karabel (1991), have begun to conceptualize and study higher education admissions processes as a field, rather than a set of isolated practices.

Field analysis is a particularly salient and powerful means of examining higher education in California, because the state's Master Plan (California State Department of Education, 1960) treats higher education in the state as a unified system within which students are channeled to institutions based on their (perceived) abilities. Under the California Master Plan, those students in the top 12.5% of their high school graduating class are eligible for admission to the University of California; those in the top 33.3% to the California State Universities, while any student who wishes may attend the community colleges. The Master Plan, and its implicit endorsement of tracking, has been criticized by those who find its apportionment of students and resources, in light of the state's recent affirmative action retrenchments? In other words, how can high school students' and their counselors use them to transfer to Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs)?

To some extent, the continuing effects of the Master Plan's tenets and their effect on higher education in California remain unchanged, and so an investigation of the way its effects are understood by those most directly affected by it - students, particularly those forced into the lowest rung on the educational opportunity ladder, would be highly useful. The continuing effects of the Master Plan have informed our third research question: What is the relationship between high school students' and counselors' perceptions of community colleges and educational equity in California, particularly in light of the state's recent affirmative action retrenchments? In other words, how can high school students' and their counselors' perceptions of community colleges be used as a lens to view relationships between higher education segments? Do these perceptions have a role in student movement between California and other areas of the nation? For example, do African American students use them to transfer to Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs)?

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To summarize, we are using a Bourdieuian framework to focus on the positive and negative aspects of community colleges as points of access to higher education and are asking the following questions:

- Do high school students and their counselors have college knowledge cultural capital? How do high school students and their counselors understand the value of attending community colleges?
- What strategies do high school students and their counselors use when choosing community colleges? To be more specific, do high school students and their counselors use school, familial, or non-familial networks in choosing community colleges?
- What is the relationship between high school students' and their counselors' perceptions of community colleges and educational equity in California, particularly in light of the state's recent affirmative action retracements?

**Method**

**Sample**

A research team centered at a major urban research university on the West Coast collected data for this study. The project, led by Pat McDonough, investigated perceptions of higher education (especially the UC system); the effect of affirmative action retracements following the adoption of Proposition 209 and SP1 and SP2 (UC policies ending affirmative action in the University system), perceptions of college opportunity, and general college awareness. Members of the research team conducted interviews with 230 students and 63 counselors, and 123 parents from 21 Southern California high schools. In all, fifty individual interviews as well as seventy-eight focus groups were conducted from Fall 1998 through Spring 1999. In total, the sample was comprised of 104 students identified as African American and 112 as Latino.

**Method of Analysis**

The current study regarding the perceptions of community college is an offshoot of that original effort. For this investigation, researchers examined statements made by counselors and African American and Latino students. The transcripts of all interviews were analyzed with NUDIST, a software tool used for qualitative inquiry. Codes were created focusing on community college and perceptions of community college, generating a sample of students and counselors who referred to community colleges in their interviews. Initially, the authors hypothesized that they would uncover significant differences between African Americans and Latinos regarding their research questions, and so transcripts from students in these groups were analyzed separately. However, as will be discussed below, reality proved to be more complex than our hypothesis, with a few differences between racial groups emerging within the context of a great many similarities.

**Findings: The Use of Community College to Enhance Cultural Capital**

**Academic Enhancement**

Many African American and some Latino students and their counselors discussed their belief that taking community college courses while in high school could enhance their cultural capital. Some of these students and counselors demonstrated their use of these institutions to enhance their academic credentials for future educational goals, including transfer to four-year schools. For example, a counselor expressed her awareness of the potential value of course-taking at community colleges by stating:

> So, now I know this is one of the little tricks of the trade getting admissions, getting accepted, getting into a UC. So, I am advising my top students, "This summer, you're going to take some college courses. You're going to either take it at one of the . . . residency program[s] for high school students or . . . you're going to take some courses at the junior college." (A counselor).

Another counselor echoed this thought, stating, "[the] thing is to be overly prepared. And that's what we were talking about . . . the last four years we have encouraged our students to go out and take community college classes to enhance their profile." A senior showed a similar intent to use community college as a tool to enhance academic credentials, asserting, "And I'm gonna take a class at a community college to boost up one of my grades in Biology." Overall, Latino students seemed far less likely than African American students to discuss community colleges as a place for personal achievement. However, in a few instances Latino students mentioned that the community colleges provided them an opportunity to improve their grades, which they believed was essential for their hopes to attend a four-year institution. One junior says his plan is to "do
community [college] first, based on my grades. I mean really raise up my grades. [Then], apply to UCLA."

In discussing the specific college preparatory needs of Latino students, some counselors identified community colleges as useful institutions for students with limited English skills to improve their language abilities. As one counselor stated, "I'll have a number of students that will come in who are very blatantly community college candidates. They've been wrestling with English and haven't had access to the top-level academic courses." This finding was reiterated by Latino students, several of whom mentioned that community colleges help prepare students who lack strong language skills. One senior stated:

Community college is like a help for ... for someone, for people that don't read that well ... foreign people ... They start getting their English, you know, so they could go [to a four-year college]. Anyway, I think it's like a help, community college.

Extending the theme that community colleges can be used to enhance one's academic credentials, some students, especially African Americans, indicated a belief that these schools could be used as a training ground for eventual success at four-year institutions. One student described them as "a good way to start off ..." Another student commented, "Well, community colleges are like helping you get yourself prepared for UC." Another student continued,

... my parents actually said there was nothing wrong with attending community or junior college as long as you keep your mind that you're only there for two years. You're only using that as a stepping stone to get to whatever type of professional school you want to get to. And with UCs and Cal States, basically I think, I feel there is no difference in education as long as you want to learn, you're gonna learn regardless of where you are ... The UCs and the Cal States, those are professional schools. You go there for 4 years, you get your degree, you prepare for a job. Community college is like in between high school and between college. You go there after high school because you're not quite ready for college, so you're there to prepare for college.

**Occupational outcomes**

The effects of attending a community college on occupational outcomes was on the minds of many African American and Latino high school students and counselors. Some counselors viewed community colleges as appropriate for those students with career intentions that demanded less education or for those students without the familial resources to allow attendance at a four-year school. For students, the decision to attend a community college was understood at times as an acceptance of a less prestigious, less rewarding career path. This African American student, who stated, "Howard, UCLA more of them become doctors, right?" concluded that attendance at a community college would lead to a public sector job, i.e., "county jobs," which would be less prestigious than those alternatives available through four-year institutions, including HBCUs.

**Community Colleges as Ambiguous Assets**

Even though many African American and Latino students demonstrated entrepreneurial strategies for the use of community colleges as positive influences on their academic development, other students dismissed full-time attendance at these institutions as a waste of time. In contrast to those students who discussed the strategic use of community colleges as enhancements to their records and chances of enrolling at four-year institutions, many African American students stated that they were interested in, or might accept, community colleges because they believed they had no other choice for their post-high school education. Citing economic pressure, a senior admitted that community colleges were not his first choice, but that he would enroll regardless,

It's like really, really expensive [to go to college] and there's absolutely no way I can afford it. I will either go to community college, even though I really don't want to, or possibly enroll in the ROTC programs ... if that's what it takes to get an education, I'm willing to do it.

Another senior confides, "If I had no other choice, yeah. I mean, if I didn't get accepted to none of them [four year colleges/universities], I would [go to community college]." The perception that community colleges are a last resort is shared by some students' families. According to one student, her family would "rather not have me attend a community college, because they think I could do better than this." Students commented often that their counselors reinforced the message that they face a choice between community colleges and no higher education at all. For example,
The Interplay between Economic and Educational Considerations

A primary advantage of community colleges over four-year institutions for both African American and Latino students was cost. For some African American students, enrolling in a community college was understood as a sound educational and financial decision because the quality of the instruction was the same as in four-year schools, at a vastly reduced price. As one student commented, "... at forty percent of college freshmen are remedial in math and English." Speaking of a particular student, this counselor continued, "I think he might be going to community college for a couple of years and get those skills up and then transfer." Another counselor saw community colleges as appropriate choices for bilingual students. "The bilingual students basically they want to go to a community college because they don't have all the requirements ... in fact their goal is to go to community college." Additionally, counselors advise special education students to attend community colleges. As one counselor states, "I work with Special Ed students and try to tell them about the different vocational schools and the different departments within the community colleges they can go into." Finally, some counselors see community college as the best option for their undocumented students, because these institutions turn a blind eye to issues of citizenship.

Overall, unlike their African American counterparts, many of the Latino students indicated that they plan to begin their higher education at community colleges. In fact, many are advised by their counselors to begin their education in community colleges, despite the highly ambiguous views both students and counselors held of these institutions. "We're told, you know, if you wanna save money go to a junior college for two years and transfer. And, or, if grades aren't good enough right now, you know, go to a junior college, do good and then transfer to another higher college you know." This advice has been followed by many of the students. For example, a senior has mapped out her educational plans accordingly. "I'm planning to go to ... two-year community college and then transfer out to either UCI or Cal State Long Beach."

Many of the counselors confirm that the choice to enroll at a community college is based on financial considerations. They are "less expensive." However, others do not see community colleges as a bargain. Counselors suggest that for some students even the community college fees are too high. "It's expensive . . . to support the student at home and give them [money] for the books and the transportation . . . The students have to work to support themselves . . . Many parents are not able to support them." Others mention that students do not complete their study at community colleges in two years, but stay "maybe four years before they transfer, so in the long run, you know . . . [they] end up losing money."
Students in both groups, but Latinos especially, commented that they did not want to burden themselves or their families with educational loans. For many Latino students, loans were not a viable option. "One of the students had said she wasn't going to take out any loans. She'd rather go to community college." A counselor corroborates this position. "The parents are not going to take out loans. They're not going to do it." Often these students are the first in their families pursuing higher education, so financial concerns and a seeming discomfort with loans strongly influence students' college choices.

Both Latino and African American students and their counselors showed skillful use of community colleges as a means of increasing their cultural capital as it relates to their educational goals (as when they stated that they understood these institutions as sites for adding to their academic skills). Despite these similarities, African Americans and Latinos show some racial/ethnic specific differences in their conceptualization of community colleges. African Americans seem to demonstrate a greater degree of comfort and familiarity with managing the educational resources available through participation in community colleges, as when they indicate their use of these institutions as a means for enhancing their academic skills and records. Latino students demonstrate similar strategies for the use of community colleges to enhance cultural capital strategy. The data suggest that community colleges can be useful for Latino students with limited English skills, as mentioned above; however, this point requires further substantiation through more research. In addition, the community colleges, according to counselors, can play a vital role in enhancing educational opportunity for those students who, because of their immigration status, would be excluded from other educational institutions.

Overall, our findings tend to support the work of Cohen and Brawer (1996), with its emphasis on the educational opportunities presented by community colleges. It is evident that the students in this study, often with the help of their counselors, found ways to use community colleges to enhance their educational success. However, the contentious of those who claim that community colleges under-serve their constituents and do not, in fact, provide the most effective cultural capital possible are substantiated in these findings as well.

The Role of Habitus in Students' Relationship to and Use of Community Colleges

Given our findings on the ways in which African American and Latino students use community colleges to enhance their cultural capital, what can we learn about the relationships between community colleges and these students' educational strategies and plans? Of course, it is not possible to disentangle this question completely from those posed above regarding the connection between community colleges and cultural capital; however, several findings specific to the development and alteration of habitis did emerge.

Lack of information

It is not possible to assume that all students developed strategies for maximizing or taking full advantage of the resources of community colleges for their personal educational goals. In fact, many students expressed confusion over the place of community colleges within the California educational system and their own academic and career plans. A student related his continuing uncertainty over his educational choices despite using traditional and academic means of information gathering:

... the only people I've talked to really is my counselor. I've, um, looked on the Internet because they have a lot of information on colleges. And I've been trying to get applications and whatnot to go to colleges. ... I don't know what might be better. ... go to a junior college for two years and get your AA and then transfer to a four-year college and get your BA, but I'm really not familiar with those types of things ...

Counselors stated that students' lack of understanding of higher education in general and the admissions process in particular might lead them to make inappropriate choices for their post-secondary education. One counselor expressed his desire for greater informational resources for students. He believed that the lack of information caused students to miss educational opportunities, "... unfortunately kids go into junior college when they don't have to. They're kind of left to be ... to drift." Counselors' statements to the effect that they require greater information are particularly important, given students' statements that their families are not able to provide...
not want to burden their families with the costs of higher education, loans were not a feasible option for them. She'd rather not see her children go through such hardships, and she wants them to stay close to home so she can help them manage the costs of college. African-American and Latino students stated that familial considerations, both economic and personal, might play a part in their decision to attend a two-year institution. Community colleges appeared to some African-American and Latino students to be an ideal educational option, partly because of their proximity to students' homes, and partly because of families' economic circumstances. (This finding is closely related to that mentioned above, in which students commented that the cost of community colleges played a highly significant role in the student's college choice.) As one counselor states, "The typical parent is saying go to a community college because it's cheaper." As one senior confirms, "I was planning on going to [a local community college] for two years ... because like my family, we can't really afford for me to go to like a UC school."

However, sometimes, according to both counselors and students, students were encouraged by their families to remain close to home irrespective of any economic considerations. At times, the families simply desired to be close to their children; at other times, students felt that being close to family was useful to provide a continued social network. As one student said, "Sometimes people aren't ready to leave and have that shock, Whoa! I'm alone!" Another student echoed this thought, stating that community colleges were the best choice "if you're not used to staying away from home." These students speak to the notion that not all students feel mature enough to move away from their homes and the support of their families. In these instances, community colleges allow the student to maintain their close familial ties.

The Role of Non-Familial Social Networks in Success in Community College
Stanton-Salazar, as noted above, calls attention to the importance of social networks in the educational success of under-represented students. In his analysis, many under-represented students are not part of social networks that can help them learn the skills and strategies necessary for progress through the educational system. As was evident from the comments of counselors, this finding was substantiated in our research, particularly for students who enrolled in community colleges. For example, a counselor supports Stanton-Salazar's theory by stating that students in community college were disadvantaged by socializing primarily with their friends, who may not know or employ strategies for academic success, rather than expanding their social networks or focusing on their coursework.

Community college, which is their home school, a lot of students will go in there and they'll have a good time because of their friends . . . They will go there and they will socialize until grades come out. After grades come out, it's like academic probation time or get a job . . . A lot of students will decide, "Well, I'll just get a job and I'll work a while and then I'll go back." And they end up going back to community college and pick up a couple of credits here and there and then they drop out and they work again. Then they go back . . . they go back and forth, back and forth . . .

These statements were supported by another counselor, who commented that some of those students who did not develop new social networks in community colleges lacked academic focus and so often dropped out, often to return, then to repeat the cycle. These findings stand in sharp contrast to that mentioned above which state that an advantage of community colleges is their proximity to established social networks and support. It seems that the content of interactions in these networks and the attitude/habitus of their members is essential in determining these networks' role in promoting educational success.

As with our research regarding cultural capital, our findings on the relationship between habitus and community colleges for African Americans and Latinos support multiple conclusions. Clearly, students (and counselors) desire and need more information on community colleges as educational options. It is clear as well that networks both familial and non-familial play a key role in shaping students' expectations of, attitudes toward, and ability to succeed in community colleges.

Academic Exchange - Summer 2000
The Role of Community Colleges within the Field of Higher Education

Transfer/Movement among Educational Institutions

Transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions was on the mind of many African-American and Latino students. A few students believed that enrollment in a community college was an uncertain, but nevertheless, realistic means of ensuring eventual admission to a four-year school, provided students stayed "focused." Counselors pointed to the advantages of community colleges for transfer as well, with some mentioning honors programs designed to facilitate this process.

However, for some students, the dream of transfer was not judged likely to be realized, and so community colleges were seen as a trap in much the way Clark described in his hypothesis on the "cooling out function" of these institutions (Clark, 1960). African American students with this view of community colleges expressed fear that they would begin and end their higher education in these schools, with some mentioning that their friends had never progressed beyond the community colleges. Latino students expressed these fears as well.

Some African Americans stated that they balanced the advantages of HBCUs as a potential educational choice against the merits of community colleges and local (particularly, in-state) four-year schools. However, it is difficult to state positively the role of HBCUs in these students' educational plans, primarily because they did not often elaborate on these issues.

Outreach

Counselors commented consistently on the importance of timely, coherent information from institutions of higher education in general and community colleges in particular for their efforts to guide students into the most appropriate post-high school plans. Some counselors mentioned particular individuals from community colleges, while others discussed outreach events hosted by community colleges.

Regardless of the format, counselors agreed that outreach from institutions of higher education was crucial for informing students of their educational options—a finding that fits well with the above-reported conclusion that many students lacked the information they needed to understand their educational options after high school. One counselor stated,

"We keep hearing it's too late, you know. Let the community college and the UCLA or the UC person come together, go together to the classroom, show how they can really work together. It's never ever too late."

The Effect of Affirmative Action Retrenchments on Students' Perceptions

Some African American students commented on their understanding of the role of community colleges in an era of affirmative action retrenchment. For some, community colleges were understood as the only remaining educational option because of affirmative action rollbacks. Some Latino students commented on the role of community colleges in the wake of affirmative action cuts, as well, but toward a different conclusion. For them, transfers from community colleges are no longer as commonplace as they once were as a result of the elimination of affirmative action in California. As senior Latino student stated,

"I've heard some people. They're like at community college and they are trying to transfer over and it's harder now. It's hard for them, so they're like, "If you're going to a community college, go. But if you can get into a university, it's better because it's harder to transfer now.""

Student Perceptions of Stratification with Higher Education

Students frequently commented on the California system of higher education in terms of levels. Many students have accepted implicitly the Master Plan (see above), with its de jure system of tracking. For them, the "UCs are at a higher level" and the community college are at the lowest. "... it scares me how, if I will or will not get accepted, will I have to stay in a community college, will I have to stay at one level. Can't I not go higher than that level?"

For some African American students, attendance at a community college was a clear signal of membership in a low, and therefore non-desirable, socioeconomic/educational class. Mentioning
that, in her high school, enrolling at a community college is little valued, a student stated that her classmates "would never go to community college." This student continued by explaining that a teacher in her high school had told her that higher education in California is highly stratified, and that the community colleges "are for the poor, the Cal States are for the middle class, and the UCs are... for the upper class." Counselors know and understand the hierarchy of institutions within California and articulate this system to their students. The counselors' focus sometimes turns to creating more accessible linkages between the segments so that students can understand and use the system to complete their maximum advantage (this finding is closely related to that above on students' use of community colleges to enhance their academic credentials).

In summary, our findings indicate that community colleges are understood by African American and Latino students and their counselors as integral components of a field of educational resources. Indeed, the ease with which students and counselors discuss transitioning into and out of community colleges on the path to the baccalaureate suggests that these students possess a cohesive understanding of the role of community colleges within the field of secondary and post-secondary education. This contention is supported by our finding that some students, even before they enroll in any segment of higher education, have a clear, if troubling, map of the system to complete their maximum advantage (this finding is closely related to that above on students' use of community colleges to enhance their academic credentials).

However, Latinos and African Americans seem to demonstrate differing conceptualizations of the role of community colleges within the field of higher education. For all respondents in this study, community colleges are gateways to senior institutions, but African Americans seem more likely than their Latino counterparts to view them as much less desirable outcomes of unsuccessful bids for admission to and success in four-year institutions. Perhaps this conclusion reflects the comparatively higher proportion of transfers to the UC system who were Latinos relative to African Americans, as detailed by Orfield (1988). However, this finding requires further investigation, especially since the transfer rates reported by Orfield detail the proportion of all transfers who were African American or Latino, rather than the proportion of African Americans and Latinos who transferred.

Cohen & Brawer (1996) as well as Brint & Karabel (1989) could find support for their conclusions on the role of community colleges as potential gateways to the baccalaureate in the above findings. Our work has underscored both the continued importance of these institutions as "ports of entry" to systems of higher education, as Cohen and Brawer would contend. In addition, our study has made evident the difficulty many students face attempting to move from community colleges to four-year schools, therefore justifying, at least in part, Brint and Karabel's charges that these schools have abandoned their transfer function. In addition, those African Americans who discussed the possibility of attending an out-of-state HBCU in nearly the same breath as their thoughts on attending a college or university within California support the conceptions of those proposing field analysis within higher education (such as McDonough, Ventresca and Outcalt, 2000). It is clear that, for these African American students, their choices regarding higher education exist within a perhaps not unified but certainly interconnected web of options. It will be impossible to understand students' complex college-going processes, not to mention their eventual educational success (or lack thereof), without taking into account the multiple actors, such as HBCUs and community colleges, in contention with one another in the arena of higher education. The implications of this point for future research will be discussed in more detail below.

Implications and Directions for Future Research
This study and its data can be used to glean valuable clues for those seeking to enhance and expand educational opportunities for those students currently under-represented in four-year institutions. Each of our major areas of inquiry--cultural capital, habitus, and relations between higher education segments--yields insights into means by which student and counselor knowledge and perceptions can inform educational practice.
If African Americans are making use of community colleges to bolster their educational accomplishments in preparation for success at four-year institutions, then community colleges could consider expanding their presence in high schools, especially for those students already committed to applying to four-year institutions. By the same token, if not as many Latino students are taking advantage of community colleges in this way, then high schools and community colleges must work together to reach these students. Similarly, if Latinos and African Americans and their counselors view community colleges as strongly less desirable alternatives to four-year colleges, further research could explore the specific reasons these students and their counselors have for their dissatisfaction, and community colleges could respond accordingly, with greater outreach to this community, service improvements, or both.

Of all findings related to cultural capital, perhaps the most striking is the need for better information for students to make educational choices that are maximally advantageous for their educational success. It is clear from our research that students, as well as their counselors, need more and better information on post-high school educational possibilities, especially in the wake of affirmative action retrenchments. We discovered a deep divide between those students who use community colleges to enhance their academic profiles and those who seemed lacking in all but the most basic understanding of higher education and their potential role in it. More research is needed to discern how students reach such different levels of knowledge and skill regarding the use of the higher education system. In addition, while it seems from our findings that familial and social networks play a complex role in Latino and African American students' educational progress, more research is needed to clarify this point. In particular, our findings indicated that some social networks might make finishing school less, rather than more, likely. Further study of this issue will allow us to probe the apparent contradiction between our findings and those of other researchers, such as Davis, who have documented the positive role played by social support networks in educational success for African American students.

While our findings provided some insights into higher education as a field in California, more research is desperately needed to understand how African American and Latino (as well as other) students make use of this system. Future research might well focus on transfer and enrollment patterns for African American and Latinos transitioning from community colleges to other postsecondary educational options, including the California State Universities, the UC system, private institutions within California, and, further afield, HBCUs, especially for African American students. Furthermore, the existing quantitative literature on transfer would be enriched through greater attention to the student perspective, which seems to contain a great deal more fluidity and ambiguity than can be encompassed by statistical models.

Finally, since schools in the larger research project from which this study evolved were stratified by average level of academic preparedness (as measured by overall eligibility for admission to the state university system), a future study could investigate the effect of academic performance on conceptualizations and use of community colleges within the field of education. This exploration would provide a valuable counter-part to the current study, because it would allow for simultaneous comparisons of race/ethnicity and academic background.

We believe that our conclusions could be used as the basis for more research on African American and Latino perceptions and use of community colleges not only in California, but in the nation. This research becomes particularly vital when one considers the spread of affirmative action retracement, and the likely effect of these rollbacks, on under-represented students.

References
Dear Educator:

The Student Voice welcomes students' essays. The essays should deal with educational issues and be well written, discussing teaching, studying, homework, or any school-related topic of concern to students. These essays will be an opportunity to encourage students to write and be published, and they will give us, their teachers, a way of learning from them as well. The essays will not be edited.

If you are interested in seeing one of your students' essays published either in hard copy or online, please send me one or two essays that you would consider well done. The essays can be sent either in e-mail or as a Word attachment. Thank you.

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