

## ***“For me, it was just routine:” Exploring Factors Related to Post-Secondary Aspirations for African Immigrants***

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### ***Abstract***

This qualitative study increases our understanding of the factors and forces which encourage African immigrant students to choose to attend college (the predisposition phase of the college-choice process). Researchers interviewed 13 African Immigrant students (the children of African immigrants or immigrants themselves) enrolled at Central University. Analyses reveal parents and family and early schooling are the most influential factors when deciding to attend college. Importantly, findings suggest parents and family members encourage students' desire to attend college by connecting achievement to cultural values, consistently demonstrating and reinforcing the importance of a college education.

### **Introduction**

At Harvard's 2004 Black alumni reunion, one of the highlights of discussion was the increase in the number of Black students attending the university (Rimer & Arenson, 2004). Although Black alumni were pleased to learn that 8 percent of the undergraduate student population at Harvard is Black, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Lani Guiner pointed out that about two thirds of the “Black population” was composed of Black immigrants: the children of African or Caribbean/West Indian immigrants or immigrants themselves (Rimer et al., 2004). Discussion sparked a question that seemed to catch fire at colleges and universities across the US: top colleges are taking more Blacks, but which ones?

The number of Black immigrants in the United States has more than doubled over the past decade, increasing from one to eight percent (Charles, Massey Mooney, & Torres, 2007; Kent, 2007). Consequently, there has been a substantial increase in the number of Africans attending US colleges and universities in the past several decades (Massey, et. al 2007; Kent, 2007). In fact, currently, 10.9% of all post-secondary students are foreign-born (US Census Bureau, 2004). During the 1990s, between 17,000 and 18,000 Africans were enrolled in college each year, and there have been over 30,000 African students enrolled in college each year since 2001 (Kent, 2007). Many African immigrants come to the US seeking educational opportunities and once here, more than one fourth of immigrants and their children obtain college degrees as tools for socioeconomic mobility (Douglass, Robeken, & Thompson, 2007).

In 2007, Massey and colleagues used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Freshmen (NLSF) to study Black immigrants and Black natives (those who have been in the

United States for at least two generations) who attend colleges and universities in the United States. In addition to finding Black immigrants are overrepresented in the general Black student college population as compared to their presence in the US population, researchers found Black immigrants are especially highly represented at selective institutions. In fact, in 2007, Black immigrants made up 36 percent of Black students at the most highly selective colleges and 24 percent at the ten least selective schools in the sample (Massey, et. al, 2007). The same study revealed that 41 percent of Black students on the campuses included in the study identified themselves as immigrants, children of immigrants, or mixed race (Massey et. al, 2007). This study suggests that when it comes to education, Black immigrants fare better and are more likely to gain access to higher education than their African American counterparts.

While research shows Black immigrants tend to be more likely than native Blacks to attend college generally and selective colleges in particular, there is little understanding of why this occurs. Minimal research has been done on the success and access of Black immigrant students (e.g., Massey et. al., 2007; Kent, 2007); however there continues to be little work on when and what influences Black immigrants to decide to go to college. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggest that choosing to attend college is a three-stage process including predisposition, search, and choice. Predisposition is defined as the early stage of the college process (Stage, 1992) when students begin to develop an attitude towards higher education (Hossler & Gallagher 1987).

Researchers suggest that the major influences on a student's predisposition to attend college include family and student background characteristics, parents' educational expectations, students' level of involvement, student achievement, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, and high school quality (e.g. Freeman, 2005; Hamrick & Stage, 1998; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2000, 2006; Stage, 1992). Generally little is known about the specific college choice process and factors influencing predisposition to attend college for underrepresented groups (Perna, 2006), and this is especially true of African immigrants. This study will answer the following question: what forces play a role in the predisposition phase of the college-choice process for African immigrants and to what extent do these factors have an influence?

This study will shed light on the predisposition phase of the choice process and what encourages African immigrants to express their desire to attend college. The findings will provide useful information to parents and administrators who seek to replicate the success of African immigrant students for future students, enabling them to encourage students to pursue a college education. In addition, it will help parents and administrators to understand an understudied population that is growing in the US. Furthermore, research about this understudied population will assist in making college a reality for everyone by teaching us more about how African immigrants are encouraged to attend college.

## Literature Review

In their article *Studying Student College Choice: A Three-Phase Model and the Implications for Policymakers* (1987), Hossler and Gallagher propose a three-phase model regarding the college-choice process of students: predisposition, search, and choice. While search and choice focus on the latter part of the college-choice process, predisposition is where the thought of possibly attending college first occurs (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). During this

phase, students begin to develop an attitude, or predisposition, towards college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). For many students it is the first time they begin to consider college seriously. Some researchers (e.g. Freeman, 2005; La Nasa, 2000) suggest that the predisposition phase of the college-choice process begins as early as the seventh or eighth grade. During the predisposition phase, students weigh all possible benefits and costs of enrolling in college before making a decision about whether or not to attend (Perna, 2000).

While it is clear that this phase exists, little is known about what factors drive students to begin considering college. Certain background characteristics seem to be positively correlated with the desire to attend college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The most common influences on a student's predisposition towards college include personal academic ability, parents, socioeconomic status (SES), peers, and school quality (Stage, 1992; La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006; Freeman, 2005; Perna, 2000; Hamrick & Stage, 1998). This section will review the forces most often discussed amongst scholars, and relate them to the predisposition of African immigrants towards college.

#### *Personal Academic Ability*

According to Hossler and Stage (1992), a student's ability is positively correlated with a predisposition towards college. Around the time students choose whether or not they would like to attend college, they have usually already begun to assess their own academic ability. As a student's ability level increases, he or she is more likely to engage in the college-choice process at an earlier age (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Thus, students with greater academic abilities, preparation, and achievement tend to be more likely to express interest in college (Perna 2006). Research has shown that Black immigrants are among the most highly educated immigrant group with some of the highest rates of academic ability, scoring significantly higher than native African Americans on the SAT (Kent, 2007; Massey et. al, 2007; Lutz, 2009). These previous findings suggest that because of their demonstrated academic performance, Black immigrant students might be more likely to start thinking about college earlier than their native Black peers.

One clear sign of a predisposition towards college-going is the academic track a student may choose or within which they are assigned. According to Hossler and Stage (1992), being in a rigorous academic track, which includes college preparatory or advanced placement classes, has a positive impact on the predisposition phase of the college choice process. In fact, academic track has proven to be a better indicator of eventual college enrollment than grades (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). La Nasa (2000) suggests that an academic track allows students to value a particular occupation or goal and schedule a college-track curriculum which will prepare students for post secondary education.

Students who are more prepared for college tend to have a greater initial stock of human capital: higher productivity rates which are attributable to "differences in investments that individuals make in their personal developments," which includes the quality and quantity of their education (Perna, 2006, p. 106). Black immigrants realize the importance and value of human capital, particularly education and occupational status (Massey et. al, 2007), as indicated by their high enrollment rates in selective colleges and universities.

#### *Parental Influence*

Parental influence has been noted by researchers as one of the strongest factors in predicting students' early educational plans (La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2006). Students with college-educated parents are more likely to consider college (Freeman, 1999; Perna, 2000) and place more value on getting a college education (Perna, 2006). Studies have shown that each year of

parental education increases the likelihood of a student's college attendance by 6 percent and encourages students to begin thinking about college earlier in life (Hossler & Stage, 1992). Parental encouragement is often the result of a parent's own educational attainment. If parents have attended college, they are more likely to suggest college to their children. Students with college-educated parents tend to have more access to information about how to obtain a college education (Perna, 2000) and research suggests that parental encouragement may raise a student's educational aspirations (Perna, 2006). Literature suggests that the expectations of immigrant parents raise children's expectations of college attendance (Keller & Tillman, 2008). As parents' expectations increase, so do students' achievements and their chances of attending a postsecondary institution (Hossler & Stage, 1992). For example, Dailey (1981) suggests that college attendance is determined by some parents for their children even before they enter the first grade. Thus, these students grow up always knowing they will attend college.

According to Massey's study (2007), 70 percent of fathers of Black immigrant freshmen were college graduates and 44 percent held advanced degrees. The high educational attainment level of immigrant parents and the success of immigrant students in selective colleges suggest there is a positive correlation between parents' education level and the predisposition phase of the college-choice process for Black immigrant students. Because Black immigrants are likely to have parents, particularly fathers, who have attended college, they may be more likely to begin the predisposition phase at an early age and grow up knowing that someday they will attend college.

#### *Socioeconomic Status*

As students go through primary and secondary school, many are motivated to attend college because of the promises of increased lifetime earnings and the opportunity to shrink the income gap (Perna, 2006). Many students realize that a college education and the economic capital that comes along with it are major factors in socioeconomic success (Freeman, 1999). Parental education and income directly affect socioeconomic status and have an effect on college enrollment beginning in preschool; as family income and education level increase, students begin to think more seriously about postsecondary plans at an earlier age (Stage, 1998). Students from high-income families are four times more likely to attend college than those who come from a low socioeconomic background (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds also tend to have less access to information about college (La Nasa, 2000) and therefore, are less likely to develop a predisposition towards college.

While native Black students tend to be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Perna, 2006), African immigrants are significantly more likely than their African American counterparts to come from intact two-parent households, have educated fathers, live in less segregated neighborhoods, and attend private, rather than public schools (Massey et. al, 2007; Lutz, 2009; Kent, 2007). These particular characteristics are consistent with students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, based on these differences, it can be hypothesized that African immigrants tend to come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than native Blacks, and are more likely to be predisposed to attending college. Because native Blacks tend to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, they oftentimes have less access to information about college, and as a result may not be predisposed to the possibility of college at such an early age.

#### *Peers*

Peers play an important role in student development (Perna, 2000; Stage, 1992). Therefore, their influence on the predisposition phase of the college choice process is one that is

worth exploring. Research suggests that peer influence is greater than parental influence, especially in terms of motivation to complete homework and maintain good grades. If a student associates him or herself with students who choose to complete homework and maintain good grades, chances are, he or she will do the same (Perna, 2000; Stage, 1992). Likewise, students with friends who have plans to further their education are more likely to attend college themselves (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Students who do not have plans to attend college are influenced by peers more than those who plan to pursue postsecondary education (Stage, 1992). The findings of Perna (2000, 2006), Stage (1992), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) have shown peers can have either a positive or negative affect on a student's predisposition towards college.

Black immigrants, however, seem to be less influenced by peers than other students. Literature suggests that Black immigrants are less susceptible to peer influence and tend to have more diverse friend bases than native African American students (Massey et. al, 2007). While native Blacks have, on average 5.9 friends of the same race, Black immigrants only have 4.7 (Massey et. al, 2007). Black immigrants tend to associate with a wider range of ethnicities, particularly Asian and Latino, and as a result, have more access to information about college education (Massey et. al, 2007). By limiting their scope of friends, native Blacks tend to have less cultural capital or opportunities which "facilitate upward mobility" (Perna, 2006, p. 111). Because the friends of Black immigrants tend to be more culturally diverse and are more likely to have parents who attended college (Massey et. al, 2007), they are able to provide Black immigrants with useful information about college.

#### *School Quality*

Literature suggests that school quality may be one of the most important influences in the predisposition phase of the college-choice process after peer and parental influence. Quality high schools (that is, schools whose mission and curriculum prepare students for college), are major predictors of college and have a positive impact on predisposition (Stage, 1992). The quality of a school can determine the academic track a student will be placed in, the amount of attention he or she will receive from teachers and counselors, and at what age students begin to consider college (Perna, 2006). Physical conditions of the school and assistance from teachers and counselors both play a role in the decision-making process (Perna, 2000). Individuals who have more access to information about college and are better prepared for college by their school are more likely to take the decision of college more seriously and enroll in a postsecondary institution (McDonough, 1998; Perna, 2006).

In addition, literature suggests that private schools better prepare students for college than public schools (Lutz, 2009; Perna, 2006). Private schools tend to have more rigorous academic tracks and more access to information about college. They tend to be more competitive regarding grades, and encourage students to do the best they can academically (Perna, 2006). Private schools are also able to offer more resources to students as they begin to think about college during the predisposition phase of their college-choice process (Perna, 2006). Because Black immigrants are more likely to attend private school than native Blacks (72 and 58 percent respectively) (Massey et. al, 2007), it is possible that Black immigrants are both better prepared for college and begin the predisposition phase of the college choice process earlier.

## Methods

Although researchers have revealed factors which matter generally in the college choice process and have highlighted college choice for Black students in general, we cannot assume that the same things matter for Black immigrant students. The research neglects to comment on such factors as the role of extended family, cultural capital, childhood experiences, and knowledge of the importance of education specifically for Black immigrant students as they make decisions about attending college.

This study will examine the potential influence of these factors more closely and explore the extent to which they influence the predisposition of Black immigrants towards college by answering the question “What factors and forces encourage African immigrant students to engage in the predisposition phase of the college-choice process?”

#### *Institutional Site*

Data used to address this question were collected from students enrolled at Central University. Central University is a large, East Coast, public research university. It is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a full-time (97% full-time, 3% part-time students), four-year, more selective (51% admit rate), lower transfer-in institution. Approximately 45,000 students are enrolled at Central; 38,000 are undergraduates. Black/African Americans are 3.5% of the undergraduate student population (1,400 students). Enrollment data is not kept on the number of Black students from immigrant backgrounds, however, 4,621 students are international. Approximately 71.3% (27,557 students) of students are from within the state, and about 28.7% (11,073 students) are out-of-state students. In addition, 45.2% (20,280 students) are female and 54.8% (24,442 students) are male. On average, incoming students have average GPAs between 3.52-2.97 and SAT scores between 1,750-1,990.

#### *Sample*

This study is part of a larger, more comprehensive project entitled “Exploring Educational Experiences of Black Immigrants” (EEEBI), and data was collected from both African and West Indian/Caribbean immigrant students. All participants met three criteria: they were full time students at Central University, self-identified as Black, and either they or one of their parents were not born in the United States. Detailed information on the participants can be found in Table 1.

Twenty-three total students (18 females, 5 males) agreed to participate. The sample includes four Freshmen, five Sophomores, five Juniors, and eight Seniors. Thirty five percent (8 students) of the students in the sample were between the ages of 17-19, 57 percent (13 students) were between the ages of 20-21, and the remaining 9percent (2 students) were either 22 or 23 years old. In the sample, 70 percent (16 students) are second generation or US-born, and the remaining 30 percent (7 students) were first generation, or born outside of the US. Students represent a diverse set of countries, including: Chad, Haiti, Jamaica, Nigeria, St. Vincent, and Zambia.

For the current study, data collected from the thirteen students from African immigrant backgrounds were analyzed. The sample includes 10 females and three males, four freshmen, one sophomore, four juniors, and four seniors. Seven of the students are US born (second generation immigrants), and six were born in African countries (first generation immigrants).

#### *Procedures*

Several strategies were utilized to recruit participants. First, researchers identified organizations on campus which were likely to include Black immigrants (e.g. ethnic/cultural groups, Black student unions, etc.) via an on-line list of Central University student organizations.

Organization presidents were contacted and asked to disseminate a recruitment e-mail. Flyers advertising the study and inviting the students to participate were also posted in academic buildings. Finally, snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) was used. Participants were asked to talk with others who were potentially eligible to participate, suggesting potential participants contact the researchers to schedule a time to participate at their convenience.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Sample**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Generational Status</b>	<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>College</b>
<b>Christina</b>	Female	1	Freshman	Life Science
<b>Estelle</b>	Female	1	Freshman	Liberal Arts
<b>Gayle</b>	Female	2	Junior	Liberal Arts
<b>Isabelle</b>	Female	2	Junior	Life Science
<b>Kayla</b>	Female	1	Sophomore	Engineering/Liberal Arts
<b>Nester</b>	Male	2	Senior	Life Science
<b>Olive</b>	Female	1	Freshman	Life Science
<b>Patricia</b>	Female	2	Senior	Health and Human Development
<b>Stacy</b>	Female	1	Senior	Business
<b>Tiffany</b>	Female	2	Senior	Health and Human Development
<b>Umar</b>	Male	1	Freshman	Life Science
<b>Vivian</b>	Female	2	Junior	Liberal Arts
<b>Wayne</b>	Male	2	Junior	Communications

Data for this study were collected during the 2009-2010 academic year. All students participating in the study were invited to share their narratives during an interview with a member of the research team. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. All students received \$10 for their participation.

Prior to each interview, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire, which asked for information such as age, citizenship status, country of origin, and educational level of the participants' parents. Participants then engaged in 1-on-1 semi-structured (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) interviews, lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. All participants were asked for permission to record interviews for verbatim transcription. The interview protocol was designed to collect a broad sense of students' cultural, family, and educational experiences throughout

their lives. Questions addressed students' childhood and adolescent experiences, journeys to higher education, cultural influences on educational experience, and career goals and aspirations.

*Data Analyses*

After all interviews were transcribed, transcripts were cleaned, or read while listening to the original recording of the interview to correct any errors. Qualitative data were then organized through a systematic coding process involving deductive and inductive methods. During the deductive phase, an initial list of codes was composed based on the questions asked on the protocol and research on the predisposition phase of Hossler and Gallagher's model of college choice (1987). The researcher then engaged in a critical review of the literature to identify the forces that have been identified as being related to college predisposition, and codes representing these findings were also added to the codebook. A list of themes was developed reflecting these factors, allowing for exploration of whether or not these items were mentioned in the interviews. Interview transcripts were then carefully read and the researcher wrote memos, discussing the researcher's thoughts on the themes emerging from the data. Consistent with this inductive process, the initial list of codes was amended to include the full range of experiences described.

Consistent with methods outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) and Merriam (1998), data were then re-read, coded, and organized based on emerging themes. After the transcripts were read and cleaned, memos (notes which described the emerging themes) were written down and checked against the data. Themes with similar underlying principles were clustered together, reflecting the ways in which various factors and experiences influenced each stage of participants' development of a predisposition to attend college. Finally, a report was written based on the coded data and revised ideas and themes.

### Limitations

While this study is useful for future research, it is important to note that like all research, there are a number of limitations. First, because the study was conducted at one university, is a qualitative design, and not all of the African immigrants on the campus were interviewed, the study cannot be generalized to the entire population of African immigrant college students in the United States. In addition, the majority of the students in the sample are from the north eastern region of Africa, thus it may not capture the experiences of those from other regions. Furthermore, this study only has two male participants and perhaps speaks more to the factors related to developing a predisposition to attend college amongst female Black immigrant students. Future research should expand upon the number of institutional sites, aim to include students from a larger range of African countries, and attempt to recruit more males to balance out the dominant female voice presented in this study. Although qualitative research is typically not generalizable, by expanding the study, both researchers and educators will be able to more accurately determine the factors which generally influence Black immigrant students decisions to attend college.

Furthermore, all of the participants in the study can be generally classified as high achievers because they are in college. Future research on African immigrants should consider interviewing those students who may have dropped out of college, those who attended community college, and those who did not attend college at all. Doing so would enable researchers and educators to understand if there are certain experiences and influences which influence students' decisions to attend college and whether or not these experiences and



influences have the same affect on all students. Because the institution the study was conducted at was a predominantly white, public institution, future research should also interview students at historically Black colleges and universities as well as private institutions.

In addition, this study only addresses the predisposition phase of the college-choice framework developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). In order to gain a more thorough understanding of how students participate in the college-choice process, future research should look into how students engage in both the search and choice processes as well.

## Findings

It is important to note that all of the students in the sample had high aspirations. All of the students mentioned that they knew early on that they would eventually attend college. Students indicated that they first began to think about college in or before elementary school or during middle school. Christina noted, “Oh, I always knew.” Other students, such as Isabelle indicated that they knew “pretty much as [they] entered elementary school.” Like Christina and Isabelle, many students grew up knowing or said that it was expected for them to go to college. As a result, college was their ultimate goal throughout their secondary educational career, indicating that for these students, the predisposition phase appears to start much earlier than what literature suggests for other students.

The study found that among all of the factors which influence African immigrants’ decisions to attend college, early schooling, high school, and parent expectations and guidance were of the most importance (represented in Figure 1). The category “Elementary/Middle School,” represents students’ elementary and middle school experiences which helped them to decide they wanted to attend college. Within the category entitled “High School,” mentioned the ways in which their high school classes, teachers, and guidance counselors either influenced their decision to attend college, or prepared them for their college coursework. Finally, students mentioned that parent expectations and guidance were particularly important. As represented in Figure 1, parents’ expectations and guidance appear to be shaped largely by culture and family members’ previous educational experiences, or a family’s educational legacy.

### *Early Schooling (elementary/middle school)*

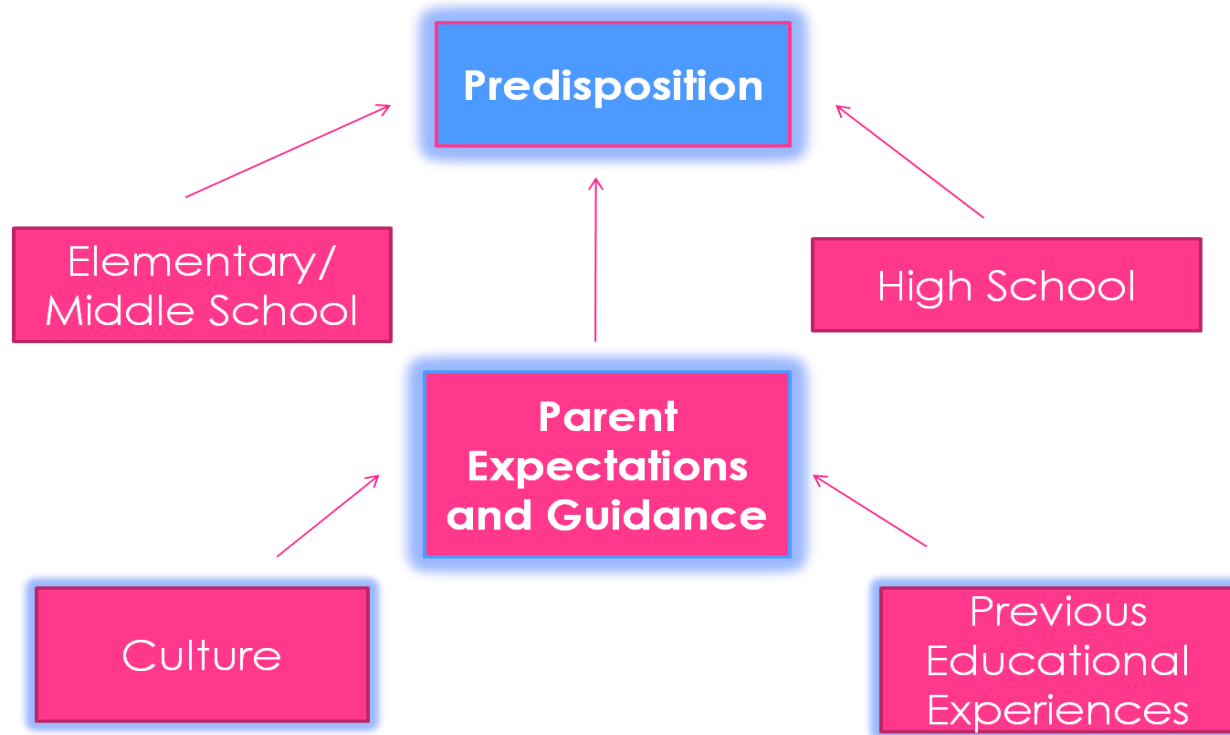
Early schooling played an important role in each participant’s decision to attend college. Among the factors regarding early schooling that were influential in students decisions were personal academic ability, country in which early schooling experiences took place, and interactions with teachers.

Many of the students in the sample tended to do fairly well (A/B grades) in school. Often, they noted that schoolwork was “easy” for them or that it “came naturally.” For instance, Umar recalled “the day before an exam, [spending] like three hours studying. And [coming] out and do either, you know, either a ‘B’ or an ‘A’.” Likewise, Christina recalls being “pretty much an above average student all through elementary school.” Like Umar and Christina, many of the students in the sample admitted to not having to try particularly hard to succeed in school.

Students who spent their early years in Africa often described their academic transition to and educational experiences in the US as being relatively unchallenging. The ease with which students who attended school in Africa completed coursework once in elementary or middle school in the United States can perhaps be accredited to the rigorous schooling they received

abroad. Students who attended school abroad seemed to make good grades with much more ease than those who had only attended school in the US. Estelle indicated that, “It was very difficult...the level of education [in Cameroon] in middle school is like high school here [in the United States].” One student in particular said school in the US was “easier than what [she] was used to.” Another student indicated that what she was learning as a small child in the US, she had “really learned in Africa...[and] was pretty much an above average student all through elementary school.” These first generation students realized that coursework in their home country was more rigorous and when they came to the US, they appeared to be ahead of their classmates.

**Figure 1: Framework Representing Factors Shaping African Immigrants’ Predisposition to Attend College**



Finally, many students had positive interactions with teachers in their early school experiences. Although not many looked to teachers as mentors, almost all of them can point to one particular teacher whose class they liked. A few students described a time when a teacher took a particular interest in them. For example, Nester mentioned having a few teachers who “looked out for [his] best interests.” These teachers mentored him and helped him to develop life skills such as etiquette, thus preparing him for his future. In addition, Gayle noted that, “Teachers were really nice, when [she] was in elementary school...they helped you a lot. Whatever you needed...” By being willing to work with the students, the teachers were perhaps encouraging their desire to learn, which would someday influence their desire to attend college. Another student, Kayla, mentioned having a teacher who had the students conduct independent

studies, always reminding them that “that’s how college would be.” In this way, teachers had a positive impact on students’ desire to attend college.

### *High School Experiences*

Another prevalent theme among students in the sample was the importance of high school experiences. Many students reported attending a private, magnet, or charter school. While often times this was the result of a parent’s decision, some students decided to apply to these schools on their own accord. If students attended a private school because of a parent, it was often because a parent “wanted them to get a better education.” These findings are similar to previous research (Lutz, 2009; Perna, 2006), which suggests that the type of high school a student attends plays an important role in a student’s predisposition to attend college.

Some, although not all, students were part of some type of educational experience outside of high school that prepared them for college, encouraging them to start thinking about college at an early age. For instance, Christina was involved in a program during high school, where she was able to attend a conference in Washington, D.C., several workshops, and field trips. Students who participated in these types of programs became particularly interested in college. Kayla worked at a research laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania. She left school every day to go to the lab where she worked as a lab assistant. It was there that she discovered she “wanted to become an [Engineer].” Isabelle mentioned a mentor from her particular program who “[knew] what it means to be a Nigerian. She knows what it means to be a different race, a different ethnic background.” Because Isabelle’s mentor was from the same cultural background as her, her mentor was able to support her as she made her decision of whether or not to attend college. These narratives suggest that for this group of students, participating in some type of college-bound program encourages them to consider future goals including college, and engage in the predisposition phase.

There did not seem to be a relationship between high school teachers and students’ predisposition to attend college. When speaking of teachers, a few students mentioned teachers who were “willing to spend that extra time with them,” or were “particular about [them],” or took a particular interest in them. However, no one seemed to mention high school teachers that were particularly influential in their decision to attend college. In fact, more students noted negative relationships with high school teachers than they did in elementary school. Estelle stated, “I didn’t like my teachers,” and Gayle recalls that some of her teachers “really didn’t care.” Although not many students had positive relationships with high school teachers, this did not seem to affect their decision to attend college.

Likewise, counselors did not seem to have a major influence on a student’s decision to attend college. In fact, many students, like Estelle and Gayle, admitted that their counselor “was not helpful at all.” In fact, Estelle recalls having a new counselor every year:

[I] had like a new one every year, I don’t know, something always happened, and they had to leave, so I never... I mean they were really nice, but it wasn’t like a close relationship and stuff.

The lack of support from both teachers and counselors suggests that these African students either received support elsewhere, or that they typically had made the decision to attend college before the time they reached high school.

In high school, many of the students in the sample were involved in rigorous academic programs. Most of them took advanced classes including Advanced Placement (AP), or college-credited classes. For instance, Stacy was in a program, “which was the advanced program for

smart students,” at her school while Umar “took ten honors classes, and...took two AP classes at a college campus, during [his] senior year,” and Kayla took AP classes because she was “always ahead of [her] class.”

### *Parents and Family*

One of the most central factors in a student’s predisposition to attend college was the influence of parents and the expectations of family members. For most of the students in the sample, college was an expectation, not an option. Parents expressed the expectations they had of their students by asking “Which college do you want to go to?” or “What do you want to be?” rather than “Do you think you will you go to college?” Furthermore, almost all of the students mentioned parents as a major source of encouragement. Parents showed their encouragement to students by saying things like, “You want it? Go for it! All we can do is support you.”

These expectations seemed to be shaped by two forces. The first, and perhaps most interesting force shaping parental expectations, was their connection to African culture. Second, whether or not the student’s parents had attended college and the way in which parents guided students’ decisions also played a role.

Among all of the ways in which parents and family played a role in a student’s decision to attend college, culture was highly salient for African immigrants. Parents were often the transmitter of cultural values and beliefs. Often times students realized their culture played an important role in shaping their opinion of school and the importance of an education. Many students who speak of culture speak of parents being strict about academics, and therefore they had no choice but to do well in school. Christina recalled being punished after not doing her best in school. Her parents used punishment to remind her of her cultural values and that failure in school was not an option:

After kind of playing the American role, you know me being born and raised here, it didn’t go well, so they did pretty much revert to the traditional Nigerian enforcement.

They were like, “You know what? We can’t take this any more.” So I definitely did go through a lot of physical punishment.

Still others responded by saying that failure in the African culture is not acceptable and therefore, they felt as though they must go to college. For example, Estelle stated,

[W]here I come from, you like, like you have to be good in school, so it’s always been like engraved in my brain that I had to do well in school, and I guess that’s what’s been my guiding force.

Like most of the students, because of her cultural background, failure was not an option. One particular participant mentioned that she wanted to go to college because she wanted to be able to help her family because as she said, that is what you do in the African culture – you help your family: “You represent your family in everything you do... Cause that’s the way we’re brought up in Africa.” She wanted to be able to help her family because according to her, that is what you do in the African culture: you help your family. To her, that was the most important reason for attending college.

As the literature suggests, many immigrants come to the United States in search of educational opportunities for their children. This held true for almost all of the participants in the study. Many students explained that their parents came to the United States in order to receive a better education for them and their children. Patricia recalled her parents telling her “we’re

Africans...we came here to make a living for you. So do well in school.” Because her parents had traveled such a far distance, she was expected to do well in school. Another student recalls knowing she was going to college once she came to the US because she knew this was the reason her parents had immigrated:

So my Dad, when my Mom won [the immigration lottery], they like debated over it, and you know, they said that it would be better for us to get an education in the US. So from then on I already knew I was going to go to college. I mean I knew that either way, but I don’t know, it was.

Because these students realized this was the sole reason their parents came to the United States, they realized college is something they must do; it was not an option for them.

Others concluded that because an education was not as easily accessible in their home country, they valued the education they received in the US. Christina mentioned being appreciative of the education she received in the US “because all school, all education in Zambia and most of Africa, you have to pay for it. There’s no free education.” Like Christina, Estelle realized that school was not so easily accessible in her country of origin:

So like when people have the opportunity to have an education in Nigeria or any other parts of any other country in Africa, it’s a privilege. So therefore you really try to work hard, just not to attain the average, but to really go far and beyond.

As a result, she took her education in the United States very seriously and realized what an opportunity it would be to attend college.

The second force driving parental expectations were parents’ educational backgrounds and experiences. Most of the parents of the students in the sample, particularly fathers, were educated, whether in their home country or in the US. As a result, college was always in the back of the students’ minds. As Olive stated, “it’s not as if I’m the first person...I guess cause my grandparents, my parents...” Like Olive, most of the students grew up knowing they would attend college because their parents had attended college. In addition, students whose parents had attended college realized that an education adds to capital or economic/social value. Christina, Estelle, Kayla, and several others indicated that their parents were wealthy in other countries and that their parents were educated. For example, Christina recalled that her dad was the CEO of Zambia State Insurance, and Kayla remembered that “before the war [her] Dad was the Army Cultural Minister in Liberia, so he was pretty wealthy.”

Some parents were even obtaining or working towards advanced degrees during the students’ childhood. Christina recalls that her “dad was in school all the time.” She says he “got his masters around the time [her] sister was like almost three.” As Christina grew up watching her father take classes, she was exposed to what it means to go to college in the US at a young age.

Although parent’s educational attainment played an important role in students’ decision to attend college, all parents encouraged students to go regardless of their own educational attainment level. For instance, even though Gayle’s mother had not attended college, she still encouraged Gayle to go to school:

And she was just like, you know, “I want you to go to a good school. I know you may have to pay back loans, but as long as you go to a good school, and you like it. Like you don’t want to go somewhere that you don’t like, and you’re not going to get like the full experience.”

Her mother realized the importance of a college education and how far it would take Gayle.

In addition to encouraging students to go, many parents expected their student to attend college: it was not an option. For many of the students in the sample, it was never a question of would they go to college, but where they would go, or what they wanted to be. Christina recalls that her family's high expectations led them to say things like, "Oh, Christina, what college?" It was mostly they'd ask like, "What college are you going to, or what do you want to be?" and less of "are you going to go to college?" Like most of the students in the sample, the decision to attend college had already been made by Christina through the guidance and expectations of her parents.

## Discussion

Although there has been research done on both the college-choice process (Stage, 1992; La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006; Freeman, 2005; Perna, 2000; Hamrick & Stage, 1998) and the way in which native Blacks engage in it, the study of African immigrants and the way in which they engage in the college-choice process has been very limited. This study offers insight as to how African immigrants engage in the predisposition phase of the college-choice process. The findings of this study indicate that although early schooling and family had a major influence on this group of African immigrant students' decision to attend college, students had typically made up their minds to attend college by high school. Thus, rather than influencing these students decisions to attend college, high school prepared them academically for their future higher educational experiences.

Literature written about the college-choice framework developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggests that for most students, personal academic ability, parents, socioeconomic status (SES), peers, and school quality are the major factors that shape a student's desire to attend college, and for native Black students, academic ability, parents, socioeconomic status, and peers are the most important factors (Freeman, 2005; Hamrick & Stage, 1998; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2000; Perna, 2006; Stage, 1992). Literature also suggests that most students begin the predisposition phase around the seventh or eighth grade (e.g. Freeman, 2005; La Nasa, 2000). For the African immigrant students in the study, however, early school experiences and parental influence appeared to play the most important roles and most students had begun to think about college as early as elementary school indicating that for African immigrants, the predisposition phase starts much earlier than what literature suggests for other students.

Future research should look more deeply into whether more students begin to consider college in elementary or middle school. That is, future research should make an effort to make a clear distinction between when students first start thinking about college and when they know for sure they want to go.

### *Early Schooling*

The results of the study were consistent with Perna's (2006) review of literature, which suggested that as a student's personal academic ability increases, he or she is more likely to engage in the college-choice process earlier and also more likely to attend college. Most of the students in the sample reported that school came easily to them throughout their early schooling experiences, which increased the likelihood that they would attend college. This finding is consistent with earlier research done by Hossler and Stage (1992), which suggests that a

student's ability is positively correlated with his or her predisposition towards college enrollment.

All of the students who had been educated in another country indicated that school came easily to them. This may be a distinction in the role of early experiences with schooling between first and second generation students. Perhaps being educated in an African country where the coursework was more advanced and rigorous is part of the reason many of the students in the sample tended to be exceptional students. Students' rigorous coursework at an early age could possibly be one of the factors contributing to predisposition. Their ability to excel in school potentially gave them confidence to believe college was a possibility.

Most of the college choice/predisposition literature neglects student/teacher relationships during early schooling (elementary and middle school). However, the findings of this study suggest that for many students, teachers were supportive in encouraging students to attend college at an early age. Most of the students recalled having at least one teacher who nurtured their desire to learn. One particular student mentioned that because her teacher incorporated college-like activities into the classroom, she began thinking about college particularly early. Future research should perhaps look at the affects of classroom activities designed by teachers on African immigrant students' desires to attend college

#### *High School*

Although the quality of the school was mentioned as an important factor in a student's predisposition to attend college, most of the students in the sample had already decided to attend college by the time they reached high school. Some students had an interest in college before high school and chose the school that would best prepare them to succeed in college. Since this is the case, it may be that high school didn't influence predisposition directly, but that it had a positive influence in college preparation readiness.

Because most of the students attended magnet or blue ribbon high schools, they were more likely to participate in rigorous academic tracks. Like high school in general, academic rigor may not have affected predisposition, but it did prepare students for college and was a clear sign of predisposition towards college; these courses can be understood as a reflection of their desire to attend college/predisposition to attend college. Most of the students took AP or IB level classes or were involved in some type of magnet program. More so than giving the students the desire to go to college, academic rigor gave students the confidence they needed to believe they could attend and successfully complete college.

One thing the literature neglected to comment on was the educational experiences outside of the classroom. For African immigrants, programs such as these played an important role in their decision to attend college. Current literature suggests that the purpose of programs such as Upward Bound is to produce the skills and motivation necessary to for college success among young students (Gullat, Y., Jan, W., 2003). Future research should examine what aspects of these programs encourage students to engage in the college choice process and how these programs effect a student's predisposition towards college.

#### *Parents and Family*

Because there is a lack of literature addressing African immigrants and how they engage in the college-choice process, there has been little said about the way in which culture plays a role in their decision to attend college. Almost all of the students in the study, however, expressed that their parents acted as a conduit of culture. The parents of the participants reminded them often that because they were of African descent and not African American, they

must do well in school. These findings are consistent with those of Keller and Tillman (2008) which suggest that the expectations of immigrant parents raise children's expectations of college attendance. Because these student's parents had high expectations of them, the students in turn had high expectations and aspirations of their own.

Some students indicated that because college was not easily accessible in their home country, they appreciated the opportunity they had in the United States to receive an education, and therefore, felt obligated to do well in school and attend college. These findings were consistent with John Ogbu's theory of the voluntary minority (1995). Ogbu suggests that voluntary minorities are people who have immigrated to the US voluntarily because of the promises of upward mobility and the "American Dream," while involuntary minorities are people who were brought to the US against their will. He argues that voluntary minorities bring with them, among many things, their culture and cultural values. Because culture holds such a high value in Africa, according to Ogbu's theory, these students brought with them the value they placed on education in their home country.

The findings in the study were also consistent with literature that suggests students with college-educated parents are more likely to consider college (Freeman, 1999; Perna, 2000). Eleven of the thirteen students in the sample had at least one parent who had completed at least a bachelor's degree. Unlike many native Black students, the African immigrant students in the sample had parents who had attended college and therefore, according to the literature, were more likely to attend college themselves (Freeman, 1999; Perna, 2000). These same students also mentioned they always knew they would attend college. The findings of the study indicate that for African immigrants, parents' level of college attainment plays a major role, not only on whether or not a student decides to go to college, but also when the student makes this decision.

### Implications

The findings of this study provide useful information to parents and administrators who seek to replicate the success of African immigrant students for future students, enabling them to encourage students to pursue a college education. In addition, it helps parents and administrators to understand an understudied population that is growing in the US. This study differs from other studies on college choice because it examines a particular group of people and how culture plays a role in the way decisions about college are made.

In order to ensure the continuation of future success for these students, educators should not only continue to observe the ways in which they engage in predisposition, but also develop and encourage students to participate in programs which will both encourage these students to think about college and prepare them for college. Because the findings implicate that these programs work for African immigrants, perhaps future research can interview students to find out, in more detail, what about these programs did students find particularly helpful.

To replicate the success of these students, teachers and administrators can and should collaborate with parents and explain to them the importance of their presence and active engagement in their children's education. The findings clearly indicate that among all things, parental expectations and guidance play the most important role in a student's predisposition towards college. Thus, if more parents are made aware of this, perhaps they will become more involved in encouraging their students to attend or prepare for college and/or will hold higher expectations for their students.



## Conclusion

Because the presence of African immigrants is growing so rapidly in the United States and particularly on college campuses, it is important that research on this population continues to be conducted. If college-choice literature is to be considered thorough, it must include this population, which cannot be ignored. As years go on and the population of African immigrants continues to grow, chances are their presence on college campuses will continue to grow as well. Thus, we must realize that they are now and will continue to be a population that is worth mentioning when considering minorities and college choice.

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