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# **Cooperation, College Knowledge, and Strong Parent Communities in the L.A. Concrete Jungle: The Case for Family-Centered Outreach**

Michael J. Smith

## **Abstract**

*Urban African American teens are unprepared to compete for jobs in the global marketplace, but higher education professionals could partner with parents to reverse this trend. After reviewing parent involvement literature, this paper shares findings from a study of urban African American parents involved in their children's outreach programs. It found that outreach programs empowered parents by creating "community" and strengthened cultural capital while providing social capital that made parents partners in their children's college choice process.*

As our nation moves further into the 21st century, the question of equality of educational opportunity is still of paramount importance, especially as competition for available jobs in the global marketplace is more intense than ever. Are urban African Americans being properly prepared to meet the challenges of this new world? Data would suggest not. In fact, with each passing year, the gap between Whites and Blacks, and the haves and have-nots within the African American community both widen, especially in urban centers where there seems to be little to mitigate this depressing trend (Jacobson et al. 2001; Ladson-Billings 2005).

While scholars correctly identify larger sociological, economic, political, and psychological issues as factors that rapidly have escalated this trend, most of the focus has been on how individual students have successfully or unsuccessfully navigated this new terrain. For the academy this has meant focusing on more intense recruitment of African American students. These recruitment efforts include accessing PSAT index data to identify potential students earlier and aggressive campus visitation programs orchestrated by admission offices. These visitation programs should include air fare, all meals, and entertainment. The problem with focusing so sharply on attracting students to college is that the impact of their families, no matter how those families are constructed, is overlooked and, thus, not considered as an important part of urban African American outreach. This approach is especially detrimental for students from low-income families (Smith 2008). If we shift our focus to urban African American families, what do we know about how they help their children negotiate life after high school and secure education for long-term, financially rewarding careers? To further explore this issue, it would be appropriate to ask in what ways higher education has included African American parents in the college choice process?

This paper uses a study of urban African American parents whose sons and daughters were enrolled in a public, magnet high school designed to prepare students for the graduate and/or professional schools in the sciences. Looking closely at this school will help us learn more about how colleges and secondary schools can cooperate to level the college choice playing field. The present study offers the testimony of parents as a way of advancing the notion that university-sponsored outreach can impact the college pipeline if the desire to make it an important institutional priority exists. Before sharing this study's findings, a discussion of what scholars have said about parental involvement for the parents of students underrepresented in higher education is necessary, as is a brief discussion of what they have noted about the identification and transfer of information important to making parents partners in the college choice process.

## **Parental Involvement and Interaction with Schools**

Most of the scholarly work concerning parent involvement in education either includes the analysis of formal parent involvement programs or the discovery of specific themes or patterns of interaction. Research on college choice addresses parental involvement from the perspective of parents' overall influence on the process. This review combines parental involvement literature relevant to relationships with schools and how these relationships impact college choice. Specifically, I discuss how parent-school interactions are impacted by parental efficacy and parental perceptions of "welcomeness" in their children's educational world. Second, I review what college-choice scholars say about the importance of college knowledge, the impact of parents' educational aspirations for their children, and how parental encouragement and support changes their children's postsecondary trajectory. Finally, I close this discussion by including my own definition for African American parent involvement in the postsecondary planning process.

If parents feel powerless to make a difference in their children's education, they are less likely to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Similarly, if they feel uncomfortable meeting with teachers, counselors, or administrators, they will be less likely to do so and more likely to appear to outsiders as ambivalent toward education (Lareau and Shumar 1996). Finally, while some parents experience no separation between their work lives, family lives, or their roles as home educators, others experience barriers that run the gamut from structural employment issues to race to those imposed by socio-economic status (SES) in the form of access to social or cultural capital (Freeman 2005; McDonough 1997).

## **Parent Education and Efficacy**

Parents who have earned college degrees are more likely to be involved in their children's education, and those without education are less likely to be involved (Lareau and Shumar 1996; Lee and Bowen 2006). Lareau and Shumar (1996) found that parents with a high school education or less often lack the knowledge to help their children and often lose "dignity and authority in the home" as a result of the

“unmasking of their limited educational skills” (25–26). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found that parents are more likely to be involved in their children’s education if they feel that their impact would be valuable, where academic efficacy is linked to parents with more education.

First-generation students tend to have low educated and low SES parents who might appear to be ambivalent toward schools because of their own lack of positive experience with education and disbelief in the “American folk theory of educational success” (Ogbu 1883, 1991; Padron 1992). While efficacy in educational matters is one indicator of the level of parental involvement, low SES African American and Latino parents do want their children to succeed and intend to prepare them for the long road after high school. Although these parents want their children to succeed, they often possess the “wrong” maps to find their way to college (Delgado-Gaitan 1991, 1992, 1994a, 1994b; Perez 1999; Smith 2009).

## **Parental Perception of “Welcomeness”**

What have scholars found about how the collective “attitude” of schools impacts involvement? Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found when schools create a welcoming, friendly environment for parents, those parents were more likely to be involved. Concomitantly, if parents believed schools wanted their participation, they were more likely to ignore inhibitions and distrust and embrace involvement. If parents get the message that they are not welcome and that their participation is not wanted, it is likely that they will be less involved (Smrekar 1996). A lack of connection to their children’s school will have negative implications for parents’ ability to accept or seek assistance in college choice (Lareau and Horvat 1999). Finally, no discussion of “welcomeness” in parental involvement would be complete without discussing the legacy of sanctioned inequality in America and the persistence of institutional racism that coalesce to produce barriers to involvement for parents of color (Fordham 1996; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Winters 1993). The literature clearly states that education levels impact efficacy in parental interactions with schools and that race, social class, and the working world can influence how much parents are involved in their children’s education (Fordham 1996; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lareau and Shumar 1996; McDonough 1994, 1997; Smrekar 1996; Stanton-Salazar 1997; Winters 1993). The literature also supports the idea that involvement in education sends children along trajectories that include post secondary options that may or may not include participation in the college choice process (Lee and Bowen 2006; Smith 2009).

## **Parent Involvement in College Choice**

Scholars who look at educational attainment, status mobility, and college access agree that parents play influential roles, but less is known about how the specifics vary by race, family composition, or social class (Auerbach 2004; Blau and Duncan 1967; Flint 1992; Hearn 1991; Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith 1989; Hossler, Schmidt, and Vesper 1999; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, and

Rhee 1997; Litten 1982; Perez 1999; Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969). The following review first explores a durable paradigm for understanding college choice and parental involvement in college preparation. Next, the college choice–parental involvement paradigm will serve as a backdrop for discussion of what scholars have said about the importance of college knowledge in securing college aspirations. Finally, I briefly describe how urban African American parent involvement is inextricably tied to the African American experience.

## **Hossler:**

### **Parental Encouragement versus Parental Support**

Over the years Hossler et al. (1987, 1989, 1999) and their durable conceptualization of college choice and parental involvement describes a process whereby a student prepares, applies, and then enrolls in college in three stages, including (1) predisposition, (2) search, and (3) choice (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith 1989; Hossler and Gallagher 1987). *Predisposition* refers to the time period during which students develop a taste for college and search is the time during which students develop “choice sets” from which they make a *choice* of schools for application and enrollment. As mentioned earlier, parent aspirations play a huge role in college choice, but Hossler et al. (1999) believe these aspirations are communicated through their encouragement and support (Hossler et al. 1999).

*Parental encouragement* is different from support in that it represents a frequency of discussions between children and parents about the parents’ expectations, hopes, and dreams for their children’s college attendance. *Parental support* is more tangible and includes saving for their children’s college attendance, taking students on visits to college campuses, or attending financial aid workshops with their children. From the work of Hossler et al. (1987, 1989, 1999) it is clear that students with parents who attended college rarely would consider the possibility of not going to college; an observation that points to the importance of college knowledge and the college predisposition that begins building long before students enter junior high school.

### **Imparting College Knowledge and the Growing Rich-Poor Enrollment Gap**

Also called “critical capital,” college knowledge is information that helps link parents and families to the college-choice process through creating a predisposition for college, helping search for and developing choice sets of possible colleges, and eventually assisting with the actual selection or choice of a college (Auerbach 2004; Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith 1989; Hossler, Schmidt, and Vesper 1999). College knowledge is not only valuable information about what is needed to prepare for and choose a college, but also defines the uses of a college degree, and how the experience will be financed (McDonough 1994, 1997; Vargas 2004). In the arena of college knowledge wealth accrues advantages, especially with perceived understandings of the value of specific financial and transformative experiential values

of college not always available in other postsecondary options (McDonough 1997). Children from such families are expected to attend college and quite often are focused on graduate school beginning in their freshman years due to their families understanding the value of a college degree (Freeman 2005; Tornatzky, Cutler, and Lee 2002).

In selective and highly selective institutions, most African American and Latino students come from advantaged families, although their low-SES sisters and brothers are seldom seen on campus (Contreras 2005). This growing college gap between high- and low-SES African American and Latino students is best illustrated by recent developments in the highly selective University of California system where Contreras (2005) found that after Proposition 209 was passed in California, banning race-based admission policies, African American and Latino students who were admitted and enrolled were from high-SES families. Even though many factors contribute to these disparities, a likely reality is that low-SES African American and Latino families have deficits in college knowledge that are disadvantageous in the college application game; a game they already play on a less than level playing field (Smith 2001; Vargas 2004).

## **Urban African American Parents: Extra Challenges and Additional Work**

In the past I have argued that urban African American parents, especially those of low SES, are well aware of the impact of race on their children's educational experiences and the fact that the playing field is less than fair. In other work I've discussed how urban African American parents of college children work hard to undo poisonous images of academic certain failure that come from not only their peer groups but from institutional agents on campus. Much of the involvement includes building self-esteem and counteracting the lowered expectations of teachers and institutional agents (Smith 2002). This involvement includes combating poor counseling and information gaps created by extraordinarily high student-to-counselor ratios, pursuing "hidden" information from a perceived malevolent "they" determined to keep their children down, and negotiating other institutional inefficiencies (Smith 2001; Smith 2002). This involvement also includes being their children's "cheering section" and equipping them with emotional "body armor" to help them believe that African American teens are just as intelligent and full of potential as any other teens (Smith 2002). Finally, no matter what the outcome, if the children do their best, they will find love at home from their parents and guidance or directions to postsecondary life with the best metaphorical maps they have at their disposal (Smith 2009).

## **Research Questions, Sample, and Methods**

This study endeavors to understand more about how urban African American parents assist their children in the college choice process. The inquiry used here draws from college choice research and from research on sociological forms of capital. As such, it is guided by the following two questions:

1. How do urban African American parents gain access to critical college capital?
2. How do African American parents, who on average, are already disadvantaged by their comparatively low SES, find ways to obtain current college knowledge products?

## **Overview**

I used a qualitative approach because the reality of African American parental participation in the college choice process easily could be misrepresented by statistics and buried under quantitative analysis. I focused on African American parents from Los Angeles, because it is an excellent example of a contemporary multiethnic and multicultural American city where African Americans compete for resources with a large collection of other racial and ethnic groups; a fact that distinguishes it in many ways from predominantly African American cities such as Atlanta, Chicago, Washington, New Orleans, or Baltimore. In many ways L.A. represents the future diversity of most major U. S. cities where turf battles and struggles over shrinking resources are the order of the day. These contested resources include access to the best colleges that will secure the most stable futures for their children. I believe that qualitative inquiry is the best way to make sense of what parents understand is necessary for their children to successfully compete academically and for eventual college admission.

## **Sample and Methods**

This study considers four African American mothers from a larger study of 39 African American parents that were a part of my doctoral thesis. The dissertation evolved from a much larger study of approximately 400 participants including students, parents, and counselors in the greater L.A. Basin designed to gauge attitudes toward the University of California after the passage of Proposition 209 (Prop 209) in 1996. Proposition 209 was a California ballot proposition that banned the use of race, sex, or ethnicity in college admission and hiring. It was spearheaded by then University of California trustee Ward Connerly and passed with 54 percent of the vote. The mothers came from a school with a high percentage of African American students and a strong college-going rate.

The transcripts came from one- to two-hour focus groups that utilized semi-structured interviews with prompts to elicit responses helpful to understanding perceptions of Prop 209 complications and challenges. Data analysis of focus groups used the constant comparative method of Glaser and Strauss (1967) in order to identify themes and patterns consistent with or in contrast to college choice and parent involvement literature (Cresswell 1994). I read each transcript carefully, including field notes, process/integrative/theoretical memos, and open/axial codes and then compared the responses of parents of 11th and 12th graders separately and then simultaneously (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Strauss and Corbin 1990). When my understandings

reached a point of saturation, the resulting selective codes or “story lines” described alternative explanations and produced a robust analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

## **Introduction: Sun Ra Medical Magnet**

Sun Ra Medical Magnet was nothing but eight bungalow-style classroom buildings when this data was collected, which gave a decidedly “temporary” feel to this school. It is located off the 105 Freeway and minutes away from Roosevelt Flats, a housing project that is one of the toughest in the city. This area is home to the Bounty Hunter Bloods and where their gang war with Crips and other sets (including several Latino gangs) is an everyday occurrence (Becerra 2007; Peralta et al. 2008). Homes around the area were in ill repair, and the most obvious manifestations of poverty could be seen on every porch or street corner; while at night the aforementioned gangs ruled the streets (Peralta et al. 2008). If a panoramic picture would have been taken at the time, it would have shown dozens of liquor stores, check cashing establishments, fast-food joints, and bail bondsmen with several storefront holiness churches dotting the landscape. Also captured in this photograph would be out-of-work African American and Latino men of all ages and descriptions involved in the daily struggle to stay alive or to find work as day laborers. In the late 1970s, the exodus of capital from this community that Wilson (1980) described as “deindustrialization” was best exemplified by the closure of the Firestone tire and rubber plant that had provided unionized manual labor employment for thousands of African American families from 1928 to 1981. During the closure, 70,000 workers were laid off, and gang membership skyrocketed to 30,000 (Peralta et al. 2008; Evirostor 2009). Its closure contributed to the destabilization of working class Black communities still recovering from the riots that occurred after the death of Malcolm X and in response to Los Angeles Police Department citizen abuse (Peralta et al. 2008).

Opening in 1982, the Sun Ra Medical School and the Sun Ra Metropolitan Hospital (Metro Hospital) were created as a response to concerns of physicians, community activists, and parents who worried about a shortage of minority medical practitioners in the area. The grass roots effort to increase the number of minority physicians included in the medical school pipeline, which spawned Sun Ra Metropolitan, also addressed issues created by Roosevelt Flats high school. Roosevelt Flats was an overcrowded, under-funded, and inadequate public high school with a dismal record of college preparation. In a bit of historical symmetry the urban disinvestment and deindustrialization that created the grass roots movement that inspired the creation of the Sun Ra Magnet expanded to other cities in the 1990s. For example, Glenn Hills, Illinois, lost 70,000 jobs in 1984 due to plant closings. Thousands of blue-collar African Americans banded together to salvage a failing public education system by calling for the creation of the Glen Hills College Preparatory Charter High School (Farmer-Hinton and Adams 2006).

At the time of these interviews the Sun Ra Medical Magnet enrolled 225 hand-picked students who had successfully negotiated the process of admission into a Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) magnet school. In fact, Sun Ra Medical Magnet was

bordered on the south by Metro Hospital, on the north by Powell Avenue Middle School, and to the East by a relatively new and comparatively upscale strip mall with a national supermarket, a McDonalds, other fast food places, and a Denny's. Even though the area is in an under-served, and by many accounts unsafe area, the tiny campus was safe, and from my observations maintained a decidedly family-like atmosphere.

With a total population of just over 200 students, Sun Ra Medical Magnet had an intimate learning environment with a small faculty-to-student ratio and a small counselor-to-student ratio. In fact most classes had no more than 20 students throughout a student's four-year secondary school experience. The unremarkable white bungalow buildings contained typical public school classrooms with unusually cramped administrative offices. However, once inside the classrooms it was obvious what made this place special—the interaction between highly motivated students and superb teachers and counselors. At the time this study was conducted the student body was 73 percent Black, 24 percent Latino, and 3 percent Asian American and Pacific Islander. Most of the faculty and administrators (most Black, a few White, very few Latino) were the envy of all the local LAUSD high schools. The students wore white lab coats and similar gear that was a not-so-subtle suggestion that they would become medical doctors or at minimum another type of health care professional. Buried in a dangerous gang-ridden and economically ravaged South Central Los Angeles community, this rather innocuous set of bungalow buildings housed what was, by any measure of evaluation, an academic powerhouse that was well connected to important outreach and support groups. These connections helped young Black and Chicano-Latino students participate in post-secondary education, and in many cases, prepared them for eventual admission into medical school.

## **The Med-Start Program and Saturday Academy**

The best example of these connections came in the form of a program called “Med-START Saturday Academy” that was sponsored by Los Angeles Private University's (LAPU) “Med-Start Program.” LPU is a Carnegie Classified Research I institution of more than 25,000 students with tremendous academic, financial, and intellectual resources and a solid commitment to the low-SES ethnic community that it surrounds. Their academic enrichment at Sun Ra Medical Magnet was developed to help students succeed in college by offering assistance in math, science, and English classes in the effort to create a college culture in Los Angeles communities with low college matriculation and completion rates.

More importantly, parents attend classes held on Saturdays that allow them to learn more about science and become more supportive of their children's educational goals, having the residual effect of creating parental involvement and employing families along with the students. Additionally, parent support groups were given the responsibility of monitoring the Med-Start program as well as their children; both characteristics had the effect of enhancing any tutorial assistance offered, also enhancing the children's overall educational universe. Sun Ra Magnet is a good example of what can happen when higher education professionals develop a sustained

commitment to outreach and public service for the public good. What the parents of Sun Ra students had to say about their experiences was instructive to any universities who seek to create more-effective outreach programs for under-represented students, especially African American students.

## **Sun Ra Medical Magnet Parents**

The four parents from the Sun Ra Magnet were consistently passionate, thoughtful, and involved in their children's education and concerned with the school's ongoing progress. They connected their educational involvement to social justice agendas in the larger community, bringing about an empowerment similar to what Auerbach (2004) noticed with Latino parents in another program, approximately 45 minutes away from Sun Ra Medical Magnet. Much of what I learned illuminated their sincere concern about the educational reputation of Sun Ra Medical Magnet and how this reputation shaped the opportunities their children had for college. Specifically, the findings of this study revealed women who were fully aware of what it meant to be African American parents in an unforgiving and often brutal metropolitan area where competition for college admission was increasingly intense. They all appreciated the fact that Sun Ra Magnet was fortunate enough to provide college knowledge for parents who need it or maximize the knowledge held by more advantaged parents.

## **Competition for College Knowledge in the L.A. "Concrete Jungle"**

These four equally strong and charismatic mothers embraced the privileged learning environment their children were fortunate to be a part of, all the while being aware of their positions as African American parents in a brutal and competitive city.

In my dissertation, I began the discussion about what I learned by introducing Michelette, the college knowledge leader for the Sun Ra focus groups. I learned later that she is a single mother of three who attended California State University Northridge, University of California Irvine, and University of California Santa Barbara. As a former college student, she was highly knowledgeable about college choice and already had a daughter enrolled in University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) along with a younger daughter who was a Sun Ra Magnet senior. Michelette peppered her comments with an Afro-centric frame of reference that was more informative and factual than it was strident or militant. She appreciated the impact of college outreach programs at Sun Ra and demonstrated a command of the fine details of college choice supported by Med Start and Talent Search. For example, she understood and knew the importance of AP courses and a high GPA and their positive impact on making college applications more competitive. Michelette provided a wonderful example of this college knowledge when she said:

So if your child doesn't get into those X amount of AP courses and there are no honor courses, even though their curriculum is rigorous, then they don't get

that extra credit. And so if they're going in competing, and they may have a 4.0, but when they're competing against another student with a 4.0 with an AP that's a 5.0 — well, I mean, you know, technically it is. Because you get a higher level. You take AP courses, so it's a concern of mine when they don't have as many slots available, and it's not to say that the child is not qualified to be in that course.

Although it is important to note that Michelette had college experience, her ability to reference outreach programs offered at Sun Ra showcased the additional college knowledge she acquired. This gained advantage regarding college choice supports the idea that college outreach can deliver middle class college knowledge and the critical college capital that levels the playing field for African American parents of children enrolled in urban high schools.

Fatima, another parent referenced, expressed herself in an Afro-centric discourse similar to that used during the late 1960s and early 1970s Black Power Movement. For example, she mentioned the term “do for self” which Black Nationalists of that era borrowed from the Nation of Islam, which was typically heard as the cry “Black man do for self!” She hammered away at the idea that the Black colleges (Historically Black Colleges and Universities or HBCUs) “belonged” to Black people and, thus, could be trusted and, in fact, were imminently worthy of African American trust based on their history of success and long lineage of alumni. The glaring irony of this unquestioned trust is the fact that her daughter was most interested in going to the University of California at Berkeley (UCB). She told me that her daughter,

... is going to be graduating. She'll just turn 16. She's looking about doing her undergraduate work perhaps at Berkeley. And then doing her graduate work at Howard. I am trying to encourage her to do everything including leaving California, but she doesn't want to leave California.

Interestingly, Fatima did not attend an HBCU, as she instead attended a community college and the University of San Francisco, an urban, private, and Jesuit college. Nevertheless, Fatima possessed plenty of college knowledge to pass along to her daughter and seemed prepared to guide her through the college choice process.

Fatima also sent her daughter what college choice parent involvement theorists Hossler et al., (1999) would describe as extraordinarily strong four-year college aspiration signals. Because of her encouragement, the daughter's college plans were solidified and clearly defined early in her academic career; this focus made Sun Ra Magnet a perfect place to support and reinforce these plans. Fatima stated that, “when she was eight years old she knew she was going to be an OB-GYN doctor and that she was going to an HBC, Howard University Medical School. We've known about going to college for a long time.” The key to Fatima's statement was the idea that college had been a goal for “a long time” as well as the fact that Sun Ra Magnet was selected for its potential to prepare her daughter for medical school through its variety of programs.

Less confident and even less prepared with respect to knowing the roads and highways of the college choice map was single parent Angel, who was struggling to hold life together for herself and her children. She was overwhelmed with the task of trying to raise a Black boy on her own without an older Black male figure or role model. Angel spoke passionately about how the cumulative pressure of these responsibilities opened the door to feelings of fear and hopelessness saying that,

. . . I'm frightened for him and like I said, I'm barely surviving, I am barely surviving. If he becomes an adult and cannot hold his own, I don't know what's out there for him. . . . he needs to take care of his business [because] I feel there's no one out there for him; he's gonna have to do it for himself.

The word Angel used most often during the focus group was “frightened,” which revealed much about her state of mind. It was clear that her plate was beyond full and crystal clear that she was drowning in responsibilities and anxious about all she did not know about the college preparation and college choice process. Even with the daunting possibilities of helping her son navigate college choice highways and byways, her determination impressed me. I was impressed equally with the fact that Angel's college knowledge would be a blank chalkboard without the help of the many outreach programs that serviced Sun Ra Magnet. She noted that:

If it wasn't for the Med-Start Program and the Talent Search program that my sons are participating in, I wouldn't have any information about college because I'm not getting it from the high schools at all. I'm not getting anything about college from the high schools.

Both of these programs provided tangible strategies and useful information delivered by a contact that she felt comfortable seeking out. Perhaps because of this multifaceted college knowledge intervention, Angel was focused, circumspect, and completely comfortable when discussing these areas of college choice. Outreach programs clearly accentuated her complete dedication to her son's academic success, even while still harboring considerable doubt and fear about her son's future.

Eltie (LT) had a son and a husband, even though her comments gave me the impression that the father was not nearly as parentally involved as LT. She was very much the disciplinarian, who was aware of her son's whereabouts at all times. She never allowed him to “hang out” without her approval, especially if it involved the local mall, which had a reputation as a place where the possibility of gang violence escalated whenever the number of teens reached a critical mass. She vigilantly sought out opportunities to enhance her son's educational options at Sun Ra Magnet, aggressively securing any information that he might need. It is clear that she took advantage of such opportunities as demonstrated by her comments about the nuances of transcript evaluation in college admission:

So if you have a student come out of Palos Verdes [Rancho Palos Verdes HS in a very wealthy neighborhood] with the exact same grade point average or

profile as a student coming out of L O C [Locke HS], they're gonna see the student coming out of P V is more qualified because of the school, but you're saying you don't have preferences. To me that's a preference.

This comment showcased her knowledge of subtle admission evaluation points by noting the unfairness in how selective institutions evaluate high school grades based on their perception of a school's quality. Such highly strategic information was shared through the advising and parent involvement apparatus of Med-Start and Talent Search; this knowledge typically is associated with middle class college knowledge and a residual benefit of a blending of community cultural capital and the college preparation provided by high schools that is an extension of this community-based capital (McDonough 1997).

## **Discussion: Outreach, Capital, and Urban Parent Communities**

It is clear that parents of Sun Ra Magnet students all wanted their children to attend some form of postsecondary education; while some focused on medical careers others thought about preparing their children for basic survival in an increasingly competitive world. In both cases it was clear how each parent benefited in some way by the many avenues of outreach provided at their Sun Ra Magnet; most impressive were gains from participation in the Med Start Saturday Academy, and this program's successful engagement with parents over the long term. It is quite clear that this engagement produced a noticeable amount of buy-in and good will; these parents were proud of their child's enrollment at Sun Ra but very invested in the school's future success. The following discussion addresses intersections and diversions from the literature about college choice, parent involvement, and the particulars of Black parent involvement (theoretical and paradigmatic).

Fatima and Michelette were empowered African American women who fully expressed the possibilities within African American cultural capital. Michelette honed in on the injustice many Black students face throughout their high school careers, the lack of equity in course selection, and the exclusion of African Americans from advanced placement (AP) courses and what this exclusion means for not only college preparation but for access to the most prestigious and life-changing colleges. I have to note here that "prestige" itself does not make a college good, not necessarily better at instruction, or even responsible for more net cognitive or emotional gains during an undergraduate career. But "prestige" does afford networking opportunities that give access to social capital likely to result in better and more lucrative career opportunities and contacts. Since Sun Ra provides this information through its many programs, Michelette is able to digest the information, deconstruct its fundamental elements, and redistribute these facts with actions (lobbying for her child's inclusion in AP courses) that will result in better course selection for her child and more social justice as her child completes the class, a college prep program, and, down the road, undergraduate study.

Fatima also touched on this same theme of empowerment by aggressively promoting HBCs as the schools most likely to care about her daughter and provide the optimum experience. Supporting an African American institution is consistent with notions of self-reliance, doing for self, and empowerment — messages that may not bear fruit in her daughter’s undergraduate choice (she wanted UCB) but perhaps in graduate school (Howard Medical School). It is interesting that even with this use of African American cultural capital and this support of education for empowerment through attending a Black college, her daughter chose another Predominantly White Institution (PWI) not necessarily known for its Black population after Proposition 209 passed. Since she is a college graduate, the Sun Ra outreach and college choice resources were more helpful in reinforcing her medical career (she wants her to be an OB-GYN) and providing an environment where she is surrounded by other parents that Freeman (2005) would describe as “automatic.” These resources were not the primary sources of information about college and the college choice process, but it was valuable in that it maintained a pro-college ethos that makes college attendance a “cool thing.” More reliant on these resources were Angel and Eltie (LT) who displayed their need for information throughout the focus group discussion.

The Sun Ra Magnet outreach resources available to both Angel and Eltie (LT) came from outreach programs such as Med-Start and TRIO programs like Talent Search. As a single parent who struggles to make ends meet and while raising a son on her own, these outreach programs provided the college knowledge that could be a form of traditional cultural capital, could be transformed into African American cultural capital, and could be transmitted in an environment rich in social capital. This social capital piece would be critical for Angel since she felt overwhelmed and without guidance; a Med Start program provides the guidance of faculty, counselors, and of other parents like Michele and Fatima who have greater levels of efficacy with involvement in this process.

Eltie (LT) gave very detailed responses and demonstrated a deep understanding about college preparation; she often explained program elements to other parents in the focus group. She seemed to have digested the most from information provided by outreach groups and as a result, was an empowered and involved parent who was able to provide encouragement and tangible support (through actions) and who was a legitimate partner in her son’s college choice process.

Not only were all four mothers aided in some way by the range of outreach opportunities that are featured at Sun Ra Magnet, but it is clear from the collegial nature of discourse between parents during the focus groups that outreach had forged an identifiable parent community. Within this community not only is African American cultural capital traded and nurtured; it also is where the value of social capital is amplified through the extensions of each parent’s personal network becoming part of this Sun Ra parent community. During the focus groups parents were prone to helping each other, clarifying points, and debating about the future of the school (a new campus was under construction at the time the interviews took place), but additionally a good deal of care and concern was expressed for the children of

their fellow parents. It was the proverbial “neighborhood raising the children,” which so many people have pined from the days of the Clinton White House until today. These findings point out the importance of outreach to urban African American parents for all of the previously stated reasons; following are some suggestions developed from these findings for use by practitioners in outreach, student affairs, admission, financial aid, and service learning units of contemporary urban colleges and universities.

## **Recommendations for Urban Higher Ed Practitioners**

Whether they embrace a K–14, K–16, or K–20 model or focus on fully developing a consistent local college access pipeline, urban institutions of higher education need to make a full commitment to developing inclusive approaches to outreach. Key to the development of inclusive outreach practice is considering parental or even family involvement as a fundamental and common practice. Many colleges and universities have already embraced this approach, while many others are distracted by justifiable concerns such as cost, family privacy, logistical concerns or even negotiating difficult pre-existing contacts between universities and urban K–12 communities (for example, Prop. 209 negatively changed relationships between the University of California and inner-city Los Angeles public schools). I have seven specific suggestions for Urban College and University practitioners based on my research and the research of other college choice and college access/equity scholars:

1. When considering African American, Latino, and Urban Asian outreach, remember to plan on consistently involving parents and making your college a place where they feel welcomed and valued as people who belong.
2. Parents who are involved tend to be better college choice partners for their children and tend to set higher goals for their children, so it is critically important to believe that these parents want the best for their children and that, with help, will be interested in any program you provide that will allow their kids to thrive and become future college graduates.
3. Make use of TRIO programs that already exist and find interesting ways to blend these programs with your own agendas. This makes re-inventing a program of your own unnecessary and makes use of decades-old infrastructure to support outreach efforts.
4. Consider such programs to be of benefit to not only your own admission and outreach (diversity) recruitment agendas, but for the public good and as a way to increase social justice in your city.
5. Consider investment from private sources to fund such programs, but realize that your own investment on a consistent and unwavering basis signals to potential

private sector donors that you are serious and that their money will contribute to the excellence you desire! Note, their money will not be the sole financial support for these programs; your institutional funds will form the foundation.

6. Provide ample, or at least fair, release time for faculty, particularly assistant professors who volunteer their time and efforts for these worthy activities. To not do so marginalizes these valuable resources by making them work at cross-purposes to larger institutional responsibilities and their efforts to secure tenure or promotions.
7. Whatever you support will add to the college knowledge of the parents and families who benefit as well as the students themselves; yet another way that your institution contributes to the public good.

By providing opportunities for urban parents and students to grow together and by creating family-centered outreach, urban institutions will embrace the goal of greater civic engagement and will improve and encourage more sustainable professional practice.

Embracing family-centered outreach for both urban African American and Latino students will require sacrifice, reorganization, and deep rethinking of how financial resources would be allocated. Family-centered outreach would not only enhance diversity but would create a more equitable and just society in the institution's "own backyard." Beginning with creating a more equitable and just city will contribute to the common good, and the public relations benefits reaped by the urban colleges and universities will reach beyond simply increasing college access to the poor. Many years ago Bowen (1977) suggested that a more fair and inclusive higher education system will help our civil society become more "civil," and help our nation foster a more robust democracy where we could all have genuine hope in the future of higher education for all our citizens. Family-centered outreach would be the exemplar of a genuine and respectful partnership among students, parents, and institution; urban colleges and universities could borrow from the motto of my own institution, "let knowledge serve the city," and lift up all of its citizens.

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