Spring 2001

Low SES Black College Choice: Playing on an Unlevel Playing Field

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Author's note: W.J. Clinton High School is a pseudonym.

Abstract
Low socioeconomic (SES) African American parents from a Los Angeles inner-city public high school were selected to talk about their perceptions of the college choice process. A qualitative, case study methodology was used to understand ways in which these parents are able to advise their children about college. The primary finding concluded that these parents feel disengaged from the process in many significant ways and suggests that admission and outreach staff make concerted efforts to include parents as part of their outreach.

Introduction
California's Proposition 209, Hopwood vs. the University of Texas and several other recent court decisions have threatened race sensitive admission practices in selective public colleges and universities. In the debates that surrounded the implementation of these measures, legislative opponents of affirmative action pointed to the success of many minorities in gaining access to higher education while claiming that majority students were increasingly becoming victims of reverse discrimination. Although there has been little effort to empirically document whether sizable percentages of majority students have suffered because of affirmative action, there is plenty to support the fact that minorities have benefited greatly. Indeed, the last 20 years witnessed the emergence of a viable African American middle class (Fulwood III 1991; Merida 1995; Roberts 1995) and dramatically higher enrollment of African Americans in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) compared to 30 years ago (Sax, Astin, Korn and Mahoney 1998).

However, social science scholars tell us that from 1967 to 1987 structural economic changes moved major corporate employers out of American inner cities. These changes helped create a largely black, urban underclass (Wilson 1987) that grew as rapidly as the emerging black middle class.
In an effort to present a more complete picture of college access and opportunity within the African American community, this study took a closer look at the college choice process for low socioeconomic status (SES) blacks. The participation of this group in college choice is important to consider because admission into college has become a high-stakes game (McDonough 1994) that they may not be prepared to play. It is important to understand the attitudes, perceptions and concerns low SES black parents have with respect to this important family event. As with other Americans, social class "matters" for blacks. Even though as a collective group African Americans share the common legacy of legalized and defacto discrimination, there are powerful, within-group social class differences that have resulted in completely different life trajectories. Could it be true in the college choice process? Do black students from higher SES groups have greater success in college access than black students from lower SES groups? These questions need to be considered in a contemporary ethnic and socioeconomic context so that African American students from low income and poor backgrounds are not abandoned in the new, competitive admission climate.

Research Question
Social science theorists have posited the existence of several forms of capital such as Becker's (1993) human capital, Bourdieu's (1977) cultural capital, and Coleman's (1988) social capital. Social class is an idea that has impact in all three capital theories. Since social class is reflective of parental resources and since parental resources influence college choice, African American parents were the focal point of this study of African American college choice. Further, low SES African American parents were chosen in order to gain a greater level of understanding of how they experience the college choice process. The aim of this study was to find out: How are low SES African American parents able to advise their children about college choice? This research question is guided by the assumption that there are important perceptual differences between low SES and higher SES blacks with respect to college choice. It also assumes that low SES black parents do advise their children about college choice.

Data Source & Collection
The data used for this study were part of a larger research effort. In the summer of 1998, a group of researchers and graduate students led by Professor Patricia McDonough at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) began work on a study that sought to understand the current state of college admission for African American and Latino students in urban California settings after the passing of Proposition 209. The area that was chosen was Los Angeles; a city that is as large and densely populated as it is diverse. Data were collected from students, parents, and counselors from high schools determined to have large black and Latino populations. The current study is based on this data.
School Selection & Sample

The school selected for this study was W. J. Clinton High School, which is located in south-central Los Angeles. Clinton enrolls around 1200 students, most being African American (80%) and almost half of whom are on public assistance (44.5% AFDC). Because of its student population and surrounding area, this is considered a low SES school. Only 60% of Clinton HS students completed the minimum requirements to be considered for admission into the University of California (UC) system in 1997; only 2% of the seniors were enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Eleven parents of Clinton HS students participated in the study, and most were interviewed in focus groups that contained between 3 and 5 people. Of the 11 parents, 8 were women and only 1 parent had earned a bachelor's degree.

Analysis

This study utilized a particular kind of qualitative research methodology, the case study. Case studies are ethnographic in nature and are designed to give "voice" to the people who are the subject of inquiry. While quantitative research is a superior method for generalizing findings to larger populations, qualitative research presents the opportunity to understand issues in a deep, highly nuanced way (Marshall and Rossman 1999; Creswell 1994; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). The primary sources of data included individual and focus group interview transcripts, field notes, and preliminary memos. In addition, analytical memos were written as a part of an ongoing constant comparison of emerging themes. To accomplish this, the Glaser and Strauss (1967) constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis that begins with a narrow laundry list of themes that are condensed into broad thematic groups was used. The result is theory that emerges from categories or themes created by and grounded in the data.

Findings: Low SES Signals

In the first level of analysis, transcripts were compared from the Clinton HS parent interviews with college behaviors (signals) typically seen from low SES parents. These signals are indicative of social class-based behavior patterns relative to college choice and were derived from scholarly literature on parental involvement in education and parental involvement in college choice. This group of parents exhibited typical low SES involvement patterns (see Appendix A). For example, the parents rarely mentioned campus visits as an important information source for choosing a college. They did not have access to important institutional agents such as admission representatives, faculty or student affairs administrators. Except for one parent, this group did not mention the use of "college knowledge" products. As posited by McDonough (1994), these products include popular periodical college ranking issues (such as U.S. News & World Report), private college admission counselors or consultants, college guidebooks (such as The Fiske Guide) or institutional Web sites. Their blue-collar lifestyles created conflicts between potential hourly wages earned and participation in the child's college choice activities; they were simply not able to take time off to be involved. Finally, parents seemed to disengage from the college choice process, not in terms of overall support or belief in their children, but in terms of information gathering and sharing. This lack of engagement made students the primary collectors of college choice information. Clinton HS parents exhibited behaviors congruent with what the literature would have us expect for those of low SES. Similar to what McDonough (1997) found for a varied group of white female high school students, social class structured the college choice expectations and behaviors of parents. In addition, parents voiced frustration with not being able to provide much in the way of assistance. Their frustration was expressed in similar ways or themes which represent the voices of Clinton HS parents.

Findings: Parents' Voices

Parents invoked four themes to describe how their helpfulness was constrained. The first was a lack of clarity about college choice and its many considerations. Their knowledge of college access, college life and college outcomes was "soft" and nonspecific; I refer to this as "soft knowledge." They also felt frustrated by not being able to produce useful information for their children. They felt that information was not only unavailable, but also purposely hidden from them. Finally, the forces that hid the information, in their eyes, were described as a nameless, faceless, and malevolent group which I call the "collective they." This obstructive force was perceived as intent on keeping their children locked out of higher education.
“Soft Knowledge” and Lack of Clarity
A strong constant throughout all of the Clinton HS parent conversations is the fuzziness of knowledge about college application, finances, admission procedures, and college life. The kind of knowledge these parents have about college and college choice is something I describe as “soft knowledge.” The softness of their knowledge is particularly visible in parents’ discussions about the SAT and other admission aptitude tests. One mother was unclear about the purpose of this exam:

“But he’s still taking the SAT test to bring his average up higher, you know, so he can have a high SAT... one of the (coaches from the) schools that wants him to come play for them tried to explain a little bit of it to me too about the SATs.”

In this example the child has to explain to his mother what the SAT is for and why it is important. In this particular instance, the young man was being recruited to play NCAA Division I athletics; the recruiting coach tried to educate his mother as well. Not understanding the purpose of the test or not being a helpful point of reference makes this parent’s input less useful and puts the student in the position of having to depend upon other sources of information.

“Soft knowledge” is the result of two things; not knowing how the college choice road is laid out and not having a map to chart any particular direction. Parents who have graduated from a four-year college or university have access to this map and those with graduate degrees have the most detailed version. The Clinton HS parents, however, had no map to speak of; they travel along the college choice highway in a lost and confused fashion. As a result, they “lack clarity” about the process. This parent gives us an example of her lack of clarity:

“Let me see, what did she tell me? I think she was saying that it was because, I’m sorry, I think I have notes here, that I took. Ok, she said she couldn’t go straight from high to film school, but she can go into multimedia.”

This parent was unclear of how her daughter would pursue a degree in film and this lack of clarity produced “soft knowledge.” Like the other Clinton HS parents, the lack of actual college experience produced a knowledge gap that would have to be filled by children or other extra-familial information sources.

“Hidden” Knowledge and the “Collective They”
College choice information is not considered to be widely accessible by these parents. They describe college choice information as something that is hidden from them and only obtained after an unreasonably lengthy and complicated search. This sentiment is reverberated with the statement of the following parent’s frustration and bewilderment with the process of obtaining college choice information: “They have a lot of hidden secrets. You have to search for the information. If you don’t search, you don’t get it.”

Another parent felt that information was intentionally hidden from select groups of people:

“I think it’s just hidden to certain people. I think just like a lot of things are hidden.”

Yet another parent was more specific about the kind of parents who were not privy to the most valuable kind of college choice information: “Maybe people just like us that have low incomes, you know, that they hide it from us.”

It is clear that Clinton H. S. parents hold several beliefs about the hidden aspect of college choice information. Namely they feel that it can only be obtained after an intense search, that it is distributed in a discriminatory way and that the method of discrimination is socioeconomic and perhaps racial. Yet, it is clear that these parents want to be more helpful even with important college choice information seemingly beyond their grasp. In frustration, they look for causes and reasons, eventually concluding that the inability to access information is the result of someone, something, or some power responsible for hiding it. The parents referred to this responsible force or entity as “they.” In my analysis, this “they” is a collective force that withholds necessary college choice information and makes little effort to notify parents about important college choice timelines.

One mother said, “They’re not having enough classes that brings this knowledge to our attention, regardless of whether you feel you need the help....” She felt that the “collective they” should take responsibility for educating parents about college choice and felt that the information should be shared regardless of any needs analysis. This “collective they” is positioned against the parents who feel it is a malevolent and prejudiced force that discriminates against them.
One way in which the “collective they” acts in a prejudiced manner against low SES parents is through differential admission standards. For example, if an “A” from their child’s high school is not considered to be of the same merit as an “A” at another, more affluent school, these parents are likely to feel discriminated against. Clinton H. S. parents see information as hidden from them while others are seen as well aware and regularly utilizing college choice knowledge to their advantage. They also feel that the children of other families are evaluated in a more equitable way. This group of parents strongly feels that there are forces that work against them; however, they never offered specific names or descriptions of such forces. Nevertheless, not being able to name the “collective they” does not make it less real. The fact that they feel conspired against or oppressed is an important indicator of how they position themselves and their children in the college choice playing field. To them, they are participants who play on the most unlevel part of this playing field.

Discussion
How are the findings of this study relevant to admission and outreach practice? It seems that the themes that emerged from the analysis of this group of low SES African American parents can be helpful in expanding the knowledge base of admission professionals interested in reaching out to this population of students. One of the first themes of importance would be the largely negative perception parents have of admission officers, outreach personnel and college representatives in general. These parties were seen as adversaries who purposely withheld information necessary for parents to help their children choose a college. Parents saw this collective group (the “collective they”) as malevolent and actively conspiring against them or people similar to them. Whether or not these feelings are based on tangible reality is not as important as the fact that they exist. It is important that college admission professionals be cognizant of this perception when planning outreach programs.

The fact that low SES parents believe that malevolent “collective they” even exists points out the high level of distrust they feel for high school administrators and college outreach/admission personnel. Trust is a key issue in establishing relationships with this group of students. Trust is defined by the Clinton HS parents as a willingness to work with and become involved at a significant level. The feelings of suspicion that these parents hold are perhaps reflective of how little they trust those who are positioned to influence the futures of their children. Without engagement from members of the “collective they,” Clinton HS parents seem somewhat disengaged from the college choice process. If admission or outreach offices are serious about working with this population, they have to do so in a manner that involves parents, engenders trust, and decreases suspicion.

Admission officers should take note that the lack of clarity parents feel for the college choice process is an expression of their desire to be more informed. By and large, they have no existing paradigms for how college choice works and they need help from those who know. Low SES African American parents need to be included in the college choice education process with their children. Finally, because they were not informed, their children had to bear the burden of being the primary information gatherers. Without outside assistance, the children are placed at a significant disadvantage when applying to even moderately selective colleges where inside knowledge of the admission process is of great importance. With admission education efforts that include this population of parents, “soft knowledge” can transform into “hard knowledge” that will be more useful and likely to engage them in the process at a much higher level.

Suggestions
Considering the preceding discussion I offer five suggestions for practice:

• In order to build effective relationships with low SES African Americans and other low SES students, admission efforts should focus on families.
• In considering families, the parent(s) should be a primary target for outreach efforts.
• Outreach should be started long before the senior year so that admission offices and their institutions can build relationships based on a level of trust.
• Admission and outreach staff should assume a minimal level of college knowledge for low SES African American and other low SES parents so that important information is not left out or improperly understood.
• Assume that parents will become your allies in teaching children about college choice and your institution specifically.

These suggestions, of course, are based on the assumption that outreach efforts targeted at low SES African Americans are sincere and constructed for the long term. Successful outreach to underrepresented populations cannot be achieved where “paper policies” exist in place of long standing “diversity commitment” (Smith 1997). The preceding suggestions will mean little if an institution adopts a less than rigorous approach to addressing the concerns of low SES African American college applicants and their parents.

Appendix

Clinton HS Parent Congruence With Low SES College Choice Behaviors

• College visits are not part of the parental initiated search process.
• Access to important institutional agents is absent or limited.
• Use of college knowledge products is limited.
• Hourly wage jobs present prohibitive time restraints on parents’ involvement.
• Lacked information about the long-term benefits of college or types of college attended.
• Frustration with lack of information seen as an obstructive border.
• Parents withdraw from the process making students the primary information gatherers.
• Information networks were localized, family-centered and less helpful for college choice.

Conclusion

This study used a population of urban, low SES African American parents whose children were students in a low SES, public, inner-city Los Angeles high school to help us understand their perceptions on the college choice “game.” In college choice, these parents behaved in a manner consistent with what scholars say is typical for those of low SES. Essentially, their behavior is a reaction to being under-informed about the process. Parents had nonspecific, “soft knowledge” about college and lacked clarity about how to help their children. They were frustrated that the knowledge needed to help their children was “hidden” by what I termed the “collective they.” This collective group consists of high school counselors, administrators, college admission and outreach personnel and any other college contacts perceived to have influence over the future of their children. The findings of this study should inform practice by sharing important perceptions held by low SES African American parents that may impact outreach efforts of colleges and universities. It is my belief that sincere commitment to building trust with this group of families will yield higher college enrollment, particularly in selective colleges. Finally, institutions must have long-term commitment to this population in order to be successful. Trust only comes from being involved with families long before the students are juniors or seniors.

References


