

The College Choice Process of African American and Hispanic Women: Implications for College Transitions

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Studies examining access and college participation have generally focused on racial and ethnic minorities as a group. This study qualitatively examined the college choice process for African American and Hispanic females. Through the voices of these women, three major themes that support their decision to attend college were identified. All study participants were from a single, case study large Southwestern university.

The participation rate of racial and ethnic minorities in higher education continues to be a major concern for many in the academy (Washington State, 1999; Nettles, 1991). Various reports have chronicled the changing demographics of the country and have called for improved access, retention, and graduation of minority students (ACE, 1988). In fact, most institutions have responded to this call by developing a myriad of programs that address student access and retention. Even with these programs, however, the participation rates for ethnic minorities continue to lag behind those of their white counterparts. The Seventeenth Annual Status Report on Minorities in Higher Education (Wilds, 2000) indicates that college participation rates for whites and minorities continue to show a disparity. In 1997, African American and Hispanic college participation rates were 39.8% and 36% respectively. This is in comparison to 45.3% for white participants. The issue of comparable participation rates is compounded when considering that these numbers do not reflect the disproportionate number of racial and ethnic minority students, particularly Hispanics, who drop out of high school at a significantly higher rate than Anglo students (Wilds, 2000).

A study by Perna (2000) revealed that African American students' aspiration for a higher education is comparable to their white counterparts; however, they are less likely to realize their goals. This would suggest there are barriers between the aspiration of these students and the actual fulfillment of their aspirations. As the number of racial and ethnic minorities continues to grow, it is crucial to the future social and economic prosperity of the United States to support the aspiration of African American and Hispanic students to assure participation in higher education.

Moses (1990) asserted that Black women have participated in higher education for over a century, but are quite often absent from the research literature. She suggested that this is an indicator of the "double jeopardy" African American women, and indeed all women of color, face as race and gender intersect. Therefore, women were the focus of

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this study, with a primary interest in examining the factors that support the college going process for young African American and Hispanic females. The purpose of this study was to examine, through the voice of African American and Hispanic females, the college choice process. Specifically, attempting to illuminate the factors that support the initial decision of African American and Hispanic females to go to college.

Research Method

A number of theory-based approaches grounded in quantitative research have been used to study college choice among high school students. These are divided into four primary paradigms: econometric, sociological, consumer and combined models (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1986). Although common variables emerge from these varied approaches, the first three identified treat the college choice process as a single decision. The combined model, proffered by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), identify multiple stages in the college choice process. This approach allows the college choice process to be considered in multiple, progressive stages, and facilitates the examination of subgroups of the college student population (Bateman & Hossler, 1996). The combined approach defines three stages in the college choice process: *Predisposition*, students decide whether to continue their education beyond the high school level. *Search*, students consider types of institutions they seek to attend and gather information. *Choice*, students evaluate a narrowed list of institutions and select a school.

Numerous studies have cited common factors that impact the various stages of college choice. These include factors such as: socioeconomic status (McDonough, 1997; Padilla, 1996; St. John, 1991), gender (Freeman & Coneal, 1998; Stage & Hossler, 1989), parental level of formal education (Jackson, 1982), parental encouragement and support (Litten, 1982), and quality of the high school and participation in an academic track (McDonough, 1997; St. John, 1991). These studies utilized a quantitative approach that provided valuable information on the college choice process.

Using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model as a frame and focused on the predisposition stage of the college choice process, this study examined the question of college choice among African American and Hispanic females using a qualitative inquiry method using focus group interviews. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized the importance of conducting research in a natural setting to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences. This approach provided an opportunity for the voice of the students to be heard, and by allowing the voice of the participant to be heard, greater clarity and depth of understanding of the issues is provided (Nieto, 1992).

Participants

Most research on college choice has focused on students at the high school or junior high level. The participants in this study consisted of 17 female college students attending a large public southwestern university. College students were selected because of their ability to articulate and convey their experiences. There are concerns of

“selective memory” whenever reflective studies are done, however, the assumption was accepted due to the perceived value and depth of the college student’s reflection on the college going process and the provision of information that further illuminates those factors that promote college attendance. The 17 students in the study (4 African American and 13 Hispanic) were undergraduates and the ratio of African American to Hispanic students mirrors that of the campus as a whole. The mean age of the participants was 20.8; with Hispanic students averaging 1.7 years older than their African American counterparts. The parental educational level for the African American women in the study and their socioeconomic level was higher than the Hispanic women in the study.

Data Collection

The data for the study was gathered through structured focus group interviews and the completion of a demographic profile. The demographic profile included questions such as age, class level, parental income, and participation in an AP program. A protocol was developed that addressed key questions in the college going process; it was pilot tested with African American and Hispanic women who were part of a campus organization. A review by this group led to improvements and refinement of the protocol. Participants for the study were then identified using targeted and convenience sampling (Patton, 1990). The Assistant Dean of Students and one of the authors compiled a list of potential participants, and these students were contacted and invited to participate in the study. Students were interviewed in groups of three to five and the interview data were taped and transcribed, with personal notes from the interviewers also being kept to record visual observations, such as body language and facial expressions. The transcribed data were re-read numerous times and discussed by the authors to identify emergent themes and patterns.

Findings

Three major themes relating to college choice emerged from the data: 1) familial influences; 2) the quintessential American Dream; and 3) striving to overcome. These themes reflect findings from previous studies that have utilized quantitative methodology, however, giving voice to the student provides greater understanding of these themes for African American and Hispanic women.

Familial Influence

All participants spoke of the importance of family in the decision-making process. For these students, family influence came in the form of encouragement and support, role modeling, and for the African American students, a need to please their parents. Parents, siblings, and close relatives were all mentioned in the context of supporting the college going process. Students spoke of the constant encouragement they received from their families. College became a topic of conversation early and often in the student’s lives.

One student, Sara, spoke of the repetitive encouragement she received from her parents “.....for me, my parents always told me; ‘go to college, go to college, you’re gonna go to college!’” Sara’s statement was accompanied by facial expressions and hand gestures that suggested she had heard these comments so often, she viewed them as a mantra from her parents. This type of indoctrination, while exasperating for the student, obviously provided a mindset of the inevitability of college attendance. Another student indicated “Everybody’s (family) ...constantly calling to say, ‘how are you doing? What are you doing? How are those grades going? Have you sent in your application yet?’ So everybody was, like, right behind me.” Parents and family members not only spoke of going to college, but also conveyed the idea that going to college was an expectation. When queried to respond specifically to how parent’s actions had demonstrated an expectation of college participation, the students most often spoke of verbal encouragement. Julie’s statement characterizes this verbal expectation “I didn’t really have a choice. I mean, there was really no option there. It was either, you go to college in El Paso, or you go to college elsewhere. I don’t think I really had a choice.” Sara supported this concept stating “I just felt they had instilled it (in me).” As the interviews continued, however, concrete examples emerged of how going to college was supported in their family. Participants spoke of being praised for good grades in elementary and secondary school, of seeing older siblings or relatives attending college, and of being taken to the library to obtain their first library card. One student spoke of an incident where she expressed an interest in medicine and her parents bought her a toy medical kit. Another student ruefully told the story of a family picnic where she was not allowed to “hangout” with her older cousins because they were in college. From that day, she indicated her constructed understanding of what it met to be an adult was linked to college attendance. These and other expressions of support for education were woven throughout the interviews.

For the African American participants in this study, an underlying familial influence emerged in the form of obeisance. They spoke of the desire to please their parents by attending college. Tia stated “I would ask my Dad, what do you think? Because, like, he means everything to me. So I mean, he knew I was going to college, and I was like, if he likes it...then I love it!” Another student, Ebony, noted “My mother always wanted me to go....I’m living out her dream.” These comments not only reflect a close relationship with their family and the influence parents had over the decision-making process, but may also reflect the level of development for these students. Cognitive development theories examine the ways an individual develops critical thinking and reasoning processes. Gilligan (1982) suggested that a woman’s concept of self and morality is based on a “caring” perspective and if one considers these remarks through the theoretical lens of Gilligan, they clearly demonstrate the concept of connectedness and relationships. For these African American women, the importance of relationships shapes the rationale for their decisions to go to college.

The Quintessential American Dream

Another theme that emerged from the data supports the concept of aspiration and

motivation in college attendance. However, the findings from this study suggested that aspiration and motivation for these students is not related to status attainment as is posited by the somewhat dated sociological models that examine college choice (Sewell, 1978), and therefore, suggesting the label the “quintessential American Dream” to address the sentiment of most voluntary and non-voluntary immigrant groups and the importance they place on education as a means to achieving the American Dream. For these participants, college was perceived as a vehicle that would insure the advancement of the student, her family, and the community as a whole. In terms of what college could do for the student; students spoke of monetary rewards. Julie commented “Like, my group of friends, we all went to different colleges, but mainly (we went to college) because we didn’t want to end up working at a minimum wage job, or getting married.” In particular, the Hispanic students had grown up in low-income neighborhoods and knew that they wanted something better for themselves. Another student stated “...to get where I want to get, have the kind of job I want, to have the kind of lifestyle that I want, I knew I had to go to college.” Students had witnessed others in their community achieving through education and spoke of wanting to do the same “I think the older I got, the more I saw that, that everyone that was successful had a higher education. And I knew I wanted to be successful so I knew I had...I had to have that education behind me.” Thus, education became synonymous with success and college was the vehicle to obtain the education.

Students also spoke of aspiring to surpass their parents and other family members in the level of education and subsequent lifestyle choices. Araceli stated “I saw my Dad, he used to work nights, come home, and I’d be leaving to go to school...So it was kind of like....that’s not really good, you know? I don’t want that.” Another student commented “And I would see my grandmother’s family working so hard...and all my cousins and uncles. And I just wanted to go to college.” There was an understanding that education would mean greater job opportunities and therefore a different lifestyle. Ebony stated “I mean, ... you want to be better than your parents. My Mom and Dad always expressed that. Always be better than us, and your kids will be better than you.”

Finally, many of the Hispanic women echoed a sentiment voiced by previous new immigrant groups. The concept of interdependence was loud and clear in these young women’s decision to attend college. They spoke of wanting to “give back” to their parents and the community. Students spoke of the sacrifices their parents had made for them. Pilar stated “The one thing that keeps me going is.I want to give back to my parents...it’s like, I have to get all this done because there comes a point where I’m gonna take care of my parents.” Araceli commented “I’ve always seen myself, myself and my family getting, you know, going somewhere. Do you know what I mean? Just getting away from where we are and going further.” Another student stated “I had my little brother, and I thought, you know what? I want to do this for him...I want him to go to school as well.” Some of the participants also felt a responsibility for their community. One student stated “There’s a lot of people that don’t have very much money and you see them and you want to be able to help them. So, if you better yourself, you can do something for them.” Clearly, these women went beyond seeing college as only a vehicle for self-improvement, but as a means to create a better environment for

their community.

Striving to Overcome

Striving to overcome was the final theme to emerge from the data. This final theme addresses the barriers these students faced and the networks utilized to overcome these barriers. In particular, the Hispanic students in the study alluded to the struggle between “being the good and dutiful daughter” and following their dream for a college education. One student stated “They (extended family members) reprimanded them (parents) for encouraging me to go to college. They said they had no business encouraging me to go. They heard it from everybody.” Rendon (1999) wrote eloquently of this struggle between family and education, illuminating the experience of straddling two worlds and the accompanying stress it produces. These findings identify that students expressed similar concerns when making the decision to attend college. Students in this study again spoke of the influence and support of family members in coping with the stress of leaving family to follow what some might consider a nontraditional path.

Another barrier faced by these students was low expectations from high school counselors. Even though thirteen of the seventeen students had participated in Advanced Placement courses, they spoke of negative messages sent by high school counselors. These messages were sent in the context of to whom the counselors provided information and to whom they dedicated their time. One student related an incident where her counselor suggested a vocational career, even though she had done well on her SAT’s. Another student, Julie, stated “I remember my high school counselor kept telling me to go to the local community college. And I’m like, “No.” She kept asking was I sure, was I sure? She thought that was the best I could do.” Students in this study spoke of individual teachers and coaches who provided support and information for college attendance. One student noted the role her second grade teacher played in her decision to go to college. “I guess she saw potential in me...She kept up with me and encouraged my parents to let me go to college.” Others spoke of the role of athletics and the confidence of their coaches in their ability to be successful in college. For this study, high school counselors had little impact on the decision-making process for African American and Hispanic students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current study was constructed to give voice to students and their understanding of the college going process. The themes that emerged parallel, to an extent, those factors found in quantitative studies of college choice. However, the voice of students who have historically been disempowered by virtue of their race, ethnicity and gender provides a special context for understanding their experience. Similar to the findings in a study by Bateman and Hossler (1996) parental expectations have a strong influence on the predisposition stage of college choice. African American and Hispanic female students in this study illustrated various ways that parents, siblings, and family members encouraged and supported their decision to go to college. Words and actions

demonstrated the value of a college education. However, some of the students in this study also experienced negative reactions to their decision to go to college. Hispanic students spoke of the difficulty in responding to the competing values of their gendered family role and the desire to obtain an education; it has been suggested that gender role identity has been considered a barrier to Hispanic women's education attainment (Rendon, 1999, Vazquez, 1982). Hispanic women in this study were coping with these competing values as well as the dissension they may cause within the family structure.

Post secondary institutions have focused on intervention programs that address the search and choice phase of college attendance. Little attention has been given to how institutions might impact the predisposition stage of the college choice process. By changing the focus of the study on college choice from high school students to college students, those students who have been successful not only in making the decision to go to college but also in matriculating to and being successful in college were examined. From the participant's reflection on their decision-making process, several suggestions can be made where colleges and universities can intervene in the early stages of college choice. These include: 1) the creation of targeted brochures; 2) consortiums, and 3) marketing that is sensitive to various groups.

First, colleges and universities must develop strategies that would build on the connection of the student to her family. Freeman (1997) suggested that early intervention is important. She wrote that students and their families should receive information on "possibilities, requirements, and outcomes earlier than in high school" (p. 543). Informational brochures, or view books, that target parents should be developed. Rather than the pictures of jubilant students at a football game or students strolling the quad, these brochures should identify the benefits of attending college. Parents need to understand why college is important and how they can support their child in the decision process. For students whose parent's native language is not English, these brochures should be bilingual. Numerous studies have identified the importance of parents in the college choice process (Litten, 1982; Bateman & Hossler, 1996; Freeman, 1997). Colleges and universities should work to provide this information as early as possible to assist parents in providing the "mantra" of college expectation.

Colleges and universities should also create consortiums that promote postsecondary education. Colleges and universities have historically competed for the pool of students who comprise each high school graduating class. The win-win approach for all institutions must be re-thought, and the pool of potential college students can be increased by developing outreach programs that promote college attendance. The focus for the consortium should be on college attendance rather than specific institutional recruitment. Elementary and secondary schools with high minority populations would particularly benefit from this type of consortium.

Finally, the interaction of socio-economic status and racial/ethnic group membership suggests there is a need to develop marketing and recruitment strategies that would address various populations. The African American women in this study came from a higher socio-economic status than their Hispanic counterparts and a difference was found in the expectation and meaning of college for individuals from different socioeconomic groups. Even though all students were racial/ethnic minorities, their SES mediated

information and networks associated with college attendance. This would suggest that “minority” brochures are not effective for all students.

Bateman and Hossler (1996) noted that more study is needed to examine the college choice process of African American students. In particular, the predisposition phase of college choice for African American and Hispanic females is crucial to the ultimate matriculation of these students to college campuses. In this study, the voice of the student provided valuable information on the college choice process. As suggested by Freeman (1997), colleges and universities would be well served to “[hear] the voices that are all too often regulated to the margins, for, logically and intuitively, those are the only voices that can possibly hold the solutions” (p. 548).

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