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# Circumscribed Agency: The Relevance of Standardized College Entrance Exams for Low SES High School Students

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For the past half century, the U.S. school system has functioned as a highly rationalized and vertically integrated mechanism for socializing and sorting students into the existing social and economic structure. As educational hierarchies expanded to increase access to postsecondary education, so reliance on the college entrance examination also expanded, with both meritocratic and stratifying consequences. The initial rise in the use of college entrance exams provided an “objective” mechanism to counteract the widespread discrimination in college admissions processes (Lemann, 2000). However, critics have since exposed such exams, particularly the SAT, as weak predictors of college academic success, particularly for nontraditional students (Sedlacek, 2004); and the lower average scores of African American and Latino students on these exams continue to present daunting obstacles for them, especially in the form of barriers to admission to selective colleges (Hacker, 1992; Hedges & Nowell, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Crane, 1998; Steele, 1997). Underrep-

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resented minorities who are lower income are particularly likely to confront such barriers (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Duran, 1994; Kane, 1998; Miller, 1995; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Vars & Bowen, 1998).

Despite the prominence of the SAT and ACT for college admissions, researchers understand relatively little about how college entrance exams influence students' college planning process and their transition into college. This lack of understanding is particularly problematic with regard to our knowledge of the experiences of underrepresented racial minority students, especially African Americans, for whom an aspiration-attainment paradox exists—relatively low degree attainment *despite* relatively high aspirations. African American students report having higher educational aspirations than their peers of other races, and they apparently put more thought into their college plans than White students (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999). Racial and ethnic gaps in college aspirations have narrowed (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999), and national data reveal that African American and Latino high school graduates enroll in postsecondary education at near parity with White graduates (Adelman, 2003; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006, 6–7).<sup>1</sup> However, Adelman (1999, 2006) and Rosenbaum (2001) remind us that high educational goals are prevalent, but not sufficient for bachelor's degree attainment. Despite increased access, racial gaps in college degree completion persist. Being Black is negatively associated with college degree completion (NCES 2003–164), and studies that employ multiple individual-level and institution-level controls reveal that substantial gaps in postsecondary attainment remain between Blacks and Latinos and their White and Asian American counterparts (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Currently, our national context is characterized by increased *access* to college but limited *success*, particularly for lower-achieving, underprepared, lower-income, and Black and Latino students—more than half of whom drop out of college (Education Trust, 2001; NCES, 2001).

Given this set of circumstances, it is evident that understanding the components and processes inherent in the transition from secondary to postsecondary education is vital to an understanding of how racial inequalities in education that have apparently decreased over the past several decades may have merely been transplanted into the postsecondary arena. College students are certainly fundamentally shaped by the high school contexts from which they emerge; yet as Nora (2002) contends, our frameworks for understanding their college adjustment and persistence lack a serious

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<sup>1</sup>Adelman (2003) Table 2.7 indicates that rates of postsecondary enrollment over eight years are 83.5% for Whites, 80.6% for Latinos, and 80.2% for African American high school graduates. It is important to note that disparities in high school dropout rates continue, with African American and Latino students much more likely to leave high school before graduating.

recognition of how those high school contexts have influenced students psychosocially, thereby influencing their transition into college and college outcomes. As potential college-bound students “make sense” of their K–12 academic trajectories and “choose” their future trajectories, the dynamics of this choice process (and the inequalities in academic preparation, achievement, resources, and school context associated with it) present a useful arena for exploring a reproduction of inequality process that is often complex and obscure. This paper focuses on the standardized college entrance exam, a key component of the transition to college, as just one mechanism through which these processes occur.

### THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

We draw on theory and literature in three major fields—higher education, sociology of education, and social psychology—to better understand how the subjective interpretations of something as “objective” as exam scores can have a real impact on college choice and trajectories. Such subjective interpretations and the behaviors they facilitate reveal that responses to seemingly objective criteria can vary among students. Such processes exemplify a new concept introduced in this article that may lead to a better understanding of how internal processes and sense-making function in students’ college plans. The concept of *circumscribed agency* integrates the emphases found in the three fields. It combines (a) the focus on “situated contexts” and their characteristics (found in higher education literature) with (b) the focus on how social groups interpret and respond to their social contexts (found in sociological theory) with (c) the focus on individual’s self-perceptions (found in social cognitive theory).

Such an integration points an analytic lens at the intersection of the three foci—at the point where individuals enact agency to direct their decisions and behaviors, but do so in a way that is inevitably circumscribed by the perceptions and interpretations inherent in their social contexts. Individual agency is limited and bounded by the layers of social context within which individuals are situated. This concept of circumscribed agency acknowledges that behavioral outcomes are a consequence of a dynamic, fluid, and ongoing interchange between social context and introspective psychological perception.

#### ***Higher Education Approaches: Situated Contexts***

In the field of higher education, the vast literature on college choice is quantitative (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). One standardized model of the college-choice process has developed in which students proceed through a series of stages from “predisposition” to “search” to “choice.” Various socioeconomic, school, and achievement

factors have been found to affect students at each stage (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This traditional model may not be fully accurate in that it is not sensitive to variations among college applicants and has not adequately represented the college choice and attainment trajectory for particular subgroups (Freeman, 1997, 1999). Furthermore, research on the role that college entrance exams play in the college-choice process has been limited mainly to quantitative examinations of the association between a student's test score and the likelihood of college enrollment, the level and selectivity of the postsecondary institution, and other attainment outcomes.

For instance, high school GPA and SAT scores are the best predictor of who applies to college (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989), Perna (2000) identifies test scores as an important predictor of college enrollment, and Zwick and Sklar (2005) find SAT scores an important predictor of college GPA and graduation. Beyond the tests' role as real or assumed criteria for admission, however, research tends to neglect a crucial element, which is the subjective component of the actual choice process—how students formulate their decisions and what factors they consider. In other words, what goes on in students' heads is absent from the analyses.

It is particularly striking that considerations of how students think about their college entrance exams are missing from explorations of college access and success for underrepresented, lower-income, first-generation college students, whose choice set is more likely to include the community colleges and less-selective, four-year institutions in which the vast majority of undergraduates enroll (Venezia & Kirst, 2005). High-SES students' approach to college entrance exams and their frenzy regarding test preparation as they seek admission to more selective universities has been documented in the research literature (McDonough, 1997; McDonough, Korn, & Yamasaki, 1997) and in the popular media. However, we know little about the subjective meanings of such tests among lower-SES students whose college choice set is less selective and whose prospects for college success are less favorable. Understanding the dynamic interplay between students' socially constructed understandings of entrance exams, their interpretation of their scores, and their decisions about their postsecondary futures is particularly critical for African American and Latino students whose lower test scores, lower academic achievement, lower rates of college enrollment, and lower likelihood of degree attainment have not been fully explained by prior research (Carter & Wilson, 1996; Freeman, 1997, 1999; Nettles, 1991). Research has done little to further understanding of the influence of subjective perceptions of these tests and test scores on students' decision-making and transition into college.

Perna's recent revised conceptual model of college choice (2006) provides a useful framework for situating this subjective component, particularly as it

relates to the experiences of marginalized groups. Perna acknowledges that students' attitudes, acquisition of information, and related behaviors stem from their "situated context," which includes several nested layers, including the school context. However, little research has addressed the interaction between a student's high school context and what Perna (2006) describes as the "internal context" or the cognitive, psychological processes that motivate an individual's attitudes and behavior. Perna's model, with its emphasis on situated contexts, provides a foundation for the idea of circumscribed agency. An individual's internal context is always situated within and shaped by various external contexts.

### ***Sociological Approaches: The Function of Habitus***

Perna's foregrounding of the role of contexts and social and cultural capital in her model reflects a strong sociological influence, but the model does not explain how access to cultural and social capital can vary between family, high school, and postsecondary contexts such that students' subjective perceptions and experiences accumulated in one context influence their perceptions and experiences in another context. For instance, family contexts of first-generation college students tend to lack college knowledge, raising the potential of the high school context to play a more prominent role as students interpret the meaning and relevance of entrance exams. Also, processes occurring during high school have implications for how students experience and interpret their postsecondary context. However, scholars of college choice tend to focus on *family* contexts while scholars of college persistence focus on *postsecondary* contexts. The reality that students enter college from differing *secondary* contexts with differing points of reference from which to understand their college experience has not been seriously considered. Once in college, students reinterpret their thinking toward new reference groups and other relevant parameters, and their secondary experiences necessarily inform this reinterpretation.

Students' thoughts and actions regarding college entrance exams are a component of these secondary experiences. It is especially problematic that the influence of the SAT and/or the ACT on students' decision-making tends to be overlooked in college-choice literature that focuses on the experiences of low-SES students and students of color (Constantine & Perna, 2001; Freeman, 1997, 1999; Gándara, 1995; Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; Perna, 2000). One of the few studies that focuses exclusively on the college choice of African Americans (Freeman, 1999) neglects to even consider students' perceptions of standardized admissions tests.

Several sociological studies have addressed the role of academic context and organizational norms, values, practices, and strategies as important mechanisms through which high schools influence college enrollment

(Alexander & Eckland, 1977; Espenshade, Hale, & Chung, 2005; Hill, 2008; McDill, Rigsby, & Meyers 1969; Meyer, 1970), yet only two focus qualitatively on the influence of the high school context on students' perceptions and decisions about college. McDonough (1997) explores this subjective component for different SES subgroups of White students, and her discussion of "organizational habitus" contributes key understandings of how different high school contexts can shape perceptions of college-going. Only one study in California details the perceptions of these tests among Black and Latino urban high school students. Walpole, McDonough, Bauer, Gibson, Kanyi, and Toliver (2005) provide a point-in-time snapshot of a group of students' perceptions of the test, their knowledge about it, and their preparation strategies. They found that these first-generation students were not adequately informed, relied on non-systematic, school-based information, had access to limited test preparation resources, engaged in repeated test-taking as a strategy of questionable value, and experienced anxiety about scoring low and the possibility of racial bias.

Our study extends knowledge about this topic by examining the role of the high school in facilitating the influence of these tests and test scores *longitudinally* for a group of low-income Black and Latino students. Moving beyond Walpole et al. (2005), we also explore the influence of these tests and test scores on the choices the students make about college and about their adjustment after enrollment.

Like prior scholars, we utilize Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 1994) to conceptualize the web of common understandings and strategies that shape the college planning and actions of race- and class-situated students from high-poverty backgrounds. According to Bourdieu (1977), cultural capital derives from one's *habitus*, "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (pp. 82–83). A habitus, therefore, is a cumulative framework of subjective perceptions, preferences, and appropriate actions common to members of the same social group and upon which individuals draw to interpret their surroundings and function in day-to-day social interactions. One's cultural capital can be understood as a function of habitus and as consisting of those cultural signals, dispositions, attitudes, skills, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals, and competencies that are both required and rewarded within particular contexts, such as school, to achieve particular outcomes, such as college aspirations and college enrollment (Bourdieu, 1977).

Prior studies in higher education and sociology have emphasized that the unique class and social circumstances of racial minority students have shaped their cultural capital with respect to the amount and type of college knowledge to which they have access (Freeman, 1997; Gonzalez, Stoner, &



Jovel, 2003; Horvat, 1995, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000; Vargas, 2004), their perceptions, decision-making, and strategizing regarding high school curriculum and college (Gándara, 1995; Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; MacLeod, 1987; McDonough, Antonio & Trent, 1997; McDonough, Nunez, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2003), and their enrollment patterns and college experiences (Constantine & Perna, 2001; Horvat, 2000; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; St. John, 1991). The simple notion, however, that less college knowledge, different forms of cultural capital, and lower college entrance exam scores result in unfair disadvantages for low-SES Black and Latino students in the college admissions process does not illuminate the precise question of how this complex set of factors intersects with students' academic context and subjective understandings to affect their college plans and attainment. By addressing this intersection and considering how all of these factors combine to affect students' college plans and actions, this study begins where Walpole et al. (2005) left off.

Our longitudinal design addresses the longitudinal nature of student success as outlined by Perna and Thomas (2006), in which students make the transition from one stage of success to the next: from college readiness to enrollment to college achievement to post-college attainment with discrete indicators marking success at each stage. In the college readiness stage, aspirations and academic readiness are the two key indicators; and in the college enrollment stage, college access and choice are the two key indicators (Perna & Thomas, 2006). Because standardized tests are generally considered a legitimate mark of college readiness, one would expect them to have strong implications for a student's aspirations, perceptions of college access, and enacted college choices, particularly since "success in one indicator contributes to success in other indicators" (Perna & Thomas, 2006, p. 5). This study considers not only the factors that influence students' ideas about these tests and interpretation of their scores, but also the nuances of the potential cumulative influence of these factors over time, such as the consequence of test scores on students' subjective perceptions of their own ability and the influence of these perceptions on their college decision-making.

### ***Social Psychological Approaches: Self-Efficacy***

Drawing from social cognitive theory, the concept of self-efficacy provides a frame of reference for considering this relationship between social context and self-perceptions. Explaining self-efficacy, Bandura (1995) states: "Students' beliefs in their capabilities to master academic activities affect their aspirations, level of interest in intellectual pursuits, academic accomplishments, and how well they prepare themselves for different occupational careers" (p. 17). Simply put, self-efficacy is how students perceive their ability to carry out an action or to do something that matters—in this case, go to college. So the decisions students make regarding college, for example, are



partly determined by their perception of their ability, and it is reasonable to consider the possibility that entrance exam scores shape students' perceptions of their ability.

Bandura explains that people have a tendency to avoid actions that they perceive as exceeding their capabilities but that they pursue activities that they judge to be more within their ability. Moreover, "any factor that influences choice behavior can have profound effects on the course of personal development" (Bandura, 1986, p. 393). For this reason, we consider the impact of college entrance exam scores on students' perception of their ability and the relevance of those scores for their choices about whether to go to college and where. This impact is particularly relevant for minority students, for whom such exams are not as reliable a predictor of college performance or attainment (Sedlacek, 2004; Steele, 1997).

In summary, in considering the relationship between college entrance exam scores and students' perceptions of their ability, it is important to apply multiple lenses, recognizing that such tests and test scores do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, students interpret the tests based on their *habitus* and the range of cultural capital available to them, which develops as a function of their school, family, social, community, and racial context. Therefore, the strategies that students employ will not be simply a direct response to the test, but a response filtered through the repertoire of strategies that make sense to them based on their context and *habitus*.

As high school students make decisions about college, their sense of their own agency is defined through a complex interplay of perceived facts and "objective" measures (exam scores), cultural and social contexts, and subjective self-understandings. Their sense of agency is *circumscribed* by this combination of factors. How do students interpret their performance on the test? How does their social context influence this interpretation? How do the scores influence their confidence about their ability to succeed in college? After students take the exams and learn their score, in what ways do their prior aspirations change or remain unchanged and why?

Furthermore, lower income and racial minority students are more likely to begin their postsecondary trajectory in two-year or community colleges, and the type of institution one first enters influences degree completion (Dougherty, 1994). The results of various studies regarding the effects of college type have shown that "initial attendance at a two-year (versus a four-year) institution reduces the likelihood of bachelor's degree completion by 15 to 20 percent" (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005, p. 376), and a more recent study measures that gap at 21 to 33 percent (Alfonso, 2006). The extent to which test scores play a role in helping to determine the types of colleges into which students enroll is a critical topic as well.

Our study attempts to move beyond prior research by using multiple disciplinary lenses to identify and describe (a) the context within which student respondents enact their decisions with regard to standardized college-entrance exams, including their habitus and available cultural capital; (b) the intersection of these contextual elements with students' approach to the exam, their interpretation of their scores, their perception of their ability, and their higher education plans and actions; and (c) the potential short- and long-term consequences of these dynamics for students as they make the transitions necessary to succeed through college.

## RESEARCH METHODS

We chose a qualitative methodology for this study, with phenomenological interviewing<sup>2</sup> as the central data-gathering strategy. Our motive was our perception that the meaning-making activity of participants is critical for understanding how they interpret and exercise agency in their various contexts and "how events, actions, and meanings are shaped by the unique circumstances in which these occur" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22). The chosen design and methods best capture the students' subjective interpretations of their experiences and their frameworks for understanding those experiences at three points in time: (a) during their senior year of high school, (b) one year later, after college enrollment did or did not occur, and (c) then again one to two years later, as a pattern of persistence or non-persistence emerged.

We collected data primarily through semi-structured, one hour-long interviews with open-ended questions; however, we also used triangulation through survey analysis, observational methods (including brief questions of high school staff and essay analysis), which adds to the trustworthiness of the study.

We conducted these interviews with 110 students, chosen as a carefully selected stratified subset of over 1,100 seniors whom we surveyed in five high-poverty Chicago high schools in the fall of 2003.<sup>3</sup> Basic analyses of the surveys revealed consistency in student reports of teacher and counselor support and encouragement but a wide distribution in students' responses to questions about the role of the ACT in shaping their college plans. (In Illinois, the ACT rather than the SAT test is the most common and preferred

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<sup>2</sup>A phenomenological approach explores how people reconstruct their experience and relate the meaning (or subjective understandings) those experiences have for them (Schutz, 1967).

<sup>3</sup>Over 70% of the students in these schools were from low-income families, according to the Chicago Public Schools Office of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability.

college entrance exam.) Student responses to these questions did not significantly correlate with any demographic measure, the high school they were attending, several other measures of high school achievement and college knowledge, or their college and career plans. Unfortunately, the survey neglected to ask students their actual ACT score, and further attempts to secure these data were unsuccessful due to issues of consent. At this point, we decided that using qualitative methods to explore this issue with a range of students from high-poverty schools who varied along other dimensions would optimize the possibility of new insights. We therefore selected students based on school, demographics, and survey responses about grades, college knowledge, and plans.

We conducted our first round of interviews during the students' senior year, then reinterviewed the same sample one to two years later, with the final interviews coming two to three years later. We constructed the interview questions from a review of the literature, the essays (described below), and eight pilot or exploratory interviews conducted with sophomores and juniors in the spring of 2003.

As a result of these pilot interviews, we learned that younger students lacked knowledge of and engagement with the college planning process and the ACT exam. These pilot interviews also showed a high level of college ambition, coupled with a confusion about how to proceed toward that goal and doubts about doing it right. We therefore decided to interview seniors and also added questions to the interview about their certitude about their plans and their sense of timelines. Using a modified ethnographic approach, we observed procedures at each high school for three full days at different points in the academic year. During these observations, we questioned staff about their practices and about the school's structure and curriculum.

The initial interview asked detailed questions about students' history, family and community background, attitudes and approach to schooling, high school experiences, college and career aspirations, perceptions of, experiences with, and scores on the ACT, the level of certainty and confidence about their college plans, their self-assessment of academic ability and potential, knowledge about college and the source of that information, and the influence of their family and social support networks.

Follow-up interviews focused on the details of students' trajectories, decision-making, and the knowledge of and experiences with college they had acquired since the initial interview. In the spirit of a phenomenological approach, the second round of interviewing centered on the participants' descriptions of their lived experience in their postsecondary setting, with additional questions relating to their home, work, and former high school contexts as well. The third interview round focused more explicitly on their subjective understandings of their experiences in their current postsecondary context, coupled with their retrospective understandings of their former

high school contexts and any other former college contexts. We adapted the questions for students who had not enrolled, had dropped/stopped out, or had transferred. We achieved an overall interview response rate of 76% over the three-year period, interviewing 110 students the first year, 102 the second year, and 84 the third year. (See the Appendix for a demographic profile of the interview sample.)

In addition to the interviews, we analyzed the content of 250 essays written by these same seniors in the fall of 2003 as part of a writing assessment jointly assigned for the purposes of a curriculum alignment initiative and our data collection. These essays represent 23% of those written by seniors responding to our dual set of questions: "Will you go to college, or not? How have other people (your friends, parents, teachers, or counselors) and your grades or ACT scores influenced your decisions about college?" We had the essays typed and the interviews transcribed verbatim, and then we analyzed both inductively (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Creswell, 1998) to generate original coding schemes based on the collected data. We entered the data into *NVivo*, a qualitative analysis package, thus facilitating the mechanics of the analysis. We began with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify general themes that guided the remainder of the data analysis, then used axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to create a structured ranking of concepts and subconcepts. Selective coding helped to identify the main themes by which we organized the final stages of the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Although the design of the study deliberately sampled students for inclusion in the study, overall, we used a modified version of the constant comparative method to begin developing a sense of the dimensions of concepts, categories, and social processes that were emerging in the data at the same time that we were continuing with data collection, rather than waiting until we had collected all of the data (Bogden & Biklen, 2007; Strauss, 1987). As a result of this process and of the data being gathered through our on-site observations and inquiries of the high school staff, we adjusted questions on the student interview guide as we identified unanticipated themes between the interview years. To further enhance validity, as relationships and themes in the data emerged, we paid particular attention to how themes and patterns were replicated and confirmed in each new round of data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We followed this sample of students over a three-year period as they graduated from high school and attempted their transition into college. By year three, a third had dropped out of college, stopped out, or had never

begun college.<sup>4</sup> Analyses of the interviews and essays generated noteworthy themes depicting circumstances that fueled a situation of circumscribed agency among the students. Ironically, the high school contexts encouraged high college aspirations while promoting a climate of low expectations with regard to the ACT that limited students' ability to exert more individual agency in their test-taking strategies and college preparation more generally. Such a dynamic took root in a context of scarce information about the ACT and about the disjuncture between their high school academic preparation and the academic standards they would face in college. Rarely did students in the study say that a low ACT score justified *not* enrolling in college, but their interpretations of their scores and the relevance or irrelevance they assigned to those scores were either drastically overestimated or drastically underestimated.

Without information or support structures that could collectively enhance test performance, students were left to misperceive or make questionable assumptions about the relevance of their ACT scores, which they felt affected their adjustment to college. Facilitated by a high school context that provided a protective and optimistic buffer, students in the study fortunately managed to preserve positive perceptions of their own abilities and self-efficacy despite their relatively low ACT scores. Unfortunately, this protective buffer was constructed in a context of limited information and through the promotion of a collective habitus that erected a low bar of ACT scores by which to measure success. As a result, students' ability to accurately assess their circumstances and take steps to exert agency with a firm knowledge of those circumstances was shortchanged by their immediate social context.

### ***A Habitus of Circumscribed College Knowledge and Information***

As the pilot interviews with high school sophomores and juniors revealed, few students possessed much knowledge about the college admissions process prior to their senior year. Although Crystal (all students have pseudonyms) is a high school junior who plans to become a doctor, her interview reveals this lack of awareness:

Interviewer: Do you know what application and enrollment process you'll have to go through when you get ready to go to college?

Crystal: Enrollment process?

Interviewer: Like . . . what you have to go through to go through admissions in a college.

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<sup>4</sup>The interview sample was likely biased toward success, given that fewer students than expected dropped out and more than expected persisted. This is a reasonable supposition, particularly since it was much more difficult to contact lower-achieving, lower-aspiring, more unsuccessful students for interviews and convince them to continue participating.

Crystal: I probably have to get, what's it called? When you get different people assigned . . . ?

Interviewer: Your registration?

Crystal: No, where they say a little bit about you, about how good of a student you are?

Interviewer: Oh, recommendation letters?

Crystal: Yeah, recommendation letters. They probably look at your GPA, and your attendance. I think that's it, or there's more. Is there more?

However, by their senior year, more than three-quarters of the students recognized that the ACT played a role in college access. They had a vague, general sense that the ACT was used to judge students for admission, but their specific knowledge about how to assess their scores and what kinds of scores were expected from different colleges was very limited. In his senior year, Azeez had raised his ACT score from a 14 to a 15 and was thinking about attending the University of Texas. When asked what score was needed to gain admission there, he responded, "I don't know." Elias is also an example of those seniors who expressed this uncertain and amorphous knowledge. When asked how his test score had affected his thinking about his chances of doing well in college, he replied in a very uncertain tone:

Well, I guess . . . the average ACT score was, like, 18 [in his high school], and I got a 21, so I guess it makes it look better for me. And I guess, then, the people at the university probably, you know, think I'm a good student, so it might—I don't know—help me more or something?

Elias did not know how his score compared to national averages, what scores were required at the particular colleges in which he expressed interest, or how much his score was weighted as a factor in admissions at these colleges.

These students' lack of information about entrance exams is consistent with the general limitations on their knowledge about college. Nearly all of the students were would-be first-generation college students whose families, despite their support and encouragement, had little or no information or assistance to offer. As Gabriela related, "It's kind of scary 'cause . . . you know . . . no one can tell me how it really was for them, except for, like, my teachers and stuff."

In fact, almost 90% of the students couched their motivations to go to college within narratives about how they wanted their paths to diverge from those of their parents, as Harmony explains:

And I get motivation from my mom. I don't want her living the way she does. I want to give her things that she never had. . . . Because we have gone through a lot of problems, and she doesn't want me to go through the same thing. . . . She wants me to have what I need and being able to afford what I need and what I want. She doesn't want me to end up like her.

Elias describes a similar experience and elaborates the ways in which his family background created a habitus that was not in any way oriented toward the pursuit of a college degree. It was his exposure to programs in high school that made him begin to think about going to college, a concept that gradually replaced his assumption that he would probably drop out of high school:

Interviewer: When do you think you first started thinking about going to college at all?

Elias: Well . . . like, junior year.

Interviewer: Okay. So before that time you . . . weren't sure if you would go to college or you hadn't really thought about it?

Elias: Well . . . my whole family are dropouts . . . all my cousins and everything. When I got to high school, I really didn't think I was going to finish, but . . . when I got to junior year, I was like, you know, I'd been through it all already, so why not just finish, you know? And my grades aren't bad or anything. They're good, so . . . I just wanted . . . to get it done.

Interviewer : Was there anybody—any person or group of people—that . . . helped you think more about college and . . . made you more confident that you wouldn't drop out of high school or that you would go to college?

Elias: Well, that law . . . program. It's all honors and A.P. classes. So . . . my friends, they're all, like, goal-oriented and college-bound. So I guess it just put me in that place, too. . . .

Interviewer : So . . . did your family and your cousins have any reaction to that?

Elias: Well . . . like . . . I'm . . . like, the only one that goes to a school. You know, they're . . . they're proud of me. But . . . they crack jokes once in a while, but . . . they're proud.

Interviewer : What kind of jokes do they crack?

Elias: Like, I'm a school nerd and everything, but it's all right.

Interviewer: What about your parents or aunts and uncles? Do they have the same reaction?

Elias: Well, my mom won't let me drop out of school now. My dad, you know, lets me make my . . . own decisions. He . . . he cares . . . (Clears throat.) Excuse me. And . . . uh . . . my aunts . . . my aunts and uncles . . . They . . . they're proud of me, too, I guess.

Interviewer: They don't really talk about it that much?

Elias: Naw . . . not much . . .

Interviewer: Now you said "*now*" your mother won't let you drop out. So you think she's changed her mind over the years?

Elias: Yeah. She . . . she wants me to go to college and stuff.

Elias's experience is similar to that of most of the other students, who, like Harmony, tended to have at least one family member who actively encouraged them to pursue college. However, it is important to note that nearly 80% of the sample did not report family involvement beyond verbal



encouragement. This was not because parents and other family members did not support the idea of college but because of their lack of familiarity with the college process. Furthermore, *none* of the students in the sample reported receiving any detailed information about the ACT from an adult family member. Students therefore, had to rely almost exclusively on high school teachers and counselors for their information, and those opportunities were limited as well. As Ana revealed, “To be honest, I don’t hardly get information.”

These examples illustrate evidence of a *habitus*, or web of common subjective understandings, that is oriented toward college-going yet is very limited in terms of the college admissions process and the role of standardized tests in that process prior to their senior year. This sociological portrait presents a challenge to traditional college choice frameworks that outline the three distinct and sequential phases of predisposition, search, and choice. For many of the students in this study, the stages are condensed into a short period of time in which the search for college information must occur nearly simultaneously with a predisposition that develops toward the latter part of their high school years rather than prior to that time. Unlike the traditional model, Perna’s (2006) model, provides a more sociological framework for understanding how the accelerated pace of these stages may be an outgrowth of the encouragement-rich and information-poor family contexts within which these students are embedded and within which their *habitus* develops.

### CIRCUMSCRIBED AGENCY IN DECISION-MAKING: THE ROLE OF ACT SCORES

In addition to a lack of information about college entrance exams among these African American and Latino students—findings similar to those of Walpole et al. (2005)—we also found that students’ lack of knowledge, weak information, and *poor preparation* have serious consequences for their plans and aspirations. About 20% of the students explained or wrote in their essays that their test scores had a strong and negative impact on their postsecondary plans. For some students, the scores were a blow to their aspirations. One student responded, “So when I got my low ACT score back, my college dreams kind of faded away.” For others, the low score challenged their motivation and effort. Another student commented, “My scores were extremely low and it made me unmotivated to want to attend college.” Their discouragement is quite problematic, given that community colleges and some four-year colleges are open access, and college entrance exams alone are not a reliable predictor of college performance or attainment for minority students (Sedlacek, 2004). Thus, low scores can unnecessarily deflect a student from choosing a postsecondary pathway.

Most of the respondents realized that their low scores would prevent them from gaining access to either college in general or to the college of their choice. "My ACT scores were not so good. . . . This discouraged my plans. I'm worried that for this reason I won't be able to go to college," wrote one senior in her essay. Another wrote, "So far my ACT is the only problem I have about getting into college. Other than that, I am free to go because . . . I make good grades . . ." About a third of the student essays expressed unhappiness with their scores and announced plans to retake the test before graduating. For some, poor performance decreased their confidence, and they were worried that a low score could jeopardize their chances of getting into college at all or into the college of their choice. In fact, this test appeared to be a source of extreme anxiety among half of these students who were not happy with their scores.

Moreover, the detrimental combination of limited information about and low performance on the ACT resulted in uninformed assumptions that hindered the choice process for students at both the lower and upper end of the score continuum. In addition to deterring students' college goals, students' uninformed perceptions of the ACT also obscured their ideas about their chances of succeeding in college. In other words, both very low scoring and relatively higher scoring students made questionable assumptions about the relevance of their ACT score for their college decision-making and their likely college success. The nuances of these assumptions for both groups are detailed in the section below, but first we consider the relevance of the high school context in shaping these assumptions and thereby shortchanging students' ability to exert agency in their planning process.

Students' questionable assumptions were related to the kinds of information emphasized by various high school staff and the students. Particularly for first-generation college-bound students, such communication can potentially be a critical vehicle through which students acquire valuable cultural capital relevant to their transition to college. Examples are information about what it takes to prepare for college, the need to choose wisely, and strategies and work habits that will assure success in college. With the exception of those whose older siblings had attempted college, the students in the sample, although relatively uninformed, tended to be the most knowledgeable ones in their family about college. Therefore, they relied on the school for information. However, the content of the students' communication with school officials—mainly teachers and counselors—focused on procedure and minimum requirements for admission to college rather than on how prepared students were to actually succeed in college.

In our interviews, we asked the students to specifically discuss the content of their communication with counselors and teachers about college and about the ACT. Only three students reported interactions that involved discussions of academic preparation that extended beyond college and fi-

nancial aid application procedures, the idea of “working hard” and raising their GPA, or the ACT score needed for admission. Consequently, students tended to drastically overemphasize or drastically underemphasize the relevance of their ACT score as an indicator of their level of college readiness. There appeared to be a misalignment inherent in students’ habitus in that their college hopes and plans were skewed by misinformed interpretations of their ACT scores.

First, the high schools included in the study were low performing, and this feature influenced an organizational habitus that shaped students’ interpretation of their ACT performance. The vast majority of students in the five high schools were below the national ACT average score of 21, with a five-school average of 16; the range was from 11 to 36. Selective colleges typically require a score of 22 or higher. Nationally, 82% of ACT-takers achieved composite scores of 17 or higher, the typical requirement for colleges with liberal (18 or higher) or open (17 or higher) admissions policies. Respondents who scored a 17 (equivalent to an SAT range of 780 to 830) lacked an understanding of just how low these scores were relative to other college-goers and what that reflected about them and their academic capabilities. These students scored among the bottom fifth nationally; but since the schools emphasized 17 or 18 as the score to which students should aspire for college entrance, those with scores of 17 or higher thought that their scores were relatively high. They didn’t realize that their measured achievement still fell just at the margins of the national average, not above it. Regarding her score of 18, Christa said, “I was happy with it,” based on her communication with those in her high school:

Interviewer: Do you remember if there was a specific score that you were actually shooting for, like a goal score that you had in mind?

Christa: I think an 18 was the, like, how do I say it? It’s not the best score, but I think it’s, like, the passing score. So I would say anything over an 18 would be good.

Interviewer: Do you think anyone at [name of high school] influenced that thinking about that particular score? Did they talk about it or say anything about it?

Christa: I know the counselors talked about it. [The career counselor], he did too. And like a lot of my teachers, like English, math, science.

An inflated sense of college readiness was particularly prevalent among those students whose made scores of 20 and 21 (equivalent to an SAT score of 950 to 990). Their perceptions were apparently influenced by the schools’ tendency to focus students on aiming at the school average as the desirable score that would raise the school’s ACT average. Students displayed little knowledge of how these scores compared to scores nationally, and they tended to use the school average as a reference point from which to set their

expectations for their performance on the test. Kevin, like many students, interpreted his score of 17 as low; but it was only one point away from an 18 (the score his school emphasized) and the apparent ceiling that Kevin imagined breaking through. He felt that a score of 19 would have been ideal.

Second, students were under the impression that the ACT was akin to an aptitude test and simply measured your innate intelligence. Only a handful of students expressed an awareness of actions they could take to improve their score. Nearly all of the students interviewed said that they had little idea about the content of the ACT before taking it. Most of their preparation came in the form of unstructured practice on questions from sample tests in their classes. Additional free prep sessions were offered after school at each of the schools, but only a small fraction of the students interviewed took advantage of this opportunity. Part of the reason that very few systematically prepared for the test was their tendency to view it as more of an IQ test, for which preparation seemed almost meaningless.

Their high schools emphasized that the test was important and that students should try to do well, but they failed to communicate any concrete strategies that would have actually raised students' scores. Consistent with the findings of a recent study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, the students reported that teachers had them work on untimed sample questions while in class, practice test-taking skills, and cram test-specific content—none of which are correlated with improved scores. In fact, although a basic familiarity with the test's structure and content is beneficial, ACT scores are much more strongly affected by the quality of student learning and the analytic, problem-solving, and inquiry skills developed in regular coursework throughout high school (Allensworth, Correa, & Ponisciak, 2008).

A dominant theme emerged in the interviews, revealing the students' lack of empowerment about the agency they could exert in their approach to the exam. They possessed few feelings of control over their performance on the test, other than the idea of getting a good night's sleep, eating breakfast, trying hard, and not letting their nerves get the best of them. It may be that low-SES public school settings are particularly vulnerable to developing organizational cultures that disempower students in this way. Or it may be that a narrow emphasis on test-taking practice creates a disconnect between the actual link between the skill development facilitated by demanding coursework and ACT performance (Allensworth, Correa & Ponisciak, 2008). Strikingly, none of the teachers acknowledged a link between the school's academic rigor and student test performance, and none of the students described any systematic strategies for improving in particular areas between their first and second taking of the test. Perhaps the College Board's denial that test prep programs influence results may encourage such fatalism. Over 40% of

the students felt so disempowered that their approach was to simply get it over with and hope for the best. Actually, even Bethesda, the valedictorian of one of the high schools (who went on to do well at Loyola University, a moderately selective local private university) took this approach.

Interviewer: Your ACT, how did you prepare for the ACT?

Bethesda: I didn't.

Interviewer: Nothing at all?

Bethesda: . . . I didn't care. I'm a horrible test-taker, so I don't even study. . . . I don't know how you would prepare for a test like that. The questions are random.

Clearly, Bethesda, like so many other students in the sample, received little guidance to enhance her cultural capital with regard to her strategy for preparing for the test. She is an example of how even the very brightest students at the five schools in the study felt overwhelmed and disempowered by these entrance exams. In observations and in student reports, the school did little to intervene to empower students to master the skills and abilities covered by the exam. In fact, teachers and other school personnel reinforced the students' sense of disempowerment by continually reminding students that their school tended to score low on the exam, so they needed to aim for an 18 in order to raise the school's average. Although a few ACT prep classes were held intermittently after school and efforts were made to cover sample questions in classrooms in the weeks before the test was administered, full-scale, long-term systematic instruction across the curriculum to enhance students' academic demands and skills was absent from the schools' strategies.

Third, a prevalent and related theme of "dismissing the test" emerged in the essays and in interviews. A quarter of the students described purposeful attempts to not let their performance on the tests worry them or deter their college plans. A surprising number of students identified themselves as bad test-takers, attributing their poor performance to this condition as if it were a personality trait of sorts rather than a skill set that could be improved. Kevin admitted, "Yeah, I got a . . . see, that's the thing. I got, I got 17 on the ACT but I, I'm a 3.0 and . . . I do good at school, but when it comes to tests it's, like, I get nervous and I got a 17." Kevin added that he didn't feel his test score reflected his abilities and that it did not affect his decisions about college. Nearly all the students who reported a "bad test-taker" identity used this trait to protect their sense of academic competence by separating their test performance from their ideas about their academic ability. Like Kevin, students with grades of A's and B's quickly pointed to their GPA as evidence of their competence and thereby invalidated the test as a measure of that competence.

Evidently, the high school context within which these students were embedded shaped the habitus that informed students' approach to the entrance exam and circumscribed their individual agency by failing to acknowledge the collective role played by the school's dominant norms and patterns of behavior. Students were disempowered by collective high school messages and norms of behavior that emphasized test preparation but deemphasized the everyday learning of the academic skills that would improve college readiness and exam performance. Students therefore lacked a sense of how to exert their own agency in the process.

### BEYOND ACCESS: MISPERCEIVING THE RELEVANCE OF THE ACT FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

Influenced by the three factors noted above that operated in their secondary environments, these students received messages that led to false perceptions about the scores to which they should aspire. They were encouraged to construct expectations elevated only slightly above the average of their underperforming peers. As a result, students on the higher end of the ACT continuum tended to drastically overemphasize the "goodness" of their ACT score, and those on the lower end drastically underemphasized the relevance of their score as an indicator of their level of preparedness for postsecondary success. Although it is true that these exam scores are not the best indicators of college attainment, they do reflect to some extent student exposure to the types of intellectual demands that will likely be expected in college and therefore have implications for the academic challenges ahead. Misconstrued signals based on circumscribed definitions of what the score represents can limit student agency and jeopardize their postsecondary success.

Elias saw his score of 21 as a signal to universities that he was "a good student," when in fact his score indicated his actual status as an average student. Other higher-scoring students also misperceived scores of 20 or 21 with an inflated sense of accomplishment. This identity as a good student was actually a realistic perception of their ability to be *admitted* to more selective colleges; and students who scored in this range were, in fact, offered admission to relatively selective universities and colleges. However, over 80% of those who enrolled faced academic struggles. For example, Ozzie was accepted into a very selective liberal arts college in Ohio only to admit during the second round of interviews, "I was a point away from academic probation."

Only in retrospect, after being in college, did the students in this predicament realize that their high school academic preparation left them disadvantaged in managing the rigors of college. Adam scored a 23 on his ACT; and in his second interview, he recalled his lack of concern for the relevance

of his high school coursework for college readiness, since his high school “really emphasized the ACT and your grade point average. . . . But no one really told me what classes to take to go to college. They just told me what classes to take to graduate.” Adam, who took honors classes in high school but avoided the more rigorous AP classes and opted out of a fourth year of math, said, “I was struggling with math” his entire first year of college and maintained a decent GPA only by several tutorial sessions every week.

In addition to the issue of academic preparation, those who scored exceptionally high relative to their high school classmates were exposed in college to an alternate frame of reference with regard to their scores. They tended to be quite surprised when they realized their scores were not as good as they had thought. Students with scores of 20 and above were more likely to gain entrance to more selective colleges and therefore found themselves among students with much more competitive ACT scores. As a result, these students were faced with the need to reassess their prior notions of their performance. Chiquita said that others in her high school “were getting 15’s and just scores that were lower than mine.” She scored a 22, enrolled at Roosevelt University and then found herself refraining from telling others her score once she realized how comparatively low it was: “I thought it was a good score, but then I found out it wasn’t. I just said I got in the low 20’s and left it at that!” Adam’s score of 23 landed him in his college’s remedial reading class for students with ACTs below 25. Dorothy scored a 24, which was the highest score of those in our sample. In her third-round follow-up interview more than two years after finishing high school, she explained:

It was funny because I thought about . . . when I was in high school a 24 was . . . really good, like, that was really good. And . . . I think not too many people in my graduating class had got something . . . that high in the first try. So it was kind of like, “Wow!”, you know? But when I went away to college . . . you just randomly talk to people about things, and I was talking to some other people who went to different schools. A 24 was not good to them. That was kind of like, “That’s all?” They were more so like, “Well I got a 29.” “I got a 30.” I was like, “What? Really? What are they teaching you people?” . . . Being at [name of her high school], a 24 was . . . super good, but at other schools a 24 wasn’t really all that. . . . I couldn’t imagine what they would have thought about some of the average scores that we had got at [name of her high school]. I think our average score was like a 17 or 18 or something.

The self-perceptions of less than 10% of the students in the sample were actually consciously shaken or challenged by this revelation. However, more than half did express a sense of regret about not knowing how their performance would compare to their future college classmates. They had trouble articulating their feelings about this situation but did indicate that they felt a sense of being cheated out of a realistic awareness of how they measured



up beyond the walls of their high school. Dorothy, for instance, pondered whether her high school had lowered the bar of expectations for students too readily and given them a standard of success that was lower than what should have been expected. When the interviewer asked if she might have tried harder to get a high score if she had known more about how certain scores compared to other college students, she considered:

If I went to a different school probably. Because I know a lot of those kids who were saying [those things] were people who went to, like, [selective magnet school]. They went to those type of schools, so yeah . . . well, hey, maybe. But then, at the same time . . . it made me feel like, "What is wrong with our school system that . . . at those schools . . . that score is acceptable, but then at these type of schools this is what is acceptable?" It's kind of almost like they were pumping us not to exceed our best, but just to . . . I don't know. Because I'm tellin' you when I got that score it was like, they gave me a little certificate, you know, and everything, like, "Oh, you did so good and everything." . . . And in the real world where every other school, it was just mediocre, it's just . . . okay, average or something. . . . Then why here it's . . . above average? It almost made me feel like we weren't on the same, well, we weren't, we weren't on the same level as everybody else. So I began to weigh that, that some people, to go to college you weren't even on the same level to compete with everybody else. You know? It's like you would be havin' to struggle.

Many of these exceptionally high scoring students gained admission to more selective colleges than their peers, at which academic demands and expectations were higher than at less selective or open admissions colleges. So, despite the fact that they were among the highest achievers in their class, they typically faced some academic challenges once they began college. In short, having a distorted perception of their ACT score yielded dual consequences for these students. It boosted their confidence with regard to their ability to do well in college, but it also provided a sense of false hope for some in that they did not expect the academic challenges that inevitably confronted them in their first year of college. As a result of not anticipating these challenges, they did not prepare themselves ahead of time. Those who persisted were among those who were able to adjust relatively quickly and make the necessary behavioral shifts. Those who dropped out or stopped out within the time frame of the study appeared unable to readjust as quickly or effectively.

Those higher scorers who were admitted to more selective schools but who chose to enroll in less competitive places seemed to face fewer academic struggles. In fact, Elias was admitted to the state's flagship campus—University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He did not accept this offer, however, because by the time UIUC sent him its acceptance letter in March, he had "already filled out everything" to enroll at Illinois State. He is still enrolled

there, unlike the 45% of the four-year beginners in the sample who either transferred to a less selective institution or left postsecondary education altogether by the third round of interviews.

The dynamics at work for the lower-scoring students were somewhat different. Like Kevin, over four-fifths of them recognized that a low score might bar their entrance to their first-choice college, but fewer than a fifth knew exactly which scores were necessary for which colleges, and even fewer perceived their poor performance as an indication that they might encounter difficulties in college classes. The connection between the level of academic skill that the test might represent and the difficulties or ease which the students would encounter in their college academic work was irrelevant to most of this group. They either underemphasized or simply did not recognize the relevance of their ACT score as an indicator of their level of college preparedness.

Among the students who held these perceptions, almost 70% identified themselves as bad test takers, as Kevin did, and they expressed their belief that one test should not carry so much weight in college admissions decisions. While a third of the students in this category were those with high grades and low test scores, about half reported high school grades of “B’s and C’s” or lower. In high schools lacking academic rigor, like those in the sample, students who receive C grades are quite underprepared for college. With a 17, Kevin realized that his score was low but didn’t realize how low it was compared to the entire pool of college applicants. Kevin, who had mostly A’s and B’s with some C’s in high school, scored so low on his math placement test that he had to take remedial classes. After three years, for academic as well as other reasons, he had completed only the equivalent of one year’s worth of credit toward an associate’s degree. Yet Kevin is among the more successful low scorers since he persisted in college for at least three years.

Raymond is an example of those students interviewed who had relatively low ACT scores and low GPA’s. During his senior year in high school, Raymond earned a 17 on the ACT and had a C average in high school. He described both his score and GPA as “average.” Other than planning to be “more focused” and “study much harder” in college, he expressed no lack of certainty about his ability to succeed in college and become a paramedic, even when the interviewer returned several times to this point. However, in his second interview—one semester into his enrollment at a community college—when asked if he felt well prepared for college, Raymond stated he was “not ready, to tell you the truth.” When asked if he would change anything about his high school, he suggested changing “the curriculum” because, “It was challenging but it wasn’t challenging enough for you to prepare you for college.” After one year of part-time remedial English classes, Raymond stopped out before even gaining eligibility to enroll in the paramedic program at his community college.

As students transitioned into college, those with lower test scores were more likely to be accepted with conditional (remedial) status or placed on academic probation shortly after enrollment. Those who dismissed their low scores as the result of “bad test-taking” were caught off guard by their academic struggles. Some described the unexpected effort it took to figure out how to succeed academically and to avoid the consequences of poor college grades. Unfortunately, students like Jonathan, Monica, and Timothy could not avoid negative consequences. Jonathan, in his second interview, said, “College requires more study time. . . . At first my grades went down. I had to get used to their way of doing stuff.” He transferred from his university to a community college after his first semester, then stopped out. In her second interview, Monica said she couldn’t earn high enough grades to stay in a four-year college: “I got thrown out.” After that, she also enrolled in a community college. In his third interview, Timothy was still struggling to raise his GPA at a local university. “I have to get my GPA up a little to get my financial aid back. . . . My parents are pushing me toward a trade school, but I’m not sure . . .” Soon after the interview, he did have to leave his four-year university; after four years, he had not yet reenrolled anywhere. All of the students in the interview sample with less than a B average *and* an ACT score below 18 failed to persist in college.

Overall, this misalignment between the signals about the ACT in these students’ high schools and the reality that faced them in college had negative consequences for both the higher and lower scoring students. Prior research has emphasized a lack of information or cultural capital among more disadvantaged students and the repercussions of these deficits on students’ aspirations, preparation, and enrollment patterns. However, a closer examination of the nuances of the habitus of these students with regard to college entrance exams reveals another dynamic that is also operating. Localized high school parameters, or reference points, filter students’ interpretations of their relative academic standing and shift their perceptions in ways that obscure their sense of how prepared they are to succeed in college. Ironically, these altered perceptions may have supported students’ college-going aspirations, yet these same perceptions put them at risk of failure once enrolled. Again, a more sociologically grounded approach generates a better understanding of these nuanced dynamics and lends itself to a more thorough examination of the role played by secondary institutional contexts in shaping students’ subjectivity with regard to college and what to anticipate.

### ***Questions of Self-Efficacy and Community Colleges***

With regard to Bandura’s self-efficacy notion, the interviews and essays reveal little evidence that lower test scores lead students to directly question their intellectual ability or academic capacity. Students were clear in stating that their scores served as a gatekeeper to college or to more selective

institutions, but surprisingly few pointed to their scores as a reason to not pursue college because they were not capable of doing so. Twelve percent of the interview sample included students who planned to attend college immediately after high school but never followed through; however, only one of these students explicitly interpreted her low ACT score as a lack of capability and influenced her decision to avoid college.

However, it was clear that those who scored lower were much more likely to lack confidence. They did not benefit from the confidence boost that the higher-scorers experienced and were more likely to emphasize their doubts about how “ready” they were for college. Although this didn’t deter many of the seniors from trying to enroll somewhere, a fifth of the sample entered college with these doubts about college readiness despite good grades and the encouragement of teachers and family. For the third of the sample who considered their scores to be good, only two expressed doubts about their academic readiness. One of the lower scoring students was Sol, who was unsure about her major, her choice of college, and how she was going to pay for college. She expressed trepidation linked explicitly to her ACT score. Unlike those who “dismissed” the test, she recognized it both as a concrete barrier and as a signal of the academic obstacles she was likely to encounter in college. Sol began her essay by discussing her uncertainties—“I’m not sure if I’m ready”—and then continued:

Another thing I’m thinking about or worried I should say is the placement exam for college. I hope I don’t have to waste money for college because I’m taking remedil [sic] classes. That would really suck big time. I scored a 17 on my ACT’s only. It doesn’t seem like I can pass the remedil classes if I only scored a 17 that’s below average. My grades are pretty good. Junior year I got four A’s and three B’s. We haven’t got our grades yet from senior year, but I’m pretty sure they’re the same. So my grades are ok but my ACT’s score isn’t.

Sol describes encouragement from her teachers, her mom, and her friends and ends her essay by stating: “I want to be successful and college is the way to go. But . . . am I ready for college? . . . I know I want to go. But will I? Do I have what it takes? I don’t know.”

In contrast, Guadalupe’s score gave her a feeling of invincibility about her college options and future prospects: “I received a twenty-two my second time on the test, and I was ecstatic about the score, and the college I could apply to. . . . It was amazing the way the ACT score changed the way I thought about my future . . .”

For those discouraged by their score, a few school officials did suggest starting at a community college or similar institution as a preferable option. Overall, however, especially for the students who were enrolled in some sort of college preparation program or honors or AP classes, community colleges were viewed with a stigma that was reinforced among these students

by most teachers. The teachers felt that these students should set their sights higher. As a result, the majority of the interview sample never considered community colleges as a possibility while in high school despite their ACT scores and the low cost of these institutions. Many students with the weakest ACT scores interpreted them in light of an all-or-nothing college choice framework. As far as they were concerned during their senior year in high school, their scores would either allow admission into a four-year college or prevent it. For most, the possibility of entering a community college was not part of their decision-making; and as a result, some chose not to enter postsecondary education at all. Although a few enrolled at a community college only after failing to be admitted to the other college or colleges to which they applied, some of the students who did not get into any of the colleges to which they applied or who figured out that they could not afford the college of their choice, decided to initially forego college altogether rather than enroll in a community college.

Interestingly, despite the fact that just over half of the students interviewed either began at or ended up at a community college or vocational college, less than 15% of them initially anticipated this trajectory when they were seniors. A third of the students in the sample who began at four-year institutions were forced to transfer to two-year colleges after failing academically, struggling financially, or not being able to adjust socially in a four-year college environment. Nearly all of these students held vastly different perceptions of community college after actually attending one. Most saw the value of attending community college as a sound financial strategy and realized the instructional benefits of smaller classes with helpful and accessible instructors only after experiencing these benefits.

In their high schools, the idea of attending community college was discouraged both by peers and teachers as a suboptimal choice. Unfortunately, this near-dismissal of community college by the adults in their high school environment was not accompanied by the communication of realistic information about the financial, social, and academic challenges to expect in a four-year environment. Dorothy had wanted to attend a community college but felt pressured to “go away” and enroll at a state university, especially given her higher-than-average ACT scores. However, Dorothy had difficulty adjusting to large classes and got “lost” navigating the four-year environment:

I don't know. . . . I think I had a good math teacher, too. . . . But, um, I, yeah, I guess you could say that, um, I don't know. It's not so much . . . it was, I felt it was harder at Illinois State 'cause you take these tests and then, like, that's your grade, you know? End of semester you took such and such tests . . . and that's the only way I got to judge my grade. Um, and then, like I said, too, you could have a relationship with your teacher, too. You know, you get to know

them, and they know you, um, you can talk . . . you know what I'm saying, discuss things. And then . . . like, working with a big classes is like, they didn't know you, you didn't know them and even if you did start talk to them and everything, they still didn't really know you. It was like, "Okay, who were you again? All right." You know? "Let me look in my book, let me look" . . . you know what I'm saying? Like, "Let me read about you, like what do I have from tests and everything, but I really don't know you." . . . Well, you try to get a rela— . . . , you know, form a relation with them, but it's like they're busy doing this and that and the other. Some of them was, like, up for tenure, so they were, like, focused on other things totally. Like, they were not even focused on this class, you know. Like, "I don't really even care about you."

Dorothy had to leave the university when her grades fell below the GPA required to maintain enrollment. As of the third interview, she was enrolled at a community college and doing much better academically, given the more intimate classroom attention and support. She still hopes to transfer back to a local four-year college but has not done so as of 2008.

Given the findings of this study regarding the role that these high schools played in structuring students' perceptions of the ACT and their two-year college options, Bandura's self-efficacy concept may be more useful if considered more broadly as a sociological phenomenon rather than just an aspect of personal development. We initially were tempted to think that a low ACT score would directly result in students developing a more negative or weaker perception of their academic ability or ability to succeed in college, which would therefore influence them to lower their college goals. However, we found that students interpret both their test scores and their college options in the context of the information and parameters provided by high school personnel. The roots of self-efficacy extend beyond the individual to the social context within which that individual develops perceptions of himself or herself relative to others.

Ironically, we found that the teachers and counselors in these high-poverty contexts limited students' perceptions of their range of options on both the high and low ends of the postsecondary spectrum. As noted above, higher achieving students located in a low-performing school have distorted notions of what is achievable, not because of their ACT scores, but because the expectations for achievement on the ACT test are artificially low due to a school's prior average performance. These students who score above their school average are led to believe that they are excelling, when in fact, more intense preparation or more rigorous coursework could make them more competitive college applicants, capable of gaining admission to very selective colleges. Instead they are praised for doing so well and gaining admission to a moderately selective college.

Among lower-achieving students, the high school teachers and counselors were so focused on the concept that everyone who possesses the motivation

should go to a four-year college that they overlooked two-year colleges as a reasonable college option. Given that such a significant proportion of the sample ended up at community college after accumulating large debts, we concluded that their high schools limited the students' choices to the lower end of the status-continuum by withholding practical information about the feasibility and benefits of community college attendance as a strategy immediately after high school.

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provides a nuanced examination of students' understandings and interpretations of entrance exams and reveals some complex phenomena. On the one hand, the need to perform well on standardized college entrance exams appears to negatively affect motivation and increase anxiety for some of these low-SES students from underrepresented groups who are seeking admission to college. Such circumstances should certainly be avoided, particularly since Sedlacek (2004) details the inadequacies of college entrance exams and advocates a more balanced approach to college admissions that gives noncognitive variables as much value as the cognitive skills presumably measured by college entrance exams. The organizational habitus of the high schools we studied appear to mitigate some of the harmful effects that these tests might otherwise have on college ambitions. Despite challenges, the students in our study aspired to attend college.

On the other hand, the agency of students in this study is shortchanged—circumscribed by a high school context that promotes college-going while ironically reinforcing a frame of reference that facilitates misperceptions among students about their academic performance and college readiness.

Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, and Li (2008) alert us to the fact that high schools often cannot provide adequate college counseling. Our findings are consistent with their conclusion that a lack of one-on-one counseling assistance for students seriously limits their ability to make informed college plans. Our findings are also consistent with Freeman's (1997) recommendations that the delivery of college information through counseling and other means should be channeled in structured ways to improve the college choice process, particularly for first-generation minority students for whom the "school system plays an even greater role when neither parent has participated in higher education" (p. 545). However, Freeman's focus is on aspirations, and she does not consider the implications on college success of students' perceptions and interpretations of their precollege academic preparation and exam scores.

In this study, we found that students' high school context promoted lack of awareness and misperceptions about the realities of college. Despite the desperate need to increase counselor-student ratios, the discussion of college



information and opportunities certainly does not begin and end with the high school counselor. It pervades the entire high school culture. We addressed dimensions of high school culture related to the messages students receive regarding appropriate strategies (or their lack) for preparing for and interpreting their performance on college entrance exams. Perna et al. (2007) show that the provision of high school counseling can vary considerably between different schools, districts, and states. We suggest that the high school context can also vary along other related dimensions, including the college readiness messages students receive from teachers, other school leaders, and their peer reference group. Unfortunately, students in this study were not attuned to the variation in high school contexts and the fact that their school occupied a low position in this hierarchy of variation. It wasn't until they reached college that they acquired a different set of reference points from their peers and their college or university's higher academic standards that opened their eyes to their high school's shortcomings.

Future research should further examine (a) this dynamic interplay between students' internal motivations and their high school context, and (b) the influence of this interplay on their behaviors and attitudes once they enter college. Such an approach would involve more of a marriage between the college readiness and choice literature and the college persistence literature. How students think about their college identity in high school has repercussions for them once they enter college and either confirms or reorients their initial frameworks. This dynamic has not been emphasized in models of college persistence. Existing models of persistence include pre-college demographic and academic variables but fail to adequately include precollege psychosocial factors, "such as self-efficacy, anticipatory attitudes, intimacy motivation, introversion, extroversion, leadership, involvement, friendship support, parental support, and explanatory styles" (Nora, 2002, p. 70).

The students in this study held high college aspirations and succeeded in formulating plans for themselves to further their education beyond high school. Furthermore, due to the prevalence of community colleges, private two-year colleges, and access-oriented four-year colleges, access to college has increased dramatically over the past several decades (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). However, college aspirations and access are only two components of a trajectory marked by a series of successive transitions toward college achievement and attainment (Perna & Thomas, 2006). We have yet to remedy the gap between the increased aspirations of the students we describe and the reality of limited college attainment.

The processes of meaning-making that occur at each point in the trajectory are vital to our understanding of how and why students succeed or fail in college. This study has attempted to move one step further in that direction by seriously considering the nuanced ramifications of the multiple contexts within which students are situated and highlighting the ways

in which a student's agency is circumscribed by collective perceptions and misperceptions that ultimately influence behavior and decision-making. Our findings provide insight into the possible mechanisms behind the aspiration-attainment paradox that exists for African American students in particular.

## APPENDIX

### DEMOGRAPHICS AND COLLEGE PLANS OF INTERVIEW SAMPLE (INFORMATION BASED ON FIRST INTERVIEW)

	Interviews		
	<i>First Round</i> (110 students) # (%)	<i>Second Round</i> (102 students) # (%)	<i>Third Round</i> (84 students) # (%)
<b>Parent Education</b>			
• HS diploma or less	73 (.66)	69 (.68)	60 (.71)
• Some college	27 (.25)	23 (.22)	16 (.19)
• BA	10 (.09)	10 (.10)	8 (.10)
<b>Gender</b>			
• Female 68 (.62)	65 (.64)	57 (.68)	
• Male	42 (.38)	37 (.36)	27 (.32)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
• African American	54 (.49)	53 (.52)	49 (.58)
• Latino	48 (.44)	43 (.42)	31 (.37)
• Asian-American	7 (.06)	5 (.05)	4 (.05)
• White	1 (.01)	1 (.01)	0 (.00)
<b>Family Income</b>			
• \$20,000 or less	59 (.54)	53 (.52)	40 (.48)
• \$21,000 to \$40,000	32 (.29)	31 (.30)	28 (.33)
• \$41,000 or more	19 (.17)	18 (.18)	16 (.19)
<b>College Plans (immediately after HS)</b>			
• No college 18 (.16)	13 (.13)	6 (.07)	
• 1 or 2 year college	10 (.09)	09 (.09)	7 (.08)
• 4 year college	82 (.75)	80 (.78)	71 (.85)

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