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# Factors That Assist Low-Income Students of Color in Pursuing Higher Education

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# Factors That Assist Low-Income Students of Color in Pursuing Higher Education

By

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### Abstract

Currently, there is an achievement gap in education between students of color and their white counterparts. While the larger picture of inequality is readily available, it does not explain why students of color graduate at lower rates. This purpose of the qualitative research study sought to understand the experiences and perceptions of low-income youth who are of color, on their transition into college. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with four youth of color who were currently enrolled in college and identified coming from a low-income background. The five major themes that emerged from the interviews were: 1) the youth's motivation to pursue higher education, 2) preparation for continuing, 3) support the youth received, 4) demographics of the youths' high school, and 5) the youth's perceptions of why other students did not pursue higher education. Implications for the field of social work, such as changing legislation of *NCLB* to better serve youth of color from low-income backgrounds, are discussed. Future recommendations of including social aspects into college access programs are also discussed.

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*Factors that Assist Low-income Students of Color in Pursuing Higher Education*

Education is a key factor in determining how members of society will make a living and contribute to the greater good of our country. However, it is well known that all children do not receive equal education opportunities. In fact, when children are separated into ethnic groups there is a clear gap of achievement shown between students of color and their white counterparts. This achievement gap is measured through children's grades, standardized-testing, high school drop-out rates, and completion of college (Achievement Gap, 2011). In 2001, national attention was called to the achievement gap through the passing of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation. Still many people would argue that *NCLB* has not helped to reduce the gap and students of color are still in fact getting left behind.

Before discussing the gap in education, one needs to have a perspective on our youth's current graduation status. In 2011, the high school graduation rate of all students was at 72% (Alliance for Excellent Education<sup>2</sup>, 2013). This means that across the nation more than a quarter of the nation's high school senior students did not graduate. When the high school graduation rates are separated into the students' respective races, the gap in education is exposed. Across the nation in 2011, while 78% of all White/Caucasian students graduated and 83% of all Asian/Pacific Islander students graduated, only 58% of all Black/African American students, 57% of all Hispanic students, and 54% of American Indian students graduated on time (Alliance for Excellent Education<sup>2</sup>, 2013). Aside from Asian/Pacific Islander population that is graduating at a higher rate than White/Caucasian students, every other ethnic group is underachieving in respect to whites by at least 20 percent. This shows that fewer students of color are graduating high school, much less continuing on in higher education.

Despite the low amount of students graduating high school, the past two decades have shown a slow but steady increase in post-secondary enrollment rates for all racial/ethnic backgrounds (Kim, 2011). Data shows that 42% of traditional college aged students are enrolled in some sort of post-secondary education (Kim, 2011). While the overall rates of students attending higher education is on the rise, the rates are disproportionate among races, especially in regards to African American students (Kim, 2011; Leach & Williams, 2007). Asian American students have had the highest enrollment rate in post-secondary education at 63%, followed by white students with 46% enrollment, 35% of African Americans, with the lowest rates of enrollment for American Indians at 23% (Kim, 2011). The discrepancy of racial achievement that is shown in high school graduation rates is still evident in college enrollment rates.

After students are enrolled in higher education institutes, the problem then becomes retaining the students. A larger number of students decide to leave before they complete their degrees (Leach & Williams, 2007). Colleges and universities measure the students that leave through attrition rates, which correlate to the percent of students that drop out or transfer to another post-secondary institute (Leach & Williams, 2007). There are multiple reasons a student may leave a post-secondary institute, such as the student's skill set (motivation, self-efficacy), personal reasons, academic failure, or characteristics of the institute itself (Ascend Learning, 2012). The attrition rates of colleges and universities then create a problem in reporting the total number of students who are completing degrees. A secondary issue in reporting the graduation rates from post-secondary institutes is the number of years it takes a student to obtain their degree. While the average degree attainment is four years, national data measures completed degrees within six years to account for students who take longer to complete their degree (U.S.

Department of Education, 2013). It is important to remember issues of retention, attrition, and years taken to obtain a degree when discussing post-secondary graduation rates.

Information that is available on graduation rates shows that of students completing a Bachelor's degree, 73% are white, 10% are black/African American, 9% are Hispanic/Latino, 7% are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% are American Indian (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Students of color still lag behind white counterparts in enrollment and achievement of higher education. The racial academic gap that is seen through high school graduation rates still is shown in post-secondary education rates.

It is then important to focus on the students who are not graduating high school, a large portion who become part of the population social workers serve, as a way to increase the number of minority students who enroll in higher education. Students that drop out or fail to graduate high school have a large potential to become unemployed, enter the corrections system, or become recipients of government assistance (Alliance for Education<sup>1</sup>, 2013; Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009). It is estimated that by 2020, 65% of all jobs will require some form of post-secondary education with only 36% of all jobs to be obtainable by people with only a high school diploma (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). With the rate at which students are not graduating, this information is disturbing; it will be harder for those who do not receive a diploma to obtain a job, much less a job with which they can afford to live a comfortable life. Not only are the lives of those who do not graduate impacted, but the economy in general is greatly impacted.

Individuals who do not have a high school diploma affect local, state, and federal tax revenues negatively. They contribute, on average, \$8,000 less than a high school graduate in taxes (Alliance for Education<sup>1</sup>, 2013). Having a higher local number of people who do not have



high school diplomas affects local and state revenue as employers have to seek individuals outside the of the community or state who have earned diplomas. This is where an increase in social programs may be seen as well; people are unable to obtain jobs due to not having a diploma, and therefore turn to social agencies for support.

Another government system that is affected by individuals not graduating high school is the Department of Corrections. Sum, Khatiwada, and McLaughlin, found that students between the ages of 16 and 24 who did not complete high school, were 63 times more likely to be incarcerated when compared to individuals who received a bachelor's degree or beyond (2009). There are many explanations as to why people who have obtained higher education commit fewer crimes (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). One theory being that those individuals who have a high school diploma earn higher wages and therefore do not need to commit crimes as they can afford basic needs. A second theory speaks to social learning theory; a bulk of criminal behaviors are learned during adolescence by watching others while out of school and the behaviors are continued into adulthood, whereas youth who are in classrooms and off the streets may avoid criminal activity. A third theory suggests having a criminal conviction associated with one's name may be of greater embarrassment for professional workers, as colleges and other professionals would know about a conviction. A final theory is that being in a classroom teaches values and develops needed skills that would prevent youth from pursuing criminal activities (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). Each year states spend an average of \$28,323 per inmate incarcerated, while in comparison it only costs \$12,643 to educate a student with a high school diploma (Kyckelhahn, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). For each individual who graduates from high school and does not enter the corrections system, the nation saves approximately \$15,000. Concluding that as a nation when more resources are invested into

helping educate our youth there will be 1) fewer incarcerated youth, 2) more individuals contributing to state revenue, 3) fewer individuals relying on government assistance, and 4) more citizens leading fruitful and productive lives.

Social workers need to become invested in the education of our nation's youth, specifically in terms of inequality of the education received by students of color. A core value that social workers hold is that of social justice, meaning that where there are injustices, social workers need to challenge the injustices on behalf of vulnerable populations (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Youth are a vulnerable population for which social workers need to advocate. Furthermore people of color are a marginalized group that deserve the advocacy of social workers. Addressing the current topic at hand, social workers need to advocate for youth of color who are not graduating at the same rate as their white counterparts, to determine why this is happening and what can be done to balance the education system.

A key factor in reducing some of these main social justice issues is to increase the amount of teens that graduate from high school, specifically those who are of minority groups. In turn, the amount of minority students enrolling in post-secondary institutions would increase. In order to have a more equal education system, we need to understand why students of color are not graduating at the same rate as their white counterparts. While the larger picture of statistics is readily available, they do not explain why students of color graduate at lower rates. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore what factors low-income youth of color believe were helpful in pursuing higher education.

### **Literature Review**

As our nation's population changes to a more racially-ethnic diverse composition, the education system, likewise, needs to adjust to the diversity of its student. It is argued that

children do not receive equal quality education, resulting in a gap of educational achievement between students of color and their white peers (Achievement Gap, 2011; Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009; Leach & Williams, 2007). Much of the current research investigates what factors perpetuate the problem of the education achievement gap, but little attends to finding those policies and programs to work with the students who are already in the gap. This literature review includes the policy '*No Child Left Behind*,' factors that have been identified to reduce the education gap, college access programs, and identifies where the gaps in research have been. In attempts to further understand what perpetuates the gap between students of color and their white counterparts, interviews will be conducted with youth of color from low socioeconomic status (SES) regarding their experiences of what factors were helpful in pursuing higher education.

### **No Child Left Behind**

The education achievement gap was defined on a national level through the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* as “the difference in the academic performance between different ethnic groups.” The solutions proposed by the Act involved addressing any policy that implied low expectations of students and increasing demands on the schools to close the gap “between African American and white students” (*No Child Left Behind Act*, 2001). Not only did the Act specify that teachers are the primary persons responsible for closing the gap, but the gap in this Act strictly referred to the comparison between African American and white students.

A main goal outlined by *NCLB* was to have 100% of students meeting both math and reading standards by the 2013-2014 school year (Hursh, 2005). To reach this goal, three major requirements were established: 1) the standards students need to know were to be determined by each state, 2) assessments to measure if students were meeting the required standards were determined by each state, and 3) each state needed to be accountable to the students and

guarantee the standards were met (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). The standardized tests implemented were then used to track a child's progress in the subjects of math and reading. Adequate yearly progress (AYP) was then determined by students who scored at least "proficient" in math or reading (Hursch, 2005). When AYP for the student population within a school was failed to be met for two years sequentially, the school was subject to financial and organizational withdraws by the state (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009; Hursch, 2005). It is believed by many that while *NCLB* was supposed to be designed to create an equal education opportunity for disadvantaged students it was actually created by the government out of fear that the education level of U.S students was lower than that of other industrialized nations (Shaker & Heliman, 2004). This thought was supported as the Act was rushed through legislature and had many implementation issues that were unaddressed in the formation of *NCLB*.

**Implementation issues.** Since the initiation of *No Child Left Behind*, there have been many implementation issues that have limited the designed benefits of the act. As *NCLB* is a federal program, each state needs to meet the National requirements outlined. However, it is the decision of each individual state as to how the children will meet the requirements (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). As a result, the requirements for *NCLB* are implemented 50 different ways varying in content, quality, rigor, and assessment standards (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009; Pallas, 2010). There have been multiple cases in which a state may show large gains in their student performance, but nationwide exams show no improvement in performance (Fuller, Wright, Gesicki, & Kang, 2007). With each state having their own standard assessment, it becomes difficult to accurately compare students' knowledge nationally.

As each state designed their standardized assessment, a second limitation emerged. Implementation of *NCLB* raised concerns that teachers would limit the material taught in the

classroom and instead focus on materials that the students would be assessed on, referred to as 'teaching to the test' (Popham, 2001). This idea argued that teachers focus on specific test items that will be on the assessment and leave out a general teaching approach. Concerns have also been voiced that by narrowing the content of the classroom, schools are failing to be held accountable for a creative and well-rounded curriculum provided by teachers (Pallas, 2010).

From its beginning implementation, *NCLB* was severely underfunded, leaving states to find a way to fund these new stipulations (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). Additionally, there is very little evidence that an increase in funding to poverty stricken areas results in higher academic achievement, or test scores, of the students (Hanushek, 2006). If the funds had focused on larger societal issues, where research shows improvement in student learning, there would have been a more positive outcome. Little research has been conducted on where funds should be allocated, but it has been highly researched as to what factors benefit a child's education. These factors will be addressed later.

A final issue with the implementation of *NCLB* is that all students are held to the same achievement standards regardless of their socioeconomic status, ability level or native language; the only students who do not have to meet the state standards are those who are diagnosed with a mental or severe physical disability (*No Child Left Behind Act*, 2001). Jennings and Beveridge (2009) suggest that schools and districts will attempt to classify students in a way which removes them from being eligible to take the standardized testing. If a student who is performing under the proficient level on the assessment is categorized into the exempt category, the schools overall testing score will automatically improve. In general, the students are not performing any better, but it may look that way on the overall results of the assessment because fewer kids are failing.

**Failure to consider social issues.** *No Child Left Behind* was explicit to state that the education gap between “African American and white students” needed to be corrected, but Gerstl-Pepin (2006) suggests that “race is emphasized to the point that poverty almost disappears” (p. 148). In her case study of a highly poverty stricken high school, she found that changing the curriculum and teaching styles were not enough to improve the students learning. Rather, when staff focused on addressing the effects poverty has on the students the test scores increased significantly (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). This information suggests that *NCLB* should have increased their efforts to address systematic barriers students face instead of increasing demands on teachers and schools.

Aside from poverty, *NCLB* does not account for the impact of issues such as inadequate housing, safe communities, proper nutrition, health care, or abuse (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). *NCLB* suggests that a child’s success should not be determined by their economic status. However, children who do not have their basic needs met cannot be held to the same academic standards without first addressing the issues that affect their everyday living. Urrieta (2004) states wonderfully that education policies attack the symptoms, but not the root causes of the problem which it attempts to solve. Therefore, a reason that *NCLB* is not showing a dramatic close of the education gap is that it focuses on the symptom- students of color achieving less than white students- and not the cause(s), such as social and economic barriers.

### **Factors That Reduce the Gap and Increase Higher Education**

There are many factors that have been associated with an increase in children’s learning. As identified in what *No Child Left Behind* is missing, addressing larger societal issues has been associated with higher student learning and reducing the education gap. Some other factors that have been identified as being key items to reduce the education achievement gap are staff

support of the child, parental involvement, means to financial stability, and having a culturally supportive environment. Many of these factors have also been identified as contributors to pursuing higher education.

**Support from school staff.** Lady Bird Johnson once said “children are likely to live up to what you believe of them (1934)”. In school, teachers are imperative to a child’s education not only in the information they provide, but also the support they provide as children learn. Reeve and Jang (2006) found that teachers who used an autonomy-supportive style of teaching increased the students’ motivation and academic success. When a student feels supported, they feel comfortable within a classroom setting. African American students are particularly sensitive to perceptions of teacher support (Tucker, Zayco, & Herman, 2002). These students are at risk for low teacher engagement and interactions that are critical for academic success (Tucker, Zayco, & Herman, 2002). In order to succeed in an academic setting, students, especially those of color, need to feel supported by their teacher.

Aside from teachers, high school counselors were found to be an important source of support for students, especially African American students, to pursue higher education. Zhang and Smith, (2011) surveyed students at a university to explore how the transition to college was different for black students and white students. Their main findings suggest that black females have the strongest academic ethic, but had similar GPA’s to black males, which were significantly lower than the GPA’s of white students (Zhang & Smith, 2011). The findings also suggest that high school counselors are an active agent in the transition process to college for black students. The students surveyed stated they benefited from frequent interactions with their high school counselor; this was especially true for black students, both male and female (Zhang & Smith, 2011). Therefore, teachers and other staff need to be supportive to all students,

particularly those of color, to close the education gap and to increase the academic achievement of students of color.

**Culturally supportive environment.** Aside from having high staff support, it is essential for students to feel comfortable in an environment that supports their cultural ideals. This is essential for African American students, as they often feel alienated in educational settings (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). Oyserman, Gant, and Ager (1995) describe alienation through self-blame and depression for not achieving academic success. As a school is part of students' sense of community, they need to feel that they are supported within the community despite being culturally or ethnically different. The lack of a sense of belonging in a classroom has only continued to increase the educational achievement gap, as African American students do not feel supported in school (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). Teachers need to create a classroom environment where students feel comfortable being of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Racial and cultural identity should be taken into consideration with regards to academic achievement. Individuals with a strong racial identity have reported higher levels of academic achievement (Chavous, Bernat, Schemelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, & Zimmerman, 2003; Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006). Chavous and colleagues (2003) conducted qualitative interviews with 606 African American youth from four public schools in a highly diverse community of a Midwestern state. The researchers interviewed the youth on their centrality of race, racial identity/group pride, and the perceptions of their race in society. Then the researchers related this information to the students' educational beliefs, school performance, and level of education attainment. The results indicate that youth who perceived both positive societal views and had a strong racial identity (group pride) were more likely to graduate high school and attend college (Chavous et al., 2003). Because of the association of a strong racial identity and higher



academic achievement, it is important for teachers and for the school itself, to embrace the commitment of students' racial identity within the classroom to achieve academic success.

Within having a culturally supportive environment, racial congruity is often addressed as a missing aspect for students of racial and ethnic minorities. Racial congruity is defined through attending a school with a high percentage of peers who are the same race as oneself (Barrett, 2010). Several studies have also explored how contextual congruence, such as social class, impacts a student's academic outcome. Ostrove and Long (2007) surveyed college students to understand how social class impacts a students' sense of belonging at the college level. The results indicate that social class does have an impact on a student's sense of belonging and adjustment to college, with weaker effects on academic performance (Ostrove & Long, 2007). This has important implications for students who are from low-income backgrounds, as this study suggests their sense of belonging in college will be less than their peers from middle or high income backgrounds. In regards to racial congruity, Tinto (1993) found that when students of racial minorities attend predominantly Caucasian universities, they had more academic difficulties and feelings of isolation than that of the Caucasian students. While these studies were conducted with college students, it is thought the same feelings of isolation and academic difficulties would be present for high school students that attend racially incongruent schools; Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder Jr. (2001) support this idea. These researchers found that the racial composition of a high school does matter, as students who attended schools with racial congruency were more attached to school. While attachment to the school was found, the effects of academic engagement were not significant.

**Parenting factors.** One factor that has been found to be positively correlated with youth pursuing a higher education is that of parental assets (Kim & Sherraden, 2011; Zhan, 2005). Kim

and Sherraden (2011) used data collected from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth; the sample of this data set was comprised of children who were in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade year starting in 1996, who were followed for an eight year period. The researchers focused on the students' high school completion, college attendance, and degree completion and compared the parents' economic resources of family income and parental financial assets. The results show that youth whose parents had financial assets and home-ownership were highly associated with high school completion and college attendance (Kim & Sherraden, 2011).

Similar results were concluded by Nam and Huang (2009). The researchers examined data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) that provides data on educational achievement and factors associated with income. Data was extracted from students that were 15 to 17 in age, in 1994 and Nam and Huang (2009) observed the education level of those students in 2003 for students who were 17, and again in 2005 for students who were 15 or 16 in 1994. The researchers focused on the relationship between parent's economic resources (family income, net worth, liquid assets, and home ownership) and their child's level of education. The results show that when family income is controlled, parental liquid assets have a significant and positive association with high school graduation, college attendance, and total years of education (Nam & Huang, 2009). As both Kim and Sherraden (2011) and Nam and Huang (2009) conclude parental assets are associated with college attendance, it is important to focus efforts on students whose parents do not have assets to increase high school completion and the pursuit of higher education.

Another factor connected with an increase in students' academic achievement is their parents' parenting style. Previous research has shown that children whose parents use an authoritative parenting style perform better academically (Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, &

Dornbusch, 1991). However, a more recent study found that there is not a positive relationship with parenting style and academic performance (Rivers, Mullis, Fortner, & Mullis, 2012). Spera (2005) concludes that parents do have a significant influence on the students' academic performance, but in terms of parenting styles, findings are not conclusive across ethnicity, culture, or socioeconomic status. In order to determine what type of parenting style is most beneficial to higher academic success, further research is needed.

A final piece that should be considered when discussing parent's ability to provide support to their children, is the parents own education level. Most of the previous research does not take into consideration the parent's education level. In fact, the majority of children who are in low-income families have parents without a college education (Douglas-Hall & Chau, 2007). 36% of children, over 10.3 million, in low-income families have parents that have received a high school diploma, but no higher education (Douglas-Hall & Chau, 2007). This proves difficult for parents to help their children navigate the college system, if they have never experienced it before.

**Motivation.** Intrinsic motivation has been found to be a predictor of success in college. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) surveyed ethnic minority students, who self-identified as Latino or Asian/Asian American, to find what motivational and environmental social supports contribute to academic achievement. The sample included students from a university on the West Coast, who were the first person in their family to attend college. These students identified a variety of motivational characteristics to attend college such as personal interest, intellectual curiosity, and a desire to have a rewarding career (Dennis, Phinney, & Cheateco, 2005). Surprisingly, the students' family expectation was not a significant motivation to their academic achievement. For the students' environment, it was found that support from peers is a stronger

correlation to academic success than support from parents (Dennis, Phinney, & Cheateco, 2005). This study suggests that in order for students of ethnic minorities, specifically Latino and Asian/Asian American to succeed in college, they need to have a strong peer support group and have intrinsic motivations for attending college.

**Poverty.** Schools that have students who are affected by or living in poverty need to address the issue as poverty has been identified as an associated factor that inhibits a student from graduating (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Orfield and Lee (2005) suggest that it unrealistic to expect a school to help a student in a deep and meaningful way without addressing issues that arise out of poverty. Gerstl-Pepin (2006) found that when teachers addressed issues of poverty in the classroom, the level of student learning improved. The school that she studied was in a poverty stricken community where 100% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. In order to see a positive improvement in the students learning, the staff focused on changing the school culture through consulting a literacy specialist, creating a positive environment for students to be supported -which Tucker, Zayco, & Herman (2002) suggests needs to be done- and helping the faculty to understand how poverty can affect the student's lives (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). Through the teachers attending workshops and reading complementary materials on poverty, they began to understand how middle class norms shape the classroom environment; the assumptions like having internet access at home for homework, or ready and available transportation creates an initial disadvantage for students in poverty.

Aside from focusing on classroom teaching, the teachers had to model expected classroom behaviors. The staff also learned that many behavior issues were a result of the student not understanding the material, then acting out due to frustrations of feeling inadequate (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). By addressing the larger issues of poverty in the school setting, rather than

ignoring it, this school was able to increase the students' comprehension. Teachers and staff viewed literacy as a way to empower students by matching material the student read, to their life circumstances. When a student was able to identify with characters and their circumstances, total reading comprehension improved (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). It is hypothesized then, if all schools were to reframe the structure of curriculums based on how poverty affects children, the children would be able to increase their learning and in turn work to reduce the gap in education.

**Early education.** A unique idea that has been purposed to create an equal education opportunity is that of a universal preschool program. Many students come into the education system unprepared to learn; not only educationally, but socially as well. As the early years are critical for development, Zigler and Finn-Stevenson (2007) suggest creating a universal preschool program that would focus on providing quality child care that would fulfill not only social-emotional needs, but cognitive development as well. The authors purpose "The 21<sup>st</sup> Century School" as an all day, year round program for 3 and 4 years old that would address all developmental areas of physical, social, emotional, and cognitive needs (Zigler & Finn-Stevenson, 2007). The main idea surrounding The 21<sup>st</sup> Century School is to provide a stabilizing factor for children who would not otherwise get the critical development needed to prepare them for not only the education system, but for life in general. By implementing this universal program for all children across the nation, it is predicted that the program would benefit later school performance and show a decrease in the education achievement gap between students of color and white counterparts.

Another program that aims to increase college attendance through the use of early education is College Bound from Birth (Collaborative for Children, 2012). In efforts to lower the dropout rates of high school students, College Bound from Birth was created to affect students

before entering the educational system. The program's short term goal is to have 95% of the students performing at grade level in both reading and math by the third grade, with the long term goal of 80% of the students' graduating high school, and at least 50% continuing on to higher education (Collaborative for Children, 2012). College Bound from Birth started in 2008 as a neighborhood based project for a poverty stricken community in Houston, Texas. The program focuses on four main components; 1) early childhood education training of staff at child care centers, family daycare providers, and Head Start programs, 2) provide family support through parenting classes, 3) provide access to healthcare and mental health counseling for the children, and 4) utilization of community engagement. Results are limited but have shown that the children who are enrolled in College Bound child care programs have an increase in all three testing categories of letter word identification, vocabulary, and applied problems (Collaborative for Children, 2012). The results of this program will be unknown until 2026, but it is hopeful that the program will show students who were enrolled in College Bound from Birth have a higher rate of graduating high school and continuing on to higher education, than students who did not participate in the program. It is important to address that College Bound heavily focuses on the academic side of the classroom, but the social aspect of the classroom is not addressed. It will be interesting in the future report if the social piece of the classroom, such as sitting in one's seat or raising a hand to get a teacher's attention, will be addressed at all.

### **College Access Programs**

In 1964 as a response to the War on Poverty, Upward Bound was developed out of the Economic Opportunity Act to assist economically disadvantage students in graduating high school and entering higher education (Myers, 2003). Talent Search and Student Support Services became the second and third programs designed to help disadvantaged students pursue higher

education; these three federal programs are referred to as TRIO (U.S Department of Education, 2011). Another national college access program is Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). AVID was developed in 1980 by an English teacher as a way to serve students that fall in the 'academic middle' receiving mostly C's and D's. Most students who participate in AVID are part of ethnic minorities with the largest minority participants being Hispanic or African American (AVID Center, 2012). College Possible is a non-profit organization that was developed in 2000, in St Paul Minnesota to help students from low-income backgrounds graduate high school and continue on to college. College possible is currently in four major cities across the Midwest, with the goal of serving 10 cities nationally by 2020 (College Possible, 2012). Lastly, a state wide program called Ramp up to Readiness was developed in 2012 as a way to increase the total number and diversity of Minnesota students who graduate high school and continue on to higher education. The ramp up program is different from other national programs in that its focus is to make sure each student from grade six to 12 is ready to graduate and enter a higher education institution (College Readiness Consortium, 2012). The following section will discuss each program and its current success at graduating minority students from low-income backgrounds.

**TRIO.** The TRIO programs strive to increase college awareness, preparation, and access to both low-income and first generation students. To administer these programs colleges, universities, and community colleges have to apply for the specific grant (Upward Bound, Talent Search, or Student Support Services) then implement them in the surrounding community (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). These federal programs offer a variety of services such as tutoring, mentoring, counseling services, college admissions workshops, assistance with

obtaining financial aid, and ACT/SAT prep (U.S. Department of Education, 2011; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brein, 2006).

Student Support Services (SSS) is a branch of TRIO that is set in place to provide services to disadvantaged students that transfer from two-year institutions to four-year institutions (Chaney, 2010). The goal of the program is to increase college retention rates and the number of students in the program that graduate college and obtain a degree. SSS has been found to be helpful for disadvantaged students who are transferring from two-year to four-year institutions, and in completing a college degree (Chaney, 2010). However, a major limitation to the program is that non-SSS students receive similar services. SSS is then viewed as redundant because it is not providing the specific service to the intended population.

The goals of Talent Search are trifold; identify disadvantaged youth who have high academic potential, inform students of availability of financial aid, and encourage high school and college dropouts to return to school (Constantine, Seftor, Martin, Silva, & Myers, 2006). The findings show that students who participated in Talent Search were more likely than the controlled group to apply for financial aid and enroll in postsecondary institutes (Constantine et al., 2006). The comparison group was comprised of students with similar backgrounds and both groups of students were first-time applicants. Unlike SSS, Talent Search has been able to correctly identify their target population and provide services to assist students' in obtaining a higher level of education.

Upward Bound is of special interest in the current discussion of students pursuing higher education, as many of the Upward Bound programs have a summer bridge program that assists students in transition from high school to college (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). These bridging programs, much like TRIO programs in general, have traditionally been geared to



students who are of low-income, minorities, and/or the first member in their family to attend college (Myers, 2003). As of 2008, there were approximately 1,122 projects under Upward Bound that served over 76,000 students (Seftor, Mamun, & Schirm, 2009). A 10 year longitudinal study was conducted to assess Upward Bound's effect on students, with 1,500 students in the treatment group and 1,300 in the control group (Seftor, Mamun, & Schirm, 2009). Through these surveys it was found that the Upward Bound programs have no detectable effect on a students' enrolment in higher education. There was an increased likelihood of the students in Upward Bound to earn a certificate of licensure from a vocational school but no effect on the earning of a degree (Seftor, Mamun, & Schirm, 2009).

Of the three federal TRIO programs designed to help disadvantaged students, Talent Search is the only one found to increase the enrollment in higher education (Constantine et al., 2006). Student Support Services has an effect on its students, but similar services provided to non-SSS student showed the same results (Chaney, 2010). Upward Bound was designed to help disadvantaged students, but the longitudinal study shows that it has no detectable effect on students' pursuing higher education (Seftor, Mamun, & Schirm, 2009). In order for these types of programs to best serve the students they intend to further research needs to be conducted. The reconstruction of these programs should incorporate the thoughts of low SES and minority students on what is beneficial in the pursuit of higher education.

**College Possible.** College Possible, which started as Admission Possible, is a nonprofit organization that focuses on gaining admission and success in college for students from low-income backgrounds (College Possible, 2012). Starting in the junior year and continuing through senior year, low-income students receive 320 hours of direct support from trained coaches. The services included in this after school program are ACT/SAT preparation, college application

assistance, financial aid consultation, and general support toward college degree completion. 91% of students enrolled in college possible are students of color, with most of the students being first-generation college students (Avery, 2013).

A recent study found that participation in College Possible more than doubles the chances that a low-income student will enroll in a four-year education institute (Avery, 2013). However, as the researcher concludes, enrollment in a higher education institute does not equate to obtaining a degree. Avery (2013) found through a randomized trial that while College Possible effects the enrollment of low-income students into college, there is little to no evidence the program has an effect on ACT performance or a student obtaining of a four year degree. Specific to ACT performance, the students still scored as expected by College Possible coaches, however, the scores are similar to the ACT scores students in the control group received (Howley & Uekawa, 2013). Researchers believe this may be due to students in the control group receiving alternative support for ACT prep, not that students who are in College Possible are not achieving as expected. The researchers found that the effects of the program on second semester enrollment are just on the borderline of being statistically significant (Avery, 2013). College Possible plans to continue tracking the outcomes of both the students in the program and in the control group to understand the full effects the program may have.

**AVID.** Advancement Via Individual Determination, AVID, is a national based program that's mission is to close the achievement gap by preparing all student for college readiness. AVID is the only college access program that serves students from elementary to high school (K-12) and AVID *for* Higher Education serves students in the college setting until their fourth year in school (AVID, 2012). This program is implemented in the classroom setting, taught by teachers who were specifically trained to the AVID curriculum. The curriculum was developed

in collaboration by middle and high school teachers, along with college professors. The curriculum is based off of the WICOR method, standing for writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization, and reading (AVID Center, 2012).

As AVID has been around since the 1980's many studies have been conducted to test the program's effectiveness. One study conducted in 2005 reviewed many different college access programs on the predictors of students to pursue higher education and their effectiveness on getting students to higher education institutes (Martinez & Klopott). Through this meta-analysis, the authors found four practices that were identified as promoting success for low-income minority students in their academic achievement and enrollment in higher education: 1) having access to rigorous classes, 2) the prevalence of personalized learning environments, 3) a balance of social and academic support, and 4) the alignment of curriculum between high school and college classes (Martinez & Klopott, 2005). AVID was found to fit all of these requirements stated to help student go on to higher education; "AVID stands out as uniquely structures and effective (p.18)."

Unlike College Possible, AVID graduates are more on track to graduate and have a higher retention rates when compared to a 'traditional' student in a higher education setting (Watt, Huerta, & Alkan, 2011). More specifically, AVID is shown to be working for minority students it was intended to effect. African American AVID students are applying and enrolling in higher education institutes 1.5 times the national average, and Latino AVID graduates are going on twice the national average to higher education institutes (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, Lintz, & Okamoto, 1996). This is one national program that is seeing huge strides in minority students from low-income backgrounds attaining higher education. The difference being that the program

starts in Kindergarten classes to prepare students for college, and the perceived support of students given by AVID teachers (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996).

**Ramp up to readiness.** Ramp-Up to readiness is a college access program that is implemented throughout the state of Minnesota in participating six through 12<sup>th</sup> grade schools. The Ramp-Up program aims to have students ready in five domains; academic readiness, admission readiness, career readiness, financial readiness, and personal and social readiness (College Readiness Consortium, 2012). The basis of this college access program is to provide all students with expectations of obtaining higher education, not just low-income or minority groups. Ramp-Up is a curriculum that can be taught in two ways, through advisors that meet for at least one class period a week, or through a one term Ramp-Up course each year.

The Ramp-Up program was designed through the University of Minnesota's College Readiness Consortium between 2008 and 2012, with its beginning implementation in Minnesota schools in the fall of 2012. An experiment design will be launched by the American Institutes of Research to evaluate the impact of participation on postsecondary readiness and enrollment, but currently there is no research that has evaluated Ramp-Up's impact. The research behind Ramp-Up shows that the content of high school courses are misaligned with what students need to know to achieve success in post-secondary education institutes (Conley, 2005). Also, research has shown that nonacademic factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and self-discipline have a significant impact on a student's performance in college (ACT Inc, 2007). The Ramp-Up program has incorporated these ideals into the implementation by including all students in the program and not specific groups, such as minority or low-income students.

### **Research Question**

Generally, the literature demonstrates that federal programs specifically designed to help students of color and or those of economically disadvantaged backgrounds are not working. The purpose of the present study is to explore what low-income students of color perceived to be most beneficial in their pursuit of higher education. The research question then is, “What are the experiences of low-income students of color regarding what was helpful in pursuing higher education?”

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **Social Learning**

Social learning theory developed by Bandera (1977), states that behavior is learned through observation, imitation, and experiences (Hutchison, 2008). According to this theory, one does not need to experience an adversity or pleasure in order to learn new behaviors. For example if a child witnessed their father physically abusing their mother, social learning theory would suggest they would then learn to use physical abuse in similar situations. A strong component of social learning theory suggests that the learned behaviors are shaped through reinforcements, punishments, and antecedents (Hutchison, 2008). It is important to note that individuals can learn slightly different behaviors or responses from the same event or stimulus, because of the thought each individual attaches to the stimulus.

Social learning theory has been found to be beneficial in the classroom setting (Edelson & Reiser, 2006). Teachers can use this theory by modeling what appropriate classroom behavior should look like for the student where the teacher is the model and the student the observer. That being said, while the classroom can be beneficial to students, it assumes that all students have similar learning of behaviors prior to coming into the classroom.

Relating social learning to the larger context of the research, many students can have a different outlook on the importance of education based on what was modeled by individuals in their home, or by other important adult figures. If the youth grows up in a household where no adult has graduated high school, they learn through observation that it is not needed for them to continue with education, much less go on to college. This research will investigate how social learning theory influenced youth and their decision to pursue higher education.

### **Resiliency**

Masten defines resilience as “good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development” (2001). For an individual to be classified as being resilient they must have first experienced some type of adversity or demonstrable risk and second, the individual must overcome the risk and be developmentally stable or adequately adjusted (Masten, 2001). The adversity part of the definition is defined in various ways such as trauma, natural disasters, socioeconomic status (SES) or even divorce. The adaptation side of the definition is harder to operationalize, but in general the individual has shown improvement and reached a stabilized mental status.

There is little debate about if resiliency exists as a conceptual model, but it has been highly criticized for the ambiguity in its definition (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). There are no set criteria as to what the risk or adversity is, aside from being detrimental to the individual, and similarly there are no set criteria to determine the improvement of mental status of the individual after the adversity. However, Masten argues that resilience is relatively ordinary and a normal function of adaptation (2001). Her argument is that individuals do not need something big or elaborate to help them cope with a trauma or adversity, but that over time normal development processes will create equilibrium in the individual. Masten does make the

distinction that having extraordinary talents or support systems would benefit the individual development in a positive manner, but would be an added bonus (2001).

Two models that adhered to the core principle of resiliency are Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome model and Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure. These models are contingent on a students' continuing education despite environment affects.

**Input-Environmental-Output.** Astin's (1991) model of Input-Environment-Outcome (IEO) is useful to consider when assessing students' transition from high school to college. The IEO model recognizes the role that effects of input and the environment can have on a students' development (outcome) and how they can affect change, as well as the role students play in their own transition (Astin, 1991). The input portion of the model refers to the characteristics that each individual student brings such as family backgrounds, previous academic experience, and demographic characteristics. The environment aspect of the model includes policies, programs, cultures, and the surrounding school atmosphere. Outcomes consist of what is gained, such as knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors (House, 1999; Zhang & Smith, 2011). The current study will be incorporating the input and environment aspects of Astin's model; the outcome is known, students attending college, the unknown is the input and environment. Understanding the experience of students input and environment will inform researchers as to what youth need to pursue higher education.

**Model of Institutional Departure.** Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1993) declares that both social and academic aspects need to be integrated into students' college career in order to be successful. Tinto suggests retention is due to students not connecting with their academic or social environment (Myers, 2003). Integration in the academic realm includes the students' performance and interactions between faculty and staff, where integration in the social

realm includes participating in college lifestyle through extracurricular activities and interactions with peer groups. While Tinto's model was developed on students who drop out of college, it can easily be applied to high school drop outs as well. In order for a student to succeed they must feel that they are part of their education and have a positive interaction with staff, at the same time Tinto recognizes that the student must integrate their social life as well. The current study incorporates Tinto's model on how students achieved graduation from high school and continued to higher education.

The current research will use the frameworks of social learning and resiliency, along with the models of Institutional Departure and I-E-O, to understand what youth of low SES believe was helpful pursuing higher education. It is predicted that through the interviews with youth, the models of Institutional Departure and I-E-O, as well as social learning and overcoming of adversities, will be key factors in students' decision to pursue higher education.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Qualitative methods were used to understand the experiences and perceptions of low-income youth who are of color, on their transition into college. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth of color who were in college and had come from a low socioeconomic background. The participants' responses were audio-recorded with permission prior to the start of the interview.

### **Sample**

The research used non-probability, convenience sample (Berg & Lune, 2012) as the participants chose to respond to posted flyers or social media postings. A total of five youth were recruited, but only four youth agreed to participate in the interview. The sample consisted of two



males and two females of differing racial-ethnic and immigrant backgrounds. The youths' ethnicities included African American, Asian American, Indian, and a combination of two or more ethnicities. While in high school the Grade Point Averages (GPA) for the youth ranged from 2.0-3.8 and in college the youth's GPA's ranged from 2.5-3.2. Half of the youth received scholarships to their higher education establishments and half of them did not receive any type of scholarships. Half of the youth attended high schools in an urban environment while half of the youth attended high schools in a suburban environment. The youth who attended urban schools reported the demographics of the school were majority African American, Asian American, or Hispanic, with Caucasian students being in the minority. Oppositely, the youth who attended suburban schools reported the Caucasian students were the majority with 20-40% of the other ethnicities represented. The youth varied in their college status as a freshman, two sophomores, and a senior but all participants were undergraduate students, with full time enrollment status.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

**Recruitment process.** Youth participants were recruited from several different venues. This study was advertised through: 1) flyers posted on community bulletin boards surrounding the University of St. Thomas, a private Catholic university in the midwest, 2) flyers posted on community bulletin boards or public venues surrounding two other colleges in the Minneapolis/St Paul area, and 3) on a social media website. The bulletin boards utilized were located in coffee shops and posted in public venues such as bus stops. Study inclusion criteria required that the youth participants identified as people of color currently enrolled in college classes, between the ages of 18-21, who came from a low socioeconomic background and graduated from a high school within the United States.

To determine how youth would meet the low socioeconomic background, they would have to have been eligible or receive free and reduced lunch in high school. The researcher prescreened participants once they made the initial contact asking the callers three questions; 1) Did you graduate from a high school within the United States? 2) How old are you? 3) When you were in high school did you receive free and reduced lunch? This prescreen ensured that all participants met the inclusion criteria prior to establishing an interview time and place. Participants who completed the interview were given a \$10 gift card to a nearby coffee house as an incentive.

**Confidentiality.** Individual participant information remained confidential. Information regarding race/ethnicity and age were obtained, but no other identifiable information, such as the participant's name, will be included in the research study. Any written field notes and audio tapes of the interview were kept in a locked and secure file cabinet. The transcription of interviews was completed by the researcher and stored on a password protected laptop, only accessible by the researcher.

**Informed consent.** To protect the privacy of the participants for this study, several precautions were taken. The participants were notified of the purpose, methods, benefits, and any known risks of their participation in the study. The researcher informed the participants that participation was completely voluntary and they could choose to end the interview at any point in time. Additionally, the researcher made it known to participants they could decline to answer or skip any question(s) they chose during the interview. This information was conveyed through an informed consent form that was also verbally explained by the researcher prior to the interview (see *Appendix A*). The participants signed the consent form acknowledging their understanding of the current study.

### **Data Collection**

For this study, data was collected through an individual, semi-structured interview with youth of color from low SES. As a secondary collection method, the interview was audio recorded for later retrieval. Additionally, field notes were taken during the interview. The semi-structured interview consisted of open-ended questions to encourage responses and elaborations by the youth (Berg & Lune, 2012). The interview questions can be found in *Appendix B*. The interviews were conducted in the months of February and March of 2014, in a private room on a midwest university campus that was predetermined by the participants and the researcher. All interviews were conducted in a face-to-face manner that required approximately half an hour to an hour of the participants time.

### **Data Analysis**

A qualitative approach was used for the data analysis. The interviews were audio recorded then later transcribed by the researcher. Through the process of transcription, reoccurring themes and patterns emerged from the data (Berg & Lune, 2012). The researcher used a grounded theory approach and went through the transcriptions of each interview to identify the major themes (Berg & Lune, 2012). In grounded theory method, the researcher first used open coding, in which the researcher stayed close to the text, representing descriptively what respondents had said during the first reading. As the transcripts were read a second and third time, the researcher moved towards a more interpretive approach, where common themes emerged due to a process of constant comparison of instances of the text.

### **Findings**

The research was focused on exploring what low-income students of color perceived as being helpful in their pursuit of higher education. Five main themes were reflected in the data,

most of which were supported through previous research; motivation, preparation, support, demographics of the school, and perceptions of why others did not go on to higher education.

*Motivation* refers to the youth's desire to continue on to higher education. The theme of motivation was categorized into three main subthemes; future, family and personal pride, and fighting stereotypes. *Preparation* included any programs students were involved in, or that were missing from their experience, that helped to prepare youth to prosper in college. *Support* referred to specific people who were supportive in the youth's life and types of support that the respondents received. *Demographics of the school* spoke to the racial congruity between students and teachers, and if the youth's culture was supported within their high school environment. Finally the *perceptions* of why other students did not go on to higher education are explored by the youth respondents. These themes helped to understand the respondent's experience and their pursuit to achieve higher education.

### **Motivation for Higher Education**

A major theme that was highlighted through the interviews with youth was their motivation to continue with their education. Some youth found motivation to continue with their education in order to create a better future for themselves and their future families. The youth discussed being motivated by growing up in a low-income household and wanting to live more comfortably in the future. Another main source of motivation for the youth discussed was both personal and familial pride. The youth wanted their family members to be proud of them for continuing on with their education. Obtaining a higher education is also a sense of personal pride for the youth. A final source of motivation for youth to obtain higher education was to fight any perceived stereotypes society holds. All youth mentioned and discussed having at least one source of motivation to pursue higher education.

**Future.** Many youth identified having a strong motivation to pursue higher education to better their future. The youth believed that continuing on to higher education would better their chances of being hired and finding a well-paying job to support themselves financially. One respondent stated:

*“Try to get a good job and do better than what my parents and grandmother did”*

Some youth experienced intergenerational poverty and did not want to financially struggle the same as their parents and grandparents. This motivated the youth to pursue higher education in hopes of obtaining occupations that pay more than minimum wage. Respondents said:

*“If you don’t go to school and you’re working only minimum wage jobs, it’s not gonna help you do anything.... after [college] you have built a career you don’t have to worry about money struggles.”*

*“There were nights she would cry cause she couldn’t give me the things I need or supplies, things other kids usually get and I didn’t get it. And me having to grow up at a young age really fast because I had younger siblings and I had to help take care of them and stuff. Being in those situations, like 10 years old babysitting while my mom goes to work, that type of stuff made me realize my mom was really struggling and it made me always wanna do good in school so that was one of my main motivations to push myself cause I didn’t want to struggle”*

*“I see a lot of people in my family in poverty; they struggle a lot with money. Some people in my family don’t have jobs and I didn’t want that life for my kid’s cause I knew how I grew up.”*

Aside from the youth growing up in a low-income household, many respondents mentioned wanting to pursue higher education to have a more comfortable living for their future family.

*“I had to fend for myself a lot of the time and had to get stuff the hard way and that’s why I want to make things easier for my kids.”*

The youth respondents reported being motivated to pursue higher education so that they could create a future with fewer financial struggles than when they were raised. These youth believed that by obtaining a degree from a higher education institute, they would be able to acquire a job

that pays more than minimum wage, which in turn would allow the youth to provide for themselves and their future family.

**Family and personal pride.** Another strong sense of motivation for youth in their pursuit to higher education was to have a sense of personal pride. The youth discussed wanting to obtain higher education so that they could feel proud of accomplishing something no one else in their family was able to do.

*“I want to make myself proud of me, have a career for myself and do the things I love.”*

This particular youth wanted to enjoy their job and be proud, knowing how hard they worked to get to that position. Having a sense of personal pride in their education motivated the youth to want to go further with their education. Also discussed by the youth respondents was making their family proud by obtaining higher education.

*“I wanted to make my parents proud. Seeing my parents struggle in low end jobs and they didn’t get an education opportunity. Seeing how hard they worked just to provide for my siblings and me pushes me harder to pursue my education for them.”*

By the youth pursuing a higher education, they believed their family members will be proud of them. One youth specified that they wanted to gain an education that the respondent’s parents couldn’t or were not able to pursue.

*“I need to do this for my family, like it’s not just about me anymore, it’s about my family”*

To help the youth stay motivated in their pursuit to higher education, they remember the struggles and hardships their parents were faced with while growing up and raising a family. The youth themselves also wanted to be proud of their achievements of pursuing higher education and use a sense of pride as a way to stay motivated on their education journey.

**Fighting stereotypes.** A final type of motivation to pursue higher education that was discussed was that of fighting negative stereotypes associated with their race. One individual

talked about how they felt their race is stereotyped as people who use and abuse the welfare system.

*“ I want to be able to enter the work force and not follow that status quo ‘you’re just a Hmong woman that’s going to get pregnant and be on welfare’ I want to show that I went to college and was not pregnant throughout that process.”*

This youth was driven to pursue higher education, to not contribute to any stereotypes, and to try and fight what some people may believe about their race. The youth felt that by being able to obtain higher education, they could start to change the way people view the race as a whole.

The youth respondents’ motivation to pursue higher education is best categorized through three main domains; to better their future, to make family members and themselves proud, and to fight any perceived stereotypes. Though the type of motivation may differ for each individual youth, all youth discussed having at least one source of motivation to continue their journey to higher education.

### **College Preparation**

Through the interviews with youth, many identified having some type of preparation for higher education. This preparation varied from a specific class or program in their high school that was targeted to help the youth gain acceptance to college, to extracurricular activities the youth participated in that they felt helped to prepare them. Additionally, the youth discussed what they believed their high schools were missing or what could have been done to better prepare them for college.

**Specific programs.** Half of the youth respondents discussed programs their school offered that directly helped prepare them for higher education. These programs varied in the types of preparation for college. One youth participated in College Possible, as an after school program, through their high school.

*“We did a lot of things that would help us in the process of going into our first year of college”*

The youth discussed that they were glad to participate in the program, not only to help prepare them for college, but as a way to help navigate the college process because they were the first member in the family to go on to higher education.

*“But I just think that it was really helpful especially being the first in my family going to college. I needed someone to help guide me”*

Having been a part of this program, the youth felt that they had an equal opportunity to get accepted into a higher education establishment as they practiced for the ACT tests, wrote essays, and practiced interviewing skills.

*“We worked a lot on taking the ACT’s and a lot on applications and applying for college. Kind of just practice writing essays for scholarships, practicing interview skills if you were to get a job and how you would be professionally”*

Additionally, the youth viewed their participation in College Possible as a strength and tool they could use for life after college with practicing how one would interview for a professional job.

Other youth respondents described programs their high school offered that were geared towards visiting higher education campuses. The youth described that the school wanted the students to get acquainted with the college campuses as most students had never been on a college campus before.

*“We got to go check out college campus’s around Minnesota and got to see how they go about college life and see [what] a typical class would be in college....they also had programs to get prepared to start applying for grants and loans”*

Aside from visiting the campuses, the youth discussed specific programs that assisted in applying for financial aid. Both youth respondents identified these programs as being an asset for preparing for higher education and for the application process itself.



One youth specified that while their school offered programs to prepare students for college, they did not partake in them.

*“There was things offered by my high school, but I just didn’t take it you know doing my own thing”*

The youth discussed that while it was offered through the school, it was part of an after school program, which took time away from other activities the youth would rather have been doing. The youth stated it would have been helpful had the school integrated the program into the curriculum so they could have benefited from the program without having to give up any extra time. In general the youth who attended schools that offered preparatory programs for higher education agreed that they were helpful in both the application process and helpful to gaining insight into the college lifestyle.

**Extracurricular activities.** Many youth respondents described other extracurricular activities they were involved in that helped prepare them for the college lifestyle. Although these activities were not specific to helping youth obtain higher education, the respondents agreed many of the skills they learned within these groups help foster main characteristics needed for college. For example, one youth was a member of Young Life, a high school ministry group

*“Having the organization of Young Life; having the opportunity to sit down and just talk to people and ask questions and yeah, learning to be present in your life”*

This individual talked about learning to be present in his life, which was helpful when in college classes. He felt the skills he acquired through the extracurricular were beneficial to his success in higher education.

When discussing higher education, it can easily be forgotten that social skills are involved with being a successful student.

*“There’s nothing that I can remember that was just really nurturing towards good social skills”*

This individual youth states that their high school did nothing specifically to help nurture social skills. Without having been involved in extracurricular activities the youth felt they would have not been as successful in higher education because this is where they learned the social skills they believed to be beneficial in their college success.

*“My success in college has been social skills and being able to talk to people, especially the professors, to ask for help when I need it.”*

The youth respondents believe that participating in extracurricular activities was helpful to their success of pursuing higher education. The youth identified skills they learned in these activities that were beneficial once in college classes.

**Easing the transition.** While some youth respondents participated in a program that helped in preparation for college, all interviewed youth felt their school could have done more to prepare them for higher education. Surprisingly enough, none of the youth mentioned needing to be more prepared academically, but wished their high school would have better prepared them socially. One youth mentioned it would have been beneficial to talk to current college students to understand their perspective.

*“They could have brought in some college students to tell us how it is, like before you graduate. Like when you start college and that you basically have to do things on your own.”*

This youth believes that being able to talk to students who were in college would have been helpful, if nothing else to at least hear the perspective of someone in college. This particular youth was the first in their family to go to college and believes there would have been less unknown elements if they were able to talk to someone in college.

Another youth mentioned having workshops devoted to identifying who they are as individuals and some potential future career options.

*“So even identification workshops to figure out who you are in high school and what you want out of life. Also like social events where you can be really intentional, like people sitting down and having discussions facilitated by a teacher.”*

The youth felt that having this prior to going on to higher education potentially would have given them an idea of what major they wanted to pursue. The youth also felt it would have been a good time in their life to identify what they hold as values and morals, to understand themselves separate from their family and friends.

Lastly, a youth identified wishing their high school would have had more discussions about differing cultures and prepared them for culture shock.

*“I think what I would have liked to know more was how to handle culture shock I guess.....That was just more of the culture shock coming here and a lot of people are misinformed about a lot of things in different cultures.”*

The youth identified their high school as a very diverse setting with the college they chose as a less diverse setting. The youth expressed wishing teachers would have facilitated discussions in high school about differing cultures and the ways the media can contribute to misinformation about minority groups.

*“It’s not that they’re ignorant, I just think they are misinformed and a lot of that has to do with the media.”*

Overall the youth believe that having preparation classes in high school for higher education were, or would have been, beneficial. Some youth felt they benefited from being involved in extracurricular activities as a way to prepare them for higher learning. Lastly, all youth respondents identified wishing their high school would have prepared them better for social aspects of college; specifically working to identify who they are individually and how to deal with larger societal issues, such as culture shock.

## **Support**

All youth respondents recognized that they had some type of support in their efforts to pursue higher education. The youth categorized their support in terms of both specific people who were supportive in their lives and specific types of support that the respondents received. When asked by whom the youth felt supported, parents, peer groups, and teachers were all persons they felt support from while continuing on to their education.

**Parent or adult.** Some youth participants explained that their parent(s) were a large support system, not only through high school but in the students' efforts to go on to higher education. When asked how the respondents felt supported, they explained that their parent was there for them as a type of emotional support.

*“My mom and my step father they really motivated me and pushed me to do good in school. They always told me don't be like all the other kids.”*

The parents helped to keep the youth focused and motivated to finish high school and pursue higher education.

*“My parents were really positive, and my siblings were really positive”*

The respondents mentioned having not only the support from their parents but from their family as a whole. The youth established that having a strong support system at home helped them to go on to pursue higher education.

Another aspect of parental and family support that was discussed by the youth was their parents' ability to support them financially with their pursuit to higher education. Some of the parents were able to help financially support their youth in their pursuit to college, while other parents were not able to.

*“My mother is financially supporting me and my daughter cause I am mainly focusing on school not tryin' to find a job”*

This particular youth is able to be financially supported by their parent. The youth recognizes that not everyone is able to be supported financially by their parents and appreciates the help while working to obtain a degree.

Most of the youth respondents indicated that their parents were not able to support them financially, as the parents struggle with having a lower income in the first place. One youth made the distinction that their parents were not able to help them financially because they still have younger siblings. The youth respondent did not want to add stress to the family by asking for financial help to support higher education.

*“No, they couldn’t support me cause I still have younger siblings they are raising and I didn’t really want my parents to help me get through college cause...I don’t want to try and put more stress on my parents”*

The youth recognizes that asking for financial support could cause stress in the family in two different ways. The parents could support the youth financially, creating a smaller family budget, or the family could be unable to help and potentially create a burden on the parents knowing they cannot help their child financially. This is the distinction one youth made.

*“I know that if I would have asked they would have helped. I didn’t want to place that burden on my parents”*

This youth chose to not ask their parents for financial support so that it would not burden the family in any way, financially or emotionally, knowing they could not afford to help the youth.

Overall, the youth respondents recognized that support from their parents was important for their pursuit on to higher education. While some youth had financial support from their parents, most did not receive this type of support, but received emotional support encouraging the youth to go on to higher education. The youth respondents identified that having parental support was a large part of their ability to pursue their education dreams.

**Peer group.** A second type of support system that the youth felt was a large benefit in their journey to higher education was having support from their peer group. Some youth had friends who did not go on to pursue higher education, but they established that they were still supported by their friends. One youth distinguishes that their sports team was a built in support system.

*“We were always asking ‘did you get this homework, did you get that done, do you need help on it’ you know to keep everyone in check”*

The youth discussed that having a group of friends who were interested in getting good grades was beneficial for them to try and get good grades as well.

*“That pushed us more to help each other out in school. You know, cause we wanted to see each other succeed and go further in life and do bigger things”*

Feeling supported by their friends in their education made it easier for the youth to want to try in school. One youth discussed that their high school peer group was not academically supportive, in that they did not care about getting good grades or turning in homework, but they received academic support from an older group of friends.

*“a lot of my friends didn’t really care about school, we just liked to party. But I had friends that were older than me that I considered my mentors that had support for academics”*

Overall the youth respondents distinguished that it was important in high school to have some friends that had similar academic attainment. The youth discussed being around individuals who were like-minded in education and supportive of academics made it easier for them to pursue their own education.

**Teachers.** A last type of support that was discussed by the youth respondents provided to them, was support from teachers and staff in their high school. One youth identified that having

staff members who seemed to genuinely care about them was of great benefit to their educational success.

*“I had a lot of teachers that were involved in my life, asking not only about classes but how I was doing as well”*

Having a working relationship with teachers made the youth feel supported within their school.

Another youth discussed feeling supported by their teachers because of their parent’s involvement in their schoolwork. Their specific parent had a relationship with the teachers in the school so that if the youth was struggling in a class, the parent would be informed to try and support the youth at home.

*“she would always come up to the school checking on me, making sure I’m doing good and she had a pretty good relationship with my teachers too... so that made it a little bit easier for me to succeed in school.”*

The congruity of support from both parents and teachers made the youth feel that it was easier to ask for help when needed. These two youth specified that feeling support from the staff at their high school was important in the pursuit of higher education.

All youth respondents suggested that they felt some type of support in their goal to obtain higher education. The received support can be categorized by specific people who were supportive and the types of support they provided. The types of support that were labeled as beneficial in the youth’s pursuit to higher education were emotional, academic, and financial support. The youth respondents also discussed that having support from their parents, peer group, and teachers was needed for their pursuit to higher education.

### **Demographics of the School**

Responses were mixed when the youth were asked if their culture was supported in their high school. Half of the youth went to a high school that was in a suburban environment, while

the other half of youth went to a high school that was in an urban setting. One youth described how their high school in an urban setting was supportive of their cultural heritage.

*“There was a lot of Hmong students that went to my high school and a lot of the teachers were very supportive. [They] were very open to learning about the culture and they would ask questions in regards to like my culture or like just like the language, traditions or norms.”*

However, another youth who was in an urban setting described feeling unsupported by their school environment in terms of recognizing culture and race.

*“I wouldn’t say supported.... Like [teachers] were there for you but they weren’t exactly there for you in a supportive way. They want you there just to get your work done and go home.”*

A youth who attended school in a suburban setting described that the school did not recognize differing cultures or races in a spoken way. This youth described race and culture in the school as a known difference but left unspoken by the staff at the school.

*“It wasn’t even really recognized in a way that was verbal and celebrated. It was just kind of like ‘yup, you’re Indian’.”*

When asked what the schools could have done to make the youth feel more supported culturally both respondents who did not feel culturally supported suggested utilizing individual teachers.

*“I don’t know if the school could have done something but maybe individual teachers showing interest would be nice.”*

Youth respondents were asked about the racial congruity between teachers and the student population. All respondents mentioned that while there may have been a few teachers from differing racial backgrounds, almost all of their teachers were Caucasian.

*“You would expect that when there are more Caucasian kids, there are more Caucasian teachers. We had some African American teachers but, not many.”*

*“If you’re talking like in the sense there were Asian or even a different race then, no. Most of my teachers were Caucasian...but I felt that International Baccalaureate program teachers were very good at building relationships with students.”*



In general the youth respondents agreed that their race or culture was not represented within the staff at their individual schools. One specific urban high school incorporated and supported the differing races and cultures that represented the students through culture clubs. However, the other respondents felt that differing cultures were not specifically supported within the school environment, that it was an unspoken difference.

### **Perceptions on Other Students not Pursuing Higher Education**

All youth respondents knew someone, be it friends or family members, who did not go on to higher education. When the respondents were asked why they believed others did not go on to higher education the answers varied from lack of adult support, negative influence of peers, alternative life routes, to cultural expectations. While some of the responses were specific to individuals, the youth were able to identify trends that affect low-income youth of color.

**Adult support.** The highest response from the youth respondents was that they had some type of parent support or an adult mentor (a coach, teacher or sibling) in their life, which they did not see in the lives of those who did not go on to higher education.

*“Because they didn’t have role models, or lack of support like maybe family members didn’t push them as hard.”*

*“I had friends that were like older than me that I considered my mentors that had supported me in general that I know others did not have.”*

One student specified that having parents who were college educated was a drive for them to pursue higher education. This student made the connection that their friends who did not go on to higher education did not have a parent who had obtained higher education themselves.

*“I can look around and see my other friends that also have educated parents and have both their parents around, even if they’re not together, they tend to be the ones that have gone on to higher education.”*

Having support from an adult was perceived as being beneficial to the youth respondents in their pursuit to higher education. Interestingly the students did not clarify that the adult support needed to be a specific individual (such as a parent), just an interested adult that empowered them to pursue higher education.

**Peers.** A few youth respondents believed other students did not go on to higher education due to the peer group with whom they associated.

*“The peers that they were around and the people they associated with were a big factor why my sister did not go to college. It seemed like none of them cared.”*

The youth suggested a ‘group mentality’ arises, when an individual is in a peer group that does not care about their education the individual does not feel that they need to pursue their education. The same can be said for individuals in peer groups that want to pursue education.

*“I tried to associate with people that have the same common goals as me, who weren’t into drinking or partying but like have a purpose.”*

The respondents all mentioned that they had an academically supportive peer group. It is worth mentioning that there were members in some of the respondents peer group that did not pursue higher education. In these cases the youth point to other reasons, such as becoming a father that deterred individuals from pursuing higher education.

**Alternative life routes.** Some students expressed a specific reason for their friends who did not go on to higher education. These responses included youth who got pregnant and had to raise a child, to youth who had entered the judicial system. The respondents had alternative life routes that did not include obtaining higher education.

*“they got girls pregnant and you know, now they’re enjoying fatherhood”*

*“getting caught up in drugs or the judicial system, some are in prison”*

An interesting contradiction, one of the interviewed youth was a single mother who explained having her daughter fueled her drive to go on to higher education; so that she could one day create a better life for both herself and her daughter.

*“I wanted to better my life for me and to do it for my daughter.”*

When the youth respondents were asked why some of their friends did not go on to higher education, they expressed that they were on an alternative life track where they could not pursue higher education currently in their life.

**Cultural expectations.** A final response when asked about why others did not pursue higher education regarded expectations set by differing cultures. A youth respondent shared that within their specific culture, the eldest man is expected to care for the family and pursuing a higher education is not included in that expectation.

*“There is that stigma in the Hmong community, guys they don’t have to really do anything. They are just the ones who carry the family name”*

The respondent identified that while the family member had the same type of support from the parents, the expectations were different for the two members and more specifically the different expectations for each gender. It is important to consider cultural expectations when looking at reasons youth do not go on to pursue higher education as the expectations of each culture can differ from the majority or dominate culture group.

In summary, motivation, college preparation, support, and school demographics were found to be important aspects for low-income youth of color to pursue higher education. The respondents who felt supported, had a strong sense of motivation, and participated in some type of program that helped to prepare them for college seemed to have the highest effect in the youth’s desire to pursue higher education. These findings suggest areas of focus to have more students of color from low-income backgrounds pursuing higher education.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to explore what factors low-income youth of color believed were helpful in pursuing higher education. The research questions that were developed from the findings of previous research focused on the youth's desire to pursue higher education, the types of support they had or lacked, if they took part in any college preparation programs, and how their race was represented in their high school. This research aimed to understand the perspectives of low-income youth of color and what they believed to be helpful in their pursuit to higher education.

### **Motivation**

Youth's motivation to pursue higher education was discussed through three main domains; to better one's future, personal and familial pride, and to fight any perceived stereotypes. Although the type of motivation may differ for each individual youth, all discussed having a source of motivation to pursue higher education. The specific questions related to the finding of this theme were as follows: What were your main reasons for pursuing higher education? Why did you go to college? Who was the most important person or what was the greatest influence that empowered you to pursue higher education?

The literature identified a variety of motivational characteristics to attend college such as personal interest, intellectual curiosity, and a desire to have a rewarding career (Dennis, Phinney, & Cheateco, 2005). These researchers also found these intrinsic motivations to be strong predictors of a student's success in college. The findings of the current research are concurrent with the findings of Dennis, Phinney, and Cheateco (2005), in that the youth respondents desire to have a rewarding career and are intrinsically motivated to pursue higher education. Research

has also shown that nonacademic factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and self-discipline have a significant impact on a student's performance in college (ACT Inc, 2007).

However, unsupported by previous literature was the youth's desire to have a better future than the lives their parents had. Coming from a low-income background many of these youth saw their parents struggle financially. The youth believed that by pursuing higher education they can obtain higher paying jobs, therefore have and provide a better living than what they had growing up. These youth are attempting to break the intergenerational poverty cycle by obtaining higher education. Having a drive to create a better life and future was very powerful and substantial to these youth from low-income backgrounds and should be pursued more through future research.

A unique answer that was not perceived by previous literature was the motivation of youth to fight against the stereotypes of minority races. The youth was motivated by wanting to prove to the majority culture that what is expected, or lack of expectations, will not define where their future will go. As stated, the youth respondents' motivation may vary, but every individual youth voiced having a motivation to pursue higher education. This implies that for future students of color from low-income backgrounds to succeed on to higher education, they need their own source of motivation- and it was not just one single factor.

### **College Preparation**

Through the interviews the youth respondents identified that having preparation classes in high school for higher education was, or would have been, beneficial. The specific questions asked of respondents related to this were as follows: Describe any programs you have participated in, offered by your high school or community that helped you into college? What do you think your high school could have done to better prepare you for college?

The literature indicated that youth who participate in college access programs, such as College Possible, double the chances that a student from a low-income background will enroll in a four-year education institution (Avery, 2013). The current findings suggest that for one individual youth who participated in College Possible, the program was of great benefit and provided reasoning to pursue higher education. The youth discussed feeling supported and guided through the college application process. The current findings of this research coincide with findings of Avery (2013) that College Possible helped the student from a low-income background enroll in college. In order for students of color from low-income backgrounds to succeed in their pursuit to higher education, it would be beneficial for them to participate in a program that helps prepare them academically, both to navigate the application process and understand how their high school grades impact higher education options.

However, the current findings also suggested that all youth wished their high school would have prepared them for social aspects of college, specifically working to identify who they are individually and how to deal with larger societal issues. For the most part, the youth felt supported academically but that they were lacking in having an understanding of who they were as individuals, and how they fit into the world. The current findings suggest that students of color from low-income backgrounds needed more support in identifying who they are, what career choices are possible and available to them, and other social aspects of college life.

### **Support**

Each youth respondent suggested they felt some type of support in their goal of higher education. This support can be categorized through both specific types of support and people who provided support. The specific questions related to the theme of support to higher education are as follows: Describe what your peer support group was like in high school? What kind of

support did your parent/guardian(s) provide you? Did they support your decision in going to college or the college of your choosing? Were they able to financially support you? Any other ways you felt supported?

The types of support that were labeled as beneficial in the youth's pursuit to higher education were emotional, academic, and financial support. The youth respondents also discussed that having support from their parents, peer group, and teachers was needed for their pursuit to higher education. The findings from the current research suggest that parental support and support from peers were the two main support systems utilized for youth's journey to higher education. Previous literature concluded that parents do not have a significant influence on the students' academic performance whereas the current findings suggest that parental support is an important system for low-income youth of color (Spera, 2005). This could be due to the small sample size of the current research, or it could mean that these specific youth felt that having support from their parents was equally important to support from their peers. Surprisingly, the students' family expectation was not a significant motivation to their academic achievement.

As far as support from peers, most previous research has found that support from peers is a stronger correlation to academic success than support from their parents (Dennis, Phinney, & Cheateco, 2005). The current research findings show that support to pursue higher education from parents and peers of low-income youth of color seems to both be significant. Important to the current research, Harper (2006) found that students of color attributed their success in college to the support offered by their same race peers. The current research did not address differences in the races of the peers, however it is an interesting aspect for success in graduating from higher education and should be addressed in future research to see if the same is true for high school students.

Another discrepancy between the literature and the current research findings was that past research found high school counselors to be a major supportive person for students, especially African American students, in their pursuit to higher education (Zhang & Smith, 2011). While the interviewed youth discussed having coaches and supportive teachers as support systems, no one mentioned high school counselors. It is important to point out that due to the sample size of interviewed youth, this finding may still be relevant; however the current findings suggest that parents, peers, and teachers were the biggest support system for youth of color from low-income backgrounds on their pursuit to higher education.

### **Demographics/Racial Congruity**

Findings indicated that the youth respondents did not have racial congruity within their high school in regards to staff. In regards to feeling culturally supported in their high school, half of the youth felt culturally supported while the other half did not feel cultural support from their school or staff. Questions that were specific to the theme of racial congruity and cultural support were as follows: Was your cultural heritage recognized and supported in high school; If so, how; If not, what do you think they could have done to make you feel more supported culturally?

Were there teachers or staff members you could identify with culturally or racially? Was your high school in a rural, urban, or suburban environment?

Previous literature discusses that it is important for racial minority students to be in a culturally supportive classroom environment in order to achieve higher academic success (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). The current research findings suggest that while the students would enjoy their culture being recognized and celebrated or having a racial congruity within their high school, this was not something they felt was needed in order to pursue higher education. This was incongruent with previous literature that states racial composition of the



school matters, in terms of encouraging minority students to pursue higher education (Johnson, Crosenoe, & Elder, 2001). As a secondary type of congruency that previous research found to be relevant to students' sense of belonging in school was social class congruency (Ostrove & Long, 2007). This research stated that students who were from same social class backgrounds felt a sense of belonging and adjustment; the current research neither confirmed nor denied this research. Some youth attended high schools that had congruency of low-income students while other youth attend high schools that were discordant; the youth suggested this was irrelevant to their pursuit to higher education. Further research needs to be done in this area to confirm or deny if social class congruency is an important factor for low-income students of color pursuit to higher education.

Overall, the literature is consistent that racially congruent school environments have more positive outcomes on academic performance. However, as discussed by Chavous et al., (2003) race and ethnicity of the teachers do not matter as much as one's identity with their race. The current research supports the findings of Chavous et al., (2003) as the youth identified racial congruity was not a necessary aspect in their pursuit of higher education.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Several strengths are associated with the design of the current study. Most of the previous research on influential factors for the pursuit of higher education for low-income students of color has been based on the perspectives of teachers, parents, or other education professionals, rather than on the perspectives of the students themselves. An associated strength of the current study is that it seeks to understand the youths' perspectives on what was helpful to graduate high school and pursue higher education through qualitative interviews, which allowed youth to speak freely on the topic. Secondly, the literature was used to frame the interview questions that the

youth responded to, in order to build upon the current body of knowledge. Third, the exploratory nature of the research may benefit future researchers and practitioners who work with low-income youth of color, as it exposed some areas of difference between the literature and the current study.

Along with strengths come some limitations. A limitation of the research is that the sample population is convenient and not representative of all ethnic or racial backgrounds surrounding the community. Therefore, generalizing the finding to the population becomes difficult. It is also important to address that most of the interviewed youth are from a private mid-western University where a majority of the students who attend are Caucasian. There is a potential the collected sample is skewed specifically to this Midwestern region and that the experience in college reflects an overwhelmingly European American culture, than a campus representing significant portions of students of color. A major limitation is the size of the sample; the researcher found that flyers were not helpful in obtaining participants. Interestingly enough, Huang and Coker (2010) discuss African Americans' resistance to be participants in research studies. The wording of 'low income' on the participation flyer may have deterred participants, as they do not consider themselves to fall into this category (see *Appendix C*). Lastly, qualifying for free and reduced lunch may not be the best measurement to obtain youth of low SES backgrounds.

### **Implications**

There are several implications that have come from this study that social workers should be aware of when working with youth of color from low-income backgrounds. Specifically, youth need to be advocated for at the macro level in regards to changing of federal policies such as *No Child Left Behind*. The policy directly includes college access programs as a way to

increase the number of minority youth from low-income backgrounds who are pursuing higher education, but it does not include the cause of the issues such as social and economic barriers that affect a student prior to the entrance of high school, and at most time the entrance of school in general (Urrieta, 2004).

A second major implication of this research is that while most college access programs are helpful in preparing a teen academically, they are missing an opportunity to prepare the students socially. Low-income youth of color suggest that this would have been a large benefit for them to experience prior to entering higher education. By implementing a social aspect into college access programs it is more likely that youth of color who come from low-income backgrounds will feel both academically and socially prepared to enter a higher education institute. This is where future research would be most beneficial; interviewed youth said they wanted more social support but did not clarify what specifically the social support should consist of. Also important to research, does it make a difference for the youth? All of the youth stated wanting more social support yet they all went on to a higher education institute. To fully understand what the youth need in regards to social support, further research needs to be conducted.

A last implication is the value of this research to school teachers, staff, social workers, and guidance counselors. By having these staff members know what low-income youth of color perceive to being beneficial to pursuing higher education, they can help step in as a support system, or connect a youth to a college access program so the youth can feel prepared to enter higher education.

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Appendix A**CONSENT FORM  
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS****Factors that assist low-income students of color in pursuing higher education****[542930-1]**

I am conducting a study on the perceptions of low-income students of color on what factors were beneficial in their pursuit of higher education. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you identified yourself as a current college student of color who has come from a low-income background. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Samantha Kaffenbarger a graduate student in social work and advised by Dr. Jessica Toft, through the School of Social Work University of St. Thomas/St. Catherine University.

**Background Information:**

Generally, the literature demonstrates that federal programs specifically designed to help students of color and or those of economically disadvantages backgrounds are not working. No Child Left Behind believes that children should succeed academically despite having to deal with other economic factors such as poverty. This contradicts most research that state larger societal issues must be addressed at the classroom level to have an positive academic outcome for children. There are many other factors that have been shown to increase a child's learning such as: feeling supported by school staff, in a school that supports the child's culture, participating in early education, and being internally motivated to continue their education. Lastly, there are many college access programs intended to help students of color and of economically disadvantaged backgrounds enroll and participate in higher education. However, the results of these programs are very controversial; some programs are increasing the enrollment of students, some programs work but not for the intended groups, and some programs have no detectable effect. I am interested in your perspective on what factors were beneficial in pursuing higher education because students have not been asked.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to answer questions during a one-time interview with me. The interview will last between 30 and 60 minutes and will be audio taped. After the interview, I will transcribe the interview to determine overarching themes.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

The study has several risks. The questions ask about your past educational experience and support, or lack of supports, that influenced your education. Therefore, some of the questions asked in this study are sensitive and may cause some emotional discomfort or distress. This may feel like an invasion of your privacy. Secondly, I will attempt to remove all identifying information from the data, but it is impossible to guarantee that other individuals may not be able to identify you as a participant in this study.

There are no known direct benefits to participating in this study.

**Compensation:**

You will receive a \$10 Caribou Coffee gift card if you agree to participate in this study, as compensation for your time and expertise.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include audio recordings and typed transcriptions of these recordings. Additionally, I will keep this consent form. Audio recordings and transcriptions will only be available to the researcher and will be stored on a password protected laptop. The consent form will be kept in a locked file cabinet within my home. The audio recordings and transcripts will be deleted from the laptop on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014, following the completion of this research. Additionally, the consent form will be destroyed via a shredder on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until one week following the interview. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will be destroyed and would not be used in the study. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

**Contacts and Questions**

My name is Samantha Kaffenbarger. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 763-293-7828. You may also contact my advisor, Jessica Toft, at 651-962-5803. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to being audio recorded. I am at least 18 years of age.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Print Name of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Questions**

1. What is your current enrollment status in college (freshman, soph.)?
2. What is your gender?
3. Which race do you identify yourself with?
4. Was your high school in a rural, urban, or suburban environment?
  - A. Describe the population of the students at the school
5. What was your GPA like in high school?  
What is your current GPA?
6. Were you involved in any extra-curricular activities?
  - A. If so, which ones?
7. Why did you go to college?
  - A. Internal motivation
  - B. Parents motivation
8. What were your main reasons for pursuing higher education?
9. What kind of support did your parent/guardian(s) provide you?
  - A. Did they support your decision in going to college or the college of your choosing?
  - B. Were they able to financially support you?
10. Describe what your peer support group was like in high school?
  - A. Did some of your friends not pursue higher education?
    - I. Why not?
    - II. What resources did you have available that your peers didn't?
11. Was your cultural heritage recognized and supported in high school?
  - A. If so, how?
  - B. If not, what do you think they could have done to make you feel more supported culturally and racially?
12. Were there teachers or staff members you could identify with culturally?
13. What do you think your high school could have done to better prepare you for college?
14. Who was the most important person or the greatest influence that empowered you to pursue higher education?
  - A. If so, who were they; a coach, teacher, staff, parent, mentor?
  - B. How did they inspire you?



15. Describe any programs you have participated in, offered by your high school or community that helped you into college?

16. What scholarships have been awarded to you?

Appendix C**Are you a current undergraduate student?****Are you a part of an ethnic or racial minority?****Do you come from a low-income background?**

If so,

You are invited to participate in a research study!

Samantha Kaffenbarger, a graduate student in the School of Social Work at University of St Thomas/St. Catherine University, would like to hear about your experience in your pursuit of higher education!

The purpose of the study is to explore what low-income students of color perceived to be most beneficial in their pursuit of higher education.

You will be asked to meet with the researcher for approximately 60 minutes to answer prepared questions on your high school experience and transition into college. The interview will take place in a confidential place and will be audio recorded. All records will be kept confidential for your privacy. This research has been approved by the St. Thomas Institutional Review Board.

As a thank you for your time and sharing of your experiences, you will be given a \$10 Caribou Coffee gift card for your participation!



TM

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