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Xavier Q. Brown
Franklin Learning Center High School

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LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING THE EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION AND SECOND-GENERATION AFRICAN AMERICAN ALUMNI

Xavier Q. Brown, Ed.D.

ABSTRACT

This manuscript will review the findings of a qualitative case study, which examined the perspectives of first-generation and second-generation African American alumni who graduated from an early college high school in Dover, Delaware. Early college high schools were developed to create tuition-free postsecondary education attainable for students who are underrepresented while attending high school with the premise that students will continue to pursue a collegiate career. Further, this manuscript will provide readers with the perspective of first and second generation African American alumni pertaining to the role and influence of their early college high school, experiences (*challenges and accomplishments*) of navigating secondary and postsecondary education concurrently attaining a high school diploma and earning college credits, student achievement, and factors that contributed to developing confidence, motivation, ambition, and a thirst to continue pursuing postsecondary education. Social capital theory will be leveraged and unpacked with an emphasis on understanding the significance of social relationships and resources that are present at the secondary and postsecondary levels of education in addition to resources that were absent. Various forms of support that were identified within this study will be highlighted; those that helped and hindered alumni in reaching milestones and goals, as well as key differences that were identified between the perspectives of first-generation and second-generation African American alumni.

Keywords: African American, First Generation, Second Generation, Early College

BACKGROUND

The Civil Rights Movement played a significant role in promoting equality in the United States of America, which was enacted due to the unequal treatment of African Americans post-slavery. The movement sought to ensure social justice by obtaining equal rights under the law during the 1950s and 1960s. Equal education was a primary area of focus and a major goal of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1974, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act was passed, ruling that all students had the right to equal educational opportunities extending to post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 1974).

The Equal Educational Opportunities Act set the tone in post-civil rights America that all students, despite race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, could have the opportunity to improve their lives via social capital through educational advancement (Freeman, 2015). However, as public schools across the United States were desegregated various gaps began to form, which led to disparities in the educational achievement of students from various races, ethnicities, and socio-economic statuses. The largest gap was illustrated between low-income African Americans and their more affluent Caucasian peers. Hence, the educational, opportunity, and achievement gaps have plagued low-income African American students into the 21st century and have demonstrated lasting effects beyond the classroom including a lack of resources, educational support, living conditions, job selection, and health care, leading to conditions that can trap generations of people (Freeman, 2015).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many first-generation and second-generation African American students who attend schools in urban areas are impacted by opportunity and achievement gaps (Bowman et al., 2018). Opportunity and achievement gaps are rooted in past and present economic and social conditions, where the adverse impact of prejudice and discrimination remain a barrier to learning. Inequalities have also surfaced in almost every other aspect of African American lives, including areas like housing and career advancement, amongst many others. Hence, many African American students' exposure and access to post-secondary education are oftentimes limited, under-resourced, and under-supported (Anderson, 2018).

Opportunity and achievement gaps have contributed to low rates of academic achievement, graduation, and enrollment into post-secondary education for African American students and students of color who are often labeled as low-income.

In the *Economic Payoff for Closing College Readiness & Completion Gaps*, Vargas (2013) noted:

Nationally, only 65 percent of low-income students who start eighth grade complete high school, compared with 87 percent of their higher-income peers. The gaps are even more significant when it comes to college completion. Nationally, only 17 percent of low-income students who start high school ever complete an Associate or bachelor's degree at a public institution of higher education. This compares with 57 percent of their higher-income peers. (p. 6)

Herein lies data that illustrates disparities within diploma and degree completion between low-income students who are frequently represented as African American students or students of color compared to their more affluent peers who are often represented as Caucasian students.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to identify and explore the support and supporters that first-generation and second-generation African American alumni of an Early College High School expressed to be the most meaningful contributors to persisting through diploma and degree completion and continuing their postsecondary education.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Conducting this research study was significant because there is not a substantial amount of research that provides a voice to first-generation and second-generation African Americans, who are oftentimes categorized as low-income students. Considering this population of students are representative of who Early College High Schools were designed to support and serve, I believed that it is essential to obtain qualitative experiential feedback. Obtaining feedback provided a wealth of information allowing researchers to take a deeper dive into understanding the Early College High School experience from the perspective of alumni who completed their high school requirements while earning college credits and continued their postsecondary education.

The research study also analyzed and evaluated the similarities and differences between first-generation and second-generation African American alumni of the Early College High School. Oftentimes, students can be grouped into categories and tokenized to speak for the masses, which illustrates the importance of understanding the two populations of research participants. This research study sought to identify if there were any distinguishing factors for both populations of research participants, despite the fact that they share race and culture as African American students. This study hypothesized that there will be significant differences.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

African American – Refers to ethnic groups of students with total or partial ancestry from any of the racial groups of Africa who were descendants of enslaved black people.

Alumnus/Alumna – Refers to former students at Early College High Schools who have conferred a high school diploma and an associate degree, concurrently.

Early College High Schools (ECHS) – An innovative way for high school students to earn both a high school diploma and a two-year associate degree (or up to two years' credit toward a bachelor's degree) saving the student both time and money.

First-Generation College Student – Learners who originate from a family where neither of their parents or guardians have obtained a bachelor's degree.

Second-Generation College Student – Learners who originate from a family where at least one of their parents or guardians have obtained a bachelor's degree.

Support for Students – Refers to services including prevention, assistance, transition, and follow-up services for students. Student support services professionals provide direct services for all students, especially those who are experiencing problems that create barriers to access and achievement (counseling, advising, advocacy, tutoring, etc.).

Academic Resources – Refers to a variety of campus-based academic support programs and services, employed to assist students to learn more in less time with greater ease and confidence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Models that Address African American Achievement & Opportunity Gaps

Over the past decade, early colleges have produced dramatic results beating typical outcomes for low-income youth, first-generation collegegoers, and students of color they were designed to serve (Webb et al., 2014). Yielding such positive results could catalyze the redesign of many public and charter high schools. Vargas (2019) said:

On key measures of student success, early college graduates consistently outperform their peers who did not attend early college. Among the impressive findings across a variety of studies, early college graduates: graduate high school at higher rates, complete both associate's and bachelor's degrees at higher rates, and are more likely to be employed full time 10 years after entering high school. (p. 4)

About 30% of early college students have earned an associate degree or other post-secondary credentials by the time they graduate high school, and many will continue that post-secondary education (Mickens Jr., 2014). In comparison, it was found that 90% of early college students earned a diploma compared to 78% of students nationally, 94% of early college students earn college credit in high school compared to 10% of students nationally, 71% of early college graduates enroll in college the semester following graduation compared to 54% of low-income graduates nationally, and 86% of early college graduates who enroll in college persist for a second year compared to 72% of college students nationally (Webb et al., 2014).

The statistics of student achievement are dramatic but necessary in the world we live in today. Now more than ever, earning a post-secondary credential is a prerequisite for economic well-being, educational and professional advancement. Our economy and democracy depend upon well-educated citizenry and millions of young people have and continue to graduate high

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school unprepared for college, career success, and to become self-sufficient adults. To be exact, only 21% of entering U.S high school students graduate on time, enter college immediately, and earn a post-secondary degree within 150% of the standard completion time (Webb et al., 2014). This data represents students who fall through the cracks of the American public school system, where about 73% are students of color, 61% are from low-income families, and 56% are the first in their families to attend college (Webb et al., 2014). Hence, Early College High Schools benefit students by supporting them to overcome the consistent constraints of education, lack of preparation, and opportunity that students face year after year in the United States of America.

Opportunities have been available for a long time in the form of dual and concurrent enrollment, advanced placement (AP), and international baccalaureate (IB) courses. These opportunities are typically extended to the most academically advanced students—those who would have completed college in any case (Barnett, 2018). Hence, dual enrollment holds the potential to offer an onramp to post-secondary success for many students, but it is most resourceful if opportunities were presented and extended to underserved students. The onramp to post-secondary success is depicted as Morrison (2008) estimated that participation in dual enrollment increases the odds of attaining an associate degree by 61%.

Lastly, Fink et al. (2017) suggests “if colleges were more proactive in working with their high school partners to reach out to their dual enrollment students and advise them on the educational opportunities and potential cost savings that community colleges afford, they would thereby be able to increase the yield of their dual enrollment students who go on to enroll at their institutions after high school” (p. 25). These recommendations can significantly increase postsecondary opportunities for first-generation and second-generation African American students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social capital theory has been utilized within other studies to highlight the various ways that families, friends, and social networks support students' college-going efforts. In a study that evaluated family influence on the college-going process for black and Latino high school boys, it was found that familial capital equipped students of color with knowledge, information, inspiration, and resources that were extended through personal lessons, experiences, beliefs, and values of securing postsecondary educational attainment (Carey, 2016). When it comes to postsecondary educational attainment, social capital can be useful in so many ways.

Access to family members, friends, or a network of people who are readily available to share their experiences and to provide guidance and support can cultivate collegiate aspirations, confidence, motivation, and a strong value system for pursuing higher education. Early College High Schools possess a unique opportunity to provide a system of support through structure and application of social capital within their model and college-going culture by providing intentional access, exposure, and opportunity within postsecondary education.

METHODOLOGY

I went through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process following the recruitment of participants via leveraging my relationship with the Early College High School's administration/leadership team, obtaining nominations, and making outreach to their alumni listserv. I contacted an equal number of men and women, but many men did not respond. For those who agreed to be participants, I requested all nominees to complete a survey, which sought information regarding demographics, enrollment, and experience within Early College High

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Schools, and interest in being interviewed for this research study. This survey allowed me to ensure the nominees met the criteria of the research study. Once the survey results were completed, I reviewed and confirmed the eligibility of all research participants and created a pool of verified potential participants based on the eligibility requirements. Once the pool of verified potential participants were identified, I made contact via email to further explain the study's purpose and began the selection process. For those who agreed to participate, I requested to interview them and scheduled a time to connect via Zoom due to the COVID-19 global pandemic safety precautions.

I conducted a semi-structured interview with a minimum of 13 participants for 40 minutes each. Each interview consisted of the same questions to ensure continuity and to reduce experimenter bias. The interview questions consisted of open-ended questions relating to their interest in attending an Early College High School, the experiences and support that were most meaningful, and what supporters inspired, motivated, and helped them to graduate and continue their post-secondary education. One-on-one interviews were conducted digitally via Zoom. For all interviews, consent was obtained both orally and in writing. Audio of the interviews was also recorded upon receiving the participant's consent. To protect the anonymity of the participants and safeguard the data collected, each participant's identity was kept confidential, and all responses remained anonymous with the use of pseudonyms.

During the interviews, I asked clarifying questions to ensure that I had a true understanding of the participants' responses, and I took detailed notes. After each interview, I completed a transcription adding observational memos. A transcript of each interview was shared with each participant, who I asked to review and offer any corrections or clarifications.

Once each participant confirmed the accuracy of transcripts, I requested edits or clarifications that the participants wanted to include, to ensure accuracy and intention on behalf of the participants.

DATA/INFORMATION ANALYSIS

I transcribed and coded the participants' responses to each interview question. The transcripts were coded using initial coding to identify themes, with a focus on identifying information relevant to the four areas related to the research questions: (1) student supports; (2) academic achievement; (3) persistence through diploma and degree completion; and (4) continued post-secondary education. Following the information gathering and initial analysis, the information was further analyzed using axial coding. Following axial coding, I used causation coding to uncover emerging storylines related to the research questions. Multiple methods of information collection and analysis allowed me to saturate categories and triangulate data, permitting me to verify if the results were reliable and valid and thus relevant beyond this study. Based on the coding process, four themes were identified that answer all three research questions of this study. The identified themes are: (1) early access and exposure to university life, (2) family support and guidance, (3) social integration, and (4) early academic involvement.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research study followed the tradition of a qualitative, case study design. A qualitative study was appropriate because the research questions of this study were tailored to extract human perspective via the experiences that first-generation and second-generation African American alumni expressed to have been meaningful within their educational journey of attending an Early College High School. Within this experience, one could imagine the thoughts, feelings, memories, ideas, and emotions that can only be prescribed in a social context. Hence,

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the research questions of this study sought to uncover a rich understanding of the research participants' experiences and perspectives. Leedy and Ormond (2016) noted, "to answer some questions, we cannot skim across the surface. We must dig deep to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon we are studying" (p. 251).

Case study research was essential to this research study, as this particular Early College High School was also distinctively different from many other Early College High Schools. Those differences include school type, geographical location, admissions requirements for students, student population, and partnership with a four-year university. In addition to those attributes, the ECHS' post-secondary partner is a Historically Black College/University, which adds a layer of representation and connectedness to this study, as it focuses on the experience of first-generation and second-generation African Americans. I gained an in-depth understanding of how each experience influenced and impacted the first-generation African American alumni.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Thirteen research participants were selected using purposive sampling. This study required research accessible participants who met the selection requirements and who could provide relevant information about their experience within an Early College High School. The selection criteria required the research participants to have graduated from the Early College High School, identify as African American, be a first-generation or second-generation college student, and be currently enrolled in or have graduated from another College or University seeking a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree.

RESEARCH SITE

The Early College High School located in Dover, Delaware was the site for this research study. The Early College High School is a public charter school that originated in 2014, which grants all residents of Delaware eligibility to apply for admission. The school's primary focus is to make the dream of attending college attainable. In doing so, the Early College High School partners with a nearby four-year public Historically Black University to provide students an opportunity to earn 60 college credits for free while in high school.

The Early College High School's enrollment is roughly 320 students in total, where 80 students are admitted per year within each grade-level (class-size). Seventy eight percent (78%) of the students are reported to be African American/Black, while eleven percent (11%) are reported to be Caucasian/White, and two percent (2%) are reported to be bi-racial as members of two or more races. Sixty seven percent (67%) of the student population is reported to be female, while thirty three percent (33%) are reported to be male. The Early College High School has a 21:1 student-to-teacher ratio and a 212:1 student-to-counselor ratio. School begins at 9:00am and ends at 4:50pm, daily. Schooling is also offered year-round with an extended-day schedule due to block scheduling, buses and vans are provided to transport students, and there is no strict dress code.

FINDINGS

This research study had three research questions: (1) What role did the Early College High School (ECHS) play in supporting their persistence through diploma and degree completion and continued post-secondary education? (2) What, if any, types of support for students within Early College High Schools (ECHS) hindered or were ineffective in contributing

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to persistence through diploma and degree completion and continued post-secondary education?

(3) What are the similarities and differences of first-generation and second-generation African American alumni of the Early College High School?

The sample used for this research study was drawn from an Early College High School that provides students with the opportunity to experience post-secondary education via taking college courses at no cost while being enrolled in high school. First-generation and second-generation African American alumni benefited from enrollment and attendance within an Early College High School. The themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews were: (1) early access and exposure to university life, (2) family support and guidance, (3) an opportunity for social integration, and (4) an opportunity for early academic involvement. As a result, the participants gained first-hand experiences and exposure to the post-secondary world, reducing the opportunity gap. The participants were also developed and supported in a college-preparatory model which provided support to become college-ready, reducing the achievement gap. Lastly, the participants illustrated how valuable the previously mentioned support and supporters were to graduate, earn college credits, and continue their post-secondary education beyond the Early College High School.

Table 1

Identified Themes

Identified Themes				
Main Theme(s):	Sub-theme 1:	Sub-theme 2:	Sub-theme 3:	Sub-theme 4:
Early access & exposure to University Life	Location of the University's Campus	-	-	-
Family Support & Guidance	Representation	-	-	-

Social Integration	Peer Support	Mentorship	Lack of Holistic Support	-
Early Academic Involvement	Post-Secondary Selection	Feelings of Preparedness		

The following table illustrates the participants’ communications related to their reasoning and motivations for deciding to attend the Early College High School.

Table 2

Participants’ Communication

Code	Frequency (N = participants mentioned)
Mother’s Influence	N=8
Father’s Influence	N=1
MS Teacher’s Recommendation	N=1
Access to College Courses	N=10
Opportunity to Graduate Early/Get Ahead	N=2
Career Interest (specific field of study)	N=1
Different than a traditional HS experience	N=1
Financial benefit of getting 2 years ahead	N=1

In addition to the lack of mental health support, other participants reported attrition of the class size (beginning with 80 students and ending with 60), being treated like children, the challenge of finding a balance between high school and college, attending ECHS while it was being developed, not having a high school space of their own, the disorganization and lack of structure of ECHS (while in its infancy stage), professors asking if students were ECHS students (due to the perception of age), the experience being too academic, not having a traditional high school

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experience, and the newness of the school (see table below).

Table 3

Participants' Communication

Code	Frequency (N = participants mentioned)
Lack of Mental Health Support	N= 1
Attrition of Class Size (Retention)	N= 1
Treated like Children	N= 1
Finding Balance between HS & College	N= 1
Newness of the ECHS	N= 4
Lack of HS space on College Campus	N= 1
Disorganization/Lack of Structure	N= 3
Not having a traditional HS experience	N= 3
Professors' identification as ECHS student	N= 1
Experience being too Academic	N= 2

When asked, "what are your future career plans and how does post-secondary education fit into those plans?" all 13 research participants expressed interest in attending graduate school, as it relates to continuing their post-secondary education and the profession/career that they are interested in obtaining. Regarding continued post-secondary education, seven of thirteen (7/13) research participants indicated an interest in attending medical school. Four of thirteen (4/13) research participants indicated an interest in attending graduate school to earn a master's degree. Two of thirteen (2/13) research participants indicated an interest in obtaining a terminal degree in various fields. Also, regarding sought after professions, seven of thirteen (7/13) research participants identified the medical field. Of those seven, two participants indicated an interest in

becoming doctors; one participant indicated an interest in becoming a pediatrician, one participant indicated an interest in becoming a pharmacist, one participant indicated an interest in becoming a dentist, and two participants indicated interest in becoming physicians and/or physician's assistants. Other research participants found interest in becoming an FBI field agent/profiler, public relations social media branding expert, journalist, human resource director, and electrical engineer/roboticist (see table below).

Table 4

Participants' Career/Post-Secondary Education Plans

Research Participant (pseudonym)	Career/Post-secondary Education Plans
EA	Become a Doctor - Attend medical school.
HA	PR/Social Media Branding - Attend graduate school for Mass Communications.
AB	FBI Agent/Profiled - Attend graduate school to obtain a Master's in Psychology.
TF	Become a Pediatrician - Attend medical school.
JG	Journalism/Teaching - Earn a Doctorate.
AG	Become a Doctor - Actively preparing for the MCAT.
TJM	Become a Pharmacist - Attend medical school and eventually earn a Doctorate.
DK	Become a Dentist - Attend medical school.
CM	Robotics - Attend medical school.
JM	Become a Human Resource Director - Obtain a Master's in Business Administration.
DP	Become a Physician's Assistant - Attend medical school.
MS	Become a Physician - Attend medical school.

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MT	Child Psychologist - Attend graduate school.
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On average, second-generation participants earned 10 more college credits than their first-generation peers. Six of the thirteen (6/13) research participants identified as second-generation and accumulated a total of 338 college credits. When divided amongst the six second-generation participants, their average was 56 college credits. In comparison, seven of the 13 (7/13) research participants identified as first-generation participants and accumulated a total of 324 college credits. When divided amongst the seven first-generation participants, their average was 46 college credits. Collectively, all 13 research participants earned 662 college credits before graduating from high school within their respective classes. Five students earned enough college credits for the equivalent of an associate degree (61-65 college credits) (see table below).

Table 5

Participants' College Credits

Research Participant (pseudonym)	# Of College Credits
First Generation African American Alumni = 46 (AVG)	
HA	33
AB	42
TF	45
TJM	45
JM	38
MS	60
MT	61
Second Generation African American Alumni = 56 (AVG)	

EA	63
JG	36
AG	76
DK	67
CM	30
DP	66

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Based on the findings of this research study, I present five (5) propositions that speak to the significance of the findings of this research study. The propositions include Proposition 1: It is beneficial for all first-generation and second-generation African Americans to have early access and be exposed to post-secondary education with support; Proposition 2: It is advantageous that all first-generation and second-generation African American students experience university life on the campus of a college or university as soon as possible within their educational journey; Proposition 3: It is paramount that all first-generation and second-generation African American students experience the representation of African American leaders, principals, college presidents, teachers, professors, and people who hold the credentials, own businesses, and operate in careers that students are interested in obtaining; Proposition 4: It is recommended for all first-generation and second-generation African American students to have access to at least one source of social capital to support them in their post-secondary journey; and Proposition 5: It is instrumental that all Early College High Schools provide holistic support to first-generation and second-generation African American students as they navigate the demands of high school and college, concurrently.

Proposition 1: Early Access and Exposure

First-generation and second-generation African American students benefited from having access and exposure to post-secondary education, with supporters and tailored support. They also communicated the benefits of early access and exposure to post-secondary education and how other students could benefit as well. Being afforded the opportunity to take part in the full college experience early enabled students to understand the difference between teachers and professors and the high school and college classrooms. Being guided into post-secondary education with the support of family, peers in a cohort model, high school personnel, and collegiate personnel (who are understanding of their partnership to promote a college education to high-school-aged youth) supported the interest, achievement, and retention of first-generation and second-generation African American students, as it relates to early access and exposure.

Proposition 2: University Life

First-generation and second-generation African American students gained an advantage from experiencing university life on the campus of colleges and universities early. They also communicated the benefits of experiencing university life on the campus of colleges and universities early and how others could benefit as well. Being afforded the opportunity to experience university life at a college or university early enabled students to develop a sense of belonging and envision themselves within post-secondary education compared to taking a traditional college tour as a junior or senior in high school. Walking a college campus, viewing the architecture, eating in the college's dining commons, relaxing in the college's student lounge, observing how full-time college students prioritize their learning in libraries, watching collegiate students as they transition from classes without permission, and being ravished by the energy of

a college campus catalyzed first-generation and second-generation African American students to envision a future within post-secondary education, as it relates to university life.

Proposition 3: Representation

First-generation and second-generation African American students benefited from experiencing representation within their high school personnel and collegiate personnel, as it relates to shared race, culture, and gender identity. They also communicated the benefits of representation and how other students could benefit as well. Being afforded the opportunity to share race, culture, and/or gender identity with individuals who they look to for leadership provided a level of motivation that affirmed what was possible to achieve and accomplish. It also led to an improvement in students' self-image and self-esteem. Having access to people who they look like, experienced the same things they have experienced, and identified with the very same beliefs they identified with created a sense of hope. Hence, students were able to see themselves within their leaders through familiarity and history. Comparable to the concept that "seeing is believing", students can and will eventually grow to stand on the shoulders of these identified individuals one day because they will become what their represented leaders are or have been.

Proposition 4: Social Capital

First-generation and second-generation African American students benefited from having access to and receiving support from at least one source of social capital, as it relates to trusted individuals who have an interest and willingness in sharing their personal experiences within post-secondary education, making recommendations, and providing guidance and mentorship. They also communicated the benefits of having sources of social capital and how other students could benefit as well. Similar to the basic building blocks of construction when an architect

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plans to erect a building, they furnish construction plans with detailed measurements and markings that guide carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and HVAC technicians for the intended outcome of the construction project. Social capital provides the same experience for students, as trusted individuals offer a blueprint of their personal experiences within post-secondary education while guiding students to take advantage of opportunities and avoid potential mistakes that they may have made, attributable to the concept of eliminating risk factors. Being afforded the opportunity to have sources of social capital allowed students to gain a sense of protection, as if they were not on their own within a new potentially intimidating experience, as it relates to the perception of post-secondary education.

Proposition 5: Holistic Support

First-generation and second-generation African American students did not benefit from having access to and receiving holistic support related to non-academic services that contribute to the whole student including mental health support, counseling, and life coaching. The lack of holistic support was perpetuated as a barrier, which seemed to be detrimental. They also communicated the potential benefits of having access to and receiving holistic support and how other students could benefit as well. Being afforded the basic necessities of support services that create and sustain safe schools could have improved the physical and psychological wellness of students and foster the improvement of problem-solving skills. All school systems and local educational agencies (LEAs) should provide a plethora of holistic support; especially, early college high schools as ECHS students experience greater levels of stress managing the demands of secondary and post-secondary education concurrently. Furthermore, students would be able to overcome barriers to education and within their personal lives by confiding in a trusted member of the school community (which serves as social capital) and have a better chance of graduating

with their high school diploma and college credits, as well as to continue their post-secondary education due to an improved quality of life.

CONCLUSION

As first-generation and second-generation African American alumni of Early College High Schools continue to navigate post-secondary spaces, they stand on the shoulders of their supporters. Supporters may have come as family members, members of their community, friends, school leaders, or educators (teachers and professors). However, they all had one thing in common: uplifting a young person to achieve. For the participants of this research study, early access and exposure to university life, family support and guidance, social integration, and early academic involvement helped them earn their high school diploma and college credits and continue their post-secondary education. These identified themes were not just in pursuit of their bachelor's degrees, but also their master's and aspiration to earn terminal degrees.

First-generation and second-generation African American students need to access and be exposed to post-secondary education with support; especially, in today's society. Education is a birthright, not a privilege, and due to the residual effects of the African American achievement gap, it is even more profound to collect on America's promise. Affirmative action may be needed to protect opportunities that are likely to be stripped if an affirmative obligation to act fairly does not exist. Americans often forget that as late as the 1960s, most African Americans amongst many other minoritized people were educated in segregated schools funded well below other schools serving their more affluent peers. African Americans were also excluded from post-secondary institutions entirely.

Based on this account of history, it is imperative for school districts, board members, school executives, school leaders, and educators to analyze their systems to ensure equity and

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identify programs and resources that uplift African American students to gain access and exposure to post-secondary education. In addition to gaining access and exposure, all African American students need to be able to envision pathways to live out their interests and passions instead of making decisions out of fear to overcome living in poverty. Most importantly, it is vital for all African American students to experience the representation of African American leaders, principals, college presidents, teachers, professors, and people who hold the credentials, own businesses, and operate in the careers that they are interested in obtaining. This experience affirms that African Americans can achieve too, despite what history says. African Americans benefit from seeing others with whom they share race, culture, and gender identity with.

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Author Biography:

Dr. Brown is a product of Philadelphia and a first-generation college student. Dr. Brown serves as Assistant Principal at Franklin Learning Center High School. His passion focuses on bridging gaps between secondary and postsecondary education by supporting first-generation students of color with access, exposure and developing Early College High Schools.