BLACK AND LATINX STUDENTS AND COMPETITIVE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE ACCESS: THE ROLE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELORS' EXPECTATIONS IN COLLEGE MATCHING

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DEDICATION

To my loving husband, Jose Antonio,
and my precious children, Danielle, Gabriel, and Emmanuel.

This dissertation is dedicated to you with heartfelt gratitude and deep appreciation for the unwavering support you provided me during the most challenging time of my life. Juggling my roles as a full-time principal, mom, and wife sometimes felt like a circus act, but your love, understanding, and cheers kept me from tumbling.

I also dedicate this dissertation to
my mother, Rosemay McBean.

Mom, you're the original superhero, a rock-solid Caribbean woman whose cultural capital, dreams, and aspirations not only set the stage for us to take on the world but also taught us how to lift others while climbing our own mountains.

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ABSTRACT

BLACK AND LATINX STUDENTS AND

COMPETITIVE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE ACCESS: THE ROLE OF

GUIDANCE COUNSELORS' EXPECTATIONS IN COLLEGE MATCHING

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This study examined New York City Black and Latinx high school students' perceptions of their college counseling experiences. In particular, I sought to understand how the students perceived the role their high school guidance counselors' expectations of their abilities played in the choice of colleges to which they were counseled to apply.

Data collection involved 21 Black and Latinx former NYC specialized high school students who shared their narratives in semi-structured interviews, filled out a 15-minute Qualtrics survey, and provided college-related archival documents. Given the dearth of research highlighting student perceptions of college counseling (Howard, 2003), granting students' voices methodological priority in this qualitative study sought to correct this gap in the research.

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework, this study honors the experiential knowledge and voices of people of color by recognizing that educators, researchers, policymakers, and others can learn from the critical knowledge of the lived experiences of minoritized people to improve American institutions that impact their life outcomes.

Results revealed that study participants' self-perceptions and their guidance counselors' expectations of their college readiness were aligned. The findings also suggested that students had an accurate perception of their qualifications to attend their desired colleges based on their college-going profiles. Overall, students perceived they were appropriately matched with

colleges and did not perceive there was college undermatching in their schools. It is noteworthy that these findings contradicted the general literature on college matching for Black and Latinx students.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

College aspiration among U.S. high schoolers is greater than ever (Bettinger & Evans, 2019; Dahill-Brown et al., 2016). The number of high school students of diverse racial, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds hoping to apply to college has increased dramatically since the mid-1970s. However, Black and Latinx students are still lagging behind White and Asian students in applying to and persisting in college. Often, when Black and Latinx students do apply, they choose less selective or competitive colleges which may limit their pathways to high-status, high-paying jobs that allow them to improve their social, economic, and political stations in life (Baker, 2019; Lee, 2013). Underrepresented high school students who desire to go to college often lack awareness of college success requirements and expectations (McWhirter et al., 2013). Therefore, these students rely heavily on the resources of their high school community, specifically their guidance counselors' assistance, to navigate the college-going process (Holland, 2015).

High school college guidance counselors can play an important role in motivating students to apply to college (McKillip et al., 2012), especially Black and Latinx students (Bryan et al., 2009; Tang & Ng, 2019). Counselors can help students choose appropriate high school courses and encourage them to find and participate in high school community activities and extracurricular activities. They can also be instrumental in helping students create résumés and college application profiles that highlight their in-school and out-of-school achievements and jobs. Through these processes, guidance counselors help students become college-ready, garner skills, and foster a mindset needed to succeed in college and beyond (Tang & Ng, 2019). Furthermore, guidance counselors should encourage students to apply to colleges and universities that match their academic performance (Farmer-Hinton, 2008).

Meanwhile, research has demonstrated that insufficient guidance and low expectations of students' abilities can result in undermatching, where students do not attend the most competitive or selective colleges their qualifications suggest they could (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Kang & García Torres, 2021; Muskens et al., 2019). Undermatching disproportionately affects Black and Latinx students, diminishing their college success and life prospects (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Hacker et al., 1998; Theokas et al., 2018). Guidance counselors may contribute to undermatching of minoritized students by making assumptions about their abilities based on their race and ethnicity. Thus, existing literature on college access suggests that guidance counselors may play an influential role in mitigating or exacerbating undermatching.

The principles of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the theoretical framework for this study, highlight the importance of incorporating the viewpoints and experiences of marginalized students (Delgado-Bernal & Aleman, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Yosso, 2005) to comprehend fully the counselor's role in the college-matching process. Having reviewed the literature on college access, I found a dearth of student voices in the college-matching literature. Therefore, through this study, I sought to address the gap in representation by centering the voices and perspectives of New York City Black and Latinx students in the discourse surrounding undermatching. Examining how students perceived their interactions with their guidance counselors and their guidance counselors' expectations of their abilities provided information about how guidance counselors aided or hindered students' ability to access competitive 4-year colleges and universities. Thus, this qualitative study was guided by the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. What are Black and Latinx NYC high school students' perceptions of their guidance counselors' role as advisors during the college preparation and application process?
2. What, if any, are the differences between Black and Latinx NYC high school students' self-perception of college readiness, and their perception of their counselors' expectations of their readiness?
3. How do these differences in perception, if they exist, manifest during the college preparation and application process?

Origin of the Question

In 2012, my daughter, a student in a selective public math and science program in a large specialized high school in Brooklyn, NY, revealed the list of colleges that she had created with the recommendation of her high school guidance counselor. Dumbfounded, my husband and I—both educators in the New York City school system—could not understand how a student with her grades, résumé of summer jobs and volunteer work, and after-school activities could have been counseled into applying to colleges that were so far below the tier of schools her academic record and student profile demonstrated she was qualified to attend. We knew that mismatching her with a college below her abilities would not be cognitively stimulating, would not push her creativity, and would rob her of the competitive edge. She had thus far thrived as a dedicated student-athlete at the top 1% of her medical science track. In fact, college selectivity and college mismatch research showed that Black and Latinx students' probabilities of graduation are higher at selective than they are at nonselective institutions (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Melguizo, 2007, 2010). Light and Strayer (2000) also found that students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are, in fact, more likely to obtain a 4-year degree attending more selective 4-year institutions, compared with similarly qualified students attending less selective 4-year institutions. Furthermore, some researchers have found that even Black and Latinx students benefiting from affirmative action, who are overmatched with schools in tiers above what their scholastic credentials would predict, have higher graduation rates than their counterparts with similar profiles at less competitive colleges (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Hacker et al., 1998; Lutz et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, undermatching of Black and Latinx students at my daughter's high school was endemic in the college advising team. I had been a student at the same high school 30 years earlier. I too was counseled into schools that were below what my academic records supported, and it was alarming to realize that this situation had not changed much. Conversations with some of my daughter's friends confirmed that their experiences with counselors had shattered their dreams of applying to top-tier schools. These students expressed a lack of trust in the counseling process, as most had believed they could get into more competitive schools than those recommended by their high school guidance counselor. College access literature showed that a guidance counselor-student relationship of mutual trust is vital in setting students of color on the path to appropriate college selection (Auerbach, 2004; Holland, 2015).

In one of our many conversations about applying to college, my daughter and her friends also expressed that although their high school was academically rigorous and offered many math and science courses, they wished they had more guidance about making informed decisions about postsecondary institutions. They wondered about the experiences of other students at their school with the college-going process. They posed frank questions like "I wonder if my recommended list supported by my guidance counselor would have the same colleges if I was

White." They intimated that something needed to be done to give them more control over a process that would shape their futures.

As I listened to the stories of high school students yearning to inform themselves so that they could apply to colleges matching their academic potential and abilities, I was drawn to better understand college readiness preparation and school culture as experienced by Black and Latinx students in NYC public high schools. I wondered, if not high school guidance counselors, who then was responsible for helping all students—especially students who are underrepresented on U.S. college campuses—to navigate the rigorous application process successfully? I wondered what current high school students as well as high school graduates were saying about their college preparation journey. Finally, I wondered how this apparent undermatching of Black and Latinx students, even within rigorous high school programs, could be mitigated.

Rationale for the Study

As a New York City educator who has pledged to provide a good education to all students, I want to encourage more Black and Latinx students to apply to competitive colleges and universities. It is incumbent upon me to seek out and elevate the voices of minoritized students. The presence of more Black and Latinx students on selective 4-year campuses will contribute to a more equitable distribution of societal resources that will positively impact society at large. Those who can improve school culture and policies, especially high school staff, can use this study to change the landscape of college campuses by encouraging or motivating underrepresented, especially Black and Latinx, students to apply to college.

Significance of the Study

As a Black woman, I am tired of negative stereotypes perpetuating the idea that Black, Latinx, and other minoritized people are less intelligent. The underrepresentation of Black and

Latinx students on elite college campuses creates misconceptions about these groups being intellectually limited. The voices of the participants in this study helped me better understand the college-matching process and how to use that information to motivate Black and Latinx students to work hard, inform themselves, and apply to the nation's most competitive colleges and universities.

This research can be meaningful for high school counselors and school leaders who hope to increase the presence of Black and Latinx students on competitive 4-year campuses. I hope that this qualitative study will, at minimum, push counselors to look at their student data to discover if they are disproportionately counseling Black and Latinx students into 2-year or non-competitive 4-year universities, even when their academic records suggest they are qualified to attend higher-caliber institutions.

Attending competitive 4-year colleges and universities provides Black and Latinx students with uniquely valuable opportunities to improve their life prospects (Baker, 2019; Bryan et al., 2011). However, for underrepresented students who would most benefit from the resources and prestige of these selective 4-year colleges, often studies (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2011; Roderick et al., 2011) have shown they do not receive the support they need in high school to apply and flourish successfully in those selective schools. Because underrepresented students, including Black and Latinx students, are less likely to have support when navigating the college application process at home, the guidance counselor plays an especially important role in shaping their educational prospects and outcomes (Belasco 2013; Bryan et al., 2022; Poynton et al., 2021). This study contributes to the research on the role of counselors in the college-going process. Moreover, it will supplement the underdeveloped research exploring the role that educator expectations play, and here specifically, guidance counselor expectations, in the college-going process of Black and Latinx students. Furthermore, this study will expand the scope of extant literature on the role of counselors' expectations and beliefs about students' academic capabilities. In addition, through this study, I sought to expand the literature on teacher expectations to consider more broadly *educator expectations*, which includes counselors.

Definitions of Key Terms

"Black" refers to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (Rastogi et al., 2011). When interviewed, students self-identified as Black, African American, African, Afro Caribbean, and Afro Latina. All of these identifications are captured by the encompassing term *Black* in this study.

"College application process," in this study, does not merely refer to the singular act of completing and submitting applications and receiving responses. Instead, it refers to the holistic "process" that leads up to the completion and submission of applications. The college application process begins at the end of junior year and concludes in senior year when students are admitted into colleges. It includes preparatory work for the applications, researching financial aid, creating a college résumé, researching colleges that might be best matches, and determining which schools to apply to (Paulsen et al., 2001; Perna & Titus, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

"College-going activities" are programs implemented by guidance counselors and other school employees dedicated to enhancing students' access and success in postsecondary education. Examples of college-going activities include, but are not limited to, college admissions and financial workshops for parents and students, college fairs, and college application workshops.

"College-going culture" refers to a school environment that promotes all students to prepare for, apply to, and enroll in college (Martinez & Everman, 2017; O'Daniel, 2019; Perna, 2000). A college-going culture includes college-going activities but is not limited to them, as it refers more broadly to a mindset shared by school officials, students, and families. Thus, it refers to more informal interactions as well as formal activities that reflect school community expectations.

"College matching" is the process of matching students to colleges based on their college-going profile and personal interests. This includes their high school Grade Point Average (GPA), test scores, special achievements, special interests, sports, school clubs, teams, extracurricular activities, cost, size, and campus culture (Pallais, 2013; Smith et al., 2013).

"Competitive colleges" and "Selective colleges" are used interchangeably, referring to colleges that are highly selective in the admissions process and typically serve middle- to upper-class students (Lee, 2013). Based on the Barron's Index of College Selectivity, the term is defined as follows: 1-most competitive, 2-highly competitive, 3-very competitive, 4-competitive (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022).

1-Most competitive colleges accept fewer than 15% of all applicants AND possess an average composite ACT (25%ile) score of at least 30 or an average combined SAT (25%ile) score of at least 1370.

2-Highly competitive colleges accept fewer than 35% of all applicants AND possess an average composite ACT (25%ile) score of at least 29 OR an average combined SAT (25%ile) score of at least 1340.

3-Very competitive colleges accept fewer than 50% of all applicants AND possess an average composite ACT (25%ile) score of at least 27 or an average combined SAT (25%ile) score of at least 1280.

4-Competitive colleges accept fewer than 60% of all applicants AND possess an average composite ACT (25%ile) score of at least 25 or an average combined SAT (25%ile) score of at least 1210.

In addition to Ivies and other private selective colleges, New York City high school students also vie for acceptance into New York City and New York State higher education system's extremely competitive flagship schools and programs—for example, the Macaulay Honors and the Sophie Davis Medical Program, both at CUNY.

"Educational System (P-16)," specifically P-16, refers to a comprehensive and integrated system of education that spans from early childhood (preschool or PreK) through higher education (up to the completion of a bachelor's degree). This inclusive approach aims to create a seamless educational experience for students by considering the whole educational continuum and addressing the diverse needs of learners at each stage of their academic journey. By focusing on P-16, this study acknowledges the interdependencies and shared responsibilities among various educational levels and institutions, including high schools and colleges, to prepare students for success in higher education and beyond.

"Educator Expectations" and "Teacher Expectations" are widely studied phenomena associated with the relation between what a teacher believes a student can do and what the student can actually do (Rubie-Davies & Turner, 2022; Sondergeld, 2014; Weinstein, 2002). However, I consider teacher expectations under the broader umbrella of educator expectations. In addition to teacher expectations, I include those of other educators, in particular guidance counselors.

"Guidance counselor," in this study, refers to a school employee who provides academic and career guidance while promoting the socioemotional development of students, a definition aligned with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, n.d.). Although sometimes referred to as "college advisors" or "counselors" (Zyromski et al., 2018), the term *guidance counselor* is employed consistently across the eight schools involved in this study. Within these schools, the guidance counselor is regarded as the primary source of support during the college application process. Additionally, some schools have a specialized college advisor on staff to assist with this process, working alongside the guidance counselor to manage the student-to-counselor ratio effectively during the college-going process.

"Latinx" refers to a person of Latin American origin or descent (used as a gender-neutral or nonbinary alternative to Latino or Latina) (Castro-Hostetler et al., 2021; Salinas, 2020; Salinas & Lozano, 2017). When interviewed, participants in this study most commonly self-identified as Hispanic, while others identified as Latino, Latina, and Afro Latina. All of these identifications are captured by the term Latinx.

"Minoritized" people are made to feel less worthy due to systemic discrimination and exclusion. This term acknowledges that these individuals or groups are not inherently inferior but, rather, have been socially and politically disadvantaged. "Minoritization" refers to the systematic marginalization of certain groups of people, based on their social identifiers such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other identity markers (Bourke, 2022; Harper, 2012) by those in positions with more power.

"Overmatching" refers to a situation in which students attend colleges and universities for which they are underqualified (as measured by standardized test scores, GPA, and extracurricular activities). The schools to which these students apply or are admitted generally admit those with GPAs and test scores superior to those of these students (Hoxby & Turner, 2013).

"Undermatching" refers to a situation in which students attend colleges and universities for which they are overqualified (as measured by standardized test scores, GPA, and extracurricular activities). Extant literature on undermatching has suggested that undermatching is negative and students attending institutions for which they are overqualified are not maximizing their educational potential (Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Tiboris, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

For this study, I used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens through which I pursued the three research questions.

Critical Race Theory

This study explored students' perspectives of the college-going culture in their schools through the lens of CRT (Delgado & Stefanic, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT is based on the premise that race is a defining feature of American life (Delgado-Bernal & Aleman, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, 2022) and is embedded in every American institution. Racism and White supremacy are woven into America's fabric and are endemic and deeply ingrained in U.S. social systems, including educational institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Delgado-Bernal & Aleman, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Racism and race are so engraved in our institutions that they are often hard to recognize (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lee, 2018).

Some of the key tenets of CRT that helped me analyze the data from this research are:

1. Race is a social construct that has been historically used to create and maintain systems of oppression. Race is not a biological fact; rather, it is a socially constructed category that has been used historically to create and maintain systems of oppression.

Black and Latinx students face unique challenges and experiences due to their racial identities that must be considered and addressed.

2. Race intersects with other identities such as class and ability to shape experiences of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality plays a crucial role in understanding the experiences of minority students and how race intersects with other identities such as gender, immigration status, sexuality, and class. Intersectionalities shape experiences of oppression and privilege. Therefore, it is imperative that we recognize and address the ways in which multiple identities intersect in a student's experience.
3. The experiences and perspectives of those who have been marginalized and oppressed, particularly people of color, should be centered in any analysis of race and racism. It is important for educators to center the experiences and perspectives of minoritized students in discussions of race and racism in educational institutions or processes. These students have experiences of marginalization that differ from those of White students and, thus, require different approaches in supporting their mental health and academic success.
4. CRT emphasizes the importance of counternarratives as a way to challenge and resist the dominant narratives that often perpetuate stereotypes, discrimination, and inequality. Counternarratives are stories or perspectives that come from marginalized or underrepresented groups, and they serve to counter mainstream narratives that may uphold systemic racism or other forms of oppression. In research using CRT, participants from marginalized backgrounds often share their counternarratives, providing insight into their experiences and perspectives that may differ from the

dominant narratives. These counternarratives can help to challenge, deconstruct, and question the prevailing assumptions and beliefs about race, power, and privilege.

5. Interest convergence theory (ICT) is a CRT concept suggesting that marginalized groups, such as minoritized students, only gain access to resources or accommodations when their interests align with those of the dominant group (Bell, 1973). ICT emphasizes the importance of examining the motives and interests of those in power, and how these interests shape policies and practices. The participants in this study all graduated from NYC specialized high schools. The analysis of this study looked at how interest convergence may impact how Black and Latinx participants experienced the college-going process.

CRT maintains that an inalienable characteristic of racism is that relationships of power are unevenly distributed based on the color of one's skin (Delgado-Bernal & Aleman, 2017). Generally, Black and Latinx people are positioned lower on the power hierarchy, compared to White people (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). In terms of racial and ethnic hierarchy trends in the United States, Asians are often perceived as being higher in the hierarchy, followed by Latinx, and then Blacks (Bonilla-Silva, 2004). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these trends are not universally applicable, as individual experiences and positions within the hierarchy can vary significantly. Importantly, the U.S. educational system perpetuates uneven power balances in society through aspects such as its predominantly White leadership and teaching force (Boutte, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 1998), biased textbooks (Ladson-Billings, 1998), and the presence of color-based biases (Boutte, 2022). Therefore, the racialized power dynamics of U.S. educational systems often result in low student expectations for Black and Latinx students, which actively shape their life outcomes (Lee, 2018). Employing a CRT lens could help educators and counselors improve their practice by stirring their awareness of how race and racism influence not only the experiences of students of color but also their relationships with academic professionals (Lee, 2018).

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) and Bowen et al. (2019) maintain that the impact of decades of bias and inequity in our educational systems is that students of color, such as Black and Latinx high school students, are at a disadvantage at every stage in their educational journey. Therefore, proponents of CRT in education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2002, 2023), following the legal professionals who developed the theory (Bell, 1973), reject the notion that race has a neutral impact. Instead, they argue that race is a socially constructed concept intentionally embedded into our daily lives to create divisions among different groups. A CRT framework not only refutes the idea that race has a neutral impact on education but also strongly rejects color blindness as a form of equity or justice. Proponents of color blindness claim to be unbiased and often attribute success or failure to individuals and the extent to which they were willing to work hard for what they have earned (Apfelbaum et al., 2011).

In this study, a CRT framework forcefully puts forward the idea that color blindness in education has the deleterious effect of negating the struggles of minoritized peoples and is complicit in perpetuating injustices in a system that has the possibility of positively impacting the life outcome of Black and Latinx students (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The Black and Latinx high school students in this study are not all the same; they have individual experiences, stories, and needs. Acknowledging the importance of color, ethnicities, and the intersectionality of other identities will help us better understand how Black and Latinx students experience the college-going phenomenon in their New York City high schools. Conducting this research through a

CRT lens allowed me, the researcher, to acknowledge that differences impact our individual experiences.

A key component of CRT is the inclusion of the voices of minoritized people. Delgado (1996) stressed the importance of including the voices of scholars of color in CRT research to understand the scope of social inequities fully. Ladson-Billings (1998) posited that those who have experienced discrimination speak with unique voices to which we should listen. Furthermore, a CRT framework invites students to use storytelling to articulate their own realities in dignified, non-exploitative, and culturally nuanced ways (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Conducting this research using a CRT lens legitimated the voices of the students' lived experiences.

There are many reasons why Black and Latinx students are historically underrepresented on college campuses across the United States. However, in this limited study, I focused on high school college guidance counselors, who, as research has shown, can have a crucial impact on the number of students of color who attend competitive 4-year colleges and universities (Bryan et al., 2009). Using the CRT framework as a lens to investigate guidance counselors' role in helping Black and Latinx students attend and thrive in competitive 4-year colleges offers educators an opportunity to improve the college admissions process. Using a CRT lens, I investigated the ways in which race influences the counseling experiences of high school students and their engagement with the college application process. Finally, a CRT framework can provide information about the role race may play in counselor expectations and undermatching.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review contains four main sections. The first section reviews the literature on college access, with a subsection on college-going culture. The second section reviews literature on high school college counseling, including a subsection that addresses the current state of the role of counselors and their perceptions of their role. The third section reviews literature on educator expectations, with subsections on teacher and guidance counselor expectations for college access and college choice as it pertains to Black and Latinx students. The fourth section discusses research on college matching, especially the phenomenon of undermatching Black and Latinx students, and the importance of 4-year colleges and universities for the life outcomes of Black and Latinx students.

College Access

The origins of higher education in the United States are rooted in the maintenance of the power hierarchy of White men and the exclusion of women and people of color, marking a long and complex legacy of discrimination in the American educational system (Gasman, 2013; Kim, 2023; Toldson & Lewis, 2012). This legacy has led to a persistent marginalization of Latinx, Black, and other minoritized groups in terms of accessing and succeeding in college due to discriminatory policies, practices, and attitudes that perpetuate systemic inequalities based on race, ethnicity, and other marginalizing characteristics (Gasman, 2013).

Over the years, various college access initiatives have been implemented in response to the history of exclusion in higher education, which have aimed to provide equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status, with the ultimate goal of increasing college access and alleviating financial burdens (Higginbotham, 2022; Orfield, 2022). The GI Bill was signed into law in 1944, providing college access to veterans, especially those from underrepresented groups (National Archives, 2022). At the federal level, Affirmative Action was introduced in 1961 to promote equal opportunity in employment, laying the groundwork for future policies addressing diversity and equal opportunity in education (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Federally subsidized loan programs were introduced in 1965 (Federal Register, 2022), and Pell grants were established in 1972 to provide financial aid to low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). The Department of Education launched GEAR UP in 1998 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b) and the Race to the Top initiative in 2009, both aiming to increase college readiness among low-income students (McGuinn, 2012). At the state level, the New York State Excelsior scholarship program was launched in 2017 to offer free tuition for eligible students at New York State public colleges and universities (Higher Education Services Corporation, n.d.). Recently, in 2021, President Biden proposed initiatives aimed at alleviating the financial burden of college attendance, including loan forgiveness (Biden, 2021).

Numerous nonprofit college access programs have emerged over the years to address enrollment disparities of underrepresented groups in higher education. Upward Bound, established in 1965, is one such program that provides high school students from low-income families with academic support and college preparatory services (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The Gates Millennium Scholars Program, founded in 1999, offers financial support to outstanding students of color, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian Pacific Islander American, and Hispanic American students to pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees (Boatman & Long, 2016). Another program, the Posse Foundation, founded in 1989, recruits and trains groups of diverse students from urban areas to attend selective colleges and universities together, providing them with additional support through the transition (Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018). These nonprofit programs have played a crucial role in facilitating access to higher education for underrepresented groups (Hwang, 2023; Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018; Ruiz Alvarado et al., 2020), helping to bridge the gap in enrollment and success rates between them and their more advantaged peers.

Despite government, local, and state initiatives, as well as nonprofit efforts to improve college access for underrepresented students, there still exists a gap in enrollment. However, the various programs and initiatives listed above have collectively contributed to boosting college enrollment for all groups, particularly for minoritized groups. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021), college enrollment rates for 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States increased from 26% in 1980 to 41% in 2019. Furthermore, the college enrollment rate for Hispanic students increased from 22% in 2000 to 36% in 2019, and the enrollment rate for Black students increased from 29% in 2000 to 37% in 2019 (NCES, 2021). Despite these improvements, significant disparities still exist. For example, the college enrollment rate for White students in 2019 was 46% and for Asian students, 62% (NCES, 2021). Additionally, Black and Latinx students are less likely to enroll in and complete college than their White peers (Simmons & Smith, 2020).

Furthermore, in addition to enrollment rate disparities, there are significant gaps in college completion rates for minoritized groups. According to the NCES in 2021, 64% of White students who started pursuing a bachelor's degree in 2013-2014 completed their degrees within 6 years, while only 54% of Asian students, 49% of Hispanic students, 40% of Black students, and 38% of Native American students completed their degrees within the same timeframe. These gaps in college access and completion contribute to persistent racial and ethnic inequalities in the

United States, as highlighted by research from Daniels et al. (2023), Gopalan (2019), and Welner and Carter (2013).

Despite the efforts made by various programs and initiatives to increase college access for underrepresented students, including those from Black and Latinx communities, there are still significant barriers preventing them from fully participating in higher education. These barriers are complex and multifaceted, and they require attention and solutions that are equally complex and multifaceted. Research from CRT scholars has identified several prominent barriers that Black and Latinx students face when attempting to access higher education. In the following sections, I outline four of these barriers along with supporting evidence from academic literature.

Socioeconomic Barriers

The socioeconomic barriers faced by Black and Latinx students are not solely limited to their economic status but are also rooted in historical and systemic factors (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Furthermore, the lack of resources available to Black and Latinx students is not an accident but, rather, a result of deliberate policies and practices (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2022).

Critical race theorists have argued that the education system is complicit in perpetuating socioeconomic disparities by reinforcing the status quo and marginalizing students of color. For example, scholars like Solórzano and Yosso (2022) have argued that schools often reinforce stereotypes and biases about people of color, leading to lower expectations for academic achievement and limited access to opportunities. This can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy in which students of color do not receive the support and resources needed to succeed academically.

Moreover, the lack of resources available to Black and Latinx students extends beyond the school system and into larger societal structures. Scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) have argued that the intersectionality of race, gender, and class can compound the effects of discrimination and marginalization faced by people of color. For instance, Black and Latinx women face unique challenges, as they are often subjected to both racial and gender discrimination. This can lead to limited access to economic and educational resources, which can hinder their ability to succeed in college.

Structural Inequalities

Structural inequalities embedded in the education system have been identified as a significant barrier to college access for Black and Latinx students (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Critical race theorists have argued that structural inequalities, which are deeply ingrained in institutional practices and policies, can have a cascading effect on the educational experiences of marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 2021). These inequalities can limit opportunities for college preparation and success and hinder upward mobility (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022).

The structural inequalities in the education system can manifest in various ways, including limited access to resources and inequitable distribution of funding (Ladson-Billings, 2021). For example, Black and Latinx students are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources, lower-quality teachers, and inadequate facilities, all of which can negatively impact their academic performance and limit their college options (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Moreover, Black and Latinx students may also face challenges related to college affordability and financial aid. For example, research has found that Black and Latinx students are more likely to have unmet financial need and to take on higher levels of debt to pay for college (College Board, 2021). This can limit their access to higher education and create additional stress and financial burdens that can negatively impact their academic performance and persistence.

Furthermore, these structural inequalities in the education system can create disparities in college access and success. For example, students from low-income families, who are disproportionately Black and Latinx, often lack access to college-preparatory resources such as tutoring, test preparation, and college counseling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Gándara & Contreras, 2010). These disparities can lead to lower performance in high school and difficulty getting into college, ultimately limiting job opportunities and career advancement (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Solórzano & Yosso, 2022).

Racism and Discrimination

Racism and discrimination can create a hostile environment for Black and Latinx students in schools and colleges, thereby affecting their college access. Exposure to racism and discrimination can limit their sense of belonging and confidence in their abilities, which can lower their aspirations for higher education (Cuyjet, 2006). For example, Black and Latinx students may experience stereotype threat, a situational predicament in which they are at risk of confirming negative stereotypes about their racial or ethnic group, leading to anxiety and undermining their academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 2004). This can negatively impact their educational outcomes and limit their opportunities for college preparation and success.

Moreover, Black and Latinx students are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, which can lead to fewer opportunities for college preparation, lower college enrollment rates, and higher rates of attrition (NCES, 2021). The lack of resources can manifest in multiple ways that affect students' educational experiences, such as having fewer advanced courses, outdated textbooks, inadequate facilities, insufficient funding for extracurricular activities, and limited access to guidance counselors. The scarcity of these resources not only hinders the overall educational experience for students but also directly impacts their college preparation, access, and success. Research has found that schools with higher percentages of Black and Latinx students receive less funding than predominantly White schools (Lafortune et al., 2018).

Racism and discrimination are not only detrimental to the mental health and well-being of Black and Latinx students but can also have long-lasting effects on their academic aspirations and college access. Exposure to racism and discrimination can cause feelings of isolation, exclusion, and doubt in their abilities, leading to a decrease in motivation to pursue higher education. For instance, a study by Leath and colleagues (2019) found that Black students who reported experiencing more racism were more likely to disidentify with school and pursue alternate paths to success.

Cultural Mismatch

Cultural mismatch refers to a disconnection between the cultural experiences and backgrounds of students and the educational system, thus impeding their academic success (Ogbu & Simons, 2022). For Black and Latinx students, cultural mismatch can be a significant barrier to college access, as they are often faced with educational systems that do not value or recognize their cultural experiences (Howard, 2003). When students feel disconnected from the educational system, they may be less engaged in learning and less motivated to pursue higher education, which can ultimately limit their opportunities for college and career advancement.

Many Black and Latinx students do not see themselves represented in the faculty and staff at their schools or in the curriculum. This lack of representation can lead to feelings of marginalization and a disconnection from the academic community. According to critical race theorist Tara Yosso (2005), the experiences and perspectives of Black and Latinx students are often excluded from mainstream curriculum, leading to a lack of validation and recognition for their contributions to the academic community. Additionally, Black and Latinx students may not have access to mentors and role models who can provide guidance and support during the college application process (Muskens et al., 2019).

Studies have shown that a lack of cultural congruity in the curriculum can lead to lower academic achievement among Black and Latinx students (Banks, 2008). This lack of “culturally responsive pedagogy” in the educational system can contribute to lower graduation rates and limited opportunities for higher education and career advancement, creating another barrier to college access for Black and Latinx students (Ladson-Billings, 2021). For example, a study by Ladson-Billings (1992) found that African American students who were exposed to culturally relevant curricula were more likely to graduate high school and attend college, highlighting the importance of a culturally responsive educational system in promoting college access for Black and Latinx students.

Moreover, cultural mismatch can also affect students’ social and emotional well-being, which can impact their college access. Black and Latinx students may experience feelings of alienation and marginalization in educational settings that do not recognize or value their cultural identities (Museus, 2012). This can lead to a lack of engagement and motivation, ultimately impacting their educational experiences at every level and creating another barrier to college access for Black and Latinx students.

College-going Culture

A college-going culture has been identified as a crucial factor in enhancing college access opportunities for underrepresented students, especially those from minoritized, low-income, and first-generation backgrounds (McClafferty et al., 2002). McDonough’s (1998) work on college access reinforced this notion by demonstrating that students’ college plans are influenced by the expectations that prevail among their peers, parents, and faculty in high school. Building on

McDonough's work, McClafferty and colleagues (2002) examined the impact of a college-going culture on high school students' postsecondary educational plans. They discovered that schools that deliberately structured and operationalized a college-going culture, with high postsecondary expectations, had a more significant impact on students' college-going plans than schools that did not prioritize these expectations. Students who attended schools with a strong college-going culture were more likely to plan to attend a 4-year college or university than those who did not attend such schools.

According to McClafferty and colleagues (2002), creating and sustaining a college-going culture in high schools require commitment and effort from school leaders, personnel, counselors, teachers, and families. They identified several key practices that should guide educators and administrators in building such a culture. These practices included: (a) school leaders must commit to building a college culture and understanding how to operationalize it; (b) all school personnel should provide consistent messages to students that support their college preparatory journey every day; (c) all counselors should serve as college counselors; and (d) counselors, teachers, and families should collaborate as partners to prepare students for college.

College-going Culture Theory

McClafferty et al.'s and McDonough's work on college access for underrepresented students has yielded important insights into the role of school culture in promoting college-going. One key concept that emerged from their research is the *college-going culture theory,* which includes nine principles that can guide educators and administrators in creating and sustaining a college-going culture (McClafferty et al., 2002). The nine principles that form the college-going culture theory include:

Create a culture of high expectations for all students: This principle involves setting high standards and goals for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or academic abilities. Educators should communicate the message that every student has the potential to succeed in college and encourage them to aim high.

Foster a sense of belonging among all students, particularly underrepresented students: This principle emphasizes the importance of creating an inclusive and welcoming school environment where all students feel valued and supported. Educators should take steps to address any barriers that might prevent underrepresented students from feeling like they belong, such as discrimination or lack of representation.

Provide rigorous academic preparation and support: This principle involves ensuring that students have access to challenging coursework and academic support services that can help them succeed. Educators should provide students with the tools and resources they need to excel academically, such as tutoring, study groups, and extra help sessions.

Provide counseling and academic advising that is college-focused: This principle involves providing students with guidance and support throughout the college application and enrollment process. Educators should help students identify their interests and goals, research colleges and universities, and navigate the financial aid process.

Build relationships with families and communities: This principle emphasizes the importance of involving families and community members in the college-going process. Educators should provide families with information about the benefits of a college education and offer support and resources to help them navigate the college application and enrollment process.

Provide information about financial aid and scholarships: This principle involves making sure that students and families have access to information about financial aid and scholarships that can help make college more affordable. Educators should provide guidance on how to apply for financial aid and scholarships and help students identify opportunities for funding.

Create college-going partnerships and collaborations: This principle involves building partnerships and collaborations with colleges and universities, community organizations, and other stakeholders. Educators should work to establish relationships that can help students access resources and support that will enable them to succeed in college.

Collect and analyze data to inform practice: This principle involves collecting and analyzing data on student outcomes and using this information to guide decision-making and improve practice. Educators should regularly assess the effectiveness of college-going initiatives and adjust their practices as needed to ensure that students are making progress toward their college goals.

Institutionalize college-going culture as part of school improvement efforts: This principle involves making college-going culture a central part of the school's mission and strategic plan. Educators should work to integrate college-going initiatives into all aspects of the school's culture and ensure that they are sustained over time.

College-going Culture Important to College Access and Equity

A growing body of research has supported the importance of a college-going culture in increasing college access for underrepresented students, with a particular focus on McDonough's and McClafferty et al.'s work as guiding principles for creating and sustaining such a culture. For example, Perna et al.'s (2010) study found that high schools with a strong college-going culture had higher college enrollment rates for low-income and first-generation students. Similarly, Rios-Aguilar and Deil-Amen's (2012) study found that students attending high schools with a strong college-going culture were more likely to attend a 4-year institution and be academically prepared for college. Bryan and colleagues' (2017) study also found that a college-going culture was positively associated with college enrollment rates for first-generation Latinx college students. These studies suggested that a college-going culture can have a significant impact on students' postsecondary educational plans and outcomes.

Furthermore, Roderick et al. (2011) found that high schools that fostered a college-going culture were more likely to have students enroll in college and persist in their postsecondary education. Van Beek (2019 found that high schools that implemented college-going initiatives, such as college visits and college application workshops, had higher rates of college enrollment among their graduates. Another study by Falcon (2015) found that a college-going culture was particularly beneficial for Black and Latinx students who were first-generation college applicants. These studies highlighted the importance of intentionally building and sustaining a college-going culture in high schools to promote college access opportunities for underrepresented students.

A college-going culture is more than just a set of practices or initiatives; it is a complex system of values, beliefs, and expectations that permeate every aspect of a high school's culture (Mehan et al., 1994). A college-going culture can be crucial in addressing the impact of systemic oppression on college access for underrepresented students. CRT emphasizes the role of structural and institutional racism in limiting opportunities for minoritized groups (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). By creating a college-going culture that is sensitive to the experiences of underrepresented students, schools can help address these structural barriers to college access. For example, educators can provide college and career resources and information that are culturally responsive and inclusive of students' diverse backgrounds (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

By centering the experiences and perspectives of underrepresented students, schools can work towards creating a college-going culture that is inclusive and equitable for all.

High School Guidance Counseling

In recent years, there has been a nationwide shift in the use of the term "guidance counselor" to simply "counselor." Despite this transition, in the context of this dissertation, the term "guidance counselor" persists, as every single interviewee consistently referred to it as such. This evolution in nomenclature reflects the dynamic changes in the roles and responsibilities of professionals in the field of education. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has been at the forefront of emphasizing the use of "school counselor" to better encompass the expanded duties and responsibilities these professionals now undertake.

This transformation marks a historical shift from measuring impact based on feelings to a proactive, data-driven approach serving all students through achievement, attendance, and behavior-focused programs (Gysbers, n.d.). Furthermore, the shift to "counselor" or "school counselor" highlights the pivotal role of school counselors in driving comprehensive school improvement initiatives, with "guidance" now primarily associated with the guidance curriculum within school counseling programs. The transformation from guidance to school counselors supports the use of data to identify students at risk of dropping out, refer students for intensive mental health support and treatment, implement positive behavioral support programs, screen students for signs of suicide, and perform a host of other responsibilities that extend well beyond career development (Savitz-Romer, 2019).

However, in locations like New York City, college counselors often face the challenge of serving a large number of students, limiting their capacity to fulfill the broader responsibilities advocated by the ASCA. This may explain why there is a continued adherence to the antiquated role of “guidance counselor,” focusing primarily on career development and college application assistance. School counselors are supposed to focus on supporting students’ mental health and to work with them on their academic and career plans. But, in some schools, the job can include nearly everything—from filling in when teachers are absent, intervening with discipline, and computing student test scores.

In the 2019-20 school year, the New York City Department of Education mandated that every school provide access to certified counselors for K-12 students. These counselors were also tasked with creating education and career plans for Grades 6-12 and establishing building-level guidance plans in all schools, signifying expanded responsibilities beyond the academic curriculum (Superville, 2023). Research conducted by Robert Feirsen at Manhattanville College delved into the perspectives of both principals and school counselors regarding recent regulatory changes (Superville, 2023). The comprehensive study involved surveying 1,630 principals and counselors to shed light on their viewpoints. Notably, principals exhibited a positive outlook toward these policy adjustments, especially during the tumultuous 2020-21 school year, which was marred by pandemic-related disruptions. They recognized the vital role that school counselors played in maintaining a well-functioning school, emphasizing their heightened significance in addressing students’ social-emotional well-being during the pandemic. Feirsen’s findings underscored the acknowledgement by principals of school counselors’ leadership roles on campus and their valuable contribution to cultivating a positive school climate. Nevertheless, the quantification of counselors’ specific contributions remained a challenge (Superville, 2023), and it is worth noting that in New York City, the term “guidance counselor” is still widely used, despite the evident transformation in the role of counselors in NYC schools.

In the context of this study, to examine the impact of guidance counselors on the college-going experiences of Black and Latinx students, it is imperative to look at the evolution of the role of guidance counselors. The existing literature presents a complex and nuanced view of the role of counselors in helping minoritized and underrepresented students attain the benefits of higher education, such as better jobs, social mobility, and political access (Engberg & Gilbert, 2013; Lindsey, 2012).

Early Guidance Counseling (1960s-1980s)

Over several decades, the literature on the role of guidance counselors in college access has been investigated, with earlier studies dating back to the 1960s and 1970s (Perna, 2000; Watts, 1996). During this time, guidance counselors were perceived negatively and seen as gatekeepers who decided which students had access to higher education and which did not (Perna, 2000). These studies found that counselors often differentially encouraged students' aspirations and selectively distributed college information based on their assessment of the students' social class position. Bryan et al. (2022) in "School Counseling College-going Culture: Counselors' Influence on Students' College-going Decisions," emphasized the counselors' significant influence on students' educational aspirations and choices. Bowles and Gintis (1976), in *Schooling in Capitalist America*, argued that counselors tended to perpetuate social stratification through their narrow counseling practices. Similarly, Persell and Cookson (1985), in "Chartering and Bartering: Elite Education and Social Reproduction," found that counselors' recommendations for higher education were biased towards students from higher social classes. These students were seen as more academically capable and suitable for college, perpetuating social inequality.

Guidance Counseling (1990s)

In contrast to earlier literature, studies from the 1990s have suggested that high school guidance counselors can have a positive impact on students' college access, particularly for minoritized students such as Black, Latinx, and low-income students. These studies emphasized the critical role guidance counselors play in facilitating the college application process by providing students with accurate college information, helping them navigate complex college-going processes, and building trust with students and their families.

In an earlier mixed-methods study that still holds relevance, Lee and Ekstrom (1987) explored student access to guidance counseling in high school. They concluded that guidance counselor support could positively impact college enrollment, particularly for disadvantaged students. Their study included survey data from students, parents, and counselors, as well as qualitative interviews. Similarly, Hossler and Stage (1992) conducted a quantitative study investigating the impact of family and high school experiences on students' postsecondary plans. They discovered that guidance counselors played a vital role in helping students develop their college aspirations, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) used a quantitative research design and found that students who received support from their guidance counselors were more likely to have positive educational outcomes. Their study highlighted the importance of guidance counselor support in promoting college access for minoritized students. Moreover, McDonough (1997) employed a mixed-methods approach, examining the role of high school guidance counselors in shaping college opportunities for students from various social class backgrounds. She found that guidance counselors could have a significant impact on college access for low-income and first-generation students, based on survey data and in-depth interviews.

Additionally, Plank and Jordan (2001) conducted a quantitative study and found that guidance counselors played a significant role in reducing dropout rates among Mexican American youth. They emphasized the importance of guidance counselor support in promoting college access and success for Latinx students. Horn and Chen (1998) used a quantitative research design to examine the factors contributing to college enrollment among at-risk students. Their research demonstrated that guidance counselor support was crucial in helping these students successfully navigate the college-going process and ultimately attend college.

Guidance Counseling in the 2000s

The early 2000s marked a period of continued growing recognition for the vital role high school guidance counselors play in fostering students' postsecondary success. Several significant studies conducted during this time provided insights into the impact of guidance counselors on students' decisions to attend college, particularly for low-income and first-generation students. These studies underscored the importance of adequate and accessible counseling services in promoting postsecondary success.

Hossler et al. (1999) conducted a study that investigated the factors influencing students' decisions to attend college. They examined the role of guidance counselors, along with other social, economic, and educational factors, in shaping students' college choices. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000b) employed a mixed-methods research design to explore the college-choice process for different racial and ethnic groups, including Black and Latinx students. They identified several factors that influenced these students' college choices, such as family background, educational aspirations, academic preparation, and guidance from high school counselors. They collected survey data from students and their families as well as conducted qualitative interviews with students, parents, and high school counselors.

In a related study, Patricia McDonough (2005) carried out a comprehensive survey involving 1,338 high schools to explore the role of high school counseling in the United States. Her research focused on the relationship between school counseling and college access for students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. The findings indicated that students who received adequate counseling were more likely to attend 4-year colleges. Additionally, McDonough's research revealed that the availability and quality of counseling services were significant factors in students' decisions to pursue higher education.

Expanding on these findings, Perna et al. (2008) conducted a study examining the relationship between school counseling and college access for low-income and first-generation students. The authors found that students who received counseling were more likely to attend 4-year colleges, reinforcing the importance of guidance counselors in promoting postsecondary success for underrepresented populations. This body of research from the early 2000s demonstrated the crucial role of guidance counselors in shaping students' college aspirations and facilitating the college application process.

Guidance Counseling (2010s and Beyond)

Some researchers have suggested that the role of the high school counselor has become less relevant in recent years, citing the availability of online resources and the counselors' limited availability as key factors. Bell et al. (2009) carried out a quantitative study using survey data from a sample of high school counselors to examine the workload and availability of counselors. They discovered that these factors varied greatly, limiting their effectiveness in assisting students with the college application process. Similarly, Owen and Westlund (2016) performed a literature review that noted high school counselors provided valuable support, especially to disadvantaged students, but their role has been called into question due to the availability of outside sources of information.

Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2011) employed a mixed-methods study involving surveys and interviews with high school counselors, students, and parents to investigate the factors that influence counselors' advice to students regarding the college application process. They found that counselors' advice is often influenced by their own experiences and perceptions of college-going, raising concerns about the objectivity and individualization of the advice provided.

Hoxby and Turner (2015) executed a quantitative study using a randomized controlled trial to explore the impact of providing students with personalized college information through an intervention. The authors noted that high school counselors may no longer hold a monopoly on college information due to the widespread availability of online resources. However, they also cautioned that students may misunderstand or misinterpret information obtained outside of the college admissions office. These findings suggested that while the role of high school counselors in the college application process may be less dominant than in the past, their expertise in interpreting and explaining complex aspects of the college-going process, such as financial aid, may still be valuable for students seeking reliable and accurate information.

Despite these concerns, some researchers caution that students may still need the advice of an expert, such as a high school counselor, to navigate the college-going process effectively. Hoxby and Turner (2015) proposed that counselors could play a critical role in providing students with specialized advice on complex aspects of the process, such as financial aid. Overall, while the role of the high school counselor may be changing in the college application process, the importance of expert guidance in certain areas remains critical.

Guidance Counselors and Building Social Capital

Despite some researchers suggesting that the guidance counselor's role in college access is becoming less relevant due to the availability of online resources and support from friends and family (Moss & Singh, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), recent literature has emphasized the crucial role of guidance counselors in building social capital for underrepresented students, particularly Black and Latinx high school students (Bryan et al., 2009; Perna et al., 2008). Social capital refers to the network of relationships that individuals have and the resources they can access through those relationships, such as job opportunities, educational resources, and other forms of support that can help individuals achieve their goals (Helliwell & Putnam, 1999; Lin, 2019).

College access literature revealed that guidance counselors play a critical role in helping students navigate the complex college application process, particularly for those who lack social capital (McDonough, 1997; Perna et al., 2008). Therefore, it is essential to examine the guidance counselor's role in helping underrepresented students build social capital to apply successfully to college (Bryan et al., 2009; Perna et al., 2008).

Guidance counselors play a crucial role in helping underrepresented students access the social capital needed for college access and explore competitive colleges that match their academic abilities (Bryan et al., 2009). For parents who have not attended college, providing concrete information about navigating the college process can be challenging, making it essential for school counselors to guide them in their quest to attend college (Holland, 2015). Furthermore, guidance counselor-student interactions can determine whether qualified low-income students and students of color ultimately apply to college (Bryan et al., 2011).

Social capital, as described by Coleman (1988), refers to resources embedded within social networks that individuals can access through their relationships with others. In the context of college access, social capital may include information about college admissions processes, access to networks of professionals or alumni, and opportunities for mentorship or support from individuals who have successfully navigated the college application process (Perna, 2000).

Guidance counselors can facilitate connections between students and essential resources or individuals, thereby providing valuable social capital. For example, Stanton-Salazar et al. (2001) found that counselors can connect students with alumni from competitive colleges who can offer firsthand insights into the college experience and application process. Additionally, counselors can introduce students to professionals in their desired fields of study, providing networking opportunities and potential mentorship relationships (Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006).

Moreover, guidance counselors can leverage their knowledge of admissions processes to help students gain access to insider information or preferential review (McDonough, 2005). For instance, they may collaborate with admissions officers from competitive colleges to organize workshops for students on crafting compelling application essays (Owen & Westlund, 2016), or they may advocate on behalf of students during the application review process, emphasizing their strengths and potential for success in higher education (Tierney & Venegas, 2006).

Guidance Counselors' Perceptions of Their Role

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of college counselors, I reviewed literature examining the perceptions of high school counselors regarding their role in promoting college access. The studies I examined included those by Akos and Galassi (2004), Bemak and Chung (2005), Holcomb-McCoy (2007), Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2011), and others.

These studies indicated that guidance counselors view their roles as encompassing various aspects, such as academic planning, providing information on college admissions and financial aid, offering career guidance and preparation, and providing social and cultural capital to help students access college. Despite this, the literature suggested that counselors often struggle to reconcile their perceptions of what they should be doing to help students achieve their postsecondary goals with the realities of limited resources and competing demands on their time. Furthermore, the literature reviewed emphasized the critical role of creating a college-going culture within high schools, which is essential for increasing college enrollment rates and reducing achievement gaps. Below are some studies that provide more details on the perceptions of guidance counselors regarding their role in the college application process:

According to Akos and Galassi (2004), guidance counselors play a critical role in helping students navigate the college-going process, providing academic and career counseling, and facilitating access to college resources. In their study, Akos and Galassi found that guidance counselors believed that their role encompassed a range of activities, including advising students on college admissions requirements and application processes, providing information on financial aid and scholarships, and assisting students in selecting appropriate academic programs.

In Bemak and Chung's (2005) study, guidance counselors considered their roles to involve various responsibilities, including academic planning, delivering information on college admissions and financial aid, and furnishing career guidance and preparation. They also perceived themselves as supplying social and cultural capital to assist students in accessing college. Nonetheless, counselors grappled with reconciling their views on how they should support students in attaining their postsecondary objectives against the backdrop of constrained resources and conflicting demands on their time.

Similarly, Holcomb-McCoy (2007) examined the perceptions of high school guidance counselors regarding their roles in college preparation and found that counselors identified a number of key areas in which they played a critical role. These included academic preparation, career counseling, and personal counseling to help students develop the social and emotional skills necessary for success in college. Additionally, counselors often viewed themselves as playing a key role in helping students navigate the financial aid process and access college resources, particularly for first-generation and low-income students.

Finally, Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2011) examined the perceptions of high school guidance counselors regarding their roles in promoting college access and found that counselors believed that their role encompassed a range of activities, including academic and career counseling, financial aid advising, and providing support for students with disabilities. Additionally, counselors often saw themselves as playing a key role in creating a college-going culture within their schools and promoting the importance of postsecondary education to students and their families.

Barriers Faced by Guidance Counselors

This study was grounded in CRT, which helped to identify and analyze barriers that guidance counselors face when guiding Black and Latinx students through the college-going process. CRT scholars have argued that these barriers are systemic and institutionalized and require a critical examination of policies and practices to promote equity and justice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Smith et al., 2007). This section of the review focuses on two key barriers that guidance counselors who work with minoritized populations face: limited resources and a lack of knowledge about the importance of the intersection of students' multiple identities, especially when working with minoritized populations. These barriers can exacerbate other challenges faced by students, such as systemic inequities and negative stereotypes, making it more difficult for counselors to support their college and career aspirations effectively (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Gushue et al., 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Limited Resources

Research has shown that schools with high percentages of low-income and underrepresented minority students often have fewer resources to support the college-going process (Akos & Galassi, 2004). This can result in guidance counselors having to juggle multiple responsibilities, including academic counseling, personal counseling, college and career advising, and administrative duties (i.e., lunch duty, hall duty) with limited time and resources (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The lack of resources can also lead to a lack of training and professional development for counselors, making it difficult for them to get to know their students personally and better serve their needs (Bryan et al., 2011). Furthermore, a lack of professional development prevents counselors from keeping up with the latest trends and practices in college access (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Case studies have also highlighted the impact of limited resources on guidance counseling. For example, a study by Hatch et al. (2015) examined the experiences of high school counselors in rural areas, where resources are often scarce. The authors found that these counselors faced numerous challenges in their work, including inadequate funding for college readiness programs and a lack of support from school administrators. Similarly, a study by Lopez and Droogsma Musoba (2023) explored the experiences of Latina/o high school students in an urban setting. The authors found that limited resources and lack of access to college readiness programs negatively impacted the college-going aspirations of these students.

High school counselors face a formidable task in preparing students for postsecondary life, yet they often encounter difficulties due to increased job responsibilities resulting from limited resources (Bryan, 2009; Johnson et al., 2010; Klugman, 2012; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; McKillip et al., 2012). These additional responsibilities leave little room for higher education preparation and advising, which in turn can negatively impact students, especially those from minoritized populations. Several studies have shown that Black and Brown students have limited contact with their guidance counselors, which can exacerbate the challenges they face in navigating the college-going process (McKillip et al., 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In addition, counselors themselves have expressed frustration at their inability to focus on college readiness due to non-academic counseling duties (Bryan, 2009; Johnson et al., 2010; Klugman, 2012; McKillip et al., 2012).

In a case study by Rutter et al. (2020), a guidance counselor working in a large urban school district with a significant Latinx student population described the challenges she faced due to increased responsibilities. The counselor reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of students for whom she was responsible and the variety of tasks she was expected to handle, which included administrative duties and mental health counseling in addition to college and career advising. As a result, the counselor felt that she was unable to provide the individualized support that Latinx students needed to succeed academically and pursue their postsecondary goals. She noted that many Latinx students did not have access to the same resources and opportunities as their White peers and their unique challenges and experiences were often overlooked or misunderstood by school staff. The counselor's heavy workload and lack of support from administrators prevented her from effectively addressing these issues, further exacerbating the barriers faced by Latinx students in the school district.

Limited Understanding of Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), refers to the ways in which multiple social identities intersect and create unique experiences and challenges. Guidance counselors who work with students from underrepresented and minoritized groups, such as those who identify as Black, Latinx, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and/or first-generation college students, often have to navigate the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identities, which can impact the effectiveness of their counseling practices (Nadal et al., 2014). Research has shown that lack of understanding of intersectionality can be a barrier to the college-going process, particularly for students of color. For example, Black and Latinx students may face stereotypes and negative perceptions that stem from the intersection of their racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic identities, which can significantly impact their academic achievement and college access (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The importance of counselors having a deeper understanding and appreciation for the intersectionality of students' identities is highlighted by numerous studies in the field of counseling. According to Shin and colleagues (2017) and Ieva (2022), the effectiveness of guidance counseling can be limited by a lack of understanding or appreciation for the intersectionality of students' minoritized identities, particularly among White counselors. Research has shown that White counselors may hold implicit biases that can impact their ability to counsel students of color effectively (Constantine et al., 2007). White counselors may also struggle to understand and navigate the unique experiences and challenges faced by students of color due to their own lack of lived experience with racism and discrimination (Moss & Singh, 2015).

In a study conducted by Parham and Helms (1981), Black students reported feeling misunderstood and unsupported by their predominantly White school counselors. The counselors were often ill-equipped to address the unique challenges and experiences faced by Black students, including issues related to racism and discrimination. This lack of understanding and support from counselors resulted in lower levels of academic achievement and college enrollment for Black students.

According to Pietrantoni and Glance (2019), White school counselors also lacked understanding and knowledge of the unique experiences of Black students, particularly regarding the intersection of race and gender. As a result, these counselors often failed to provide culturally responsive counseling and support, which impacted the academic and personal development of Black students. These studies underscored the need for counselors to have a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of students' identities and the impact of systemic inequities on their academic and personal development.

A case study by Akos and Galassi (2004) examined the experiences of a guidance counselor at a predominantly low-income, minority high school. The counselor reported feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of students she was responsible for, with caseloads often exceeding the recommended ratio of 250 students per counselor, as suggested by the ASCA. Consequently, the counselor struggled to provide individualized college access support and build strong relationships with each student. Additionally, the counselor described feeling frustrated by the lack of engagement from students and parents, who often did not prioritize college access due to factors such as financial constraints, limited knowledge about college options, and competing priorities. The counselor also faced challenges in collaborating with teachers and administrators to create a college-going culture within the school.

Educator Expectations, Teacher Expectations, and Guidance Counselor Expectations

This study aimed to fill the gap in the literature on the perceptions of Black and Latinx students in New York City regarding the role that their guidance counselors' expectations play in the college-going process, particularly in the college-matching process. While teacher expectations have been widely explored in college access literature, there has been a lack of attention to the impact of other educator expectations, including those of guidance counselors. Like teacher expectations, counselors' expectations are the perceptions of or beliefs about their students' abilities and life outcomes (Bryan et al., 2022).

It is crucial to recognize that guidance counselor expectations are not formed in a vacuum but are influenced by the expectations of teachers and other educators who have interacted with students since their early years (Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, building on the literature on teacher expectations, this section examines teacher expectations, guidance counselor expectations, and broader educator expectations to provide a comprehensive understanding of how educator expectations impact the college-going and college-matching process for Black and Latinx NYC students. By expanding the scope beyond teacher expectations, this study aimed to provide a rationale for expanding to include all educators who interact with students under a broader term, "educator expectations."

Teacher Expectations

Research over the years has consistently shown that teacher expectations can significantly impact students' lives (Jussim & Harber, 2005; McKow & Weinstein, 2008; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). In more recent studies, researchers have found that teacher expectations can affect a wide range of outcomes, including academic achievement, motivation, and even physical health (Gehlbach et al., 2011; Gershenson et al., 2016; Jang et al., 2010). Furthermore, teacher expectations have been found to be especially powerful for students from traditionally marginalized groups, such as low-income students and students of color (Namrata, 2011; Rubie-Davies & Turner, 2022). Members of marginalized groups live under constant stress (racial, home insecurity, hunger, threat of violence, etc.) (Stevenson, 2014). Teacher expectations add to their stress by penetrating students' psyche, impacting decisions about their capabilities (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010). Teacher expectations impact how students perform throughout their elementary and secondary school careers, thus shaping postsecondary goals and opportunities (Dusek & Joseph, 1983; Jordan & Stanovich, 2001; Rubie-Davies & Turner, 2022).

Teachers across the United States, in urban, rural, and suburban areas, are increasingly faced with the challenge of educating students from varying ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Research has shown that White and Asian students often are more academically successful than their Black, Latinx, and Native American counterparts (Black, 2020; Flanagan et al., 2020). Researchers dating back as far as 1968 have said that many factors contributing to this gap, such as socioeconomic status, parents' education, peers, and the quality of the school students attend, cannot be easily changed (Flanagan et al., 2020; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010). Teacher expectations, however—the beliefs teachers have about their students' academic capabilities—is an alterable variable that influences how teachers and students interact with each other (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010). The psychological impact of teacher expectations on students helps build or reduce trust, motivation, self-esteem, and anxiety and can be a powerful tool in increasing learning outcomes for Black Indigenous and People of Color BIPOC students (Jussim et al., 2009; Timmermans & Rubie-Davies, 2018; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010).

Teacher expectations, present in every classroom, can be based on objective data such as student grades on exams and quizzes, or they can be influenced by subjective factors such as implicit biases and stereotypes against individuals based on their race, gender, or disability. Flanagan et al. (2020) posited there is strong evidence that teacher perceptions of students may bias how an exam is graded, how a teacher constructs an exam, and what types of questions are asked to different students. As a result, students intuit their teachers' expectations and feelings about them. Many become disheartened and are thrust into the Pygmalion cycle (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), where students' behavior and achievement conform to the initial teacher expectations, and teachers' expectations reflect student output (Gentrup & Rjosk, 2018; Jussim et al., 2009).

Teacher expectation literature shows a clear connection between teacher expectations and the academic performance of all students, particularly those of color. While there is an underlying assumption that positive teacher attitudes and motivational strategies benefit all students psychologically, this study aimed to shed light on the specific experiences of Black and Latinx students in high-performing schools. Despite the mounting evidence on the impact of teacher expectations, there is still a need for further research on how to improve teacher expectations and reduce biases in the classroom (Cohen & Garcia, 2014).

Guidance Counselor Expectations

Current research has defined and explored teacher expectations but has neglected the nuances and importance of other educator expectations, including guidance counselors. The participants in this dissertation research can begin to help fill the gap in the literature that is found in the area of guidance counselor expectations and other educator expectations. Guidance counselors' interactions, perceptions, and expectations can impact the life outcomes of students who depend on their services. They are especially impactful on those who do not have the social capital to navigate the college application process without them—as research has shown that Black and Latinx students often need the help of their guidance counselors to bridge the social capital gap created by systemic racism.

While literature has documented the positive and negative effects of teacher expectations on students, the literature gap in the area of guidance counselor expectations is significant. However, several recent studies have shed light on this important topic. For example, Vela et al. (2013) found that guidance counselors' perceptions and biases influence their recommendation for students' course enrollment, which can have significant effects on their academic opportunities and outcomes. Similarly, Jones et al. (2013) found that guidance counselors often lack cultural competence and awareness of their own biases, which can lead to lower expectations and less favorable recommendations for Black and Latinx students.

Other studies have also found that guidance counselors' expectations and beliefs about students can shape their decisions about college readiness programs and the quality of the resources they provide (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Jussim & Harber, 2005). In addition, research has suggested that guidance counselors' expectations can impact students' aspirations and self-efficacy beliefs (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Hatch et al., 2015), which in turn can influence students' academic and career trajectories.

Moreover, guidance counselors' expectations can be influenced by students' social identities, including race and ethnicity, which in turn can affect their recommendations and support (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Hatch et al., 2015). For example, guidance counselors may have lower expectations for Black and Latinx students due to stereotypes or biases, which can lead to less support and lower academic outcomes (Papageorge et al., 2020; Steen & Noguera, 2010). On the other hand, some research has found that culturally responsive counseling can improve guidance counselors' expectations and support for underrepresented students (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Mason et al., 1975).

Overall, the literature suggests that guidance counselor expectations are an important factor in students' academic and life outcomes, especially for Black and Latinx students who may face systemic barriers to success. This dissertation contributes to the literature by examining the impact of guidance counselors' expectations on NYC Black and Latinx students in high-performing specialized high schools.

Educator Expectations

The literature clearly demonstrates that teacher and guidance counselor expectations have a significant impact on students' academic and emotional lives, including their motivation, self-esteem, and opportunities for pursuing secondary education (Jussim & Harber, 2005). Moreover, several studies have shown that teacher expectations expressed from an early age can follow students into their college-going days and beyond, impacting their career choices and even their lifelong earning potential (Timmermans & Rubie-Davies, 2018). Similarly, guidance counselors' expectations can affect students' self-efficacy and overall perceptions of their abilities and potential for success, ultimately influencing college readiness and access (Clark & Amatea, 2004).

However, expectations from teachers and guidance counselors alone do not dictate student outcomes. Other educators and staff members in school buildings who interact with students also play a crucial role in impacting student achievement, such as custodians, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers. For instance, a study published in *The Journal of Educational Research*, which utilized a quantitative approach, examined the impact of staff expectations on the college aspirations of low-income students from two urban school districts in the southeastern United States. The study found that when all staff members were supportive and had high expectations for students, the students were more likely to have positive attitudes towards college and higher education (Jones et al., 2012).

College Matching

Academic matching, which is the degree to which students' academic credentials match the academic rigor of the institution they attend, is a crucial aspect of the college selection process (Smith et al., 2013). The three types of academic matching are undermatching, academic fit, and overmatching (Borman & Rachuba, 2001). Undermatching occurs when a student attends a college with less academic rigor than they are capable of handling (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014). Academic fit, on the other hand, refers to a student attending a college that is an appropriate level of academic challenge for them (Smith et al., 2013). Overmatching occurs when a student attends a college with more academic rigor than they are prepared for (Howell & Pender, 2016).

This section of the literature review explores each type of academic matching and discusses what research has revealed about their impact on students' academic and personal lives, especially for members of historically minoritized populations.

Undermatching

Undermatching refers to the phenomenon where highly prepared students attend colleges or universities that are less selective than their academic credentials suggest they could gain admission to (Howell & Pender, 2016; Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Although undermatching affects students from diverse backgrounds, it is particularly prevalent among low-income, Black, and Latinx communities. Most undermatching scholars view it as an involuntary phenomenon that is forced upon underrepresented populations (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Smith et al., 2013).

The literature on undermatching has emphasized two key assumptions: first, students would not choose to undermatch if they had access to more information to make better-informed decisions; and second, undermatching can hinder students from realizing their full academic and socioeconomic potential (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Hoxby & Avery, 2013). The first assumption aligns with what CRT says about the pervasiveness of racism and systemic inequalities that impact the life outcomes of minoritized populations (Delgado-Bernal & Aleman, 2017). Black and Latinx students from low-income backgrounds may not have the same level of information and resources as their more privileged peers, which can prevent them from making informed decisions about college. For example, Hoxby and Avery (2013) noted that low-income high-achieving students may not realize that selective schools can often be cheaper than less competitive institutions.

In addition, limited access to information and support for navigating the college application process can cause students to adopt unconventional application strategies, resulting in undermatching (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Hoxby & Turner, 2015; McDonough, 1997). For instance, some students may apply only to community colleges or non-selective 4-year colleges near their homes, while others may add a highly selective college to their list of applications without considering whether it is a good fit for them (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). These strategies are often ineffective in helping students find a suitable college and can make the application process feel like a game of chance rather than a deliberate decision-making process.

Furthermore, timely access to college information is crucial in enabling students to choose from a wider pool of colleges, particularly those with earlier application deadlines (Roderick et al., 2009). However, underserved students often lack access to such information and planning, resulting in them missing crucial deadlines for submitting standardized tests, college applications, and financial aid forms (Roderick et al., 2006). As a result, students who begin planning for college late have a lower chance of enrolling in a college that matches their needs and interests (Cochran & Coles, 2012).

These systemic inequities of resources are perpetuated by the permanence of racism, which affects all aspects of life, including income, job opportunities, and educational experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

The second assumption about undermatching impeding students from realizing their full academic and socioeconomic potential is supported by research that has shown students who undermatch may face challenges in terms of academic success and graduation rates. For instance, a study conducted by Bowen (2018) found that students who were undermatched in terms of the selectivity of college attended were less likely to graduate from college within 6 years, compared to well-matched students. Similarly, another study by Hoxby and Turner (2015) found that high-achieving, low-income students who undermatched in their college choices had lower college GPAs and were less likely to graduate from college than their higher-income peers who attended more selective colleges.

Moreover, undermatching can have long-term impacts on students' future career prospects. A study by Martinez and Klopott (2005) found that students who undermatched in college were less likely to be employed in high-skilled jobs and earned less than their peers who attended more selective colleges. These findings suggested that undermatching not only affects students' academic outcomes but also their economic well-being.

Undermatching Viewed Through a CRT Lens

CRT provides a useful framework for understanding the factors that contribute to undermatching in higher education. Research has identified several key factors that contribute to undermatching, as discussed below using the CRT framework.

Structural barriers are built-in barriers in social, economic, and political systems of society that hinder the access and success of underrepresented groups in higher education. These barriers can take many forms, including inadequate funding for public schools in low-income areas, lack of access to high-quality college preparatory programs, and discriminatory admissions policies at colleges and universities (Harper, 2012).

The social construction of race is another key tenet of CRT that highlights how race is a socially constructed category and can change over time. In the context of undermatching, the social construction of race can help us understand how historical and contemporary systems of racism and oppression have created barriers for individuals from underrepresented groups to access and succeed in higher education. For example, historical policies of segregation and discrimination in higher education have created a system of racial inequality that persists today (Sevon, 2022).

Stereotyping and bias can significantly impact undermatching by influencing the expectations that educators, peers, and college admissions officers have for students from underrepresented groups. For instance, educators may be less likely to recommend challenging courses to students of color or low-income students, assuming that they are not prepared for the material (Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013). Admissions officers may also view these students as “risky” and less likely to succeed in college, even when they have strong academic credentials (Harper, 2012).

Cultural mismatch occurs when students from underrepresented groups feel like they do not fit in with the dominant culture of higher education, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation that can hinder academic and social success. For example, students from low-income backgrounds may struggle to navigate the norms and expectations of a college campus that is predominantly populated by students from more privileged backgrounds (Flores & Oseguera, 2009).

A lack of support and resources for students from underrepresented groups is another factor that contributes to undermatching. Inadequate financial aid, lack of access to academic support services, and limited mentoring opportunities can create additional barriers for these students, hindering their access and success in higher education (Oseguera et al., 2010).

Intersectionality, a key tenet of CRT, highlights how individuals hold multiple social identities that interact in complex ways to shape their experiences. For example, a Black woman may face both racism and sexism, and these two forms of oppression can interact in unique and complex ways to impact her experiences. In the context of undermatching, intersectionality can help us understand how students from underrepresented groups who hold multiple marginalized identities may face additional barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education. First-generation college students who come from low-income backgrounds are an example of individuals who may face multiple intersecting barriers, such as a lack of familiarity with the college application process, limited access to college preparatory resources, and social stigma associated with being the first in their family to pursue higher education (Harper & Griffin, 2011).

Interest convergence is the idea that dominant groups only support policies and actions that benefit marginalized groups when it aligns with their own interests. In the context of undermatching, interest convergence can help us understand why some colleges and universities may be more motivated to address undermatching when it aligns with their own interests, such as financial or reputational gains. For example, colleges and universities may prioritize diversity and inclusion efforts to attract a more diverse student body and improve their rankings or public image (Flores & Oseguera, 2009).

Academic Match

Research has suggested that an academic match between students and their chosen college is associated with various positive outcomes, such as higher academic performance, greater satisfaction with college experiences, and increased likelihood of graduating (Fosnacht, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012). An academic match involves choosing a college that is academically suitable for a student based on their academic abilities, interests, and goals (Sedlacek, 2010).

To determine an academic match, researchers and authors often consider criteria such as high school GPA, standardized test scores (e.g., SAT or ACT), and rigor of high school curriculum (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Roderick et al., 2011). By comparing these criteria with the average academic profile of admitted students at a given college, researchers can evaluate whether the student is academically well-matched to that institution (Smith et al., 2013).

When students attend colleges that are academically matched to their abilities and interests, they are more likely to find courses that challenge them and provide opportunities to explore and develop their intellectual abilities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Furthermore, academic fit has been linked to higher levels of engagement, participation in extracurricular activities, and positive relationships with faculty (Sedlacek, 2010; Tinto, 2012). Such experiences can help students develop a sense of belonging to the college community, which is important for their overall well-being and success (Tinto, 2012).

Academic Overmatch

Overmatching refers to the phenomenon where students attend colleges that are academically more rigorous than their qualifications and preparation would suggest. Research has shown that overmatching can have negative consequences for students, such as lower grades, higher dropout rates, and increased student loan debt (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2014). For example, Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2014) found that students who overmatched by attending highly selective colleges with lower levels of preparation had lower GPAs than students who attended less selective colleges that matched their qualifications. This was due in part to the fact that overmatched students struggled to keep up with the academic demands of their colleges and were less likely to receive the support they needed to succeed.

In addition, overmatching can also lead to higher student loan debt because students who attend highly selective colleges with lower levels of preparation are less likely to receive merit-based scholarships and more likely to rely on loans to finance their education (Hoxby & Turner, 2015).

While overmatching is generally viewed as negative because it can lead to academic, social, and financial challenges for students, some researchers have posited that it can have some positive consequences. For instance, some argue that overmatching can increase students' motivation and provide them with a more rigorous academic experience, which may lead to better career prospects and higher earnings in the future (Dillon & Smith, 2017; Zilanawala et al., 2017). Additionally, overmatching may provide students with access to resources and opportunities that they would not have had otherwise, such as access to research facilities, faculty mentors, and prestigious internships (Dillon & Smith, 2017; Zilanawala et al., 2017). However, it is important to note that these potential benefits are not guaranteed and may come with significant challenges for students who are not academically prepared for the rigor of the institution with which they are overmatched.

Best 'Fit'

The majority of scholars studying college matching have focused on the benefits of appropriate academic matches between students and the colleges and universities they choose (Yeager & Walton, 2011). However, some researchers have argued that college matching is a more complex process than simply reviewing a student's college-going profile, as it requires consideration of factors beyond standardized test scores, GPA, school clubs, and extracurricular activities (Crane, 2003; Hoxby & Avery, 2013).

These researchers proposed that best fits, rather than best matches, yield better outcomes. They have investigated additional factors such as affordability, location, social activities, cultural offerings, student body demographics, and religious beliefs to enhance college-matching outcomes.

While "match" refers to the quantitative elements of selecting a postsecondary option, "fit" encompasses more nebulous concepts such as how well a student might integrate into an institution, socially, emotionally, financially, and otherwise (Allen & Schulz, 2020, p. 16). Considering the components of "fit" rather than "match" may emphasize the importance of factors such as a college or university's geographic location, proximity to a student's home, major offerings, financial aid availability, or net cost. Researchers have demonstrated that underrepresented students from disadvantaged or minoritized groups may have fewer resources to relocate far from their homes (Ovink et al., 2017). Their research found that when students lived within 50 miles of an appropriate-match institution, they were 5% less likely to undermatch, with Black students slightly less likely to undermatch than White students. These results supported the significance of fit considerations in college matching, particularly for underrepresented students.

Similar to patterns noted by Hoxby and Avery (2013), the analysis also suggested that Black students qualified to attend the most selective institutions were significantly more likely to undermatch than similar White students. While undermatching is typically viewed as negative, scholars have recognized that undermatching may also have some positive consequences (Allen & Schulz, 2020). Therefore, considering both "fit" and "match" factors may help students find the right college or university for them.

Why Selective/Competitive Schools Matter

Selective colleges have been shown to provide opportunities for high earning potential, social mobility, and political access (Bowen, 2018; Pallais & Turner, 2006; Persell & Cookson, 1985). A longitudinal study by Bowen and Bok (1998) found that students of color who attended selective colleges had higher graduation rates than their peers at less selective institutions. However, the phenomenon of undermatching prevents many academically qualified students of color from attaining these societal assets, which are heavily concentrated in the communities of people who attended selective colleges.

Undermatching is further highlighted by a study by Robinson and Roska (2016), who analyzed a nationally representative dataset and found that undermatched students were significantly less likely to graduate from college within 4 to 6 years, compared to their non-undermatched counterparts. Graduating within this typical timeframe is crucial for students to benefit fully from the advantages that selective colleges can offer, such as improved career opportunities, financial stability, and overall life satisfaction. When students do not graduate in a timely manner, they may face increased student loan debt, delayed entry into the workforce, and challenges in building professional networks, all of which can hinder their ability to improve their station in life (Bound et al., 2010).

The impact of racism and systemic inequalities, such as financial barriers, information gaps, and lack of resources, can make it more challenging for Black and Latinx students to apply to competitive colleges. A study by Thompson (2018) involving a qualitative interview approach showed that biases among guidance counselors may further contribute to undermatching by dissuading even those students who might have otherwise applied to more selective institutions. Other disadvantages these students might face include a lack of access to rigorous coursework, limited exposure to college-going culture, and inadequate college preparation support, as evidenced by a quantitative analysis of national survey data conducted by Perna and Titus (2005). Consequently, addressing both the systemic barriers and potential biases among guidance counselors is essential to ensure that Black and Latinx students have equitable opportunities to apply to and attend competitive colleges that match their qualifications, enabling them to graduate on time and fully reap the benefits associated with attending selective institutions (Perna & Titus, 2005; Robinson & Roska, 2016).

Although research has shown that college aspirations are at an all-time high among all ethnic groups in the United States (Bettinger & Evans, 2019), Black, Latinx, and Native Americans still have a disproportionately smaller presence at America's most selective colleges (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Kang & García Torres, 2021). Young and Bryan (2015) analyzed data from the NCES and found that the percentage of Black and Latinx students graduating from college with a bachelor's degree is significantly lower than that of White or Asian students.

Selective colleges are vital for increasing earning potential and life opportunities (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Klugman, 2012; Roderick et al., 2011). A study by Hersch (2019) found that doing well at a lower-tier college does not guarantee admission to an elite graduate program, suggesting that it may be too late to wait until graduate school to seek improved selectivity. For example, Nancy Hass's 2014 article in *The New York Times* entitled "Why Can't You Catch Up?" explained that data showed the best postgraduate opportunities are offered to those from the most competitive colleges. Dworkin (1998, cited by Alon and Tienda (2005), asserted that research has demonstrated a consistent positive association between institutional selectivity and several postgraduation outcomes, including the completion of advanced degrees, earnings, and overall satisfaction with college experiences. Consequently, it is essential to support students in attending the best selectivity match that their academic records predict at the undergraduate level, rather than waiting until graduate school.

"Competitive Colleges" and "Selective Colleges"

Competitive colleges and selective colleges, terms that are used interchangeably, refer to colleges that are highly selective in the admissions process and typically serve middle- to upper-class students (Lee, 2013). College selectivity rankings from www.collegetransitions.com are used in this dissertation as follows.

Most selective colleges accept fewer than 15% of all applicants AND possess an average composite ACT (25%ile) score of at least 30 or an average combined SAT (25%ile) score of at least 1370. Some colleges in the Most selective category are Amherst, Barnard College, Duke University, Harvey Mudd College, and Johns Hopkins University.

Extremely selective colleges accept fewer than 35% of all applicants AND possess an average composite ACT (25%ile) score of at least 29 OR an average combined SAT (25%ile) score of at least 1340. Some colleges in the Extremely selective category are Carnegie Mellon University, New York University, Northeastern University, Smith College, and Tulane University.

Very selective colleges accept fewer than 50% of all applicants AND possess an average composite ACT (25%ile) score of at least 27 or an average combined SAT (25%ile) score of at least 1280. Some very selective colleges based on this scale are as follows: Bard College, George Washington University, Kenyon College, and Mount Holyoke College.

Moderately selective colleges accept fewer than 60% of all applicants AND possess an average composite ACT (25%ile) score of at least 25 or an average combined SAT (25%ile) score of at least 1210. Some colleges that fit into this category based on this scale are as follows: Baylor University, Clark University, Clarkson University, and Sarah Lawrence College.

Research has shown that undermatching is not new. It is sometimes used as a tool to maintain the social status quo. CRT proponents (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) posited that minoritized people are barred entrance to the nation's most important vehicle of social mobility, selective colleges, by design. Research connects the manipulation of educational resources or processes such as undermatching to systemic racism and reproduction and maintenance of the social hierarchies that rule this country (Alon & Tienda, 2005).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In this section, I discuss the research design and methodological techniques I used to carry out the study. I describe my participant recruitment plan and selection criteria, methods of data collection, and data analysis. In addition, I address issues of validity and outline the sequencing of the study. When designing this research, I reflected on the purpose of my inquiry and the types of questions I wanted to investigate (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021). Subsequently, I ruminated over the methods and design that would best help me answer my research questions. To explore how Black and Latinx New York City public high school students perceive the role that their counselors' expectations play in matching them with colleges, I chose a qualitative approach to collecting and analyzing the data. Since Education CRT, the theoretical framework of this study, prioritizes giving voice to the narratives of people of color, I adopted a qualitative approach highlighting the narratives and stories of Black and Latinx high school students. Specifically, I used phenomenological and narrative inquiry approaches to provide descriptive qualitative data about the perspectives and lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2021).

Phenomenological Approach

A phenomenological research approach, highlighting the importance of the lived experiences of participants, was used to study how Black and Latinx students experienced and made sense of the phenomenon of preparing to go to college. Phenomenological approaches describe the essence and the nature of experiencing the phenomena being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this approach, the phenomenon of the college-going process was central, and participant narratives were the means of acquiring information about experiences.

Therefore, drawing on the phenomenological methodological approach as described by Ravitch and Carl (2021), the study collected first-hand information about participants' perceptions. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of how guidance counselors' expectations impacted the college-matching process and how participants engaged in the college-going process. The emphasis on individual perspectives, as suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2021), contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the college application process.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research in which the stories are the raw data (Butina, 2015). This study used a narrative inquiry method to compare individual accounts of the college-going phenomenon and to provide an opportunity for students to share their experiences about the college-going process. Centering student voices enabled a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of NYC Black and Latinx students (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Narrative inquiry provided rich raw data about NYC schools' college-going culture, the historical experiences of students in NYC high schools, the role students' identities may play in the college-matching process, and the narrators' personal experiences with their counselors (Lieblich & Josselson, 2012). Bruner (1991) noted that narrative knowledge helps make meaning of the opacity and intricacy of human lives. By collecting stories of life events and analyzing them through narrative inquiry, I am able to open a direct gate to the past experiences as well as the hopes and dreams of the Black and Latinx high school students.

Procedures

In this study, I utilized a strategic sequencing of methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) to ensure systematic and organized data collection and analysis. However, my approach was also iterative, allowing for ongoing refinement and development of findings through cyclical processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

First, I purposefully decided on the school setting and student profile for prospective participants, as recommended by Maxwell (2013) and Creswell and Creswell (2018). I utilized various methods to recruit participants, including advertising on social media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook, as well as through word of mouth. I also posted flyers and reached out to potential participants identified through LinkedIn profiles. When participants expressed interest in the study, I contacted them via phone or email to provide them with further details and to schedule a meeting to discuss consent.

During the consent meeting, I verified participant eligibility by cross-checking their information against predefined criteria. This process ensured that participants met the necessary requirements for inclusion in the study and that their responses were aligned with the research objectives. Once consent was obtained and signed, participants were provided with a link to complete a Qualtrics survey. Participants scheduled themselves for semi-structured interviews using Calendly, with all interviews taking place over Zoom due to the COVID-19 virus. During the interviews, I used interviewing techniques such as checking for understanding by saying statements like "I think I heard you say..." and "Please let me know if I understand you correctly..." to ensure accurate data collection. Additionally, I maintained ongoing communication with participants after the interviews to clarify any points that arose and to gather more information, ensuring data accuracy.

I diligently journaled, organized the interviews after each session, and began initial coding of the data. As noted by Given (2008), "it is often during early readings of the material that researchers develop a list of preliminary codes to try out" (p. 87). This was true for my research as well, where I conducted several coding cycles to refine my codes and create more appropriate categories as my research progressed. Finally, I utilized data gathered from journals, surveys, semi-structured interviews, observational field notes, and archival data to complete the final coding schemes and conduct analysis of the data. This sequencing approach ensured a systematic and organized approach to data collection and analysis in my research.

Though I outlined the stages of my research above, the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation were iterative; they occurred in an ongoing and cyclical manner, allowing for continuous refinement and development of findings. I went back and forth between different stages of the research process to ensure a thorough and comprehensive analysis. For example, after conducting initial interviews and transcribing them using Otter-ai transcription software, I engaged in the process of coding, where I developed a list of preliminary codes based on early readings of the material, as recommended by Given (2008). As I progressed with my analysis, I refined these codes and created more appropriate categories to capture the nuances of the data. Additionally, I contacted participants as needed during the process to clarify any questions that arose during the analysis phase.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Participant Selection

Given my personal experiences and interest in the optimal matching of high school students with colleges and universities, I chose as my focus high-academic-performing Black and Latinx students attending NYC's specialized high schools. New York City has eight specialized high schools for high academic performers. A few of the most well-known are Bronx Science, Stuyvesant, and Brooklyn Technical High School (NYC DOE Data group, n.d.).

The experiences of high-academic-achieving Black and Latinx students are germane to this study about the role guidance counselors' expectations play in the college-matching process because their academic profiles suggest that these high-performing students may qualify for the nation's most selective colleges, universities, and programs. Students attending these schools passed the rigorous Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) (NYC open data, n.d.b), which is the only admissions factor for these eight specialized high schools. Attendance and actual grades are not weighed in this specialized high school admissions process, which further standardizes the qualifications for determining my selection sites. The research participants of this study attended six of the NYC specialized high schools.

Very few Black and Latinx are enrolled in NYC specialized high schools—a fact that has sparked much controversy surrounding the admissions process of these schools (Ali & Chin, 2018). These specialized high schools are highly regarded for their ability to prepare students for competitive colleges and universities. They offer many AP courses and a plethora of afterschool activities; many of them are STEM high schools but also offer strong programs in literature and journalism.

To better understand the demographics of the specialized high schools included in this study, Table 1 presents the approximate number and percentage of Black and Latinx students enrolled in each school.

Selection Criteria

The selection of participants in qualitative research is a critical decision that shapes the findings and insights generated from the study. In this dissertation, I employed a purposive sampling approach, specifically focusing on extreme cases within the population of interest—Black and Latinx students identified as high-performing students in elite public high schools in New York City.

Table 1

Approximate Number and Percentage of Black and Latinx Students in NYC Specialized High Schools

School Name	School Code	Total No. of Students	% Black Students	Approximate No. of Black Students	% Latinx Students	Approximate No. of Latinx Students
Bronx Science	10X445	2,983	3.7	110	8.2	244
Brooklyn Latin	14K449	843	12.2	103	11	93
Brooklyn Tech	13K430	5,957	5.6	334	6.4	381
HSMSE at City College	05M692	524	10.1	53	17	89
HS of American Studies	10X696	407	9.3	38	17.2	70
Queens HS for the Sciences	26Q867	520	3.3	17	5.0	26
Stuyvesant	02M475	3,319	1.6	53	3.8	126

Note. The numbers of students are approximate and may have changed since 2021.

Source: 2020-2021 Diversity Report (NYC open data, n.d.a)

Purposive sampling, as defined by Maxwell (2013), involves intentionally selecting particular settings, persons, or activities to provide information that is particularly relevant to the research questions and goals and cannot be obtained as effectively from other choices. In this study, purposive sampling was carried out by selecting only Black and Latinx students from eight specialized high schools in New York City. These specialized high schools are renowned for their rigorous academic programs and competitive admissions process, attracting high-performing students from diverse backgrounds.

The use of extreme case sampling in this study involves deliberately selecting participants who represent a unique and extreme case within the population of interest (Patton, 2002). By focusing on high-performing Black and Latinx students in elite public high schools, I aimed to capture the experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by this specific group of students in the context of college preparation and recommendations from their high school college counselors. The selection of extreme cases allows for a deeper exploration of the experiences and insights that may not be easily observable in a typical sample, contributing to the richness and depth of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of extreme case sampling, as the findings may not be generalizable to other populations or settings (Yin, 2017). However, the purpose of this study was not to make broad generalizations but, rather, to provide a nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of high-performing Black and Latinx students in elite public high schools in New York City. The use of purposive sampling, specifically extreme case sampling, aligned with the research questions and goals of this study, providing a deliberate and intentional approach to participant selection (Patton, 2002).

Participant Recruitment

For this study, I recruited participants using word of mouth and three social media platforms: LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook. I posted my recruitment flyer on each platform with my email address, the purpose of the study, and what characteristics I was seeking in the participants. Prospective participants emailed or messaged me through the social media platform where they saw the flyer. I followed up with each person who expressed interest.

Seventeen of the 21 participants were recruited through LinkedIn. Thirty-five participants responded to my recruitment flyer on LinkedIn; 17 of them followed through and completed the survey and interview. Four people joined the study from word-of-mouth advertising. Everyone who wanted to participate and fit the criteria was accepted into the study. No one was recruited through Facebook or Twitter.

Research Participant Demographics

The research data for this study were gathered from 21 Black and Latinx youth who graduated from high-performing, specialized high schools in New York City within the past 5 years. Table 2 presents the demographics of the study participants, providing a summary of their self-identified ethnicities, first-generation American status (including 0.5-generation Americans), first-generation college student status, and low-income family backgrounds. The majority of the participants identified as Black (66.67%), followed by Hispanic/Latinx (28.57%), and Afro Latina (4.76%). Most participants were first-generation Americans (85.71%), with a small percentage being 0.5-generation Americans (14.29%). Furthermore, 71.4% of the participants were first-generation college students, and 61.9% came from low-income families.

Table 2

Participant Demographics: Ethnicity, Generational Status, and Family Income

Category	Number of Participants	Percentage
Self-Identified Ethnicity		
Black	14/21	66.67
Hispanic/Latinx	6/21	28.57
Afro Latina	1/21	4.76
First-generation American	18/21	85.71
0.5-generation American	3/21	14.29
First-generation College Student	15/21	71.4
From Low-income Family	13/21	61.9

To better envision the participants of this study, I present in Table 3 a comprehensive overview of participant profiles, each uniquely representative of diverse academic and personal backgrounds. These profiles encompass factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, income level, academic achievements, the number of colleges applied to, college selection, and whether the chosen institution was perceived as a good match by the students themselves. This information on students allows readers to explore the potential influence of various demographic and academic factors on college choices, providing valuable insights into the criteria and considerations that students weigh when making critical decisions about their higher education journeys.

The student profiles are based on self-identification within each category. Table 3 encompasses the following statistics. There are 13 females, 7 males, and 1 abstention. Racial and ethnic backgrounds of students include 14 Black, 1 Latinx, 1 Hispanic/Latinx, 1 Hispanic/Latino, 1 Latina, and 1 Afro Latina. Regarding income levels, 13 students come from low-income households, while 8 are from middle-income backgrounds. The average GPA among these students was 3.57. On average, students applied to 15.9 colleges. College selections varied, with 7 students choosing Ivy League, 2 opting for the most selective, 3 for Extremely Selective, and 2 for Very Selective institutions. One student chose a Selective school, while another pursued NYC Special Career Programs. One student enrolled in a regular CUNY school, and another joined a Flagship CUNY institution. One took a Gap Year, while 2 students attended a NYS Flagship State School. Of the 21 students, 14 perceived their chosen college as a good match, and 2 stated that their match was okay.

Table 3

Participant Profiles and College Choices

Name*	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Income Level	GPA	# Colleges Applied to	Top 5 Acceptance	College Selectivity/ Competitiveness***	According to student: Good match?	Why good match or not for student?
James	M	Black	Low income	4	4	2	Ivy	Yes	Mentors, peers, resources
Ashleigh	F	Black	Middle income	3.7	16	5	Very Selective	No	Expensive, social, location
Silvia	F	Latinx	Low income	4	17	3	Extremely Selective	No	Social, location
Regine	F	Black	Low income	4	25	5	Ivy	Yes	Financial aid, location
Joylene	F	Black	Low income	4	9	5	Ivy	OK	Social
Beverly	F	Black	Middle income	3.2	12	np**	A CUNY school	n/a	Pandemic
Kevin	M	Black	Middle income	2.9	~12	2	Selective	OK	Location, social
Brian	M	Black	Middle income	4	14	5	Extremely Selective	Yes	Resources, community
Thomas	M	Black	Middle income	np**	23	5	NYC Special Career Program	Yes	Special program, prestige
Luis	M	Hispanic/ Latinx	Middle income	3.7	19	0	Gap year	n/a	Not satisfied with acceptances
Camila	F	Latina	Low income	4	27	2	Most Selective	Yes	Size, location, student culture
Cristina	F	Hispanic/ Latino	Low income	3.95	13	4	Ivy	Yes	Mentorship, support, special program
Toni	?	Black	Middle income	3.7	20	5	Most Selective	Yes	Location, staff, major
Amanda	F	Hispanic	Low income	3.7	13	2	Ivy	Yes	Location, academics
Justine	F	Black	Low income	3.7	13	5	NYS Flagship State School	Yes	Location, price
Dolores	F	Afro Latina	Low income	4	16	5	Ivy	Yes	Financial aid, location
Jenn	F	Black	Low income	4	14	5	Ivy	Yes	People
Gale	F	Black	Low income	3.71	10	2	Very Selective	No	Not what expected
Gavin	M	Black	Low income	3	13	5	Flagship CUNY	Yes	Graduate early, freedom
Marie	F	Black	Middle income	4	12	3	NYS Flagship State School	Yes	Programs, community
Langston	M	Black	Low income	3.2	5	5	Extremely Selective	Yes	Financial aid, location, prestige

*Names have been changed to protect the identity of the students. ** Not provided. ***Selective and competitive are interchangeable.

The students completed an online 15-minute Qualtrics survey and participated in an hour Zoom semi-structured interview during January 2023. Additionally, they furnished the researcher with archival data to complete their college-going profiles, including transcripts, college essays, flyers, and college preparation materials that provided additional context for the survey responses and student narratives. The data received from participants were anonymized to protect their identity. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, personal identifiers were removed, and participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Data Collection Methods

For this qualitative study, I utilized a comprehensive research approach, combining both phenomenological and narrative inquiry approaches to gain a holistic understanding of the research topic. Data for this study were collected using a variety of methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, a short Qualtrics online survey, email correspondence, and phone calls. All students were made aware that email responses and phone call communications were part of the collected data to ensure compliance with IRB requirements. The collected data, including interviews, survey responses, email communications, and phone call records, can be found in Appendices for the sake of transparency and rigor. In addition, archival documents such as information on parent workshops, flyaway programs, high school transcripts, student awards, and financial aid workshops were thoroughly reviewed to provide rich contextual insights.

The integration of diverse data collection methods, including interviews, surveys, informal conversations, and archival materials, contributed to the robustness and comprehensiveness of the research design. This multi-method approach facilitated a rich and multifaceted exploration of the research topic, strengthening the validity of the findings. The survey and interview protocols can be found in the Appendices.

To ensure reflexivity and deepen the understanding of the data, I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process. Ortlipp (2015) highlighted that reflective journals can be instrumental in allowing for critical self-reflection and identification of emerging patterns and themes. This reflective approach added depth and nuance to the analysis, enhancing the validity and reliability of the research findings. Finlay (2002) further emphasized the importance of reflexivity in fostering greater awareness of the researcher's subjectivity, which contributes to the overall rigor of the study.

Survey Data

I carefully designed the survey in Qualtrics, a user-friendly computer-based program that allowed participants to access and complete the questionnaire easily by clicking on the provided link. The questionnaire-format survey consisted of 19 thoughtfully crafted short-answer and multiple-choice questions, including a Likert scale and open-ended questions (short answers), to capture a comprehensive range of data related to the research topic. This approach ensured that the survey was tailored specifically to the research questions and goals of this study. Participants reported that the survey took less than 15 minutes to complete, and they were given the flexibility to complete it at their own leisure, providing them with ample time to reflect deeply on their experiences. The Qualtrics data were immediately available for analysis, allowing for prompt data processing and interpretation.

The use of surveys in this study also served a crucial role in triangulating data from multiple sources, including interviews and archival materials. Triangulation, a widely recognized method in qualitative research, involves using multiple data sources or methods to corroborate findings, enhance credibility, and improve the reliability and validity of research results. By integrating data from surveys, interviews, and archival materials, I employed triangulation to ensure that the findings were supported by diverse sources of information, adding robustness and trustworthiness to the research findings. The use of surveys, as one of the data collection methods, contributed to the overall rigor and validity of the research, strengthening the conclusions drawn from the study findings.

Semi-structured Interviews

I employed a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection instrument. The choice of interviews was guided by Marshall and Rossman's (2011) assertion that interviews allow the researcher to understand the meanings that everyday activities hold for people. The interviews aimed to capture the participants' narratives and gather their stories about their lived experiences and perceptions of the role their guidance counselors' expectations played in their college-going and matching process, as informed by Creswell (2021). To ensure consistency and comprehensiveness, an interview protocol was developed based on relevant literature and used during the semi-structured interviews, following the approach advocated by Patton (2002). The semi-structured format allowed participants to develop their thoughts and ideas in response to the interview questions, as suggested by Denscombe (2014), which facilitated a deeper understanding of the culture and phenomenon being investigated, following Genzuk's (2003) recommendations.

The interview protocol that guided the research interviews consisted of 14 questions, including a mix of predetermined and open-ended questions, as recommended by Creswell (2021). While closed questions were used sparingly for yes or no responses, the majority of questions were open-ended to allow the students to express their perspectives without predetermined categories, following Creswell's (2021) approach to provide a rich and nuanced understanding. This approach enabled the students to describe how their college-going application process was influenced by their guidance counselors' expectations. By using open-ended questions, the students were able to construct their own descriptions and highlight personally meaningful topics, aligning with Given's (2008) approach. The non-directive nature of the interview style also allowed for responsiveness to individual identities and participant sensibilities, in line with my commitment to attending to participant identities and paying attention to their unique perspectives. This facilitated probing follow-up questions to explore student experiences, behaviors, and values in relation to the research phenomenon. The interview questions were designed to elicit in-depth and rich data, following Creswell's (2021) and Patton's (2002) recommendations, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of guidance counselor expectations in the college-going process, aligning with the qualitative research tradition that emphasizes capturing participants' subjective perspectives and meanings they assign to their experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

The construction of the interview protocol was guided by current literature on undermatching, guidance counselors, and teacher expectations. To ensure its effectiveness, I pilot-tested the interview protocol on two high school students and sought feedback from six doctoral student colleagues. Based on their input, the questions were revised to best align with the research questions and elicit meaningful answers from the study participants. The interviews with participants focused on their high school experiences related to preparing for attendance at selective colleges. Follow-up and probing questions were used to supplement initial answers and encourage participants to provide detailed responses.

The interviews for this study were conducted in January 2023, during a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was manageable but not completely resolved. As a result, I remained flexible with the interview medium, taking into consideration participants' comfort level and preferences. Given the prominence and acceptance of Zoom as a medium for conducting qualitative research, I conducted the interviews using the Zoom platform and recorded them for transcription purposes. Transcription was facilitated using Otter-ai, a transcription tool that converts audio recordings into text format.

However, I also acknowledged that conducting interviews via Zoom presented unique challenges compared to in-person interviewing, as the dynamics of virtual interactions are different. For instance, I was not able to capture gestures and facial expressions, which are important elements of social data collection in face-to-face interviews. Additionally, some participants preferred not to turn on their cameras, and while I respected their preferences, it limited my ability to observe nonverbal cues. Despite these challenges, I made efforts to establish rapport, build trust, and ensure participant comfort during the Zoom interviews.

During the interviews, I employed member checking, a well-established practice in qualitative research, to enhance the validity of my findings (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). This involved reviewing what I heard from the participants and asking for their feedback to ensure the accuracy of my interpretations. Member checking has been recognized as an important step in validating qualitative research findings, as it allows participants to confirm or correct the researcher's understanding of their perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, I utilized email follow-up as a means of data triangulation, a common approach in qualitative research to corroborate findings from multiple sources (Creswell, 2021). By reaching out to the participants to gather additional information about their background as either first-generation Americans or first-generation college students, I sought to deepen the contextual understanding of their experiences and add rigor to the research process.

In summary, this qualitative study utilized a semi-structured interview protocol to conduct structured interviews in order to capture in-depth narratives on participants' perceptions and experiences related to guidance counselor expectations in the college-going and matching process. The interview questions were designed to be open-ended, allowing for free expression of perspectives, and were pilot-tested and revised for clarity and relevance. Flexibility in the interview medium was maintained to accommodate participants' preferences, and efforts were made to ensure accuracy in capturing participants' perspectives during the interviews.

Archival Document Review

Archival document review—including educational flyers, event programs, website text, and student records—allowed me to uncover what types of programs, classes, parental workshops, and information were provided to the students and their families to help prepare them to access a rigorous university education that could positively change the trajectory of the students' lives.

There were two sources of archival data in this study. First, the participants were asked to bring personal documents such as report cards, student-counselor meeting notes, résumés, SAT scores, sports awards, and honors. These helped to tell their stories and provide empirical data to answer the question about the types of colleges recommended to them by their guidance counselors and to verify their academic records (see "Semi-structured Interviews" above). Additionally, I independently gathered relevant documents, including flyers, website text, college preparation materials, and more, from various sources such as non-participants, former students who graduated more than 5 years prior, and employees who could not provide information about students but could share informational materials like emails and other documents.

Table 4 offers a summary of the archival data compiled, outlining the document types, number of documents obtained, and brief descriptions of each category. The documents served not only to enrich the participants' narratives but also to complement the empirical data gathered through semi-structured interviews, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Table 4

Personal Archival Documents Provided by Participants

Category	Document Type	Number of Documents	Description
Academic Records	Report cards	19	Records of academic performance
Achievements	Résumés	19	Summary of participants' experiences and achievements
Exams—Standardized	Results report for AP exams	35	Student reports of AP exams
Honors	Emails, pictures, letters	30	Academic honors and distinctions
SAT/ACT scores	SAT/ACT score reports	20	Standardized test scores
Sports awards	Emails, pictures, letters	5	Awards received in sports
Student-counselor meeting notes	Emails, letters, student notes	7	Notes from meetings with guidance counselor

Observational Field Notes

As a qualitative researcher, I recognized the importance of observational field notes in my study. Observational field notes are essential for capturing rich and contextual information during data collection. However, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, my fieldwork had to be conducted virtually using video technologies such as Zoom and Google Meets.

One significant impact of using Zoom for data collection was the limited capture of nonverbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions. In in-person interviews, these nonverbal cues provide valuable contextual information that can enrich field notes. However, in Zoom interviews, these cues may be less apparent or not captured at all, which could impact the depth and richness of the observational field notes.

To mitigate this limitation, I took notes and recorded my reflections in my reflective journal, which also served as a mechanism to bracket my positionality and personal feelings during data collection. I followed the concept of “bracketing,” as described by Gearing (2004) to acknowledge and set aside my own biases and preconceived notions during data collection. However, I also recognized that capturing nonverbal cues and informal conversations during the virtual interviews was challenging.

During the interviews, 19 of the 21 participants turned on their cameras, which allowed me to capture some gestures, facial expressions, and digressions as well as more informal conversations. Nevertheless, I remained mindful of the limitations of virtual interactions and adjusted my approach to field notes accordingly, considering the absence of certain nonverbal cues.

Despite the limitations, using Zoom as a virtual communication tool was a valuable resource that allowed me to complete my research and reach a wider audience, including participants from out of state. However, I acknowledged the potential impact on the type of field notes taken and remained vigilant in maintaining the rigor and validity of my qualitative research, while adapting to the constraints posed by the global pandemic.

Reflective Writing and Journaling

As a novice researcher, I used a research journal (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) to record my thoughts, ideas, experiences, and questions throughout the research process. This helped me to reflect and develop my thoughts about the research process. In addition to retrospective reflection, the journal provided forward-looking, generative space in which I brainstormed interview questions for the students and ideas about data analysis. My journal entries included interpretations of the data and examinations of intra-school connections and relationships, which have been acknowledged as important research material by past qualitative educational researchers (Maxwell, 2013). The journal was intended to be a constructive mechanism to map out ideas and theories and bracket (Gearing, 2004) presuppositions and biases associated with my positionality (Given, 2008).

Data Analysis

This study used a CRT conceptual framework (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2022) to code, categorize, and analyze the data generated from the surveys, interviews, and narrative voices of Black and Latinx students. They shared their experiences and perceptions about the college-going phenomenon in their school relating to: (a) their experiences with college and career readiness in their high schools; (b) the role their high school college counselor played in helping them to apply to colleges matching their academic profile; and (c) how teacher and guidance counselor perceptions impact the level of selectivity of the colleges and universities they were recommended.

According to Merriam (2009), “the overall process of data analysis begins by identifying segments in your data set that are responsive to your research questions” (p. 176). In order to do this, I implemented coding, which Maxwell (2013) described as a qualitative research method that "fractures" the data and rearranges them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category or broader themes and issues. Using a "mixing and matching" (Miles et al., 2019) of coding techniques—i.e., In Vivo coding (using participants' own words), process coding (capturing steps or stages in a process), open coding (creating initial codes without preconceived categories), descriptive coding (summarizing or describing data without interpretation), and values coding (identifying values, beliefs, or ideologies expressed in the data), I attempted to capture what was most salient or similar in the Black and Latinx high school students' perspectives and experiences from various data sources, e.g., student interviews, student reflections, survey responses, observational field notes, and archival data.

I began my analysis by establishing a set of deductive codes that aligned with research based on CRT. These codes included categories such as racial/ethnic identity and college choice, structural racism and choice, racialized experiences in high school, and guidance counselor bias. Drawing from my research questions, prior knowledge, and established literature on the topic, these deductive codes provided a framework for my initial analysis.

However, as I delved into the data and sought to capture the voices and lived experiences of underrepresented students, I also recognized the need to adopt an inductive coding approach. It was crucial to let the research findings emerge from the student narratives and other data sources. Therefore, I employed an inductive coding lens to allow the data to reveal their own patterns and themes.

As a result, during the coding process, additional codes emerged inductively, such as guidance counselor support, advocacy by guidance counselors, cultural competence of guidance counselors, CRT-informed decision-making, and guidance counselor support informed by identity and the intersectionality of identities. These inductive codes were derived from the rich and nuanced narratives shared by the participants, capturing the unique perspectives and experiences of the students in the study.

The combination of deductive and inductive coding approaches allowed me to draw on existing research while also being open to new insights and perspectives that emerged from the data. This comprehensive approach enriched the analysis and provided a holistic understanding of the complexities surrounding the role of guidance counselors in the college selection process for underrepresented students, informed by both established literature and the lived experiences of the participants.

I utilized Microsoft Excel as a tool for organizing the analyzed data. Spreadsheets were employed to categorize the research questions asked during interviews, focus groups, and observations. Furthermore, themes and concepts that emerged during the coding process were also organized using Microsoft Excel. This allowed for a clear representation of the frequency of certain responses, providing a structured and organized overview of the analyzed data.

As I elaborated in the previous section, this study employed a non-linear and iterative approach to data analysis, wherein the analysis took place concurrently with data collection and subsequent stages. Drawing from established educational literature, including Ravitch and Carl (2021), Miles et al. (2019), and Creswell and Creswell (2018), I recognized that qualitative research involves continuous reflection, analytic questioning, and memo writing throughout the study (Creswell, 2021, p. 184).

Furthermore, Miles et al. (2019) advocated for concurrent analysis with data collection, as opposed to a linear sequence of data collection followed by separate analysis. This non-linear approach allows a researcher to cycle back and forth dynamically between existing data and generating strategies for collecting new data and facilitating ongoing refinement and improvement of the data collection process, leading to enriched findings and interpretations. It makes the analysis process lively, flexible, and adaptable to the evolving research context. By adopting a non-linear and iterative approach to data analysis, this study embraced the dynamic nature of qualitative research and facilitated a deep and engaged analysis of the data. However, one shortcoming was that the first few participants may not have received the most comprehensive interview.

To address this concern, I implemented a strategy of following up with earlier participants when additional questions or themes emerged during the data collection process. By conducting these follow-up interviews or reaching out via email or phone, I was able to ensure that the information gathered from the early participants was as thorough and comprehensive as that obtained from the later participants. This follow-up process not only strengthened the overall data collection but also provided opportunities for participants to clarify or expand on their initial responses, thereby contributing to a more in-depth understanding of their experiences and perspectives.

Coding Themes

The following sections provide an overview of the two sets of codes used in this study: CRT-based codes about college access (Table 5) and codes specific to guidance counselors (Table 6). These codes were developed to help analyze and categorize participants' experiences and perspectives concerning the influence of race and ethnicity on their college choices, experiences, and the role of guidance counselors in the process.

Table 5

CRT-based Codes About College Access

#	Code Name	Description
1	Racial/ethnic identity and college choices	Instances where participants mention how their racial or ethnic identity influenced their college choices
2	Structural racism and college choices	Instances where participants discuss how structural racism, such as systemic discrimination or unequal access to resources, influenced their college choices
3	Intersectionality and college choices	Instances where participants discuss how intersecting social identities, such as race, gender, and class, influenced their college choices and experiences
4	Racial discrimination and college choices	Instances where participants mention experiencing racial discrimination or bias in the college selection process
5	CRT-informed decision-making process	Instances where participants discuss how guidance counselors and staff could have applied CRT principles in their decision-making process for choosing a college
6	Racialized experiences in high school	Instances where participants discuss their experiences with race or racism in high school

Table 6

Codes Specific to Guidance Counselors

#	Code Name	Description
1	Guidance counselor bias	Instances where participants discussed experiences of bias or discrimination from guidance counselors based on their race or ethnicity
2	Guidance counselor support	Instances where participants discussed positive experiences of guidance counselors providing support, guidance, and mentorship to Black and Latinx students
3	Lack of guidance counselor support	Instances where participants discussed experiences of inadequate or insufficient support from guidance counselors in the college selection process
4	Stereotyping by guidance counselors	Instances where participants discussed experiences of being stereotyped or stigmatized by guidance counselors based on their race or ethnicity

Positionality

Engaging in this research stems directly from my role as a Black female former New York City high school student at a specialized high school, the very same high school my daughter attended. My perspective towards this topic is also situated within my identities as mother, aunt, cousin, and educator of Black and Latinx students. Moreover, preparation for going to college has been a constant theme about which my high school students have expressed strong opinions. This personal experience, both inside my family and in my professional life, has strengthened my curiosity and desire to hear the narratives of other Black and Latinx students to compare their experiences to those in my community as well as, possibly, in other school systems.

My positionality as a Black female former NYC high school student as well as the mother of three Black Hispanic (as they self-identify) students could impact the rigor of my study. I am self-aware of my own passion for the subject matter of my study and, indeed, hold a personal ambition to augment the number of Black and Latinx students in competitive higher learning institutions, which can provide resources and mental stimulation to support these students on their journey to becoming active and informed citizens.

Validity

The concept of validity in qualitative research pertains to the researcher's ability to affirm the faithfulness of the findings to the voices and experiences of the participants in the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Validity is a critical concern, especially in qualitative research where the subjective nature of data collection and interpretation can pose challenges. In this study, I employed various strategies to enhance the validity of the research and ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings, while remaining faithful to the voices of the Black and Latinx participants in my analysis and interpretation.

One key strategy was the process of bracketing my assumptions and preconceived notions to ensure that the true experiences of the students who participated in the study were accurately reflected (Given, 2008). Recognizing that my personal connections to the topic of education for Black and Latinx students could potentially introduce biases into the research, I maintained a reflexive journal and actively identified and acknowledged my preconceptions throughout the research process (Gearing, 2004). This helped me maintain a meta-reflexive stance and avoid undue influence of my own background on the findings.

Throughout the research process, I sought the support of critical friends from the University of Pennsylvania Mid-Career Cohort 19 to enhance the research significantly. One critical friend, experienced in working with marginalized communities, provided valuable insights on culturally responsive approaches, which informed the data collection process. Critical friends offered constructive feedback on various aspects of the research, such as the interview protocol and survey design, and shared their experiences and knowledge to help refine research questions and identify potential gaps in the literature review. These collaborative exchanges allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic, while mitigating potential biases and blind spots. Engagement with critical friends from diverse backgrounds enriched the research and strengthened its validity and overall quality.

Additionally, I employed triangulation as a methodological approach to enhance the validity of the findings. Triangulation involves using multiple sources or methods to challenge and confirm the findings and seek convergence among different sources of information (Creswell, 2021). In this study, I utilized data triangulation by collecting various forms of data, including semi-structured interviews, surveys, archival documents, and student records and résumés. This allowed me to gather data from different sources and perspectives and examine the phenomenon of education for Black and Latinx students from multiple angles.

Furthermore, I implemented participant validation strategies, also known as member checks, to enhance the validity of the findings. I actively sought feedback from the participants by asking questions such as "Does this transcript reflect and resonate with your perspective?" and "Is there anything that this transcript did not capture?" This helped ensure that the findings were aligned with the participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In conclusion, the validity of the research findings in this study was supported through the use of bracketing to mitigate potential biases, data triangulation to gather data from multiple sources, participant validation strategies to ensure alignment with the participants' perspectives, and the incorporation of critical friends into the research process. These strategies collectively contributed to the validity and trustworthiness of the research findings and increased the rigor of the study.

Consent

The informed consent process for the study began with providing all participants with an informed consent form via email prior to conducting interviews. The consent form was comprehensive and clearly outlined the nature of the study, including the fact that the information gathered through interviews would be used for research purposes, specifically for my dissertation. The consent form also explicitly granted permission to use the data for other related studies that I might conduct without seeking further consent. Additionally, the consent form detailed the role of the lead researcher in the study and provided information on measures that would be taken to protect participant identity and information, including the duration for which the data would be retained.

Participants were given the opportunity to meet with me through a Zoom meeting or phone call to discuss the study further. During this initial meeting, participants were encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification to ensure they had a clear understanding of what their participation entailed. Participants were explicitly informed that all information shared during the interviews would be treated with strict confidentiality. The consent form explicitly stated that all data collected would be de-identified, and participant identities would be kept confidential throughout the study. Additionally, the consent form outlined the procedures that would be implemented to protect participant anonymity, such as using pseudonyms or removing any identifying information from the published results.

The consent form emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time without any repercussions. It also included information about the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study, allowing participants to make an informed decision about their participation while considering the potential consequences. The contact information of the lead researcher and relevant institutional review boards or ethics committees was provided in the consent form for participants to seek further information or address any concerns.

Overall, the informed consent process was meticulously designed to ensure that participants were fully informed about the study, its purpose, and the data handling procedures, with particular emphasis on protecting participant anonymity. It also ensured that participants had the opportunity to ask questions and make an informed decision about their participation, upholding the principles of autonomy, voluntariness, and confidentiality. The process was implemented with the aim of protecting participants' rights and well-being throughout the study, adhering to dissertation-level standards of rigor and ethical consideration.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The findings of this study have the potential to inform NYC school officials and others about creating conditions in high schools recognizing that due to structural inequalities, special attention must be paid to the needs of minoritized populations whose needs are often ignored or misunderstood.

Research Questions

This qualitative study, therefore, asked the following questions:

1. What are Black and Latinx NYC high school students' perceptions of their guidance counselors' role as advisors during the college preparation and application process?
2. What, if any, are the differences between Black and Latinx NYC high school students' self-perception of college readiness, and their perception of their counselors' expectations of their readiness?
3. How do these differences in perception, if they exist, manifest during the college preparation and application process?

Summary of Major Findings

1. Participants identified three key roles of their guidance counselors: provider of tools and information, cheerleader, and realist.
2. Participant narratives and surveys in this study did not indicate any difference in their own self-perception of college readiness and their perception of their guidance counselors' expectations of their readiness. Most participants perceived that their counselors' expectations of their college readiness aligned with their own, and there was no undermatching at their schools.

3. This study revealed that on the rare occasions when students and their guidance counselors' perceptions of college readiness did not align, it was the guidance counselors who held higher expectations of the students' abilities.

Additional Findings

4. In addition to contributing to the answer for Research Question 2, the significance of the college-going culture theory emerged as a crucial factor in explaining the participants' success. Although guidance counselors played an important role in the college application process, a key finding of this study was that the participants attributed their readiness for matching with competitive 4-year colleges to their school's robust college-going culture. This culture, which they consistently experienced throughout their 4 years of high school, proved to be an essential element in ensuring their preparedness for college applications and admissions, reinforcing its importance in the broader context of the research.
5. Black and Latinx students in this study shared that their White and Asian peers, not their guidance counselors, intimated or openly articulated doubts about their college readiness and prospects of gaining admission to highly selective colleges.
6. Participants said that guidance counselors and school staff needed to pay special attention to their intersectional identities in order to best inform them for "best fit" colleges, not just "best match" colleges.

The primary findings from this study are structured according to the research questions, highlighting critical themes that emerged during the data collection and analysis phase. Additionally, three supplementary findings that surfaced organically during the research process are presented. Although these additional findings may not directly address the initial research questions, they deserve their own platform because they significantly influence the experiences of Black and Latinx students in NYC specialized high schools during the college-going process. These findings provide valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by these students, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of their college-going journey.

Findings Related to Research Questions

Research Question #1

1. What are Black and Latinx NYC high school students' perceptions of their guidance counselors' role as advisors during the college preparation and application process?

Roles of the Guidance Counselor

In addressing Research Question #1, the study findings revealed that participants identified three key roles of their guidance counselors: provider of tools and information, cheerleader, and realist.

Provider of Tools and College-related Information. When asked about their guidance counselors' role in the college-going process, all respondents emphasized that their counselors provided them with valuable tools and resources that aided them in making informed decisions about which schools to include on their college list. They looked to their counselors for guidance on how to access accurate and up-to-date information about colleges and universities, including academic programs, location, size, campus culture, and financial aid options. They expected their counselors to help them understand complex application requirements and deadlines, and provide guidance on writing essays, preparing for interviews, and obtaining letters of recommendation. They also anticipated receiving assistance with various tools such as Naviance, a college-matching software program, scholarships, college access programs, college ratings, and college-going student profiles.

During their interviews, each participant listed at least two tools or resources their guidance counselors provided or were expected to provide to help them navigate the college-matching process. Here are some examples of assistance from their guidance counselors:

> Naviance login...that was really helpful. (Kevin)
>
> Information about college...like financial aid, college fairs, and colleges. (Joylene)
>
> A website with scholarship opportunities. (Camila)

However, not all guidance counselors provided the same information. While some students received information about specific scholarships, such as the Posse Program, Questbridge, and other opportunities, other participants noted that they were not provided enough information about scholarships that could have made a difference in their college choice. Camila, who attended a most selective college, stated that she was upset with her counselor because she felt that her guidance counselor neglected to provide her with information about specific scholarships for which she qualified.

> I was not sure that I would get into my reach school which offers a full ride. So, I wanted to apply to Questbridge which also offers full rides to selective colleges. However, when my guidance counselor discouraged me from doing so and they did not offer me other alternatives. (Camila, January 2023)

Sixty-one percent (13/21) of the participants identified themselves as being from low-income households. Of those 13 students, eight expressed that they were not worried about scholarships because the schools they believed they qualified for were highly selective and offered financial aid to meet the complete financial needs of the students. James, Regine, and Dolores, all low-income students who were accepted into Ivies, expressed that during their process, they counted on the guidance counselor for tools that would make the college-going process less stressful. However, they did not pay much attention to scholarships because they were set on going to Ivies and counted on their full financial need being met.

> The guidance counselor gave me a list of scholarships to apply to. I did not apply to any because my grades, SAT scores and Naviance profiles aligned with an Ivy League student. I am low-income, I knew they would offer me a full ride. (Dolores, interview, January 2023)

However, students like Luis, who considered themselves middle-income, were very concerned that they would not get enough financial aid to cover their financial need. Luis stated:

> My parents are both educators. For some reason, colleges believed we could afford more than we really could. I used the websites and information that my counselor gave me to find scholarships. I did not get outside scholarships. My story was not compelling enough. (Luis, interview, January 2023)

Empowering Independence with College Tools. Eighty-one percent (17/21) of the participants believed that the college application tools provided by their guidance counselor were designed to promote independence. Joylene, for example, stated that her school emphasized building independence from freshman year, including taking control of their future and collaborating with others. For her, learning how to use the tools provided by her guidance counselor was viewed as another way students in her school were expected to continue fostering independence and taking responsibility for their own lives. Joylene shared:

> She did not spend any time holding my hands. I saw her role as helping me build independence to make my college choices. She treated us as if we were mature enough to discover what was best for us. We had to do the research and the work to learn more about the schools. We had a say in what colleges we wanted to apply to. She told us how to use Naviance to research schools independently. It was like a necessity that forced us to collaborate and figure out some things for ourselves. She gave us guidelines for "safety, target, and reach." (Joylene, interview, January 2023)

James, another student, appreciated the information he received from his counselor but felt that it was not tailored to his needs. He had hoped for more guidance and support in his college application process and felt somewhat neglected by his counselor, instead of feeling empowered to be independent.

> It all felt so impersonal. What he gave me, I could have found on my own.... Why have a guidance counselor if they can't help you the way you need them to? (James, interview, January 27, 2023)

Need for Specialized Information and Tools. However, 19% (4/21) of the students felt they were not provided with the appropriate information or tools to navigate the college application process effectively. Silvia, an undocumented Latinx, for instance, believed that it was the responsibility of the guidance counselor to truly understand and know their students. Research supports this notion, indicating that considering students' individual circumstances not only enhances academic outcomes but also promotes equity and accessibility in higher education (De Vries, 2014; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012). Silvia further expressed that there was a lack of differentiation for students who did not conform to the "typical mold," highlighting the need for tailored support in fostering independence.

Moreover, Silvia expressed that she understood the guidance counselor's workload but believed it was still the responsibility of the school and its staff to provide individualized education to all students, regardless of their background. She emphasized that students, especially those from low-income or undocumented backgrounds like hers, need more support to overcome the challenges they face. Despite not openly sharing her DACA-undocumented status with other students, school officials were aware of Silvia's situation. Silvia expressed that being the first in her family to pursue college was both brave and scary. She spoke about the obstacles she faced in attaining higher education, including a lack of financial aid, limited resources, institutional regulations, and psychological and social challenges. Silvia asserted that ignoring or neglecting these unique situations should not be disguised as fostering independence during the college enrollment process. This perspective is supported by proponents of CRT and educational researchers (Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano & Yosso, 2022; Stevenson, 2014). Silvia's statement underscored the importance of equity in education and the need for inclusive practices to foster independence among all students.

> My guidance counselor was lacking. I am an undocumented student. She was not prepared to meet my specific needs. We do not have the same needs as other students. My guidance counselor, my principal, and the other adults in my school knew of my situation and did not provide me with any additional tools to help me navigate my special situation. Yes, I used Naviance and saw the historical—anonymous profiles of students in my school and what schools they got into.... She knew I existed, yet she acted as though there was no need to take the extra step to help me. (Silvia, semi-structured interview, January 15, 2023)

Guidance Counselor as Cheerleader. In addition to providing tools, New York City Black and Latinx students also viewed their guidance counselors as cheerleaders, offering encouragement and support. Current research on college matching and access aligned with this finding, indicating that guidance counselors play a crucial role in motivating students to pursue their college aspirations (Tang & Ng, 2019). Only 1 out of 20 students who provided their GPAs reported a GPA below 3.2, indicating that the participants in this study were overwhelmingly high achievers. However, even these high-achieving students sometimes had reservations about whether they measured up to a certain standard and experienced uncertainty or self-doubt. This uncertainty or self-doubt occasionally manifested in discussions with their guidance counselors. For example, three participants openly shared their personal struggles with doubting their abilities in specific classes or not seeing themselves as qualified for certain colleges. They all stated that their guidance counselor encouraged and helped them overcome their self-doubt. Anika specifically thanked her guidance counselor for pushing her to apply to more competitive colleges, despite her initial doubts about her qualifications.

> You know, they made me feel a lot better about my academic profile and where I was capable of going and what I was capable of doing. It definitely was a boost to my self-esteem, my psyche, and also just generally my work ethic because, you know, it is very hard to apply to colleges when you have low self-esteem about your academic profile. But they helped me and I was able to make a lot of progress. So, I applied to a couple of places I would not have had it not been for my guidance counselor cheering me on. (Anika)

Guidance Counselor as Realist. The role of the guidance counselor as a realist emerged as a recurring theme in the interviews conducted with 21 participants. Out of these, 15 participants expressed the expectation that their guidance counselors should be realists and provide them with factual information about their chances of getting into certain colleges. Students appreciated guidance counselors who presented information objectively, without bias, and helped them create a balanced list of safety, target, and reach schools. The use of tools like Naviance, which provided historical data on other students who went to their schools, also helped ease conversations about college choices.

While some students felt that their guidance counselors could have been more candid in their conversations, others recognized that the delivery of the information mattered as much as the content itself. Students appreciated guidance counselors who used a formula, such as the "⅓ school list formula," mentioned by Pamela, which required all students to apply to reach, target, and safety schools in equal proportion. This approach was seen as a realistic way to protect students from potential disappointment and ensure they had a balanced list of college options.

The importance of how information is delivered by guidance counselors was highlighted by Gale, who mentioned that she did not take offense when her guidance counselor asked her to add colleges to her list because she saw it as the counselor looking out for her. Pamela also praised the "realist" approach of her school's guidance counselors for using a consistent formula for all students, which prevented biased recommendations and ensured that students considered a balanced range of college options.

Brian, a student who also appreciated the realist approach of the "⅓ college list formula," acknowledged that not all students had the same reaction to their counselors' suggestions. While he personally appreciated the counselor's advice, he mentioned that some of his friends were irritated by the tone in which their counselors tried to get them to add more colleges to their list. He suggested that the delivery of the information by guidance counselors, including the tone and manner in which it is conveyed, can impact how students perceive and respond to the realist approach.

> She had a very, like, "realist" approach, which I appreciated, but it could have been off-putting to some people. I think some people have actually done stuff like, only applying to Ivies. And she was like, she was straight up and down and told them like, no, like, don't do that, you can't do that. And they got mad because they thought she did not believe in them. (Brian, Semi-structured interview)

Research Question #2

2. What, if any, are the differences between Black and Latinx NYC high school students' self-perception of college readiness, and their perception of their counselors' expectations of their readiness?

No Difference in Perception of College Readiness

In answering Research Question #2, I found that the narratives of the participants in this study did not indicate any difference in their own self-perception of college readiness and their perception of their guidance counselors' expectations of their readiness. Most participants perceived that their counselors' expectations of their college readiness aligned with their own, and there was no undermatching at their schools.

Participants' Self-perception of College Readiness. The participants had a high self-perception of their academic readiness for college. Based on interviews, surveys, and archival documents, all participants (21/21) expressed confidence in their own college readiness. Participants emphasized the rigorous nature of their course offerings, which required all students to take AP, honors, and/or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes. They expressed confidence that these high-level classes in STEM and humanities academically prepared them for college.

Furthermore, the fact that all students had to pass the same standardized entrance test (SHSAT) to enter the specialized high schools created a sense of confidence that everyone had the ability to succeed, further reinforcing their perception of being prepared for college. In addition, many of the participants had been high academic achievers who had attended specialized middle schools or magnet programs within local middle schools—all of which added to their confidence in their academic abilities.

Moreover, the students were encouraged to get involved in extracurricular activities. Five out of 21 participants held leadership positions in their schools, and 18 out of 21 actively engaged in student government or supported student causes, particularly those related to Black and Latinx communities.

Guidance Counselors' Expectations of Students' College Readiness. In this study, participants perceived that their guidance counselors had high expectations of their academic abilities and college readiness, which they attributed to data from their academic records, student activities, and SAT scores. For example, Beverly summed up ideas many other participants expressed:

> Though we only saw our guidance counselors at most eight times total in 4 years, they knew what we could do. They had access to our records. Our guidance counselors cannot deny our exam scores, résumés, and other accomplishments. (Beverly, interview, January 2023)

Furthermore, students believed that the guidance counselors recognized that all students took the same entrance exam, which verified their capabilities for high achievement. As Thomas stated, "We all passed the exam where tons of other kids did not."

However, participants also noted that their counselors' perception of their college readiness was not shaped by personal knowledge of them, as their physical contact with their guidance counselors was limited to 3-8 meetings throughout their entire high school career. This limited interaction hindered opportunities to know their students beyond what their traditional data revealed.

Naviance Software: Taking out Guesswork and Bias

Of the 21 participants in this study, 20 reported utilizing Naviance during their college application process. Naviance, a data-driven tool that employs algorithms to recommend colleges based on students' academic credentials, extracurricular activities, and interests, has gained recognition for its ability to minimize guesswork and bias in the college application process (Christian et al., 2017; Power School, 2023). Leveraging historical data of students who previously attended their school, Naviance provides prospective applicants with insights into their chances of being accepted into certain colleges (David et al., 2017). Moreover, Naviance incorporates various data sources to assist students in identifying colleges that have shown interest in students with similar academic profiles.

Research has highlighted that college undermatching, where students with the potential for more selective colleges choose less competitive options, is more prevalent among minoritized students (Hossler et al., 1999; Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Lindsey, 2012). The participants in this study were aware of the potential for bias in the college-matching process. In fact, Hwang (2023) and Ieva and colleagues (2022) argued that college-matching counseling sessions can be tense for minoritized students, as they are cognizant of the possibility of being undermatched and guidance counselors may fear accusations of undermatching. In this study, 90% (19/21) of the participants expressed that Naviance helped to alleviate racial tensions that could arise during college advising sessions. They praised Naviance as a data-driven approach for identifying college matches. Furthermore, five of the 21 participants interviewed specifically mentioned that Naviance made them feel more comfortable with the choices offered by their counselors. According to Thomas:

> I loved Naviance because it allowed me to research schools that fit my preferences and academic profile. When my guidance counselor recommended certain schools, I felt comfortable with her suggestions because I had already done my research. (Thomas, interview, January 2023)

Furthermore, 50% of the participants reported feeling less racial stress during their sessions with their guidance counselors due to their use of Naviance prior to discussing their college list. As Cristina shared:

> My sister graduated a few years ago. She said her counselor was biased. I was prepared to defend my choices if my guidance counselor recommended low colleges but, fortunately, she used Naviance and so did I. The colleges she asked me to add felt appropriate. (Cristina, interview, January 2023)

In short, the participants in this study liked Naviance because they could manipulate it themselves; their families could access it; and, most importantly, it was data-driven.

Strong College-going Culture

The college-going culture, as elucidated by the findings of this study, exemplified key "Principles of a College Culture," as identified by McClafferty et al. (2002), including college talk, clear expectations, information and resources, a comprehensive counseling model, testing and curriculum, faculty involvement, family involvement, college partnerships, and articulations.

Despite the important role of guidance counselors in the college application process, a major finding of this study was that participants reported their school's robust college-going culture, experienced consistently over their 4 years of high school, was most instrumental in ensuring their preparedness for matching with competitive 4-year colleges.

Black and Latinx students in NYC specialized high schools expressed that the operationalized college-going culture in their schools prepared them to attend the nation's most selective colleges and universities. Unlike in traditional college access literature, the minoritized participants in this study did not heavily rely on the presence of their guidance counselor to navigate the college-going process successfully. Participants narrated that they just did not see enough of their guidance counselors for their counseling sessions to be as impactful as college access and college-matching literature has suggested. They stated that their guidance counselors' role was peripheral for 2 years—in freshman and sophomore years handing out schedules, doing group meetings, and generally supporting the school's college-going atmosphere. In junior and senior year, students reported to have met with their counselors individually a total of 2-4 times to discuss the college application and matching process. "If my guidance counseling session had been all the college-going support we received, I would not have ended up at an Ivy," said Cristina (Interview 2023).

Participants consistently reported feeling well-prepared for college and attributed their preparedness to the strong college-going culture present in their high schools rather than to any individual efforts. This culture of high expectations was established from the moment they entered their high schools, as evidenced by participant interviews, surveys, and archival documents. The New York Specialized High Schools were found to have a strong college-going culture that aligns with the principles outlined by McClafferty et al. (2002). Participants identified high expectations for all students, rigorous academic preparation and support, and faculty involvement as critical components of this culture. They explained how this college-going culture fostered an environment where preparation for selective colleges was emphasized as a primary goal for all students.

Toni vividly illustrated the impact of rigor, a fundamental principle of McClafferty et al.'s college-going culture theory, as they reflected on their personal experience with the high expectations and challenging academic preparation in their high school:

> We were pushed to do our best. The only time that teachers gave us a break was at the height of COVID when we were plagued by emotional and mental stress. No one could doubt your intellect if you are doing well on your exams. We were prepared. Even during COVID, we made up the work and tried to stay on top not to lose our opportunity at great colleges. (Toni, Semi-structured interview, January 2023)

James's account resonated with the voices of other participants, underscoring a common thread where adults held the belief that academically gifted students who gained entry into their schools had the potential to pursue top-tier colleges in the country through diligent effort. This echoed the prevailing sentiment among the participants, further corroborating the notion that high expectations and a focus on hard work were intrinsic components of the college-going culture in their schools.

> Upon entering School X, the expectation for high performance was evident from day one. Freshman students were all assigned the same level of classes, and regardless of their background or name, everyone was treated equally. The only exception was for those who had passing grades from Regent or Proficiency exams in middle school, who were placed in higher-level classes with sophomores or juniors. Despite the limited choices due to my school being a small specialized high school, where all classes were considered honors classes…there was an unwavering emphasis on academic rigor in the school's college-going culture. (James, interview, January 2023)

In the context of the eight New York City specialized high schools whose former students participated in this study, the success of students and their college readiness was perceived as a collective effort involving every adult in the building. As per the principles of a strong college-going culture, everyone had a role to play. Guidance counselors played their role as providers of information, cheerleaders, and realists during the college application and matching process. Educators assumed mentoring roles, providing a consistent forum for candid conversations with students throughout their high school journey. These dialogues facilitated a genuine understanding of students' individual experiences and fostered authentic connections, built on trust and mutual respect.

Students related that they were constantly engaged in "college talk" with adults in the building as well as with their classmates. Students argued that those who had siblings or parents who had gone to college were armed with valuable information that they shared within their social circles. In these circles, both students and teachers contributed to the building of social capital through discussions about college and university admissions.

The participants in the study consistently identified the counseling aspect of their college-going culture as an area that needed improvement. As per McClafferty et al. (2002), counseling programs should provide college-focused counseling and academic advising, which all students reported they received. However, students expressed that there was a lack of sufficient counseling and personalization, which weakened the overall impact of college counseling in the eight specialized high schools examined in the study.

No Undermatching. Contrary to traditional research on academic matching and college access, the findings of this study, which focused on NYC Black and Latinx former specialized high school students, revealed that these students did not perceive academic undermatching at their schools. This finding is significant because it challenges the conventional understanding of high-performing Black and Latinx students as victims or objects of academic undermatching, a phenomenon that disproportionately affects minoritized populations and has been linked to systemic and structural racism (Smith et al., 2013). The participants in the study reported that their guidance counselors' expectations did not contribute to academic undermatching, based on objective data such as entrance exam scores, grades, and standardized test scores, as well as a strong college-going culture. In fact, the students believed that their schools had a reputation for sending the majority of their students to selective schools, and it would not reflect well on their schools or their counselors if there were a pattern of their Black and Latinx students not applying to or gaining admission to top-ranked schools.

Each participant in our study spoke about the starkly low representation of Black and Latinx students at their respective schools, with comments such as "3 Blacks," "10 Latinx," "Less than 10 Black students," "a handful," and "We are the minority of the minority." These statements by the students aligned with the concept of interest convergence from CRT, which suggests that actions taken by institutions are often driven by self-interest (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). In the case of NYC specialized high schools, which have faced criticism for their admissions policies that rely on a single test, resulting in limited access for Black and Latinx students, the participants in our study suggested that it is in the best interest of these schools not to undermatch in order to improve their reputation and address issues of underrepresentation. This underscored the significance of considering the interest convergence perspective in understanding the dynamics of college matching and access for minoritized populations.

Best Fit, Not Academic Undermatching

"I was not undermatched! I chose to go to a CUNY school," said Marie. "Great programs and it met my needs," she affirmed. Marie and five other participants in this study shared a strong belief that finding a "best fit" college is more beneficial for students, challenging the common notion of academic matching. For instance, Justine expressed that she desired to find her "own version of Harvard in NYC," emphasizing the importance of location and cultural offerings for her college choice. Marie mentioned being close to their family and not wanting to go miles away from them for college, indicating that proximity to home was a significant consideration for them. Ashleigh and Gavin mentioned that their religious affiliation factored into their college choice. These students argued that considering more than just academic match, and instead prioritizing a "best fit" college, was important.

Mental health was a recurring theme that emerged from the narratives of the participants. Students expressed that attention should be paid to the racial and mental stress of being Black in predominantly White educational institutions. Additionally, Marie and Beverly expressed concerns about the academic pressures at Ivy League or "most selective" colleges, citing potential negative impacts on their mental health.

These perspectives highlighted how subjective factors such as location, cultural offerings, family proximity, student body demographics, and religious beliefs can play a crucial role in determining the right fit for a student, going beyond traditional notions of academic match. This aligned with the idea that a "best fit" college takes into consideration a student's unique circumstances and needs, beyond academic performance alone. This perspective was supported by research suggesting that college selection should encompass subjective elements beyond academic performance, including social integration, emotional well-being, and financial affordability (Allen & Schulz, 2020; Hoxby & Avery, 2013).

Research Question #3

3. How do these differences, if they exist, in perception manifest during the college preparation and application process?

Guidance Counselors' Higher Expectations: Lifting Students When Doubt Sets in

In addressing Research Question #3, this study revealed that on the rare occasions when students and their guidance counselors' perceptions of college readiness did not align, it was the guidance counselors who held higher expectations of the students' abilities. Specifically, guidance counselors exhibited greater optimism in students' potential to gain admission to colleges with higher selectivity, compared to the students' own perceptions. For example, Justine reported that her guidance counselor encouraged her to add colleges from the "most selective" category in the *Barron's Index of College Selectivity*, saying, "The world is your oyster! Add a couple of 'most selective' colleges in your 'reach' category and see what happens." Despite following the counselor's advice, Justine was not accepted to the colleges she added, but she did get into several schools listed as "very selective" in the same index. Ultimately, she chose to attend a City University of New York (CUNY) college to remain close to home due to her parents' job loss during the pandemic, which required her to work and support her family.

Similarly, James shared that he was initially anxious about his chances of getting into Ivy League "X" University due to his struggles in his engineering class. However, after seeking guidance from his counselor multiple times, he was reassured and encouraged, with the counselor expressing confidence in his abilities and grades and saying, "You are a great student, you have an excellent chance of getting into that Ivy." Following the counselor's encouragement, James applied and was accepted into Ivy League “X” University through early decision, with the counselor having more faith in his capabilities than he did.

Additional Findings

Low Expectations from Non-Black and Latinx Classmates

Black and Latinx students in this study shared that their White and Asian peers, not their guidance counselors, intimated or openly articulated doubts about their college readiness and prospects of gaining admission to highly selective colleges. Approximately 47.5% (10/21) of the participants expressed experiencing racial stress during their time at their specialized high school, as their non-Black and Latinx classmates doubted their right to belong within the school community. This doubt was often fueled by subtle yet pointed questions such as “Were you a part of the Discovery Program?” or “How did you get here? Through Discovery?”—a clever tactic to cast doubt in the minds of the few Black and Latinx students who had rightfully earned their place in these prestigious institutions. (The Discovery Program is a summer program offered by the NYC Department of Education that provides opportunities for certain disadvantaged students who scored within a certain range on the Specialized High Schools Admissions Test [SHSAT] to receive additional academic support and resources.)

The irony of the situation is that the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) cannot establish program criteria based on race, as doing so would be against the law. The NYCDOE can establish program guidelines based on income, special education status, and second language status. Many students fit into these categories who would never be asked if they “got in on Discovery” because they did not look the part. However, as James put it, “If we get something good that other races want, we did not earn it. There must have been a loophole for us.” Furthermore, as Cristina aptly stated:

> When they see us, they see "discovery." Black and Latinx students are often perceived as affirmative action beneficiaries or "favorite minority" due to their race, which creates a perception of their supposed inadequacy. If there were a loophole to get more of us in based on race, don't you think the DOE would save itself the embarrassment of admitting only one Black person into Stuyvesant? (Cristina, Interview, January 2023)

This perception was reinforced by the students' relentless pressure to prove themselves. Amanda and Cristina recounted that Black and Latinx students constantly felt the need to share their grades or achievements in freshman year in order to gain respect from their peers, which led to stress—racial, mental, and social. The stress of having to prove their abilities and worthiness for admission was exhausting and took a toll on their well-being. James, Dolores, and Ashleigh said that when looking for a college, they considered ways to connect with their culture to reduce racial stress.

> I made sure that the school had Black-Latinx sororities. (Dolores, Interview, January 2023)

> I looked for Black churches nearby. (Ashleigh, Interview, January 2023)

> My college has a society for Black engineers and housing for Black students. (James, Interview, January 2023)

Students narrated that the stress in their high schools was further intensified during the college application period, when students became hypersensitive about their college application outcomes.

> Black and Latinx students often opt for early action or early decision, but are hesitant to share their results with others due to the fear of being perceived as "stealing" someone else's place or being seen as undeserving. (Justine, interview, January 2023)

Some students even faced derogatory comments, such as "You don't have to worry, you are a favorite minority. I wish I were Black" (Justine, interview, January 2023), which highlighted the persistent stereotypes and misconceptions that Black and Latinx students face.

Despite these challenges, some students actively worked towards fostering racial and cultural understanding among their peers. Seven out of 10 (70%) students who reported low expectations of their abilities by White and Asian peers mentioned their involvement in student government or school clubs as a way to promote understanding and inclusivity within their school community. Amanda, James, and Gale talked about the importance of taking action to protect their psyche and build understanding with other racial and ethnic groups as a way to reduce the stress of being a minoritized teenager in a select predominantly White high school:

> It's important to create a safe space for students to have these conversations and develop empathy and understanding for each other's differences. (Amanda, interview, January 2023)
>
> Being part of the Equity Committee was empowering. We facilitated meaningful discussions about race and culture. (Gale, Interview, January 2023)
>
> Starting the Black Student Union was empowering…provided support, raised awareness about racial equality and inclusivity at our school. (James, interview, January 2023)

The findings shed light on the damaging effects of racial bias on Black and Latinx students in specialized high schools, who are constantly questioned by their peers about their abilities, despite the guidance and support of their counselors and other adults. This emphasizes the systemic challenges that these students face, including racial stress and emotional strain, as they navigate the college-going process.

Social Identity in High School College Counseling

According to the findings of this study, a significant proportion (33%) of the participants expressed the opinion that their guidance counselors should have taken their social identity into account during the college-matching process. These participants argued that their minoritized identities had a significant impact on their lived experiences and, therefore, should be given equal importance alongside their academic profiles when determining their college matches.

Although the participants lauded the overall college-going culture in their high schools and acknowledged the support from school adults in the college-going, application, and matching processes, they expressed concerns about the inadequacy of the counseling programs. Participants noted that counselors were often overworked, facing high caseloads and limited resources, which made it challenging for them to dedicate enough time to get to know students well enough to provide specialized sessions. Furthermore, the participants felt that their counselors lacked training in understanding how students' social identities could impact their experiences in college, which was not adequately addressed. Specific examples and anecdotes from the participants' experiences could further highlight the impact of the counseling programs on their college transition.

Thirty-three percent (7/21) of the participants in this study highlighted the importance of considering their social identities during the college-matching process. They noted that a 'colorblind' approach, where all students are treated the same, was not the most effective way of counseling students through this process. The participants emphasized that this approach was ineffective in counseling students from minoritized backgrounds, particularly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students attending selective colleges and universities, which are typically predominantly White institutions (PWIs). These seven participants expressed that by neglecting to consider the implications of their social identities in the college-matching process, their guidance counselors left out important information about best-fit colleges for them.

The participants in this study, who transitioned from New York City specialized high schools that were predominantly Asian and White to highly selective PWI colleges and universities, shared their suggestions on how their guidance counselors could have better acknowledged and supported their social identities during the college-matching process. In their own words, the participants emphasized the need for guidance counselors to understand microaggressions, unconscious bias, stereotype threat, and other forms of systemic discrimination. They also highlighted the importance of providing access to resources, former student groups, and cultural training. Some of the perspectives shared by the participants included:

> I needed a guidance counselor who understood microaggressions and could teach me how to combat them. (Jenn, Interview, January 2023)
>
> Offer education on unconscious bias, stereotype threat, and other forms of systemic discrimination...strategies for addressing and challenging these issues, during high school and college. (Regine, Interview, January 2023)
>
> My guidance counselor had 100 students. But maybe she could have provided me with resources that I could read, or a group of former students I could talk to... (Gale, Interview, January 2023)
>
> There should be more cultural, identity, and bias training for my guidance counselor. (Langston, Interview, January 2023)

Here are some suggestions from students when asked how their guidance counselors could have better prepared them for navigating PWI colleges or universities:

1. Offer strategies for building a supportive network and finding community as a minority student in a PWI.
2. Help students understand and address the potential impact of their social identities, such as being Black, Latinx, or a first-generation college student, on their academic and social experiences in a PWI.
3. Teach techniques for self-advocacy and assertiveness in addressing issues related to social identities in academic and social settings.

4. Suggest counseling on mental health and well-being, including coping strategies for managing the additional stressors and challenges that may arise as a minority student in a PWI.

When asked why they thought their guidance counselors did not consider their social identities in their college-matching process, Regine, Marie, and Brian said they thought their guidance counselors did not want to seem as if they were steering them to colleges that were less rigorous.

> They were not trained on how to talk about the importance of being with people like you without feeling uncomfortable. (Regine)

> They did not want to seem as though they thought we were not good enough for Selective PWIs. (Brian)

> There was little talk about going to HBCUs. I think they didn't want to seem biased. (Marie)

Jenn, Cristina, and Thomas shared that they believed their guidance counselors assumed they would thrive at PWIs for college, considering they were already attending high schools where they were in the minority, sometimes with only eight Black and Latinx students out of 749 in their cohort. However, after spending 1 to 4 years in college, all seven participants unanimously agreed that being a minoritized student in a New York City specialized public high school was not equivalent to attending a selective private PWI college or university. Their college experiences were characterized by narratives of "extreme wealth," "legacy," and "entitlement" among their peers, highlighting stark differences in their college environment, compared to their NYC high school experiences.

> In high school there was racial tension, but I could go home to my friends at the end of the day. I had my family, my church, my people at close proximity. (Regine, Interview, January 2023)

> We mixed with each other in high school. I had friends from all ethnicities…very few Blacks because we were so few. Ethnic and racial groups stand side by side. They do not mix here. (Joylene, Interview, January 2023)

> In high school, many students were low-income across ethnicities. It feels different here. (James, Interview, January 2023)

Silvia, a senior at an extremely selective university in New England, was unhappy at her college. She said that because she was low-income, she paid a lot of attention to finances.

> I followed the money. I should have investigated how other aspects of my identity would impact my college experience. I am a Latina stuck in a college in the Midwest with no car and very few people who share my cultural identity. I am miserable. (Silvia, Interview, January 2023)

The importance placed on social identity by this study's participants was consistent with previous research suggesting that identity-based matching plays an important role in increasing postsecondary success, especially those from minoritized backgrounds (Ovink et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2007). The findings from a study by Nieuwenhuis et al. (2019) revealed student identity should be used in conjunction with other factors to ensure the best possible fit.

By acknowledging the complexities of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, guidance counselors demonstrate a commitment to fostering an equitable and inclusive environment that supports each student's unique postsecondary journey (Bryan et al., 2022; Parham & Helms, 1981). This is essential because these factors are inextricably linked to students' academic, social, and emotional experiences (Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2019). Therefore, incorporating intersectional perspectives into their counseling approach enables high school guidance counselors to advocate for underrepresented students and promote social justice and diversity within the broader educational sphere (Hoxby & Turner, 2015).

In conclusion, based on the feedback and perspectives shared by participants in this study, some Black and Latinx students in specialized high schools reported experiencing racial stress and social stress due to challenges to their sense of belonging presented by White and Asian peers. These students also reported having strong college-going cultures. However, they expressed that while their guidance counselors were well-intentioned and supportive, they were often overworked and may not have had the necessary training to address their specific needs. Participants suggested that incorporating identity-based counseling during the college-matching process could empower minoritized students to make informed choices about their college matches, thereby improving their college experiences and facilitating better fit matches.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discusses the study's findings, implications, limitations, recommendations for future research, and conclusion. Using a CRT framework, I investigated Black and Latinx New York City high school students' perceptions of guidance counselors' roles during college preparation, application, and matching processes. The research focused on students' self-perceptions of college readiness, their perceived counselors' expectations, and any differences between these perceptions. The study also explored how these differences manifested during the college preparation and application processes and that their implications are for students, guidance counselors, and educational stakeholders.

Additionally, the study examined how students perceived the intersections of race, power, and social structures in shaping their educational experiences. A CRT perspective acknowledges systemic racism and social inequities, which affect access to guidance counselors and their effectiveness in supporting students. Thus, the participants relied on additional support networks like peers, family, and community organizations. Based on interview narratives, I organically discovered student resilience, resourcefulness, and cultural capital, which developed as students fought for their right to prepare for and attend the nation's most selective universities. By examining these aspects, I aimed to provide valuable insights into Black and Latinx students' experiences in college preparation and application, ultimately informing more effective and equitable support strategies for minoritized students.

Role of the Guidance Counselor (Finding #1)

The Resource Provider, Motivator, and Realist

In this study, participants identified three primary roles for their guidance counselors: information and tool provider, motivator, and realist. These findings aligned with college access literature, which has documented the evolution of the guidance counselor's role since the 1990s, transitioning from gatekeeper to significantly influencing the college application process, particularly for minoritized students (Avery & Daly, 2010; Belasco, 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Perna et al., 2008; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Participants in this study self-identified as Latinx and/or Black and disclosed other minoritized identities such as low-income, first-generation American (FGA) or 0.5 FGA, first-generation college student (FGCS), and English language learner (ELL). Examined through a CRT lens, these findings underscored the guidance counselor's vital role in addressing information and resource gaps resulting from systemic barriers that have perpetuated educational inequities.

In the course of the study, it became apparent that a subset of the school community did not rely on guidance counselors for assistance during the college application process. As participant Joylene noted, "Some students engaged private consultants, circumventing the need for their guidance counselor." None of the individuals within the participant group possessed the financial means to secure such services. The presence of resources, such as generational wealth—often absent in the lives of minoritized students—exacerbated the issue of inequitable access to college planning resources. Families with greater financial means and social capital can readily procure the services of private consultants, who furnish insider knowledge and tailored guidance, rendering the limited availability of guidance counselors inconsequential to their college application experience.

Critical race theory posits that the intersectionality of students' identities can intensify systemic disparities, necessitating their reliance on guidance counselors for information and resources. A salient example is the limited understanding of the U.S. college system, which significantly impacted participants and was directly related to their multifaceted intersectional identities, particularly their immigrant family background. All but one (20/21) of the participants were either first-generation Americans or 0.5-generation Americans. As a result, even those with college-educated parents hailing from other countries found themselves unacquainted with the intricacies of the American college and university system. These students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, benefitted from the interventions provided by guidance counselors.

A remarkable discovery emerged from the narratives of Silvia, Amanda, and Toni: The college-going process in their school not only influenced the students but also inspired their parents to pursue higher education. These students shared stories of their parents being motivated to attend college, either simultaneously or after their children had enrolled. They reported sharing guidance counselor resources with their parents, thereby extending the tools, resources, and motivation provided by the guidance counselor to another generation. For example, Silvia remarked:

> My mom went to college when I was a sophomore in college. I shared information from my guidance counselor with her. We researched and worked together. We still share information…and now with my little brother.

This unique outcome deviates from the norm, where attending college typically impacts students or future generations, like a sibling, a cousin, or a child. The cases of Silvia, Amanda, and Toni highlighted the school's college-going culture, in which the guidance counselor plays a crucial role, for deeply engaging students and their parents. Consequently, the parents, as Silvia described, "made themselves vulnerable" and pursued college education alongside their children.

This aligned with participants' perceptions of their guidance counselors as motivators who fostered aspirations and cultivated a college-going culture. The impact of including parents in this process holds significant implications for the college access realm, as families develop social capital (Bryan et al., 2009). This social capital can be utilized by other family members to apply successfully to college and investigate competitive institutions that match their academic abilities.

Beyond Guidance Counselors: The Power of Diverse Support Networks

Interestingly, overall, participants in this study did not reveal heavy reliance on their guidance counselors throughout the college preparation process. While they recognized that their guidance counselors had important information to offer about the application process and they sought out that information, the participants also expressed that the availability and preparation of their guidance counselors were not enough to meet all of their needs in the college application and matching processes. As a result, they expressed gratitude for being in a strong college-going culture that allowed them to rely on other sources of information to navigate the college process. Thus, this finding may challenge college research that lauds guidance counselors as the main source of information in the college application process.

New York City's specialized high schools, as part of the larger public school system, consistently face budget cuts that affect their ability to maintain well-trained and well-resourced college guidance departments (Bettinger & Evans, 2019). The entire New York City school system is home to a diverse student population, with 25.5% Black, 40.6% Latinx, 16.6% Asian students, and 16.2% ELLs and special education students (NYCDOE, 2021). However, Black (10.5%) and Latinx (10.3%) students represent only a small percentage within NYC specialized high schools (NYCDOE, 2021). Despite these differences, students in specialized high schools face similar challenges as those in other schools within the system. Due to budget constraints and lack of resources, guidance counseling services may be inadequate in these schools, with minoritized students often experiencing a disproportionate impact during the college-going process.

Findings from this study showed that as students navigate the complexities of the college-going process, it is crucial to acknowledge the multitude of influences that contribute to their success. Guidance counselors play a significant role in providing information and support, but it is essential to recognize the value of the broader network of individuals and organizations that contribute to fostering a college-going culture. In addition to guidance counselors, families, and community organizations offering essential support, students themselves can play a proactive role in their college-going endeavors. Empowered by their own aspirations and resilience, participants in this study actively sought out information and resources, tapping into a variety of sources to supplement the guidance provided by their schools.

Participants cultivated relationships with friends and peer networks, leaning on one another for advice, encouragement, and firsthand experiences related to the college application process (Perna et al., 2008; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). These connections not only offered practical support but also fostered a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose among students who were navigating similar challenges. The participants in this study said that their peer networks were built organically from the college talk and strong college-going atmosphere. However, they were also created out of necessity; as Brian said, “We minorities of the minorities relied on each other for information and resources. Sometimes, these resources were hoarded by certain groups.”

Additionally, students recognized the value of their family members' wisdom and experiences, drawing on their insights and guidance throughout their educational journey (Auerbach, 2004; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008). Through these interactions, students learn to harness their own cultural capital and navigate the complexities of the college application process. This is significant because it often seems as though minoritized people are powerless to lift themselves up. We see that students are capable of self-determination and self-help.

Moreover, students actively engage with other adults in their social networks, such as teachers, coaches, and mentors, who can offer valuable perspectives and resources (Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010). By establishing these relationships, students build a diverse support system that bolsters their confidence and abilities as they pursue their academic goals.

Participant narratives revealed the initiative and resourcefulness that students can exhibit in the college-going process. As educators, we should celebrate their agency and recognize the importance of fostering an environment that encourages self-advocacy, resilience, and a strong sense of community. Recognizing the proactive role that students play in their own success not only empowers them to embrace their potential but also provides a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to equitable access to higher education.

Convergence of Interest, Alignment of Expectations (Finding #2)

This study's findings showed that Black and Latinx former NYC specialized high school students' perceptions and those of their guidance counselors were aligned with respect to their college preparedness. They perceived that their counselors believed they were well-prepared to attend our nation's most selective and competitive colleges.

The alignment between students and counselors concerning college readiness can be attributed to several factors rooted in the strong college-going culture, high academic standards, and systematic college preparation tools. However, interest convergence may also play a critical role in this alignment. In NYC specialized high schools, the interests of students and counselors are uniquely intertwined, as both parties benefit from successful college matches.

This unexpected finding prompted further investigation, especially considering the contrasting experiences of high-performing Black and Latinx students in other schools. Student narratives expressed a distinct relationship between students and educators in their school community, including their guidance counselors in NYC specialized schools, which fosters a shared commitment to each other's success. This interconnectedness of interests creates an environment where students and educators in their community actively work towards a common goal, which may contribute to the observed alignment in their perceptions of college preparedness and the matching process.

Interest convergence could potentially play a pivotal role in shaping the alignment between students and counselors in NYC specialized schools. According to Bell et al.'s (2009) interest convergence theory, the alignment of interests between different groups occurs only when it serves the dominant group's interests. In the context of NYC specialized high schools, the disproportionate focus on maintaining the schools' reputation for excellence could be harmful to Black and Latinx students, as it may come at the expense of addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by these students.

While the schools are addressing issues of academic rigor and providing a wide range of activities, they may fall short in addressing issues of bias exhibited by peers and staff in other areas. This negligence may be due to administrators not recognizing the connection between social issues, such as racial stress experienced by Black and Latinx students as well as academic outcomes like test scores or college acceptance rates. This disconnect in understanding results in the interests of administrators and students not converging in this area. Consequently, Black and Latinx students are left in a social and emotional quagmire as they navigate an environment where their numbers are minuscule, and their unique experiences and challenges are not adequately addressed.

For example, the participants in this study reported that their non-Black and Latinx peers intimated they got into their elite high school through the Discovery Program, which allows certain students who missed the exam cutoff by a few points to take a summer session to enter. Attention is not paid to the tension this causes or to the veiled or overt insufferable comments they face at college-matching time about them gaining access to select colleges simply because of affirmative action. Another example is that although the staff may not show outward prejudice in the area of college matching and preparation, students have reported that students of color are unfairly targeted by staff for behavioral issues. As Sylvia, one of the participants, shared, “My friend, who is Black, wasn’t even at the park but was accused of smoking and causing trouble. No Black kids were there.”

Given the broader sociopolitical context during the study’s timeframe, it is important to acknowledge the impact of external factors on the experiences of Black and Latinx students. Fifteen of the 21 students who participated in this study—accounting for approximately 71% of the participants—were seniors in high school during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a time marked by social uprisings against police brutality and anti-Black racism. The social unrest following these events has prompted widespread calls for change and increased examination of institutions, including educational establishments.

In response to these calls for change, specialized high schools, which have a limited number of Black and Latinx students, were put under intensified scrutiny to ensure the success of these students in securing good college matches. Additionally, any allegations of open bias towards Black and Latinx students from their guidance counselors during the college-matching process could damage the schools' reputation as elite institutions.

No Undermatching: A Unique Case for NYC Students

The findings of this study challenge conventional research on academic matching and college access, as Black and Latinx alumni/ae of specialized NYC high schools did not perceive or experience academic undermatching at their schools. This suggests that traditional measures of academic undermatching may not fully capture these students' experiences.

Black and Latinx students in NYC specialized high schools did not perceive undermatching, and they believed their guidance counselors' expectations aligned with their own. The strong college-going culture, Naviance software, and the practice of choosing "safety, target, and reach" schools contributed to this perception. However, it is essential to acknowledge that other schools with similar structures still have students who perceive undermatching, as was the case in 2013 with my daughter's magnet school mentioned in the earlier section called "Origin of the Question."

This dissertation's unique approach to examining undermatching from the students' perspective rather than relying solely on traditional academic indices offers a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences. By placing the students' voices at the forefront, this study has revealed new insights and raised several thought-provoking questions:

- How has the increased awareness of racial injustice since George Floyd's death and the sense of loss and need for cherishing loved ones due to the COVID-19 pandemic influenced students' priorities when selecting a college?

- In the context of a heightened focus on racial equity and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, how are students balancing "academic match" and "best fit" in their college selection process?
- Do counselors in specialized high schools approach the college-matching process with heightened caution, particularly with regards to undermatching, due to concerns about potentially being labeled as "racist" and the implications this may have on their professional reputation and the school's standing?
- Have the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying social climate, which have spurred widespread discussions about race and racism, influenced the attitudes of administrators, guidance counselors, and other educators in specialized high schools towards addressing and actively confronting issues of racism in all aspects of the educational experience for Black and Latinx students?
- If a larger number of Black and Latinx students were in NYC specialized high schools, would the study findings have been different, particularly in terms of Black and Latinx students perceiving undermatching in their college process?

Exploring these questions further can provide valuable insights into the unique experiences of Black and Latinx students in specialized high schools and inform more equitable and effective college preparation and matching processes.

High School Guidance Counselor Expectations (Finding #3)

In addressing Research Question #3, this study revealed that on the rare occasions when students' and their guidance counselors' perceptions of college readiness did not align, it was the guidance counselors who held higher expectations of the students' abilities.

The findings of this study highlighted a unique aspect of the setting, specialized high schools in a large urban context, which may contribute to the differences in academic matching for Black and Latinx students, compared to other high schools where undermatching may occur. In this study, it was found that in cases where students and their guidance counselors had differing perceptions of college readiness, it was the guidance counselors who held higher expectations of the students' abilities.

This finding suggests that specialized high schools in NYC may have a positive influence on the perceptions of academic readiness among Black and Latinx students. The guidance counselors in these schools may play a crucial role in shaping students' expectations and aspirations for college, and their higher expectations may counteract the negative impact of racism and biases that can contribute to undermatching in other settings. The specialized high schools in NYC may provide a supportive and inclusive environment where guidance counselors are actively engaged in promoting college readiness and success for Black and Latinx students.

This finding also raises important questions about the role of guidance counselors in addressing academic undermatching and promoting equitable college access for underrepresented minority students. It suggests that guidance counselors can play a pivotal role in challenging stereotypes and biases as well as fostering higher expectations among Black and Latinx students. It underscores the need for ongoing professional development and training for guidance counselors to ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and awareness to support the diverse needs of students from underrepresented minority backgrounds effectively.

In conclusion, the findings of this study shed light on the unique aspects of the specialized high school setting in New York City that may contribute to differences in perceptions of academic matching for Black and Latinx students. The higher expectations held by guidance counselors in these schools may counteract the negative impact of racism and biases and promote college readiness among Black and Latinx students.

Discussion of Other Findings

Bias from Black and Asian Peers (Finding #4)

Black and Latinx students in this study shared that their White and Asian peers, not their guidance counselors, intimated or openly articulated doubts about their college readiness and prospects of gaining admission to highly selective colleges.

As we discuss the impact of racial bias in highly competitive high schools and colleges, it is crucial to examine this issue through the lens of CRT, which is a theoretical framework that recognizes the ways in which race intersects with other social categories, such as class, gender, and ability, to shape social structures and systems of power. In this context, racial bias is not an isolated incident but rather a systemic issue that perpetuates harmful stereotypes and discrimination against Black and Latinx students.

It is disheartening to see how deeply ingrained racial bias is in our educational institutions, leading to the replication of learned behaviors among students. The belief that Black and Latinx students are not smart enough to gain admission to specialized high schools or colleges without special programs, such as the “Discovery” Program, is a manifestation of this bias. Meanwhile, White and Asian low-income and special education students who may have missed the test mark by a few points are given opportunities through summer bridge programs without facing similar scrutiny because they “fit the part.”

To bridge the understanding between ethnic groups in highly competitive high schools and colleges, it is imperative to take proactive measures. Here are some key steps that can be taken:

- Address Implicit Bias: Provide comprehensive training for staff, including educators and administrators, to recognize and address their own implicit biases. This can involve workshops, seminars, and ongoing professional development to increase awareness and develop strategies to mitigate bias in their interactions with students and decision-making processes.
- Inclusive Admissions Criteria: Reevaluate and revise admissions criteria to ensure they are inclusive and do not perpetuate racial bias. Consider alternative measures beyond standardized test scores, such as holistic evaluations that take into account diverse experiences, achievements, and potential. This can create a more equitable and inclusive admission process that considers the strengths and abilities of all students, regardless of their race or ethnicity.
- Diverse Representation: Increase the representation of diverse racial and ethnic groups among faculty, staff, and leadership positions. Having a diverse staff can create more inclusive and supportive environments for students of all backgrounds, challenge stereotypes, and provide positive role models for Black and Latinx students.
- Culturally Responsive Curriculum: Develop and implement a culturally responsive curriculum that reflects the experiences, perspectives, and contributions of Black and Latinx communities. This can include incorporating diverse literature, history, and cultural studies into the curriculum as well as incorporating student input to make it more relevant and engaging.
- Peer-to-Peer Dialogue and Collaboration: Foster opportunities for peer-to-peer dialogue and collaboration among students from different racial and ethnic

backgrounds. This can involve structured activities, such as dialogues, group projects, or cultural exchange programs, that encourage mutual understanding, empathy, and collaboration among students from diverse backgrounds.

- Student Empowerment: Empower Black and Latinx students to be active agents in their education and communities. Provide opportunities for them to engage in leadership roles, advocacy, and decision-making processes. This can help students develop agency, critical thinking skills, and a sense of ownership in their education, leading to greater success and self-efficacy.
- Community Engagement: Establish strong partnerships with local communities, including Black and Latinx organizations, to promote community engagement and involvement in school activities. Collaborate with these organizations to create initiatives that provide support, resources, and opportunities for students to excel academically and socially.

Importance of Social Identity in High School College Counseling (Finding #5)

According to the findings of this study, a significant proportion (33%) of the participants expressed the opinion that their guidance counselor should have taken their social identity into account during the college-matching process. The feedback from students regarding personalized counseling is crucial in understanding the implications of racism and structural inequities in the college admissions process as well as the importance of considering social identities in the college matching process.

The experiences of Black and Latinx students in navigating the college admissions process are often shaped by systemic racism and structural inequities that can limit their access to resources and opportunities. As a result, the guidance counselors' information that is geared towards academic matches may not fully address the unique challenges and circumstances that these students face. This highlights the need for counselors to be aware of and address these challenges in their counseling approach.

The idea of a "best fit" for Black and Latinx students may not solely be determined by factors such as the college's selectivity ranking or financial aid package. These students may also prioritize factors such as representation, cultural affinity, and social atmosphere when considering their college choices. Being around people who look like them and share similar interests can be important for their motivation and sense of belonging in a college environment.

It is important for guidance counselors to consider students' social identities as a significant part of the college-matching process. Fear of pushing students into lower selectivity-rated colleges or universities should not override the consideration of social identities in the decision-making process. Choosing not to attend an Ivy League or a highly selective college on Barron's selectivity scale does not necessarily mean undermatching; rather, it could be seen as prioritizing a best fit for the students' overall well-being and success.

In light of the findings from the students' feedback, it is imperative for guidance counselors to adopt a CRT-informed approach that takes into account the unique experiences, challenges, and preferences of Black and Latinx students. This may involve actively addressing implicit biases, incorporating cultural responsiveness in counseling practices, providing information about diverse college options, and empowering students to make informed decisions that align with their individual needs and aspirations.

By considering social identities and the impact of racism and structural inequities on the college admissions process, guidance counselors can play a crucial role in promoting more equitable and inclusive college pathways for Black and Latinx students. This may include advocating for resources and opportunities that enhance college options for these students and actively addressing any barriers that may limit their access to higher education. Through a CRT-informed approach, guidance counselors can contribute to creating a more just and equitable college admissions process that supports the success of all students, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

Implications

Practical Implications

The findings of this study provided valuable insights into the college preparation process for Black and Latinx students in specialized high schools. Based on these insights, several practice implications can be identified to enhance guidance counseling support for minoritized students. By implementing these recommendations, schools and guidance counselors can better address the unique needs of their diverse student populations and promote equitable college access.

- Culturally Responsive Counseling: Guidance counselors should develop culturally responsive practices to better understand and support the unique experiences of minoritized students in the college preparation process.
- Diverse Strategies and Resources: Counselors should provide diverse strategies and resources that cater to the varying needs of minoritized students, ensuring equitable access to college preparation support.
- Strong College-Going Culture: Schools should invest in creating a strong college-going culture that includes the active participation of all community members in supporting students' college aspirations and readiness. All employees should be

trained as counselors. This can stretch the capacity of high school counseling in schools.

- Parental Engagement: Schools and guidance counselors should encourage and facilitate parental involvement in the college preparation process, acknowledging its significant impact on students' aspirations and motivation.
- Continuous Professional Development: Guidance counselors should engage in ongoing professional development to stay informed about the latest research, strategies, and best practices for supporting minoritized students in their college preparation journey.

Policy Implications

The journey from state-level policy changes to effective execution within school districts and individual school settings is often marked by obstacles, deviations, and redirections (Dahir et al., 2019). For instance, in 2017, the New York State Education Department mandated a shift from traditional "guidance" counseling to a more comprehensive, data-driven approach in schools. Even during the pandemic, when expansive counseling services were greatly needed, there were significant disparities in perceptions and expectations among educational stakeholders (Dahir et al., 2019) about how to implement the changes. Much is at stake for our students, especially our students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As stakeholders grapple with the challenges inherent in implementing policy changes, they must consider the uniqueness of their student populations and work together, not simply to meet administrative requirements but to effect meaningful change in their school communities.

In light of this study's findings, it is crucial to consider policy implications aimed at addressing systemic barriers and fostering a more inclusive college preparation process for Black and Latinx students. To bridge the gap in understanding and perception of the expectations and duties required for a comprehensive and relevant counseling department, stakeholders must engage in collaboration and meaningful dialogue to shape new state and local policies, so they are applicable in their schools. This collaborative effort, driven by a commitment to making policies truly beneficial for students rather than mere checkboxes, can empower educational stakeholders and policymakers to create a more equitable educational landscape that supports the college aspirations and readiness of all students, regardless of their race or ethnicity. Allocating funding is essential for the successful implementation of the suggested policy implications listed below.

- Counselor Workload and Resource Allocation: Policymakers should address guidance counselors' workload and resource limitations, ensuring equitable access to support and resources for schools with high proportions of minoritized students.
- College Preparatory Course Accessibility: Policies should promote the availability and accessibility of college preparatory courses, such as AP and IB programs, in schools with high numbers of minoritized students.
- Teacher Quality and Expectations: Policymakers should prioritize hiring and retaining high-quality teachers who hold high expectations for all students, regardless of their race or ethnicity.
- Extracurricular Opportunities: Policies should encourage the provision of diverse extracurricular opportunities and enrichment programs that foster college readiness and expand matching opportunities for high-performing Black and Latinx students.
- Culturally Responsive School Environments: Policymakers should promote the creation of inclusive and culturally responsive school environments that foster a sense

of belonging, motivation, and success for all students, particularly Black and Latinx students.

Recommendations for Future Research

The complexity of the college preparation process for minoritized students and the role of guidance counselors necessitate further investigation. Future research could delve into alternative strategies and resources used by these students and how they intersect with their engagement with guidance counselors. Additionally, examining the impact of policy changes and interventions addressing guidance counselors' limitations in supporting minoritized students during their college preparation journey is essential.

Policymakers and educators must consider the specific contexts and resources of schools attended by Black and Latinx students when designing interventions to promote college access and success. Furthermore, exploring the perceptions and experiences of underrepresented minority students concerning academic matching and college access will help inform evidence-based policies and practices that better serve their needs. Addressing contextual factors, engaging communities, and fostering collaboration among policymakers, educators, and researchers are crucial to developing effective strategies that support the educational success of underrepresented minority students.

The findings of this study highlighted a unique aspect of the setting, which is specialized high schools in a large urban context, that may contribute to differences in perceptions of academic matching for Black and Latinx students, compared to other high schools where undermatching may occur. In this study, it was found that in cases where students and their guidance counselors had differing perceptions of college readiness, it was the guidance counselors who held higher expectations of the students' abilities.

This finding suggested that specialized high schools in NYC may have a positive influence on the perceptions of academic readiness among Black and Latinx students. The guidance counselors in these schools may play a crucial role in shaping students' expectations and aspirations for college, and their higher expectations may counteract the negative impact of racism and biases that can contribute to undermatching in other settings. Specialized high schools in NYC may provide a supportive and inclusive environment where guidance counselors are actively engaged in promoting college readiness and success for Black and Latinx students. Further studies, in non-specialized high schools and schools with varying demographics will provide data about the impact of counselor expectations on the college and application process for Black and Latinx students.

Timely future research will also provide an opportunity to investigate the consequences of recent Supreme Court decisions banning the use of race and ethnicity in the college admissions process. Researchers can delve into how admissions officers at highly competitive colleges and universities are adapting their strategies to uphold or enhance diversity, particularly among Black and Latinx students, within the confines of this legal constraint. It offers a chance to explore the innovative approaches they employ to create equitable opportunities for underrepresented minority groups and how they adjust their admissions criteria and policies. Furthermore, this research can examine the challenges and complexities these institutions face as they navigate the evolving legal framework while continuing to champion diversity and inclusion. Such comprehensive exploration can deepen our understanding of how Supreme Court decisions have influenced the strategies and practices of highly selective colleges and their commitment to diversity in the post-decision landscape, informing both academic discourse and policy considerations.

Future quantitative studies could delve into the implications of the opt-out option for standardized test scores, now offered by many highly selective colleges. Researchers could utilize specific survey questions, such as "Did your guidance counselor suggest that you exercise the opt-out of standardized test option?" to assess the extent to which this policy affects minority applicants, particularly Black and Latinx students, and whether it leads to more equitable access to these institutions. Quantitative research can also investigate the relationship between test-optional policies and the diversity of admitted students by analyzing data on acceptance rates. This data-driven approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the impact of this policy on college aspirations and outcomes, contributing to a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of equitable access to highly competitive institutions.

It is evident that there is a need for a comprehensive body of literature on educator expectations, dedicated to examining the effects of expectations of all staff members who interact with students on a consistent basis. Such a body of literature would benefit researchers, policymakers, and anyone interested in exploring the impact of educator expectations on student outcomes.

Limitations

This study presented a couple of limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. One limitation was the generalizability of the study's results. The participants in this study were Black and Latinx students attending specialized high schools in NYC, who are not representative of the experiences of all Black and Latinx students in other educational settings. The results of this study might not be replicable if students were not in specialized schools with strong college-going cultures.

Another limitation was the study's reliance on the perceptions of Black and Latinx students, which may be subject to personal interpretation based on their experiences. However, collecting counternarratives from minoritized populations is a valuable approach to understanding their experiences. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of undermatching in various educational contexts, future studies could incorporate additional data sources, such as college enrollment data, or interviews with guidance counselors and other school staff members.

While relying solely on student perceptions may have limitations, this method offered a unique perspective on the issue of undermatching and the factors that contribute to it. By combining multiple data sources and perspectives, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex issues surrounding academic matching and college access for underrepresented minority students.

Conclusion

This study explored the role that guidance counselors and their expectations play in the college preparation and application process for Black and Latinx students attending NYC specialized high schools. These students demonstrated remarkable resilience, hard work, and the ability to harness their cultural capital to claim their place in the nation's most selective universities. Despite facing racism and daily structural inequities that pervaded every aspect of their existence, these students were highly successful in their schools.

The study highlighted the three key roles played by guidance counselors: provider of tools and information, cheerleader, and realist. Importantly, the majority of participants perceived their guidance counselors' expectations regarding their college readiness to align with their own, indicating no undermatching in their schools.

Moreover, the study emphasized the significance of a strong college-going culture in ensuring students' preparedness for matching with competitive 4-year colleges. The findings illuminated the importance of considering students' intersectional identities in college advising, focusing on "best fit" colleges rather than solely on "best match" colleges.

These findings hold crucial implications for NYC school officials and others involved in shaping high school environments, particularly for minoritized populations. Results underscored the importance of addressing the unique needs of Black and Latinx students due to existing structural inequalities. By doing so, school officials could create more inclusive and supportive conditions that recognize and address the distinct challenges faced by these students during the college preparation and application process.

Imagine the possibilities if we began addressing systemic inequities as early as preschool and created spaces where all educators held high expectations for students, passing on a sense of empowerment and self-belief. This study showed the value of peer networks, family, and community members in fostering a college-going culture and supplementing the support provided by guidance counselors.

In conclusion, the study shed light on the important but limited role of guidance counselors and the college-going culture in promoting college readiness and success for Black and Latinx students attending specialized high schools in a large urban context. The resilience and determination to succeed in competitive colleges and universities exhibited by these students serve as a testament to their potential for even greater achievements in a more equitable educational system. Further research and efforts towards promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in education are crucial to ensuring equal opportunities for academic success for all students.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your name?
2. What is your self-described ethnicity?
3. What specialized NYC high school did you attend, and when did you graduate?
4. Tell me about your high school courses. Did you take any A.P., I.B., or Regents courses?
5. Discuss how your guidance counselor works/worked with students at your school. How did you get access to their services?
6. How did you choose your classes in high school? Was your guidance counselor involved in your course selections? Were you encouraged to take rigorous courses in high school (and if so, who encouraged you)?
7. Did you perceive that you worked more or less than other students with your guidance counselor? What informed this perception?
8. How did you know what type of school to apply to? Did your college guidance counselor provide you with a list of recommended schools tailored to you? If so, when did you receive this list?
9. When you received this list (or otherwise recommendations) from your guidance counselor, what were your initial thoughts?
10. Now, looking back x years later, what are your thoughts about the list?
11. Describe your feelings about the level of competitiveness of the colleges your guidance counselor suggested.
12. Did you perceive that you were encouraged to apply to more or less competitive schools than other students by your guidance counselor? What informed this perception?
13. What role do you believe your guidance counselor expectations play in the college list recommended to you?
14. Discuss how your relationship with your guidance counselor influenced your decisions regarding applying to college.

Appendix B: Survey Tool

1. What is your full (first, last) name?
2. What is your email address?
3. What is your self-described ethnicity?

   Black   Latinx

4. What specialized high school did you attend?

   Brooklyn Technical High School, Bronx High School of Science, Brooklyn Latin High School, High School of American Studies at Lehman College, Queens High School for the Sciences at York College, Staten Island Technical High School, Stuyvesant High School, High School for Mathematics, Science, and Engineering at City College of New York

5. On average, how often did you meet with your college counselor/advisor in junior year?

   less than once a semester in junior year   once a semester during junior year

   a couple of times during a semester during junior year

   never during junior year

6. How many times did you meet with your college counselor/advisor during senior year?

   once, twice, three times, four or more times, as often as I requested

7. What was your cumulative GPA upon graduating high school?
8. What was your class rank upon applying for college (senior year HS)?
9. In what fields did you take at least one honors class? (Note: AP classes will be discussed in a separate question.)

   Social Studies and History, Math, Language Arts and English, Science, Other (Identify)

10. In what fields did you take at least one AP class? (Note: exclude non-AP honors classes, which were discussed in the question above.)

Social Studies and History, Math, Language Arts and English, Science, Other (Identify)

12. What kinds of extracurricular activities did you participate in?

a. School level and local: track, debate, student body president …

b. Recognized on a local and national level:

*stand out Solo performance(s) (i.e., Carnegie Hall, Ballet Hispanico...)

*highly selective programs like the Research Science Institute

*National competitive victories, Intel Science Talent Search,

*Large merit scholarships, like Gates and Coca-Cola

13. What college resources did your high school provide to you during the college application process? Select all that apply.

Sessions with Guidance Counselor (If yes, how often?), HS-arranged College Tours (If so, how many tours?), College flyers with college related information, College-specific pages linked on the HS website (If so, did you use it?), Mentors to help with college process, Information about individual college stay/fly away programs, Parent sessions with guidance counselors, Information about financial aid, Essay writing support, Help with SAT preparation, Specific guidance about college selection

14. What did you base your college selections on (Choose all that apply)

Information from school counselors, Information from the internet, Information from independent sources, information from a mentor, information friends and relatives who have gone to college, HS GPA, HS rank, extracurricular, activities, location, price, other

15. How many colleges did you apply to?

16. List as many of the colleges you applied to that you can remember.
17. Which colleges in your top five did you get into? List all you can remember.
18. What college did you go to? If you did not go to college, what did you do after high school?
19. If you attend/attended college, was it a good match? Please state why or why not. Please be specific.

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Flyer

Raise your voice! Participate in a research study about your college preparation experience in your high school !

- Are you a Black or Latinx high graduate of a NYC specialized high school ?

•We want to hear about your perception of your college preparation and application experience!

•How do you perceive yourHS guidancecounselor's role inthe college matchingprocess?

•To participate, you will be asked to fill out a short survey, share your experience about your college preparation process in an interview and share documents pertaining to how your high school prepared you for the college application process.

- Earn a $25 Amazon gift card
- Email: garraway@upenn.edu

Appendix D: Undermatching? Findings in a Poem

In the heart of the city, where dreams take flight,
A tale of resilience, of will and might.
Black and Latinx youth, determined to prove,
Their rightful place, as they rise and move.
In this phenomenological study, these students share,
Their NYC specialized high school experience, with stories laid bare.
Graduates from the past five years, they all had a say,
Guidance counselors' roles and college-going culture on display.
Realist, cheerleader, and resource provider too,
These were the roles that guidance counselors were expected to do.
Seen once a semester, these students knew,
Cultural capital and peer networks, they'd need to pursue.

Black and Latinx students, in a sea of White and Asian peers, they stand,
Seeking answers, breaking barriers, overcoming fears, hand in hand.
Through a CRT lens, my dissertation sought to explore,
If undermatching in NYC's specialized high schools was an issue at their core.

In this study, participants' narratives and surveys convey,
No difference in self-perception, or what guidance counselors say.
Alignment found in college readiness, as they both agreed,
No undermatching in their schools, expectations guaranteed.

Findings unveiled an alignment, expectations in sync,
But when perceptions differed, guidance counselors made students think.
With words of encouragement, like "the world is your oyster," they'd say,
Great expectations for Black and Latinx, to grace top colleges and universities one day.

College-going culture's role, a crucial factor in success,
This study's research question its significance did address.
Guidance counselors mattered, but participants were clear,
Their school's robust culture, to readiness, it did steer.

Throughout four high school years, this culture strong and steady,
Prepared them for applications, kept them focused and ready.
A key finding emerged, college-going culture's weight,
In ensuring students' futures, shaping their academic fate.

Black and Latinx students carried a burden to bear,
White and Asian classmates questioned their worth,
"Did you get in through the Discovery Program?" they aired.
Successful exams and extracurriculars showed their light,
But self-doubt still lingered, an unwelcome companion in their fight.

Yet school educators, minoritized peers, and family provided wisdom,

By the time applications arrived, doubts disappeared,

The heat of doubt replaced by a confidence revered.

No longer did “you got in because you are Black” make them doubtful,

Their success was no longer up for debate, no longer questionable.

Black and Latinx students urged counselors to see,

Their intersectional identities, as they pursue their degree.

“Not just best match,” they say, “but best fit for me,”

Guidance and staff must inform, with cultural sensitivity.

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